

PORTFOLIO TRAINING: GETTING LEARNERS ACTIVELY INVOLVED

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Abstract: *This article aims at helping teachers make effective use of language portfolios in an EFL/ESL context. This is through proposing and making clear the steps of integrating them into their teaching and the way learners' training into their use needs to be conducted to promote their reflective and autonomous learning. These range from identifying the students' readiness to autonomous learning to teachers' assessment of students' portfolios and their evaluation of this process. It is worth noting here that, this training process is being carried out on a sample of undergraduate students at the department of English of Abdelhamid Ibn Badis University of Mostaganem, Algeria.*

Key words: language portfolios, EFL/ESL, autonomous learning

Introduction

The last decade has witnessed an array of changes in language learning goals, requirements as well as perspectives. The prevailing tendency is to teach learners how to learn in order to enable them to cope with new technologies and learning environments. Indeed, assessment of learners needs to contribute to their learning instead of merely providing data on their accomplishment or learning outcomes. Therefore, a variety of assessment methods or what has been called alternative assessments has been advocated. Language portfolios are among these methods which are gaining more popularity and support among teachers, teacher-trainers, learners, stakeholders, material designers, educational boards, and researchers (Mitchell, 1992). They can provide opportunities for learners' involvement and reflection over their learning, thus promoting their autonomous learning. To develop learners' autonomy, conscious awareness of portfolios' use is an important key for the achievement of this process because it involves decision making and taking. Hence, implementing language portfolios requires training learners about its process. To clarify more what constitutes this training, this paper

suggests a portfolio training model which a sample of undergraduate students has been undertaking within an EFL context. Before describing its stages, I have attempted first to account for the concept of learner autonomy, learner portfolio, and its importance in language learning.

Definition of Learner Autonomy

In the field of political philosophy, the notion of personal autonomy has always been regarded as a basic human right because it refers to "the freedom and ability to shape our lives" (Young, 1986, p. 81). Hence, in learning and educational settings, autonomy has been equated with different meanings. This concept was first introduced into the language teaching in the late 1960s through the adult education movement in Europe and North America. Within this movement, Holec (1981), who piloted many autonomous language learning projects, provided the first definition of autonomy. In his terms, autonomy is "the ability to take charge of one's own learning" (Holec, 1981, p. 3). Several researchers have displayed their consensus upon this definition. For instance, Benson (2001) described autonomy as "the capacity to control one's own learning" (p. 7). Similarly, Aoki

(1999) broadened this definition into “a capacity to take control of one’s own learning in the service of one’s perceived needs and aspirations” (p. 4).

However, if this autonomy is considered as a capacity or ability, there is a need to account for what constitutes this ability in order to figure out how taking charge of one’s learning can be implemented. According to Little (1991) autonomy is a “capacity for detachment, critical reflection, decision making and independent action” (p. 40). It follows that autonomous learners are able to reflect on their learning, take decision over their learning, and depend on themselves to improve it. Indeed, Holec (1980) made clear such a decision process which a learner may involve in. According to him being able to control one’s learning means:

1. Determining the objectives.
2. Defining the contents and progressions.
3. Selecting methods and techniques to be used.
4. Monitoring the procedure of acquisition (rhythm, time, place) and evaluating what has been acquired. (Holec, 1980, p. 4)

Hence, for other views this capacity does not only imply a decision making process where learners are responsible for their learning, but it can be extended to include “an attitude to learning where the learner is prepared to take or does take responsibility for his own learning” (Dickinson, 1992, p. 330). To clarify this type of attitude, Dickinson (1993) identifies five characteristics of autonomous learners as follows:

1. They are able to identify what has been taught, i.e., what a teacher is doing and why he/she is doing that.
2. They set their own learning goals in collaboration with their teacher.
3. They have a rich repertoire of strategies and the confidence to select

and implement those that are effective to their learning

4. They can monitor their own use of learning strategies.

Thus, autonomous learners’ attitudes differ from the traditional mode of learning where learners depend entirely on their teacher, while their initiation, reflection and creativity in learning become stunted. Within this conception, learning is not a matter of memorization, “it is a constructive process that involves actively seeking meaning from events” (Candy, 1991, p. 271).

