

# The more the merrier? Analysing self-assessment tool set use

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Self-assessment is seen as a crucial component for successful language learning in autonomous settings. Since self-assessment is a metacognitive competence of a language learner, it can be practised and developed by students themselves, and, more importantly, it can also be fostered by language teachers or language advisors. This text describes self-assessment tools and practices that are suggested to students of the English Autonomously course (EA) taught at Masaryk University. The goal of the text is to investigate whether the range of self-assessment options and the tool set offered to students in the course help them to evaluate their language learning in a personalised and effective way.

The term *self-assessment* is defined with regard to this particular course and the course context is shortly described in the second chapter of this text. The third chapter explains the individual self-assessment tools and how they are presented in the course. The fourth chapter compares and analyses how individual students approach the tool set and leads into a conclusion.

## 1 Background

### 1.1 Definition of self-assessment

The term *self-assessment* has been defined in multiple ways and in various ranges. This text is based on the definition by Panadero et al. (2016) who sees *self-assessment* as 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 processes and products” (p. 804). Therefore, this article describes steps students take to self-assess their language skills as well as to evaluate their previous language learning experience. Both the terms *self-assessment* and *self-evaluation* are going to be used to portray the various tools and their complementary functions in the English Autonomously course. Furthermore, the text follows Andrade’s

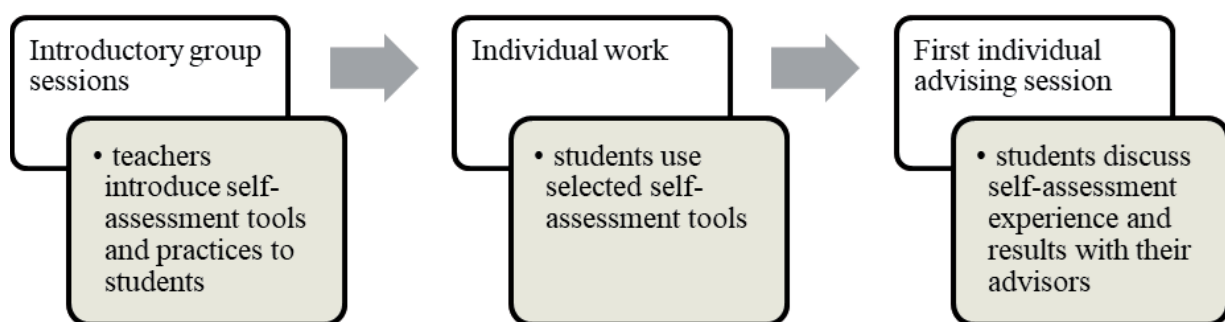
broad understanding of this concept which does “include *self-assessment* of one’s abilities, processes, and products” (2019, p. 2). As a result, the term self-assessment can be applied to the complete set of tools and activities that are catered to students in the investigated course to help them to “inform adjustments to processes and products that deepen learning and enhance performance” (Andrade, 2019, p. 2).

### 1.2 Context: English Autonomously course (EA)

English Autonomously is an elective course at Masaryk University which is open to students of all faculties, and it aims at developing their language skills as well as their metacognition. The course gives students a chance to identify their individual language learning needs, to set their own goals, to create their study plans and to include activities and materials of their choice. To be able to make all those self-regulating steps, they are supported by a team of Language Centre teachers and the course provides them with a clear framework for learning in an autonomous way. The framework consists of two introductory group sessions, a series of individual advising sessions and a set of tools; all the framework components are provided in the target language as explained later. This article focuses on the initial stage of the course when self-assessment plays a crucial role. The scheme below shows the sequence of self-assessment activities at the beginning of the course.

