

SELF-ASSESSMENT:  
A motivating tool for achieving better language skills

Master's Thesis  
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March 2011

## JYVÄSKYLÄN YLIOPISTO

Tiedekunta – Faculty Humanistinen tiedekunta	Laitos – Department Kielten laitos
Tekijä – Author Tiina Lehtola	
Työn nimi – Title SELF-ASSESSMENT: A motivating tool for achieving better language skills	
Oppiaine – Subject Englannin kieli	Työn laji – Level Pro Gradu -tutkielma
Aika – Month and year maaliskuu 2011	Sivumäärä – Number of pages 85 sivua + 3 liitettä
<b>Tiivistelmä – Abstract</b> <p>Kielitaidon itsearviointi on tärkeä taito, sillä sen avulla kielten oppijat voivat tehostaa oppimistaan toisaalta arvioimalla kielitaitonsa tasoa ja toisaalta asettamalla mielekkäitä oppimistavoitteita. Tämän tutkimuksen tarkoituksena on selvittää kielten opiskelijoiden kykyä arvioida kielitaitoaan ja käsityksiä itsestään kielenoppijaina. Tutkimukseen osallistui 59 Jyväskylän yliopiston kielten laitoksen pää- ja sivuaineopiskelijaa. Aineisto kerättiin lokakuussa 2009 osana ainelaitoksen kurssia <i>Johdatusta kieleen ja sen tutkimukseen</i>, ja se koostuu opiskelijoiden kurssin oppimistehtävää varten kirjoittamista noin sivun pituisista kirjoitelmista. Opiskelijoita pyydettiin tehtävässä arvioimaan luetunymmärtämisen taitonsa eurooppalaisen viitekehyksen taitotasoasteikon mukaisesti ja sitten tekemään DIALANGIN luetunymmärtämisen testi. Opiskelijoita pyydettiin myös pohtimaan itsearvioinnin ja testituloksen välistä suhdetta. Tutkimuksessa ovat mukana opiskelijat, jotka arvioivat ja testasivat osaamistaan englannin, saksan, ruotsin tai ranskan kielessä.</p> <p>Tutkimuksessa etsitään vastauksia seuraaviin kysymyksiin: 1) Mitkä opiskelijoiden taitotasot ovat itsearviointien perusteella ja toisaalta DIALANGIN mukaan? 2) Vastaavatko opiskelijoiden itsearviointit DIALANGIN antamaa tulosta 3) Miten opiskelijat suhtautuvat oman arvion ja testituloksen väliseen suhteeseen? Teoreettisessa viitekehyksessä itsearviointia lähestytään sosio-konstruktivistisesta näkökulmasta. Myös oppimisstrategioiden sekä itseohjautuvuuden merkitystä itsearviointiin käsitellään. Lisäksi tarkastellaan itsetunnon, motivaation ja itsearvioinnin välistä suhdetta. Metodologisesti tutkimustehtävää lähestytään laadullisesti sisällön analyysin keinoin. Sisällön analyysiä täydentää aineiston kvantifiointi.</p> <p>Tutkimuksen mukaan opiskelijoilla on taipumusta aliarvioida osaamistaan, mikä viittaa siihen, että opiskelijat ovat kriittisiä kielitaitoaan kohtaan. Opiskelijat myös kokevat tarvitsevansa enemmän harjoitusta ja tukea tarkoituksenmukaisen itsearvioinnin toteutumiseksi. Useimmat opiskelijat yllättyivät tuloksista. Toisaalta opiskelijat kokivat oman arvion ja testituloksen välisen suhteen vastaavan odotuksia.</p> <p>Opiskelijoita kiinnosti itsearviointi ja lopputulos näytti vahvistavan heidän itsetuntoa kielten osaajina ja toisaalta myös motivoivan heitä kielten oppimisessa. Johtopäätöksenä voidaan esittää, että kielitaidon itsearviointia tarvitaan ja sillä on tulevaisuudessa syytä olla huomattavasti tärkeämpi rooli kielten opiskelussa kuin sillä on tähän saakka ollut.</p>	
Asiasanat – Keywords self-assessment, foreign languages, reflection, self-esteem, motivation	
Säilytyspaikka – Depository Kielten laitos	
Muita tietoja – Additional information	

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## 1. INTRODUCTION

Self-assessment of language proficiency is an important skill as it involves learners more deeply in the overall language learning process by helping them to identify their own weaknesses and strengths and thus focus on the essential in learning, which also supports the learners in developing their language skills in the most beneficial way. This is confirmed by Tudor (1996: 196) as he points out that self-assessment has an important role in the learners' engagement in their language learning process: it combines reflection on the learning objectives with evaluation of one's language proficiency. Tudor continues by stating that the setting of suitable learning objectives and the selection of learning activities are also closely related to self-assessment. In fact, it can be argued that self-assessment is one of the best ways to enhance learning and thus make it more meaningful to the learners themselves as it increases the responsibility they take of their own learning. For this reason self-assessment also includes the aspect of learner self-direction.

Self-assessment is also linked to the concept of lifelong learning since it requires the skills of learning to learn. Thus, self-assessment can be seen as one of these skills because it helps learners become more aware of their own learning and its outcomes. However, the learners need time to develop their self-assessment skills, and this is why self-assessment should be made part of learning in its different stages.

In this study, the focus is on the self-assessment of reading skills among language students doing their basic studies at the Department of Languages, University of Jyväskylä. Reading skills were chosen as the focus of self-assessment since it can be assumed that this is the language skill in which the

students are at their best at the beginning of their university studies as reading skills are mainly concentrated on in the Finnish school context. For this reason the students could self-assess their language proficiency in an area that would probably not lead to any major disappointments. Accordingly, the objective was to maintain and strengthen the students' positive attitude towards their language skills and improving them instead of discouraging the students with their insufficient skills, for instance, in writing. Reading is also part of all students' multilingualism because they need to be able to read texts in different languages during their studies for the purposes of exams, essays and theses. This is why the students also benefit from assessing and testing their reading skills already at an early stage of their studies.

The present study was conducted at the Department of Languages, University of Jyväskylä. Altogether 59 students studying one of the language subjects either as their major or minor at the time of data collection were selected as participants in the study. The data were gathered as part of a joint course of the Department, *Introduction to language and linguistics*, in October 2009. The data consisted of the students' written assignments in which they reflected the match between their self-assessment of reading skills based on the self-assessment grid of the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages (CEFR) and the proficiency level they achieved according to DIALANG<sup>1</sup>.

The following chapters will concentrate on presenting the theoretical framework of the present study. First, the main ideas of the constructivist learning theory are presented and linked to the concept of self-assessment. The emphasis is on social constructivism as it stresses aspects such as reflection

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<sup>1</sup> The CEFR describes what language learners have to learn to do in order to use a language for communication and what knowledge and skills they have to develop to be able to act effectively. It also defines the levels of proficiency which allow learners' progress to be measured at each stage of learning and on a life-long basis (CEFR 2001: 1). Dialang, in turn, is an assessment system intended for language learners who want to obtain diagnostic information about their proficiency (CEFR 2001: 226).

about one's own learning, self-direction and the development of one's identity. These aspects are considered important within the framework of the present study. Also the concept of lifelong learning and learning strategies are introduced and discussed in relation to self-assessment.

Second, self-assessment is defined and discussed after which previous studies on self-assessment are presented. Self-esteem and foreign language self-concept are also closely related to self-assessment since they define the way in which people see themselves as language learners and how they consider their own learning. For this reason these concepts are included in the theoretical framework of the study.

Third, in this study motivation is considered to relate to learning in two different ways: 1) motivation enhances learning and 2) motivation is increased with learning since learning awakens the urge to learn more. Motivation is also closely related to self-assessment as it can be said that well-motivated learners are also willing to assess their own skills and thus become more aware of their own leaning, which also helps them to develop their skills. Therefore, the role of motivation in self-assessment and learning is also discussed.

Subsequently, the methods and data collection of the present study are introduced and then the findings are presented and discussed in relation to the theoretical framework of the study. The study ends with a conclusion in which the whole research is reflected.

## 2. CONSTRUCTIVISM AND LEARNING STRATEGIES IN RELATION TO SELF-ASSESSMENT

### 2.1. Reflection and constructivism

Self-assessment is a reflective activity that requires learners' active engagement in the learning process. In addition, learners need to be able to reflect on their own learning and thus be active in constructing their own knowledge. As these ideas are combined in the constructivist views about learning, I start with defining constructivism in more detail.

There has been a significant change in the way learning is seen during the last century: the learning process used to be seen as externally regulated, whereas the focus is now on the inner regulation of the learning process. One thing that the current notions of learning emphasize is *experiential learning* which has a lot in common with the constructivist learning theory. (Kristiansen 1998: 13.) Constructivism emphasizes that people are by nature active and goal oriented. Learning is thus regarded as the by-product of learners' cognitive actions and inner processes (Kristiansen 1998: 20). In other words, learners are not passive recipients in the learning process but, instead, they are actively engaged in the process. By reflecting their own actions, the learners also reconstruct their earlier notions and knowledge, and this reconstruction process is seen as the core of learning (Dewey 1938, as quoted by Kristiansen 1998: 20). Lammi (2000: 161) explains the relationship between reflection and learning by referring to Ojanen's (1996: 51) ideas, stating that in the light of reflection learning is seen as a process which helps people to actively reflect on their own learning processes and construct their own reality by learning from their experiences. Also Boud et al. (1985: 18) support the idea as they define reflection as the learner's response to experience. With regard to the learner's role in the learning process, Huhta

(2003: 20) emphasizes that learning is enhanced by the learner's active participation in the learning process: especially the reflection of one's own actions and the creative restructuring of the new information support learning. Kauppila (2007: 39) concludes this by stating that the learner's activity occurs in relation to learning objectives, challenges as well as to the learner's level of motivation.

In this context, it is important to note that constructivism is not a single learning theory. Instead, it originates from several sources and it has various orientations, which are 1) cognitive constructivism, 2) sociocultural approaches, 3) symbolic interactionism and 4) social constructivism. However, all branches of constructivism share the idea of learners as active in constructing their own knowledge. They also emphasize that learning is a creative and reflective process, not simple repetition and memorizing. The clearest difference between the views is the way in which learning is seen: either at the level of an individual or in the context of a group or a larger community. (Tynjälä 2002: 57-58.) Yet, all constructivist theories see people's actions as important and emphasize that people are themselves responsible for constructing information. This means that the skills of learning to learn and self-assessment have a significant role in the overall learning process. In other words, learning is a conscious process. (Kristiansen 1998: 21.)

In this study, the main theoretical background is based on social constructivism since it considers learning as a process which includes aspects such as reflection about one's own learning, self-direction and the development of one's identity (Kauppila 2007: 48). In fact, it is important that learners create their own inner representations of knowledge instead of just trying to gather knowledge from their environment without being actively engaged themselves in the processing of new knowledge. As Kauppila (2007: 51) points out, the learner's inner and



interactive reflection is essential in the learning process. This means that especially in social constructivism the role of learners' cognitive processes is emphasized. In addition, in social constructivism also social interaction is regarded as a factor that both enhances and structures learning. However, knowledge is seen as individually constructed, which also means that learning processes are individual. The fact that social constructivism takes into account also social interaction, links the theory to social practices and thus both activates learners' own thinking and enables the learners to form a shared view of understanding. Nevertheless, in this study the focus is on the reflective side of social constructivism as the focus is on the research participants' self-assessment and their reflections on the relationship between the self-assessment and diagnostic assessment of their language proficiency.

Social constructivism is based on the ideas of such scholars as Dewey (1957, 1960) and Gergen (1999, 2001 and 2003). Dewey was an American philosopher and education theorist who emphasized the role of social interaction and systematic - active - reflection in learning, whereas Gergen combines social psychology, social sciences and social constructivism in his views about the nature of learning. In the context of constructivism Gergen emphasizes that language has an essential role in constructing knowledge and reality. In fact, Gergen claims that reality is socially constructed through language.

It is also relevant to consider the implications of constructivism to the practice of pedagogy. Tynjälä (2002: 61-67) lists the essential implications of constructivism to pedagogy. The most interesting implications for the present study are the active role of the learner, the improvement of metacognitive skills and the development of new evaluation methods. The role of an active learner has already been briefly discussed above, but it is still relevant to emphasize here that the interest is on what the learner does and how she or he acts.

Since learners' previous knowledge and their level of engagement in the learning process have a significant role in learning, it follows that the learners' metacognitive awareness and their strategic self-management skills are also important. With regard to evaluation methods, it is natural that the methods have evolved due to the new ideas about learning. As in the context of constructivism the individual learning process is seen as essential, this is why evaluation is based on this process, not on the learner's ability to memorize information and display it in exams. In addition, the learner is seen as an active participant of the evaluation process, which connects evaluation to the overall learning process and prevents it from simply being a separate occasion at the end of a learning course. As Tynjälä (2002: 180) points out, the self-assessment of one's own learning is important in the light of developing metacognitive and reflective skills.

## **2.2. Indirect learning strategies**

Learning strategies have an important role in supporting and enhancing language learning. There is much research on learning strategies. Here, Oxford (1990) is used as she argues that learning strategies can be divided into direct and indirect ones and they greatly support learners' active agency in the learning process. Since the interest in this study is on self-assessment, the main focus is on indirect strategies as they help learners to control their learning processes. However, I will first discuss learning strategies in a more general level.

Learning strategies are tools which help students enhance their learning. In other words, the term learning strategy refers to systematic methods that an individual uses in order to learn to communicate in a foreign language

(Kristiansen 1998: 43). Different strategies can thus be regarded as important especially for language learners and for the actual process of language learning since they enable an active and self-directed involvement of the learners in the process. In addition, the objective of learning strategies is to help learners improve their self-confidence and language proficiency. (Oxford 1990: 1.) However, as Kristiansen (1998: 43) points out, it would perhaps be more appropriate to use the term *study strategy* since no strategy can itself guarantee learning. Nevertheless, learners should have strategic knowledge - i.e. the knowledge which learners have about strategies - and thus be aware of the effective strategies in language learning (Wenden, 1991: 38-39). Those strategies can be divided into direct and indirect ones: direct strategies involve the target language directly, whereas the role of indirect strategies in supporting and managing language learning takes place without directly involving the target language (Oxford 1990: 37, 135).

In this study the interest is on indirect strategies that include metacognitive, affective and social strategies, and especially on metacognitive ones since, according to Oxford (1990: 135), these are the strategies which learners use to control their learning process. This means that the learners have appropriate tools for coordinating their learning process by, for instance, planning their learning process and evaluating how well they have learned. In other words, metacognitive skills refer both to the learners' capability of assessing their own learning and their being aware of their own restrictions (Kristiansen 1998: 44). In this study the focus is on the students' ability to self-assess their language skills.

At this point, it is relevant to define also *metacognition*. Wenden (2001: 45) defines metacognition as the learners' knowledge about their own learning, whereas Tynjälä (2002: 114) emphasizes that metacognition refers to the

awareness of one's own cognitive functions, i.e. thinking, learning and knowing, and it can be divided into *knowledge* and *skills*. *Metacognitive skills* mean the learners' ability to use their metacognitive knowledge when regulating their own learning process. Furthermore, the use of metacognitive self-regulation strategies includes various functions. Towards the end of a learning process these strategies involve the self-assessment of one's own performance and skills in the learning process, whereas at the beginning it means defining the learning objectives and choosing appropriate strategies to achieve them. (Tynjälä 2002: 114-115.) As Kristiansen (1998: 46) points out, learners' metacognitive skills also develop when they learn to evaluate learning strategies in terms of their efficacy. In this case, it is appropriate to talk about independent learners who are able to reflect their own learning. Furthermore, self-assessment requires that learners make judgments about their own learning. In other words, in order to be successful, self-assessment needs to contain the aspect of thinking about one's own learning (Ruth 2002: 118-119).

