Developmental Potential of Self-Assessment Reports for High School Students' Writing Skills: A Qualitative Study

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Abstract

Though many studies have been conducted on the effects of self-assessment on L2 learning over the last decade, none has investigated how self-assessment reports lead to improving L2 learning. Thus, this study aims to disclose how self-assessment reports improve Iranian high school students' writing skills and their perceptions of the effectiveness of self-assessment reports in cultivating writing skills. For this purpose, the researchers selected one intact grade 11 class (n = 21) at Shahed public high school in Borujerd, Iran. During the instruction lasting 15 sessions held twice a week, a self-assessment report was designed based on Nunan's (2004) template and given to the students to assess their writings weekly. Then, a focus group interview was run with six students. Findings documented a significant improvement in the students' writing skills in terms of content, language, organization, and task requirements. Additionally, the focus

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group interview results yielded four themes: raising students' awareness of evaluation criteria, making students more self-regulated, letting students have a voice in their academic destiny, and increasing students' motivation to write. In light of the findings, a number of conclusions are drawn, and several implications are put forward.

Over the last decades, there has been an instantaneous growing interest in the second language (L2) writing assessment approaches. This increasing interest has focused on moving from norm-referenced summative assessment to formative, student-centered assessment, from product-based assessment to process-based assessment, and from bureaucratic assessment to humanized, democratic assessment (Balderas & Cuamatzi, 2018; Jakavonytė-Staškuvienė, 2021; Lam, 2018). As Barootchi and Keshavarz (2002) stress, the very reason for this shift is that the traditional assessment approaches cannot provide a realistic picture of the processes involved in doing a writing task. This drawback was the staple impetus for the leaders of the field to seek alternative, authentic ways of writing assessment methods.

The primary purpose of alternative, authentic assessments is to foster L2 learners' knowledge and skills to use L2 as a resource to convey their message accurately (Chau, 2005). In line with the concept of the 'washback effect' (Alderson et al., 1996; Andrews et al., 2002; Bachman, 1990; Graham, 2019; Hoomanfard et al., 2018; Shohamy et al., 1996), assessment practices are also perceived as both developmental and evaluative. In this sense, L2 learners' attention is drawn to the crucial processes in writing successfully. Under this premise, therefore, it is argued that a part of assessment responsibilities is shared with students themselves through alternative assessment methods like

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self-assessment (Dunn, 2021; Lam, 2010; Li & Zhang, 2021; Litterio, 2018; Soleimani & Rahmanian, 2014).

In this perspective, self-assessment is considered "a means by which teachers help students become more metacognitive about their writing and writing processes, but they also often attempt to mitigate the negative effects of grading or testing writing" (Schendel & O'Niel, 2000, p. 200). In the self-assessment, L2 learners are encouraged to assess their writing performances, where the results are used to make important decisions about their future. As such, as a gate-keeping function on their performance, L2 learners expose their own weaknesses and reflect on the processes used to complete the writing tasks (Andrade, 2019; Esmaili et al., 2021; Lam, 2018; Melhe et al., 2021).

Despite these rigorous theoretical underpinnings, self-assessment is rarely practiced in Iranian high school classes, and the traditional approaches are preferred by EFL teachers (Barootchi & Keshavarz, 2002; Naghdipour, 2016; Zarinkamar et al., 2021). This reservation may be attributed to the scarcity of qualitative research works to disclose how self-assessment can improve Iranian high school students' writing performance. The present qualitative study aims to reveal how self-assessment reports can cultivate Iranian high school students' writing skills to bridge this gap. Besides, it seeks to explore their perceptions of the efficiency of self-assessment reports in developing their writing skills. The hope is that the current study's findings can be illuminative for EFL teachers and students to further their understanding of the possible advantages of self-assessment in boosting writing skills.

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Literature Review

Since the 1950s, the self-assessment concept has been under the lens of the leaders of the field for both research and teaching purposes. According to Hilgers et al. (2000), its roots can be traced back to social and clinical psychology. Self-assessment is built on two notions, namely self-observation, and self-monitoring (Al-Mamoory & Abathar Witwit, 2021; Lam, 2010, 2018). Self-monitoring pushes learners to generate internal feedback so that they are given the opportunity to compare their current performance with well-established educational criteria (Carroll, 2020; Kanfer, 1975; Sabri Ali, 2021; Shahidi, 2020). As Lam (2010) stresses, "this feedback comes partially from observation and evaluation, which are key processes in affecting change with deep-seated human behaviors" (p. 16).

Self-assessment has also gained support from social constructivism theory. Under the premise of this theory, the social context is an influencing factor in shaping or modifying the behavior in which it is situated (Grabe & Kaplan, 1996; Nieminen, 2021; Qinghua, 2021). However, self-assessment could not be justified from the perspectives of behaviorism and cognitivism as they consider self-assessment a series of isolated performances (Lam, 2010). In other words, these perspectives, as Hilgers et al. (2000) put it, have been unable to show and justify how L2 learners learn the needed strategies to implement self-assessment correctly and how these perspectives can self-evaluate their performance in social conditions. Therefore, it is essential to adopt a social constructivism perspective as the underpinning of a self-assessment study to determine and disclose how self-assessment strategies and practices improve L2 learners' performance in social contexts (Karimi & Sarem, 2021; Lam, 2018). In connection with L2 writing, adopting this approach is most likely to reveal how self-assessment helps L2 learners

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become better writers when actively involved in planning, drafting, editing, and self-monitoring their performances.

