

A Framework of Five Level Learner Autonomy Method and Self-Assessment: A Case Study of Applying Self-Assessment in SAT Test Preparation Phase

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Abstract

In the fields of pedagogy and language assessment, self-assessment has been regarded as an effective teaching and learning method. This method can promote learning in a positive way, and have positive washback on learning, particularly for students who are preparing for high-stake tests. However, in a Chinese context, neither teachers nor students attach much importance to self-assessment, either in classroom or after school. This paper addresses how to apply a new framework, united with Nunan's five level learner autonomy method and self-assessment, in an SAT preparation phase. It is found that the new framework is able to promote learning and learning strategies positively. Also, this paper suggests that, in the initial stage of the implementation of the new framework, some problems need to be taken seriously by teachers.

Key words: Self-assessment; five level learner autonomy method; framework; SAT; test preparation phase

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Introduction

The score report of Scholastic Aptitude Test, often known as SAT, has been regarded as one of the application requirements by US university admissions (ETS, 2015). SAT is organized and developed by ETS (Educational Testing Service) and is under the supervision of US College Board (Lewin, 2014). The history of SAT dates to 1926. With a history duration of almost 93 years, there has been a few reforms in terms of this test. One of the most recent reforms is related to the test format, and the new updated SAT test was put in practice in 2016 (College Board, 2017).

According to previous studies, in terms of the requirements for university admissions, 67% of the top-ranked universities in US suggested “considered”, which means the scores are considered; 19% “recommended” or “recommended strongly”, which means the universities highly recommend that candidates should have the SAT score report to apply to the universities; 7% “alternative”, which means candidates may use other grades as substitution (Sawyer, 2018). It can be seen that the attitude of US universities to the SAT test scores has always been a reference, which is a reference for selecting and recruiting suitable applicants. As China's study abroad continues to heat up, as of November 2017, the Institute of International Education issued a report stating that between 2016 and 2017, China has been the country with the largest number of international students in the United States for eight consecutive years (OpenDoors, 2017).

The score report of SAT, a high-stake test, has been required by many U.S. universities (Sharpe, 2001). Hence, this test may influence the test-takers throughout the preparation and test-taking phase. In language testing field, there has been a number of studies researching on how a test may affect learners; but in regard with how a test may improve learner awareness and learner autonomy, there is a dearth in the relevant research. On the other hand, according to previous studies, a high-stake test enables learners to become more motivated than they normally do (Dong, 2015). In this case, how to use this force for learners in the test preparation phase remains a question for language testers, pedagogy researchers, and more importantly, the language teachers. In the pedagogical field, the Learner Autonomy method has been promoted as an effective method. For example, the Learner Autonomy method may motivate learners, and by doing so, learners may become more aware of the fact that they should be responsible for their own learning (Benson and Voller, 1997). Also, the Learners Autonomy method can enable learners to self-direct themselves, self-guide themselves, and have a clearer learning goal (Esch, 1997; Littlewood, 1997; Sheering, 1997).

In this light, by mixing the self-assessment theory and the five-level Learner Autonomy method (Nunan, 1997), the present study proposes a new framework, which is applied in an SAT preparation phase to promote the test-taker's preparation, aiming at the formation of the ultimate positive washback of teaching: to motivate the learner to improve the language learning. According domestic and overseas data, along with the perspectives of domestic administration, such as median and tutoring institution, it is acknowledged that Chinese learners obtain a comparatively higher average score at the SAT Mathematics subject; they achieve relatively lower average score at Evidenced-based reading and writing (Yuan, 2014; Gov.cn, 2018). Hence, my present study will implement the new framework to improve learners' awareness

regarding Evidenced-based reading and writing, with a particular focus on writing, by discussing the results found from a case study conducted in China. Future suggestions and directions will also be proved in the end.

