

The Effect of Self-Assessment on Achievement in Writing in English¹

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ABSTRACT

The “learning autonomy,” which is believed to have positive effects on learning processes, is achieved when learners have the responsibility to make decisions in their own learning process. In order for individuals to have learner autonomy, the individual must be able to decide which methods and techniques to use in the learning process, to follow their own learning process, and to arrive at realistic assessments for their own learning situation. In the literature, the evaluation of one’s own learning process and products is called “self-assessment.” Self-assessment is expressed as having a positive contribution to one’s own learning processes. The main aim of this study is to investigate the effects of self-assessment on the English writing skills of non-native students. The research was conducted at a state university in Ankara in B1 level, beginning at the second semester of the academic year 2014-2015 and lasted for eight weeks. The study used a pretest - posttest control group design. The required data for the research were collected by pretest and posttest English Writing Tasks, a scoring rubric, and an interview form developed by the researcher. Analysis of the data obtained from the pretest and posttest was carried out by two-way ANOVA for mixed measures, while content analysis method was conducted in order to analyze the data obtained from the interviews. As a result of the research, it has been concluded that writing lessons in which students practice self-assessment are more effective in improving the writing skills of students than writing lessons conducted by traditional means.

Key Words: Writing skills, Achievement in writing lessons, Feedback, Measurement and evaluation, Self-assessment

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INTRODUCTION

Language is formed for people's communication needs (Günay, 2007). The two most commonly used forms of language are written and oral expression (Aksan, 2005). Written expression is the arrangement of ideas related to a topic in a sentence, paragraph or text (Kavcar, 1986), and successful written expression requires significant writing skills that may be in need of improvement. Writing skills require training and can be achieved as a result of a long process (Tabak, & Göçer, 2013). One of the environments where written expression is cared about and tried to be improved is schools. It is important for schools to create opportunities through which their students can acquire writing skills in both a foreign language and in their native language. In other words, writing lessons are an important component of language learning lessons.

A widely accepted approach in today's language learning context is that language learning achievement can be improved by providing learning autonomy in the language learning process. Learning autonomy is achieved when learners take responsibility for making decisions in their own learning process (Benson, 1996; Holec, 1981). It is mentioned that autonomous learning should be adopted during the development of writing skills in both the learner's native language and any foreign language being learned, and in this sense, the planning of writing courses must be undertaken meticulously.

Foreign language writing courses are traditionally conducted as student-centered. In traditional foreign language writing lessons, the teacher waits for the students to generate a written product that meets a specified criteria after providing some input information, and then provides feedback on the written product. The learner focuses on learning from any mistakes made by reworking the written product according to the feedback received. However, in foreign language writing courses based on learning autonomy, writing lessons are arranged in such a way as to allow self-assessment; where the learner is also given responsibility for the feedback process.

Benson (2001) stated that self-assessment is the only condition for autonomous learning, mentioning that "an autonomous learner is a person who can crown his or her learning process with self-assessment practices and use the results of self-assessments to guide own subsequent learning." Self-assessment was defined by Boud (1995) as students' being actively involved in their learning process by getting involved in the process of building the criteria to be used in the evaluation of their products, or by determining whether their products meet these criteria after they have been thoroughly informed about them. Thus self-assessment in writing lessons can be achieved if students are involved in the process while their written products are evaluated. Today research found in the literature suggests that foreign language writing lessons which give students the opportunity for self-assessment of their written products are more effective in improving writing skills than traditional writing classes (Andrade, & Boulay, 2003; Andrade, Du, & Mycek, 2010; Banlı, 2014; Bayrakçı, 2007; Nurov, 2000; Ross, Rolheiser, & Hogaboam-Gray, 1999; Uysal, 2008; Yurdabakan, & Cihanoğlu, 2011).

In Turkey, English is the language which people are most encouraged to learn. English language learning is important at all levels of education in Turkey, and a significant amount of investment is made for students to learn it in preparatory schools of universities (Çakır, 2010). However, Turkey has fallen behind many other countries where English is learned with regard to its success in helping students learn English (Coşkun Demirpolat, 2015). According

to the data shared by the world's leading private education company, Education First in 2014, Turkey ranked 47th among 63 countries in terms of English proficiency and fell behind all European countries. Also, as the research puts forward, success of Turkish students in acquiring the language skills in English is especially lower in writing and speaking when compared to reading and listening (Karahan, 2007).

