How Do Swedish Student Teachers Assess their Own Writing Skills in English as a Foreign Language? A Pilot Study

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Abstract: *The present paper reports some results from a pilot project where student teachers' ability to assess their global ability in English, as well as their writing skills, were investigated using the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages (CEFR). Data was generated from a self-assessment and feedback questionnaire administered to a total cohort (N=29) of first-year students of a teacher education programme in English as a Foreign Language (EFL) for lower- and upper secondary school in Sweden. Self-assessment is a metacognitive skill that helps develop awareness of the learning process and that is said to foster learning to learn skills. This skill is considered so important that it is included in the Swedish curriculum and syllabus for languages from an early level but there is little known whether once pupils leave upper secondary school, they are able to assess their language skills with any degree of accuracy. The results indicate that though the students are fairly accurate in their assessments of their general language skills at the group level, self-assessment needs to be practiced for the students to have a realistic view, individually of their own specific writing ability as these skills do not seem to develop otherwise.*

Keywords: self-assessment, EFL, CEFR, writing, higher education

1. Background

The need for students to develop autonomous and lifelong learning skills is something that both European and Swedish educational policy, curricula and syllabuses emphasize. The European documents, endorsed by the European Commission, aim to promote the ability of all European citizens to speak two languages in addition to their mother tongue (European Communities 2004). Self-monitoring and self-assessment (SA) involve the language learner's *own* perception and understanding of learning processes and results. This is something that they should have the opportunity to develop in collaboration with their teachers, in the everyday language classroom.

In Sweden, the ability to assess one's own learning is considered so important that it is included in the Swedish curriculum and syllabus for languages since 1990's, but there is little known whether this has of yet had any results and whether, once pupils leave upper secondary school, they are able to assess their language skills with any degree of accuracy as is expected.

While Swedish school students are generally considered good at expressing themselves in English at an everyday oral communicative level, their skills in writing need a great deal of further developing. In a recent international

comparative study at the end-of-compulsory school level it was found that Swedish pupils score considerably lower in writing than in other ability areas (Skolverket 2012). At more advanced levels, in for example teacher education, it is clear that many students need much additional work aimed at, in particular, enhanced written proficiency (Köhlmyr 2013). There is actually overwhelming evidence that students' inadequate command of the written language is a problem, something which has been increasingly reflected in public debate and the Swedish media recently. Both Samuelsson (2013) and Jensen (2015), for example, point at the lowering of levels of language skills among university students and what they call a non-existent notion of what written language ought to look like. According to Samuelsson (ibid) as well as Jensen (ibid), these problems have nothing to do with what is termed academic writing, but rather the students' inability to use the language in written form according to the norm and to express ideas clearly.

The pilot study presented here is part of a larger proposed study whose aim is to investigate student teachers' beliefs and attitudes towards, and effects of, formative assessment practices such as feedback and self-assessment when it comes to overall writing skills. Student teachers were targeted as a special group of interest, as teachers tend to teach and give feedback as they themselves have been taught and been given feedback. Unless lecturers within teacher education are aware of this, their students may subconsciously and unintentionally perpetuate practices not in line with recent research findings and recommended practice.

2. Literature review

The rationale behind the European documents and the Swedish curriculum and syllabus for languages rests on metacognitive and interactional theory as well as a social constructivist view of language learning – emphasizing the communicative competences[1], which involve more than just linguistic skills. Research on classroom interaction by Giota (2002), for example, suggests that students' interest and involvement in learning increase when they can exert influence on the procedures they are involved in and that they thus develop learning-to-learn skills. Collaborative interpretation of results through, for example, peer and self-assessment may thus help to develop independent, lifelong language learning skills (Dragemark Oscarson 2009) and give students the power to connect in an ever changing world.

