

Students' Self-Assessment of Their English Writing Skills

Vu Thi Thanh Hue

English Department, School of Foreign Languages, Thai Nguyen University

Abstract

Background:

Assessment is considered to be a process of collecting, synthesizing and interpreting information in order to make decisions on students' performance. In class, assessment can be carried out to diagnose students' problems, to assess their academic performance, to provide feedback to students and to plan instructions (Airasian, 1994). Self-assessment is done by learners to judge and monitor their own level of knowledge, performance and understanding and to get information about their learning (Cariaga-Lo, Richard and Frye, 1992, Dickinson, 1987). Hence, self-assessment is what learners see from their own perspectives (Oscarson, 1989). This way of assessment helps learners self-monitor their learning and develop metacognitive awareness of knowledge and thought.

Materials and Methods

In this research, 74 students from English department, School for Foreign Languages, Thai Nguyen university were asked to response to a questionnaire about their self-assessment of their English writing skills. All these students are third year English majors and are going to learn a 15-week essay writing course. The purpose of this questionnaire is to judge students' self-assessment of their English writing skills: what they often do before, while and after writing. Based on the results of the questionnaire, the researcher could diagnose students' problems and then adjust the course syllabus and teaching methods that would be appropriate to them.

Results

The majority of students have good habits of writing. They brainstorm, make an outline before writing, use some techniques when writing, make a revision on their writing and receive feedback from teachers and peers. However, about a quarter of respondents haven't followed the writing process and nearly 20% of them sometimes obey this progress.

Conclusion

It can be concluded that while a large number of students are aware of the proper writing process, many of them sometimes or rarely follow. That can be a struggle which prevents students' successful completion of the writing.

Key words

Self-assessment, writing process, writing skills, writing habits

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I. Introduction

"Learning autonomy" is stated to have benefits on students' learning. It is achieved when learners have responsibility to make decision on their own learning process. They are able to decide which learning methods they should follow, which techniques they need for successful learning and more importantly they can evaluate their own learning.

Self-assessment has achieved much attention in recent years for its emphasis on learners' independence and learners' autonomy. According to O'Malley and Valdez (1996), self-assessment practice not only promotes students' critical thinking towards their performance but also encourages them to look for solutions to the constraints encountered. Chen (2008) stated that active involvement of the learners in assessing their performance will enable them to gain ownership of their learning. Li (1998) also discovered that implementing self-assessment is a meaningful activity to sensitize students to the experience of greater participation and to make students more involved in learning.

Since writing was taught as a language skill, it has been considered to be a process that needs both response and revision. Writing should be taught, not just assigned, at every grade. The writing process involves the following steps:

- Pre-writing which includes generating and gathering ideas and facts through, for example, talking and reading
- Multiple rough drafts
- Sharing drafts through reading own peer work
- Feedback and revision to improve content and organization on the drafts

- Editing the formal language errors at the final stage
- Last version to be published, posted and/or graded.

For each writing step, students should use specific techniques that could enhance their writing speed and quality. These techniques can be acquired by students' own writing experience; however, most of them should be taught by the teacher during the process of writing.

In Vietnam, English writing is one of the most important skills which benefits students from domestic as well as international publications throughout their academic lives. In addition, graduates with satisfactory writing skills are essential in proving them to be qualified workforce. In this sense, facilitating students with good writing techniques is a crucial job of writing teachers. One way to achieve it is enabling them to self-evaluate their own writing skills. Therefore, in this paper, the researcher conducted a survey on English third-year students' self-assessment of their own writing skills.

The research questions are as follows:

1. What are writing skills students use when writing an essay?
2. How often do they use them?

II. Materials and Methods

Study Location: This research was carried out at School of Foreign Languages, Thai Nguyen University, Vietnam. It is a regional school which specializes in training English bachelors who can work as English teachers or English translators after graduation.

Study Duration: 15th January, 2021 to 10th May, 2021

Sample size: 74 third-year English students

Subjects and selection methods: Subjects of the study are third-year English students at School of Foreign Languages, Thai Nguyen University. At the time of the survey, they were at the beginning of the first semester and writing an essay was one of the obligatory subjects they had to study. Therefore, 74 students who belong to two writing classes were chosen to answer to a questionnaire about their self-assessment of their writing skills.

Procedure Methodology: After studying the materials, a well-designed questionnaire was used to collect the data of the participants. The questionnaire includes 19 questions which are divided into 3 main parts. In each part, the researcher focuses on asking the respondents about the frequency of their using specific techniques in each stage of writing: before writing, while writing and after writing. Then, the questionnaire was explained to students so that they are clear about its purposes. After that, a link was sent to the students so that they respond to the questionnaire online and their data was calculated automatically as soon as the participants finished their answers.