Nevertheless, a question which may be raised is whether this capacity or attitude to control one’s learning is natural or can be acquired. According to Holec (1981), Little (1999), and Littlewood (1996), autonomy is an ability which is not inborn but has to be acquired mostly by formal learning where learners are provided with the necessary tools which may help develop their autonomy. On the other hand, Benson (2003) opposed this view and claimed that autonomy cannot be taught but fostered in the classroom. Therefore, the question which needs to be addressed is not how to produce autonomous learners but rather how to build upon the autonomy which they already have (Benson, 2003). To provide more support for this claim, Aoki (1999) stated that “the core of learner autonomy is a psychological construct” (p. 144) between the learners’ feelings and their learning context. Indeed, the learners’ possession of knowledge and skills does not necessary pave the way to autonomous learning if they are not provided with a context which supports their feelings of autonomy. Thus, learners with regards to their possession of the necessary knowledge and skills need to feel motivated and self-efficacious to use such skills and knowledge effectively. As matter of fact, autonomy is not only a matter of skills and knowledge but it also

depends on learners' willingness and confidence to engage in its process as Littlewood (1996) noted

We can define an autonomous person as one who has an independent capacity to make and carry out the choices which govern his/her actions. This capacity depends on two main components: ability and willingness....ability depends on possessing both knowledge about the alternatives from which choices have to be made and the necessary skills for carrying out whatever choices seem most appropriate. Willingness depends on having both the motivation and the confidence to take responsibility for the choices required. (p. 428)

Thus, one accepts that autonomy can be fostered because it involves affective factors related to learning such as motivation, self-efficacy, etc. Meanwhile, possessing the necessary skills and knowledge to act independently in learning is deemed important to develop one's autonomy because the latter requires learners to build up a skill set that allows them to control their own learning (Reinders & Balcikanli, 2011). Accordingly, to train learners into such a process, teachers need to develop such skills and knowledge while handling with care affective factors within this process. To achieve this objective, effective tools need to be implemented among them language portfolios.

Learners' Language Portfolios: Rationality behind Their Use

Gillespie, Ford, Gillespie, and Leavell (1996) defined portfolios as "a purposeful, multidimensional process of collecting evidence that illustrates a student's accomplishments, efforts, and progress (utilizing a variety of authentic evidence) overtime" (p. 487). Indeed, portfolio is a collection of students' work (e. g, notes,

writing projects, audio-video recording, etc.) which reflects their development, achievement, interest, and motivation in a form of notebooks, box files, loose-leaf binders, scrapbooks (Read-Dickins & Gardner, 2000). Moreover, Collins (1992) described portfolio as "a container of collected evidence with a purpose. Evidence is documentation that can be used by one person or group of persons to infer another person's knowledge, skill, and/or disposition" (p. 452). Yet, portfolios can serve different purposes and defining them depends on their purpose and contents. They can be used to show growth over time (Cameron, Politano, MacNaughton, & Tate, 1997), to provide assessment of information that guides instructional decision-making (Gillespie et al., 1996), to show progress towards curriculum standards (Biggs, 1995), and/or to gather quantitative information for the purposes of assessment outside the classroom (Fritz, 2001).

Students' portfolios have been used as a powerful instrument for formative assessment or for assessment for learning and advocated by many researchers (e.g. De Fina, 1992; Micklo, 1997). Their flexibility and the in-depth involvement of students and choices these tools offer make students more likely to develop ownership and autonomy over their learning. Also, it has been shown that classrooms where portfolio assessment plays an important role are more student-centered, collaborative, and holistic than classrooms which has relied only on tests or more conventional forms of assessment (Genesee & Upshur, 1996).

In fact, research has shown that portfolios provide excellent opportunities for students' self-assessment (Genesee & Upshur, 1996) because they can be used to monitor their progress and make judgments about their own learning process (Julius, 2000). Indeed, portfolio development "provides not only a means

for internalizing learning at deeper level, but also a means for developing and/or refining higher order thinking skills” (Jones & Shelton, 2011, p. 25). Portfolios’ construction involves skills such as awareness of audience, awareness of personal learning needs, understanding of criteria of quality, the way in which quality is revealed, and the development of the skills necessary for the task completion (Yancey & Weiser, 1997).