In addition, according to Hobson (1996), written self-assessment, as a powerful method, can make way for L2 learners to enter a professional community. He reasons that the self-assessment can do so by encouraging students "to think, make decisions, and evaluate their actions using the self-assessment tools as other members of the community" (p. 56). From this perspective, self-assessment is beneficial for L2 learners to understand their favorite professional community's typical conventions and values (Litterio, 2018; Sadeghi et al., 2017).

In addition, self-assessment has received support theoretically and practically from other perspectives. For example, according to Schendel and O'Neil (2000), by getting L2 learners to assess their writing performance, they continue to reflect on all the factors influencing writing processes. In this way, L2 learners' self-awareness of their writing skills significantly improves. The self-assessment is also very useful to help L2 learners "take control over their writing, writing process, and learning-key considerations in supporting a student-centered and effective learning environment" (Schendel & O'Neil, p. 205). This, in turn, may make L2 learners self-regulated. The increased self-regulation in L2 learners urges them to practice metacognitive strategies in which they can plan, monitor, and evaluate their writings and produce self-directed feedback as to what should be done and not done next (Butler & Schnellert, 2015; Zimmerman, 2008; Zheng et al., 2021).

Different Approaches to Self-assessment

In the literature, two main self-assessment approaches have been verified. According to Brown (2005), the first type measures L2 learners' proficiency

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through discrete-point tests that are objectively rated. The second type assesses L2 learners' proficiency via checklists to rate and comment on their abilities (North, 2000; Yan & Carless, 2021). Though objectively-ratable tests enjoy a high level of reliability, they cannot push L2 learners to generate linguistically complex structures in productive skills. As Brown (2005) stresses, this goes in sharp contrast with the fundamental tenets of alternative assessment approaches, which put stress on outcome-based learning. In other words, they prioritize learning grammar, vocabulary, pronunciation, and orthography as the traditional building blocks and listening and reading comprehension at the cost of productive skills. Hence, it is clear that this kind of assessment does not permit L2 learners to use the newly-acquired structures in new communicative contexts.

In contrast, self-assessment checklists are designed based on the current status quo of L2 learners to assess their productive skills along with other receptive skills and language components (Brown, 2005). They include open-ended statements like 'I can talk about….' or 'I can write about ….'. Though these self-assessment instruments do not possess a high level of reliability, they encourage L2 learners to concentrate on L2 use in communicative contexts. The outstanding feature of self-assessment checklists is that they allow L2 learners to reflect upon the processes and stages they have passed through to produce a piece of writing (Hoo et al., 2021; Lam, 2010; Porter & Cleland, 1995; Ross, 1998). In line with these considerable benefits, self-assessment reports were used in the present study.

Writing in EFL Classrooms

In the 21st century, the ability to write in English as an international language has gained more attention than ever due to globalization and

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technological advances such as the Internet. All age groups require written communication across languages and cultures for business, education, and other purposes (Hyland, 2016; Rahimi et al., 2021; Wiegle, 2014). From this perspective, writing is considered an act of interactive communication between the writer and reader through texts (White, 2019). Vis-à-vis spoken interactions, the writing process is more demanding for writers as there is no immediate feedback.

Different approaches to teaching L2 writing have been developed and practiced in the literature. According to Silva (1990), they represent "a cycle in which particular approaches achieve dominance and then fade but never really disappear" (p. 11). These approaches, in general, have differed from two perspectives: the degree of articulation of the curricular proposals deriving from them and the degree to which of the three essential elements of writing constitutes the core of the pedagogical option, that is, texts, writers, or readers and contexts of writing (Hyland, 2016). In this sense, teaching writing approaches have fallen into two broad categories: product-based and process-based approaches.

In the product-based approach, the primary attention is on the final texts that L2 writers are required to produce for educational or vocational purposes. In this approach, texts are considered as 'objects,' and the ultimate goal of the course is to help L2 writers generate different kinds of texts in line with their contextual needs (Hyland, 2016). The aim is to equip L2 learners with different and adequate patterns and forms to produce a well-organized paragraph. In contrast, following the premises of the learner-centered pedagogy, the process-based approach emphasizes L2 writers themselves (Hyland, 2016). From this perspective, as Crusan (2010) notes, L2 writing is considered a cognitively demanding and problem-solving task, and the writing

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course needs to provide a couple of required strategies deployed by expert writers. The aim is to help L2 writers involve successfully in a variety of processes characteristics of expert writers' composing behavior, such as generating ideas, planning, goal setting, monitoring, evaluating, and searching for language with which to express their intended meaning (Kyttälä et al., 2022; Weigle, 2014).

Writing assessments can be considered a continuum from least to most authentic "in terms of the degree to which they simulate real-world writing conditions" (Wiegle, 2013). A distinction can be made between indirect and direct writing tests at the end of the continuum. As a prevalent approach in the 1970s and 80s (White, 1994; Wolcott, 1998), the indirect tests measure the sub-skills engaged in writing like grammar and usage through selected-response questions, such as multiple choices, fill-in-the-blank, matching, identifying the problematic parts, among others (Crusan, 2010; Yan et al., 2021). On the other hand, as Elliot and Perelman (2012) note, direct writing tests get test-takers to generate a piece of text in response to a set of directions. According to Weigle (2013), direct writing tests are administered under timed conditions, and test-takers must produce a piece of language going beyond the sentence level. On the other end of the continuum, alternative assessment methods exist like self-assessment, peer-assessment, portfolio assessment, and collaborative assessment, among others, in which authenticity is the number one priority. In these writing tests, as Weigle (2013) puts it, they "allow writing to be assessed over time and over a range of writing tasks and genres" (p. 2).

