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# DEVELOPING STUDENTS' (SELF-)EVALUATION SKILLS. A CASE STUDY ON APPLIED MODERN LANGUAGE STUDENTS IN ROMANIA

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*Abstract*

*Against the background of international discussion on the benefits of developing students' (self-) evaluation skills, the aim of this article is to present the approach undertaken in this respect by a team of academics from the Bucharest University of Economic Studies - ASE, Romania. We present the procedure used to equip Applied Modern Language students with exam-taking skills by familiarizing them not only with exam items, but also with evaluation criteria (standardized by means of an evaluation grid), as well as by raising awareness on the possibility of marking variation function of evaluator subjectivity. The article relies on a corpus-based analysis of student midterm exam answers, as well as evaluation grids used by students for self- and peer assessment. Findings point to the usefulness of the procedure, both as regards students' final exam performance, and as regards student feedback obtained through class discussion.*

## 1. Introduction

The current paper aims to contribute to the discussion on the benefits and challenges of involving students in assessment. We do so by: briefly clarifying key concepts, incentives, short- and long-term benefits, sensitive contexts, as well as by presenting the results of the case study undertaken by the authors with respect to encouraging Applied Modern Language students to engage in self-assessment practice at the Bucharest University of Economic Studies – ASE, Romania.

Researchers in the field have defined self-assessment in various ways. Stănuș (2001, 189) defines self-assessment as "the process by which learners are trained to evaluate their own performances, e.g. imagining how well they would cope in a range of real-life settings". McMillan & Hearn (2008, 41) resort to a more elaborate explanation of self-assessment: "the combination of three components related in a cyclical, ongoing process: self-monitoring, self-evaluation, and identification and implementation of instructional correctives as needed". Andrade & Valtcheva (2009, 13) point out the contrast between self-assessment and self-evaluation: the former is "a process of formative assessment during which students reflect on the quality of their work, judge the degree to which it

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reflects explicitly stated goals or criteria, and revise accordingly" while the latter "refers to approaches that involve students in grading their work, perhaps as part of their final grade for an assignment or a class". Moreover, according to Sadler & Good (2006, 28), "self-grading is best thought of not as an isolated educational practice, but as a part of the system of learning and assessment carried out in a teacher's classroom" as it "appears to further student understanding of the subject matter being taught".

There has been significant international discussion on the benefits of developing students' self-assessment skills (see Andrade & Valtcheva, 2009; Boud, Lawson & Thompson, 2013; Sadler & Good, 2006). Andrade & Valtcheva's study (2009, 16) revealed the fact that, while engaged in self-assessment procedures, their students started feeling more comfortable about self-assessing, they were more aware of their knowledge and about what to learn in order to get better grades, which actually led to decreased anxiety. Sadler & Good (2006, 2-3) describe four potential advantages of student self-assessment over teacher assessment, coined as "logistical" (the teacher saves time), "pedagogical" (students' better understanding of the topic), "metacognitive" (students' increased awareness of their knowledge and what else needs to be learnt) and "affective" (i.e. "a greater sense of shared ownership for the learning process").

When it comes to the reasons for resorting to self-assessment, a very strong reason proves to be motivation. We can say that when midterms with self and peer-assessment were resorted to, students seemed to perform better in final exams, as a consequence of their motivation. McMillan & Hearn (2008, 44) agree with the fact that "self-assessment plays a significant role in developing self-perceptions that lead to greater motivation". As our research will show further, students are motivated in various degrees. Even if not all students get better results for the final exam, at least some do and if there is hope that by means of self-assessment students may be encouraged to study more for the final exam, then this is a strong reason this whole process should be experienced.

The "echoes" of self-assessment can be near or distant. Andrade & Valtcheva (2009, 17) speak about the "short-term effect" of self-assessment, in which case "self-assessment influences student performance on a particular assignment" and the "long-term effect" of self-assessment when "students become more self-regulated in their learning". Boud, Lawson & Thompson (2013, 941) go further and stress the importance of self-assessment as having lifelong applicability: "If a graduate is not able to make their own judgements about the quality of their work, they will be ill equipped for most professional or even non-professional roles". Therefore, the dimension and effects of self-assessment should not at all be neglected.

