

Self-assessment, self-evaluation, or self-grading: What's in a name?

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Abstract: The ability of judging one's own performance seems to be an increasingly attractive topic in foreign language learning and teaching research. Although there have been numerous studies confirming the positive impact of such a competence of students at various levels of education on the improvement of the foreign language acquisition process, questions regarding terminology conventions remain and discussions continue.

The aim of this article is, therefore, to respond to some of those questions, namely: What should we call this ability, *self-assessment*? Is *self-assessment* the same as *self-evaluation*? What does it mean to *self-grade*? This article provides an insight into the origins of the terms *self-assessment* and *self-evaluation* and their development in the fields of psychology and pedagogy, before focusing on their use in the area of teaching and learning a foreign language.

Keywords: self-assessment, self-evaluation, self-grading, development of self-assessment

Studies show that developing the competence of self-assessment in students has a positive impact on the overall learning of foreign languages (see, for example, Hattie, 2018). One of the potential shortcomings of the studies on self-assessment appears to be the lack of agreement when it comes to terminology. Based on the conclusions of a recent literature review (Keplová, 2021), it seems that authors assume the readers' knowledge and understanding of the term and, therefore, do not feel the need to provide an explanation. What adds to the confusing situation is that authors of some studies might omit to clarify even the reason for choosing self-assessment as the specific activity to be carried out as part of their research. As Andrade (2019) suggests in her review, the purpose for which teachers and/or researchers use self-assessment activities shapes the procedure of conducting the self-assessment. Not only that, but the purpose may actually determine the terminology, i.e. whether the term *self-assessment* or *self-evaluation* is

appropriate. The current situation resembles what Roeser et al. (2006, as cited in Panadero et al., 2016, p. 810) aptly describe in their study of the types of student self-assessment (SSA): “it seems reasonably clear that SSA is in danger of jingle-jangle fallacies in that different kinds of SSA are given the same name, while similar kinds of SSA are sometimes given different names.”

This article, therefore, offers an overview of commonly used terms for the area of students making judgements on their own performance. It aims to specify the difference between *self-assessment*, *self-evaluation*, and *self-grading*, in order to define the specific uses of these terms.

The focus of this article being teaching and learning English as a foreign language, the most relevant supporting sciences to take into account when looking for definitions and uses of the terminology in question are psychology and pedagogy. Psychology provides the basis for the understanding of the self and its place in the personal development, including the development of foreign language competence. Pedagogy links the general ideas of language teaching and learning with the area of language assessment and evaluation but also introduces the term *self-grading*.

This article starts with a brief introduction of the terms assessment and evaluation, defining their original meanings and their adaptation in the fields of psychology and pedagogy. Further, the terms self-assessment, self-evaluation and self-grading are specified for the area of foreign language teaching and learning. This is by no means the ultimate guide to selecting the terminology. Nevertheless, it suggests one possible approach to the decision-making process.

1 The origins of *assessment* and *evaluation*

Originally, the meaning of the two terms, *assessment* and *evaluation*, was very similar. The 16th century term assessment originally stood for the “value of property for tax purposes” (Online Etymology Dictionary, n.d.), while the 18th century term *evaluation* meant “the action of appraising” (Online Etymology Dictionary, n.d.). In both cases, the outcome was a numerical estimate. However, these terms changed their meaning in due course and their use became more common outside the taxation and sales field. There are currently several definitions of *assessment* and *evaluation* available. From a general point of view, the online Cambridge Dictionary (n.d.) offers the

following definitions of the two terms: *assessment* is “the process of testing, and making a judgment about, someone’s knowledge, ability, skills, etc., or the judgment that is made,” while *evaluation* is “the process of judging or calculating the quality, importance, amount, or value of something.”

To draw the distinction between *assessing* and *evaluating*, it is important to know what is being judged. Therefore, the terms learning *product* and learning *process* need to be clarified. Rephrasing Spada’s (1987, p. 137) definitions of language learning programme product and process to reflect the learner-centred take on the terms, the *product* will be understood here as that which the learner produces in terms of language learning and the *process* as what the learner accomplishes in terms of learning practices and procedures. The product and process of learning form the objects of judgements and, therefore, will eventually determine the terminology to be used.

