There are various ways of learning. I would like to listen more to the voices of the learners as individual persons, not only as students of English. I have decided to introduce portfolios into my classes because they can make language learning more visible. One of the perceived advantages of portfolios for students is that they can become autonomous learners. Autonomy, which can be a general educational goal, has become a key concept in language education.

This paper will explore how portfolios influence the students’ autonomy in my teaching context, discussing the findings from a case study. The study, therefore, employs qualitative ethnographic methods. Since I, as a teacher-researcher, introduced portfolios into my English class in April, this is a presentation of progress results from a one-year classroom research.

1. Portfolio and autonomy
1.1 Definition of portfolios
The most frequently cited definition of portfolios was developed by Paulson, Paulson, and Meyer (1991: 60):

‘A purposeful collection of student work that exhibits the student's efforts, progress, and achievements in one or more areas. The collection must include student participation in selecting contents, the criteria for selection, the criteria for judging merit, and evidence of student self-reflection ... A portfolio ... provides a complex and comprehensive view of student performance in context.’

The overall purpose of portfolios is to enable the student to demonstrate to others learning and progress. The greatest value of portfolios is that, in building them, students can become active participants in the learning process and its assessment.

1.2 Advantages of portfolios
Listed here are some advantages of using portfolios.

Portfolios
• can be an efficient tool for demonstrating learning.
• can develop awareness of own learning.
• can improve motivation and involvement in learning.
• can give a profile of various learner abilities.
• can provide opportunity for student-teacher dialogue.
• can match assessment to instruction.

Portfolios can help to make the language learning process more visible to learners, developing their capacity for reflection and self-assessment, and thus enabling them gradually to assume more and more responsibility for their own learning. In this way, it serves as a tool for promoting the development of learner autonomy.

1.3 Definition of autonomy

Autonomy is an elusive notion that is somewhat difficult to get hold of, because it can take different forms for different individuals. It is usually defined as the capacity to take charge of, or responsibility for, one’s own learning. Benson (2001) defines it as ‘the capacity to take control of one’s own learning’, because the construct of ‘control’ seems to be more open to investigation. He also writes, ‘there is no single best method of developing it’.

The basic ideas of portfolios fit into the constructive views of learning. According to these views, students should be active agents of their learning, and learning is a product of the learner’s own actions. In effective learning, students take control over their learning in order to reach their goals.

1.4 Essential elements of portfolios

• cover letter (It should summarize the evidence of a student’s learning and progress.)
• table of contents
• entries: core (items which students have to include) & optional (items of student’s choice)
• dates (on all entries, to facilitate proof of growth over time)
• drafts and revised versions
• reflections (For each item, a brief rationale for choosing the item should be included.)

1.5 Portfolio development process (Danielson & Abrutyn, 1997)

(1) collection: save artifacts that represent the day-to-day results of learning
(2) selection: review and evaluate the artifacts saved, and identify those that demonstrate achievement of specific standards or goals
(3) reflection: reflect on the significance of the artifacts chosen for the portfolio in relationship to specific learning goals
(4) projection: compare the reflections to the standards/goals and performance indicators, and set learning goals for the future
1.6 Lessons from some case studies (Guard, Richter & Waller, 2002)
   - balance between prescription and student choice
     While clear criteria are important for students to develop their products, making choices and being creative are essential motivational factors.
   - scaffolding as steps towards autonomous learning
     A model is recommended, which starts with a high level of support and then gradually withdraws scaffolding.
   - workload and students’ responsibility for learning
     Developing students’ self-evaluation skills as part of learner autonomy, can be seen as way towards decreasing the teacher workload and increasing students’ responsibility for their learning process.
   - ‘real world’ connections
     If students can choose their own topics, so that the tasks relate to the world of the students and have meaningful processes and outcomes.

2. Research
2.1 Research question
   I would like to explore how portfolios influence the development of the students’ autonomy in my teaching context, employing qualitative research methods. I have just finished the first term, about three months, so in this paper I will present the progress results.