On the other hand, having written expression skills in English is important for students to be able to benefit from international publications throughout their academic lives and to be able to produce publications to an internationally acceptable quality, to communicate internationally, and to provide an internationally qualified workforce after graduation. As graduating individuals with writing skills in English are so important for universities, the investments made in Turkish higher education for this purpose should not be wasted, and the methods or techniques which have been proven to positively affect achievement in foreign language writing classes should be taken into account while planning foreign language writing classes. In this sense, it is important to undertake research into the effects of self-assessment, whose positive effect on writing achievement has been put forward with research conducted in different countries, on the achievement in English writing classes in Turkish university preparatory schools.

The overall objective of this current study is to demonstrate the effects of self-assessment on the written skills of students at B1 level (Pre-intermediate level) in the English preparatory program of a state university. The research questions are as follows:

1. Is the change in the average score of the experimental group from the pretest to the posttest significantly different from the change in the average score of the control group from the pretest to the posttest?
2. What is the distribution of the average scores of the experimental group and control group students from the four writing tasks produced throughout the writing classes when the teacher's grades for the second drafts are taken into consideration?
3. What is the distribution of the average scores of the experimental group from the four writing tasks for different criteria ("content," "organization," and "language use") when the teacher's grades for the second drafts are taken into consideration?
4. What is the distribution of the average scores of the teacher's grades to the first drafts of the four writing tasks and the students' own self-assessed grades to the same tasks?
5. What are the views of the experimental group students on the use of self-assessment in English writing classes?

METHOD

This section includes information on the research model, study group, the data collection tools used, and the analysis of the data.

Research Model

This research is a semi-experimental study. The study was designed with a pretest and posttest control group in order to demonstrate the effect of self-assessment on written expression skills. In order for the data required for this research to be collected, two classes from all the classes in the same language level (B1) in the institution where the research was

conducted were selected randomly, with one of the two selected classes randomly assigned as the experimental group. In both groups, some tests were applied to determine the level of writing skills of the students in the group before and after the application of the writing classes. A causal relationship was tried to be established between writing achievement and self-assessment variables. In this way, whether or not the achievement in writing differed based on the feedback method applied was attempted to be revealed.

In this study, the main findings were obtained by the application of pretest and posttest. In order for the conclusions and interpretations made to be supported, some graphs were prepared using the grades of the students from the four writing tasks conducted during the writing lessons and the qualitative data obtained from the interviews were used.

Study Group

The research was conducted at a state university in Ankara, Turkey, during the second semester of the 2014-2015 academic year and during the first eight-week period. The data required for the study were obtained from B1 level students. The study group for this research was two classes that were randomly selected from all the B1 level classes, each composed of 30 students and formed by random assignment of all B1 level students to different classes by computer.

The interviews conducted within the scope of this research involved 15 students determined from the experimental group. In order for these 15 students to be specified, the experimental group students were ranked according to the difference between their posttest and pretest English Writing Task scores. This list was split into three; with 10 students included in each group from a total of 30 students in the experimental group. The top 10 students at the top of the list were identified as “students who have achieved a high level of success in writing,” the 10 students in the middle were identified as “students who have been moderately successful in writing,” and the 10 students at the bottom were identified as “students who have achieved a low level of success in writing.” Five students were selected from each group randomly and, in this way, 15 students in total were selected for interview.

Data Collection Tools

An English Writing Task, a scoring rubric and an Interview Form, all developed by the researcher for this study, were used to collect the necessary data in the study.

The English Writing Task was used to obtain data for the first research question. The same English writing Task was utilized both as the posttest and the pretest. The English Writing Task required students to compose cause-effect paragraphs explaining the possible reasons why students are unsuccessful in learning English.

Developed for being used in this study, the scoring rubric includes the criteria content, paragraph organization and language use, which were determined to be the most common criteria on the scoring rubrics (Andrade et al., 2010; Brooks, 2012; İnözü, & Yumru, 2006; Luoma, & Tarnanen, 2003; Oscarson, 2009) used for grading student paragraphs in English. Since the current study is aimed to investigate the effect of self-assessment on different components of writing skill separately, an analytical scoring rubric, which has five levels of achievement, was prepared. The maximum score on the scoring rubric is 100 as possible validity problems were wanted to be avoided and successful and unsuccessful students in writing wanted to be distinguished better. As research results were found to point to the

importance of content and language use in written expression (Quintero, 2008; Urrutia, & Gutierrez, 2011; White, & Arndt, 1991), different scores were allocated to different criteria on the scoring rubric. The maximum score for paragraph organization was 20, for both content and language use 40 points. For the validity of the new rubric to be checked, an expert opinion form suggested by Moskal and Leydens (2000) was utilized and the rubric was evaluated by four experts in total.