Narrowing the field of assessment and evaluation by restricting the agent making judgements, *self-assessment* and *self-evaluation* are the processes of students making judgments on their own learning products or their own learning processes. Before the details of further distinction are delved into, however, the use of *self-assessment* and *self-evaluation* from the point of view of psychology as a supporting science is clarified, then the point of pedagogy is taken into account and finally the view of teaching and learning English as a foreign language.

2 Self-assessment and self-evaluation in psychology

The concept of the Self is based on the widely used definition of *I-self* and *Me-self* as presented by William James (1892). James proposed that “the total self of me, being as it were duplex, partly known and partly knower, partly object and partly subject, must have two aspects discriminated in it, of which for shortness we may call one the *Me*, and the other the *I*.” (1892, p. 176). *Me*, therefore, is the object and *I* is the subject of attention. James (1892, p. 187) established an equation to describe how a person determines their own worth, which he calls *self-esteem*:

$$\text{Self-esteem} = \frac{\text{Success}}{\text{Pretensions}}$$

The equation illustrates the way we estimate our value, i.e. self-esteem. The pretensions in the equation represent the expectations we set for ourselves. Self-esteem is formed based on the ratio between the success we experience and the expectations we set for ourselves. This means, each individual can influence their self-esteem by setting realistic goals for themselves and succeeding to reach those. The explanation appears to be close to the definitions of assessment and evaluation as already introduced in this article, i.e. valuing or appraising of something. The something, in this case, being the individual carrying out the valuing.

The ideas proposed by James have been expanded on, rather than contested, by symbolic interactionists such as C. D. Cooley and G. H. Mead (Blatný, 2010). Current research still operates with a Self as the subject and a Self as the object, two functions of the *self-system* which are different but not separate. Such research provides the basis for the study of self-regulation and, consequently, self-assessment.

The concept of self-regulation is also taken up by Mareš (2013), who works within the field of pedagogical psychology and sees the concept as a continual characteristic a learner might possess. The recurring theme in Mareš's (2013) account of self-regulation is the importance of aims, which learners set for themselves and, using self-selected strategies, monitor their own progress towards these aims by means of clear criteria. Mareš aptly comments that "[r]esearchers agree that [in terms of developmental changes of learner's self-regulation] it is a lifelong process" (2013, p. 235). This view is clearly in line with James's note of "our self-feeling is in our power" (James, 1892, p. 188).

The recurring theme of monitoring one's own work, i.e. paying close attention to the completed work, and using clear criteria to decide how well the work was completed, is important for understanding how close the terms *self-assessment* and *self-evaluation* actually are, but also how close they appear to be to other terms, such as *self-regulation* and *self-reflection*. Blatný (2010, p. 125) defines self-assessment as "the image a person has of themselves in terms of values and competences." Self-assessment, according to Blatný (2010), is the outcome of the monitoring of own activities and comparing the results, using set personal criteria, within the given social context. To be able to self-assess, a learner first needs to reflect on their work and, based on the purpose of the specific self-assessment, to recognise their

own strong and weak points. Once the learner is able to reflect on their work and can use clear criteria to recognise its worth, i.e. to assess, they are then able to regulate their learning to achieve their goals.

As shown above, the view of psychology is concerned mainly with the competences, the ability to achieve goals rather than the journey towards the goals and the way of acquiring the competences. In terms already defined, this view seems mainly focused on the product of learning rather than the process. This is further supported by a Dörnyei's framework (2009), which describes the various aspects of learners acquiring the abilities of making their own judgements about their own language production.

