

Student and teacher engagement in Learning and assessment with portfolios

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Suggested Citation:

Phothongsunan, S. (2020). Student and teacher engagement in Learning and assessment with portfolios. Cypriot
Journal of Educational Science. 15(6), 1569-1573. <https://doi.org/10.18844/cjes.v15i6.5317>

Received from June 25, 2020; revised from September, 25, 2020; accepted from December 25, 2020.

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Abstract

Assessing student knowledge and success during and after teaching and learning is an embedded part of education since it offers important specifics for teachers. This action research was undertaken to inquire about students' and teachers' attitudes to portfolio assessment in their English courses. Two methods were employed, including a student portfolio attitude survey and a teacher survey. It was found that most students had a clear understanding regarding how a portfolio was made and admitted that the portfolio could assist them in learning how to write better in many aspects. Likewise, most teachers found the portfolio to be practical mainly in indicating students' problems and monitoring their learning progress. Implications from the study point to the need for training students to have skills important for using a portfolio as a life-long learning tool and for encouraging language teachers to use various forms of assessment to help students engage more in learning and ensure that targeted learning outcomes are achieved.

Keywords: Portfolio assessment, Engagement, Attitudes

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1. Introduction

Using alternative forms of assessment such as presentations, reflections, projects, and portfolios, known as authentic measures, has become imperative to measure the acquisition and utilisation of skills including problem solving, critical thinking, and presentation and communication skills that constitute a necessary part of the present language curriculum worldwide. A portfolio serves as an informative collection of student work that shows students' efforts, development and achievement. It is also considered a teaching implement that enhances the progress of language skills (Snively and Wright, 2003). Since writing is more of a process than a product, a portfolio can show the gradual development of writing skills over time. It also involves incessant reflection on strengths and weaknesses which motivates progress, augments student confidence, and fosters autonomous learning. In addition, students engage in various kinds of writing that are not evaluated and one-time tests are surely not a reflection of all the effort and improvement a student makes over one semester.

Two research questions that this study attempts to answer are:

1. What are the students' attitudes towards using portfolios in English courses?
2. What are the teachers' attitudes towards portfolio assessment in teaching English writing?

2. Literature Review

Previous research findings indicate that portfolio assessment has a short and long term positive effect on language learning, especially writing. It gives the teacher a clearer picture about the students' needs, supplements traditional evaluation, and it is advantageous for formative assessment and curriculum development.

A review of the literature reveals that there is a lack of research undertaken to explore the use of a portfolio with EFL students. According to Song and August (2002), the literary work is abundant in the debate of the central issues escalated by portfolio assessment as well as the expansion of portfolio assessment schemes. Nevertheless, this has not been knowingly amplified by quantitative research studies. Barootchi and Keshavaraz (2002) studied to extent to which portfolio assessment led to EFL learners' success in learning English. They investigated the writing assessment scores of two EFL classes. Their findings disclose that portfolio assessment gave rise to EFL learners' development. They found that not only the students agreeably took advantage of the teacher's feedback and suggestions on their learning, but also portfolio assessment provided the teacher an improved stance on their learning status, which certainly impacted the overall pedagogy. It was revealed that portfolio assessment serves as a practical teaching instrument for teachers to offer incessant advice of student development necessary for formative appraisal and for instructional planning purposes. Almost identical findings were also reported in Caner's (2002) research, which aimed at using a portfolio as an alternate assessment tool for early EFL learners. Caner (2002) compared two groups of primary school learners in relation to EFL learning and performance examination. In the experimental group, a portfolio was employed both for assessment and language enhancement, while in the other class traditional assessment instruments were employed. When the student achievements were analysed, the students in the portfolio class outperformed their counterparts in the control group. These findings disclosed that a portfolio could serve as a suitable tool for assessment and an applicable teaching method for learners in supporting their language learning.

In general, the existing literature on portfolio assessment has suggested that portfolio assessment is one of the dependable means for identifying student promptness to progress to a higher level of

instruction. By and large, in the matter of EFL and ESL learners, portfolio assessment has been regarded as a trustworthy underpinning when it comes to making decisions about student placement and progress (Caner, 2002).

3. Methodology

The aim of the study was to inquire about students' and teachers' attitudes towards portfolio assessment in their English subjects since research is rather limited in this area and because gaining this insight can help teachers, students as well as administrators to better understand the effectiveness of the portfolio as a teaching and evaluation tool.

