Contributions and controversies of self-assessment to the development of writing skill

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Abstract: The current study investigated how self–assessment activity contributes to the development of EFL student writing skills. This study used qualitative and quantitative approaches to explore how in-service students develop their writing skill through this assessment. A total of 120 third-year students registered for taking writing course were purposively sampled. Pre and post intervention questionnaires were used to collect data from the all 120 subjects and focus group discussions were conducted with 10 subjects. Observation during the self-assessment activities was also among the tools used to collect data. The findings show that in-service students' writing proficiencies can be improved through self-assessment activities. However, factors, including students' awareness, their past practices and the difficulties related to the nature of writing can influence negatively on their performance.

Keywords: Essay writing, feedback, in-service students, self-assessment

Kontribusi dan kontroversi penilaian diri terhadap pengembangan keterampilan menulis

Abstrak: Studi saat ini menyelidiki bagaimana aktivitas penilaian diri berkontribusi pada pengembangan keterampilan menulis mahasiswa bahasa inggris. Penelitian ini menggunakan pendekatan kualitatif dan kuantitatif untuk mengeksplorasi bagaimana mahasiswa dalam jabatan mengembangkan keterampilan menulis mereka melalui penilaian diri. Sebanyak 120 mahasiswa tahun ketiga yang mendaftar untuk mengambil mata kuliah menulis diambil sebagai sampel secara purposive. Kuesioner pra dan pasca intervensi digunakan untuk mengumpulkan data dari 120 subjek dan diskusi kelompok terfokus dilakukan dengan 10 subjek. Observasi selama kegiatan penilaian diri juga merupakan salah satu alat yang digunakan untuk mengumpulkan data. Temuan menunjukkan bahwa kemampuan menulis mahasiswa dalam jabatan dapat ditingkatkan melalui kegiatan penilaian diri. Namun, faktor-faktor termasuk kesadaran masiswa, praktik masa lalu mereka, dan kesulitan yang terkait dengan sifat menulis dapat memengaruhi kinerja mereka secara negatif.

Kata Kunci: Penulisan esai, umpan balik, mahasiswa dalam jabatan, penilaian diri

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INTRODUCTION

Writing skill in higher education is the common medium for assignments, proposals, research works, homework and reports. So, this literacy at higher education is important for students' progress and achievement as writing is often used to evaluate students' mastery of disciplinary course content (Mazgutova & Hanks, 2021). Its importance is not only to master English language but also to be successful in learning other field of study where English is the medium of instruction. For example, Beccaria et al. (2019) found writing as an important tool to communicate and to be successful in academic achievements in different field of study. In order to help students enhance their writing skills, therefore, taking part in assessment activity could be one of the ways to support them as it is an integral part of learning. Involving students in self-assessment activity, in particular, may help writers dwell on, assess and amend their own writing and by doing so, the self-assessors improve the piece of writing being dealt with and gets the skills for later use.

With the changing conceptions of teaching and learning, there is a need to develop assessment approaches that give students the opportunity to monitor and assess their own writing processes (Shepard, 2019; Zekarias, 2022). Ahmad et al. 2020) also asserted that within a constructivist framework, assessments of student learning should be interwoven with teaching. So, in order to assess students' learning proficiency and knowledge, it is generally acknowledged that educators need to use a variety of assessment methods. Reddy (2019) suggests strategies such as summarizing, note-making, asking questions, rubrics to evaluate success on a task or other types of self-evaluation help learners to learn how to learn.

Besides, it could be possible to motivate learners to be responsible for their learning and contribute to develop their writing skills through involving them in assessment activities. Thus, students need metacognitive skills in order to be able to reflect on their own and others perspectives. These changes in the current views on learning lead the rethinking of the nature of assessment. Indeed, currently, there is a large agreement within the field of education that learning should be in congruence with assessment (Kiliç-Çakmak, 2010). This has led to the assessment culture which is moving from testing to assessments and from isolated to integrated assessment activities. This in turn urges the involvement of students in the assessment and finally leading them to develop their autonomous learning.

Because of the close relationship between assessment and learning, there are many studies carried out previously on alternative assessments in relation to approaches to learning, learner autonomy and the perceptions of teachers and learners towards involving learners in assessment process. Alek et al. (2020) study addresses the topic of self-assessment as a way to link the gap between teachers and student perception of the assessment process and as a way to foster students taking charge of their learning. As to these academics, self-assessment to be effective, it should be carried out on the continuous basis and the teachers should be trained on how to guide the self-assessors.