From the point of view of the psychology of foreign language acquisition, therefore, the process of self-monitoring is central to the framework prepared by Dörnyei (2009). The author builds on the ideas of Markus and Nurius (1986, as cited in Dörnyei, 2009) to define: "Ideal L2 Self, which is the L2-facet of one's ideal self"; "Ought-to L2 Self, which concerns the attributes that one believes one ought to possess to meet expectations and to avoid possible negative outcomes"; and "L2 Learning Experience, which concerns situated, 'executive' motives related to the immediate learning environment and experience" (Dörnyei, 2009, pp. 217–218). Dörnyei works with the concept of the learners monitoring both their learning process and performance to achieve the desired results, which offers a steppingstone to self-assessment and self-evaluation.

3 Self-assessment and self-evaluation in pedagogy

Trying to find the distinction between *assessment* and *evaluation* in pedagogy, or to determine whether there is a distinction, indeed, appears to be topic of some discussion as the terminology is determined by the perceived meaning of the phrase. It is, therefore, important to explore the meaning of *self-assessment* and *self-evaluation* in specific contexts. An early definition by Scriven (1981) actually states that *assessment* is "often used as a synonym for evaluation" (p. 12).

Reviews of pedagogical literature and research of self-assessment frequently include the key terms of *self-assessment* and *self-evaluation*, without further distinction made between the two. Some authors of reviews acknowledge work done on clarifying the distinction between the two terms, for example,

Brown and Harris (2013) admit that “distinguishing between assessment and evaluation has become commonplace in the [assessment for learning] community” (p. 369) but they make it clear that they do not share the same view: “it is our position that there is little merit in creating a dichotomy between assessment and evaluation” (p. 369).

The close relationship between the activity of assessing and evaluating is demonstrated in current research, for example, by Panadero et al. (2016): “Student self-assessment (SSA) most generally involves a wide variety of mechanisms and techniques through which students describe (i.e. assess) and possibly assign merit or worth to (i.e. evaluate) the qualities of their own learning process and products” (p. 804). Referring to a number of studies, Panadero et al. (2016) consider the types of self-assessment and the various methods of including *self-assessment* in the teaching and learning process to determine the correct terminology. Panadero et al. (2016) use the term self-assessment as the central term, the one which refers to the main activity of students’ making judgements about their learning process and/or product. The authors provide various typologies of self-assessment, e.g. knowledge interest or student-teacher involvement typologies. They draw on their extensive review to distinguish, among many others, *self-grading*: “upon request by the teacher (e.g., via task) or a system (e.g., via computer) students assess at a surface level and mainly with summative purposes” (Panadero et al., 2016, p. 807). From this point of view, *self-grading* can be seen as simplified self-assessment or, perhaps, a preparatory stage of *self-assessment*, a step before students learn to work with criteria and delve into details of the language produced, i.e. their language product.

For further distinction in the terminology, it is important to consider learner self-regulation, learner autonomy and learner motivation. Each of these areas offers a unique take on the learners’ ability to judge their own work and will be looked at in detail.

3.1 *Learner self-regulation and self-assessment*

Andrade (2010) argues that “self-regulation and self-assessment are complementary processes that can lead to marked improvements in academic achievement and autonomy” (p. 3). According to the author, “self-regulated learning is a dynamic process of striving to meet learning goals by generating, monitoring, and modifying one’s own thoughts, feelings, actions and, to some

degree, context” (p. 5). In her later work, Andrade (2019) works with the term self-assessment as the overarching term for the student appraisal of their work. She points to a close link between *self-assessment* and *self-regulated* learning. Andrade’s main focus is on the purpose of self-assessment, and she stipulates that for summative purposes, self-grading is suitable as the form of self-assessment for the product of learning (2019, p. 3).

Zimmerman (1998) makes the case that *self-evaluation* is an integral part of self-regulated learning which he sees as an essential ability not only for students but for everyone in their daily life. Zimmerman (1998, p. 83) proposes “a cyclical model of self-regulated learning” in which goal setting and strategic planning lead to strategy implementation and monitoring. This is then followed by strategic outcome monitoring which, in turn, feeds into self-evaluation and monitoring. This stage initiates a new cycle of goal setting and strategic planning and so on.

Zimmerman’s choice of *self-evaluation* rather than *self-assessment* may indicate his understanding of *evaluation* as being connected with the process of learning, rather than its product as in the case of Andrade (2019).