I. Self-assessment and Learner Autonomy method

1. Self-assessment

It has long been argued that the implementation of self-assessment in SAT test preparation is a key ingredient for learning, which may exert positive washback on learners and learning (Bailey, 1996). Moreover, self-assessment, on a large scale, is able to promote autonomous learning (Dickinson, 1987; Bailey, 1996). Hence, in terms of the relevant literature, self-assessment and learner autonomy, at least in test preparation, are inseparable; they may even be supplement to each other. In the Chinese educational context, according to previous research, self-assessment is beneficial to both teaching and learning (Leung, 2004; Leung, 2007). However, more often than not, due to various reasons and restraints, e.g. school policy, the learners are not learning in the autonomous way but rather following the rote learning and passive learning (Kember, 2000; Zhu, 2013). What is more, there is research finding suggesting that most learners not understand what self-assessment is, which is another way of saying their awareness has not been raised yet (Dong, 2015). For example, instead of fully understanding the mechanism of what to assess, how to assess, and when to assess, the learners only regard self-checking as self-assessment (Gardner, 2000; Guo, 2016). In this light, there is a need of an outside force to promote learning and to raise learners' awareness in regard to self-assessment. Because, as mentioned, the Learner Autonomy and self-assessment are inseparable, the force should and can be the Learner Autonomy method. There are a few famous Learner Autonomy theoretical frameworks or models, one of which is Nunan's five-level Learner Autonomy framework (Nunan, 1997).

2. Five-level Learner Autonomy framework

As shown in Table 1, Nunan's five-level framework is designed to promote learning autonomy. Throughout the learning process, the learners always take dominant role. On the first level, which is very important, the teacher should make learners aware of the learning goal and materials. The learners need to understand and raise their awareness regarding what their short-term and long-term goals are, how to set their goals, what kind of learning strategies they would like to use, and so on. On the second level, after the awareness being raised, though not completely, the learners are involved in the goal setting. On the third level, the learners can modify their goals and tasks, according to the formative learning outcome and feedback. On the fourth level, the learners create new goals and tasks. This level may overlap with the previous levels. On the fifth level, the learners may go out of the classroom, coming into contact with the society and learning from the society, which, gradually, enables the learners to transform to autonomous learners to autonomous people (Littlewood, 1997).

Table 1. Five-level Learner Autonomy framework

Level	Learner action	Content	Process
1	Awareness	Learners are made aware of the pedagogical goals and content of the materials they are using.	Learners identify strategy implications of pedagogical tasks and identify their own preferred learning styles.
2	Involvement	Learners are involved in setting their own goals from a range of alternatives.	Learners make choices among a range of options.
3	Intervention	Learners are involved in modifying and adapting the goals and content of the learning programme.	Learners modify or adapt tasks.
4	Creation	Learners create their own goals and objectives.	Learners create their own tasks.
5	Transcendence	Learners go beyond the classroom and make links between the content of classroom learning and the world beyond.	Learners become teachers and researchers.

3. New framework

Nevertheless, in the classroom application, it is somehow problematic with either self-assessment or Learner Autonomy, particularly, with the reliability of self-assessment being the focus of discussion (Gardner, 2000). Also, as for Learner Autonomy method, Nunan (1997) mentions that it is not possible that learners have determination that they should be completely responsible for their own learning throughout the learning process before they enter the classroom; furthermore, they may lack adequate cognitive knowledge regarding the language ability and skills they are going to learn (Nunan, 1997). In the Chinese context, especially in the test preparation, there are various high-stake test stakeholders, such as parents, test-takers, language institute teachers and so on. The stake may increase the difficulty to apply the self-assessment and Learner Autonomy at some point.

In terms of research findings, on the one hand, the implementation of self-assessment and Learner Autonomy can affect learners and learning positively. On the other hand, in specific context, the teacher needs to be prepared when applying the two methods, and learners also need to be prepared, particularly about the target language and skills. Besides, taking into account the above factors, the present research mixed the self-assessment theory and five-level framework and made a new framework (Table 2). First, the teacher and the learners discuss the SAT writing target language points: what SAT tests, what the learning goals are, and how many goals the learner needs to accomplish. Second, the learner designs a set of self-assessment question items. Third,

throughout the preparation phase, the teacher and the learners need to conduct formative feedback and what specific areas the learner needs to modify and develop. Fourth, based on the feedback, the learner will set new goals and continue to self-develop. Last, the learner will search for the authentic materials outside classroom and try to identify all the possible language points that are relevant to SAT target language, and discuss with the teacher continuously. This new framework is based on the five-level framework, taking account of the timing, content, and the principles of self-assessment.