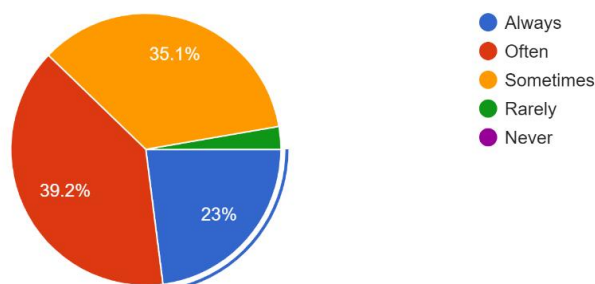
Statistical analysis: The data was analyzed using google forms which could collect students' responses online and automatically analyzed the data in percentage.

III. Results

As mentioned above, the questionnaire is divided into three main portions according to stages in the writing process: before writing, while writing and after writing. In the first part, there are 8 questions asking students' frequency of using writing techniques before they write. The results are as below:

1. I review my class notes before beginning to write.

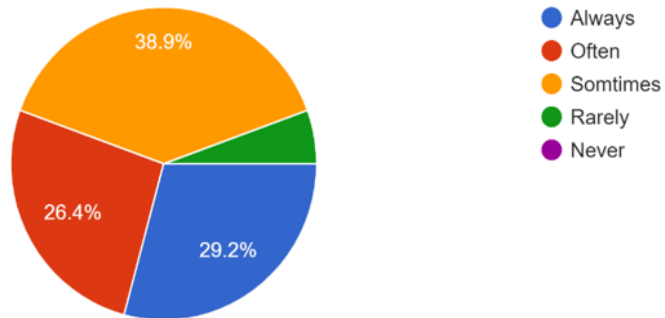
74 responses



Question 1 aims at questioning participants whether they review class notes before writing. This technique is to help students remember and applied what they have learnt in their writing. It can be seen from the chart that 62,2% of the respondents always or often consider this job to be necessary while the rest just sometimes or rarely do so. Although a large number of students are aware of the importance of reviewing class notes, there are still a minority of them underestimating this job.

2. I consider the task and instructions carefully before writing.

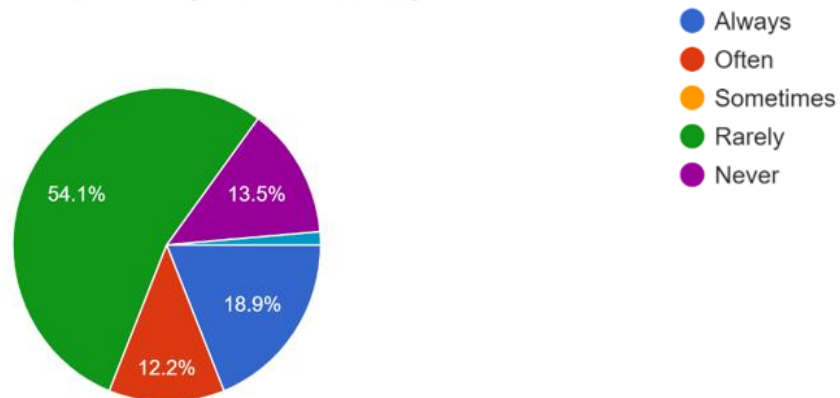
72 responses



In terms of question 2, students were asked if they read the task and instructions carefully before writing. As shown in the chart, over half of them always or often do this task. However, it is noticeable that nearly half of them sometimes or rarely read. Although it is advised by most of the writing teachers that reading the task and instruction carefully before writing is extremely important, many of the participants do not value this step.

5. I make an outline or plan in English before writing.

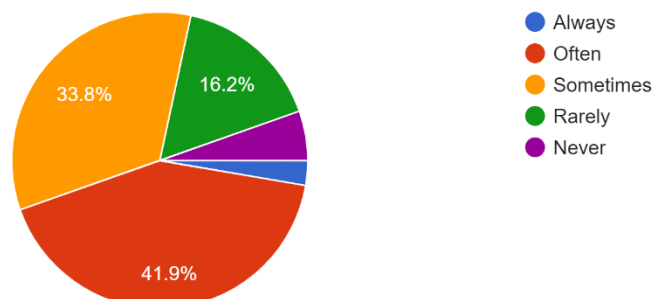
74 responses



According to the results from question 5, just over one third of the respondents always or often make an outline before writing while under two third of them rarely or never do so. Therefore, it can be confirmed that this writing stage are not popular among the majority of students despite its significance.