It is self-evident that the way teachers assess and give feedback affects students' self-esteem, interests and how they learn. The alternative assessments like self-

assessment can motivate students to be engaged in the activities and foster a better approach to learning (Sharma et al., 2016). The key benefit of this assessment is the integration of learning and assessment. Because the focus of teaching-learning process these days is on the student, rather than the teacher, involving students in their writing assessment activities is thought to help students construct their knowledge of their writing skill.

Through self-assessment, students learn checking their progress in the process of writing (Barksdale, 2018). It also provides learners with personalized feedback on the use of their learning approaches and specific learning methods. There are some more reasons why academics support self-assessment to be used in teaching-learning environment. First, it is used as instrument for life-long learning after finishing formal studies. Lifelong learning requires self-assessment. Fathi et al. (2019) assert that self-assessment is used for reflection upon one's own work and it equips students to evaluate their own performance. As to Li (2018) self-assessment requires re-working throughout life and this in turn needs being an effective lifelong assessor. One of the ways of examining the efficacy of assessment practices for enhancing lifelong learning is to evaluate its sustainability beyond its immediate practice. Lifelong learning is increasingly used as a basis for student self-assessment in higher institution (Sellers & Neff, 2019). Likewise, Choy et al. (2021) add that self-assessment allows students to form the habit of personal reflection in lifelong learning.

Second, self-assessment practices train students to make their own judgments of their learning in order to utilize the same skills when pursuing learning outside the higher education institution. At the same time, the introduction of the practices forces students to examine their existing outlooks to their learning roles (Kızıl & Yumru, 2019). Jafarigohar (2020) perceived that self-assessment opportunities allowed their students to gain more confidence to in guiding and gauging their future learning.

Third, self-assessment helps us to empower students. In a traditional assessment, students typically have little or no saying at the setting of assignments, let alone in the marking of them. Too often, particularly in the recent past, teachers act alone. This situation readily gives rise to problems relating to marker reliability and student discontent (González Pérez & Trevino, 2019). Self-assessment practices can be also used as a means of teachers sharing their power so that students exercise teachers' power for themselves. This allows students to practice teachers' power fully engaged in making amendments on their work (Fathi & Khodabakhsh, 2019).

Fourth, it may help teachers to reduce their work load (Rämö et al., 2022). For example, a teacher cannot give feedback to each learner for his/her written work frequently if the class is large. So, self-assessment allows diversity of learners to participate in the activity at their own pace, experience and backgrounds. Farooq et al. (2020) call self-assessment is a self-monitoring technique.

Fifth, self-assessment has a motivating benefit. Being aware of showing progress, students are motivated for further learning. As a result of practicing student self-assessment, as Arefian (2022) noticed, a change in student and tutor attitude and self-assessment tasks can inspire students to take charge of one's learning. Among its many benefits, the self-assessment process provides students with a significant opportunity to receive useful feedback to improve future performances. This contention is supported by

Nieminen et al. (2021) who found evidence in the literature that student involvement in assessment brought about unspecified educational/learning benefits.

On the whole, self-assessment has both strengths and weaknesses. It improves learning and it is a means to understand better for what purpose the students are doing and have done a given activity or work (Zhang, 2021). With regard to the weaknesses, there are doubts that some students may not be able to pinpoint their strong and weak aspects of their work (Gazza et al., 2018). So, the development of self-assessment skills requires support from lecturer and working with peers as part of cooperative work. Nieminen (2022) found that working with a lecturer compared to the only individual's self-assessment, integrated instructor's feedback helped students to make more amendments. Helping students to internalize and use feedback from diverse sources is an important aspect of self-regulation and co-regulation (Xiao & Yang, 2019). This notion has the implication of accompanying self-assessment with peer and co-assessment so as to get effective feedback and learning. The other problems of this type of assessment, if students lack awareness on the purpose, include: reliability, validity and reluctance from the students, considering that it is teachers' job. Here, the role of teachers so as to avoid the drawbacks, include: raising awareness, providing guidance and helping learners understand the significance of its effects (Pop & Khampirat, 2019).

As a final point, to encourage student centred learning, therefore, giving an opportunity for students to be engaged in reflective learning and self-assessment is very vital (Omarakly & Tamer, 2021). They asserts that reflective learning, accompanied by self-assessment, makes students aware of their own learning, especially in how and what of their learning through the use of criteria which helps the self-assessors to guide the activity and make it more feasible.