The participants were 30 Business English university students in a Thai university, all of them taking English for Academic and Specific Purposes, with a few non-Thai students from Japan and China. Also, taking part were five experienced teachers with more than 10 years' teaching experience and some experience in using portfolios. The research instruments used in the study included a student portfolio use attitude survey, adapted from Caner (2010), consisting of 12 statements that the students scored on a five-point scale, ranging from 'strongly agree' to 'strongly disagree'. The statements covered three areas: awareness, actual practice and attitudes. Another research tool used was a teacher survey, adapted from Arter and Spandel (1992), made up of seven questions on the purpose of using portfolios; their advantages, drawbacks and effectiveness; how teachers handled portfolios in their classes and encouraged their students to reflect on their work; the problems they faced; and the assessment method they preferred. Both research tools were validated by three experts in language teaching using the IOC.

4. Findings and Discussion

From the findings, it was found that the majority of the participants ($M=4.45$), having a clear idea about how to compile a portfolio, agreed that it was helpful in learning and assessment, in enhancing writing skills, organising, presenting, reflecting on learning, and pinpointing their upsides and downsides. According to Davis (2005), making a portfolio provides teachers crucial specifics for diagnosing students' strengths and weaknesses to support and improve their learning performance.

However, about half of the students ($M=2.77$) thought the portfolio was an increased burden, and only slightly fewer than half ($M=2.35$) said that they actually preferred to be evaluated using a portfolio. Given the extra responsibility that comes with a portfolio, it seems that many students find completing a portfolio overwhelming and rather arduous. Indeed, portfolio assessment is perceived to be quite time-consuming for students to complete as well as for teachers to mark especially if portfolios are done in addition to traditional classroom tasks and evaluation (Gómez, 1999).

As for the teachers, they all reported using the portfolio to show a process besides a product, monitor the students' progress, identify problems and help them determine results when the portfolio was given a percentage of the overall grades at the end of the semester. Nonetheless, the problems they encountered included lack of students' sense of commitment, readiness to make good use of their portfolios, use of the portfolio being time consuming, and portfolio use not being taken seriously by their departments. The criteria that the teachers used to evaluate the portfolio were quality, growth, depth of reflection and completeness. Most of the teachers agreed that the use of a portfolio for assessment was more objective and comprehensive than one-time tests, provided that reflection

was included. This is in line with Baume (2000)'s claim that portfolios are a very practical method for influencing, supporting, integrating and evaluating student work.

The positive results of the student survey endorse Caner's (2010) findings. The less frequent neutral and negative responses could be attributed to the students' lack of familiarity with the tool and partly to their past learning experiences, which did not foster autonomous learning. Students' self-directed learning ability can be developed through the activity of keeping a portfolio active (Huang, 2012). It is therefore advisable to train students on the skills necessary to properly utilize a portfolio. These include critical thinking, time management, organization and above all meta-cognition. Serhani (2007) explains that students with teacher assistance and guidance are in fact instinctively equipped with soft skills when preparing their own portfolios. This helps students gain a sense of responsibility towards their work. When students are engaged in such activities, they become more analytical and self-reflective, which clearly promotes students' critical thinking skills.

The findings from the teacher survey showed the teachers' belief in the effectiveness of a portfolio in teaching and learning and assessment and their willingness to utilise it. However, they should also be made aware of the need to employ multiple forms of assessment that can measure the new learning outcomes and be familiar with the specific features and requirements of a well-developed portfolio. In addition, it is about the administration that should be more willing to accept and support any change in assessment methods and invest time and effort in training teachers.

5. Conclusion

The responses from the student participants in this study reveal that they are aware of the upsides of collecting a portfolio in their writing courses. Nevertheless, they believe that portfolio assessment comes with additional burdens and duties. Thus, students should be notified ahead of time about its positive and negative attributes. Besides, students should be directed to apply autonomous learning tactics or techniques which could help them to recognize the steps of portfolio preparation. It is because students' different learning styles are a factor in the utilization of a portfolio into the teaching and learning process. The incorporation of a portfolio into the learning and student assessment process requires a careful arrangement. In order to embed portfolios into English courses, teachers should familiarize students with the notion of autonomous learning. Equally important is that teachers should explicitly discuss with students the pros of actualizing a portfolio both as a learning tool and as an optional assessment instrument. With the successful use of portfolio assessment, it is likely that teachers and learners can mutually engage themselves in teaching and learning EFL.

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