

Reflective Portfolio Assessment in an EFL Context

Hüseyin Efe

Artvin Coruh University, Faculty of Letters and Sciences Artvin, Turkey 0800
E-mail: efe@artvin.edu.tr

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ABSTRACT Learning a foreign language is a lifelong endeavor, which requires learners to approach it from a reflective and lifelong learning perspective. It is therefore essential to know to what extent learners are reflective. Portfolio assessment is a learner-centered form of assessment used to monitor learner development. This study based on semi-quasi experimental design was conducted at Artvin Coruh University, Turkey to see the impact of reflective portfolio assessment on their language development for the Test of Foreign Language, YDS, which is an English language proficiency test. The way in which reflective portfolio development and implementation has been developed is briefly described, followed by a survey on the use of the portfolio to determine the learners' perceptions about the assessment. The findings reveal that reflective assessment was beneficial for the learners' language development and that the learners had positive attitudes toward the use of the assessment of reflective portfolios.

INTRODUCTION

The famous English saying "You can't teach an old dog new trick" seems to have an equivalent in various languages, and implies that learning becomes increasingly difficult or even impossible as people get older. But, the phrase "from cradle to grave", which is also familiar in many languages, challenges this belief and suggests that learning should not be confined to a particular age. So, people should consider opportunities for learning and testing their progress at all stages of their lives.

To be able to monitor the progress, learners do not need outside testers. They can also monitor their progress through reflective portfolio assessment. As is widely known, testing is integrated with the learning and teaching of languages. Within this context, Bachman (1990) points out "language tests could be essential data sources about the effective teaching and learning". However, it can be difficult to assess development in the four skills using traditional testing. Thus, new forms of assessment of learner learning, also known as alternative assessment, have been developed to demonstrate what learners are learning and what they can do with their knowledge.

Portfolio assessment is considered to be one of the instruments of the alternative measures of assessment. The definition of portfolio differs according to the purposes of its use. The reflective assessment of portfolios is a collection of learner products that helps learners monitor their own progress in various contexts over

the course of time (Goker 2006). The characteristics of reflective portfolios in language teaching could be different for different purposes. For example, learners actively select their portfolio tasks. Learners themselves engage in determining the criteria for assessing the portfolios, and they are assessed by people who know those learners and their context of learning (Lynch and Shaw 2005).

A wide variety of collection of research and practitioners' studies has revealed the benefits of portfolios and their use in EFL classrooms (Delett et al. 2001; Allen 2004; Nunes 2004; Schmenk 2005; Lo 2007). However, much is not known about the problems faced by teachers and learners while implementing portfolios. If the problems at each step are well identified, then portfolio development process can act as a guide to teachers to offer timely help for learners. In addition, little has been done to see the impact of portfolios to promote autonomous language learning. Thus, the main objective of this study was to see the impact of reflective portfolio assessment on EFL learners' language development for the Test of Foreign Language, YDS, which is an English language proficiency test in Turkey.

Definitions of Lifelong Learning

The belief that learning is a lifelong process is not new: evidence for this could be seen in Plato's *Republic*. However, this belief did not exist in modern education until the 1920's, when philosophers of education like Dewey, Lindeman and Yeaxle suggested a more systematic ap-

proach to learning during a person's life by emphasizing the fact that learning is life itself, and therefore it should be seen as an intrinsic part of life (Ayhan 2006). This helps us acknowledge that learning can take place in informal, formal and non-formal settings throughout life. Therefore, lifelong learning (LLL) could be defined as a process of deliberate and unintentional opportunities effecting learning throughout one's life span (Iqbal 2009).

Several attempts to show the difference between learning and education, and to define LLL, culminated in the adoption of one generally accepted definition of LLL by the UNESCO Institute of Education:

... education is not a once-for-all experience that is confined to an initial cycle of continuous education commenced in childhood, but a process that should continue throughout life. Life is already a continuous learning process, but each human being needs specific opportunities for continuing, purposive and sequential learning in order that he or she may keep abreast of technical and social change, may equip himself or herself for changes in his or her own circumstances... (Titmus 1979).