It is also widely acknowledged that the skills of learning to learn are important and primary in the process of developing study skills. It is commonly thought that everybody should be able to learn constantly. The term lifelong learning is therefore widely used. (Kristiansen 1998: 45.) Kristiansen (1998: 45) states that in order to become an autonomous, i.e. self-directed language learner, the person has to be able to manage different and efficient learning strategies. Wenden (2001: 50) links self-regulation and metacognitive knowledge since metacognitive knowledge can be seen as crucial to a self-regulated language learning process. Wenden continues by stating that self-regulation "refers to the processes by which learners plan how they will approach a task, their task analysis and how they actually monitor its implementation". In fact, both self-direction and learner autonomy are terms that refer to the same processes in

language learning. The ability to assess one's own learning is an essential skill in these self-directed processes of learning.

### **3. TOOLS FOR SUCCESSFUL AND MEANINGFUL LEARNING**

#### **3.1. Defining self-assessment**

Self-assessment is a term that describes a wide range of practices some of which are more applicable to higher education than others. Self-assessment involves students taking responsibility for monitoring and making judgments about various aspects of their own learning. In fact, all students, regardless of their level of familiarity with the practices of self-assessment, need to consider how they can effectively monitor their own performance when confronted with new types of knowledge and skills. (Boud 1986: 1.) In other words, the students' engagement in the overall learning process is a key concept in the self-assessment framework. In fact, self-assessment can be said to have a highly important role in the learners' engagement in their language learning process as it clearly links reflection on the learning objectives with evaluating one's own language proficiency, the setting of appropriate learning goals and selecting learning activities (Tudor 1996: 196). In addition, most learners are expected to have a certain capacity for determining their own language ability, provided they have at their disposal suitable means which can help them express their intuitions (Oscarson 1980: 33).

In order to be successful in assessing their own language proficiency, most learners need practice in the use of the techniques involved. As Oscarson (1980: 17) points out, if the learners do not get the opportunity to practise their self-assessment skills, there is a risk that personality factors may affect, or even invalidate, the results obtained. For this reason proper training in self-

observation and in making judgments should be made part of the overall learning process. Also Boud (1986: 27) agrees on the importance of the practice of self-assessment skills since, according to him, self-assessment - like any other complex academic skill - must be practised if it is to be developed. Boud continues by stating that it is not reasonable to expect that a few isolated occurrences in one or two courses during the studies will lead to a very substantial increase in the students' ability in this area. This means that in order to practise successful and meaningful self-assessment, the process needs to be extensive and continuous and the learners have to be provided with appropriate tools for it. In short, self-assessment, like other aspects of learner involvement, is an activity which the learners need guidance and time to grow into (Tudor 1996: 167). Furthermore, according to Long (1990: 88), the learners need to be willing and able to accept responsibility for their own learning and to take the initiative with regard to their own development in order to reach successful self-evaluation.

Self-assessment includes the aspect of students' critical evaluation about their own learning, and it also requires students to identify appropriate standards of performance and to apply them to their own work. Self-assessment thus encourages students to look to themselves and to other sources to determine what criteria should be used in judging their work rather than being dependent solely on their teachers. (Boud 1986: 1.) Self-assessment can actually be said to be a supplement to teacher assessment of students. If students rely excessively on their teachers, there is a risk of students beginning to distrust their own assessment. This may lead to a situation in which the students are inhibited in becoming independent learners who can exercise their own critical judgment. (Boud 1986: 5.)

Self-assessment is closely related to the concept of lifelong learning. Boud (1995: 13-15) argues for the importance of self-assessment especially in higher education by referring to its significance for lifelong and effective learning. Boud states that all learners should develop the ability to realistically judge their own performance and effectively monitor their own learning. Furthermore, Boud links self-assessment to such concepts as student autonomy, independence in learning and self-regulation. At the Department of Languages, University of Jyväskylä where the present study was conducted, the Department has set general objectives for the students doing their Bachelor's degree and these objectives include aspects, such as the ability to improve one's language skills independently<sup>2</sup>, which Boud relates to self-assessment. Boud also emphasizes the fact that the students need to be able to monitor their own learning and modify their learning strategies appropriately. According to Boud (1995: 32), an essential feature of self-assessment is the development of reflective skills as they offer thoughtfulness and meaningfulness to the whole process of self-assessment. In fact, Boud (1995: 34) argues that "it is not useful to consider reflection and self-assessment as entirely separate ideas". In other words, self-assessment develops reflective skills as it is considered a reflective activity.

As any other form of assessment, self-assessment needs to be investigated in the light of its validity and reliability. Self-assessment is actually often thought to be very subjective and for this reason unreliable. Nevertheless, a realistic idea about one's own skills help learners set realistic goals to their language studies. An important remark is that an objective evaluation, especially gained through tests, describes language proficiency at one moment in those few tasks and situations that are included in the test, whereas self-assessment can, at least in principle, be based on the whole history of a person's language learning and language use. A good basis for the comparison of self-evaluation and external

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<sup>2</sup> For more information see <https://www.jyu.fi/hum/laitokset/kielet/opiskelu/huk>

evaluation is to consider both of them as accurate and valid – they only display different things about the learner’s skills and knowledge. However, neither good self-assessment nor testing of good quality is successful without any practice. This is why it is worth considering how and in what kinds of situations self-assessment is useful and when precisely does it have a positive effect on learning and teaching and, further, what kind of information and practice would be useful. (Huhta 2003: 29-30.)

The study of self-assessment of language proficiency is a rather new field of investigation compared to other aspects of assessment of language proficiency (Huhta 2007: 372). However, as Yang and Xu (2008: 20) point out, it has become a popular issue of discussion and investigation in the field of foreign language education during the past few decades. Nevertheless, Yang and Xu also point out that the question of what is involved in the self-evaluation process based on a predetermined scale has been overshadowed by the enthusiasm for self-assessment in general. The constructivist learning theories have caused a significant change in the attitudes towards the importance of self-assessment since, according to them, learning becomes more efficient when the learner participates actively in the whole learning process and, especially, when the learner reflects on his or her own learning (Gipps 1995; Oscarson 1997, cited in Huhta 2007: 372.) In fact, self-assessment has usually been regarded as part of such ideas of language learning that deal with, for instance, lifelong learning or those views of learning in which the learners are given a lot of responsibility of their own learning (Oscarson 1997, cited in Huhta 2007: 372). Self-assessment is most suitable for situations in which the learners have no specific reason to evaluate incorrectly their own skills and knowledge. These situations are usually related to the diagnostic and formative evaluation which support teaching and learning. (Huhta 2003: 21.)



There has been a shift of emphasis from the teaching process to individual differences in modes and strategies of learning, to differences in learning goals and to behavioral objectives. This trend is accompanied by a redirection of the interest from *norm-referenced tests* (i.e. tests where the learner's performance is matched against that of other learners) to *criterion-referenced tests* where the learner's performance is evaluated in relation to some predetermined criteria, ideally concrete language behavior. Criterion-referenced tests and performance objectives thus facilitate the adaptation of instruction to the individual goals, and the learner can assume more responsibility of his or her own training. (Oscarson 1980: 18.) Students should be involved in making decisions on the basis of various kinds of information. Furthermore, self-assessment does not imply that the students work in isolation from the views and judgements of others. (Boud 1986: 5.) Boud (1986: 5) sees the engagement of students in two processes as the defining characteristics of self-assessment. These processes are: 1) identifying the standards and criteria to apply to their work and 2) making judgements about the extent to which they have met these criteria and standards. Self-assessment is thus seen to mean more than just another technique for testing students' performance since it can be considered a way for the students of becoming involved in assessing their own performance. In other words, self-assessment means involving the students in the processes of determining what is good work or a good performance in any given situation. (Boud 1986: 5.)

Finally, authentic situations provide the most valid opportunities for self-evaluation. It is the actual use of the language, in real-life settings in which one may ultimately test one's communicative ability. Therefore learners should always try to assess their ability in terms of their use of the language in natural situations, not in terms of test scores or in terms of performance in an artificial learning situation. (Oscarson 1980: 25.)

The research participants of this study are young adults. They usually begin their university studies after having finished upper secondary education and they have thus passed the Finnish matriculation examination. Furthermore, the students are particularly interested in foreign languages and cultures and they have been selected as students at the Department of Languages, University of Jyväskylä based on their success in the entrance examination. Since these students have chosen to study languages either as their major or minor, it could be assumed that they actively use the languages they study in different contexts also outside formal education and thus actively maintain and improve their language skills. Furthermore, in this study the focus is on the students' reading skills. It can be assumed that the students read many kinds of texts in foreign languages related to both their own field of study and other interests, and they thus have many authentic situations to refer to when assessing their own reading skills. For this reason the self-assessment of reading skills was seen as a good way to start assessing one's own language skills.

### **3.2. Studies on self-assessment**

In the present study the focus is on self-assessment among university students. For this reason I will give a brief survey of a few studies conducted in the same level of studies or in studies of learners preparing themselves to higher education.

Nedzinskaitė et al. (2006) conducted a study on self-assessment among students at the Centre of Foreign Languages in Kaunas University of Technology. The subjects were asked to write self-assessment essays which helped teachers assess the students' progress. In their essays, the students assessed themselves in all four language skills (reading, writing, speaking and listening) during class

activities and individually. The findings show that the majority of students saw improvement in their language learning due to the self-evaluative practices. In addition, the self-assessment essays were seen as a useful way of helping the students to focus on their own performance. With regard to their reading proficiency, the students reported that they had improved this skill during the term due to much reading. Furthermore, reading had helped the students in advancing language learning as well as in nurturing their emotional intelligence. Nedzinskaitė et al. conclude that student self-assessment is practical in a university context since it promotes independency and student autonomy and also engages the students in the learning process and makes them active judges of their own performance. They also point out that self-assessment can be integrated into university classroom practices and it can also give a thorough picture of the students' foreign language abilities and achievements in learning.

Huhta (2007) conducted a study on how language learners reacted to feedback on self-assessment of language proficiency provided by DIALANG (for a more detailed discussion see Huhta 2010). The study by Huhta was conducted as a long-term study in 2003-2006. The subjects were Finnish and they were studying either at the university, at the university of applied sciences or in upper secondary school. The data were collected by a questionnaire to which 557 users of DIALANG responded. Huhta found out that the users of DIALANG considered the feedback at least fairly positive and in many cases even very positive. In addition, the feedback on the correspondence of self-assessment and the test result appeared to be one of the most popular forms of feedback provided by DIALANG and the students considered it interesting and useful. Furthermore, the students' justifications for their opinions on the usefulness of self-assessment were also collected with the help of open-ended questions. The findings show that the benefits of self-assessment include,

among other things, the following: 1) it promotes learning, 2) it helps you to become more aware of your strengths and weaknesses, 3) it encourages you to learn more and 4) language learning becomes more conscious. The students also expressed some problems related to self-assessment, such as 1) it is frustrating if you disagree with it and 2) you cannot assess yourself realistically.

Dragemark Oscarson (2009) studied the role of self-assessment in developing language learning skills and furthering the development of more comprehensive assessment practices. Two teachers and four groups of Swedish upper secondary students participated in Dragemark Oscarson's study during one school year. In her study, Dragemark Oscarson concentrated on exploring the relationship between the perceptions of writing skills among Swedish upper secondary EFL students and syllabus goals. In addition, Dragemark Oscarson also explored whether students' own perceptions about their writing skills were affected by the self-assessment practices and what kinds of reactions the students and teachers had about integrating self-assessment into classroom practices. More specifically, the students self-assessed the results of two written assignments - a classroom writing assignment and a written test task - and the classroom writing assignment was also analyzed linguistically by the researcher. At the end of the study, the teachers and students were interviewed about their experiences.

Dragemark Oscarson found out that at the group level the students were able to assess their general writing skills in relation to the criterion (grades given by teachers). However, at the individual level the results varied more mostly depending on the type of writing activity assessed and on the amount of practice the students had had of self-assessment. The results also show that the self-assessments became more realistic with practice. Furthermore, the students seemed to have a tendency to be self-critical with respect to their specific

writing skills, in this case spelling and grammar. This is why they underestimated their own performance in relation to the researcher's assessment of the same skills. The results also show that both the students and teachers considered self-assessment valuable in the overall context of assessment.

### **3.3. Self-direction and learner autonomy**

As discussed in section 2.1., learners' *self-direction* is considered important in the overall learning process in the socio-constructive view of learning. Furthermore, self-direction is also one of the objectives at the Department of Languages, University of Jyväskylä as the students are expected to develop their study skills towards self-direction and thus improve their language proficiency also outside their study program<sup>3</sup>.

Self-directed language learners regard self-assessment as a meaningful tool of their own learning: it can enhance and support learning by making the students more aware of their own skills. In addition, self-directed students are also able to assess their own skills appropriately, which means that they understand the role of self-assessment in their overall learning process as a supportive factor instead of a means of simply assessing one's own language proficiency without any greater significance to learning. However, self-directed learning is closely related to the concept of *learner autonomy*, and this is why they are often used as parallel terms. Nevertheless, there is a slight difference between these two terms and this is why it is appropriate to define them.

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<sup>3</sup> For more information see <https://www.jyu.fi/hum/laitokset/kielet/opiskelu/huk>

Benson (1997: 23) suggests that constructivism relates to autonomous learning by the fact that they both emphasize the concept of individual responsibility of the learning process. Furthermore, Benson (1997: 24) also points out that constructivism supports self-directed learning as a “positive means of promoting autonomy”. However, with regard to autonomy and self-direction, the level of students’ responsibility of their own learning obviously varies. One way of defining autonomy is to say that it means that the learner is completely responsible of everything related to his or her language learning process. Therefore, neither a teacher nor an institution (e.g. school) is involved in learning if a learner is fully autonomous. Furthermore, the learner does not rely on any particular learning materials. In contrast, in self-direction a specific attitude towards learning is emphasized, and it thus differs from the concept of learner autonomy. To clarify, self-direction means that the learners do accept their responsibility for the decisions related to their own learning, but they do not necessarily carry out the implementation of those decisions. (Dickinson 1987: 11.) Holec (1985: 188) also defines learner responsibility in relation to autonomous and self-directed learners. He sees autonomous learners as being able to “run one’s own learning affairs”, and autonomy is thus regarded as capacity, a potential. Self-directed learners possess, instead, the skill of knowing how to realize that capacity.

In a self-directive learning process, individuals take the initiative in identifying their own learning needs and desired learning objectives as well as make the decisions concerning the learning process and evaluate the learning outcomes. However, self-directed learning does not mean that learning takes place in isolation. Instead, it is typical for a self-directed learning process to take place in association with other people, such as teachers and peers. (Knowles 1975: 18.)

Oxford (1990: 10) discusses the relation of learning strategies and learner self-directedness by stating that the ability to use different language learning strategies enhances learners' self-direction. According to Oxford, self-direction is very important for language learners since they do not have the teacher around to guide them when using the language in authentic situations outside the classroom. Oxford also links self-direction to the development of language skills. However, Oxford reminds that self-direction is not an "all or nothing" concept: instead, it increases as learners become more comfortable with their own responsibility of the learning process. Furthermore, self-directed learners gradually gain greater self-confidence and language proficiency as their level of involvement increases.

It is important to be able to evaluate one's own performance in the light of its effectiveness in the field of foreign language learning. This is particularly important when learning becomes autonomous. (Dickinson 1987: 136.) Recent thinking on language teaching methodology has been informed by two notions with regard to learner autonomy: firstly, greater autonomy is a legitimate goal of language education and, secondly, autonomous learning is more or less equivalent to effective learning (Benson 1997: 18). In fact, self-direction and self-assessment can be said to form an entity as effective and meaningful self-assessment requires that the learners are willing to take responsibility for their own learning. Therefore, self-assessment can be seen as a way of making learning more effective: it helps students to better identify their learning needs and thus focus on them.

