

# **A Case Study of Developing Autonomy in a Portfolio-Oriented English Class at a Japanese Senior High School**

## **--- Focusing on two students' portfolios**

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### **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 poster session I am presenting the progress results, focusing on two students' portfolios.

### **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.

### **3 Course objectives**

Considering these contextual factors and the students' motivation, I set the general objective for this course: 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 8 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.*

#### **4 Findings**

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.

Different kinds of work completed during the course are included into one package and closely related. In this poster, I will consider briefly some findings for each specific objective, focusing on two students' portfolios.

##### **4.1 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'.

##### **4.2 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).

Some students feel these challenging tasks too much burden, but some feel such tasks are very useful for understanding the stories better and motivating. This task can also facilitate students' understanding of the relationship that exists among reading, writing, and thinking. One of the problems is that these tasks are quite divorced from

the term test items.

#### **4.3 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.

#### **4.4 Objective (6)**

This objective or criteria was very confusing to some students. 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.

#### **4.5 Objective (7)**

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.

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. And, reflective thinking will become increasingly automatic, with time and practice.

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.

#### **4.6 Objective (8)**

The portfolio approach wants students to have the freedom and power of making decisions concerning their studying. 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.