However, there are arguments on using alternative assessments. For example, focusing on the importance of the self-assessment, it has strongly been argued that self-assessment is an integral part of autonomous learning Biskri and Laiche (2022) strongly uphold that without this activity, there cannot be student autonomy. Self-assessment promotes taking charge of one's own learning. But, if only the teacher takes the responsibility to give feedback to the students' written work, without involving students, they become passive receivers. Besides, as Tseng and Geng (2022) claims, students must be given plenty of opportunities to be engaged in their writing process. It is because they learn little or nothing when the teachers provide correct forms for the students' writings. Concerning students' involvement in assessment in general, however, some previous studies, for example, Arefian (2022) noted that subjectivity may apply both to self- and peer-assessment practices. However, careful guidance on the marking can ensure that all markers apply previously agreed criteria in a consistent way.

In EFL context, despite student writing has got due attention, particularly in relation to the contribution of the assessment for providing feedback practices, the process of developing the skill is still very complex. It is because in order to develop student writing and feedback, there are a number of challenges particularly with respect to assessing student writing. This, in turn, has raised questions about the roles that students play in enhancing their writing skill through taking responsibility to learn (Franco León, 2021; Husain et al., 2021). Although involving students in assessment was thought to solve the problem, this also caused the abovementioned controversies on alternative assessments.

In addition, the context where the students take writing course like distance courses which in-service students take may not be convenient for teachers to assess and give formative feedback.

In general, in order to gain better understanding of how self-assessments on developing the students' writing skills and to implement them appropriately in our educational settings, particularly in the higher education, the current study aims to examine how this assessment impact student writing skills. The constructivists' view of learning emphasizes the integration of assessment and instruction, and the innovations of new assessments are aligned to constructivist and socio-constructivist learning theories, in which the learner is an active partner in the process of learning and assessment. Constructivist theories and practices go together with a shift from assessing for evaluation to assessing for learning sake. The current uses of alternative assessments are, therefore, aimed at integrating assessment and learning through the involvement of students as active participants in the assessment tasks which are authentic, meaningful and engaging (Sambell & Sambell, 2019). Shah (2019) describes the authentic activities that students do in a constructivist classroom as learners are actively involved in decisions about how to learn, what to learn and why they are learning, and are also actively involved in decisions about criteria for assessment and the process of judging their own and other's work, then their relationship to their studies will be qualitatively different to those learners who are treated as recipients of teaching and who are the object of others' unilateral assessment. The purpose of the current study is, therefore, to examine the controversies and contributions of self–assessment activities in enhancing EFL students' writing.

METHOD

A case study was thought to be relevant to the current study in that the researcher aimed to conduct the study with in-service students who registered for taking writing courses at Dilla University, Ethiopia. Within this limited area, by collecting wide ranging data through questionnaire, interviews, essays and observation, the researcher may have better understanding of the problem that is, whether involving students in self-assessment of their writing help them develop their writing skill.

The study adopted a mixed research paradigm. A research paradigm that focuses on both qualitative and quantitative viewpoints combines together collecting and analysing data obtained through various tools to address research questions. The current research emphasizes on qualitative dominant research analysis which is expounded by Hitchcock and Onwuegbuzie (2020) as a qualitative research in addition to quantitative data and analysis would address the research question(s) in more detailed way. So, the pragmatic research paradigm is relevant to the current case study to consolidate and triangulate multiple data collected through different tools so as to address the research questions.

Case studies allow for various kinds of methods to collect data (Hoorani et al., 2019). They assert case studies try to discover and depict the various aspects of the subjects in detail and are thus able to describe the complex reality. Thus, case studies tend to use different tools to collect data. The tools include observations, documents, interviews, records, questionnaires, and life histories. Data, in many cases, are collected where the activity takes place. In case studies, because several data-collection techniques are used, the weaknesses of one can be balanced by the strength of the other.

The current study used focus group interviews and written responses on their beliefs and experiences whether involving them in assessment, namely self-assessments can foster students writing and feedback. In in-service EFL students' context, this research design enables the researcher to get profound data on perceptions and experiences of the selected samples. The type of sampling used in this study for the questionnaire is purposeful sampling. Purposeful sampling was selected because the main goal of purposeful sampling is to focus on specific features of a population that are of interest, and as they are information rich and that helps the researcher to deal with his research problem.

The inclusion of only EFL in-service students is, being professional teachers in their respective schools; they are responsible to improve their own and help develop the students' writing skills. Therefore, in 2015/2016 the number of students who were taking basic and advanced writing courses was 120 and all of them were included as participants in phase one, two and three of this study. For another, including all the students as participants enabled the researcher to gather wider range of information. Therefore, a questionnaire was used to collect data from the sample before and after the intervention. With these students, the researcher spent two months giving training and practicing on self-assessment activities of their essays. While the students were practicing the assessment activity, the researcher also collected data by using the already prepared observation checklist.