#### **3.4. Self-esteem and the concept of self in relation to self-assessment**

Self-esteem is a concept that refers to and affects the way in which people see

themselves. It is therefore closely related to self-assessment and learning outcomes. A detailed description of what is meant by self-esteem is offered by Keltikangas-Järvinen (2010: 17-23). She distinguishes six different components of self-esteem. First, self-esteem consists of one's own perceptions about one's self. Self-esteem is considered good when a person sees more positive than negative qualities in oneself. Furthermore, people who are judged to have a good self-esteem also have a realistic view about themselves. This means that they can identify both their strengths and weaknesses. When describing themselves, people with a good self-esteem emphasize their strengths and positive qualities, but acknowledging their weaknesses and deficiencies does not decrease their self-esteem. Second, a good self-esteem also refers to self-respect, which appears as a capability of being content about one's performance. The third point that Keltikangas-Järvinen mentions is seeing one's own life as valuable and unique. The fourth point is that the ability to respect others is closely related to a good self-esteem. This means that people recognize their own value and skills, but they do not believe to be the only ones who possess this knowledge and these skills. Fifth, Keltikangas-Järvinen sees a close relationship between self-esteem and independency (i.e. self-direction or autonomy) since, according to her, a good self-esteem means that one can set individual goals and is able to hold on to them. Finally, a good self-esteem includes the ability to face disappointments and failures without letting them affect one's self-esteem. In this case, failures lead to reflection about the reasons behind what has happened and what can be learned for the future.

To continue, Koppinen et al. (1999) provide a description about the relationship between a good self-esteem and learning, which also includes the benefit of self-assessment in relation to learning. They argue that self-assessment can support learning as it helps people to identify their own strengths and weaknesses and therefore helps people to concentrate on the essential in their own learning. In



fact, Koppinen et al. state that, in the context of learning, a good self-esteem means that learners have a realistic idea about their own skills and knowledge as well as about their strengths and weaknesses. In addition, the learners also know the quality of their own performance and its sufficiency in relation to the learning objectives. In other words, self-esteem depicts the way in which people see themselves as learners. Koppinen et al. also point out that sufficient self-knowledge and the ability to acknowledge one's strengths and weaknesses enables self-directed learning, and setting one's own learning goals ensures motivation towards learning. Furthermore, realistic goals help learners to have successful learning experiences which, in turn, affect one's self-esteem positively and which also help learners set more demanding goals for their own learning.

Also Keltikangas-Järvinen (2010: 40) supports the idea that there is a clear relationship between self-esteem and success in learning. She says that it can even be claimed that self-esteem is one of the most important factors affecting learning. In fact, Keltikangas-Järvinen argues that self-confidence and the ability to reflect one's characteristics and capacity define more one's success in learning than, for instance, intelligence. Furthermore, Keltikangas-Järvinen suggests that the importance of self-esteem in relation to learning increases according to the level of learning. In other words, the higher the level of education is, the role of self-esteem becomes more important.

The concept of self is closely related to self-esteem. The self-concept can be defined as a sum of attitudes, thoughts and values towards the self (Burns 1982: 29). It is important to be aware that the nature of self-concept is, on the one hand, fairly unchangeable and, on the other hand, constantly changing. With regard to the permanent identity, it is important that an individual will have created a stable and well-balanced self-concept and self-knowledge by the time

he or she reaches adolescence (Laine and Pihko 1991: 8). In the research, the fact that the self-concept affects significantly the way in which an individual behaves is a central interest of investigation. According to Burns (1982: 9), the relationship between the self-concept and behavior shows in three ways: the self-concept 1) maintains one's inner unity, 2) defines the way in which one interprets certain experiences and 3) provides one with presuppositions about learning. It is the individual expectations that define the quality of one's experiences. The interpretation of different experiences is clearly linked to emotions. If the experiences are in accordance with one's self-concept, one sees them as positive, whereas self-contradictions can be experienced as negative if one feels that they threaten the concept of self (Jersild 1969: 206, cited in Laine and Pihko 1991: 8).

A good self-esteem and self-concept support learning and encourage learners to reflect on their own learning and thus enhance learning. In addition, self-esteem and self-concept also greatly affect students' self-assessments of their own achievements. This is why the way in which learners see themselves is related to their assessment of their achievements. (Boud 1995: 212.) A low self-esteem usually leads to an unrealistic and highly critical view about oneself as a learner. Furthermore, as Boud (1995: 212) points out, the reason behind students' poor ability to self-assess their own skills is closely related to the way in which students see themselves as learners. By this Boud means that the students may not be able to assess their skills based on their current abilities. Instead, the image they have about themselves as learners is more important when assessing their own skills. For this reason it can be assumed that the lower one's self-esteem is, the lower the quality and accuracy of self-assessment are. In this case self-assessment also easily loses its meaning in the overall learning process if learners are not able to self-assess their skills appropriately. In contrast, a good self-esteem probably affects self-assessment positively since

a realistic view about oneself, including views about one's strengths and weaknesses, is usually closely related to a good self-esteem (cf. Keltikangas-Järvinen 2010).

Furthermore, self-assessment can affect positively the way in which students see themselves as learners and also improve their self-esteem, which can, in turn, motivate students in their learning process. This is especially the case among students who tend to be too critical about their own language skills and thus have little confidence in their own proficiency, which easily leads to the underestimation of one's own skills. If students underestimate their own language skills and gain a better assessment of their skills from another source, such as from DIALANG in the present study, students can have a self-confidence boost which results in greater motivation and willingness to improve one's language skills as students realize that they already achieve a higher proficiency level than they initially thought based on their self-assessment.

However, students may also overestimate their own language proficiency in relation to other forms of assessment. The reasons behind students' overestimations may vary. One reason may be students' excessive self-confidence which prevents them from seeing realistically their current level of ability, another the lack of experience in the self-assessment of language skills and third the weakness of the self-evaluation tools to which students refer when assessing their own skills. However, in the scope of the present study it was not possible to investigate the reasons behind students' overestimations in more detail.

### 3.5. Foreign language self-concept

Another related concept is the way in which individuals see themselves as *foreign language learners* in particular. The foreign language self-concept includes all the information, beliefs, hopes and estimations that language learners have about themselves. It includes several aspects, such as 1) the ideas about oneself as a language learner, 2) the knowledge about one's own skills and 3) the potential to learn. It is estimated that this kind of self-evaluation is a significant psychological factor in foreign language learning. It is most likely the foreign language self-concept that affects the way in which individuals consider their own learning and it also defines the expectations towards learning and demands about learning. Furthermore, the foreign language self-concept is the learners' fairly permanent basic attitude towards themselves and their own possibilities, and it can be either positive or negative. This is why the foreign language self-concept also partly defines learning outcomes. (Laine and Pihko 1991: 15.) However, Laine and Pihko (1991: 15) point out that the foreign language self-concept is not a predetermined quality but, instead, develops as language studies advance. The way in which students see themselves as language learners and users usually depends on different learning experiences they have faced: positive experiences support the development of the foreign language self-concept by enhancing self-appreciation and by improving trust in one's own abilities, whereas negative experiences tend to weaken the foreign language self-concept. Furthermore, if a learner has a weak self-esteem, it is possible that it leads to a rejecting attitude towards language learning. (Laine and Pihko 1991: 15.)

In this study, the students were asked to reflect on the relationship between the self-assessment of their reading skills and the test result provided by DIALANG. This comparison hopefully helps the students to better understand

what kind of foreign language self-concept they have and also to identify their qualities as foreign language learners.

### **3.6. The role of motivation in self-assessment and learning**

Motivation is essential in learning and without learners being motivated the learning outcomes may not be as expected. In addition, motivation links to self-assessment as it helps learners to self-assess their own language ability and skills in the most beneficial way, and learners who are motivated usually find self-assessment easy to use (Tuominen 2010: 31). Furthermore, well-motivated students usually understand the relation between self-assessment and motivation. This means that the students are willing to self-assess their own skills and learning outcomes and thus become more aware of their own strengths and weaknesses. In fact, self-assessment and motivation form an entity which makes the overall learning process more efficient and also rewarding to the learners themselves. However, as motivation is not the focus of the present study, it will not be discussed in great detail. In this study, the focus is on how motivation may link to self-assessment.

Brophy (2010: 3) explains motivation by referring to the definition provided by Maehr and Mayer (1997) as follows: “motivation is a theoretical construct used to explain the initiation, direction, intensity, persistence, and quality of behaviour, especially goal-directed behaviour”. Ruohotie (1998: 42) adds to this that motivation refers to an individual’s psychological state which determines the level of engagement into the learning activities and which also depicts the direction of one’s interests. In addition, according to Gardner (1985: 50), motivation consists of four aspects: 1) learning objectives, 2) effortful behavior, 3) a desire to attain the learning objectives and 4) favorable attitudes towards

the activity in question, but there are also other views on motivation (see for example Dörnyei 2001).

There are different types of motivation, the most traditional division being into *intrinsic* and *extrinsic* motivation. If motivation is purely extrinsic, it is not the activities themselves that learners value. Instead, learning activities are seen as instruments which the learners can use to obtain rewards they value. In contrast, motivation is intrinsic when the learners value the learning activities themselves. (Brophy 2010: 152.) However, Deci and Ryan (2008: 14) also distinguish between autonomous and controlled motivation by stating that autonomous motivation “involves behaving with a full sense of volition and choice”, whereas controlled motivation derives from external pressure and requirement towards the expected outcomes. They also point out that it is not the degree of motivation that is important in predicting learning outcomes but, instead, it is the type of motivation that counts.

Deci and Ryan have also introduced the concept of *self-determination* in the field of motivation and learning (see Deci and Ryan 1985). In their theory Deci and Ryan assume that “people are by nature active and self-motivated, curious and interested, vital and eager to succeed because success itself is personally satisfying and rewarding”. In addition, this theory argues that people share the need to have the feeling of being competent and autonomous as well as being related to others (Deci and Ryan 2000, cited in Deci and Ryan 2008: 14-15). Furthermore, within the self-determination tradition, a distinction is also made between extrinsic and intrinsic motivation. Extrinsic motivation is said to derive from the engagement in an activity that leads to a separate consequence, such as obtaining a reward or avoiding punishment. In contrast, intrinsic motivation means that the behavior derives from the activity itself as it is considered interesting and satisfying. In other words, intrinsic motivation leads to people

performing activities because the activities themselves result in positive feelings. (Deci and Ryan 2008: 15; cf. Brophy 2010: 152.)

In the study environment of the research participants of this study (i.e. the Department of Languages, University of Jyväskylä) one of the objectives during the studies is that the students are able to identify their own intrinsic motivation, which makes learning meaningful and rewarding. This objective aims at encouraging the students to develop their language skills also outside formal education, which makes learning a continuous process in which the students' motivation and willingness to improve their language skills go hand in hand. Self-assessment also closely relates to this learning objective since by assessing their own language proficiency the students also probably find their own intrinsic motivation towards learning and developing their own language proficiency. In this study, the role of motivation is speculated upon when analyzing the students' reflections on the relationship between their own self-assessment and the test result. More precisely, with regard to motivation, the focus is on the students' own perceptions about the role of motivation when reflecting on the results of the assignment. This means that the interest is on whether the students mention motivation in their responses and especially whether they feel that their level of motivation has either increased or decreased due to the relationship between their self-assessment and the DIALANG test result.

### **3.7. Lifelong learning**

Lifelong learning is a concept that covers an individual's whole life span. This means that learning should extend to every aspect of one's life and not be restricted to formal education. In addition, reflective activities and self-

assessment support lifelong learning since they enable learners to become aware of their own learning processes and thus work towards achieving the objective of lifelong learning. In this process also learning strategies are important since they provide the learners with tools that help them in self-assessment and reflective activities. Furthermore, the learners are active agents in their own learning when they successfully engage effective learning strategies and reflective activities along with self-assessment to the learning process. Next, the concept of lifelong learning is defined.

Learning is commonly seen as an active process that continues throughout an individual's life regardless of the level of one's involvement with the formal educational system. However, people do not necessarily realize that a learning process is actually occurring. Instead, this active process is usually seen as an everyday experience (e.g. travelling and playing games) rather than a conscious desire to undergo an education. Furthermore, the ideology behind the concept of lifelong learning seeks to provide a framework within which people can reflect on their past experiences and prepare for the future in terms of learning experiences. (Long 1990: 29.) In fact, lifelong learning should not only refer to formal education or to a specific time in an individual's life but it should be a continuous process that may have different objectives at different phases of life and the depth of which may also vary throughout life (Tuominen 2010: 15).

Furthermore, it is also important to develop the skills of learning to learn since, as Nyssölä and Hämäläinen state (2001: 82), these skills form the basis of lifelong learning. Self-regulated learning and self-regulated assessment of one's achievements are also associated with the concept of lifelong learning. For example, Oscarson (1997: 176) does this by stating that lifelong learning demands "learners to be able both to work independently and assess their own developing capabilities after having left formal education". This also leads to



the fact that learners are seen as active in the process of constructing their own learning (Nyyssölä and Hämäläinen 2001).

## **4. THE PRESENT STUDY**

### **4.1. Data collection**

The data used in this study were collected in the form of a written assignment in October 2009 as part of the course *Introduction to language and linguistics*<sup>4</sup>, an obligatory course for students doing their basic level studies at the Department of Languages, University of Jyväskylä. The course is an introductory course in the field of linguistics, and it is compulsory for all language students, including those majoring in languages and those studying languages as their minors. The students were asked to give their permission to use the assignment as data in the present study by filling in a form in which they agreed to participate in the study (see Appendix 1). The form was given to the students on the 5th of October 2009 by one of the lecturers of the course. With regard to the written assignment, the students were asked to hand it in on paper by the 19th of October 2009. The researcher received the data in December 2009 once all the information that would have enabled the identification of individual participants had been omitted and the assignments had been numbered.

### **4.2. The written assignment**

As mentioned above, the data consist of a written assignment which included two different tasks from which the students could choose: the first one had language learning and teaching as its orientation and the second one

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<sup>4</sup> Johdatusta kieleen ja sen tutkimukseen

concentrated on discourse analysis. In the present study, only the first task will be studied. The task consisted of two parts, one being a self-assessment of reading skills and the other a self-evaluation of self-directedness. However, only the first part (i.e. self-assessment) was chosen to be analyzed.

In the task to be analyzed in this study, the students were first asked to assess their own reading skills in a particular language of their choice by referring to the self-assessment grid of the CEFR (See Appendix 3). After completing their own self-assessment, the students were asked to familiarize themselves with the DIALANG system and test their reading skills in the same language in which they had previously assessed themselves.

DIALANG is a long-term project funded by the European Commission under which a language diagnosis system was developed between the years 1996 and 2004. DIALANG is available on the Internet free of charge and it covers 14 languages spoken in Europe, such as English and French, and it reports on one's language proficiency. The system includes self-assessment, language tests and feedback. Self-assessment of language proficiency is an essential part of DIALANG and its self-assessment tools were developed based on the CEFR. (CEFR 2001: 226; Huhta 2007: 373; see also Alderson 2005.)

After completing the test, the research participants were asked to report how the feedback DIALANG gave them corresponded to their own ideas about their reading skills in the particular language they had chosen. In addition, the students were also requested to report 1) the language in which they had assessed their reading skills, 2) their CEFR proficiency level according to DIALANG and 3) to reflect the feedback they received by commenting what they considered unexpected and what they could anticipate based on their own self-assessment.