Only a limited number of studies (see for example Dragemark Oscarson and Oscarson 2010) have as of yet looked at the use of the Common European Framework of Reference (CEFR) in this context. The CEFR, amongst other things, has criteria in the form of descriptors for common reference levels, which extend from the basic language user, over the independent user and up to the proficient user. These are defined by means of "can-do" statements indicating what a language user "can do" at six different levels, i.e. A1 – C2 (See appendix A and B).

While oral communication is usually the primary goal for a majority of European language learners, competence in writing is increasingly regarded as a vital skill as well. Improving the learner's ability to articulate thoughts, ideas and responses in writing is about empowerment and self-regulation in general (Myhill 2005), and is also, when applied to the learner's first language, about access to further education and employment. It is likewise frequently associated with professional and academic success (Cushing Weigle 2002).

At a national level the importance is reflected in the Swedish curriculum and syllabus for English, which is highly influenced by the CEFR. At the highest course level in the upper secondary school[2] it is stated that pupils should "be given the opportunity to develop correctness in their use of language in […] writing" (Skolverket 2011:53). Furthermore, the syllabus says that, when it comes to writing skills, pupils should be able to "express themselves with good precision, in ways that are varied, balanced, clear and well structured. [....] and in more formal and complex contexts [....] express themselves clearly, freely and with fluency" (Skolverket 2011:57). They should also be able to adapt their writing "to purpose, recipient and situation" (ibid). All these indications of targets to be reached presuppose teacher intervention in the form of feedback in the ongoing learning process. For further discussion and examples of the use of self-assessment in the language classroom, see for instance Oscarson (2013).

3. Research questions

In view of the above, this minor study aims at taking a closer look at whether Swedish student teachers of English as a foreign language (EFL) are able to assess their own language proficiency, especially in writing, in the manner that the curriculum and syllabus expects them to be able to do when leaving upper secondary school. The following three research questions were thus posed:

- How reliable are the student teachers' assessments of their global skills in EFL using the CEFR in relation to grades received on an entry test (on a group level)?
- How reliable are the student teachers' assessments of their overall writing skills in EFL using the CEFR in relation to grades on a writing assignment (on a group level)?
- How do self-assessment skills develop during a course in written proficiency, without any self-assessment practice?

4. Method

4.1. Participants

Participants were students doing their first year in the teaching program in English towards either lower- or upper secondary school in Sweden, and starting their second term of studies with their major in English. The total cohort was 29 and there were 9 men (31%) and 20 women (69%). The majority, that is, two thirds of the students had Swedish as their native language. The course with which they start the second term, is a course in written proficiency (WP) and it

is compulsory for all student teachers. All of the student teachers had completed the previous upper secondary level in Sweden, and they had thus all been subjected to the Swedish curriculum/syllabus where the ability to assess their own language progress is inscribed.

4.2. Procedure

The students were given a questionnaire both at the beginning of the course in WP and again towards the end. They were asked numerous questions related to the focus of the study. Questions were related to whether and in what manner different types of feedback contributed to writing development. They were also asked to use the CEFR to

1) assess their own proficiency in English according to the global scale (Appendix A), and

2) assess their own proficiency in writing according to the overall written production scale (Appendix B).

During the first class, before they were given the questionnaire, the students were given an initial assignment to write a short English summary of a Swedish text. The students' results on these summaries were used to investigate the student group's overall writing skills, as the students' lecturer in written proficiency also used the CEFR overall written production scale to define each student's written proficiency level.

The students' entry test results, which were given on a three point graded scale (1 – 3, three being the highest level), were collected from the department data base, as were final results on the written proficiency course, in the form of grades (on a three point grade scale: Fail, Pass and Pass with Distinction) from their course lecturer at the end of the term.

Due to the conditions around the pilot study (where many things were tried out) it was not possible for the researcher to link the individual students' self-assessments to individual results in this preliminary phase. Group level outcomes were deemed to be sufficient at this point, but of course the missing students cannot be identified. In the larger research project it will be necessary to do so.