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Empirical Studies on Self-assessment

Some studies are critically reviewed here to lay the groundwork for the current study. In a seminal study, Lam (2010) probed into the effects of self-assessment on students' writings. He collected the required data by asking the students (n = 20) to fill in a self-assessment report and complete a writing journal at the end of the semester. The findings disclosed that since self-assessment reports were helpful for the students to identify their mistakes and make plans for more improvement, they got motivated to hone their writing skills. In another study by Khodadady and Khodabakhshzade (2012), the effects of self-assessment on improving Iranian university students' (n = 60) writing and self-regulation abilities were explored. Their results indicated that the experimental group did outperform the control group regarding writing ability. Moreover, the findings revealed that the self-regulation ability improved significantly at the end of the intervention. Besides, Purwanti (2015) tried to real how students react to the use of self-assessment reports and how it would be useful to revise their writings. His findings documented that the participants welcomed the use of self-assessment reports. Additionally, the results evidenced that the self-assessment report was beneficial for the participants to improve their writings in terms of lexical, phrase, surface, and content level though not effective in enhancing grammatical accuracy.

Further, Ratminingsih et al. (2018) investigated the impacts of the self-assessment on students' independence and writing performance. Their participants went through pre-test, intervention, and post-test. Their findings disclosed that students' writing skills significantly improved at the end of the instruction due to the positive effects of the self-assessment. Finally, Chung et al. (2021) explored the impact of self-assessment, planning and goal setting, and reflection on students' self-efficacy and writing performance before and

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after revision. Their findings evidenced that the experimental group had significant gains in writing performance on the post-test. Additionally, they found that the participants' self-efficacy significantly improved after the revision compared to before the revision.

As can be inferred from the above-alluded studies, though the self-assessment can be considered a practical approach to L2 learning, its effects on Iranian high school students' writing skills are under-researched. Therefore, the present qualitative study attempts to fill in the gap by disclosing the impacts of self-assessment reports on Iranian high school students' writing skills.

Context of the Study

Iranian high school students need to develop writing skills. For example, they know that writing skills are of central importance to successfully use the new social technologies (e.g., Whatsaap, Facebook, Instagram, etc.) to pass their messages across to other people across the world (Naghdipour, 2016). Despite this paramount importance tied to writing skills, they have gained scant attention in the syllabus of the Iranian high schools. The writing parts are mostly restricted to sentence writing levels in the newly-designed high school books Vision series (Alavi et al., 2016). For example, in Vision I, nouns, adjectives, verbs, and adverbs are presented and practiced. In Vision II, the 'basic structure of a simple sentence', 'gerund', and 'to be infinitive' are presented and practiced. In Vision III, the structure of compound sentences is introduced in Unit one, and the next two Units are assigned to developing paragraph writing skills. In other words, the writing skills have not been principally and systematically covered in the Iranian high school English coursebooks. In fact, as Naghdipour (2016) notes, the "English language

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education in Iran appears to follow a "truncated" curriculum in that it ignores productive language learnings skills, such as speaking and writing" (p. 83). To ameliorate this thorny condition, it is essential to introduce and practice new pedagogies with rigorous theoretical foundations such as self-assessment. Hence, this impetus urged the researchers to excavate the effects of the self-assessment on the development of the Iranian high school students' writing skills. In addition, it aims at disclosing their perceptions about the effectiveness of the self-assessment. To meet these goals, the following research questions were put forward:

1) How does self-assessment lead to the improvement of Iranian high school students' writing skills?
2) What are the perceptions of Iranian high school students about the effects of self-assessment reports on the development of their writing skills?

Method

Setting and Participants

This study was conducted at Shahed public high school in Borujerd, Iran, in the autumn of 2019 semester. One intact grade 11 class (n = 21), including female students, was selected. The students aged from 16 to 17 years old and those who were not willing to participate in the study were not included. The English course is compulsory in the high school syllabus, and learners have to attend the English course for three hours per week. Moreover, it should be stressed that the students were trained based on the third-grade public high school coursebook (Vision III) to ensure they were already familiar with paragraph writing skills. In this regard, their English teacher confirmed that the students had not been educated on paragraph writing skills already. It is

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worth noting that the researchers assured the school principal, English teacher, and students that the data would be collected would remain confidential and informed about the final findings.

Instruments

Self-assessment Report

One of the instruments used in this study was a self-assessment report. It was designed based on the template presented by Nunan (2004). The self-assessment report was given to the students to record their growth and development weekly over the course. The self-assessment report covered a range of different items, including what the students have studied and learned over the current week, how their writings have developed in terms of organization, content, language, and task achievement requirements, what kinds of mistakes they have made, what difficulties they have, what they tend to learn, and what plans they have for their upcoming sessions. It should be noted that the self-assessment report was explained in detail to the students, and the teacher filled it in several times as a sample in front of the class to let the students know how to use it during the instruction. Finally, it should be stressed that the self-assessment report was piloted prior to the main study to measure its validity. For this purpose, the researchers invited two university professors in Applied Linguistics at Lorestan University. They examined the self-assessment report regarding face and content and reported that it could be used in the current study. Afterward, five grade 11 students were asked to write about a topic and then assessed their writings based on the self-assessment report. Next, they were asked about any ambiguity with the self-assessment report's items. Based on the students' comments, some items were modified in terms of language.

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The study's self assessment report appears below.

Self-assessment Report

Student's ID: ………….   Week: ……………

This week I studied ....

This week I learned ....

This week my writing organization was..

This week my writing language was……………………………………………

This week my writing content was……………………………………………

This week my writing achieved task requirements…………………………….

This week I made these mistakes ....

My difficulties are ....