Table 2. New Framework

Level	Learner action	Content	Process	Teacher role
1	Awareness	Learners understand and set learning goal.	Learner decides the materials and learner strategy	Feedback, Suggestion, Director, facilitator
		Teacher provides relevant materials, and constantly communicate with the learner.	Learner decides the learning duration.	
2	Involvement	Learners involve in the goal setting.	Learner design a set of self-assessment goals.	
		Learner decides what he or she needs to learn, particularly the room to develop part in order to self-assess.		
3	Intervention	Weekly feedback and goal adjusting.	Learner modifies the task.	
4	Creation	Learner creates new goal and continue to self-develop.	Learner creates new learning tasks.	
5	Transcend	Locate WL language items in life	Reading fiction, article, speech to locate WL items	

II. Case study

The research method is, by conducting a case study in China, a mixed method including observation, formative feedback, and interview.

1. Candidate

The candidate, anonymously Zhang Hua, used to take SAT preparation course in Beijing, and was familiar with the test format. Also, she had been learning English

since junior high school, and her language level was equivalent to upper-intermediate. After receiving her first SAT score report, she was not very satisfied with her report, and decided to prepare for the test and take it again. Hence, on the recommendation by the language institute, I contacted Zhang Hua and conducted a pre-interview (semi-structured) with her. After the interview, I found that she had three major features: first, Zhang Hua was autonomous due to the impact of the SAT (Pintrich and Schunk, 1996); second, Zhang Hua was familiar with the target language of SAT writing (Nunan, 1997); third, however, Zhang Hua was unfamiliar with what SAT specifically tests and the specific requirements of the writing subject. As for the research regarding self-assessment development and Learner Autonomy, it is important to recruit a candidate who is autonomous on some level, understanding the target language but not completely. Hence, taking into account the above features, Zhuang Hua was a very suitable candidate.

2. Rationale behind the proposed research method

There are three features of the research. First, there is a need to include continuously formative monitoring. In this research, the candidate takes dominant role and gradually direct the assessment; the researcher (the teacher) communicates with the candidate on the basis of two or three days, along with providing feedback. Second, the timing is of importance. The research is conducted chronologically. The candidate suggested that she have almost six hours per day to prepare for the test. Third, this research is designed specifically for Zhang Hua, the candidate, with a particular focus on her self-assessment. Hence, considering the above features, the appropriate research method should be a case study (Duff, 2007; Cohen, Manion, and Morrison, 2011).

3. Case study

Table 3. Self-assessment mechanism

Level	Learner action	Content	Process	Teacher role
1	Aware of rubric	TL – understand and raise awareness	TL = construct + scoring	Supervisor, Facilitator
		Online resources search	Resources collection	
2	Goal setting and materials	Set the goal	Learner sets the goal and makes the syllabus	
		Design self-assessment syllabus		
3	Weekly self-assessment and room to develop	Daily practice, feedback on two-day basis, weekly feedback and summary	Modify goals and materials on weekly basis	
4	Development	Mock test on two-week basis	Learner, based on the specific condition, sets new goals.	
5	Transcend	Fiction excerpt, speech	Learner read and locate WL items	