There is another aspect we should mention here, namely the differences between the teacher's grading and the students' grading, which may lead to some tension. This issue is highlighted by Andrade & Valtcheva (2009, 17) who believe that the solution to this problem relies on both open discussions and "codefining criteria for a given assignment".

Case studies in the field have brought to light another interesting situation. When grading their colleagues, students tend give lower scores, while when grading themselves their tendency is to resort to higher scores: "When grading others, students awarded lower grades to the best performing students than their teacher did. When grading themselves, lower performing students tended to inflate their own low scores (Sadler & Good, 2006, 1). Boud, Lawson & Thompson (2013, 945) have a reasonable explanation for this state of facts: "the accuracy of judgement varies according to the expertise of the student and the level of course: stronger students are more likely to underestimate grades, weaker students over-estimate; students in advanced courses are more likely to underestimate". Bearing all these in mind, students, moreover, should be encouraged and rewarded for their accurate grading (Sadler & Good, 2006, 28).

Having shortly referred to several research studies which tackle the topic of student self-assessment and present benefits and challenges arising while attempting to involve students in such activities, we now turn to a detailed presentation of the procedures undertaken by the authors in this respect with the

aim of developing the self-evaluating skills of Applied Modern Language students from the Bucharest University of Economic Studies – ASE, Romania.

## 2. Case study – Self-assessment activities with Applied Modern Language Students in ASE, Romania

The current section describes the activities designed by the authors to develop the self-evaluation skills of Applied Modern Language (AML) students from the Bucharest University of Economic Studies – ASE, Romania. The rationale behind this endeavor is the teachers' two-decade long experience in assessing student homework and test answers, and the empirical observation that, when midterms were resorted to, students seemed to perform better in final exams; hence, the decision was made to investigate whether this observation is valid or not. The investigation is based on the analysis of a corpus of 332 documents, out of which 196 midterm-related documents (instructions, exam sheets, answer keys, evaluation grid, exam answers, evaluation sheets filled in by students and teachers, distribution of exam answers to students) and 136 final exam-related documents of the same types.

### 2.1 Methodology

During the second semester of the 2021-2022 academic year, Viorela-Valentina Dima and Elena Tălmăcian taught General Linguistics as part of the curriculum for the Bachelor's programme in Applied Modern Languages (English-French) organized by the Faculty of International Business and Economics from the Bucharest University of Economic Studies - ASE, Romania. Successful completion of the subject required: active participation in lecture and seminar debates, delivery of an oral presentation, passing of a final exam. To prepare for the exam, the teachers decided to organize a midterm exam simulation in a hybrid format: face-to-face and online interaction via the online.ase.ro educational platform, to provide all 65 first year students with the opportunity to participate, irrespective of occasional lack of in-person attendance. The objectives of the activity were the following:

- to provide opportunity for midterm revision of topics covered;
- to familiarize students with General Linguistics exam tasks and procedures;
- to familiarize students with assessment steps and procedures;
- to increase self-awareness regarding:
    - the understanding of concepts covered,
    - the ability to discuss/ present/ explain/ exemplify/ analyze concepts,
    - the ability to assess one's and peers' exam answers.

The activity was organized as follows: one week prior to the midterm exam simulation for the General Linguistics discipline, the teachers posted on the online.ase.ro educational platform the "Midterm exam simulation instructions", referring to: the objectives of the activity and the steps to be followed by students:

- *Before* the simulation – topics/ lessons to revise (both lecture and seminar materials), recommendation to solve all the exercises on the seminar handouts, midterm exam format (types of exam items and points awarded);
- *During* the simulation – 1 hour was allotted for the exam simulation, 15 minutes for scanning/saving/uploading the answers on the platform in a dedicated Assignment file for each of the 3 groups of first-year AML students;
- *After* the simulation – the teachers provided Answer keys, the Evaluation grid, the List of tests to be evaluated by each student, and the Midterm exam answer sheets (as they are not visible to students on the platform unless the teacher makes them available).