Data Collection

In the research process, the writing classes of the experimental group were conducted by the researcher, while the writing classes of the control group were conducted by a teacher who volunteered to take part in the study, and who was informed in detail beforehand about the necessary points. In addition, at the beginning of the process, the scoring rubric was introduced to the volunteer teacher and she was helped to gain experience in the use of the scoring rubric by scoring two sample paragraphs under the supervision of the researcher.

Before the writing lessons started, the same pretest English Writing Task was applied to both the experimental and the control groups. The paragraphs written by the students were scored by two teachers, one being the researcher and the other being a volunteer teacher working in the same institution. The scores given by the researcher constituted the pretest grades of the students. The scores given by the volunteer teacher to the same paragraphs were used to calculate scorer reliability. Since two scorers were included, the Pearson Moments Multiplication Correlation Coefficient (Kutlu, Doğan, & Karakaya, 2015) was used to calculate the scorer reliability. The correlation between two scorers was found to be .95.

Following the application of the pretest, writing classes were started in both groups. In both groups, four writing tasks were included throughout the writing classes. Students in the different groups followed different stages while producing their written work. In the control group, as students composed their first drafts, they received feedback from the teacher, wrote their second drafts and were then given scores on their second drafts by the teacher. In the experimental group, the students composed their first draft, self-assessed the first draft by assigning their own grades (the first drafts were also graded by the teacher), prepared the second drafts and were given scores on their second drafts. The self-assessment that students made was controlled by the teacher so that the self-assessment skills of the students would be regulated and improved over time. All the scoring in both groups (both by the students and the teachers) were made based on the same scoring rubric.

At the end of the writing lessons, the post-test English Writing Task was applied. The paragraphs were again scored according to the scoring rubric by two teachers, one being the researcher and the other a teacher working in the same institution. The scores the researcher gave constituted the post-test English Writing Task scores. The scores given by the volunteer teacher were used to calculate scorer reliability. The correlation between the two scores was found to be .96.

Following the application of the post-test, interviews were conducted with 15 students from the experimental group. The interviews were completed over three days and each student was interviewed for 15-20 minutes. The interviews were video-recorded. When the interviews were complete, the interviews were assessed and coded in writing by the researcher.

Data Analysis

There are five research questions of this study. For the first research question to be answered, the “two-factor ANOVA for mixed measures” was used. The analysis was performed using the SPSS 20.0 package program. The significance level (p) was accepted as .05. In order for the second, third and fourth research questions to be answered, the relevant data were arranged on graphs. For the fifth research question to be answered, the data obtained from the interviews conducted with the experimental group were analyzed by content analysis method and a set of themes determined. Then the student ideas were categorized according to these themes. Three specialists were involved in the process of the categorization of the student ideas. The three specialist’s agreement regarding the categorization was found to be 93%. A table showing student numbers for different themes was prepared.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSIONS

In this section, findings from the data analysis have been arranged as tables and graphics to aid the discussion. Based on the findings, the discussions relate to the order of the study’s research questions.

Research Question 1: *Is the change in the average score of the experimental group from the pretest to the posttest significantly different from the change in the average score of the control group from the pretest to the posttest?*

The mean scores and standard deviation values for the experimental and control groups are shown in Table 1.

Table 1. *Pretest/posttest average scores and standard deviations for experimental and control groups*

Group	Pretest			Posttest		
	n	\bar{X}	S_x	n	\bar{X}	S_x
Experimental Group	30	58.57	13.41	30	87.60	9.70
Control Group	30	61.20	10.41	30	70.47	11.23

The results of the two-factor ANOVA for mixed measures as to whether or not the change in the writing achievement level of the experimental and control group students from the pretest to the posttest differ significantly are as shown in Table 2.