4.3. Analysis

A conventional statistical programme (SPSS) was used to analyse the data. To explore the reliability of the student group's global self-assessments these were compared to the mean score of the student group's entry test results. To explore the reliability of the student group's self-assessments of overall writing skills these were compared to the lecturer's initial assessment of their written proficiency, also using the CEFR scale. Furthermore, the first- and second set of self-assessments were compared to the mean score of the lecturers' final grading at the end of the course.

5. Results

The distribution of the student group's initial self-assessments of their general level of English in accordance with the CEFR global scale is shown in Table 1.

Table 1. Initial student self-assessment of global level of English

CEFR Level	N (29)
C2	5
C1	7
B2	15
B1	2
A2	0
A1	0

Roughly half of the student group (n=17) self-assessed their level of English to be at the B1 - B2 levels of general, or global proficiency, which is a reasonable assessment for those who enter university studies. B1 – B2 is deemed to be equivalent to the upper secondary level Step 5 and 6 within the Swedish school system (Oscarson, 2015). Step 5 was previously compulsory for admittance to most programs at university and was so for the student group in focus[3]. No students assessed themselves at a lower level than this, but 12 students assessed themselves to be at C1-C2. C2 is the level where the student can "understand with ease virtually everything heard or read" and "can express him/herself […] very fluently and precisely, differentiating finer shades of meaning" (Council of Europe 2001:24), that is close to academic native speaker ability and hardly a level that may be expected to be reached even after having completed a course at undergraduate level. These assessments seem to be unrealistically high.

Compared to the initial entry test given at the Department of Languages and Literatures at the University of Gothenburg, which can be said to test global ability, the results of the student group's self-assessments are fairly realistic - on a group level - as the mean on the three grade point scale (1, 2 and 3) was 2,7. This can be translated into a high pass and could then be said to be comparable to the B2-C1 level even if there is no such stipulated level to be reached.

Table 2 shows how the student teachers initially assessed their global skills in English, (i.e. all their language skills such as speaking, reading, listening and writing) compared with how they initially assessed their overall written production on the CEFR scale.

Table 2. Student self-assessments of their global skills in English, compared to their self-assessments of their overall written production (WP)

CEFR Level	Global S-A (N 29)	WP S-A (N29)
C2	5	2
C1	7	8
B2	15	12
B1	2	7
A2	0	0
A1	0	0

For a visual representation of the comparison between students' self-assessment of global skills in English and more specifically in relation to writing in English (i.e. Table 2), see Diagram 1.

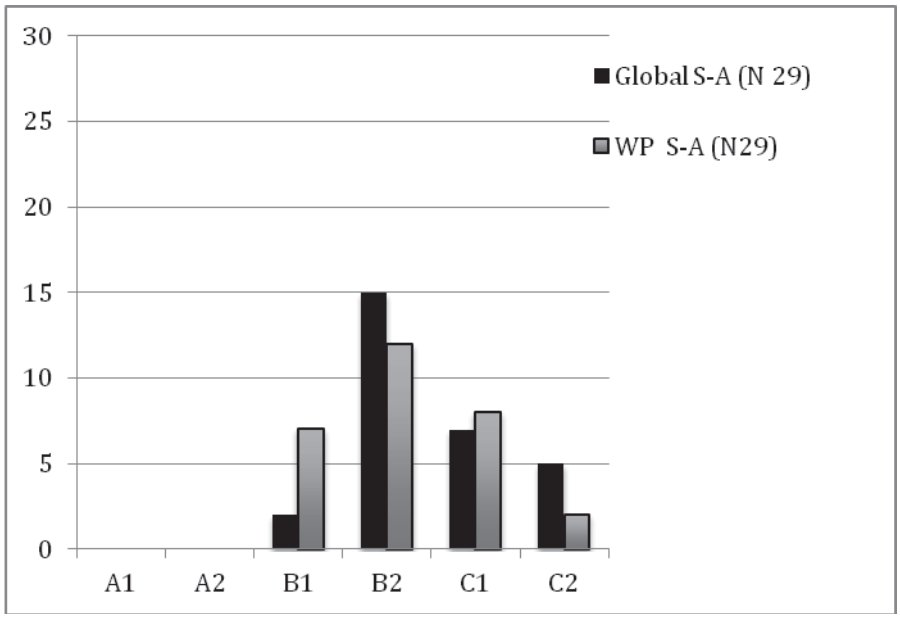

Diagram 1. Student self-assessment of their global skills in English, compared to self-assessments of their overall written production