#### Figure 1

##### *English Autonomously course – initial stage*

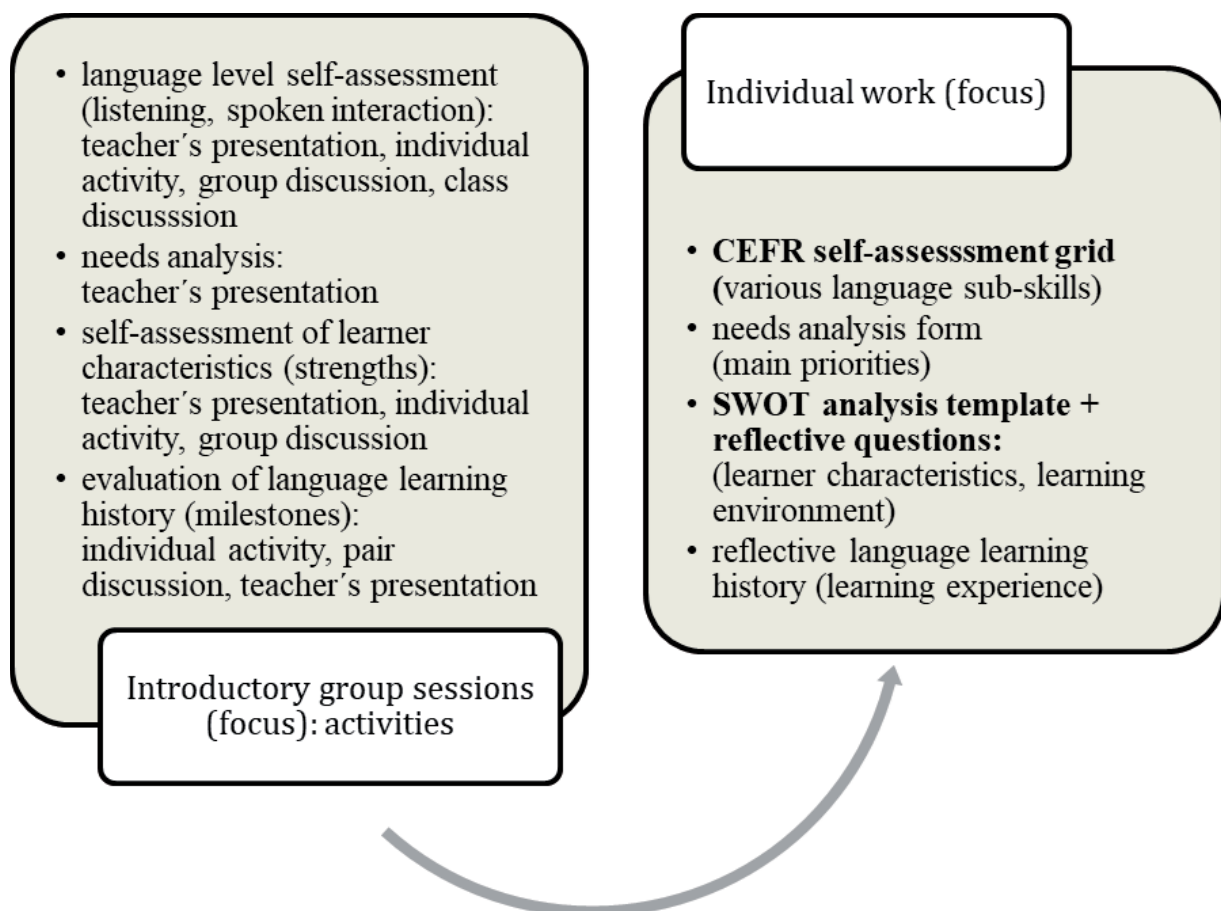


## 2 Self-assessment tools and practices in EA

This chapter describes the set of self-assessment tools that is recommended to all English Autonomously students, it explains their origin and purpose, and shows how they are launched through (group) activities during the introductory sessions. In chapter 4, it will be investigated how two selected students approach these (optional) tools when working with them on individual basis and whether the tool set provides them with diversified support. Figure 2 shows which self-assessment activities are included in the group sessions and which options students have to self-assess their learning while working individually. The recommended tools for individual work are highlighted.