### 4.3. Participants

There were 206 students registered in the course *Introduction to language and linguistics* in autumn 2009 and 190 of them completed the course. The assignment analyzed in this study was chosen by 148 students of whom 97 students gave their permission to use it as data in the present study. However, out of the 97 assignments 59 were selected as the data of the present study due to various reasons.

Consequently, 16 assignments out of the total amount of 97 were left out of the present study since 16 students had had technical problems with DIALANG and they had completed the first part of the task by using another self-evaluation system found on the site YKItreenit<sup>5</sup> that is meant for practising and preparing for the National Language Certificate in Finland.

YKItreenit offers different tasks in which one can practise their language skills when preparing for the test. As well as DIALANG, YKItreenit also gives feedback on the performance and one can test their own language proficiency on this site. However, the results are not based on the CEFR and this is why the test provided by YKItreenit is not compatible with the one in DIALANG. Thus, its results should not be analyzed in the same way as those gained by using DIALANG. For this reason, the assignments in which the test results were provided by YKItreenit were left out of the analysis.

Furthermore, one student who had given the permission to use the assignment as data did not eventually hand it in, while another student had assessed his or her reading skills both in English and in German. In addition, one student did not report the results gained in the diagnostic test. This is why these students'

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<sup>5</sup> <http://yle.fi/java/yki/index.nvl>

assignments were also left out of the analysis. In addition, one student had assessed his or her reading skills in Italian and another in Icelandic, whereas two students had assessed their skills in Finnish. These students and their assignments were also left out of the analysis since the languages they had chosen cannot be studied as foreign language majors at the Department of Languages, University of Jyväskylä.

To sum up, there were 59 students who had reported both their reading proficiency level based on their own self-assessment and the proficiency level they gained in the DIALANG test, and these students' assignments were selected as the data of the present study. Most of the 59 participants were first year students majoring in one of the language subjects at the Department of Languages, University of Jyväskylä at the time of data collection in October 2009. Among the 59 participants there were 14 English majors, 14 German majors, 10 Swedish majors, 5 Russian majors, 3 Finnish majors and 3 French majors. However, there were also 10 participants whose major was not a language subject but something else, such as Teacher Education or Literature. Since the students could freely choose the language in which they wanted to test and assess their reading skills, not only those who were studying a particular language either as their major or as their minor could choose the given language. This is why there were altogether 26 students who had assessed their skills in English, whereas 18 students had assessed their skills in German, 11 students in Swedish and 4 students in French.

#### **4.4. Working with data: Content analysis**

The research participants' written reflections were analyzed with the help of content analysis. Content analysis is a research technique – a scientific tool –

that enables making replicable and valid inferences from texts to the context of their use. However, the word text does not restrict content analysis to written materials as in content analysis also other representations of communication, such as images and sounds, can be regarded as texts and they can thus be analyzed as data. (Krippendorff 2004: 18-19.) In fact, content analysis is considered a basic method of analysis in the field of qualitative research, and it can be applied to all data processing traditions in this field of research. In other words, content analysis is considered the basis for many kinds of research designs. Most of the different qualitative data processing methods are based in some way on the content analysis when it is referred as the theoretical framework of analysis of written, heard or seen contents. (Tuomi and Sarajärvi 2009: 91.) Furthermore, content analysis provides the researcher with a tool that helps him or her analyze the documents - such as diaries, interviews, dialogues or reports - systematically and objectively (Tuomi and Sarajärvi 2009: 103). An important aspect of content analysis is to make a decision about the main interest in the research and, thus, have the focus on that in the data and leave other aspects out of the study (Tuomi and Sarajärvi 2009: 92). With regard to the aim of this method, it can be said that the method aims at creating a concise and explicit verbal description of the phenomenon under investigation without losing any of its information content (Tuomi and Sarajärvi 2009: 108).

In qualitative research, content analysis can be divided into *inductive* and *deductive* analysis (Tuomi and Sarajärvi 2009: 95, 107). Inductive analysis includes patterns, themes and categories of discovery in one's data. Thus, findings emerge from the data through the interaction between the analyst and the data, whereas in deductive analysis the data are analyzed according to an already existing framework (Patton 2002: 453). However, this distinction can be seen as problematic since the possibility of pure induction has been questioned: it is thought that a new theory cannot be gained simply through observation

(Tuomi and Sarajärvi 2009: 95). Eskola (2001: 136-137) describes the researcher's relationship with theory by offering three alternative ways of approaching the data: *data-driven*, *theory-bound* and *theory-driven*. In data-driven analysis, the aim is to form a theoretical entity from the data in which the units of analysis are chosen based on the purpose and aims of the study, whereas in theory-bound analysis theoretical connections are made during the analysis. It should, however, be noted that these theoretical connections are not necessarily directly based on any particular theory, and the theory can be used as a guideline in the process of analysis. Theory-bound and theory-driven analyses differ in that the latter one arises from a particular theory and this theoretical framework based on previous knowledge provides a starting point for the analysis, whereas in theory-bound analysis, as mentioned above, theoretical connections can be made, but they do not form the basis for the study. (Tuomi and Sarajärvi 2009: 95-97.) To clarify this, both in data-driven and in theory-bound analyses the data collection does not depend on previous knowledge about the phenomenon studied. Instead, in theory-driven analysis previous knowledge controls the way in which the data are collected and how the phenomenon under investigation is defined. (Tuomi and Sarajärvi 2009: 98.)

In content analysis, the actual process of data analysis can be approached in different ways. The first option is to classify the data into different content categories and see how many times each category emerges from the data. In fact, classifying is considered the simplest way of processing data and, as a result of this approach, the data can be demonstrated and summarized in tables. (Tuomi and Sarajärvi 2009: 93.) In this context, it is actually appropriate to talk about quantifying qualitative data. As Eskola and Suoranta (2005: 164) point out, quantifying may not be the most appropriate way of analyzing qualitative data but it can, however, help the researcher get a hold of the data - in other words to form a general idea about what the data have to offer - and

give him or her a starting point for and some control over the analysis. To ensure the accuracy and meaningfulness of each category and the division of the data in them, the researcher should work back and forth between the data and the classification system (Patton 2002: 465-466).

The second option to approach data processing is to distinguish certain themes from the data. This can be done by dividing the data into smaller units and by classifying the data according to different themes. Thematic analysis can be, in principle, similar to classifying and categorizing the data, but the emphasis is on what is said about each theme while the number of occurrences of the themes does not necessarily have such an essential role as in classifying the data into different categories. (Tuomi and Sarajärvi 2009: 93.) Before looking for the actual themes in the data, it can be classified according to some simple bases, such as the sex and age of the informants, after which the researcher starts looking for the emerging themes and views that support the different themes (Tuomi and Sarajärvi 2009: 93).

The third option is to derive different types of paradigms from the data. This means that the researcher looks for typical features in the data and, as a result, summarizes the data comprehensively in illustrative paradigms. In other words, this form of data processing concentrates on the information provided by the informants, not on the informants themselves. Furthermore, this type of analysis requires an active role of the researcher in the process of data analysis. (Saaranen-Kauppinen and Puusniekka 2006.) As Tuomi and Sarajärvi (2009: 93) point out, thematic analysis and deriving paradigms from the data may have a close relationship since thematic analysis can be the basis for forming paradigms by offering the frames from which the researcher can look for common features of the views shared by the informants and, thus, form some sort of generalizations of these shared views in the form of paradigms.

However, at this point it is relevant to mention that the interest can be either on typical or atypical, deviant, features emerging from the data (Saaranen-Kauppinen and Puusniekka 2006). In short, deriving paradigms from the data means taking one step further than in thematic analysis since it allows the data to be described more extensively than in thematic analysis. Thus, paradigms can be said to represent different themes or, in other words, the themes are included in the paradigms. (Saaranen-Kauppinen and Puusniekka 2006.)

Content analysis can be either qualitative or quantitative. Metsämuuronen (2006: 212) explains the difference between quantitative and qualitative content analysis as follows: in quantitative content analysis, the analysis is based on counting the categories and their frequencies defined by the researcher, whereas in qualitative content analysis, the emphasis is on trying to understand and explain categories used by different members of the culture. Tuomi and Sarajärvi (2009: 120) see quantifying the data as an extension to qualitative content analysis, which means that the qualitative analysis is supplemented by quantitative facts expressing, for instance, the number of occurrences of certain elements in the data (cf. Metsämuuronen 2006: 212). An important remark is that quantifying the data may not bring any extra value to the findings since the data in qualitative research tends to be rather small (Tuomi and Sarajärvi 2009: 121). However, these two methods of analysis can be combined as long as the researcher is aware of their differences in terms of their aims and purpose. As Alasuutari (2001: 212) points out, qualitative and quantitative analyses are different means of deriving conclusions that link the plain observations emerged from the data. If the theoretical and methodological framework of the study allow defining several comparable units of analysis, or categorization, both the qualitative and quantitative methods of analysis are available under certain terms.



As mentioned above, qualitative content analysis refers to the analysis of written, as in the present study, heard or seen contents. In content analysis the researcher needs to make a decision about the main interest in the research and then focus on that information in the data. In the present study, the main focus was on language students' reflections on and perceptions about their own self-assessment of reading skills based on the CEFR compared to the test result provided by DIALANG. Also the way in which the students saw the relationship between their own self-assessment and the DIALANG test result was investigated. This is why the data itself was the most important guideline in grouping and analyzing the findings. This means that the findings emerged from the data through the interaction between the researcher and the data.

In the present study, the findings were first grouped into themes and within these themes into different types of paradigms. In other words, thematic analysis was the basis for defining paradigms as it provided the researcher with the frames from which to look for common features of the views shared by the research participants. The emphasis was on what was said about each theme, and on finding and analyzing perceptions illustrating the different themes. As a result, these shared views were grouped in the form of paradigms.

Since the data consisted of 59 written assignments, it was also classified into content categories. The data was therefore also quantified in the form of illustrative figures and diagrams which complemented the findings of the qualitative content analysis. In addition, quantifying the data helped the researcher to form a general idea about what the data had to offer, and it also gave the researcher a starting point for the qualitative analysis.

The present study had inductive analysis as its starting point since the findings emerged from the data through the interaction between the researcher and the

data. Also theoretical connections were made during the analysis, but they mainly acted as a guideline in the process of analysis. Accordingly, the starting point for the study was the use of the data as the main defining factor of the selection of the units of analysis based on the purpose and aims of the study.

With this study by using the aforementioned methods I try to provide answers to the following research questions:

1. What are the students' CEFR proficiency levels for reading according to their self-assessments and DIALANG?
2. Do the students' self-assessments correspond to the DIALANG test results?
3. How do the students respond to the relationship between their own self-assessment and the test result?

## **5. FINDINGS**

Keeping the research questions and the methodological approach in mind, this chapter is divided into three sections. The first two sections (5.1. and 5.2.) report the students' proficiency levels in reading according to their self-assessments and DIALANG. The correspondence of the self-assessments and the test results is also reported. First, the results in all four languages (English, German, Swedish and French) in which the students had self-assessed and tested their skills are presented. Second, the relationship between the self-assessments and the test results is discussed in each language. It is important to remember that the students could freely choose the language in which they wanted to self-assess and test their reading skills so the results in each language are not based on only the responses by students who study a particular language either as their major or as their minor. Third, the correspondence between all self-

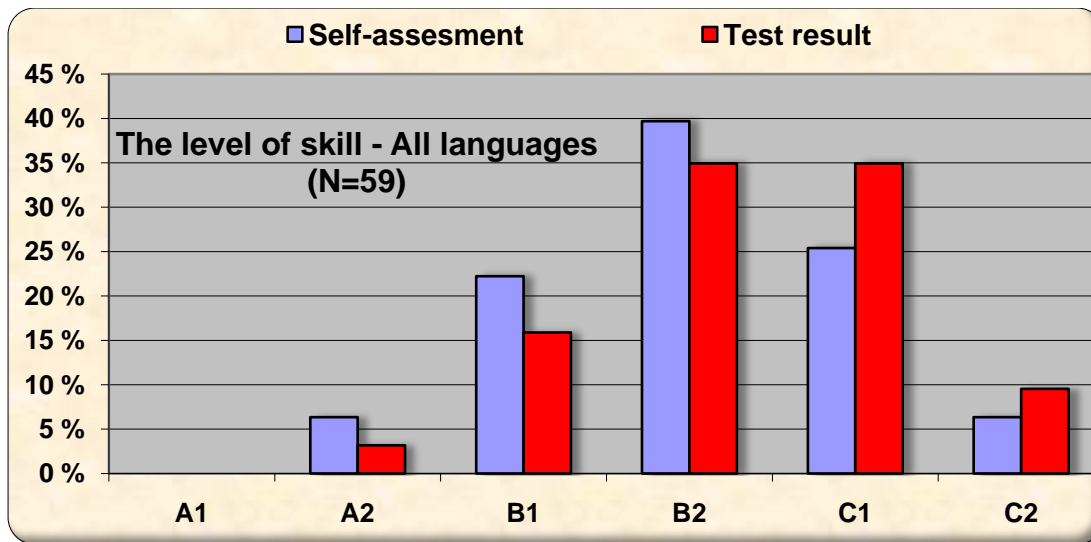
assessments and test results is presented. Then, the division of self-assessments into underestimations and overestimations is shown.

The third section of this chapter (5.3.) concentrates on reporting the findings of the relationship between the students' self-assessments and the test results and thus explores the students' individual responses to the correspondence of these two assessments of their reading skills. In this section, the responses are presented and described based on the students' own words.

## **5.1. The students' CEFR levels: the results of self-assessments and DIALANG**

### **5.1.1. All languages**

The results of the correspondence of the students' self-assessments of their reading skills by referring to the self-assessment grid of the CEFR and their proficiency levels according to DIALANG are presented in Figure 1. In this figure the correspondence of the self-assessments and the DIALANG test results are shown in all four languages (English, German, Swedish and French) which were analyzed in this study.

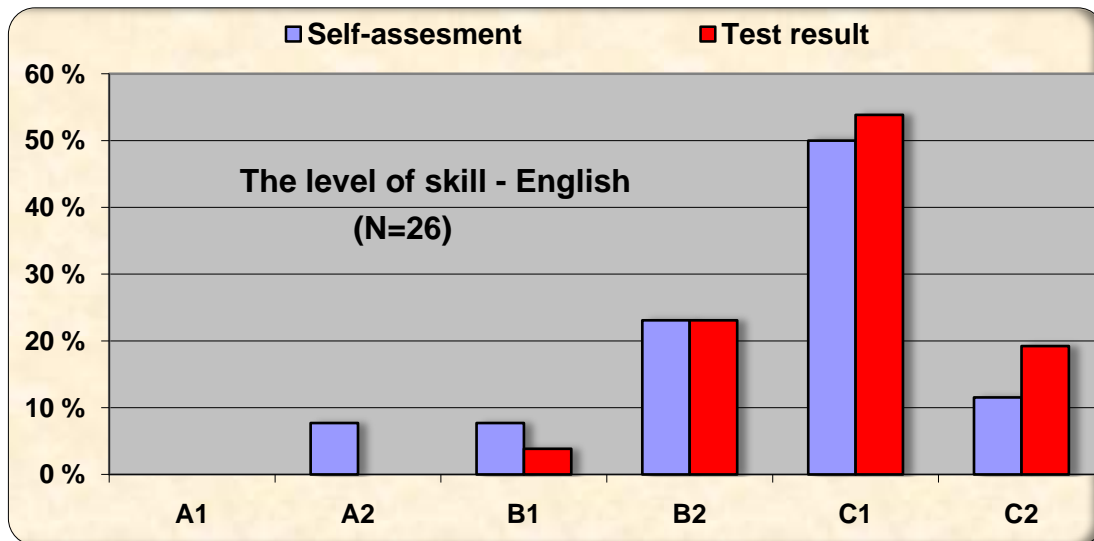


**FIGURE 1. The students' CEFR levels according to their self-assessments and DIALANG in all four languages**

The results show that the students' self-assessments of their reading skills were generally lower than their proficiency levels according to DIALANG. The most common level based on the self-assessments was B2 whereas, according to DIALANG, the same amount of students achieved either level B2 or C1. It is not surprising that the most common proficiency level was B2 - according to both the majority of students and DIALANG - since B2 is the target reading proficiency level of upper secondary education. In other words, the general objective in upper secondary education in Finland is to achieve this level of reading proficiency in Swedish and in foreign languages (NCC 2003: 84, 102). Furthermore, the biggest difference between the self-assessments and test results can be seen at level C1 since the percentage of the self-assessments is clearly lower at this proficiency level than the percentage of the DIALANG test results. However, at level C2 the percentage of the self-assessments and test results nearly correspond to each other.