For the focus group interviews, the researcher selected ten participants by using a simple random sampling technique. Howe (2013) defines simple random sampling as it is the simplest approach in which each population member has an equal chance of being selected. This technique can be applied through drawing a lot or allocating each member a unique number and using random number generators. Thus, of the 120 participants who participated in responding to the questionnaire, only ten students who were volunteer to take part in the focus group interviews were involved.

RESULTS

This section presents the findings obtained from the questionnaire and focus group discussions. The findings entail participants' experiences and perceptions as teachers at their schools and as students at Dilla University. It also includes their prior experience, that is, the experience they had during their diploma education at college level.

Table 1. Participants' experiences and perceptions of self- assessment activities

No	Item	Percentage	
		Yes	No
1	Whether the participants had experience of self- assessment	30	70
	1.1 As a school teacher, have you engaged in self-assessment activities with your learners?	45	55
	1.2 As a university student, do you engage in self-assessment activities?		
2	Have you drawn up self-assessment criteria with teachers?	45.8	54.2
3	Can you improve your writing through self-assessment?	80.8	19.2
4	Can self-assessment develop independent learning?	60.8	39.2

As indicated in the table above, very few respondents had experience of engaging in self-assessment activities in their writing classes as students (45%) or as teachers (30%). Of interest is that, despite this, the majority thought that self-assessment activities were beneficial and 80.8% believe that the activity could enhance their writing skills and 60.8% responded that self-assessment help develop independent learning.

In the open ended part of questionnaire the respondents reflected that the self-assessment activity is difficult. Among the reasons they reflected include the following responses in Fig 1.

Participant 1

I don't have enough experience of both writing and self-assessing essays. So, when I write I am not confident in my wording, punctuating and in using the cohesive devices. Therefore, while trying to assess my essay for example, I lose my confidence to amend what I have already written

Participant 2

When I write, I feel I am using my all competence, what I know and as I try to assess my essay, I convince my mind saying 'I have already put my effort in to practice and wrote the text or essay. So I can't change anymore.

Participants 3

I have a problem of identifying my mistakes and my strong sides of my work; in most cases, I realize when they show me where my strengths and weaknesses are

Participants 4

I usually consider assessing oneself is bewildering activity, so I feel that my work should be assessed by the external body so as to make the assessment genuine

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Fig 1. Reasons for difficult self-assessment

On the question of self-assessment activity, participants who reported that it was uncomfortable thought that they either over marked or they awarded less mark while assessing and grading their own essays. There were contradictions in this assessment. In some instances, like having many mistakes in their essays, some students were over confident and they were observed giving high marks. Conversely, some participants, being good at writing essays, were not satisfied with their own performances.

In contrast, there were also considerable numbers of participants who perceived that frequent self-assessment as important.

Doing something at once and doing it frequently results in different outcomes; through repeatedly drafting, writing and rewriting, we can see our problems and this enables us to revise and improve our writing. Likewise, self-assessment gives you the opportunity to read deeply and examine your writing which also leads you to amend your writing.

Fig 2. Perceptions of some students that frequent assessment is important.

Expecting only teachers frequently to assess and give feedback to their writing doesn't lead students to deep learning and the opportunity to get such sources may not be available at any time needed. Students once graduated from a university, for instance,

can't get the chance to depend on their teachers, and they may not have access to receive feedback on their writing, too. Therefore, developing self-assessing skill appears to be essential so as to learn anywhere without depending much on others.

Despite the importance of self-assessment in developing writing skill, interviewees before the pre-intervention responded that some of them did not have any experience of this tool even writing the essay itself. Among the focus group discussion (FGD) participants, Zeleke (pseudo name, and all the names of the participants in this research were substituted by pseudo names), stated that he didn't have the experience of writing and self-assessing essays on his own but he used to write only when he was told to do so by his teachers. What he usually did was, he simply wrote and submitted without self-assessing. His attention was only on finishing the essay instead of checking his essay writing performance.

Although Zeleke didn't have the experience of participating in self-assessment activities, he perceived that students can benefit if they take part in assessing their own essays and he associated student involvement in assessment with the current approach of learning. He stated:

> Currently the approach of language teaching and learning, namely student-centered approach, is more of making students participate in activities so that they can benefit from their active involvement. Therefore, I believe that if students are benefiting from taking part in the assessment activities, they can also benefit from their involvement in formative assessments like self- assessment. If students learn how to assess their work, they can experience autonomous learning and this in turn help them learn out of the wall of the university and learning doesn't begin and end in the class (Zeleke, Jul 5, 2015).