Furthermore, when using portfolios an on-going feedback is provided where students are accompanied by criteria that describe their growth overtime and indicate what is required from them to achieve success. When students use criteria in the form of a rubric in which they describe their progress towards achievement, they are more able to assess and monitor their own learning and thus identify strengths and areas which need improvement (Joslin, 2002). On the other hand, when using scores alone, students who did not perform well remain unable to find how to improve their performance in the future (Joslin). In fact, using rubrics and assessing continuously one’s learning involves students’ talk about what needs to be improved, what was done well, and how they need to perform a given assignment.

Using portfolios as a self-assessment tool supports learning because it is not limiting feedback but rather increasing descriptive feedback and making it available to students. In doing so, it is also supporting teaching because it provides teachers with information on their students’ process of learning (i.e., their difficulties, needs, learning views and styles) as well as their teaching process (i.e., to what extent is it effective or not?). In this respect, Mullin (1998) stressed that portfolios provide teachers a new perspective in education because they can answer questions like: what kind of troubles do students have? Which activities are more effective or ineffective? What subjects are understood

and not understood? How efficient is the teaching process?

Despite such benefits, training learners about portfolios development remains crucial for achieving their objectives, mainly with learners who have never used them before. As Little (1999) points out, students do not become autonomous learners simply by being told that they are now in charge of their learning. Rather, they need to be trained in this process through using portfolios continuously along with their learning.

Training Students into Language Portfolios: The Process

Before implementing language portfolios there is need to clarify first the portfolio type, purpose, and expected audience. The language portfolio suggested within this context is a learning portfolio which intends to help students ‘learn how to learn’ through involving them in making and taking decisions over their learning process, assessing this process, and reflecting continuously over their progress as well as their learning needs and goals. This portfolio has been adapted from the European Language Portfolio, which contains three sections: the language biography, dossier, and passport). It covers two functions: reporting (a form of alternative assessment) and pedagogical functions (a reflective tool). It is a learning tool as well as a reflective tool, which aims at developing students’ autonomy in studying English as a foreign language. The developed students’ portfolios are to be assessed by the teacher who is the main audience. They will be also viewed by other students and teachers within the same university and may be viewed by their parents.

This language portfolio is integrated into the written expression course, and it concerns three existing groups of first year undergraduate students at the department

of English of Abdelhamid Ibn Badis University of Mostaganem, Algeria. These subjects have been selected for this experiment because the researcher aims at making portfolios' development a life-long experience which starts during their first year and persists along their studies at university, and can be extended well into their future profession. In addition to the intention of achieving such a long term goal, the portfolio process requires students' motivation and involvement in the process. Being enrolled in the first year, students are more likely to be motivated in studying the English language. Their beliefs and attitudes towards learning are more likely to be shaped by the teacher because they know a little or nothing about the university learning environment. As a result, resistance to engage in this process is unlikely to emerge.

The process of training these students about portfolio development involved the following stages:

1. Identifying the subjects' readiness for autonomous learning.
2. Raising their awareness of autonomous learning.
3. Introducing the portfolio content.
4. Checking how the subjects are proceeding with their use and providing continuous feedback.
5. Assessing their portfolios.
6. Evaluating the process.

Each step in the process is discussed below.

Identifying the Students' Readiness for Autonomous Learning

Identifying the students' readiness entailed finding out about the students' learning beliefs concerning the teacher's and students' roles at university and looking for their learning styles in learning English. In doing so, one attempted to know about the students' learning

autonomy, i.e., are they autonomous or are they in the process of its development or not? The aim behind making this attempt is also to identify their readiness for autonomous learning, so that the researcher can get an idea about how much awareness' raising is needed in this case. Therefore, two questionnaires were administered to the sample during the second week of studying. The first used instrument was the Learner Autonomy Questionnaire (Kashefian, 2002), while the second one was the researcher's own design.