### 5.1.2. English

In the following figure the relationship between the students' self-assessments of their English reading skills and the test results is presented.



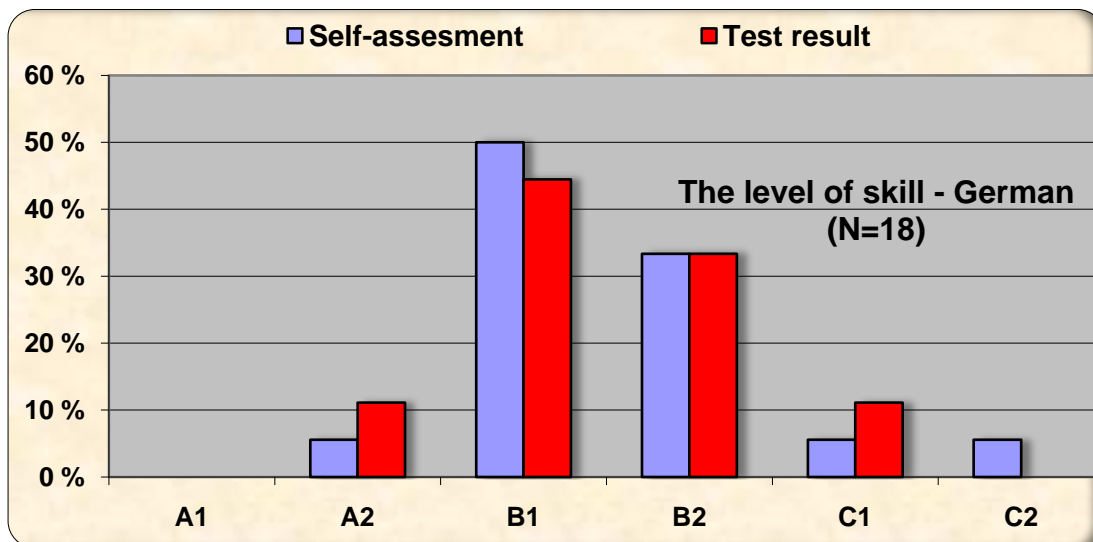
**FIGURE 2. The students' CEFR levels in the English reading according to their self-assessments and DIALANG**

When the students had self-assessed and tested their reading skills in English, the most common proficiency level was the second highest level (C1) in the CEFR scale. In fact, half of the students had defined C1 as their proficiency level in their self-assessment. Thus, in evaluating their English reading skills, the students evaluated themselves more often at this level in comparison to the other languages. However, it is interesting that the students had underestimated their skills at levels C1 and C2. In DIALANG, more students achieved these proficiency levels than in the self-assessments. Therefore, at the two highest proficiency levels the gap between the students' own perceptions and the proficiency levels according to DIALANG differed from each other. In fact, the biggest difference between the self-assessments and the test results was at the highest proficiency level (C2). This seems to suggest that the students

have more doubts about their language skills the higher their level of proficiency is. Furthermore, the students had overestimated their skills at level B1, whereas at level B2 the percentage of the self-assessments and test results corresponded to each other. It is also interesting that some students had assessed their own reading skills at level A2, but none of the students were at this level according to DIALANG. Furthermore, it is particularly interesting that the proficiency levels in the self-assessments and the DIALANG results corresponded to each other better in English than in any other language. This can be due to the fact that the students use and hear a lot of English in their everyday lives (see Leppänen et al. 2009 for a more detailed discussion of the role of English in Finland).

### 5.1.3. German

In the following figure the relationship between the students' self-assessments and DIALANG test results in German is presented.

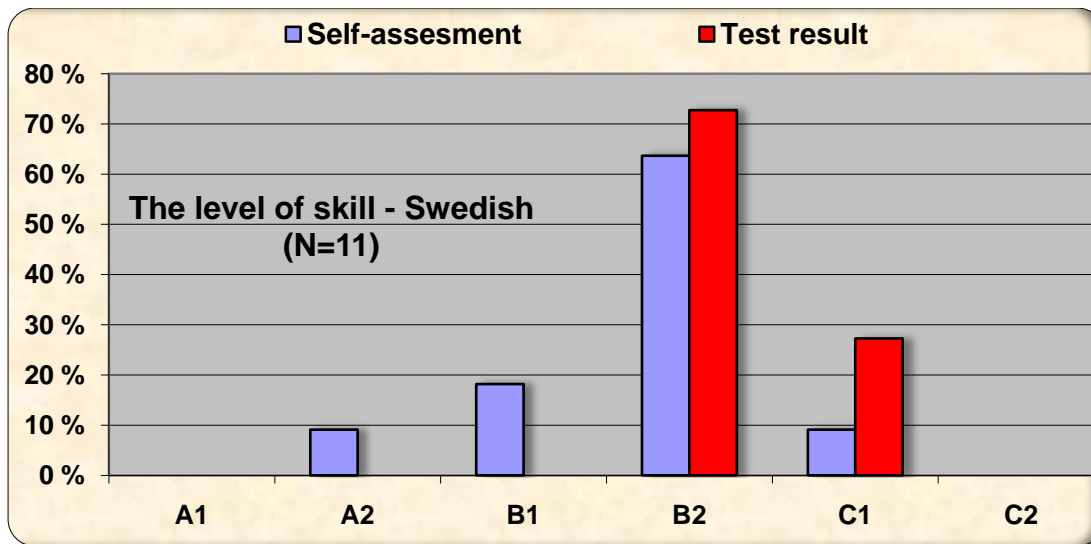


**FIGURE 3. The students' CEFR levels in the German reading according to their self-assessments and DIALANG**

As Figure 3 shows, the students who self-assessed their German reading skills seem to have a tendency to either underestimate or overestimate their own skills. However, at level B2 the percentage of the students' self-assessments and test results corresponded to each other, which was also the case when the language assessed was English. Nevertheless, it is particularly interesting that half of the students assessed their skills at level B1, whereas in other languages most students assessed their own skills either at level B2 or C1. In other words, half of the students assessed their German reading skills to correspond to the level B1. This is the lowest proficiency level to which most students self-assessed their skills when all languages are considered as a whole. Furthermore, based on the test results, most students also achieved the level B1 as their German reading skills. It is also interesting that according to the self-assessments, one student achieved the highest proficiency level (C2) but this level did not actualize in the test results. In this case also overestimation was thus seen.

#### **5.1.4. Swedish**

Next, the results in the Swedish language will be discussed. The following figure shows the relationship between the students' self-assessments of their Swedish reading skills and the DIALANG test results.



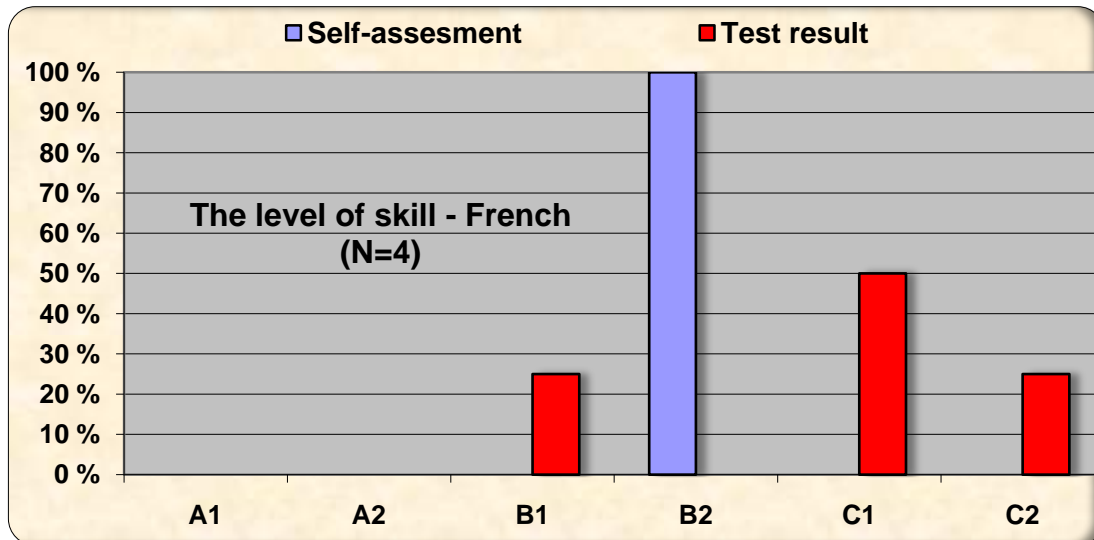
**FIGURE 4. The students' CEFR levels in the Swedish reading according to their self-assessments and DIALANG**

The results show that the students who self-assessed and tested their Swedish reading skills appear to have a clear tendency to underestimate their own skills. The DIALANG test results indicate that the students achieved more advanced reading skills than their self-assessments suggested (for further discussion of university students' proficiency in Swedish see Palviainen 2010). According to the test results, all students achieved either level B2 or C1. Furthermore, at the level C1 the students had clearly underestimated their own skills: more students achieved this proficiency level than what was suggested by their own assessments. The gap between the self-assessments and test results is also rather noticeable at this proficiency level. It is also interesting that the gap between the students' self-assessments and their test results is as high as two proficiency levels. Some students had assessed their own reading skills as corresponding either the level A2 or B1 but, as the results show, none of the students were at these proficiency levels in their DIALANG test results.



### 5.1.5. French

In the following figure the relationship between the students' self-assessments of their French reading skills and the test results is presented.

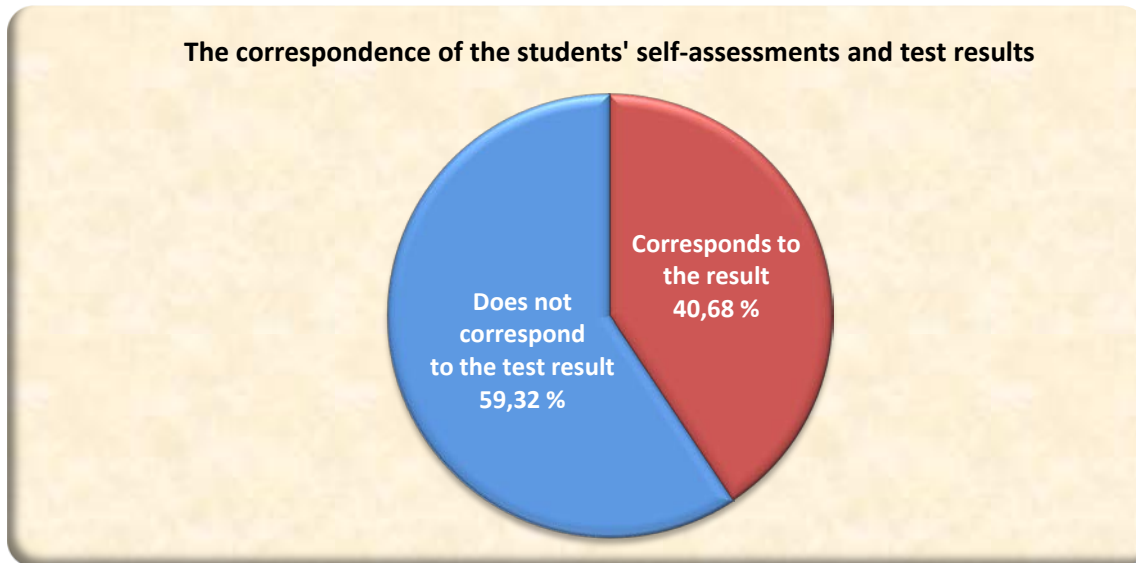


**FIGURE 5. The students' CEFR levels in the French reading according to their self-assessments and DIALANG**

As it can be seen from Figure 5, the students had assessed their French reading skills as corresponding to the level B2. However, based on the test results none of the students were at this CEFR level. Instead, the students had either underestimated or overestimated their reading skills since, according to DIALANG, their CEFR levels varied between B1, C1 and C2.

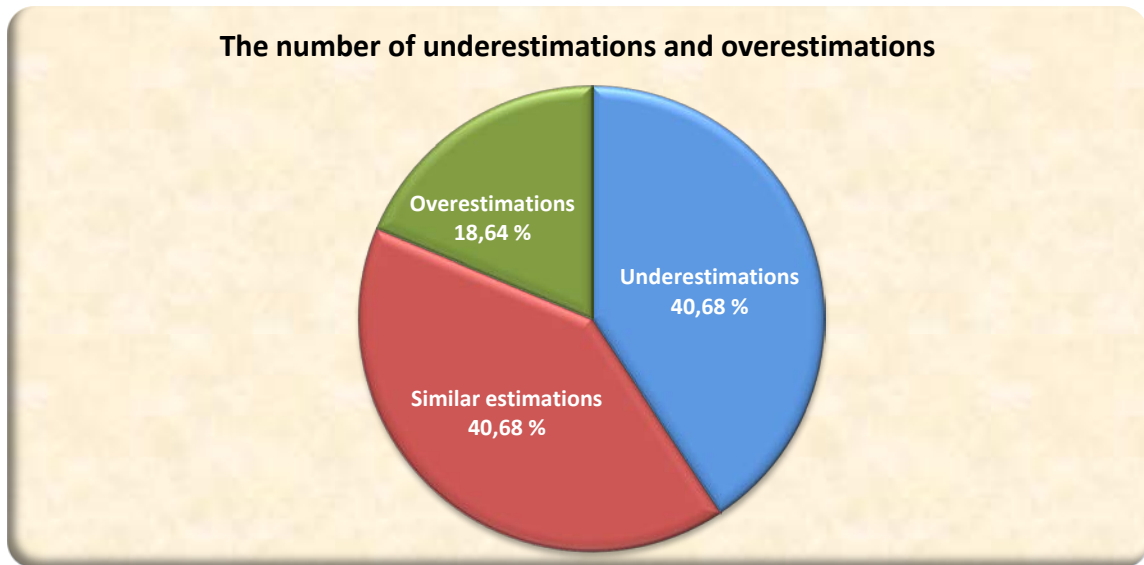
## 5.2. The correspondence of the students' self-assessments and test results

Next, I will discuss the match between the self-assessments and DIALANG test results. First, Diagram 1 illustrates the correspondence of the students' self-assessments and test results.



**DIAGRAM 1. The correspondence of the students' self-assessments and test results.**

As Diagram 1 shows, in over half of all the cases, the self-assessments did not correspond to the test results. To continue, the cases in which no correspondence between the test results and self-evaluations were found were divided into cases in which the students had 1) underestimated or 2) overestimated their reading skills. The following diagram illustrates the division into these different types of self-assessments.



**DIAGRAM 2. The number of underestimations and overestimations.**

Hence, when all students' self-assessments and test results are considered, it is clear that most students had a tendency to underestimate their own skills. This is well seen in Diagram 2 which shows that nearly half of all students (40,68 %) had underestimated their reading skills.