When it comes to overall written production, the profile is similar to the students' global assessment, but not surprisingly with somewhat fewer students assessing themselves at the higher levels (i.e. there are not so many that assess their skills to C2). The mean score of the students' global self-assessments on a converted 6 point scale from A1 (1) to C2 (6) is M=4.52 while the mean score for their writing skills is M=4.17.

In Table 3 the lecturer's and the students' initial assessments of the students overall writing skills on the initial assignment (i.e. to write a summary of a Swedish text) are compared. Due to the conditions of the pilot study it is not

possible to report the relationship on an individual level or to calculate the correlation between the lecturer's and students' assessments.

Table 3. Students' self-assessments and lecturer's assessment of overall written production (WP)

CEFR Level	Student initial WP S-A (N 29)	Lecturer's initial WP assessment (N 29)
C2	2	0
C1	8	5
B2	12	6
B1	7	15
A2	0	3
A1	0	0

Diagram 2 sets out the same data in graphic form.

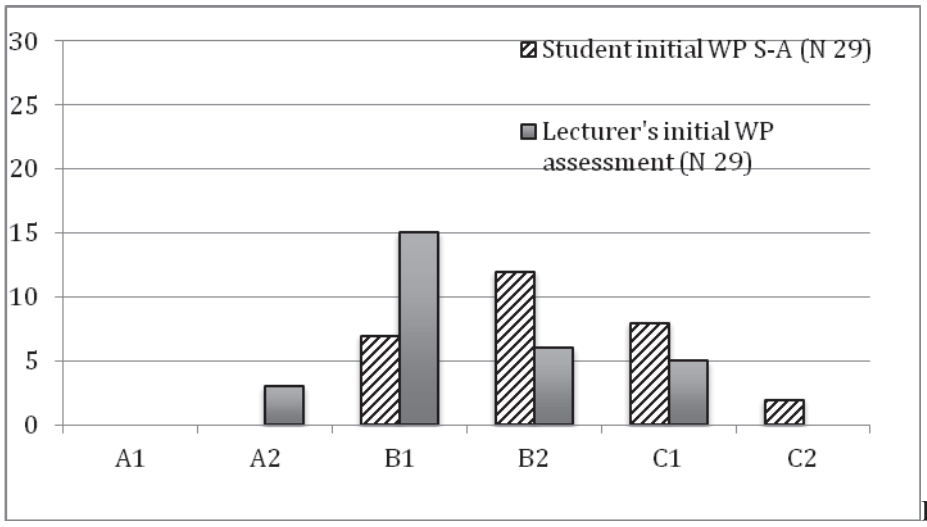

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Diagram 2. Students' self-assessments and lecturer's assessment of overall written production

On a group level, the student teachers had a tendency to assess themselves at a higher CEFR level in written proficiency than the university lecturer did. The mean for the students initial written proficiency self-assessment is M=4.17 (B2) on a converted 6 point scale ranging from A1 = 1 to C2 = 6. The mean level the lecturer assessed the students written assignment to is M=3.45 (mid B1 – B2). No student for example reached the C2 level according to the lecturer.

On the final written proficiency test that the student group had at the end of the course, the mean score (on a three point scale) was M=2.9, i.e. staying just below what may be compared to the C1 level.

To explore the students' development of self-assessment skills during the course, a comparison was made between the students' self-assessments of their writing skills at the start of the course, and towards the end. Again, as it was not possible to match individual students' assessments, there are several students missing in the last set of data. The results shown in Table 4 may only be indicative of a tendency.