I would like to know ....

I would like help with ....

My learning and practicing plans for next week are ....

Focus Group Interview

The second instrument was a focus group interview administered with six students who actively participated during the instruction. The participation was voluntary, and prior to running the focus group interview, written consent was translated into Persian and signed by the students' parents. Particularly, the interview revolved around the participants' perceptions and experiences of the effectiveness of the self-assessment reports in developing their writing ability. During the interview, the participants expressed their experiences of the intervention and responded to other participants. The focus group interview was audio-recorded by two voice recorders. It was run at the end of the instruction at an agreed time with all the participants, lasted around 2-3 hours, and run in the participants' mother tongue (Persian) to let them express their voices with ease.

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Students' Coursebooks

The participants' course books were the last instrument utilized in this study. The course books are comprised of a student book and a workbook. The student book named Vision III includes three units. Every unit covers a range of parts, including Get Ready, Conversation, New Words and Expressions, Reading, Grammar, Listening and Speaking, and Writing. Concerning the writing part, it should be noted that the writing part of Unit 1 deals with the development of compound sentences. In Units 2 and 3, paragraph writing is introduced and exercised. It seems that the primary objective is to enable third-grade students to write short description paragraphs in a principled way. The workbook written in three units encompasses some activities consistent with the content of the student book.

Data Collection Procedures

Some steps were taken to carry out the current study. First, to satisfy the ethical requirements, before running the study, the researchers met the school principal and English teacher and explained the current study's objectives in detail. Having received the consent of the school principal and the English teacher to let the study be run in their school, the researchers semi-randomly selected one of the grade 11 classes. At an agreed time, the researchers attended the class and illuminated in detail the objectives of the study for the students. Then, the written consent in Persian was given to the students to be signed by their parents. Second, the teacher was taught the principles and procedures of the self-assessment with a particular focus on writing skills by an assistant professor at Ayatollah Borujerdi University. The reflections and explanations of the teacher demonstrated that he has completely learned the principles and procedures of the self-assessment. Then, the instruction lasted

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about 15 sessions, and the classes were held in 75 minutes twice a week. The first session was dedicated to introducing and explaining the participants' self-assessment reports and writing skills. In this session, the teacher explained the self-assessment reports and the required steps to use them. She illuminated the different parts of the self-assessment reports. In clear words, Concerning the content, she explained that the content should be relevant and sufficient. Relevant means the content needs to be meaningful to the topic, and sufficient means there should be enough content. She detailed that the content or ideas need to be presented logically and grouped or separated in meaningful ways concerning the organization. Regarding the language, she illuminated that they need to make use of a range of grammatical and sentence structures accurately and use a variety of vocabulary and expressions accurately. Their punctuation was to be assessed, and the spelling had to be accurate. Their writing had to be around 100 words in length concerning the task requirements. This procedure was followed twice to clear any misunderstandings or ambiguities. The students raised their questions and affirmed that they had got the key points.

By following Grower et al.'s (1995, pp. 115-116) model, which has been presented to teach L2 writing skills, every session included some distinct steps. The lesson started with the *introduction* (about five minutes), in which the participants' interest and background knowledge were activated in different ways, such as playing a listening clip, reading a text, displaying a short video, and narrating a short story. The next stage was *working with ideas* (about ten minutes), in which the teacher extracted the students' ideas through brainstorming technique, wrote the ideas on the whiteboard, and chose the most appropriate ones. In the next stage, called *planning to write* (about ten minutes), a model of the intended paragraph with its typical features and

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structures was provided to the students. The lesson continued by *drafting* (about ten minutes), in which the teacher had the students write an initial draft based on their notes and plans. The students were recommended to consult dictionaries, grammar reference books, and model paragraphs for some conventions to complete this part. The fifth stage was *reviewing and drafting* (about ten minutes), in which the students were urged to edit and improve their first draft. In the next stage, called *reviewing* (about ten minutes), the students had to repeat their writings and modify the problematic parts. During the rest of the class time, the students were given the self-assessment reports to assess their writing performance (about twenty minutes) in line with the given open-ended statements. In doing so, the teacher encouraged the students to reflect on their different aspects of writing regarding organization, content, language, and task achievement requirements, detect areas of weakness and strength and plan for improvement. In doing so, the students were left alone to reflect upon their learning and compare and contrast their new writings with the previous ones. The teacher monitored the students when they completed the self-assessment reports and responded to their questions. Every week, the teacher gathered the self-assessment reports and put them in a cabinet in the corner of the class. At the end of the instruction, the focus group interview was run with six students who participated actively.

Data Analysis Procedures

As two different kinds of qualitative data were collected in the present study, they were analyzed differently. The analysis of the self-assessment reports was done through the microgentic development approach. According to Riazi (2016), the microgenetic development approach deals with the changes in L2 learners' learning processes. It includes examining L2 learners'

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performance at different points throughout transition in the domain of interest. In the current study, in light of the students' self-report data, it was explored how the students' writing skills were changed over the instruction by comparing and contrasting their self-assessment reports at different points in time. To this aim, the students' self-assessment reports were extracted, examined, and explained meticulously based on the underlying underpinnings of the self-assessment. The researchers precisely selected three different self-assessment reports at three different points in time and compared and contrasted them in detail. For example, they meticulously examined how the students reported how the organization of their writings improved during the instruction.