Focus Group Discussion

As opposed to Zeleke's experience, Shemsu, although not much exposure, had some experience of assessing his own essay when he was a college student attending his diploma courses. He stated both the benefits and his experience of self-assessment as:

> When I was attending my college education, I had the experience of assessing my essays. I did it repeatedly and this helped me to find my errors and to revise my writing. In the first draft, I did not get my faults but as I went on assessing again and again, I usually got many faults of grammar, punctuation and diction. I also used to write in other languages like Afan Oromo which is my mother tongue and used to assess it before I give for the readers. (Shemsu, Jul 5, 2015).

Shemsu's experience of repeatedly revising his essays shows the significance of meaningful time spent on task. It appears that Shemsu benefitted by frequently assessing his essays, as he mentioned that he used to get some errors of grammar, and punctuations giving him an opportunity to amend, before submitting. This issue is about how much time and effort students allocate: the 'time on task' principle by Griffith et al. (2022) that if students do not spend enough time on something (self-assessing and checking their progress), they won't learn it. They found that the most influential variable for effective learning is the amount of meaningful energy and time that the students put in.

Similarly, Endale had also some experience of assessing his essays and he strongly suggested that using self-assessment is very important. Taking writing as a process, he did not used to write once and stops; rather he assessed his essays at different stages. In his words, Endale explained:

> I feel and believe that assessing one's own essay is very essential because of many reasons: it helps the student to identify his current performance as compared to his friends and this enables him to produce a well-organized essay. As my friend Shemsu said, I also used to assess my essay when I was a college student while attending my diploma education. I used to assess my paragraphs and essays before bringing it to class. I used to write the first draft; I write again by checking the logical flow of ideas and punctuation. I used to assess my writings not only because my teacher told me to do it but also because I wanted to write something good for my readers (Endale, Jul 5, 2015).

Endale did use to assess his essay not only because he was told to do so by his teacher, but because he wanted his essay to be good and interesting for his readers. This implies that he was sure that self-assessment of one's own essay could help him improve his writing. He also reflected that he used to have some points like vocabulary selection, appropriate conjunction and grammar in a 'shopping list' form to check whether he achieved his intended goal after finishing his essay writing. The list, though general, was important rubric for him to self-assess his essay.

Netsanet was among the interviewees who believed that self-assessing enable the writers to examine whether the written text fits the understanding level of the readers or not. She explained how she assesses and the importance of self-assessment as: "I assess my essays based on whether my sentences are clear, and my vocabularies are in line with my readers' level of understanding before I show to my friend or submit to my teacher. So, I think assessing one's own essay is very crucial to enable you to identify to whom you are writing and help you to adjust your language in accordance" (Jul 5, 2015).

Netsanet was interested in self-assessment because she perceived that by self-assessing, students are engaged in writing and re-writing, identifying their strengths and weaknesses. They appreciate the strong points, and plan to improve the weak ones. In addition to this, by self-assessing, they can develop their knowledge of vocabulary. As they check whether a certain word is right to use in a given context, they write, revise and substitute by the appropriate word. Therefore, this enables the students to be rich in the meanings of vocabulary.

One of the interviewees, Sintayehu, has the experience of assessing his own essays and believes that self- assessment increases the responsibility for students to learn, how to write essays and improve writing skills in general. He noted that self-assessing does not only show that someone is engaged in assessing and increasing his responsibility to gain knowledge but it enables the writers to produce and provide good texts for the readers. In order to produce an essay with a polished language, however, it needs the writer's effort and taking responsibility. Correspondingly, Abebayehu had the experience of assessing his own paragraphs and essays because he feels confident in his writings as he self-assesses. He adds:

After assessing my essays, I feel confident because I realize that I am able to assess my own essay. I also could see and identify my faults and amend them; I tell myself that I can correct faults that I made in my essays and this boosts confidence in me to write and assess. Instead of rushing to finish and submit the writing activity, assessing what has been produced in the text form is very crucial. I believe that self-assessing is the first step to assess others; one who can't assess himself also can't assess others as well. (Abebayehu, Jul 5, 2015).

It is clear that confidence can be developed if someone is able to do something by himself. Likewise, if students are able to write, to assess and to improve their writing, they can develop their confidence. As opposed to the above participants, Solomon doesn't have any experience of assessing his essays because of some reasons he mentions. "I don't have the experience of assessing my essays. My teachers also didn't use to give attention for writing essays. So, if you don't have the experience of writing, how can you have the experience of self-assessing essays?"(Jul 5, 2015). Based on the question whether the students think self- assessments help them learn independently and interdependently, the interviewees unanimously believe that once students are engaged in self-assessment, they can practice independent learning autonomously.