In Figures 1 and 2 below, we provide samples of midterm exam items and the evaluation grid, respectively. With regard to the midterm exam items and points allocated, we mention the fact that they mirror the final exam items and points. With respect to the Evaluation grid, we would like to point to the fact that the students were encouraged to not act mechanically (i.e. to award points for any correct answer, be it worded as in the Answer key provided by the teacher or with the test taker's own words, on condition that the meaning in the Answer key is preserved; to consider allowing fractional points for partially correct answers). Moreover, in the column dedicated to 'Teacher's observations', very specific instructions were given on how to allocate fractional points if the student answers were partially complete/correct, so as to ensure as much objectivity as possible. Last but not least, students were encouraged to fill in the column dedicated to 'Student evaluator's observations' both with points allocated and with potential observations and comments, to help peer test takers understand the evaluation results.

**Figure 1. Midterm exam items**

EXAM FORMAT: 50 points + 10 points ex officio = 60 points

I. Define/ explain/ exemplify key concepts:          (10 points)
II. Compare and contrast the following concepts:          (10 points)
III. Answer the following questions:          (10 points)
IV. In no more than a page, comment on the text below:  (10 points)
V. Make a one-page presentation of the following topic: (10 points)

Source: the authors' own Midterm exam simulation instructions

**Figure 2. Excerpt from the Midterm Evaluation grid**

Full name of the evaluator: ………………………………………
Full name of the test taker: ………………………………………          **Mark: … points out of 60 points**
Group no.: ………………………………………
Date: ………………………………………

**GENERAL LINGUISTICS** - Midterm exam simulation
**EVALUATION GRID**

- Evaluators award points for any correct answer, be it worded as in the Answer key provided by the teacher or with the test taker's own words, on condition that the meaning in the Answer key is preserved
- The maximum number of points awarded for the test answer is 60 points: 50 points for the answers + 10 points ex officio
- Fractional points can be awarded as specified in the table below; when awarding fractional points, the evaluator has to judge the degree of task completion – for instance, a task half completed gets half the points, a task 75% completed gets 75% of the points and so on. When evaluating the grammatical accuracy or punctuation and spelling, evaluators have to judge the amount of errors against the entire passage in Exam Items IV and V.
- Student evaluators need to fill in the last column with at least the points awarded for each item and sub-component; other observations and comments are also welcome, to help test takers understand the evaluation results.

| Exam item | Points | Teacher's Observations | Student evaluator's observations |
|---|---|---|---|

Source: the authors' own Midterm exam evaluation grid

In what concerns the List of tests to be evaluated by each student, for each of the test takers, it contained the names of the peers whose tests the former had to evaluate. More specifically, each test taker was assigned three tests to evaluate: one's own and two answer sheets uploaded by peers. Thus, every test-taking student had the opportunity to: evaluate oneself and receive feedback from two peers, as well as to evaluate oneself and provide feedback to two peers. Consequently, the activity provided opportunity for increasing one's awareness of the possibility of marking variation arising due to the subjectivity of the evaluator (subjectivity cannot be avoided, only minimized by resorting to the detailed Answer key provided by the teachers). This increased awareness can help students cope with exam results that differ from their own perception of the quality of the exam answers submitted.

Before describing the findings of this elaborated activity, we would like to also mention that the teachers tried to mitigate potential deterrents for student participation by informing them that, on the one hand, the marks awarded (by themselves and peers) for the midterm simulation did not count towards the final mark and that, on the other hand, teachers may decide to grant extra points for the marking activity performed after the midterm exam simulation, function of the conscientiousness with which the task is performed. Naturally, the teachers informed students that opportunity will be

provided for discussion of both strengths and weaknesses in solving exam tasks and the marking task so that both exam-taking and evaluation skills would be enhanced.