This new definition of education inspired other international institutions to further elaborate on this notion with a focus on learning rather than education. The Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD), for instance, defines the term as a process of individual learning and development across the lifespan, from cradle to grave – from learning in early childhood to learning in retirement. It is an inclusive concept that refers not only to education in formal settings, such as schools, universities and adult education institutions, but also to 'life-wide' learning in informal settings, at home, at work and in the wider community (OECD 1996).

Language Learning and Lifelong Learning

Focusing on increased life expectancies and changes in age structures, the Commission of the European Communities published a white paper on lifelong learning in 1995, setting different goals for member countries with a priority on LLL. For language learning, the White Paper set the objective of encouraging the citizens of member nations to learn at least three European lan-

guages to a level of proficiency. It was further stated that this would provide people with both occupational and personal benefits by helping them work and travel abroad. On the other hand, with an educational initiative called the SOCRATES program, the European Commission supported the production of language teaching materials for young learners, believing that learning a foreign language should become one of the foundations of acquiring knowledge. It was also noted in The White Paper that an early introduction to learning a foreign language develops proficiency in that language, and also increases awareness of one's own mother tongue. Thus, individuals will have more open minds, intellectual agility and expanded cultural horizons, and foreign language learning is particularly important in vocational training as it creates more job opportunities.

The great interest in lifelong learning also led the UNESCO Institute of Education to change its name as the UNESCO Institute for Lifelong Learning (UIL) in 2006 to reflect the philosophy of learning throughout the lifespan, whether in school, out of school or in other ways. Two of the Institute's documents (UNESCO Institute of Education 2003; UNESCO Institute for Lifelong Learning 2009) focus on the importance of languages and language learning. The first strategy document underlies the role of languages in protecting cultural diversity, in which it is suggested that local languages reflect the identity of local communities and help young people see their history and cultural individuality; so, teaching local languages is also a bridge to teaching other languages. The other document briefly shows the challenges faced and focuses on the advantages of lifelong learning at individual, societal and global levels.

Reflective Learning

"Let's think it through first" is a typical reflective learner's response. Within the context of learner's learning, we can see knowledge, skills and perspectives learners get during the preparation and renewal of their practice (Goker 2006). Interacting with other colleagues offering ideas, critique and moral support in the renewal process is an essential opportunity for professional development (Farrell 2001).

The terms 'reflection' and 'reflective practice' have become popular in the literature, although

their definition seems to vary greatly. Typically, 'reflection' refers to the mental process that facilitates the transformation of experience into personal knowledge by acting as a conduit between the emotional and cognitive states (Boyd and Fales 1983; Pierson 1998; Yancey 1998).

On the other hand, Dewey (1938), the widely accepted originator of reflective learning, asserted that people do not so much learn from experience as they learn from reflecting on experience. The term 'reflection' emanates principally from the socio-constructivist concept of learning to denote revision of one's goals or work. This involves self-assessment of learning to identify the gap between intention, accomplishment and strategies for accomplishing learning outcomes (Yancey 1998). So, reflection is goal-oriented, sequential, active and controlled by the learner who desires to learn, to find a solution to a problem or to clarify an ambiguous process (Dewey 1960). Dewey further added that reflection is language-specific, and that language connects and organizes meanings as well as selects and fixes them. Also, Jones and Shelton (2006) describe reflection as "the practice of intentionally bringing into conscious awareness one's motivations, thoughts, beliefs and expectations for the purpose of gaining insightful understanding as to their meaning, their connections to what is personally known, and in light of new experiences and information. Reflection makes possible the insights necessary to learn from experience and alter habitual behaviors" (Dewey 1960). A key benefit of reflection lies in its potential to provide learners with insights into the development of knowledge and thought processes (Yancey 1998). Encouraging learners to reflect in multiple ways is "inviting them to triangulate their own truths, to understand and articulate the pluralism of truth" (Yancey 1998).

Portfolio Assessment

The portfolio, which is considered to be an essential part of authentic evaluation, has helped many teachers to see the bigger picture and enabled a more efficient way to evaluate their learners' knowledge and skills to get learners to engage in the evaluation process, and to simultaneously develop their skills of clarifying if anonymity could affect the significance of the findings or not.