Getachew added, self-assessment is a valuable tool in that if someone is able to assess his work, he/she can learn after school. Students cannot be always with teachers in their life time - after they finish their university education, they go back to their work place. So, unless the student assesses his own writing, he cannot be autonomous lifelong learner. Self-assessing fosters learning independently and interdependently and this in turn is crucial for developing one's writing in that independence increases the time that we give for learning and interdependence boosts the source we get we get feedback.

Similarly, Shemsu believed that through encouraging and engaging students in self-assessment, we can get feedback from their own assessment and from their peers and instructors as well. They can also practice taking responsibility to learn out of class in the absence of teachers. Shemsu stated, 'Self-assessment helped me to check whether what I intended to say and what the essay read are similar." This is to say errors and mistakes can be made, when one   astray from his intention and the aimed meaning cannot be met.

Emphasizing on the values of self-assessment, Sintayehu expounded by exemplifying as before any person moves out of his home, he stands before a mirror and has to check his wearing style and sees if there is anything went wrong. This is not done for a single day, but whenever we go out- daily. Likewise, one should check or self-assess whenever he/she writes before showing to a peer or before submission. Otherwise, there will be many mistakes in the essays and makes our essays very poor and increases burden on teachers to give feedback on each error. Therefore, self-assessment can contribute to the writer to be confident in what he or she writes and to revise some of the mistakes made by himself (Sintayehu, Jul 5, 2015). Sintayehu's analogy shows that self-assessment is important because it gives us an opportunity to check and identify weaknesses in our essays that can be improved by ourselves before we give it to peers or teachers for further feedback.

On the subject of the importance of self-assessment for in-service students, the participants were asked whether they think self-assessment activity is useful in both

contexts-distance and on-site. Some of the interviewees considered that on-site context is very convenient. Their reason was that although self-assessment is carried out by the writer wherever he/she is, they believe that it should be accompanied with peer and/or co-assessments. So, peers and instructors are easily accessible on campus as compared to distance courses. Others considered self-assessment is applicable in both cases and still others responded it is even mainly useful in distance context as there are no instructors available, students should use their own effort in such context. However, in distance context, writing material may support the students in guiding to assess their progress.

In distance education, learning largely rests on the teaching/learning materials and on the commitment of course designers and writers. To this goal, course materials have a major role in enhancing learners' capacity for self-assessment and critical reflection. Self-assessment, as opposed to its contribution to increase feedback, it is helpful to enhance students' responsibility or commitment to learn. Although all the assessment types help students increase responsibility to check their progress of learning, self-assessment, as it is carried out by one's own drive, is more helpful leading the self- assessors' to be more committed. As to the participants' reflections involving students in self-assessment was found to be important particularly for in-service students because they learn in both independent and interdependent contexts. Self-assessment activity, as they reported, was also important for reflective learning though, in some cases, identifying the strengths and weaknesses of their essays was challenging.

On the subject of self-assessment and its importance, the participants entirely agreed that it was a valuable tool to check and assess one's own writing before providing for the reader or audience. By self-assessing, students felt responsible for their own learning that is, they worked independently by reflecting on their own work. One of the participants, Abayneh, explaining the importance of assessment activities under study perceived that all the three types were found to be helpful in that they enabled all the students in the class participate actively in the writing activities. Self-assessment urged students to begin to take the responsibility of the activities. In this activity, Abayneh thought, students tried to check, amend and improve their essays and they reflected afterward on their essays during the interactions of peer- and co-assessment activities.

Similarly, he asserted that self-assessment enabled the writers to pinpoint what aspects of writing had been learnt and what needed to be improved. Peer- and co-assessments led to cooperative learning but self-assessment was the base helping the students to be responsible and reflective learners. All the three types of assessments together enabled learners to align checking their progress with learning (Aug 30, 2015). Abebayehu, speaking on his experience stated that he couldn't easily identify his mistakes unless he was told by others. Therefore, he suggested that peer- and co-assessments were important in informing the self-assessor so that he/she can amend his/her essays. In his own word:

The problem that I faced when I assessed my essay was I couldn't easily find my strengths and weaknesses. But when my peers assessed my essays and showed me my errors, I realized that really they were. After setting the criteria, however, I improved my essay a lot for it enabled me to see each language aspects in detail and one by one; for example spelling, grammar, punctuation and dictation. Although I believe that assessing

my own essays based on the criteria enabled me to improve them, I feel applying to peer- and co-assessments subsequently will help me develop even more (Aug 30, 2015).

This shows, despite the fact that students may face difficulty in assessing their own essays, when they assess based on the criteria, they can carry out the assessment activity. This implies, criteria or rubrics are very important in formative assessments like self, peer and co-assessments. In addition, the participants believe that if these assessments are applied successively, they will help students to improve essays and writing skills step by step and progressively.