As mentioned, Zhang Hua should and needs to take dominant role in the whole process, with the teacher (the researcher myself) as the monitor and supervisor. On the basis of the new framework, Zhang Hua and I together developed a self-assessment mechanism (Table 3). The whole process lasted for two months (from 3rd July 2-18 to 3rd September 2018). On the first level, starting from 3rd July, in order to make Zhang Hua more aware of the complete list of target language in SAT writing, I suggested that she should search on the Internet and try to find as much information as possible, and analyze the information. Within one week, I found that the teacher should be available, be involved, and help the learner, instead of being absent and leaving all the work to the learner. Otherwise, the learner might be demotivating at the beginning. Hence, on this level, we, together, searched for, collected, and collated the information, and then analyzed the information. In the first week of July, Zhang Hua gradually moved on to the next level. She started to analyze the information, and tried to make a list of questions which served as the self-assessment material. However, I found that the teacher, again, should not be totally absent. I conducted an interview with Zhang Hua and found that she needed a teacher as a consultant: if she met with problems, there should be a teacher available. Rather than being there all the time, I decided to motivate her and provide her with assistance via WeChat (an equivalent to Twitter). In a few days, I found Zhang Hua beginning to be familiar with the process and feel herself more than she did just a few days before. Successfully, at the end of this level, Zhang Hua and I finally made the list of 28 self-assessment questions (according to the six target language points of SAT writing: Development, Organization, Effective language use, Conventions of Usage, Sentence structure, Conventions of Punctuation), which gave her a sense of accomplishment. As we can see, the teacher should be available on some level or at least at some particular time of the level, with adequate direction, guidance, and motivation, particularly at the first two levels. Then, the next level went on well: Zhang Hua, in accordance with the time schedule she and I made, self-assessed herself on weekly basis. Because the self-assessment questions were made by her and me, she was very familiar with all the items, and the self-assessment went well too. Each week, Zhang Hua would work on four official tests provided by The Official SAT Study Guide (published by the College Board) and “Cracking the SAT with 5 Practice Tests” (published by Princeton Review). For each test, Zhang Hua should finish it strictly within 35 minutes, which was required by the authentic SAT testing situation (Messick, 1996). After finishing each test, she would self-assess by using the 28-question list. For example, she answered the questions via WeChat or computer. By scanning the QRcode, she was able to answer the questions (Appendix 1), similarly to answering survey questions, and also typing her analysis about the reason that she answered some questions incorrectly. By submitting the survey questions via WeChat or Internet, she would inform me. Then, I could see her answers by logging on the website (Zhou, 2016), and I would download her answers and analysis, summarized the information in an Excel form, and sent it back to her within the day. In this form, I would highlight the main and new problems. On receiving the form, Zhang Hua would move to the next level. She would check the form and start to summarize her problems and set new learning goals, which led to the goal and material modification. As we can see, on this level, Zhang Hua found her new problems, set her new goals, and developed herself. Moreover, the last level (Transcend) was actually embedded in the latter half of the process. I encouraged her to search for speech, literature excerpts and so on. Then she would try to locate and highlight the language use which

resonated with the SAT writing target language points. For example, after finishing the Official Guide tests, Zhang Hua found the Pearl Harbor Speech delivered by U.S. President Franklin Delano Roosevelt on December 8, 1941. She found that President Roosevelt used a number of comparison techniques in the speech to emphasize the importance of starting a war and to increase the power of the language. Then, Zhang Hua highlighted all the comparison techniques in the speech and sent it (Appendix 2) to me for a later discussion via WeChat.

4. Findings

This self-assessment enables Zhang Hua to constantly understand her problems and new emerging problems, and to be aware of the areas where she needs further development, which, in turn, presents a positive washback on her learning. The most important washback effect is that Zhang Hua's awareness regarding learning, test, and the relationship between test and learning were largely raised. After her recent SAT test in Hong Kong, I conducted a follow-up interview with her, when she said that the self-assessment was helpful for her. Before, the classroom was dominated by the teacher, and she as the learner was not able to completely understand her own problems as such. So, she was not able to self-develop. In contrast, during self-assessment, Zhang Hua had the ownership in her own learning: from the first level to the last, she was leading the class, while I, the teacher, acted as the director and consultant (Esch, 1997), which suggested the shift of the roles of teacher and learner. More importantly, during the self-assessment, Zhang Hua understood SAT much deeper and her second time SAT score was enhanced, which suggests that this learning method positively affected her language learning and improved her language proficiency (Messick, 1996). We may not be able to interpret her score and the accountability of the score may need further research. But according to Zhang Hua, her awareness was raised, and she positively faced the future study too.