*2.2 Findings*

This section refers to aspects such as: the number of participating students (i.e. of students who accepted the challenge of taking the Midterm exam and of acting as self- and peer evaluators), comparison of marks awarded by self/peers/the teacher for the midterm exam answers, student feedback on the procedure. In the current section, we discuss the implications of student performance and feedback on the midterm simulation activity in relation to the final exam.

Figure 3 below illustrates the number of participating students: out of the 65 first-year students enrolled in the AML programme in the 2021-2022 academic year, only 39 (i.e. 60%) decided to participate in the midterm exam simulation. Among them, 39 (i.e. all participating students) assumed the role of student test takers, whereas 37 assumed the role of student evaluators (i.e. not all test takers also wanted to be test evaluators).
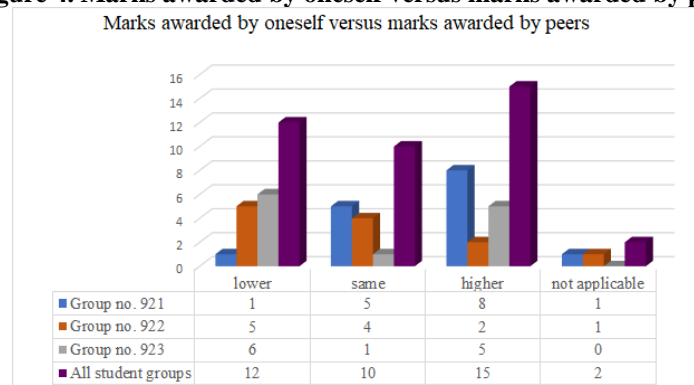
**Figure 3. Student participation in the midterm simulation activity**
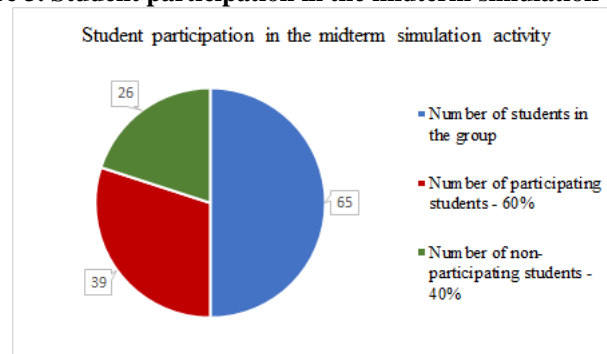


Source: the authors' own analysis

Figure 4 compares the marks awarded by students to oneself with those awarded by peers. We notice that 12 students awarded themselves lower marks than peers – 31%, 10 students awarded themselves the same marks as peers – 26%, 15 students awarded themselves higher marks than peers – 38%, while 2 students did not award themselves any mark – 5%. Hence, the majority of students (64%) awarded themselves the same or higher marks than peers, whereas a minority of students (31%) awarded themselves lower marks than peers.

**Figure 4. Marks awarded by oneself versus marks awarded by peers**



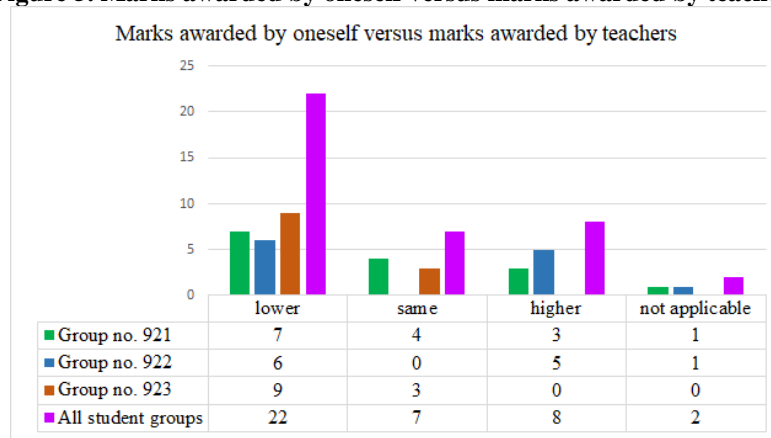| | lower | same | higher | not applicable |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| Group no. 921 | 1 | 5 | 8 | 1 |
| Group no. 922 | 5 | 4 | 2 | 1 |
| Group no. 923 | 6 | 1 | 5 | 0 |
| All student groups | 12 | 10 | 15 | 2 |