Table 4. Students' initial and final self-assessments of overall written production

CEFR Level	Initial S-A WP (N29)	Final S-A WP (N 23)
C2	2	4
C1	8	11
B2	12	7
B1	7	1
A2	0	0
A1	0	0

Diagram 3 visualizes the comparison between the students' first self-assessments of overall written production and the final one towards the end of the course in written proficiency.

As can be seen in Diagram 3, with reservation for the fact that all students did not do the final self-assessment, there is a tendency for more students to assess themselves higher than initially. The mean level of the students' initial self-assessments is M=4.17 compared to the mean level of the final self- assessments M=4.78 on a converted 6 point scale ranging from A1 = 1 to C2 = 6.

6. Discussion and conclusions

The study has not been exclusively undertaken to investigate student teachers' self-assessments, but the results are part of a larger pilot study focusing on feedback in written proficiency. It is a clear limitation that the individual students' results cannot be linked to their self-assessments but a pilot cannot take on or consider everything a larger project would do. It is the intention of the planned research project team to look at these aspects in particular. In spite of this some interesting tendencies emerge when it comes to self-assessment of language skills, at least as far as writing skills are concerned.

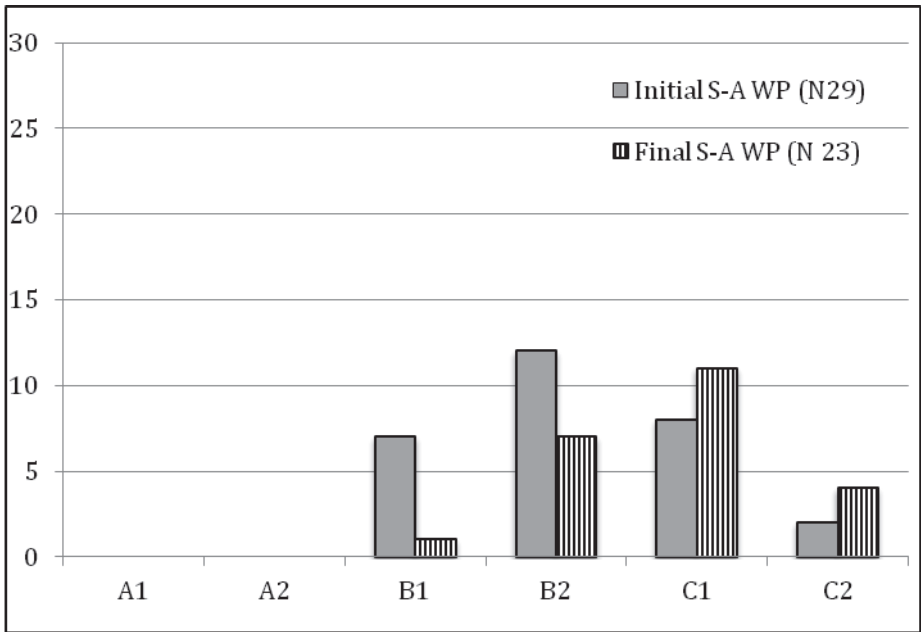

Diagram 3: Students' initial and final self-assessments of written proficiency

Students tend to assess their global competences fairly accurately, which is something previous research also indicates. As also seen in previous research, more specific skills in comparison seem to be comparatively more difficult to assess (Dragemark Oscarson, 2009). Moreover, the students seem to believe that they have progressed to a higher CEFR level more quickly than they may be expected to reach during the course of a few months. This said, the student group may have a larger degree of concurrence between their own assessments and those of their lecturers at the end of their education programme when goals and criteria become more transparent to them.

In the researcher's judgement, the results indicate that though the group of student teachers are fairly accurate in their self-assessments on a general or global level, there is still a lot of work that needs to be done in the area for the students to have a truly realistic view of their writing skills in particular. Some students also seem to have, again in the eyes of the researcher, rather unrealistic expectations on how quickly their language skills can be expected to progress, e.g. from a high B2 – a low C1 in the course of a few months.