3.2 *Autonomous learner and self-assessment*

The interest in learner autonomy is steadily rising. According to Benson (2013, p. 839), “Autonomy refers [...] to a capacity to control important aspects of one’s language learning.”

Richards (n.d., online) puts even more stress on the initiative of the learner in his definition: “Learner autonomy refers to the principle that learners should take an increasing amount of responsibility for what they learn and how they learn it.” He proposes five principles for helping learners to develop autonomy, among which he includes “Encouraging reflection” and suggests the European Language Portfolio as a practical tool for the development of learner autonomy. Such reflection cannot be achieved with the learners’ use of set criteria and monitoring of their own work – the principles of self-assessment and self-evaluation.

While Gardner (2000) describes *self-assessment*, a term he uses consistently throughout the paper, as a process which “refers simply to the mode of administration, i.e., assessments which are self-administered,” (p. 50), the author provides evidence of the benefits (and pitfalls) of practicing

self-assessment for autonomous learners. Gardner accepts Holec's definition of autonomy as "the ability to take charge of one's learning" (Holec, 1981, as cited in Gardner, 2000, p. 20). In this sense, the focus of judgements broadens to include the product of learning as well as the process.

Autonomous learners are, as hinted above, expected to take responsibility for their learning. To do that, they need to monitor their learning and their progress to be able to identify areas for improvement and plan their further learning. In other words, learners look at the *process* of their learning. However, learners also need to know how well they did in a particular performance and, therefore, they judge the *product* of their learning, too.

3.3 *Learning and motivational strategies*

Self-assessment and self-evaluation are often referred to as parts of strategies research. The two main areas in which they appear are learning strategies and motivational strategies.

Oxford et al. (1989) suggest that "good language learners manage their own learning process through metacognitive strategies, such as paying attention, consciously searching for practice opportunities, planning for language tasks, self-evaluating, and self-monitoring" (p. 30). The authors refer to *evaluation* and *self-evaluation* without further explanation for their choice of terminology. In her later article, Oxford (1999) continues to refer to *evaluating* as one of the metacognitive learning strategies learners should acquire to progress towards communicative competence. This seems to point to the focus on the *process* of learning.

Strategies for motivating learners are a topic spanning at least two scientific fields: educational psychology and pedagogy. In his research of strategies to motivate learners of foreign languages, Dörnyei (2001) presents the following definition of the strategies: "Motivational strategies are techniques that promote the individual's goal-related behaviour" (Dörnyei, 2001, p. 28). The author lists *self-assessment* as one of the efficient ways to keep language learners motivated and his use of the terms *self-assessment* and *self-evaluation* is very interesting. Dörnyei (2001) often uses *self-assessment* as a noun but *self-evaluation* as an adjective, for example: "Encourage accurate student *self-assessment* by providing various self-evaluation tools" (p. 134). He also refers to students *evaluating* their language performances, for example: "Goals are not only outcomes to shoot for but also standards by

which students can evaluate their own performance and which mark their progress” (p. 82). Dörnyei does not provide an explanation of the difference he sees between the two terms, if any, but from his use of them, it seems that *self-assessment* refers to the whole process of setting the task, completing it, applying criteria of success, and drawing conclusions for further study. *Self-evaluation*, on the other hand, seems to describe the actual act of applying the criteria only.

4 Self-assessment and self-evaluation in teaching and learning English as a foreign language

There are a number of considerations to be taken into account when determining the most suitable terminology to be used in educational research. Not the least of those is the actual identity of the teaching and learning English as a foreign language (TLEFL). Among clarifications of the supporting sciences and their role in forming this identity, Pířová (2011) stresses the need to distinguish between TLEFL and theories of foreign language acquisition (FLA). The author sees FLA as intentional or incidental language acquisition in any context, whereas TLEFL focuses specifically on the language acquisition within the educational context, taking into consideration the teaching and learning processes. The area of FLA does not concern itself with learner assessment or evaluation and is, therefore, irrelevant for this study. However, there are several reliable sources of information regarding the terminology in the TLEFL field.