In addition to these instruments, structured observations were also used in order to reveal the students' motivation and beliefs as well as attitudes in their learning process. These observations were conducted not only along the process of portfolio training but also before this process had started. Indeed, the two first weeks (from the 10th to 24th November) were devoted to these observations before the portfolios' implementation. When holding the first conference with them on the 26th of November, the subjects were asked about their beliefs concerning the role of the university teacher and their role as students. Besides the two questionnaires, observing and interviewing the subjects supported the aim of finding out about their autonomy and readiness to engage in its process.

Raising Their Awareness of Autonomous Learning

Before introducing the idea of portfolios one should bear in mind that because the students have never been introduced to these learning tools, nor have they been acquainted with autonomous learning approaches before, their resistance to the process was expected. For this reason, raising their awareness of the importance of being autonomous in learning and the role of portfolios in achieving this aim was crucial within this process. The awareness

raising stage within this study started during the third week of the study (i.e., on the 26th of November). On this day, a conference was held with all the three experimental groups and lasted for one hour and thirty minutes. The researcher started by asking the subjects questions about their feelings, opinions, and beliefs concerning studying at university. Then, she moved to asking them the following questions:

- According to you, what is the role of the teacher at university?
- Does it differ from that within middle or secondary schools?
- What have you noticed here? Are your teachers giving you everything you need within their courses?
- Do you find this acceptable (the teacher should facilitate your learning)?
- What is then the role of students?

Raising such questions created a debate in class where the researcher attempted to listen to their opinions, questions, and meanwhile understand how these students perceived things. In the light of the obtained feedback, the researcher explained both the teacher's and students' roles, the importance of being autonomous and developing the language portfolio. It is worth noting, that this awareness raising stage was taking place along the portfolio development. The researcher was always reminding the subjects of the importance of developing their portfolios, and showing commitment to their use, so that they get more autonomous in studying English. Observations were also conducted along this stage in order to reveal the subjects' reactions to and attitudes towards this process.

Introducing the Portfolio Content

Before introducing the portfolio content, the researcher asked the subjects whether they have used this tool during their previous learning experiences. They all answered that they have neither used it nor

heard about it before. Therefore, there was a need to familiarize them with the process of constructing or developing their portfolios because their ignorance of its mode may render it complex and demotivating process. The three sections of the student portfolio were introduced to them during the first conference. The objectives, content, and use of each section were explained. The first section 'the language biography' was sent to the students via emails in order to facilitate its access and encourage the students to use the internet for learning purposes. For the other sections 'the language dossier and passport,' they were given handouts which contained their objectives and instructions about their use. It is worth noting, that the portfolio's content was re-explained further during the lessons of written expression course because it was still unclear for some of them.

Along with such lessons, the subjects were also handed samples for suggested exercises, lessons, and tests. They were shown the criteria for selection and the need to justify the reason of their selected artifacts. To stimulate their interest in the process and clarify more what is expected from them within, the subjects were shown samples of the best produced portfolios of students of the previous year (2012-2013). The contents of such portfolios were discussed in groups and questions were raised concerning what needs to be done to achieve similar grades.

Checking How the Subjects Are Proceeding with Their Use and Providing Continuous Feedback

The researcher attempted to provide continuous feedback to the subjects through scheduled conferences and mostly along the taught lessons. Indeed, the first thirty minutes of each lesson was devoted to checking the students' portfolios by asking them questions such as: How are you doing with your portfolio? Are there

any questions, problems, or difficulties encountered with their development? The researcher went along the rows to see their portfolios and listen to their inquiries. Along this stage, one maintained the importance of keeping the portfolio up-to-date by completing its parts regularly, mentioning the date, time, and week of doing so. Emphasis was also put upon organization through separating each section and making clear each part of it. Justifying the inclusion of each artifact was stressed because it showed their reflection and aimed at achieving a reasonable selection based upon the preset criteria.

Furthermore, the researcher aimed at helping the students develop a liking for their portfolios in order to devote their commitment and concern to their accomplishment. They were often reminded of its benefits over their learning which could not be attained unless they liked this process. Along this stage, the researcher also attempted to motivate and encourage them to engage more in writing portfolios through praising them for their creativity, use of a particular strategy, or good selection of artifacts, besides pointing out to the mark which they will have for their portfolios.

As stated above, conferences were also used for the provision of this feedback.