As illustrated above, it was clear that the students' self-assessments of their reading skills and the test results provided by DIALANG differed from each other. The students had a tendency to underestimate their own skills since their self-assessments were generally lower than their CEFR levels according to the DIALANG test results. It is particularly interesting that in every language the students had underestimated their skills at level C1. This suggests that the students have more doubts about their language skills the higher their proficiency level is. However, there were also some students who had overestimated their own skills. Furthermore, there were also differences between the languages. In addition, as the DIALANG results indicate, nearly half of all students achieved a more advanced reading proficiency than is

expected from first year language students, that is, if we assume that the students leave school with the proficiency level that is equivalent to the general objective of upper secondary education, B2.

### **5.3. Self-assessments vs. test results: Observations on students' responses**

In the following section, I will report the results of the qualitative analysis of the students' responses to the match between their self-assessments and test results. More precisely, the section explores the students' individual responses to the correspondence of these two means of assessment of their reading skills. Accordingly, the students' responses are presented in their own words. Furthermore, in my analysis, I divided the students into two groups based on their reactions. These groups were: 1) the students who reported that the match between their self-assessment and the proficiency level according to DIALANG was unexpected and 2) the students who reported that the relationship between their self-assessment and the test result was as expected. There were also students who did not report their particular response to the relationship of their self-assessment and the test result. Accordingly, these students were left out of the qualitative analysis.

The following section is thus divided as follows: first, the responses of the students who reported that the match between their self-assessment and the DIALANG test result was unexpected are presented and, subsequently, the responses of the students who could anticipate the outcome are reported.

#### **5.3.1. Unexpected outcomes**

With regard to the students who reported that the relationship between their self-assessment and the test result was unexpected, three different types of

reactions emerged from the data. In the first type of response, the outcome was unexpected because the students achieved a higher proficiency level according to DIALANG compared to their own assessment. The second type was that the students' proficiency levels were lower according to DIALANG than based on their own assessment. The third type was that the students' own assessment and the test result corresponded to each other. Next, these different types are presented and illustrated with examples.

#### **5.3.1.1. Underestimated skills**

Most of the students who reported that the relationship between their own assessment and the CEFR level according to DIALANG was unexpected had underestimated their own reading skills. Since the students had underestimated their skills, it is probable that they have little confidence in them. To continue, this seems to suggest that these students might have a low self-esteem and they therefore distrust their own language proficiency (for further discussion about the relationship between learning and self-esteem, see e.g. Koppinen et al. 1999). These students were thus positively surprised about the more advanced proficiency level they achieved in the DIALANG test. Furthermore, this type of reaction did not depend on the particular language in which the students had self-assessed and tested their reading skills as all languages were represented within this group of students. The following examples illustrate the students' reactions and the positive surprise to which a better test result compared to their own assessment led.

The first example illustrates how the students who had assessed and tested their reading skills in the German language describe the positive effect the DIALANG test result had on them.

### Example 1.

Tein siis Dialang -ohjelmassa saksan kielen lukemisen osion, ja sain tulokseksi tason B2. Olen tästä tuloksesta enemmän kuin yllättynyt: itsearviointitaulukkoa tutkiessani en ollut aivan varma, ovatko kielitaitoni riittävät tuohon B2 -tasoon vaadittavaan ajankohtaisten artikkeleiden yms. lukemiseen ja luetunymmärtämisen tehtävät olivat välillä hyvinkin haastavia, [...]. Olen tähän tulokseen erittäin tyytyväinen, on aina motivoivaa huomata osaavansa enemmän kuin uskoo!

I thus took the German reading test in Dialang, and the result was level B2. I am more than surprised about this result: when going through the self-assessment grid, I was not quite sure whether my skills are adequate for the reading of current articles etc. and the tasks in the reading comprehension were very demanding at times, [...]. I am very pleased with this result, it is always motivating to realize to know more than you believe! (Amy)

Next, Example 2 illustrates the students' responses to the match between their self-evaluated Swedish reading skills and the DIALANG test result.

### Example 2.

Minulle jäi luennolta mieleen, että me ensimmäisen vuoden opiskelijat olisimme keskimäärin tasolla B2. Sen asettamat "vaatimukset" omalle kielitaidolleni tuntuivat kuitenkin liian suurilta, joten arvioin itseni B1-sarakkeeseen. Loppupalaute jännitti minua vähän, mutta sainkin yllättyä iloisesti: kone arvioi minut B2-tasolle. Omat itsearviointitaitoni tuppaaavat nimittäin olemaan vähän turhan ankaria joskus. Luin viitekehyksen kuvauksen taitotasostani uudestaan ja mietin, osaanko todellakin kaikki ne asiat, mitä siinä sanotaan. Ehkä minä sitten osaan.

I remember from the lecture that we first year students are on average at level B2. However, the "demands" it sets for my language skills seemed too big so I assessed myself at level B1. I was a little nervous about the final feedback, but I got to surprise positively: the machine assessed me at level B2. My own self-assessment skills tend to be a little too harsh sometimes. I read the framework description of my proficiency level again and wondered whether I truly know all the things it says. Well, maybe I do. (Bree)

In the following example, a student who had assessed and tested his or her reading skills in French describes the positive effect the DIALANG test result had on his or her learning.

### Example 3.

Arvioin olevani eurooppalaisen viitekehyksen mukaan B2 -tasolla ranskan luetunymmärtämisessä, [...]. Sain taitotasokseni C1 -tason. Yliopistoon tullessa olen alkanut saada enemmän luottamusta omiin ranskan taitoihini ja huomannut

edistyneeni. Silti C1 -taso yllätti positiivisesti ja antaa intoa kehittää itseään vielä enemmän.

I evaluated to be at level B2 in French reading skills according to the European Framework, [...]. I got C1 as my proficiency level. After coming to university, I have started to gain more trust in my French skills and I have noticed to have improved. Still, level C1 surprised me positively and increases my enthusiasm to improve myself even more. (Camille)

Example 4 illustrates the response to the outcome of a student who had assessed his or her English reading skills.

Example 4.

En suinkaan ollut huonompi kuin mitä itse arvioin. Ohjelma nimittäin sijoitti englannin luetun ymmärtämiseni tasolle C2, mikä tuli minulle melkoisena yllätyksenä, sillä Eurooppalaisen viitekehyksen mukaan tason edellytyksenä on kaikenlaisen kirjoitetun kielen lukeminen vaivatta. Erimielisyys vaivattomassa lukemisessa on kuitenkin vain yksi syy oman arvioni ja testin tuloksen eroihin. Minulla on nimittäin taipumusta aliarvioida taitojani lähes asiassa kuin asiassa.

I was by no means worse than I evaluated myself. That is, the program placed my English reading comprehension at level C2, which came to me as a big surprise since, according to the European framework, the level requires reading all kind of written language effortlessly. However, the disagreement in reading effortlessly is only one reason for the differences between my own assessment and the test result. That is, I have a tendency to underestimate my skills almost in everything. (Anthony)

As the examples above indicate, the students were not only positively surprised about the higher proficiency level they achieved according to the test results than they had expected based on their self-assessments, but they also expressed themselves in a way that seems to suggest they had gained more self-confidence and thus a better self-esteem. This in turn is likely to affect their learning positively since the increase in self-confidence supports learners in setting meaningful learning objectives and also in actively improving their skills (for further discussion on self-esteem see e.g. Keltikangas-Järvinen 2010). Furthermore, the students seemed to have found the result motivating in cases when DIALANG showed them that they actually knew more than they

thought. Therefore, it can be suggested that the increase in motivation also encourages students to actively improve their language skills.

#### 5.3.1.2. Overestimated skills

Among the students to whom the relationship between their self-assessment and the test result was unexpected were those who gained a lower proficiency level in DIALANG than in their self-evaluation. In this group, there were only students who had assessed either their English or German reading skills. When the students' comments were analyzed, it turned out that they reacted in two different ways: some were disappointed with the test result since they expected a higher proficiency level based on their own self-assessment, while others questioned the validity of the test result.

Furthermore, those students who were disappointed with the outcome reacted in two ways: some showed little trust on their self-assessment skills and had found self-assessment difficult. This means that these students considered the test result more reliable than their own perception about the level of their reading skills (see Example 5).

Example 5.

Pidän Dialang -testiä luotettavampana kuin itsearviointia, koska itsensä arvioiminen ei ole aina niin helppoa.

I consider the Dialang test more reliable than self-assessment since it is not always that easy to assess oneself. (Daphne)

The second group of students, in contrast, did not seem to understand why their proficiency level was lower than they had anticipated based on their self-assessment as they considered reading skills as their strength (see Example 6).



Example 6.

Dialang -testin mukaan olen kuitenkin yliarvioinut itseni. Testi antoi englannin luetunymmärtämisessä tuloksekseni taitotason B2. Olin melko yllättynyt, ja hieman pettynyt, sillä olin niin varma C1 -tasosta.

However, according to the Dialang test, I have overestimated myself. The test gave me the proficiency level B2 as my result in English reading comprehension. I was quite surprised, and slightly disappointed as well, since I was so sure about the level C1. (Emily)

Furthermore, there was also one student who questioned the validity of the test result. It is therefore quite obvious that the student seemed to trust more her own idea about the proficiency level than the one according to DIALANG, as can be seen in Example 7.

Example 7.

Itse arvioin olevani luetun ymmärtämisessä selvästi tasolla C2. Hämmästyin siis todella, kun Dialangin mukaan suurin heikkouteni englannin saralla on juuri luetun ymmärtäminen ja tasoni B2. Englanninkielisiä tekstejä tulee kuitenkin luettua paljon niin opinnoissa kuin vapaa-ajallanikin ja mielestäni ymmärrän lukemaani hyvin. Uskaltaisin siis väittää, että todellisuudessa kielitaitoni on parempi kuin Dialang antaa olettaa, vaikka kieltä on viime vuosina tarvinnut käyttää aiempaa vähemmän, joten taidot ovat hiukan ruosteessa.

I evaluated to be clearly at level C2 in reading comprehension. I was therefore very surprised as, according to Dialang, my biggest weakness in English is reading comprehension and my level is B2. However, I read a lot of texts in English in my studies as well as in my free time and I think that I understand well what I read. Therefore I would dare to claim that in reality my language proficiency is better than Dialang suggests even though in recent years I have needed to use the language less than before so my skills are a little rusty. (Felicia)

However, as Example 7 shows, the student admitted not to have used the language actively in recent years, which in turn suggests that the student may not actually achieve the proficiency level expected based on the self-assessment. This, in turn, suggests that the student is too confident about her reading skills.

### 5.3.1.3. Matching self-evaluations and DIALANG results

Finally, there were also students who reported to have surprised because their self-assessment corresponded to the proficiency level they gained according to DIALANG. These students had assessed their reading skills either in English, German or Swedish. Example 8 illustrates this kind of response.

Example 8.

Osasin odottaa, että testin tulos on hyvä ja että ymmärtäisin kunkin tekstin pääajatuksen. Minut kuitenkin yllätti se, että tasoni oli sama kuin oma arvioni. Minulle on usein tyypillistä, että aliarvioin omat taitoni, joten oli hyvä huomata, että uskaltauduin arvioimaan itseni totuudenmukaisesti ilman, että väheksyisin osaamistani.

I could expect that the test result is good and that I would understand the main idea in each text. However, I was surprised because my level was the same as my own assessment. It is often typical for me to underestimate my own skills so it was good to notice that I had the courage to assess myself truthfully without underestimating my skills. (Gabrielle)

As the previous example shows, some students were surprised about the outcome even though their self-assessment and the test result corresponded to each other. In fact, they seemed to have a tendency to underestimate their skills. These students were therefore positively surprised since they had for once assessed their own skills truthfully without underestimating them.

### 5.3.2. Expected outcomes

Among the students who reported that the relationship between their self-assessment and the test result corresponded to their expectations, two different types of responses emerged from the data. First, there were students who were content with the match between their own self-assessment and the test result. Second, there were also students who were reflective about their actual

proficiency level. Next, these different types of responses are discussed and illustrated.

#### 5.3.2.1. Contended students

Among the students who could anticipate the outcome, the most common type of response was that the students were content with the match between their own assessment and the test result. In addition, the majority of these students had assessed their own skills in a way that the self-assessment and test result corresponded to each other. Furthermore, these students seemed to trust their own self-assessment skills and feel that the test result simply confirmed their own assessment as right. They also said to have a realistic idea about their current reading skills. The following examples illustrate these findings.

Example 9.

Tulokset olivat täysin samassa linjassa oman käsitykseni kanssa. [...] minulla on realistinen käsitys taidoistani, mikä helpottaa oppimista, kun tavoitteet ovat mielekkäitä. Testi oli siis hyvinkin oikeilla jäljillä.

The results were perfectly in line with my own ideas. [...] I have a realistic idea about my skills, which facilitates learning when the objectives are meaningful. The test was thus very much on the right track. (Hannah)

Example 10.

Lukemisen osiossa taitotasokseni osoittautui B1, joka vastaa hyvin itse arvioimaani tasoa ja omia ajatuksiani itsestäni kielenoppijana.

In the reading section B1 turned out as my proficiency level, which corresponds well to my self-evaluated level and my own thoughts about myself as a language learner. (Ida)

As the examples above show, the students also seemed to associate a realistic idea about one's language skills with its role in supporting learning as it helps them to set reasonable learning objectives (see also Example 11). Furthermore, realistic self-assessment seemed to strengthen the way in which the students see themselves as language learners and thus affect their foreign language self-

concept (for further discussion about the role of foreign language self-concept in learning see e.g. Laine and Pihko 1991). It can therefore be assumed that also this affects learning positively.

Example 11.

[...] Dialangin palaute vastasi hyvin omaa käsitystäni lukemisen taidoistani, sillä sain taitotasokseni B2 - aivan kuten arvelinkin. Minulla on siis sangen realistinen käsitys omista taidoistani, mikä helpottaa tavoitteiden asettamista opiskeluilleni.

[...] the feedback in Dialang corresponded well to my own idea about my reading skills since I got B2 as my proficiency level - just as I believed. I thus have a very realistic idea about my own skills, which facilitates setting goals for my studies. (Jessica)

However, among the research participants, there was also one student who had underestimated her reading skills in relation to the proficiency level gained in the test result (see Example 12). Due to the underestimation, it might be speculated that this student has a lower self-esteem in relation to other students who reported that the relationship between their self-assessment and the test result corresponded to their expectations. This student pointed out that she did not expect to achieve a high proficiency level based on her self-assessment. Nevertheless, the student felt that the test result was in accordance with her own perceptions about the reading skills, and this is why the student was not surprised about the outcome.

Example 12.

Tein Dialang -ohjelmassa luetunymmärtämistestin englannin kielestä ja sain taitotasokseni B1:n. En ole yllättynyt saamastani tasosta, sillä olin arvioinut itseni A2 -tasolle itsearviointitaulukon perusteella, joten en oletanut, että saisin mitään hyvää taitotasoa. Dialang -ohjelman antama palaute vastasi aikailla samalla tavalla omaa käsitystäni lukemisen taidoistani englannin kielessä.

I did the English reading comprehension test in Dialang and got B1 as my proficiency level. I am not surprised about the level I got as I had assessed myself at level A2 based on the self-assessment grid so I did not expect to have any good proficiency level. The feedback Dialang gave me corresponded quite well to my own ideas about my English reading skills. (Katherine)

Furthermore, some students said that the test result confirmed their own assessment and therefore became helpful in the learning process. It also helped them to set goals for learning, as can be seen in Example 13. Thus, in this case the students seemed to trust more the test result than their own assessment. However, they did not seem to distrust their own self-assessment skills either.

