

A Case Study of Using Portfolios to Make Language Learning More Visible at a Japanese Senior High School

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I decided to introduce portfolios into an English class because I would like to listen more to the voices of the learners as individual persons, not only as students of English. Portfolios are not merely a collection of best practice, but are also intended to document the learning process and involve students in actively reflecting on their learning.

It is said that portfolios can make language learning more visible. The purpose of this study is to explore how portfolios influence the students' learning and to what extent they can make language learning more visible in my teaching context. In this study, which employs a qualitative ethnographic methodology, the subjects are 26 third-grade students enrolled in a reading course at a private senior high school in Japan.

1. Portfolio

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.'

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 Essential elements of portfolios

Portfolios differ in several ways from folders. Unlike folders,

- portfolios have some clear instructional purposes.
- students participate in choosing what goes in their portfolios, using selection criteria.
- portfolios are evaluated holistically with evaluation criteria.
- portfolios illustrate growth.
- portfolios are continually updated.
- portfolios include written student reflections.

The following elements are included in portfolios:

- cover letter which summarizes 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.)

1.3 Portfolio development process

The portfolio development process covers the following stages (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
(5) presentation: share the portfolio with peers and receive feedback

1.4 Portfolio types

A working portfolio, also called a process portfolio, contains a variety of pieces of work with all their versions, documenting the whole learning process.

At the end of the course, for their final showcase portfolios, the students are asked to choose two or three of their pieces of work and state their criteria for selection. The showcase portfolio thus usually represents the students' best work showing their strengths. Many of the students emphasize the amount of work and effort, the working process, and learning outcomes as well as the personal relevance of the piece.

1.5 Lessons from some case studies

Guard, Richter and Waller (2002) shows the following points that are commonly seen among some previous case studies:

- 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

Many previous studies show that portfolios can help to make some of the language learning more visible to students and teachers. In this paper, I would like to explore how portfolios influence the students' learning and to what extent they can make language learning more visible in my teaching context.

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 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 take responsibility for one's own learning --- reflection, arrangement, etc
- (7) Each student sets his own goal.
- (8) Each student sets his own goal.

I set the objectives (7) and (8) because I wanted my students to take greater responsibility for their own work and to have the freedom and power to make decisions concerning their learning.

2.4 Findings from the students' final showcase portfolios

The students' final showcase portfolios were analyzed qualitatively in terms of what items were seen and why they were chosen. The findings included: various learning styles, capacity for reflection and self-assessment, motivation and involvement in learning, awareness of own learning, and so on.

Everyone's portfolio was a unique picture of that person's learning, reflection and development in the course, so no two portfolios were exactly alike. Different kinds of work completed during the course were included into one package and closely related. In this paper, I will consider the following three points which I found from the students' final showcase portfolios.

[1] *Portfolios can give a profile of various learner's abilities and interests.*

The objectives (1) and (2) aim at basic reading skills. The portfolios showed the student's learning styles for vocabulary and grammar, motivation, attitude, efforts to improve, and so on. They varied 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 seemed to be influenced by so-called 'their language levels'.

As for the 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 exhibited the student's own choice and interests.

[2] *Portfolios can exhibit learner's efforts, progress, and achievements over a period of time.*

The objectives (3) and (4) aim at more advanced reading skills than literal comprehension. Such practices as skimming and scanning were conducted during the class, so the students were 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 exhibited the students' efforts, progress and achievements over a period of time. The main emphasis being on effort, content and fluency, accuracy alone was not the most important criteria for the objectives (3) and (4).

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

[3] *Portfolios can develop learner's awareness of their own learning.*

In a Japanese EFL context, there has been little focus on the objective (6). 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 gave 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.

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 the objectives (7) and (8), the students set their own goal, collected (or wrote down progress made), selected, reflected, and projected. Portfolios also showed 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.

2.5 Reactions towards portfolios

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.
- It is very useful for studying for the exams.
- It helps me retrieve information easily.

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.)

Many of the students considered the portfolio-based course a positive and encouraging experience. However, I must admit that it did not suit all my students.

3. Discussion

3.1 Interaction (Conference)

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 was monitored at regular intervals during the course of study. The teacher has an important function as a resource person for students' reflective learning.

A student-student conference is also said to be an important element in the portfolio approach. Actually, I did not set any meetings among the students about the portfolio itself because my students tended to think that their own portfolios were very personal.

However, learning from others, or sharing with their peers is an effective way of learning, so I introduced some group work in the process of writing summaries. Some class time was devoted to discussing what good summaries are, so I just gave them some advice. Portfolios assisted in creating a collaborative climate.

3.2 Assessment

At the end of each term, the portfolio was assessed by the teacher (me) according to the criteria discussed at the beginning of the course. The main emphasis was on the effort and involvement of the student. The students actively participated in the evaluation process collaboratively with me.

Evaluating the portfolios proved difficult and frustrating. It is probably because a scoring guide called 'rubric' was not complete. How can I transform all that work, effort, and creativity into a single grade? Even though it took a lot of time, the narrative assessment was considered very important both by the teacher and students.

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.

3.3 Workload

While portfolios can offer a lot of advantages, the greatest weaknesses seem to be the increased workload and decreased instructional time for the teachers. Workload has been a concern raised in many case studies. Many previous studies recommend a model that starts with a high level of support and then gradually withdraws scaffolding. It is a way towards decreasing the teacher workload and increasing students' responsibility for their learning process.

I didn't want to reduce instructional time, so I had an interview with my students after school, focusing on developing their ability to manage time, to gain confidence in their abilities, and to assess their performance. During the first term, I gave feedback at regular intervals, but during the second term, I tried to become a facilitator or counselor of learning. Actually, some of my students, who thought that they needed much more guide or control, preferred teacher-directed teaching.

4. Conclusion

Portfolios helped to make the language learning process more visible to the teacher (me). The portfolios provided me with a more significant picture of the student's growth and some useful data for instructional decision-making.

Portfolios also helped 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. Introducing my students to the portfolio 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. Portfolios facilitated students' understanding of the relationship among reading, writing and thinking.

Despite some difficulties, I found the portfolio approach a very positive experience.

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