Portfolio assessment, within this context, is considered to be an instrument of alternative

assessment referring to the selective, purposeful collection of learner products and, thus, reflective self-assessment is employed to document development and achievement over the course of time (Douglas 2000: 241).

The main characteristics of alternative assessment require an active engagement of learners in the evaluation of their own progress and the development of reflective thinking. Whether alternative assessment achieves or fails depends on the performance indicating what learners are able to do with language in communicative classrooms. Self-assessment, on the other hand, is an important part of alternative assessment; it is commonly seen in the form of reflections on a learner's performance. Alternative assessments could employ self-evaluation of performance in listening, essays, oral presentations, or different contributions to papers or e-portfolios.

Reflective Portfolio Assessment

As discussed earlier, self-assessment is an important part of alternative assessment; it is commonly seen in the form of reflections on a learner's performance. Reflective journals and portfolios are considered to be examples of tools of assessment that are employed to encourage reflective, self-directed learning. In both contexts, learners are responsible for reflecting on their learning and development over time. These evaluation techniques can specifically be used in language learning classrooms, in which learners are encouraged to reflect on their engagement with new knowledge in communicative tasks in four skills (Goker 2012).

A portfolio is regarded as an organized collection of learner products used to represent their efforts and academic achievements. A reflective portfolio is a useful assessment tool for documenting accomplishments and helps learners reflect on their performance and development in the language learning environment. Learners actively take responsibility for organizing their portfolio and choosing the most appropriate content, depending on the goal of the portfolio assessment task. Learners in this YDS class were allowed to organize their reflective portfolios to monitor their progress and compare it with that of other learners. Apart from being useful assessment tools, reflective portfolios provide further feedback for teachers about how learners learn and understand. The data collected, in turn,

enable efficient guidance on how to improve their performance and strategies for motivating learning in the subject.

Recently, reflective portfolios have also been developed for online learning environments. For example, e-portfolios are frequently used in collecting, reporting and maintaining the evidence of learning. They also have greater flexibility as they are updated by learners anywhere, anytime.

METHODOLOGY

Background

This study sought to administer reflective portfolios in the YDS English course with a class of 20 adult EFL learners who were studying to pass the YDS foreign language exam in 2013–2014 at the (SEM) Continuing Education and Research Center at Artvin Coruh University. The YDS is an English language proficiency test, mostly taken by civil servants, academics and military personnel. It is administered by OSYM (Measuring, Selection and Placement Center) in Turkey in order to evaluate the foreign language skills, especially of governmental employees. The way reflective portfolio development and implementation in the YDS English course has been developed is briefly described followed by a survey on the use of the portfolio that was conducted to determine the learners' perceptions about the assessment.

The YDS course aimed to develop learners' grammar, reading, translation, vocabulary and writing together with their autonomy. The course was conducted 4 hours a week. It was given in two terms for the adult learners, who were all full-time employed in different sectors. After piloting in the first term, regular study was undertaken including 20 learners from the same class in the second term. Of the 20 learners, 10 were male and 10 were females, and their ages ranged from 19 to 50 years. The same procedures were applied during both the pilot and regular studies. The learners were motivated to submit some of their portfolios developed during the second term. The learners in this YDS class were allowed to organize their own reflective portfolios to monitor their progress and compare it with that of other learners. Based on the developed hypothesis, the following research questions were asked:

- 1) What attitudes do the learners have regarding the portfolio use in their EFL class?
- 2) What do they think about the effects of using the portfolio on their learning?
- 3) What problems can be identified when carrying out the portfolio assessment process in the language learning context?

As part of the portfolio assessment, all the learners were expected to complete the portfolio before the end of term, and they all received feedback from the teacher based on their strengths and weaknesses.

Instrumentation

The data were gathered from questionnaires, the researcher's weekly performance progress records and the learners' portfolios. Six close-ended questions about the learners' attitudes toward the use of portfolios and two open-ended questions were used in the questionnaires. Six different statements rated on a five-point scale from strongly disagree (1) to strongly agree (5) were given to the learners. Two open-ended questions were also asked to collect further information about the learners' contribution to the portfolio assessment process together with any problems encountered during the use of the portfolios.