2.2 Teaching context
   - EFL situation.
   - My senior high school, a boys’ school, is affiliated with Waseda University, so the students can go on to the university without taking an entrance examination.
   - ‘Reading (a)’ is a required one-year course for the 3rd-grade students.
   - For this subject, 9 teachers use the same textbook, a book written by Bob Greene, an American columnist.
   - The students take the term examinations in common, and a term exam accounts for 80% of their marks.
   - Each teacher decides on the rest, 20%, by their own modes of assessment.
   - There are 26 students enrolled in the class.

2.3 Course objectives
   Considering these contextual factors and the students’ motivation, I set the general objective for this course as follows:
to develop the reading skills which will be needed at the university level (= Waseda University)
This comes from my hope that they can develop some advanced reading skills (integrated with writing skills as well) other than literal comprehension, and that they can become autonomous, in other words, they can build the foundations of life-time English learning.

I also set eight specific objectives as follows, which are selection or assessment criteria as well:

1. to understand the meanings of words/phrases
2. to understand the meanings of each sentence
3. to understand information at the discourse level → to summarize passages in English
4. to understand the writer’s intentions and express one’s own ideas in English
5. to utilize a variety of information tools/resource materials, such as dictionaries, Internet, etc.
6. to deepen one’s own interest
7. to take responsibility for one’s own learning → reflection, arrangement, etc
8. Each student sets his own goal.

2.4 Findings
Different kinds of work completed during the course are included into one package and closely related. In this paper, I will consider briefly some findings for each specific objective.

[objective (1), (2)]
These objectives aim at basic reading skills. The students’ portfolios show ‘learning styles’ for vocabulary and grammar, ‘motivation’, ‘attitude’, ‘efforts to improve’, and so on. They vary from just word-to-word/sentence-to-sentence translation for rote memorization, to writing down inflections, parsing sentences, and so on. Besides, the selected contents seem to be influenced by so-called ‘their language levels’.

(cf. Ex 1)
I give my students such a word list for each chapter. They use it as they like. This student took a lot of notes, and made his own arrangement, using different-colored pens.

(cf. Ex 2)
This student wrote his Japanese translation, paragraph by paragraph. He took an active approach to the task.
[objective (3), (4)]

These objectives aim at more advanced reading skills than literal comprehension. Such practices as skimming and scanning can be conducted during the class, so the students are required to write the summary of each story and write their ideas in English (or in Japanese if they feel frustrated) at home.

The portfolios exhibit the students’ efforts, progress and achievements over a period of time. The main emphasis being on effort, content and fluency, accuracy alone is not the most important criteria for objective (3) and (4).

Many of the students feel these challenging tasks too much burden, probably because they are quite divorced from the term test items. However, most of them feel such tasks are very useful for understanding the stories better and motivating. These tasks can also facilitate students’ understanding of the relationship that exists among reading, writing, and thinking.

(cf. Ex 3)
Above, the students write their summary. Below, they write their own idea of the story. Like many other students, this student wrote a summary in English, but he was not ready for writing his idea in English.

(cf. Ex 4)
I used this sheet for discussing ‘key words for summary’ in a group work. Learning from others, which is related with objective (5), is an effective way of learning, so I introduced some group work in the process of discussing summaries. This student reflected well on what he had achieved and what remained to be achieved.

[objective (5)]
The students are expected to learn with the help of available resources and materials: not only English-Japanese dictionaries, but also other dictionaries, reference books, Internet, and so on. The portfolios exhibit the student’s own choice and interests.

[objective (6)]
This objective or criteria was very confusing to some students. In the beginning, I meant ‘to deepen one’s own interest in some topic related with the textbook’, but some students understood differently. I should have made the objective clearer. During the final conference, we decided to delete this criterion from the assessment.

[objective (7)]
In a Japanese EFL context, there has been little focus on this objective. Self-assessment is fundamental to the processes of planning, monitoring and evaluating learning, which means that it lies at the heart of learner reflection and learner autonomy.
With time and practice, reflective thinking will become increasingly automatic.

I have given my students, for raising their metacognitive awareness, as many chances as possible to reflect on what they did, and some opportunities for self-assessment.

Some students rewrote their previous summaries in English, and some students tried organizing their portfolios appropriately for easy retrieval. Some also invested a lot of time in the visual design of their work.

(cf. Ex 5)
For this student, reflection seems to be getting automatic. After receiving his scored quiz, he wrote down his reflection, ‘Next time I [will] do my best to get full marks.’