Also, the data gathered from the focus group interview were analyzed through a thematic coding analysis. Braun and Clarke (2006) introduced and validated the procedures followed to analyze the data. They included some distinct procedures to identify the recurring patterns and themes within the collected data. To do this, at first, the surveys and transcripts generated during the semi-structured interviews were read repeatedly. Next, along with coding the responses carefully to diagnose and verify particular features in the collected data, adequate attention was given to the raised questions. This, in turn, set the ground for recurrent concepts and themes to emerge. Considering the central concepts coded previously and presented in the respondents' answers, the themes were identified. Then, the prevalence of the themes was demonstrated through relevant coded data that emerged from the database. To go beyond the description of the data and make correct interpretive judgments about the prominent themes, the researchers examined them one more time according to the already-existing theoretical foundations. It should be stressed that the researchers measured the reliability and validity of the findings.

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Concerning reliability, they recruited two coding analysts to analyze the collected data independently. The consistency of their ratings was measured through inter-rater reliability, and the results yielded ($\alpha = 0.91$), which was acceptable for the current study's purposes. Regarding the validity, they used a member-checking strategy. In doing so, a copy of the final findings was given to three of the participants to check if they represented their intended meanings. In general, they confirmed that the extracted themes and excerpts matched their intended meanings.

Results

Self-assessment Reports

The first research question investigated how the self-assessment reports improve the Iranian high school students' writing skills. To this aim, they were gathered and analyzed carefully to show how the students' writing skills improved over the instruction. To evidence the effects of the self-assessment reports on the students' writing skills, every item was examined for a student at three different times. For example, the following excerpt belongs to Zeinab in the second week.

This week my writing organization was...n..o..t...good...Sometimes...I...used..irrelevant..meanings..in..my..writing.................................

As can be seen, at this time, Zeinab felt that her writing organization was not good enough since she was using unrelated meanings in her writings. In the fifth week, her self-assessment report was examined to see if this problem was mitigated in the upcoming sessions.

This week my writing organization was...I..think,..good...I..tried..to..use..relevant..and..correct..meanings...in..my...writing.................

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The above excerpt shows that Zeinab's writing organization somehow improved due to the instruction. At this time, she reported that she was trying to use more relevant and correct meanings. Finally, her self-assessment report in the eighth week was examined to see how her writing organization has enhanced. That part is presented below.

This week my writing organization was very good. For example, I could somehow present my sentences logically together. As the teacher approved.

The above excerpt indicates that Zeinab assessed her organization writing very well. At this time of the instruction, she presents her sentences logically. The strong evidence for this considerable development is her teacher's positive feedback ability.

In addition, Neda's self-assessment reports concerning the language factor were checked out in the first week. Her exact comment is reported below.

This week my writing language was not good. Sometimes I used irrelevant meanings in my writing.

As the above excerpt demonstrates, Neda believes that her language writing is not well. At this time, her writing suffered from many spelling and grammatical mistakes. The succeeding excerpt taken from her self-assessment report in the third week shows how her language writing quality was fostered.

This week my writing language was good, I think. For example I make less spelling and grammatical mistakes.

The comment above reveals that her writing language is at a satisfactory level. Neda maintained that at this point, she is making fewer spelling and grammatical mistakes compared to the previous weeks. In the end, to excavate

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the effectiveness of the given instruction in cultivating, her language writing in the eighth week was examined. The relevant part is displayed below.

This week my writing language was... *! good. my teacher said that the content of my writing is very good. the content is relevant.*

As can be observed, Neda ranked her language writing excellent. In support of this, she reported that she was using the punctuation marks correctly and had very few misspelled words.

Additionally, to probe into the participants' writings in terms of content, Maryam's self-assessment report in the first week was selected and examined. The students' comment is reported below.

This week my writing content was... *very bad. Because I could not write a lot about the topic.*

The statement above shows that Maryam's writing content is not well yet. At this point, she could not write relevant content about the topics. The following excerpt was taken from her self-assessment report in the fourth week to see if any improvement occurred in the upcoming sessions.

This week my writing content was... *very good. For example, I could write enough about the topic.*

At this time, Maryam felt somehow satisfied with her content writing since she could write enough about the given topics. Finally, the researchers investigated how her content writing has improved up to week 8. To do so, they extracted the relevant part and presented it below.

This week my writing content was... *good. my teacher said that the content of my writing is very good and the content is really relevant.*

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The excerpt clearly shows Maryam maintains that her writing content is good. She stated that her content writings are more relevant, and her teacher affirmed and appraised this considerable improvement.

Another factor explored was achieving the task requirements. The researchers chose Shima's self-assessment report in the second week. Her comment is reported below.

This week my writing achieved task requirements...was not good. my teacher said that my partemer and I need to write more words.

As can be seen, Shima's assessment of her writing to achieve task requirements is that it is not yet at an acceptable level. Regarding their teacher's feedback, Shima affirmed that word numbers in her writings are not enough. To show the development of her writing with the aspect of this factor, her self-assessment report in the fifth week is cut and pasted below.

This week my writing achieved task requirements...were good. my writing this week was about 90 words... I think it is good...

The excerpt above indicates that Shima has achieved task requirements by writing a paragraph with 90 words, which created a kind of satisfaction for her. Additionally, to check out the improvement in her task requirement, the researchers referred to her self-assessment report in the eighth week and reported her judgment below.

This week my writing achieved task requirements...because I could write up to 120 words ...in a paragraph...The number of my words are a lot how........

This excerpt displays the considerable improvement of Shima's writing in terms of the task requirement factor. At this time, she could write a paragraph with over 100 words. Owing to the positive effects of the

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instruction, Shima's use of the words increased from 90 words in the fifth week to more than 120 words in the eighth week.

The other factor aimed at clarifying the students' mistakes during the instruction. Indeed, it would reveal how the students' errors decreased during the course. Bahar's self-assessment report was selected in the first week to meet this goal. Her comment is cut and pasted below.