4.1 Teaching and learning English as a foreign language and self-assessment

A useful explanation of what self-assessment is can be found in Harris and Brown (2018): “self-assessment is a descriptive and evaluative act carried out by the student concerning his or her own work and academic abilities” (Brown & Harris, 2013, as cited in Harris & Brown, 2018, pp. 6–7). Once more, the adjective *evaluative*, used here to describe the activity of judging own work, appears to confirm that *self-assessment* seems to be used synonymously with *self-evaluation*. The authors accept that the definition does not suit all self-assessment opportunities, but they propose it as suitable for learners who are beginning to develop their self-assessment abilities.

A trustworthy and widely used source of terminology for language assessment which should be included in determining the correct use of *self-assessment* is the Common European Framework of Reference for languages (CEFR). The CEFR was created based on numerous studies and discussions among experts in the language learning, teaching, and assessment fields. Both the original CEFR (2001) and the CEFR Companion Volume (2020) use the term *self-assessment* only, making no reference to *self-evaluation*. It is, therefore, reasonable to assume that the descriptors are to be used to judge the language ability of a learner, i.e. the *product* of language learning, rather than the impact of the course the learner might be attending to improve their competence in the language, i.e. the *process* of learning the target language. The availability of self-assessment grids (CEFR CV, 2020, pp. 177–181) may be seen as proof of such understanding.

To compare, Tsagari et al. (2018) discuss *self-assessment* frequently in their *Handbook of Assessment for Language Teacher*. Interestingly, their definition of self-assessment, i.e. “the involvement of learners in assessment procedures” (p. 217) and their definition of assessment, i.e. “Language assessment is the practice of evaluating the extent to which learning and teaching have been successful, focusing on what learners can do with the language, on their strengths rather than their weaknesses” (p. 184) seem to suggest that, for the authors, assessment is the act of evaluating, similar to other works already mentioned. It may also be noteworthy that the authors consider the success of the teaching and learning *process* to be an integral part of the language learners use of the language, i.e. the *product*.

4.2 Language testing and self-assessment

To complete the teaching and learning English as a foreign language picture, it is useful to consider one more area of research: language testing. As the research of teaching and learning foreign languages grew in importance, the development of testing and specific national/international/specialist examinations became important milestones in determining the learners’ progress and/or achievement.

The Association of Language Testers in Europe (ALTE), which focuses on the quality of testing foreign and second languages, published a *Multilingual glossary of language testing terms* (further referred to as the *Glossary*) in 1998, to help standardise the use of relevant terminology. Their distinction

between *assessment* and *evaluation* is stated clearly: *assessment* is defined as “the measurement of one or more aspects of language proficiency, by means of some test or procedure” (p. 135). Whereas *evaluation* is the “gathering [of] information with the intention of using it as a basis for decision-making. In language testing, evaluation may focus on the effectiveness or impact of a programme of instruction, examination, or project” (p. 144). In other words, in language testing, *assessment* provides information about the learners’ ability to use a specific area of language but *evaluation* informs of how well a programme prepares learners for the test. This would imply, in line with what has already been presented, that *assessment* is the term to be used when referring to the judgement regarding the *product* of language learning, whereas evaluation provides information on the *process*.

In the *Glossary* (1998), the authors also provide definitions for other essential terms within language testing, such as *marking*, with its definition of “assigning a mark to a candidate’s response to a test. This may involve professional judgement, or the application of a mark scheme which lists all acceptable answers” (p. 152); or *grading*, defined as “the process of converting test scores or marks into grades” (p. 146).

The whole hierarchy may, therefore, be summed up as follows: Grades are created by converting test scores into a standardised scale. Usually, these are represented by a letter representing the level of quality of language output. The test scores are the result of a marking process, which is completed by language assessors. The marking, or assigning of marks based on a mark scheme, is completed for a specific instance of assessment, for example a written test, which focuses on a selected language feature or area. Several assessments are commonly conducted over a period of time to provide basis for a longer-term process of evaluation of the teaching/learning process. Such evaluation then provides feedback on the learning process.