6. Before writing the first draft, I do extra study outside the classroom to improve my writing.

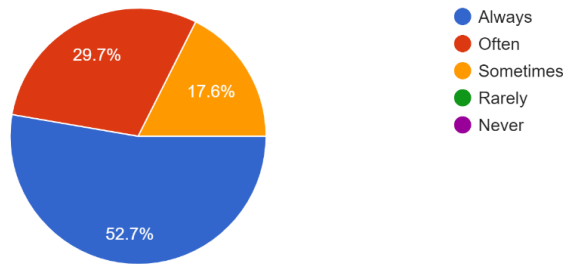
74 responses



Regarding question 6, the researcher wanted to know whether her students do extra study outside classroom to improve their writing. As revealed from the chart, around half of the students always or often do research while over half of them sometimes, rarely or even never conduct the study.

7. I use a dictionary to check things I am not sure about before I write.

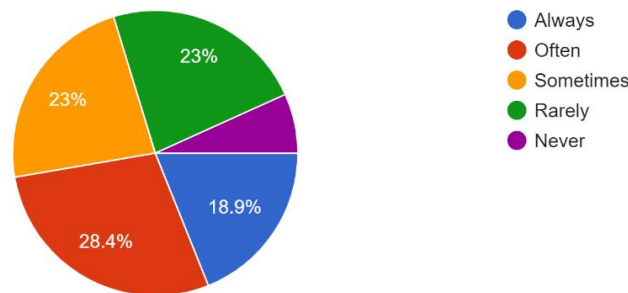
74 responses



Unlike the results from question 6, the data collected from question 7 shows that there are no answers for items “rarely” or “never”. Almost all students stated that they always (52,7%), often (29,7%) and sometimes (17,6%) check things they are not sure in a dictionary before they write. It can be assumed that students pay more attention to vocabulary used in the writing than the content or grammar which is shown from the results of question 8

8. I use a grammar book to check things I am not sure about before I write.

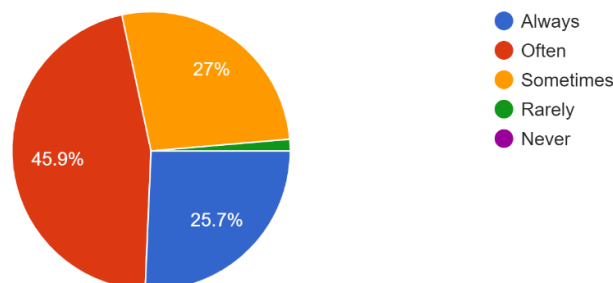
74 responses



Moving to while-writing stage, question 9 focuses on discovering students' writing places. As can be seen from the chart, most of the students prefer to read in a quiet place where they can concentrate on their writing. Therefore, it can be suggested that no matter where the writing is produced, the teacher should provide a quiet atmosphere for students to write.

9. I try to write in a comfortable, quiet place where I can concentrate.

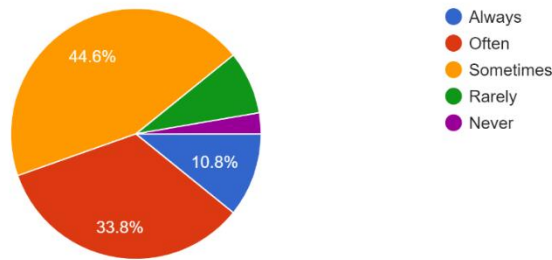
74 responses



With reference to question 10, it is clear that most of the respondents know to use their background knowledge to develop their ideas. However, when being asked if they edit the content and organization as they are writing, just 44,6% of them considered this activity necessary while the rest sometimes or rarely do that.

11. I edit the content and organization as I am writing.

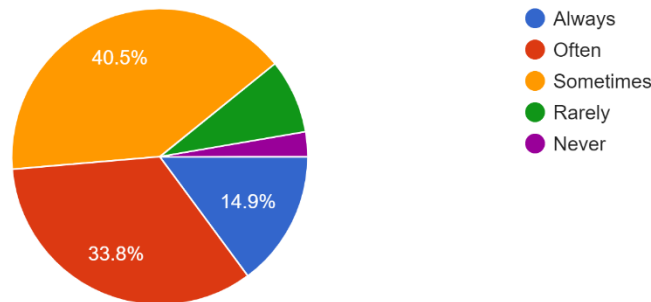
74 responses



Question 15 intends to explore students' habits of revising and improving organization, grammar, vocabulary, spelling and punctuation after they finish their writing.