The excerpt above displayed that Bahar's writing suffered from some mistakes. For example, her topic sentences were difficult to understand. The following excerpt was taken to show this student's mistakes after three weeks.

As can be observed, Bahar had difficulties using the conjunctions correctly at this time. This part, it seems, is related to her inability to link her sentences together in a coherent way. Also, the researchers examined her mistakes at the end of the instruction. Note the following.

The comment above demonstrates that Bahar's mistakes are related to the inability to use discourse markers and lack of vocabulary knowledge. The self-assessment reports disclosed that she had difficulties with the linguistic structures, which are common even among advanced English users.

Another part of the self-assessment report was concerned with the difficulties that the participants were experiencing during the course. The

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following excerpt was chosen from Darya's self-assessment report in the second week.

My difficulties are *Spelling and grammatical. I cannot use to much vocabulary. I cannot link my sentences together*

The statement above is indicative that Darya had problems using spelling and grammatical structures. At this time, she could not use enough vocabulary and link her sentences together appropriately. Additionally, to see her difficulties in the fifth week, her exact words are presented below.

My difficulties are *related to weak supporting sentences. I cannot give good supporting sentences to my topic sentences.*

As can be seen, Darya's report revealed that she had difficulties in providing appropriate supporting sentences to support the topic sentences. Furthermore, her problems at the end of the course are presented below.

My difficulties are *related to write about different topics. I think I need to practice more writing about different topics.*

The quotation above discloses that Darya could not write about different topics in the end. She believed that she needed to practice writing more to alleviate this limitation. On a critical note, her self-assessment reports unveiled that the writing difficulties have changed over the course and, more importantly, she was fully aware of them.

The next part of the self-assessment report deal with the likes and wants of the students. For example, in the first week, Azam reported that:

I would like to know *how to write a good paragraph. I would like to use a lot of vocabulary and structures*

As can be seen, Azam expressed that she would like to know how to write a well-formed paragraph. She added that she likes to use a lot of

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vocabulary and structures in her writing. To see the learning needs and wants of Azam in week 5, the researchers examined her self-assessment report.

I would like to know *how I can improve my organization and content of writing.*

As Azam's self-report unveils, at this time, she intended to improve her writing skills in terms of organization and content factors. Further, it shows that she was aware of her problems and knew what she would gain in the future. Additionally, she commented on her learning desires after the course in the next excerpt.

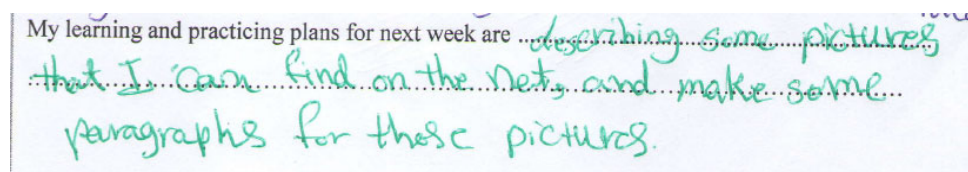I would like to know *how I can write a short essay.*

The excerpt above demonstrates that Azam liked to go beyond a paragraph and write a short essay. It seems that owing to the positive effects of instruction, she became motivated to work on her writing ability and to write a well-organized essay.

The last part of the self-assessment report addressed the students' learning and practicing plans for the next week. To uncover how the students' learning and practicing plans changed over the course, Dorsa's comment is selected in the first week and presented below.

My learning and practicing plans for next week are *making sentences with "but, so, and, or' about my daily life; and trying to make a story out of it.*
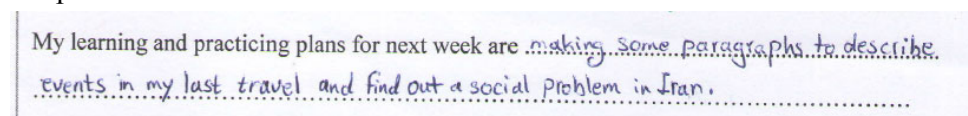
As can be observed, this student aimed to make compound sentences with 'but, so, and, or' about her daily life events and make a short story out of them.

Dorsa's learning and practicing plans are reported in the following excerpt in the fourth week.

The excerpt above reveals that Dorsa got rid of generating compound sentences at this time and was trying to write short paragraphs regarding some pictures that she could find on the net. To see what the learning and practicing plans of Dorsa are for the upcoming weeks after instructions, her exact words are presented below.

At this stage, Dorsa intended to generate some paragraphs to describe her past experiences and address a social problem in her country. As the excerpt revealed, finally, the student had plans to go beyond the paragraph limit and generate a short essay, thanks to instructions. This considerable improvement may be ascribed to the positive effects of the instruction offered based on the self-assessment tenets.

Focus Group Interviews

The second research question examined the Iranian high school students' perceptions of the effects of the self-assessment reports on developing their writing skills. The collected data were subjected to inductive content analysis, and the findings yielded four overarching themes: 'raising students' awareness of evaluation criteria'; 'making students' more self-regulated'; 'letting students'

have a voice on their academic destiny'; and 'increasing students' motivation to write.'