Table 2. *Results of ANOVA for pretest and posttest English writing task scores*

Source of Variance	KT	SD	KO	F	p
Between the subjects	8767.292	59			
Group	1576.875	1	1576.875	12.720	.001
Error	7190.417	58	123.973		
Within the subjects	2148.5	60			
Measures (pretest - posttest)	11001.675	1	11001.675	84.444	.000
Group*Measures	2930.408	1	2930.408	22.493	.000
Error	7556.417	58	130.283		
Total	10915.792	119			

As seen in Table 2, the two-factor ANOVA results indicate that the change in the writing achievement level of the experimental and control group students from the pretest to the posttest differ significantly [$F_{(1-58)}=22.493$, $p<.05$]. This finding shows that the writing lessons conducted traditionally and through self-assessment have different effects on improving students' writing skills. The mean values in Table 1 indicate that the students in the experimental group increased their average scores in writing more than the students of the control group by means of the writing classes. This points to the writing lessons conducted with self-assessment as being more effective than the writing lessons conducted in the traditional way in terms of improving the writing skills of students.

Research Question 2: *What is the distribution of the average scores of the experimental group and control group students from the four writing tasks produced throughout the writing classes when teacher's grades for the second drafts are taken into consideration?*

The graph in Figure 1 shows how the average scores of the experimental and control group students from the four writing tasks carried out during the writing lessons changed:

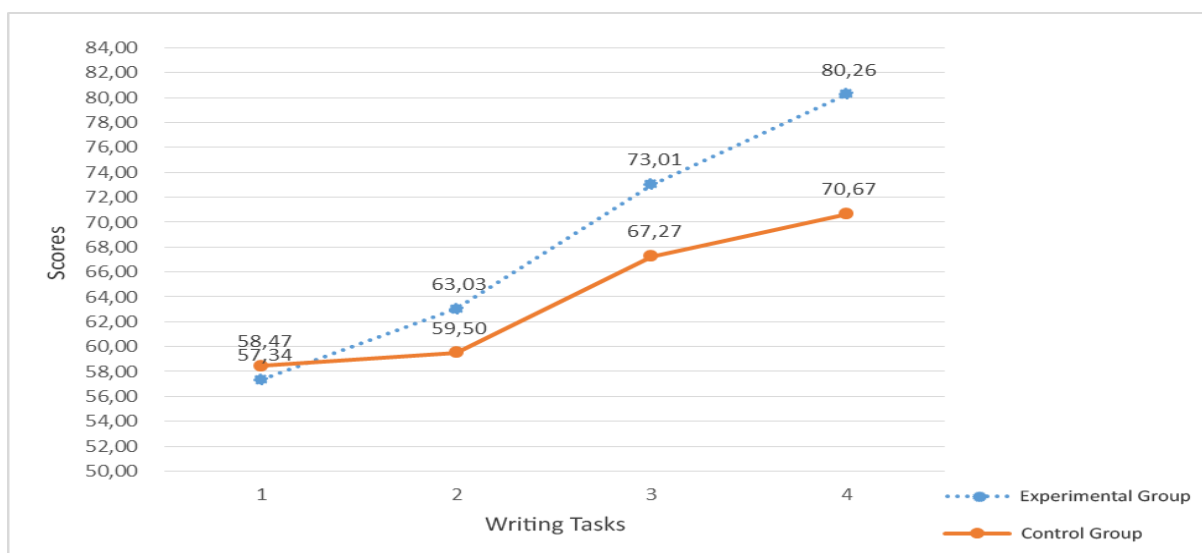


Figure 1. *Distribution of the averages of the teacher scores for the second drafts of the four writing tasks in experimental and control groups*

As Figure 1 shows, both groups continuously increased their average; but this increase was higher in the experimental group. This supports the interpretation which was made based on the result of ANOVA, that writing lessons conducted by self-assessment are more effective than writing lessons conducted in a traditional way in improving the writing skills of students.