The findings – in the form of tendencies - are important for teacher education in general, and language education in particular, as it shows that Swedish students are fairly realistic in their global assessments of their language skills, but they do not yet have the skills in self-assessment that the Swedish upper secondary school expects them to have when they leave school, at least not when it comes to something more specific, such as overall writing skills. The reasons for this may vary; either that the curriculum/syllabus has not been implemented the way it should have been, or that teachers do not have the

knowledge or methodological skills required to work with and develop self-assessment skills amongst their students. It seems reasonable to assume that lecturers and other teacher educators in EFL need to help future teachers to develop much more of an awareness of their strengths and weaknesses in written proficiency before they can successfully teach their future students this skill.

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Appendix A

Table 1. *Common Reference Levels: global scale*

Proficient User	C2	Can understand with ease virtually everything heard or read. Can summarise information from different spoken and written sources, reconstructing arguments and accounts in a coherent presentation. Can express him/herself spontaneously, very fluently and precisely, differentiating finer shades of meaning even in more complex situations.
	C1	Can understand a wide range of demanding, longer texts, and recognise implicit meaning. Can express him/herself fluently and spontaneously without much obvious searching for expressions. Can use language flexibly and effectively for social, academic and professional purposes. Can produce clear, well-structured, detailed text on complex subjects, showing controlled use of organisational patterns, connectors and cohesive devices.
Independent User	B2	Can understand the main ideas of complex text on both concrete and abstract topics, including technical discussions in his/her field of specialisation. Can interact with a degree of fluency and spontaneity that makes regular interaction with native speakers quite possible without strain for either party. Can produce clear, detailed text on a wide range of subjects and explain a viewpoint on a topical issue giving the advantages and disadvantages of various options.
	B1	Can understand the main points of clear standard input on familiar matters regularly encountered in work, school, leisure, etc. Can deal with most situations likely to arise whilst travelling in an area where the language is spoken. Can produce simple connected text on topics which are familiar or of personal interest. Can describe experiences and events, dreams, hopes and ambitions and briefly give reasons and explanations for opinions and plans.
Basic User	A2	Can understand sentences and frequently used expressions related to areas of most immediate relevance (e.g. very basic personal and family information, shopping, local geography, employment). Can communicate in simple and routine tasks requiring a simple and direct exchange of information on familiar and routine matters. Can describe in simple terms aspects of his/her background, immediate environment and matters in areas of immediate need.
	A1	Can understand and use familiar everyday expressions and very basic phrases aimed at the satisfaction of needs of a concrete type. Can introduce him/herself and others and can ask and answer questions about personal details such as where he/she lives, people he/she knows and things he/she has. Can interact in a simple way provided the other person talks slowly and clearly and is prepared to help.

Appendix B

	OVERALL WRITTEN PRODUCTION
C2	*Can write clear, smoothly flowing, complex texts in an appropriate and effective style and a logical structure which helps the reader to find significant points.*
C1	*Can write clear, well-structured texts of complex subjects, underlining the relevant salient issues, expanding and supporting points of view at some length with subsidiary points, reasons and relevant examples, and rounding off with an appropriate conclusion.*
B2	*Can write clear, detailed texts on a variety of subjects related to his/her field of interest, synthesising and evaluating information and arguments from a number of sources.*
B1	*Can write straightforward connected texts on a range of familiar subjects within his field of interest, by linking a series of shorter discrete elements into a linear sequence.*
A2	*Can write a series of simple phrases and sentences linked with simple connectors like 'and', 'but' and 'because'.*
A1	*Can write simple isolated phrases and sentences.*

[1] Linguistic, sociolinguistic and pragmatic competences (but sometimes also further divided into discourse competence, linguistic competence, pragmatic competence, strategic compentence and fluency.)

[2] In Sweden, pupils start to study English at elementary school. Compulsory schooling is 9 years and non-compulsory, e.g. upper secondary school comprises 3 years.

[3] Since 2011 Step 6 is required as a general level of admittance