Example 13.

Oli ilahduttavaa huomata tietäväni oman kielitaidon tasoni ja olen samaa mieltä siitä, että nyt on helpompi asettaa uusia ja mielekkäitä tavoitteita pyrkiessäni kohti yhä parempaa kielitaitoa.

It was delightful to realize to know the level of my language skills and I agree on that it is now easier to set new and meaningful goals when aiming at even better language proficiency. (Laura)

It is also noteworthy that some students referred to their previous experience in assessing their own learning, which apparently helped them to better assess their current language skills. In addition, the students also felt to have a realistic idea about their skills. This can be seen in Example 14.

Example 14.

Olen muutaman viime vuoden aikana oppinut arvioimaan kielitaitoani paremmin, ja uskon, että nykyään minulla on siitä aika selkeä ja realistinen kuva ainakin ruotsin kielen osalta.

I have learnt to better assess my language skills during the past few years, and I believe that these days I have quite a clear and realistic picture about them at least with regard to Swedish language. (Madeleine)

Furthermore, one student (Example 15) was also familiar with the assessment criteria of the CEFR since they had been discussed in the language classes in upper secondary school. The same student also pointed out that self-assessment was essential already in comprehensive school and in upper secondary school.

Example 15.

Arviointini sekä Dialangissa, että eurooppalaisen viitekehyksen mukaan osuivat hyvin kohdalleen. En ollut yllätynyt itsearviointitaidoistani, sillä itsearviointiin kiinnitettiin jo peruskoulussa ja lukiossa paljon huomiota. Tutustuin eurooppalaiseen viitekehykseenkin jo lukion kielten tunneilla.

Both my assessment in Dialang and based on the European framework were a good match. I was not surprised about my self-assessment skills as they were paid attention to already in comprehensive school and in upper secondary school. I also familiarized myself with the European framework already in language classes in upper secondary school. (Natalie)

Based on Example 15, it can be assumed that this student has a good basis for meaningful self-assessment which truly supports learning due to the previous familiarization with the CEFR and self-assessment as an evaluation method.

### 5.3.2.2. Reflections on the actual proficiency level

Among the research participants, there were also students who reflected on their actual proficiency level. These students had overestimated their own reading skills. However, they could anticipate the lower proficiency level in the DIALANG test and they were thus not surprised about the result. One reason for overestimation of one's skills seemed to be excessive self-confidence with regard to the current reading skills, as can be seen in Example 16.

Example 16.

Mistään ohjelman antamasta palautteesta en varsinaisesti yllätynyt. [...] syy, minkä myös uskon vaikuttavan kohdallani on liiallinen itseluottamus.

I was not really surprised about any feedback the program gave me. [...] a reason that I also believe to have an effect in my case is excessive self-confidence. (Olivia)

Another reason for the overestimation appeared to be the lack of practice since the last time when the language had actively been used was a long time ago.

For this reason, the current language skills might not actually correspond to the self-assessment, as can be seen in what a student says in Example 17.

Example 17.

Toisaalta oli helppo odottaa eri tulosta kuin oma arvioni. Viimeisimmästä kielenkäyttötilanteesta on kulunut aikaa ja vaikka silloin olisinkin ollut tasolla B1, monet asiat ovat ehtineet unohtua ja käsitys omasta saksan kielen taidosta hämärtyä. Dialang-testin antama taso kuvaa tämänhetkistä kielitaitoani luetun ymmärtämisen osalta.

On the one hand, it was easy to expect a different result from my own assessment. It has been a while since the last time I used the language and even if I had been at level B1 back then, many things have been forgotten and the idea about my own German skills obscured. The level Dialang test gave me describes my current language proficiency with regard to reading skills. (Phoebe)

Furthermore, one student brought up that she expected to have good English reading skills due to much reading in that particular language, as Example 18 shows.

Example 18.

[...] olen samaa mieltä Dialangista tulleiden tulosten kanssa, sillä luen sujuvasti englanninkielistä kaunokirjallisuutta eivätkä asiaylliset tekstitkään tuota suurempia ongelmia. Olen lukenut sen verran paljon englannin kielisiä tekstejä jo monta vuotta, että alan jo tavallaan odottaakin itseltäni, että viesti kuin viesti menee perille, ellei teksti ole aivan liian vaikeaselkoinen.

[...] I agree with the test results provided by Dialang as I read fluently English literature, and factual texts do not either cause any major problems. I have read a lot of English texts for many years already so I kind of begin to expect from myself that any message is understood unless the text is way too complex. (Rachel)

This student also seemed to trust her reading skills and this is why the self-assessment and test result corresponded to each other.

## 6. DISCUSSION

In this chapter the findings reported in the previous chapter will be interpreted and discussed in more detail. The analysis is divided based on the findings reported in the previous chapter. This means that the analysis begins with interpreting the match between the students' CEFR levels according to their self-assessments and the DIALANG test results. Consequently, the students' responses to the relationship between their self-assessments and test results are interpreted.

### 6.1. The correspondence of the students' self-assessments and test results

According to the findings reported above, with regard to all languages, the most common CEFR level in the students' self-assessments was B2, whereas the DIALANG test results indicate that most students achieved either level B2 or C1. Since the students have gone through the Finnish upper secondary education, it can be assumed that they on average have achieved the level B2 in reading before their university studies. This is why the self-assessments are in accordance with the objectives of instruction set for upper secondary education in Finland (NCC 2003: 84, 102). Nevertheless, over half of all self-assessments did not correspond to the test results. The self-assessments which differed from the CEFR levels measured by DIALANG were divided into overestimations and underestimations. The percentage of underestimations was significantly higher than the percentage of overestimations (see Diagram 2, p. 51). Therefore, the students seemed to have a tendency to be self-critical with regard to their reading skills, and for this reason they had underestimated their competency. This finding is supported by Dragemark Oscarson (2009: 176) who found out in her study that Swedish upper secondary students had a clear tendency to



underestimate their own writing skills in relation to the researcher's assessment of the same writing tasks. However, as my findings indicate, in this study there were differences between the languages in which the students assessed and tested their reading skills in the match between the self-assessments and test results. These will be discussed later in this section.

The reasons behind the students' underestimations and overestimations about their reading skills may be different. One reason could be that this kind of tendency reflects the lack of a deeper understanding of the grading criteria and what the criteria represent, as suggested also by Dragemark Oscarson (2009: 158). In other words, it can be assumed that the students had not necessarily grasped properly the self-assessment criteria of the CEFR they needed to apply to their own performance, and this is why it might have been difficult to choose the best criteria in relation to one's skills. This also refers to insufficient practice in self-assessment. In fact, many students considered self-assessment as difficult and they said they had difficulties in assessing their language skills due to insufficient practice. Therefore, it is quite obvious that more practice and guidance in self-assessment are needed if this skill is to be developed.

The importance of practice in self-assessment is emphasized, for instance, by Boud (1986: 27) and Tudor (1996: 167). They both argue that the process of self-assessment needs to be continuous and extensive if the students are expected to assess their skills successfully. This means that it is not reasonable to expect that a few occurrences during the studies will lead to a very substantial increase in the students' ability in this area (Boud 1986: 27). Also Dragemark Oscarson (2009: 158) has come to the same conclusion as she suggests that the students' tendency to overestimate or underestimate their own skills may refer to the need for a more thorough and long-term practice of self-assessment. As first year students at the Department of Languages, University of Jyväskylä felt to

have inadequate skills in assessing their own performance, it is quite clear that they had not had sufficient practice in self-assessment during their previous studies. For this reason it can be assumed that one of the goals of the Finnish upper secondary education - i.e. the students' ability to assess their language proficiency in relation to the objectives set for language skills (NCC 2003: 84, 102) - is not achieved. This implies that the self-assessment practices are not seen as important within the language teaching framework or, alternatively, they are not considered significant in the overall assessment at school. In other words, this suggests that becoming aware of one's strengths and weaknesses and reflecting them are not essential features of language learning during school years, which also implies that the students are not encouraged to assess their own skills. In fact, when students feel that their own self-assessment does not have any importance in the context of learning and assessment, there is a risk that the students begin to distrust their ability to assess their skills and, as Boud (1986: 5) argues, they may become unable to exercise their own critical judgment. This in turn easily shows as uncertainty when assessing one's language skills.

As both the findings of the present study and previous research (e.g. Oscarson 1980; Boud 1986; Tudor 1996; Dragemark Oscarson 2009) show similar results about the importance of continuous and long-term self-assessment, it is relevant to consider its implications for learning. First of all, if students regularly self-assess their own language proficiency, they are able to monitor the development of their language skills and thus become aware of their own strengths and weaknesses as language learners. This helps them to set realistic and meaningful learning objectives which naturally support learning positively. Furthermore, long-term self-assessment also helps students to estimate whether their self-assessment skills have improved over time and whether this development is in relation to the improvement of their language skills.

Accordingly, long-term and regular self-assessment of language proficiency creates a good basis for forming one's own language learning profile, which is also supported by other forms of assessment, such as diagnostic assessment provided by DIALANG and teacher assessment. However, it is essential to include all language skills in the assessment process, not just reading skills as in the present study. Furthermore, if self-assessment is integrated into the other forms of assessment, it is possible to form a thorough picture of students' foreign language abilities and achievements in learning (Nedzinskaitė et al. 2006: 87). In order to meaningfully support learning, there is also a need to draw conclusions on one's language learning profile. One way to do this is by making an illustrative figure which demonstrates the way in which one's language skills have developed over time. This not only helps the learners to see whether their skills have improved or remained the same or even decreased, but this also helps the teachers to assess more thoroughly the progress their students show in developing their language proficiency. In fact, when this is applied to teaching, the teachers can also evaluate the reasons for which the students show certain tendency in their development of language skills and thus make adjustments in their own teaching if necessary.

As the findings indicate, the match between the self-assessments and test results varied between the languages in which the students assessed and tested their reading skills. For this reason it is also important to consider what the reasons behind this variation may be.

According to the findings of this study, the best match between these two assessments of reading skills could be seen in the English language. In Finland, English is the most studied foreign language, which means that most people (90,2 %) begin their English studies at an early phase of comprehensive school

and study English as the first compulsory language (for more details see e.g. Official statistics of Finland). In addition, it is relatively easy to find situations in which people can practise their English reading skills in authentic situations, such as reading on-line news, novels or newspapers (for further discussion about the role of English in Finland, see e.g. Leppänen et al. 2009).

Furthermore, the students are required to read academic texts in English during their university studies regardless their field of study. In addition, it can be assumed that the students have many opportunities to improve their reading skills also outside formal education and for this reason one can assume that the students have a fairly good idea about their reading skills with regard to the English language. Already Oscarson (1980: 25) pointed out in his early studies on self-assessment of foreign language proficiency the importance of assessing one's language skills in natural, real-life situations as, according to Oscarson, authentic situations form the most valid framework for self-assessment. The findings of the present study support this hypothesis since the students who had assessed and tested their reading skills in English had the best correspondence between their self-assessments and test results.

Furthermore, Swedish is the second national language of Finland and it is compulsory to study the language for all Finnish speaking students at lower and upper secondary school. In addition, at university every student taking a degree must obtain Civil Service Language Proficiency Certificate in Swedish (for a more detailed discussion of the proficiency in Swedish of university students see Palviainen 2010). Since the research participants of this study have studied Swedish at least during their previous education, it could be assumed that they possess good language skills in Swedish and thus have a good idea about their own proficiency. However, it is interesting that the students seemed to have a clear tendency to underestimate their Swedish reading skills as the

test results indicate that the students' proficiency level was either B2 or C1. Nevertheless, the self-assessments varied between the levels A2 and C1, which suggests that the gap between the students' self-assessments and the test results was even as high as two proficiency levels. Due to this gap it can be assumed that the students are insecure about their Swedish reading proficiency.

In addition, German and French are less studied languages in Finland as they fall into the category of elective studies in the Finnish education system. However, it can be assumed that the students are usually well-motivated and committed to study these languages. Nevertheless, as German and French do not have any significant status in Finland, the students are required to be very active in developing their language proficiency also outside formal education as authentic material is not as easily available as in English and Swedish. Since the students usually are well-motivated, it can be assumed that they also gain good language proficiency. Nevertheless, the research participants of this study seemed to have doubts about their proficiency as they had underestimated their skills both in German and French. Despite, the data also suggest that some students had overestimated their skills. The variation between the under- and overestimations may suggest that the students do not have the necessary skills to assess their own language proficiency due to fewer authentic situations to which they can refer to than in the other two languages. Therefore these students may have an unclear idea about their actual skills.

## **6.2. The relationship between the students' self-assessments and test results**

As reported previously in section 5.3., the students were divided into two groups based on their responses to the relationship between their own self-assessment and the CEFR level gained in the DIALANG reading test. The

students were either surprised about the relationship between their self-assessment and the test result or the result was as expected. First, the reactions of the students who were surprised are interpreted. Subsequently, the reactions of the students who felt the result was as expected are interpreted.

As the findings indicate, most of the students were surprised about the relationship between their self-assessment and the test result since they achieved a better CEFR level according to DIALANG than based on their self-assessment. This means that the students had underestimated their skills and they were therefore positively surprised about the higher proficiency level which they achieved according to the test result. Furthermore, these students seemed to have doubts about their own skills and this is why the test result led to a positive response.

Because of the low trust in one's own skills, these students possibly have a low self-esteem, which also might affect the way in which the students see themselves as language learners. As argued by Koppinen et al. (1999) self-esteem is closely related to learning and a good self-esteem helps learners to form a realistic idea about their own skills, strengths and weaknesses. Thus, when the students had underestimated their own skills, they probably did not have a realistic idea about their current language proficiency, which appeared as excessive self-criticism. This is alarming since the lack of trust in one's own abilities may prevent the students from actively using the language and thus from continuously developing their language skills. This idea is supported by Keltikangas-Järvinen (2010: 40) as she points out that self-esteem is one of the most important, if not the most important, single factor affecting learning. Also Dragemark Oscarson's (2009: 185) findings support the idea that self-esteem and the level of self-criticism affect the accuracy of one's self-assessment. Furthermore, Keltikangas-Järvinen (2010: 40) also emphasizes that the role of

self-esteem increases along the level of education. For this reason the students who have doubts about their own language proficiency should be able to overcome those doubts and have more trust in themselves. This is particularly important among students who study foreign languages at the university level since they are future experts in languages and this is why it is desirable that they have a good self-esteem which supports them in being confident language users.

The way in which students see themselves as language learners is also closely related to the concept of self-esteem. Self-assessment can at best increase one's self-esteem and this effect is also reflected to learning as a better self-esteem likely supports learning. Furthermore, the foreign language self-concept is also closely related to self-esteem and it consists of a fairly definite basic attitude towards oneself as a language learner and for this reason it is a factor that also defines learning outcomes (Laine and Pihko 1991: 15). The students who had underestimated their own skills possibly have a negative foreign language self-concept and this is why they distrust their own abilities. However, the students reported that the test result had a positive effect on the way in which they see themselves as language learners. The following example illustrates this kind of reaction.

Example 19.

Tehtyäni Dialangin luetunymmärtämisen testin ranskaksi, sain tulokseksi C1. Jouduin muuttamaan käsitystäni omasta kielitaidostani, onneksi näin että se olikin parempi kuin mitä olin kuvitellut.