**Figure 2**

*Self-assessment activities and tools in EA*



It needs to be pointed out that self-assessment, as well as other meta-cognitive and self-regulating activities are only conducted in English in the course. The fact that target language use is tightly interconnected with self-regulation corresponds to the double aim of the English Autonomously course. It also reflects the underlying principle of language learner autonomy development. As explained by Little (2022), when learners plan, implement, monitor, and evaluate their own learning in English, i.e., “by exercising agency in the target language they gradually develop a proficiency that is reflective as well as communicative” (p. 64). It will be shown in this text that self-assessment in the EA course entails using the target language in introspective, reflective activities and in interactive, communicative situations too.

### 2.1 *Self-assessment of language skills*

The first tool that is offered to EA students is the CEFR self-assessment grid<sup>1</sup> because most of them are familiar with the system of A1 – C2 language levels. At the introductory session, a paper version of the grid is handed out and the teachers explain the concept of “can do statements.” The aim is to make students realize that their current language level can be described in a more precise and detailed way and that this description will typically cover more than one CEFR level. As authors of the *New CEFR Companion Volume* suggest, the teachers “encourage users to develop differentiated profiles” (p. 38).

During the introductory session, the students are asked to focus on descriptors for two selected subskills, usually spoken interaction and listening, and to identify those descriptors that apply to their current competences. Then, the students decide which level best describes their respective skills and they share the results of this mini self-assessment activity anonymously using an online tool e.g. Menti or Google forms. The overall results are shown to the students, and they are invited to comment on them in small groups. In group discussions, students discuss the level differences between the two skills or between their individual and group profiles. In the follow-up class discussion, the idea of differentiated profiles is emphasized again by the teacher. After the introductory session, the students are recommended to continue working with the self-assessment grid or with more specific descriptors, and to finalize their profiles. In chapter 4, examples of these CEFR based individual language level profiles will be discussed.

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<sup>1</sup> Assessment grid – English (<https://rm.coe.int/CoERMPublicCommonSearchServices/DisplayDCTMContent?documentId=090000168045bb52>)

## 2.2 *Needs analysis*

The second aspect of their language learning situation that the students are asked to self-evaluate is their needs. When designing the English Autonomously course, the team was lucky as they could build on the expertise of the colleagues from Language Centre at University of Helsinki. They shared their best practices gained from running Autonomous Learning Modules (ALMS) and the EA team was allowed to use ALMS tools too including the Needs Analysis form. This form is listing typical students' needs both in a short- and long-term perspective and was slightly adapted by the EA team (see Appendix 1).

When the tool is distributed to the students during the first intro session, it is introduced only shortly, but the idea of prioritising their needs is emphasized. Furthermore, the students are reminded that they can only address a certain number of goals in the short-term perspective. Working with this form should support self-assessment of current and future needs which according to Murray, “provides insight towards learning goals to get closer to their ideal selves” (2011). However, the example listed in chapter 4 shows that even if the tool is clearly structured and easy to use, some students need additional support in bridging their most immediate needs with their ideal selves.

## 2.3 *Self-assessment of strengths, weaknesses, opportunities and threats*

The third perspective that the students are invited to evaluate is their approach to language learning in general, they are encouraged to evaluate their internal (language) learning characteristics, to assess themselves as learners and also to consider external factors that affect their learning. An existing tool, the SWOT analysis template, was further developed by the EA team, so that it is more supportive for the students. For each of the four template sections (strengths, weaknesses, opportunities, threats), a set of reflective questions was added to lead students into thinking about their learning preferences and limitations (see Appendix 2).