Raising Students' Awareness of Evaluation Criteria

The first theme extracted from the data was 'raising students' awareness of evaluation criteria. The participants stressed that they had a better picture of the criteria used to assess their writings after the instruction. In this regard, one of the students commented:

> *This approach helped me become familiar with the rules my writings are assessed. For example, now I know that my writing is evaluated in content, language, organization, and task requirements.*

In corroborating with the precedent statement, another student stated:

> *Now I know the ins and outs of the assessment criteria of high-quality writing. Hence, I try to learn, practice and improve my writing according to these criteria.*

Making Students' More Self-regulated

'Making students' more self-regulated' was another theme catching the participants' attention. The participants noted that the self-assessment helped them be more self-regulated learners. In this regard, one of the interviewees remarked:

> *The self-assessment approach assisted me to be more self-regulated in my writing performance. I mean that by reflecting on the processes required to plan, draft, edit, and monitor my writing, I got more independent from the teacher and peers.*

Consistent with the previous statement, another participant quoted:

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When I was filling out the self-assessment reports, the light was shed on the different stages to formulate and complete a well-organized paragraph. As such, I got more self-regulated to write well outside the class.

Letting Students' Have a Voice in Their Academic Destiny

The other theme that emerged from the data was 'letting students' have a voice in their academic destiny.' In a sense, the participants were satisfied with the self-assessment since they felt that they had a role in their academic destiny. In this respect, one of the students opined:

The self-assessment let me feel that I can have a role in my academic destiny. I mean, I determined my real score rather than other persons. I felt that the teacher determined my real abilities; sometimes, her assessments are not fair.

Congruent with the preceding quotation, another interviewee commented:

When I was allowed to assess my performance, I accepted the results and considered the decisions made based on test scores fair. So, I felt that I have a role in my academic destiny.

Increasing Students' Motivation to Write

The last recurring theme was 'increasing students' motivation to write.' The participants' words indicate that they got more motivated to continue writing due to the efficiency of the self-assessment reports. In this respect, one of the students said:

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To me, this approach was fascinating and motivating. It really aided me in learning how to write better. When I could easily put my thoughts into words, I got motivated to write more.

In line with the previous statement, another participant asserted:
The self-assessment reports were highly influential in stimulating me to write better. When I learned the fundamental strategies and techniques to write well in English, it gained a pleasing experience pushing me to repeat it in the future. A sense of achievement was created, which, in turn, urged me to write more about different topics.

Discussion

The first research question investigated how self-assessment reports improve Iranian high school students' writing skills. As reported above, the findings unveiled that the students reported that their writing skills improved during the instruction. The self-assessment reports documented that the students could improve their writing skills with aspects to content, language, organization, and task requirement factors during the instruction. Moreover, the results indicated that the students' writing mistakes dwindled, and their writing difficulties ameliorated with the cross of time. Likewise, the findings evidenced that the students reported that their motivation increased and wanted to practice writing more in the upcoming times at the end of the course.

The second research question examined the Iranian high school students' perceptions of the effects of the self-assessment reports on the development of their writing skills. As reported above, the results evidenced that the students had very positive attitudes toward the efficiency of self-assessment reports in cultivating their writing performance. The recurring themes

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unveiled that the students maintained that the self-assessment reports could raise their awareness of evaluation criteria, make them more self-regulated, have a voice in their life academic destiny, and increase their motivation to write more. According to the findings, it may be argued that using the self-assessment reports affected the students both cognitively and affectively.

The study's findings provide support to Hamp-Lyons's (2000) results, revealing that though at first, the participants assessed their writing ability as poor and showed resistance toward self-assessment practices, with the cross of time, they could find out that the self-assessment was so valuable to identify their writing problems. Additionally, the study's results are partially in line with those of Manuputty (2000), reporting that with the inclusion of self-assessment during a writing course at Pattimura University, students' writing ability significantly increased in terms of development and organization factors. Further, the current study's findings lend credence to those of Khodadady and Khodabakhshzade (2012), which demonstrated that the regular use of a self-assessment checklist in class and outside class positively affected EFL learners' writing sense of independence. In addition, the study's results are partially consistent with Lam's (2010) findings, reporting that self-assessment could foster the students' motivation to practice more writing. However, the participants reported that they found the self-assessment useful to only handle surface errors like the punctuation marks of writing and to use the correct lexical structures. Moreover, the present study's findings also accord with those of Birjandi and Siyyari (2010), yielding that vis-à-vis the EFL learners who were deprived of assessing their writings, self-assessment could significantly boost the EFL learners' writing ability. Finally, the study's findings are somehow in line with those of Brown and Harris (2013), reporting that self-assessment is highly useful to raise L2 learners' self-regulation.

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As noted by Klenowski (2009) and Zimmerman (2008), one possible explanation for the study's findings may be ascribed to this view that the self-assessment reports could contribute to the increased self-regulation of learning among the students. To explain this more, the self-regulation of learning might have pushed the learners to practice metacognitive strategies in which the learners could plan, monitor, and evaluate their own writings and produce self-directed feedback as to what should not be done and should be done next (Butler & Schnellert, 2015; Zimmerman, 2008). In this sense, the self-assessment reports enhanced the students' self-regulation (Brown & Harris, 2013). From the perspectives of the self-regulation and self-regulated learning theories, the study's findings can be explained as the assessment practices were not kept away from the students, they were given the invaluable opportunities to monitor directly, control, and regulate their cognition, affect, and behavior to achieve the intended purposes (Zimmerman & Schunk, 2011). Under the premise of these theories, it is argued that students' participation in all stages of instruction is essential to reaching positive educational outcomes. According to Zimmerman (2008), as the students were engaged in the educational practices through the self-assessment reports, the interaction occurred between the students and the environment, as well as between the students and their internal cognitive processes by which the cognitive, affective, and behavioral goals got closer to their hands.