The weekly performance progress notes including their responses to the portfolio use, difficulties encountered when preparing a portfolio and their reflections were continuously recorded, and the main source of data collection consisted of the portfolios.

Portfolio Assessment Development Process, Setting the Purpose and Tasks

No fixed model was used during the reflective portfolio assessment process. Previous research studies in the context of the foreign language classroom were taken into consideration (Delett et al. 2001; Lo 2010; Padilla 1996). The portfolio assessment in this research study followed seven stages: determining the portfolio tasks, planning, defining the purpose, establishing the criteria for assessment, organizing, encouraging the learners, observing the portfolio and finally assessing it.

The main purpose was to guide the portfolio outline. The learners were initially asked to negotiate this, and finally it was agreed to observe the learners' progress in the YDS English course,

to encourage learner engagement, and to improve the learners' four language skills together with autonomous learning.

Taking the objectives of the YDS English course and the aim of employing the portfolio into consideration, reflective portfolio tasks consisted of reporting the ability to use English in grammar, reading, vocabulary and writing, which are the main parts of the YDS exam. Samples of their work included mainly practice tests on a given topic.

Criteria for Assessment and Organization

Sample YDS tests were used as the goal of assessment. The tests consist of 80 multiple-choice questions to be finished within 150 minutes. The questions mainly deal with vocabulary, grammatical structures, sentence completion, English-Turkish and Turkish-English translation, paragraph completion, finding irrelevant sentences, restatement, dialogue completion and reading comprehension passages. The learners' performance tests were evaluated both by the teacher and their peers for the test elements given above. In the final portfolio grading, self-reflection and assessment, completeness (different small-scale tests and the assessment of learning products taking the learners' and teacher's feedback into consideration) and recordings (the tasks were dated and described) were used as the criteria.

Four different parts were used in the portfolio: 1) All self, peer-assessment and teacher feedback tasks; 2) weekly time management papers, monthly and term goal setting, and assessing reflective journals; 3) summative assessment records; and 4), a strategic plan to develop weak areas.

Monitoring and Assessing the Portfolio

Various management tools were employed. Every week, the learners were requested to write reflective sentences for parts they had chosen considering their goals and assessing their weekly and monthly development. Every week, 15 minutes were spent on peer conferencing and they submitted their portfolios to the teacher. They were also asked to include the term's goals and assessments both at the beginning and the end of the term.

Both summative and formative assessments were carried out. Class conferences and peer and self-assessment as formative assessments were used, and the learners used rubrics and prescribed criteria. At the end of the term, the teacher collected these portfolios for final assessment. Fifteen minutes were given to every learner to discuss their portfolio, then the teacher graded their portfolios using holistic scoring, which includes self-assessment, a detailed description assessment together with some suggestions for improvement.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Learners' Attitudes toward Portfolio Assessment

The five statements used in the questionnaire are: 1. the portfolio is a part of my learning experience; 2. it is a supportive experience of learning; 3. I will recommend my colleagues to create portfolios; 4. the portfolio is better than traditional assessment; 5. completing the portfolio increases my confidence.

A total of 20 learners completed the questionnaires and returned them along with their portfolios in March 2014. According to the results, 82 percent of the learners saw it as a more efficient assessment tool (Table 1). 79 percent of them regarded it as a beneficial learning experience. 24.4 percent of them stated that they were not confident in preparing a portfolio, whereas 58 percent of them were not sure about a prospective use for it.

Table 1: Learners' attitudes toward the assessment of reflective portfolios

	<i>Strongly agree</i>	<i>Agree</i>	<i>Not sure</i>	<i>Disagree</i>	<i>Strongly disagree</i>
1	58.1	23.7	15.2		
2	28	49.7	14.2	2.3	
3	13.8	66.6	15.2		3.2
4	18.6	23.5	53.7	3.2	
5	31	51.4	13.0	3.2	3.2
6	18.2	59.2	24.4		

As seen in the results, the learners have mainly positive perceptions of the use of reflective portfolio assessment; however, some are not so sure about creating their portfolios. This finding is also related to the teacher's observations. The fact that some learners were not so sure about

creating their portfolios may be due to the fact that they had not used one before.