(cf. Ex 6)
I sometimes give these kinds of reflection sheets. This sheet showed this student tried to assess his learning products and process with some evidence.

[objective (8)]
In addition to studying the English language, a main idea of the portfolio introduction is to promote learner-centered learning. Teachers want their students to learn to set their own goals and to assess their work and learning.

For objective (8), The students ‘set a goal’, ‘collect’ (or note down progress made), ‘select’, ‘reflect’, ‘project’ or ‘produce examples of work which can be kept in one place’. Portfolios also show their development in ‘time management’, ‘research skills’, and so on.

They set a variety of goals: for example, ‘increasing vocabulary’, ‘understanding complicated sentence structures with concrete examples’, ‘listening to the tapes with the logging of activities’, ‘understanding American culture more’, and so on.

(cf. Ex 7)
This student’s goal is increasing his vocabulary, so he tried to write down as many related words as possible.

(cf. Ex 8)
This student’s goal is understanding American culture better, so he studied as many cultural topics as possible related to the textbook, using the information through the Internet.

3. Discussion
Portfolio assessment can offer new possibilities for making some of language learning more visible to students and teachers. Language learning involves various
kinds of students’ personal properties and their beliefs. Such properties and beliefs, which can be inferred from the students’ observable performance in their portfolios, are crucial for learner autonomy.

Careful structuring of the portfolio work leads learners to take control over their independent learning. Introducing my students to the portfolio has involved them in the planning, implementation and evaluation of their learning, and developed their capacity for reflection and self-assessment, thus making them more autonomous.

At the end of the term, I asked my students their opinions of portfolios. Most of the positive reactions are related to the overall concept of portfolio as a highly useful revision tool, as follows:

- I know what I still need to learn.
- It helps me see progress in learning.
- It stimulates me to participate.

Most of the students seem to have taken charge of their new learner role actively and responsibly. However, there are also some negative reactions towards the portfolio approach, as follows:

- Portfolios take a lot of time, trouble, and space.
- Portfolios are too much burden with too many objectives.
- Portfolios are not for me because I am lazy and bad at organizing them.
- Portfolios are a form of coercion into doing something.
- I hate self-assessment, by which he means self-advertisement for better marks.

I would like to summarize the advantages of using portfolios, from my case study, as follows:

- Portfolios provide a concrete display of the learner’s best work and the learner’s development.
- Portfolios encourage dialogue and collaboration between students and their teachers.
- Students and their teachers can share a tool for reflection on learning goals.
- Teachers can obtain multidimensional assessment information over time.

When using a portfolio, one of the important activities is a teacher-student conference. It is a good opportunity for students to reflect on their own learning, and for teachers to give some advice or feedback, identifying the strengths and weaknesses. To observe process, the development of portfolios has to be monitored at regular intervals during the course of study. The teacher consequently has an important function as a resource person for students’ reflective learning.
While portfolios offer a lot of advantages, the greatest weaknesses are the increased workload and decreased instructional time for the teachers. Grading the portfolios also proved difficult and frustrating. Therefore, in addition to the actual grade, the teacher have to give a more comprehensive verbal assessment of the portfolio, focusing on its strengths and pointing out possible areas of improvement. Actually, the students can actively participate in the evaluation process collaboratively with their teachers.

I would like to continue this research, with the following encouraging quotation in my mind:

‘A fuller understanding of the nature of autonomy in language learning, the practices that best foster it among learners and their relation to language acquisition is a goal that we may approach through the accumulation and analysis of research focused on problems of day-to-day practice. Action research grounded in the professional concerns of practising teacher-researchers can contribute much towards the achievement of this goal.’

(Benson, 2001: 225)

References
Appendix

Ex 1)

A woman who is a high school teacher lived in the Chicago suburb. Her mother had been suffering from cancer was not doing well. So she drove to her mother.

In the conversation of the two, suddenly the mother said she would want to see her, and the two of them cried and kissed each other. The daughter was afraid of missing the mother and she might not be able to see her again.

Finally the time has come. The mother died in the children's eyes. At first after that, she would think of the mother and sometimes cried. But recently, she will spend a day without thinking the mother. She thinks it's amazing and says "It's the life and death of it."
Ex 5)

Ex 6)

Ex 7)

Ex 8)