In addition, the study's findings can be justified by the metacognition theory (Schunk, 2004). It means that the self-assessment reports might have paved the way for the students to consciously control their cognitive skills, such as self-selecting, self-monitoring, self-evaluating, and self-predicting. Since the students trained and implemented the self-assessment report well, they could practice a range of cognitive learning strategies and achieve higher-

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order thinking skills. This, in turn, could provide effective feedback to the students' writing performance and offer useful direction for more improvement (Chammot & O'Malley, 1994). Further, along with Oscarsson (1989), the results can be explained from this perspective that the self-assessment administration was an excellent way to raise the students' awareness. That is, by raising the students' awareness, they know their current abilities, how much progress they have made till now, and what they are going to learn in the future. More pertinently, the students realized what they could and could not do with the learned writing skills, and they could actively move forward to better achievements.

Further, another line of discussion of the study's findings is the motivational and emotional benefits of the self-assessment reports. That is, engaging the students in assessing their own abilities might have evoked their intrinsic and extrinsic motivation (Brown & Harris, 2013). As the learners' writing ability improved via the self-assessment reports, their extrinsic needs may have been satisfied, such as completing a writing course. Also, the intervention might have made the students enjoy practicing writing in a second language and met their intrinsic needs. In turn, this might have created a sense of achievement in students. This argument has gained support from the previous studies that reported that involving students in assessment practices positively affects the students' motivation (Asghar, 2010), self-efficacy (Bruning et al., 2013), and effort regulation (Steuer et al., 2013). As the students' motivation was sustained and increased, they were pushed forward to follow their educational goals.

The significant improvement of the students' writing ability can also be ascribed to this view that, as Alexander et al. (2008) note, self-assessment reports might have been beneficial to raising learners' autonomy. Indeed, the

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self-assessment reports might have increased the students' independence by encouraging them to monitor their own learning processes and offering themselves appropriate feedback on the amount and quality of their learning progress. In other words, as self-assessment was implemented permanently in the instruction, it may have assisted the students in understanding that they should not be much independent of the teachers' help. In alignment with Alexander et al. (2008), the study's results suggested that the students became more successful due to being more willing to complete the self-assessment reports, take more risks, and have a higher activity level. Since the students enjoyed these features, they had a better chance to be autonomous learners. Further, coupled with the study's findings, Chen (2008) opines that "equipped with self-assessment skills, students gradually develop a critical attitude toward learning throughout their lives and in the long run achieve the fullest autonomy." (p. 201). In sum, alignment with Fulcher (2010) and Mousavi (2012), it is argued that the self-assessment reports might have brought out this salient advantage through which students' awareness of their weaknesses and strengths was raised.

Finally, the study's findings can be justified from this dimension that the self-assessment report was perceived as positive by the students since it created educational advantages for the students and let them take part and assume responsibilities in the class. In other words, in line with Rasooli et al. (2018), the study's findings can be explained from this view that by involving the students in assessing their own writing abilities, they are given an invaluable opportunity to make correct judgments about their own academic destiny. Notably, as the study's findings documented, when the students are engaged in the testing practices through the self-assessment reports, the test

scores, and interpretations of test scores, and the decisions made based on them are perceived as fair and valid by the students (Paris & Paris, 2001).

Conclusion and Pedagogical Implications

The present study aimed to scrutinize how self-assessment reports foster Iranian high school students' writing skills. Besides, it sought to excavate the Iranian high school students' perceptions about the effectiveness of self-assessment reports in cultivating their writing. The results of the self-assessment reports demonstrated that the students assessed that their writing abilities significantly improved with aspects of content, language, organization, language, and task requirements. In addition, complementary to the self-assessment reports' findings, the focus group interview results evidenced that the students have very positive attitudes toward the efficacy of the self-assessment report. In light of the findings, it can be concluded that EFL learners can exercise self-assessment reports to boost their writing skills.

In line with the study's findings, a number of pedagogical implications are suggested. First, to take advantage of self-assessment reports in high school classes, the teacher educators may want to give enough attention to this alternative assessment approach theoretically and practically. By doing so, it is assured that the Iranian EFL teachers get a comprehensive understanding of the pros and cons of self-assessment and, accordingly, employ it in their real classes. Second, owing to the promising results of the current study, the authors of the Iranian high school course books are recommended to include self-assessment at least in the workbook. For example, a particular space can be assigned at the end of each lesson in which, using a self-assessment report, students can self-assess their performance over the lesson. Later on, they can return to their reports and clearly understand their growth and development.

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Third, congruent with the study's findings, the Iranian EFL teachers may want to use self-assessment in their pedagogy. However, they need to present clear and straightforward explanations of the benefits of the self-assessment report to their students and train them on how to do it inside and outside the class. Finally, as self-assessment lets the students of the current study get more motivated to write, make more correct judgments about their writings, and increase their self-regulated skills, the Iranian high school students may want to benefit from its implementation in the learning of other language skills and components.

In light of the limitations imposed on the current study, some suggestions for further research are presented here. As this study's results provided strong support for the benefits of self-assessment reports to foster the Iranian high school students' writing ability, there is much scope for exploring how self-assessment reports can improve the other language skills and language components. Future research can also extend how online self-assessment reports may boost EFL learners' educational achievements in mixed methods or qualitative studies. Additionally, it is suggested that the efficacy of self-assessment reports in developing EFL learners' self-regulation skills be examined. Moreover, the effects of self-assessment reports can be put into research with different participants (e.g., kids, teenagers, and adults) in other contexts (e.g., elementary schools, private language schools, and universities). Last but not least, the findings of the present study could provide the background for a survey to uncover the Iranian EFL teachers' thinking and perceptions about alternative assessment methods, like self-assessment reports in the future.

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