Learners' Perceptions about the Effects of Portfolio Assessment

Part 2 of the questionnaire was about the learners' opinions about the effects of portfolio assessment in the YDS English course. The learners mainly regarded portfolios as rewarding and difficult. Increasing autonomy, motivation, confidence, promoting responsibility and developing language skills were the advantages.

The first issue mentioned by the learners was responsibility. The findings were in accordance with some research results that argue that creating a portfolio is useful for the responsibilities of learning (Barootchi et al. 2002; Pollari 2000).

Furthermore, creating a reflective portfolio helped learners develop their autonomous learning because they could define their objectives and reflect on their learning under the teacher's guidance. This type of experience is seen to contribute to creating awareness of the learners' weak and strong points (Delett et al. 2001), to realizing the importance of learning and assessment, and to developing autonomy (Alabdelwahab 2002; Lo 2010).

Language development and critical thinking were also seen as important effects of the portfolios. As can be seen, portfolio assessment is a sort of task-based assessment. The learners' critical thinking and problem-solving abilities also increased through preparing these difficult tasks. It can also be argued that these experiences also helped increase the learners' motivation and confidence.

Creating a portfolio task is hard work and it gives learners a sense of accomplishment and confidence by providing them with comprehensive and descriptive feedback. They also have the chance to receive more feedback from their friends. This type of feedback is very effective in developing learning motivation and fostering a collaborative learning environment.

The findings of this study have proven to show some of the potential benefits of portfolios and they *parallel* the *findings* in some related research studies (Allen 2004; Nunes 2004; Schmenk 2005; Lo 2007).

Problems Encountered in Portfolio Assessment

The main problem related to portfolio implementation was peer assessment. According to

the learners, the observation system employed in this research study was beneficial in helping the learners engage in assessing their planning and reflecting on their learning. However, a few problems arose during the observations. For example, peer assessment was still a problem. It is widely accepted the peer assessment and conference process is widely accepted because it is the main source of constructive feedback and of providing social reinforcement. However, little feedback was used in some of the peer assessment, which was not so helpful. One reason for this was that a few of the learners were not good at language skills; the second was that some of the learners stated that they were not able to develop certain assessment skills. Training learners on completing their portfolios takes time.

All the data gathered show that developing portfolios was quite rewarding for the learners and they were able to do it. However, some of the learners claimed that portfolio preparation required more time and they did not have it. This might be due to the fact that portfolio development is not suitable for some learning styles (Cancer 2010). Others said that they were very busy at work, that they did not have enough autonomous learning strategies, or that they had a passive learning style. However, the majority were of the opinion that portfolio development helped them to make progress in their learning quality and that they had developed a more positive attitude toward learning.

CONCLUSION

Reflective portfolio assessments can make a great contribution to the quality of learning as they have great educational significance. Teachers, within this context, could receive more constructive feedback on their teaching and their learners' learning, which in turn could be an asset for developing their teaching. The learners in this study were closely engaged in the practice of both assessment and learning. They feel that they made progress both in autonomous learning and in using the language by preparing a reflective portfolio. They can now better see the impact of portfolio assessment and compare it with traditional assessment techniques. However, the majority of the learners developed positive attitudes toward portfolio assessment even though a few problems were encountered.

In conclusion, reflective portfolios have proven to be useful in enhancing student language learning in Turkey. It not only enables students to engage in multi-domain learning but also helps learners practise autonomous learning skills. The point to be grasped here is that as students have little experience in producing portfolios and lack knowledge of autonomous learning, teachers in the Turkish EFL context could design constructive activities and create more learning opportunities for learners to actively engage in the process.

RECOMMENDATIONS

The number of research studies on reflective portfolio assessment could be increased in many different disciplines, and they could be used to confirm that it is also beneficial in various classroom contexts. As reflection is goal-oriented, sequential, active and controlled by the learner who desires to learn, to find a solution to a problem or to clarify an ambiguous process, individuals can be more aware of their weaknesses and strengths in their learning efforts. To do this, reflective learning environments where individuals are open to criticism should be created by educational organizations.

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