The *Glossary* (1998) also offers a definition for the key term of this paper, i.e. *self-assessment*, which is here related to the specific field of language learning. It defines self-assessment thusly: “The process by which a student assesses his/her own level of ability, either by taking a test which can be self-administered, or by means of some other device such as a questionnaire or checklist” (p. 162). The use of *self-assessment*, rather than *self-evaluation*, is consistent with the nature of assessment as defined by the *Glossary* (1998)

and points to the act of self-assessment being focused on a specific language performance conducted by a particular test or procedure.

Mirroring the abovementioned hierarchy of grading – marking – assessing – evaluating, it is possible to create a similar hierarchy involving the learners themselves as the judges. Therefore, *self-grading* can be seen as referring to the students' assigning grades to their work (i.e. the product of the language learning), *self-marking* as describing the act of students using a mark scheme to decide which of their responses are correct and which are not, *self-assessment* as pointing to the use of criteria, whether provided by the teacher or co-created with the teacher, to analyse a specific product of language learning a student produced, and finally, *self-evaluation* as the reflection a student conducts to analyse how effective the process of learning was to achieve the student learning goals.

5 Conclusion

In current research of teaching and learning foreign languages, there seems to be little to no consensus on how different *self-assessment* and *self-evaluation* are and when to use each of the terms. This article aimed to provide an insight into how terminology is used in the research of learners making judgements about their own language performance. The various viewpoints of the supporting sciences of psychology and pedagogy have been presented to introduce the terms *self-assessment* and *self-evaluation* in a general way. This then provided the basis for presenting the terms in the field of teaching and learning English as a foreign language, with the inclusion of the specific term *self-grading*.

The understanding of the terms *self-assessment* and *self-evaluation* appears to be synonymous in the field of psychology, although the meaning and use of the terms in pedagogy starts to offer some distinction, especially that between appraising the product or the process of learning. Also, the term *self-grading* appears in the field of pedagogy, though it is not relevant for psychology. Once the research field is narrowed further to the specific area of teaching and learning English as a foreign language, the three terms show a marked distinction in their meaning and use. *Self-assessment* appears to be mostly relevant when students are asked to analyse a *product of their language learning*, such as an essay they produced. They are encouraged to monitor their spoken or written performance and use set criteria to decide

how well they performed in that particular instance. *Self-evaluation* most commonly describes the analysis of the *language learning process*, be it a language course, a school term of language learning, and so on. Students do not consider one particular language performance but rather analyse their approach to learning, the time spent learning in a formal and/or informal way, and other aspects of learning a language. *Self-grading* is the narrowest of the three terms and refers exclusively to students assigning grades to their own language learning product, based on a list of correct responses rather than complex criteria. The term often implies that there is little to no analysis of the learner's work.

As research on self-assessment and self-evaluation continues, it will be interesting to monitor how the use of the terminology develops and how the meanings of the terms become more refined.

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Sebehodnocení, sebe-evaluace, nebo sebe-známkování: Co je po jméně?

Abstrakt: Schopnost hodnotit vlastní výkon se zdá být čím dál atraktivnějším tématem výzkumu v oblasti výuky a učení se cizímu jazyku. Přestože existuje řada studií, které potvrzují pozitivní vliv této schopnosti na rozvoj řečových dovedností v procesu osvojování cizího jazyka na různých stupních vzdělání, stále zůstávají otázky ohledně terminologie a diskuse nad správným pojmenováním se stále vedou. Cílem tohoto článku je tudíž pokusit se odpovědět na tyto otázky, a to konkrétně: Jak se tato schopnost nazývá, sebehodnocení? Jsou sebehodnocení a sebe-evaluace to samé? Co znamená sebe-známkování? Tento článek nabízí vhled do původu sebehodnocení a sebe-evaluace a jejich rozvoje v oblasti psychologie a pedagogiky. Následně se zaměřuje na použití těchto termínů v oblasti výuky a učení se cizímu jazyku.

Klíčová slova: sebehodnocení, sebe-evaluace, sebe-známkování, rozvoj sebehodnocení