Source: the authors' own analysis

Figure 5 compares the marks awarded by students to oneself with those awarded by the teachers. Thus, 22 students awarded themselves lower marks than teachers – 56%, 7 students awarded themselves the same marks as teachers – 18%, 8 students awarded themselves higher marks than

teachers – 21%, whereas 2 students did not award themselves any mark – 5%. We notice that the majority of students (56%) awarded themselves lower marks than the teacher, while a minority of students awarded themselves the same or higher marks than teachers (39%).

**Figure 5. Marks awarded by oneself versus marks awarded by teachers**



| | lower | same | higher | not applicable |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| Group no. 921 | 7 | 4 | 3 | 1 |
| Group no. 922 | 6 | 0 | 5 | 1 |
| Group no. 923 | 9 | 3 | 0 | 0 |
| All student groups | 22 | 7 | 8 | 2 |

Source: the authors' own analysis

At the end of the self- and peer evaluation procedure, teachers and students exchanged views on the benefits and challenges of the activity during in-class informal discussions. Table 1 below summarizes the positive and 'not-so-positive' outcomes of the midterm simulation and evaluation activity. On the one hand, both students and teachers have expressed their satisfaction with regard to the fact that the midterm simulation activity has led them towards better understanding of not only exam-related issues (item design, evaluation procedures, manner of preparing for an exam), but also subject-related issues (content to be learned/ taught, manner of learning/ teaching, the purpose of this particular discipline in the curriculum). On the other hand, both students and teachers have referred to the challenges posed by the midterm simulation activity (the complexity and thoroughness of the (self-)evaluation procedures) and by the discipline itself (highly theoretical in nature, General Linguistics seems impractical, thus 'scary', hence the need to contextualize concepts and applications).

| | Positive outcomes | Not so positive outcomes |
|---|---|---|
| **For students:** | Raising awareness of:<br>• exam items,<br>• evaluation criteria and procedures,<br>• oneself – learning habits, evaluating one's work against peers/ teachers,<br>• peers – learning habits, test taking habits, (potentially different) understanding of concepts and skills exposed to during the semester,<br>• the teacher – rationale behind the overall objectives of the discipline, the topics covered, the way they are supposed to be studied and tested,<br>• the evaluation aspects of the teaching profession. | Awestricken by:<br>• the overall objectives of the discipline, the topics covered, the way they are supposed to be studied and tested,<br>• the complexity and thoroughness of the (self-)evaluation procedures. |
| **For teachers:** | Raising awareness of:<br>• oneself – teaching habits, (need for more) clarity in presenting concepts, tasks etc., | Raising awareness of:<br>• oneself – the need to refine content and manner of delivery for the General Linguistics topics, as well |

| | | |
|---|---|---|
| | • peers – consultation on content and manner of delivery<br>• the students – at least some seem to have genuinely benefited from the midterm simulation both in terms of subsequent seminar involvement and in terms of final exam results! | as for the self-evaluation procedure,<br>• the students – heterogeneity of motivations, dedication, personalities/ learning styles etc. |