During the introductory session, the SWOT tool is introduced through a short activity. The students first identify their personal strengths as learners and then exchange information on these “special powers” in small groups, presenting them as resources they can draw on both individually and as a group. This group sharing should initiate deeper reflection and introspection as well as promote the interactive aspect of self-regulated learning. As

explained by Ushioda (2006) it is important to create “a social environment that supports learners’ sense of autonomy and intrinsic motivation to pursue optimal challenges through the zone of proximal development” (p. 15). When they later meet in group activities, the students should be aware of which learning strengths they can offer so that the whole group could benefit. After the intro session, the students are expected to go further and deeper in self-evaluating their weaknesses and assessing their learning opportunities and threats. As the example in the following chapter illustrates, if they choose to use the SWOT tool, the additional questions help them to better self-assess both internal and external factors that impact their learning.

#### *2.4 Language learning history*

In contrast to the previously mentioned form-based, clearly structured self-assessment tools, evaluation of students’ learning history was first included into the course as an open writing activity. The EA team soon noticed that many students have problems approaching this open task. When asked to write their language learning histories, the students would often only produce a chronological overview of individual stages in their language learning history. However, the aim of this task is to initiate a process of self-reflection and it should result in a text which evaluates their previous learning experience.

To support the move into evaluation and reflection, a preparational activity was designed for the introductory session. The students are asked to look back at their language learning experience, to perceive it as a journey and to produce an image representing their journey. The teachers make sure that this activity is introduced in an open and safe way, the students are encouraged to be creative and to express themselves in a visual form that is most appropriate for them, it is suggested that they can produce simple pictures, use symbols or metaphors, graphs, or schemes, etc. The students then comment and reflect on their various images in small groups, some examples are discussed in an open class forum. The discussion leads into teacher’s recommendations on how they should transform their images into reflective texts. The teacher aims to point out that they need to go beyond the facts when writing their language learning histories. They are advised to comment on their images, to reflect on the depicted events, to explain the related emotions, and to interpret the meaning of factors forming their language learning experience. The following chapter compares a sketch and

a text produced by a selected student and explains how they complement each other.

### **3 Analysis: Self-assessment tool set use**

This chapter discusses how two students (A and B) with different language learning profiles approached the above-described self-assessment tool set. Their use of the same tools is compared to find out whether the choice of tools supports them in an individualized way when self-assessing their language learning. Students A and B were selected to represent diverse types of English Autonomously population and to investigate whether the tool set provides them with diversified support. Student A is enrolled into a bachelor programme at Faculty of Social Sciences, student B is a Master student at Faculty of Natural Sciences; their entrance language levels varied and as it will be shown below, they approached the tools with various level of learner autonomy too.

When working with the CEFR grid, both students highlighted the most advanced statements that they found corresponding to their level. Student A was able to assess his skills by using a mix of B1, B1+ and B2 descriptors, he even excluded specific descriptors' details that he had not considered appropriate. As a result, he created an individualised language profile. On the other hand, student B completely relied on descriptors for B2 which correspond to the officially declared level of her secondary school leaving exam. Since she accepted them all without any adaptation, the profile very probably did not reflect neither her individualized skill set nor her language learning experience since the exam. By comparing the two profiles, it can be suggested that student B's ability to self-assess her language competences was lower than student A's. The two examples illustrate that CEFR self-assessment grid can lead students in creating personalized profiles, but those who are less advanced or less experienced in self-assessment need to be supported in going beyond the basic level scale and in using more specific can-do statements. In the EA course, such additional support can be offered in the individual advising session.

Interestingly, student B made an additional note on her self-assessment grid, she added a small arrow pointing to C1 level in spoken interaction and marked it as her "next step". Thus, she managed to relate her language level self-assessment closely to needs analysis and goal setting. When she was later

working with the needs analysis form, she incorporated this observation, and emphasized the item *holding social conversations* among the four short-term needs that she selected. This indicates that she is able to identify and prioritise her needs and the EA tools supported her in doing so. In contrast, student A experienced some difficulties in identifying his immediate needs. Using the needs analysis form, he identified all the listed skills as useful and selected twenty-two of the items as skills he needed immediately (now). Such a wide selection would not help in setting goals or designing a study plan for a semester; thus, it can be concluded that student A's ability to prioritise his needs was rather low. It was during the individual advising sessions that the student was able to consult his needs and to gain additional support in prioritising from his advisor. Eventually, the student selected four academic sub-skills which are inter-related (*listening to lectures and talks, taking notes, taking part in group discussions, giving mini presentations*) and highlighted them as "acute needs". His example shows that some students need more explanation and guidance to fully benefit from using the needs analysis tool.