DISCUSSION

Self-assessment, in addition to its contribution to increase feedback, it enhances students' responsibility or commitment to learn. Although the extent differs, participants believed that they amended and made feedback on their essays through the assessment activity. Besides, they contributed to the active engagement of students in the activities. As also discussed in the literature review part, constructivism as a learning theory suggests, learning to be effective, it requires active participation of the students (Taber, 2011). This encourages student-centered leaning. Despite the fact that writing being a process activity is a demanding skill (Al Fadda, 2012) for students to improve it on their own.

Perhaps the most constructive and potentially time saving techniques are getting students to participate in assessment and reflection. Self-assessment activities in particular give the chance to take part individually and independently in order to work on developing one's own writing. In self-assessment activity, participants perceived that once they finished writing, they thought they couldn't make significant changes and amendments on their essays considering that they had already done to their best. With reference to the purpose of the assessment, participants' perceptions differed both in the pre- and post- intervention phases. Despite the vitality of the assessment activity for learning purpose, involving them for grading led them to be uncomfortable, biased (giving marks which don't fit the feedback provided, or harsh (giving less marks than someone deserves) on assessing their own essay writing.

The FGD before the intervention indicated that there were some participants who didn't have any experience of the self-assessments and never participated in the activities. Besides, those who had some experience of these assessments also didn't have adequate understanding on how to carry out the activity and they had also the propensity of focusing on the teachers' presence for the assessment purpose. It is because whenever assessment is the subject of discussion, they think it is for grading purpose and believe that assessment is of only teachers' activity. However, later, when they knew the purpose was for learning purpose, they became interested in the assessment. Among the participants, those who didn't have the opportunity to practice self-assessment activities found them odd to practice as students. Because these assessments were brought together with the advent of student-centered approach, those students who were acquainted with the traditional assessment culture in which only the teacher carries out, have less awareness of current approaches of learning and face challenge to practice them.

During the post intervention FGD participants informed both the strengths and weaknesses of these assessment activities. Taking part in such assessment activities had a symbiotic benefit both for the students and teachers so as to fulfil the agenda of students

writing skill development. The participants' assessment provided information to teachers that could help the teacher to identify on what aspects of writing the student need lesson to improve their writing. Students being able to provide and receive constructive feedback, they improve their writing and it can provide good information to teachers. Based on the feedback, teachers' can understand where the students need support and in what aspects of the writing skills they are good at, that is to say it's a feedback for students and feed forward for the teacher.

In the course of students assessing their own writing, criteria had got high consideration by the participants. It was used to mediate the disparity between the writer and the teacher, and it also created transparency between them. Criteria were found to be very essential so as to identify the strengths and weaknesses of the students' essay. It also helped the students to stay on the assessment task while they were trying to check whether the essay was in line with and fitted the agreed criteria.

Self-assessment activity provided a starting point for a dialogue between students and their teachers. That is to say, self-assessment activity enabled students to reflect on their own work, and opened up productive student-teacher dialogue. It, therefore, boosted interaction between the student and the text, and student and teacher and this contributed to deeply understand the essay they had written and helped them to reflect on during the discussion with the teacher. As to the link between self-assessment and tutor assessment, Race (2001) noted that self-assessment gets students to reflect on their own work, and can open up productive student-teacher dialogues. Giving feedback on students' self-assessment (rather than just on their work) had two important benefits: causing better learning for students, and can be very useful for teachers, allowing them to see in much clearer perspective.

Self-assessment also alleviated the weaknesses of the essay. This, in turn, saved teacher's time; particularly when students were able to pinpoint where their difficulties in the essays were found. But some students were not good at in doing so. They couldn't show where their weaknesses and strengths were found in the essays. Teacher assessing these students' papers was almost similar to the traditional one in its time consumption. As it was noticed, during the intervention, by assessing the students' essays, teachers' assessment after the students' self-assessment in some cases was even more time consuming. It's because the teacher had to give feedback on both the self-assessment activity and on the essays written. But, the important point was because the students had already read well for the purpose of self-assessment; they could easily understand the comments from the teacher. This benefited student because it's deep and individualized feedback though time consuming.

In addition, self-assessment enabled the writers to check their essays on the process of writing. Participants tried to assess and amend their essays before they were checked by the teacher. This was found to be important for the writer or self-assessor for in advance preparation to reflect on during the peer-assessment and co-assessment activities. As Taras (2010) emphasizes, encouraging students to participate, in self-assessment activity leads to be engaged in reflecting on their own learning and this in turn is important in developing their learning and achievements.