To sum up, this section has described the results obtained during the midterm simulation activity. Since it was conducted voluntarily, a good chunk (40%) of the first year AML Bachelor students taking General Linguistics decided not to participate. Out of the participating students, all acted as test-takers, and the wide majority also acted as test-evaluators. When comparing marks awarded by students and those awarded by teachers (see figures 4 and 5 above), we notice that the majority of student evaluators award themselves the same or higher marks than peers, but lower marks than teachers. In one respect, our results are in line with those obtained by Sadler & Good (2006), whose students generally awarded higher marks to themselves ("self-grading students tended to overgrade", p. 16). In the other respect, our results are contrary to those obtained by Sadler & Good (2006), whose students generally awarded themselves similar marks to their teachers ("Self-grades appear to show a highly correlated pattern with teacher grades", p. 17). With respect to the feedback received via informal discussions with the students and teachers, we have seen that both positive and not-so-positive aspects were mentioned about not only the midterm simulation and evaluation activity but also about the discipline itself. As regards the ability of solving exam tasks, students highlighted the need to prepare more and said that the activity helped them realize the importance of reading and learning the materials throughout the semester, as it is too much information to digest in just a few days before the final exam; moreover, students said that the midterm simulation motivated them to get down to work and prepare for the final exam more seriously as the midterm was actually a sample of the items they would have for the General Linguistics final examination. As regards the ability to evaluate oneself (and peers), students said that the self- and peer evaluation activity increased their awareness of what is expected of them to do so as to perform better when solving final exam items.

*2.3 Discussion*

The feedback obtained from students at the end of the midterm simulation and evaluation activity seems to confirm the teachers' empirical observation that midterms contribute to enhancing end-of-term exam performance by raising students' awareness of both exam items and evaluation procedures. However, students saying this is one thing, acting upon it is another.

To test the student and teacher impressions, the authors went a step forward and analysed students' behavior with respect to exam preparation before and after the midterm, as well as the correlation between midterm and final exam marks.

Figure 6 below tries to answer the following question: Did the self-/peer evaluation activity stimulate students to prepare for future seminars (by doing their homework)? On the one hand, out of the *participating* students: 26 students did the same or more homework after the midterm simulation – 67%, and 13 students did less homework after the midterm simulation – 33%. On the other hand, out of the *non-participating* students: 1 student did more homework after the midterm simulation – 4%, while 25 students did less homework after the midterm simulation – 96%. Overall: 27 students did the same or more homework after the midterm simulation – 42%, whereas 38 students did less homework after the midterm simulation – 58%. Consequently, we may say that the midterm evaluation indeed motivated *participating* students to do more homework and thus prepare for the final exam[3], but had little effect overall.

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[3] By way of a reminder: all (midterm and final) exam items were taken from seminar handouts, the latter being structured as follows: objectives, activities, possible topics for student research, possible topics for the final evaluation, further reading. Students were informed about the fact that exam items would be taken from the
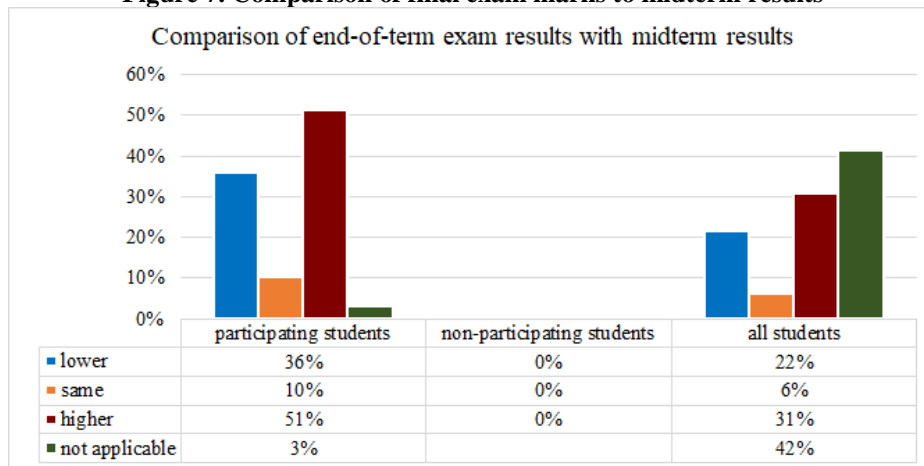
**Figure 6. Student behavior with respect to seminar assignment before and after the midterm**
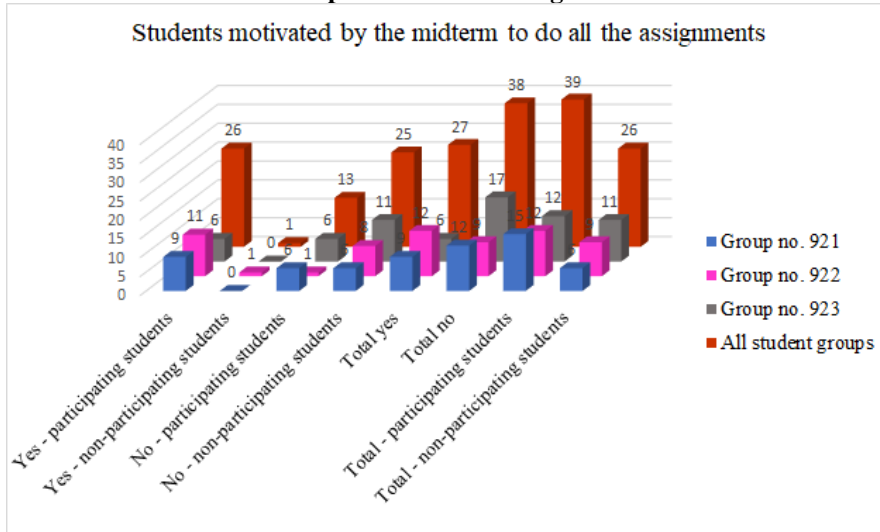