Both students worked with the SWOT tool during the introduction session, but only student A decided to employ the template for his individual self-assessment. He filled all four sections with short statements, besides the language skills e.g., "speaking only about basic topics", his points reflect upon his personal characteristics "ambitious character", "bad time management" and his motivation for learning "need of the English language" too. In each section, he provided answers to two or three leading questions which were relevant for him, and there are logical connections to his previously conducted needs analysis as well as to the CEFR based language level self-assessment. Thus, student A demonstrated that he is able to use the tool to evaluate his learning process and to self-assess him as a learner. Student B opted not to use the SWOT template for her self-assessment, but as it will be shown below, she carefully conducted an analysis of her previous language learning experience using a different tool.

As for her language learning history (LLH), student B created a simple, yet informative image of a plant representing her growth as a learner during the introductory session, and she discussed it with other students. Student A decided not to get involved in this activity at the introductory session and he wrote his language learning history without this preparational stage. The text he submitted was quite long (378 words), but it referred not only



to English (182 words), but to German, Spanish and French languages too. Thus, his account of English language learning was rather superficial and descriptive. The following sample demonstrates that there are only minimal reflective or evaluative comments in student A's description of his secondary school experience<sup>2</sup>.

I continued with English language at secondary school of course, there was the same problem ... unfortunately – a new teacher every year. Last teacher we had was without personal approach and we spent lot of lessons watching tv series friends or reading English texts together, top of this were long and useless homeworks during distance-learning.

The reflective moments in student A's text focus mostly on teachers and learning content, they do not evaluate his learning experience.

Student B's account of her language learning history is longer (498 words), and it only concerns the English language. It can be considered not only more detailed, but also more reflective and evaluative which is demonstrated by the following sample also commenting on a secondary school teacher:

When I was in secondary school, I had to rely on myself more as our teacher didn't show much enthusiasm about teaching. I started to watch videos on YouTube more and I came across some books providing simplified reading. This helped me improve my understanding as well as grammar. Later I chose English as a voluntary subject. At these lessons I met other more experienced students. Once again, I felt like our teacher was passionate about his subject. He also helped me with preparation for an English Olympiad. Although I was very nervous and felt like I knew nothing, I performed quite well in the written test, which boosted my confidence. At that time, I also started to watch British shows like Doctor Who and Sherlock. While I really enjoyed following the plot and characters, I also improved my listening skills and learnt some new words.

The sample shows that Student B is able to reflect on her learning experience in more depth. When comparing her LLH text to the original image, an extension of insight can be observed. The image suggests that there were two "branches", two ways of learning English at secondary school. The text explains in more detail that while the school experience was not satisfactory, the voluntary learning was more beneficial. When contrasted to student A's text, her reflective comments also concern the student herself, her emotions are more often mentioned, and her learning outcomes are more clearly

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<sup>2</sup> All samples of students' texts are presented in their original, unrevised form in this article.

evaluated. The comparison shows that a deeper self-reflection of learning processes is a difficult task that needs certain scaffolding. Students A and B each decided to use a different tool to help them reflect on their language learning experience, furthermore, both of them had an opportunity to attend an advising session and to focus on learning history reflection then. Their various approaches to evaluating their learning histories suggest that a choice of optional support elements in the course provides students with additional scaffolding.