Research Question 3: *What is the distribution of the average scores of the experimental group from the four writing tasks for different criteria (content, organization and language use) when teacher's grades for the second drafts are taken into consideration?*

The graph in Figure 2 shows the distribution of the averages of the teacher's scores given to the experimental group students from the four writing tasks for different criteria on the scoring rubric (content, paragraph organization, and language use):

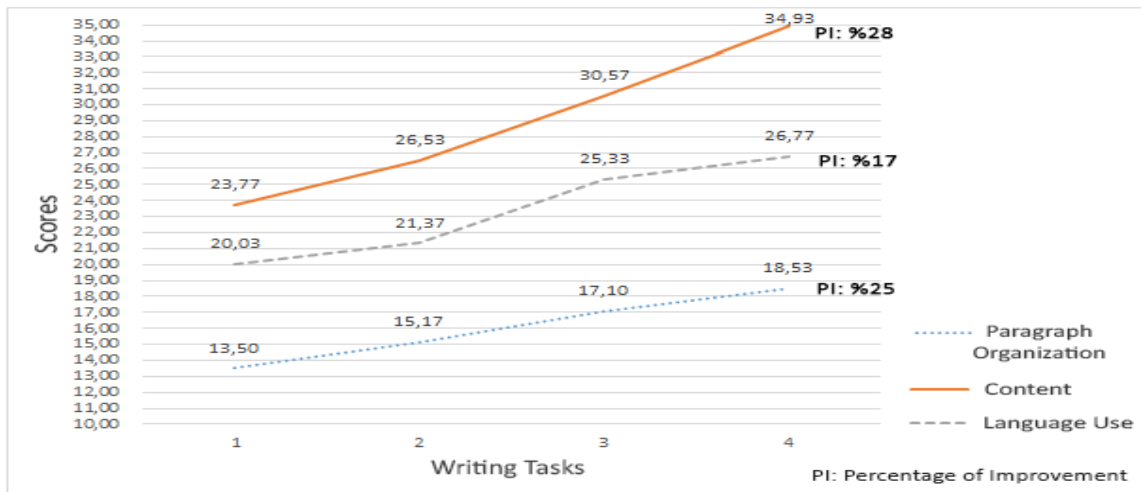


Figure 2. Distribution of average score of experimental group for content, paragraph organization and language use in four writing tasks

According to Figure 2, the experimental group increased their average for *paragraph organization* from 13.50 to 18.53 out of 20. That is, they achieved a 25% improvement in their ability to organize their paragraphs properly. They increased their average for *language use* from 20.03 to 26.77 out of 40; showing that they achieved a 17% improvement in their ability to use grammar and vocabulary effectively while writing a paragraph. They increased their average for *content* from 23.77 to 34.93 out of 40, which was a 28% improvement in their ability to develop ideas in their paragraphs. These findings show that through self-assessment, the improvement in content development and paragraph organization is higher than the improvement in language use.

Research Question 4: What is the distribution of the average scores of the teacher’s grades to the first drafts of the four writing tasks and the students’ own self-assessed grades to the same tasks?

The graph in Figure 3 shows the distribution of the averages of the student and teacher scores for the first drafts of the four writing tasks:

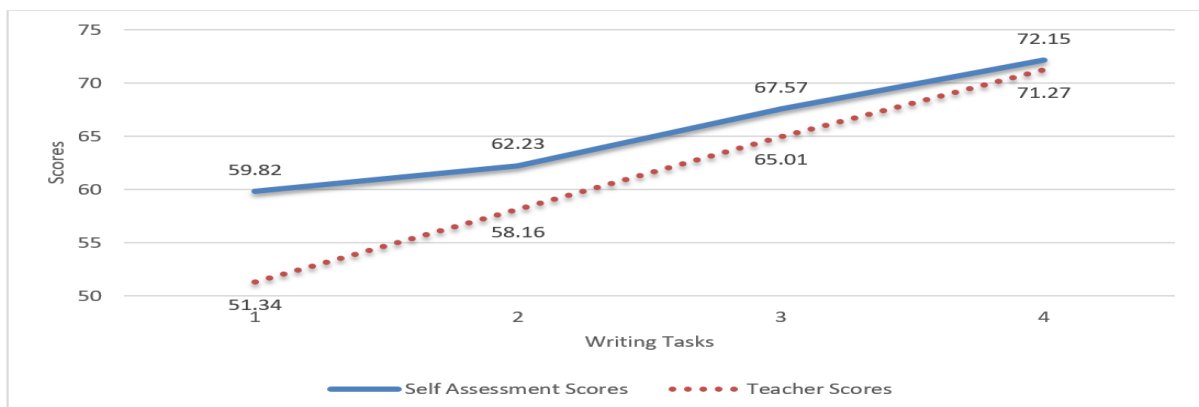


Figure 3. Distribution of averages of student and teacher scores for first drafts of four writing tasks

As Figure 3 shows, in general, the scores given by the students to the same paragraphs are higher than the scores given by their teachers. However, the difference between the averages closes after practice. This indicates that as the number of self-assessment practices increases, students become more proficient in their self-assessment.