III. Discussion and suggestion

The design of the new framework is based on Nunan's five-level framework, with the embedding of the three strands of self-assessment: when, how, and what to assess. Throughout the whole self-assessment, the learner was able to understand the duration of self-assessment, the detailed content and strands of self-assessment, and the specific methods of self-assessment. Then, the learner began to be responsible for her learning. However, one limitation is the time in this research: only two months. According to previous research and official data, normally a three-month preparation phase is able to assist the test-takers to enhance their score (BALEAP, 2004). Hence, the time duration is one major limitation. Also, at the beginning of the research, particularly the first two levels did not go well, which suggested the importance of teacher's availability and motivation. Overall, the implementation of the new framework met up the research expectation, and had positive washback on learning and learner. In accordance with the follow-up interview, the candidate also said that this learning method was effective for her and she felt happier than she did before. Yet, whether the framework is able to affect learners and learning in the long term still remains question, and the findings from this research do not provide me with enough evidence to say more (Dong, 2018).

Based on the findings, there are two suggestions provided. First, not all the learners are suitable candidates. Under the supervision of the researcher (the teacher), necessary pre-interviews are of importance (Venuleo, Mossi, and Salvatore, 2016). Second, as for language institution, due to local school policy and other factors, there is possibility that it is of difficulty to apply the new framework. Hence, it is suggested that the framework should be applied little by little, starting as a case then gradually becoming a project or a class; it is highly not suggested that the institution implement the framework on a large scale. Third, there should be effective and constant communication among learners, parents, institutions, and other stakeholders. More often than not, the language institutions have already been commercialized (Hogan and Tompson, 2017). Under this circumstance, the institutions may focus on the profit a lot; the parents and learners may focus on the instant success more (Kang, 2014). Therefore, a constant communication is essential throughout the implementation of the framework in order to raise not only the learners' awareness but also other stakeholders'.

IV. Conclusion

By mixing Nunan's five-level Learner Autonomy framework and self-assessment, the present study proposed a new framework, and implemented this new framework in an SAT test preparation phase. According to the case study findings, for suitable candidates or test-takers, the implementation of the new framework is able to promote their motivation and autonomy, to appropriately raise their awareness regarding the specific target language of the construct of SAT, and indirectly to improve their score that on some level reflects their language proficiency improvement. However, the findings also suggest that a constant communication among stakeholders is important. Moreover, in certain contexts, the teacher should be available on some levels, particularly on the first two levels. Last, test-takers, teachers, institutions, and schools should implement the framework effectively and adjust to the local contexts.

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Appendices

Appendix 1 SAT writing and language self-assessment questions

Expression of ideas - the art of writing									
Development									
1.	Proposition	主题：添加、修改或保留主题句等与篇章或段落主要思想相关的句子							
2.	Support	支持原文观点：添加、修改或保留能支持文章观点或主张的内容							
3.	Focus	是非理由题：添加、修改、保留或删除与文章目的有关的内容							
4.	Quantitative Information	图标信息：通过运用图标中的数据来加强文章的准确性							
Organization									
5.	Logical Sequence	逻辑顺序：确保文章的内容在逻辑上安排合理							
6.	Introductions, Conclusions and Transitions	引入、总结、过渡：改善开头段、结尾段以及段落之间的衔接方式							
Effective Language Use									
7.	Precision	精确：根据文章内容选择更准确合适的词汇							
8.	Concision	简洁：语言上表述清晰、无赘余内容。							
9.	Style and Tone	风格和语气：词汇选择上应该贴近文章的整体行文风格或者符合某种修辞目的							
10.	Syntax	句法：通过结合句子来改善文章的语言或者实现某种修辞目的							
Standard English conventions: the craft of language									
Conventions of Usage									
11.	Pronoun Clarity	代词明确：识别并改正指代不明晰的代词							
12.	Possessive Determiners	物主代词：区分物主代词、能略形式和副词							
13.	Agreement	一致性：确保主谓之间、代词和先行词、名词之间在语法上的一致性							
14.	Frequently Confused Words	易混单词：有效区分容易混淆的词汇							
15.	Logical Comparison	逻辑比较：识别并改正不同类型事物之间的比较							
16.	Conventional Expression	习惯表达：识别并改正不符合习惯用法的表达方式							
Sentence Structure									
17.	Sentence Boundaries	句子完成：识别并改正语法上不完整的句子							
Conventions of Punctuation									
18.	Subordination and Coordination	逻辑关联词：识别并改正句子之间使用错误的逻辑关联词							
19.	Parallel Structure	平行结构：识别并改正平行结构错误							
20.	Modifier Placement	修饰语位置：识别并改正与修饰语有关的错误，包括悬垂修饰语和误置修饰语							
21.	Inappropriate shifts in Verb Tense, Mood and Voice	动词时态、语气、语态							
22.	Inappropriate shifts in Pronoun Person and Number	人称代词和数							
Conventions of Punctuation									
23.	Items in a Series	逗号、分号、并列：运用逗号；有时候也会用分号连接并列的句子							
24.	Nonrestrictive and Parenthetical Elements	逗号：非限制性成分和插入语							
25.	Possessive Nouns and Pronouns	撇号：名词所有格和代词							
26.	Unnecessary Punctuation	多余的标点：识别并删除不必要的标点							
27.	End-of-Sentence Punctuation	句末标点							
28.	Within-sentence Punctuation	句中标点							