## 4 Conclusion

The aim of the text was to describe the practices and tools that students of English Autonomously are encouraged to use for self-assessment and to analyse whether the tool set provide them with appropriate support to evaluate their learning situations in a diversified way. It was shown how the four basic tools (CEFR grid, Needs Analysis form, SWOT template and LLH) are presented during the introductory sessions of the course and that individual students choose to use them differently afterwards. The students compared in this text demonstrated different levels of various metacognitive sub-skills, e.g., the ability to prioritise needs or ability to create an individualised language profile when working with the tool set. Based on their comparison, it was observed that providing a choice of self-assessment tools and practices is meaningful as it helps to compensate for students' lack of specific self-regulating skills. It can be recommended that the choice and options available to students are well explained. Furthermore, it was confirmed that it is beneficial if self-assessment tools are employed in communicative activities in classroom or in advising sessions. This approach to promoting self-regulation is explained by Tassinari (2016): "Since learners may not be used to this reflection, it is the duty of the adviser and/or teacher to choose settings and pedagogic practices which enhance reflection, and which always take into account the needs and attitudes of the learners." (p. 130) This text was analysing whether, by combining a variety of activities and providing a choice of tools, the self-assessment stage of the English Autonomously course is efficient. Following the examples described in this text, it can be stated that "The more the merrier", because it was the range of self-assessment practices that helped the students successfully self-evaluate their language learning experience, create their language profiles, identify their needs, and become more aware about themselves as language learners.

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## Appendix A: Needs analysis checklist

### PRIORITISING YOUR NEEDS

In the table below, tick the skills you see yourself needing most at present or in the future.

LANGUAGE FOCUS	NOW	FUTURE
READING		
Reading academic articles or texts		
Reading literature		
Reading texts in Internet		
Reading newspapers or magazines		
Reading advertisements and public announcements		
WRITING		
Writing essays, report		
Writing academic articles or texts		
Creative writing		
Writing CV		
Writing a diary		
Writing formal letters		
Filling in forms		
Writing informal letters		
Writing texts on the Internet		
Writing memos and messages		
Writing newspaper articles		
Writing scholarship or grant proposals		
Writing for talks and presentations		
LISTENING		
Listening to lectures, talks and presentations		
Listening to conversations or discussions		
Listening for entertainment (e.g., TV, films, videos)		
Listening to interviews		

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LANGUAGE FOCUS	NOW	FUTURE
Listening to news on TV or radio		
Listening to songs or music		
Listening on the Internet		
Listening on the telephone		
<b>SPEAKING</b>		
Holding social conversations		
Taking part in group discussions (e.g., tutorials)		
Having interviews		
Giving talks and presentations		
Holding telephone conversations		
Attending meetings		
Communicating when travelling (e.g., airports, hotels)		
<b>OTHER NEEDS</b>		

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## Appendix B: SWOT analysis template

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*strengths*

*weaknesses*

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*opportunities*

*threats*

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## **SWOT ANALYSIS QUESTIONS**

### **STRENGTHS**

- What are you good at when you are learning a language?
- What do you like about languages (even your native one)?
- What is your greatest achievement in terms of learning languages? How did you achieve it? Did you enjoy the process?
- What personal strengths (characteristics) could you use for learning English?
- What general learning strategies you are good at could you use for English?

### **WEAKNESSES**

- What problems do you typically encounter when learning languages?
- What do you hate when learning a language?
- What do you find boring?
- What personal weakness could stop you from speaking better English? Can you turn it into a strength?

### **OPPORTUNITIES**

- What is your inspiration/ motivation for learning English?
- Are there any people you can “use”?
- Where can you plunge more into English?
- What are your passions that you could follow in English?
- How can you increase the percentage of speaking English in your life?

### **THREATS**

- What are the biggest obstacles on your way to better English?
- Are you sure you cannot do anything about them?
- When you were learning a language last time, what was most difficult?
- Do you lack anything in order to be successful in learning English?
- Look deep – who says you are not good at learning languages, speaking etc.? How do they know? Can you find one example when this was not true?