In the interviews with 15 students from the experimental group, 13 students asserted that self-assessment had a positive effect on their writing skills, while two students stated that self-assessment did not have any effect on their writing skills. The two students told that their low level of proficiency prevented them from evaluating their own paragraphs properly and thus did not give them the chance to improve their writing skills through self-assessment.

13 students were asked “What are the positive effects of self-assessment on your writing skills? Can you explain by giving examples from your own experiences?” Responses for this question were analyzed by content analysis method and a number of themes were determined. Student responses were then grouped under themes. The number of student ideas for different themes is given in Table 3.

Table 3. *Students’ opinions regarding positive effect of self-esteem on writing skill*

<i>Themes</i>	<i>f</i>
1. An increase in the motivation level of the students in writing lessons	11
2. An increase in the improvement of writing skills through writing lessons	10
3. Getting to know how a paragraph is evaluated and what is expected from them in a writing lesson	7
4. An improvement in self-assessment skills	5
5. An increase in the self-confidence level of the students in written expression	3
6. Becoming more self-disciplined in writing lessons	2

As Table 3 shows, the experimental group students asserted that the self-assessment practices increased their motivation level and self-confidence in writing lessons; improved their self-discipline and self-assessment skills, and helped them become more aware of the expectations in a writing lesson.

CONCLUSIONS

Conducted for the effect of self-assessment on the writing skills of students in preparatory classes of a state university in Turkey, this survey adopted a pretest - posttest control group design. During the research process, the writing classes were conducted in the control group in a traditional way, while the experimental group students practiced self-assessment. The experimental group students increased their average score from 58.57 to 87.60 from the pretest to the posttest, whereas the control group students increased their average score from 61.20 to 70.47. In other words, both groups improved their writing skills throughout the process. However, two-factor ANOVA results showed that writing lessons including self-assessment and writing lessons conducted in a traditional way had significantly different effects on improving the students’ writing skills. As the experimental group students achieved a higher increase in their average score from the pretest to the posttest, it was concluded that writing lessons including self-assessment were more effective than writing lessons conducted in a traditional way in improving the students’ writing skills. This result supported the results of other related research studies (Andrade, & Boulay, 2003; Andrade, Du, & Mycek, 2010; Hirvela, & Pierson, 2000; Meihami, & Varmaghani, 2013; Oscarson, 2009; Ross, 2006; Ross et al.,

1999; Sajedi, 2014). In addition, at the end of the study, 86% of the experimental group students who were interviewed expressed, and gave concrete examples and justifications, that self-assessment had a positive effect on their writing skills.

As a result of this research, it was also found that self-assessment practices applied in the experimental group during the study led to a positive change in the self-assessment skills of the students in the experimental group. This proved that self-assessment skills can be improved with practice. In the interviews conducted as part of the research, the experimental group students stated that their self-assessment skills had improved with practice. This result supported other research studies to be found in the literature (Boud, & Falchikov, 1989; Ferris, & Hedgcock, 1998; Kaya Yıldırım, 2001; O'Malley, & Pierce, 1996; Oscarson, 2009).

In addition, in this study, some differences were observed among the improvement that the experimental group students achieved in different components (content, paragraph organization, and language use) of their writing skill. This brought the researcher to the conclusion that through self-assessment, students do not improve the content, organization, and language use in their paragraph equally. In another research with the same result, Bing (2016) asserted that what is responsible for the difference in the improvement level of different components of the writing skill is not the feedback technique used, as improving language use requires an elongated process.

At the end of the study, two out of the 15 students interviewed stated that self-assessment had no effect on their writing skills; whilst 13 stated that it had a positive effect on their writing skills. Therefore, in the current research, the students were mostly positive about the effect of self-assessment on their writing skills, which reflects the results seen in many other studies (Banlı, 2014; Bayat, 2010; Bing, 2016; İnözü, & Yumru, 2006; Lam, 2010; Oscarson, 2009). However, there two of the students stated that their low proficiency level in English prevented them from getting any benefit from the self-assessment practices. Some other studies in the literature (Boud, & Falchikov, 1989; Oscarson, 2009) also pointed to a link between the proficiency level in English and the improvement attained through self-assessment practices.

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