Conversely, there were also issues that didn't work well with the self-assessment activity. These include the fact that, at the beginning, the self-assessors were reluctant to

assess their essays. But, later on, because of the training and using the criteria, they made an effort to focus on some aspects of the essays in line with the criteria agreed. The students assessed their own essays based on the criteria agreed on with the instructor. It helped them to identify whether there was a thesis statement, controlling all the ideas detailed in the essay, how the ideas were organized, whether there were grammatical problems and they also checked diction. The use of criteria was not only to help check the presence or absence of weaknesses and/or strengths but also to what extent the essay contains problems or was meticulously written.

In spite of the training and the criteria, students didn't make thorough changes in self-assessment. They didn't focus on the concepts, organization of the essay which can affect the global or holistic meaning of the essay. Instead, they gave attention to reading word by word and line by line amending the discrete points which didn't consume their time to revise and rewrite their essay. The essays were improved slightly as compared to those written before the training and the improvements were on using appropriate words, on sentential level issues like punctuation, capitalization, spelling, and subject-verb agreements and improvements on faulty sentences. The changes were more of vocabulary and grammatical or structural issues. The reason for focusing on discrete points could be because of the difficulty nature of the writing skill, that is, they might have considered that if they amended one section, it would affect the other part of the essay and they thought they had used their maximum effort when they wrote it, so they either didn't understand some of their weaknesses or didn't want to make ample changes which could spoil the entire essay leading them to write and rewrite the essays which is tiresome activity. Larsen-Freeman (2000) notes the difficulty a writer has in seeing his own text as a genuine site for rethinking and revision. Having students learnt to describe their own texts during the process of revision, they achieve the often elusive objectivity.

The second problem was regarding self-assessment for grading purpose. As has already been mentioned some students were reluctant about assessing their own essays particularly before the training and before creating the criteria to assess their essays. But later, when they internalized the criteria, they made amendments on their essays. But they were still reluctant to give score. Even if they did, they gave high or inflated marks. Their reason was, after they self-assessed, they thought they had to submit the essay so that the instructor would assess again, and they feared that their scores might influence the score given by the teacher. However, when they were told that it was only for learning purpose, they hardly improved their scores. They provided almost similar and higher marks in spite of the presence of many weaknesses and amendments they showed or suggested to be made.

The third was the challenge of self-assessing essays was in relation to time constraints. Because students were assessing the essays which had been written by themselves, they took longer time to revise the essays. It is clear that the aim of using formative activities is to enhance the student learning experience without the pressure of summative assessment. But the students were resistant to formative activities because of the pressures on their time. This is one of the challenges teachers in higher education could face – encouraging students' participation in formative activities and reduce the amount of time they spent on summative activities.

Observation during the intervention also helped the researcher to gather data on how the participants were performing the self-assessment activities, challenges they faced and their motivation to be engaged in the activity. As evidenced by the meagre feedback, at the beginning of the training, the students were observed simply gazing at their essays. This implied that they considered they had already done to their best effort and there wouldn't be any changes which they could make. But, later on, agreeing on the criteria, students were observed reading the essay and the criteria turn by turn and again and again checking whether the essay met the criteria and they began working again on their essays. During the activity, criteria played a great role by enabling the assessors to pinpoint the strengths and weaknesses of the text. The focus of the criteria was on the thesis statement, organization, supporting detail and grammar of the essays. As Little (2005) states one of the trends in the changing world of language assessment has been promoting learners' self-assessment, facilitated by the explicit descriptive criteria. Integrating self-assessment with predetermined and agreed criteria, therefore, helped learners to examine and revise their essays. They were observed trying to scrutinize each section of the essay- thesis statement, organization, grammar and diction in line with the criteria points. Asserting the vitality of the criteria, Boud (2013) clarified that it provides students with a valuable opportunity to reflect on their writing activities based upon a standardized thought provoking checklist.

CONCLUSION

During the self-assessment activity, since every student was engaged in the task, it played a vital role to sidestep the passivity and dependence of students on teachers rather it encouraged active participation. Similarly, evidences in the literature showed that in the constructivist approach of learning students are expected to actively construct their knowledge. In this self-assessment activity, in order to carry out it, criteria played a great role. It enables students to internalize the standards by which their products and performances will be judged. However, self-assessment, despite its all advantages, had challenges which the assessors faced during the activity. These include some were unable to identify their strengths and weaknesses. In this case, a teacher was needed to support them. Despite the self-assessors effort to improve their essay writing, they took longer time as they were unable to detect their strengths and weaknesses. On the process of the activity, some participants simply underlined and/or encircled those words and expressions they were uncertain about their contextual use informing that their amendments on their essays were not thorough.

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