Source: the authors' own analysis

Figure 7 compares final exam results (teacher-awarded marks) to midterm results (expressed as an average between self-, peer- and teacher- awarded marks). We would like to stress the fact that exam items and evaluation procedures were the same for the midterm simulation and for the final exam, so as to make the comparison possible. Out of the *participating* students, 61% obtained the same or higher final exam marks than midterm marks (10% and 51%, respectively); there was no way to compare non-participating students' midterm to final exam results since midterm results were missing. Overall, 37% of all students obtained the same or higher final exam marks than midterm marks (6% and 31%, respectively).

**Figure 7. Comparison of final exam marks to midterm results**



| | participating students | non-participating students | all students |
|---|---|---|---|
| ■ lower | 36% | 0% | 22% |
| ■ same | 10% | 0% | 6% |
| ■ higher | 51% | 0% | 31% |
| ■ not applicable | 3% | | 42% |

Source: the authors' own analysis

To sum up, this section has briefly investigated whether students' declared increased motivation to study more throughout the semester in order to be better prepared for the final exam is indeed reflected in their performance throughout the remainder of the semester and in their final exam results. On the one hand, we have seen that 67% of participating students and 4% of non-participating students did the same or more homework during the remainder of the semester. On the other hand, 61% of participating students obtained the same or higher final exam grades than midterm grades. All in all, it could be said that the majority of participating students did in fact benefit from deciding to act as both test-takers and test-evaluators. However, teachers still need to find ways to stimulate all

seminar handouts from the very first seminar and they became fully aware of this on the occasion of the midterm simulation.

students to get more engaged during seminars and prepare more for the midterm and final exams, and thus deal with the non-participating students' lack of interest/ motivation.

## 3. Conclusions

The aim of the present paper has been to discuss the opportunities and challenges of involving students in self- and peer assessment. We first briefly referred to a selection of articles on aspects related to key concepts, incentives for student self-/ peer evaluation, short- and long-term benefits, sensitive issues that may arise in the process. Next, we provided data on the complex procedures undertaken by the authors with a view to developing the self- and peer evaluation skills of Applied Modern Language students from the Bucharest University of Economic Studies - ASE, Romania. Based on a corpus of 332 midterm- and final exam-related documents (instructions, exam sheets, answer keys, evaluation grid, exam answers, evaluation sheets filled in by students and teachers, distribution of exam answers to students), we arrived at the conclusion that getting students involved in self- and peer assessment is beneficial both for (participating) students and for teachers. Among other things, students benefit in that they enhance their exam-taking skills, as well as in that their awareness of self/peer/teacher evaluation conduct leads to improved performance in the classroom and in final exams. Furthermore, teachers benefit from students' involvement in self-/ peer evaluation as the latter contribute to the former's understanding of the strengths and weaknesses of their course design and teaching/ testing practices.

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