15. I go back to my writing to revise and improve my organization, grammar, vocabulary, spelling and punctuation.

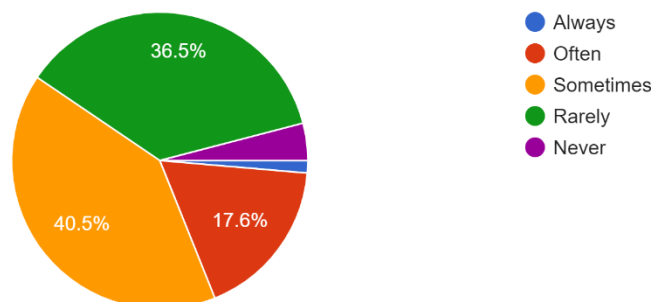
74 responses



As shown from the chart, just nearly half of the participants have this habit while 40,5% of them sometimes revise their performances. The rest (10,8%) don't regard this activity essential. That is the reason why they rarely or never take time for it. It is believed that revising is an important step that must be done by all students. This step helps students revise and edit any mistakes they have made during the process of writing when the writers focus more on the content than word use or grammatical structures. Therefore, it is suggested that making students more aware of the significance of this activity is a job that must be done. Getting feedback from the teacher and peers is one way to improve the writing; However, the results from question 16 reveals that this activity is not preferred by the majority of students.

16. I discuss my work with my teacher to get feedback on how I can improve it.

74 responses

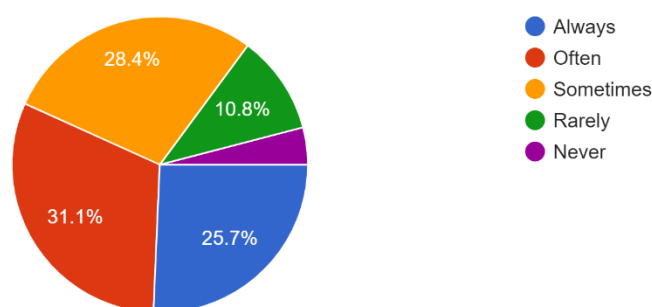


It is noticeable that approximately one fifth of the students always or often discuss their work with the teacher and friends while the majority of them sometimes, rarely or even never participate in this activity. It is advised that the teacher should discover the reasons why students do not value this writing habit: whether they do not have an opportunity to discuss the work with their peers and the instructor or they do not think it is necessary to do although it is giving and getting feedback from peers is a must do job in composing texts.

Question 17, 18 and 19 aims at asking students what they would do after receiving feedback from their teachers and classmates. In general, most of them make effective use of the notes they have. However, about a quarter of them rarely or never come back to the feedback.

18. I make notes or try to remember feedback I get so I do not keep making the same types of errors.

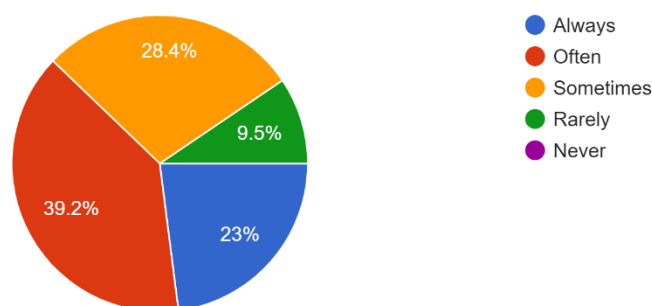
74 responses



As revealed from the above chart, over half of the students always or often try to remember the feedback to avoid making the errors again. However, 28,5% of them sometimes do this activity and the rest rarely or never try to remmember. Similary, as shown in the results of question 19, nearly a third of the respondents sometimes or rarely read feedback from the previous writing and use it in the next one.

19. I read the feedback from my previous writing and use this feedback in my next writing.

74 responses



IV. Discussion

From the results analyzed above, there are some issues that need to be discussed. Firstly, almost half of the students keep good habits of writing. They often apply the right techniques at the right writing stage. The review class notes, study the task and instruction carefully, brainstorm ideas and make an outline in English before writing. Then when they write, they use their background knowledge to develop ideas, edit the content, organization, vocabulary and grammar. After completing their performance, they come back to the writing to revise, discuss the feedback with teachers and peers and use the feedback to improve their next writings. However, nearly a quarter of the respondents sometimes follow this writing process. it is necessary that the instructor to find out the reasons why they underestimate these writing techniques. It is assumed that these students are aware of the writing process; however, they may not consider it essential to follow or they do not have the habit of doing these activities. In addition, over 20% of the participants rarely or never follow these writing activities. There may be some reasons behind these choices. However, making these students value the significance of this writing process and practice doing them as a habit is vital. Therefore, it is well advised that

at the beginning of the writing course, the teacher should take time to train students the process as well as some techniques they should follow as they write.

V. Conclusion

It can be concluded that at the beginning of the writing course, the teacher should do a brief training on the process as well as techniques used in writing. In addition, he or she should also emphasize on giving feedback to students' writing as well as create peer feedback among students so that they are aware of the importance of giving and receiving feedback.

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