Appendix 2

PEARL HARBOR SPEECH

Franklin Delano Roosevelt December 8, 1941

Mr. Vice President, Mr. Speaker, Members of the Senate, and of the House of Representatives:

Yesterday, Dec. 7, 1941 – a date which will live in infamy – the United States of America was suddenly and deliberately attacked by naval and air forces of the Empire of Japan.

The United States was at peace with that nation and, at the solicitation of Japan, was still in conversation with its government and its emperor looking toward the maintenance of peace in the Pacific.

Indeed, one hour after Japanese air squadrons had commenced bombing in Oahu, the Japanese ambassador to the United States and his colleagues delivered to the Secretary of State a formal reply to a recent American message. While this reply stated that it seemed useless to continue the existing diplomatic negotiations, it contained no threat or hint of war or armed attack.

It will be recorded that the distance of Hawaii from Japan makes it obvious that the attack was deliberately planned many days or even weeks ago. During the intervening time, the Japanese government has deliberately sought to deceive the United States by false statements and expressions of hope for continued peace.

The attack yesterday on the Hawaiian islands has caused severe damage to American naval and military forces. Very many American lives have been lost. In addition, American ships have been reported torpedoed on the high seas between San Francisco and Honolulu.

Yesterday, the Japanese government also launched an attack against Malaya.

Last night, Japanese forces attacked Hong Kong.

Last night, Japanese forces attacked Guam.

Last night, Japanese forces attacked the Philippine Islands.

Last night, the Japanese attacked Wake Island.

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Last night, the Japanese attacked Wake Island.

This morning, the Japanese attacked Midway Island.

Japan has, therefore, undertaken a surprise offensive extending throughout the Pacific area. The facts of yesterday and today speak for themselves. The people of the United States have already formed their opinions and well understand the implications to the very life and safety of our nation.

As commander in chief of the Army and Navy, I have directed that all measures be taken for our defense. But always will we remember the character of the onslaught against us.

No matter how long it may take us to overcome this premeditated invasion, the American people in their righteous might will win through to absolute victory.

I believe I interpret the will of the Congress and of the people when I assert that we will not only defend ourselves to the uttermost, but will make very certain that this form of treachery shall never endanger us again.

Hostilities exist. There is no blinking at the fact that our people, our territory and our interests are in grave danger.

With confidence in our armed forces, with the unbounding determination of our people, we will gain the inevitable triumph – so help us God.

I ask that the Congress declare that since the unprovoked and dastardly attack by Japan on Sunday, Dec. 7, a state of war has existed between the United States and the Japanese empire.

PEARL HARBOR SPEECH

Franklin Delano Roosevelt December 8, 1941

Mr. Vice President, Mr. Speaker, Members of the Senate, and of the House of Representatives:

Yesterday, Dec. 7, 1941 – a date which will live in infamy – the United States of America was suddenly and deliberately attacked by naval and air forces of the Empire of Japan.

The United States was at peace with that nation and, at the solicitation of Japan, was still in conversation with its government and its emperor looking toward the maintenance of peace in the Pacific.

Indeed, one hour after Japanese air squadrons had commenced bombing in Oahu, the Japanese ambassador to the United States and his colleagues delivered to the Secretary of State a formal reply to a recent American message. While this reply stated that it seemed useless to continue the existing diplomatic negotiations, it contained no threat or hint of war or armed attack.

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