After taking the Dialang reading comprehension test in French, the result was C1. I had to change my perception about my language skills, luckily this way that they were better than I had thought. (Sandra)

In fact, it can be said that the comparison of one's self-assessment and the test result helps the students to better understand their own foreign language self-

concept, which also leads to a change in the way in which the students see themselves as learners. Therefore, it is important that the students are encouraged to assess their own learning regularly. However, in order to do this successfully, the students probably need guidance and support in the process and this is why self-assessment of language proficiency should be made a permanent part of the overall study program. This is necessary especially in higher education as the aim is to become self-directed learners, and self-assessment is an essential skill needed in order to achieve this goal (see e.g. Boud 1995 for a more detailed discussion on the importance of self-assessment skills in higher education).

Motivation is another theme that emerged from the students' reflections. The findings show that the students found it motivating when they gained a better CEFR level in the DIALANG reading test than their self-assessment suggested. This impact on motivation presumably supports learning and helps the students to set meaningful learning objectives and thus improve their language skills. This finding is in accordance with Huhta's (2007) findings as he found out in his study that language learners associate self-assessment with aspects such as the promotion of learning and the encouragement to learn more. Therefore, the role of motivation in relation to self-assessment should not be forgotten as good motivation helps the students to assess their own language skills meaningfully. In addition, it can also be assumed that well-motivated learners also find self-assessment easy. (Tuominen 2010: 31.)

Furthermore, according to the findings, the students had also overestimated their own skills in relation to the test result. In this case, the students reacted in two different ways, i.e. they were either disappointed with the outcome or they questioned the validity of the test result. When the students were disappointed, they either distrusted their self-assessment skills and for this reason seemed to



consider the test result more reliable than their own assessment or they did not seem to understand why their proficiency level was lower than they anticipated based on their self-assessment as they considered reading skills as their strength (see Examples 5 and 6, p. 56-57). It is interesting that even though the students felt that their strength is reading in a foreign language, they did not seem to reflect on the validity of the test result. Instead, the students accepted the result as such. This may be due to the inexperience in self-assessment and also to the distrust towards self-assessment as a form of evaluation. As Huhta (2003: 29) points out, self-assessment is often considered as subjective and thus unreliable. However, this should not be the case since integrating self-assessment into the overall evaluation process actually ensures a more thorough description about what has been learned (Nedzinskaitė et al. 2006).

However, according to the findings, one student questioned the validity of the test result. In this case the student seemed to trust more the self-assessment than the proficiency level suggested by DIALANG. Nevertheless, as the student admitted not to have actively used the language recently, it might be that the student does not actually achieve the CEFR level anticipated based on the self-assessment. The reason behind the overestimation may be in this case excessive self-confidence which reflects to the self-assessment as a too optimistic idea about one's reading skills (see Example 7, p. 57). Being too optimistic is not necessarily a good thing with regard to learning since it easily leads to unrealistic expectations, which can in turn cause disappointments and, in the worst case, demotivate learners and thus prevent them from setting meaningful learning objectives.

Among the students who were surprised there were also students whose self-assessments corresponded to the test result. Even though the self-assessments were in line with the test results, the students reported to have surprised about

this because of their tendency to underestimate their language skills. Therefore, this led to a positive reaction since the students had assessed their own skills truthfully without underestimating their language proficiency. This kind of result is likely to motivate the students in developing their language skills since these students could see that they already had a good idea about their proficiency. For this reason the students will probably have more trust in their self-assessment skills in the future, which also supports learning positively. In addition, the students are likely to be able to set adequate learning objectives for themselves and thus be encouraged to actively use the languages they study and improve their language proficiency. Accordingly, when the students realize that they had assessed their skills realistically in relation to DIALANG, they are also likely to gain a better understanding of their foreign language self-concept and thus become more aware of their own qualities as language learners.

Among the students who expected the outcome, most of them were content with the relationship between their self-assessment and the test result. Furthermore, the students' own assessment and the test result corresponded to each other in general. The findings also show that these students seemed to be confident about their self-assessment skills, which suggests that they also have a realistic idea about their language proficiency. This in turn supports learning as it can be assumed that the students are also able to identify their strengths and weaknesses and thus focus on the essential in learning. This is also supported by previous research (see e.g. Koppinen et al. 1999).

At this context some students also pointed out that their previous experience in self-assessment had helped them to improve their self-assessment skills and thus meaningfully assess their language proficiency. Consequently, they seemed to have a realistic idea about their language skills. This finding supports the idea that meaningful self-assessment needs to be consistent and

long-term practice is therefore needed (Boud 1986: 27; Tudor 1996: 167). Furthermore, it is also likely that these students find self-assessment a supportive factor in the learning process since they have probably been able to see their development due to much self-assessment. In fact, being able to regularly see the progress one makes is very motivating and it thus supports learning.

Among the students who could expect the outcome, some students remained reflective about their real proficiency level. Furthermore, some of them had overestimated their own skills. Regardless, they could anticipate the lower proficiency level for different reasons. The first reason was excessive self-confidence. As in the case of the student who was surprised about the lower proficiency level suggested by DIALANG and who questioned the validity of the test result, excessive self-confidence may refer to a too optimistic idea about one's language skills. As already pointed out in this context, being too optimistic can lead to unrealistic expectations towards learning and thus cause disappointments. Also the effect of a long pause in using the particular language was brought up. It is true that languages need to be actively used if one wishes to maintain their language skills. Therefore, if one does not use the language for a long time, it is very likely that one's ideas about the level of language skills may be obscured.

## 7. CONCLUSION

In this chapter the main points of this study will be summarized. First, the findings will be reviewed and examined in relation to the objectives of the study. Second, the research process will be analyzed, and finally suggestions for further investigation will be given.

The study revealed foreign language students' notions about their language skills. Furthermore, the students' ability to assess their own skills was also explored and interpreted. The students' thoughts about self-assessment were also investigated. When analyzing the data, the emphasis was on the students' own perceptions about the aforementioned themes, and for this reason the research task was approached with the help of qualitative content analysis. Nevertheless, quantifying the data supported the analysis as it enabled the use of illustrative figures and diagrams.

The first aim of this study was to find out whether foreign language students' self-assessments of their reading skills correspond to the proficiency level they gain in the DIALANG reading test. The findings show that the students' self-assessments and the test results differed from each other. Consequently, the students had a clear tendency to underestimate their own skills since nearly half of the students who participated in the study had underestimated their reading skills in relation to the test result. This suggests that the students tend to be self-critical with regard to their skills. Furthermore, many students felt that they did not have the adequate tools needed for meaningful self-assessment, i.e. the lack of practice and support in self-assessment were brought up by many of them.

The second aim of this study was to elucidate the students' reactions to the relationship between their self-assessment and the test result. The findings

indicate that most students were surprised about the result as the outcome was unexpected. The main reason for the surprise was that the students had underestimated their own skills in relation to the test result, which meant that they achieved a higher proficiency level in the DIALANG reading test and were therefore positively surprised. It can be suggested that this motivates the students and supports them in setting meaningful learning objectives. The same kind of reaction was also seen among students whose self-assessment corresponded to the test result as they also tended to underestimate their skills. Accordingly, the students appeared to be motivated to further develop their language skills since the test result confirmed that they already had a realistic idea about their proficiency. Furthermore, these students are likely to gain a better understanding of their foreign language self-concept and therefore be able to better identify their qualities as language learners.

Furthermore, some students had overestimated their skills and the results were therefore unexpected. In this case the students were either disappointed with the result or they questioned the validity of the test result. When disappointed, the students tended to distrust their own assessment and value more the test result or, alternatively, they reflected on the reasons for which their proficiency level in the test was lower than based on their own assessment. As the students seemed to value more the test result than their own assessment of the same skill, it is probable that they lack experience in self-assessment and they may also distrust the validity of self-assessment as a form of evaluation.

According to the findings, the students could also expect the outcome and most of these students were pleased with the match between their own assessment and the test result since their self-assessments and test results corresponded to each other. Accordingly, these students seemed to be confident about their self-assessment skills and thus also about their language proficiency. Furthermore,

within this group of students, the supportive effect the previous experience in self-assessment had on assessing their current skills was also brought up.

In addition, some students who felt that the relationship between their self-assessment and the test result was as expected remained reflective about their proficiency level as they had overestimated their reading skills. Nevertheless, they could anticipate the lower proficiency level they achieved in the test due to either excessive self-confidence or a long pause in actively using the particular language.

To sum up, it can be said that the students found self-assessment interesting. Most of them also associated truthful self-assessment skills with the increase in self-esteem, which naturally supports learning as the students are more able to set meaningful learning objectives and reflect on their strengths and weaknesses. Furthermore, the students also felt that self-assessment is a useful skill in language learning and it is therefore needed. The students also brought up that self-assessment will have an essential role in their language learning in the future.

With regard to the methods of the present study, it can be said that the qualitative approach is justifiable in the light of the study as it enabled the examination of the students' individual perceptions about their self-assessment of reading skills in relation to the test result in DIALANG. Therefore, the students' own words and thoughts formed the basis of the study. In addition, the qualitative analysis also clarified the individual students' perceptions, which could first be grouped into different types and then analyzed and interpreted. In fact, it can be said that approaching the data qualitatively offers a personal and descriptive picture about the phenomenon. However, quantifying the data was also used in this study since it complemented the

qualitative analysis by illustrating the findings in the form of figures and diagrams. Even though the number of students assessing and testing their reading skills was rather small in some languages (e.g. in French) analyzed in this study, quantifying the data can be justified because of its role in supporting and complementing the qualitative analysis. It should be remembered that the main focus of the analysis was on the qualitative approach, not on quantifying the data.

Next, the data collection and the research process are evaluated. Initially, 97 written assignments were handed in for the purposes of the present study. However, due to various reasons reported in chapter 4, the final amount of the assignments analyzed was 59, which was, nevertheless, adequate for the scale of the present study especially since the data were mainly analyzed qualitatively. Furthermore, the division between the different languages represented in this study was unequal but corresponded to the amount of students studying each language at the Department of Languages, University of Jyväskylä.

In this study the focus was on the students' self-assessment of their reading skills. This means that within the scope of this study, only a peak to self-assessment of foreign language proficiency at the university level could be offered. This means that in the future it is important to concentrate on providing information about the self-assessment of other language skills as well and thus provide more thorough insights into the phenomenon as a whole. Consequently, self-assessment can become more meaningful and thus better support learning. It is therefore desirable that the importance of more comprehensive research is acknowledged in this field of study. Furthermore, there are various ways in which the study of self-assessment of foreign language skills can be completed. In this study, the point of view was that of the

learners and therefore it would be interesting to also examine teachers' perceptions about the issue. Another interesting approach would be to study the self-assessment practices used in language education in Finland and thus provide information about the frequency of self-assessment practices as part of language learning in formal contexts. As a conclusion, self-assessment of language proficiency remains an interesting field of study and there are different options for further research.



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# APPENDICES

## APPENDIX 1. Consent form

Hyvä vieraan kielen opiskelija!

Opettajankoulutuslaitoksen kielipedagogiikan lehtorit Kati Kajander, Tarja Nyman ja Olli-Pekka Salo, Normaalikoulun lehtori Hannele Kara, kielten laitoksen lehtori Jaana Toomar ja SOLKI:n ma. professori Riikka Alanen tekevät yhdessä tutkimusta, jonka tavoitteena on vieraan kielen opiskelijoiden pedagogisen portfolion kehittäminen. Tutkimus alkaa lukuvuonna 2009 ja se kestää siihen saakka, kunnes tutkimuksen opiskelijat ovat suorittaneet opettajan pedagogiset aineopinnot. Suomen Akatemia suosittaa tutkimuseettisessä ohjeistossaan, että tutkittavilta pyydetään kirjallinen vahvistus heiltä kerätyn aineiston käyttöön. Tämän vuoksi pyydämmekin Sinua allekirjoittamaan suostumuksen.

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Aika ja paikka

---

Nimi ja nimen selvennys

Tutkimusryhmän puolesta

Kati Kajander ja Tarja Nyman

## APPENDIX 2. Instructions for the written assignment

**Viesti kaikille KLSP002-kurssilaisille 12.10.2009:**

**\*\* High Priority \*\***

Ohessa liitteenä II oppimistehtävän ohjeet. Tehtäviä on kaksi, joista valitset vain toisen, josta kirjoitat yhden A4 mittaisen selosteen. Tehtävän palautus ma 19.10.2009 paperiversiona Anita Moilaselle.

Jokainen voi valita oppimistehtävistä oman suuntautumisensa tai mielenkiintonsa mukaan. Mutta jos et osaa valita, vaihtoehto 1 laatijatiimi toivoo sinun vastaavan kielen oppimisen ja opettamisen tehtävään, jotta he saisivat materiaalia tutkimustaan varten.

Vaihtoehto 1 (kielen oppiminen ja opettaminen)

KLSP002 Johdatusta kieleen ja sen tutkimukseen (3 op)

2. Oppimistehtävä

Tehtävien palautus 19.10.2009 mennessä Anita Moilaselle vain paperiversiona.

1. Dialang on tietokoneohjelma, jonka avulla voit saada palautetta kielitaidostasi. Dialang on asennettu P-rakennuksen atk-luokan (P113) koneisiin, kielikeskuksen oppimiskeskuksen koneisiin Aallon lukusalissa ja C-rakennuksen atk-tilan koneisiin kielikeskuksen infotiskin läheisyydessä. Voit ladata ohjelman halutessasi myös omalle koneellesi osoitteesta <http://www.dialang.org/finnish/index.htm>

Arvioi itsesi luetun ymmärtämisessä itsearviointitaulukon perusteella siinä kielessä, jossa aiot tehdä Dialangin lukemisen testin. Taulukko löytyy osoitteesta <http://www.uta.fi/laitokset/kielikeskus/CEF/viitekehys.htm>. Tutustu sen jälkeen Dialangiin ja tee ohjelman alkutestin jälkeen jonkin kielen lukemisen osio. Kirjoita, millä tavoin Dialang-ohjelman antama palaute vastasi omaa käsitystäsi lukemisen taidoistasi ko. kielessä. Kerro myös, minkä kielen lukemisen osion teit, minkä taitotason sait, mikä palautteessa yllätti sinut ja mitä osat odottaa.

### APPENDIX 3. The self-assessment grid of the CEFR

	A1	A2	B1
Luetun ymmärtäminen	Ymmärrän tuttuja nimiä, sanoja ja hyvin yksinkertaisia lauseita esimerkiksi ilmoituksissa, julisteissa ja luetteloissa.	Pystyn lukemaan hyvin lyhyitä, yksinkertaisia tekstejä. Pystyn löytämään tiettyä, ennustettavissa olevaa tietoa jokapäiväisistä yksinkertaisista teksteistä, esimerkiksi mainoksista, esitteistä, ruokalistaista ja aikatauluista. Ymmärrän lyhyitä, yksinkertaisia henkilökohtaisia kirjeitä.	Ymmärrän tekstejä, joissa on pääasiassa hyvin tavallista arkipäivän kieltä tai työhön liittyvää kieltä. Ymmärrän tapahtumien, tunteiden ja toiveiden kuvaukset henkilökohtaisissa kirjeissä.
	B2	C1	C2
Luetun ymmärtäminen	Pystyn lukemaan ajankohtaisia ongelmia käsitteleviä artikkeleita ja raportteja ja havaitsemaan niissä kirjoittajien näkökulmat ja kannanotot. Ymmärrän oman aikani kaunokirjallisuutta.	Ymmärrän pitkiä ja monipolvisia asia- ja kirjallisuustekstejä ja huo- maan tyylieroja. Ymmärrän erityis-alojen artikkeleita ja melko pitkiä teknisiä ohjeita silloinkin, kun ne eivät liity omaan alaani.	Pystyn lukemaan vaivatta käytännöllisesti katsoen kaikenlaista kirjoitettua kieltä, myös abstrakteja, rakenteellisesti tai kielellisesti monimutkaisia tekstejä, kuten ohjekirjoja, erityis-alojen artikkeleita ja kaunokirjallisuutta.