1. The first conference on the 26th of November 2013 aimed at introducing them into the process and raising their awareness.
2. The second one took place on the 7th of January in which the researcher clarified the assessment criteria, provided them with the portfolio development checklists, and explained more the portfolio's content and construction process.
3. The third conference on the 20th of February attempted to find out about the students' reaction towards their marks of portfolios, their awareness of

their difficulties, and reasons of shortcomings, and their motivation to make further efforts to improve their portfolios. In this conference, the researcher sought for clarifying more what should be done and how to produce the intended portfolios. Additionally, new worksheets were handed to the students such as 'Feeling Good,' and 'My Progress Checklist.'

4. The fourth conference on the 15th of April concerned checking how the students' were getting along with their portfolios, especially for the new integrated parts.
5. The fifth conference was scheduled for the 8th of May, and it was devoted for listening to the students' difficulties, questions, or inquiries in relation to the portfolio process. During this conference, the researcher decided the deadline for submitting their portfolios for correction.

Assessing Their Portfolios

To assess the students' portfolios, the researcher developed a scoring rubric. It was based on the criteria upon which the portfolio was to be assessed. These criteria ranged from content to organization to presentation:

- Artifacts selection: Their support to the portfolio purpose, their organization, variety, clarity, and relevance (i.e., they can help students learn, understand the lessons and improve their English).
- Reflections: Their clarity, honesty, and completion of the assessment of the teaching contents and learning process and progress.
- The Portfolio: Completion of all sections respecting timelines, their organization, and creativity.
- Language Form: The use of grammar, spelling, punctuation, and capitalization rules.

Evaluating the Process

Within this investigation, the process of evaluating the students' portfolios included both product and process evaluation. That is, the researcher attempted to assess the product, i.e., the student portfolio through finding out which section(s) of the portfolio most of them did not accomplish and those which were completed successfully. In doing so, the researcher was trying to reveal to what extent their portfolios met the pre-set criteria for their development. Meanwhile, evaluation also concerned the process, i.e., how the students proceed with developing these learning tools. It took place along two stages. The first one was done after assessing their portfolios for the sake of revealing:

- Whether the students showed commitment to the process or not.
- What kinds of difficulties were apparent through their portfolios?
- To what extent they understood the researcher's feedback and instructions.
- Which group (among the participants) had really succeeded in the process?

Concerning the second stage, it was completed by the end of the first semester (two weeks after giving them back their assessed portfolios) through administering a questionnaire to the participants to fill in. Its objective was not only to look for the difficulties they were facing in developing and using their portfolios, but also to get an idea about their views and feelings concerning this process, including the teacher's explanation and guidance within.

Conclusion

Introducing language portfolios requires learners' awareness of their use and objectives targeted so that they can reflect over their learning through these tools. Using them as an assessment and learning tool entails involving in an organized and systematic process where learners'

involvement is required along with teachers' clear guidelines and feedback. Hence, learners' training into language portfolios should not be solely concerned with raising their awareness of this process and developing the effective strategies within, but it should first prepare them psychologically through

- Providing them with a learning environment where they want to engage, not have to engage (Tosh, Werdmuller, Chen, Light, & Haywood, 2006) and where they can voice their feelings, expectations, and opinions via the experience of assessing themselves in learning.
- Showing interest and commitment in it.
- Clarifying what language learning involves in order to change their expectations that language learning cannot occur without teacher's control (Gibran, 2000).
- Encouraging them to engage in the process through showing its benefits over their learning achievement.
- Raising their self-confidence and promoting their involvement through providing them with the chance to set assessment criteria and helping them "to clarify what they feel are appropriate criteria for evaluating their own learning" (Aoki, 1999, p. 153).
- Providing continuous support and guidelines while listening to their enquiries and difficulties with this form of assessment, besides, showing interest and commitment in this process.

Therefore, teacher-students' meetings need to be organized regularly, in order to clarify for the students the portfolio content, purpose, and assessment criteria. Also, to train learners to use portfolios and reflect over their learning, dialogue and interaction should characterize such meetings because they can improve reflection as Dysthe and Engelsen's (2004) research has proved. Moreover, if the

instructor is friendly while interacting with learners, it can encourage social and personal development in them and respect their whole person (Lefrancois, 1997).

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