

Portfolio Assessment and Students' Autonomy in Language Learning

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Abstract

The purpose of this study was to investigate the impact of portfolio assessment as a process-oriented mechanism on the autonomy of first year English students at Abdelhamid Ibn Badis University of Mostaganem. The participants were 48 male and female EFL students to whom the Learner Autonomy Questionnaire (Kashefian, 2002) was administered as a pre-and post-test. The portfolio assessment was integrated into the experimental groups within the Written Expression course to explore whether and to what extent their autonomy might get enhanced. The data were analyzed using two independent samples *t* tests, a paired sample *t*-test and mean scores. The results showed that the portfolio assessment process helped the students' develop some self-assessment learning attitudes. But, engaging in such a process did not support them gain a considerable degree of autonomy which allows them to act by themselves. This is so, since they were still relying on their teacher as their views reflected.

Key words: Autonomy, portfolio assessment, training, language learning.

Introduction

Since the 1980s, portfolios have gained increasing popularity with the growing dissatisfaction with timed impromptu essay test. They reflect Constructivism or as Jones and Shelton (2011) describe them: “an expression of Constructivism, a theoretical perspective that embodies a certain way of thinking about human learning and development” (p.05). How are, then, portfolios connected to Constructivism? A constructivist stance toward teaching and learning emphasizes students’ active involvement in learning, their own construction and reconstruction of knowledge, thus their continuous reflection, questioning and experimentation along their learning process. Indeed, this teaching/learning approach “describes knowledge as temporary, developmental, nonobjective, internally constructed and socially and culturally mediated” (Fosnot, 1996, p. IX). Thus, within this conception learning occurs through interacting, cooperating and negotiating meaning with others.

Therefore, Constructivism as “a teaching/learning approach that takes into account the cognitive, social, and affective dimensions of the learner necessitates the use of tools, methods, and strategies that go well beyond the standard paper-and-pencil tests and the traditional emphasis on ‘producing the right answer’” (Jones & Shelton, 2011, p.19). In this respect, portfolios emerged as a pedagogical tool with which to engage students. Indeed, to reframe one’s pedagogy (the way we teach), there is a need for bringing one’s theories (the way people learn and develop) and philosophy

Portfolio Assessment and Students' Autonomy in Language Learning

(beliefs and values about how we should teach) into alignment (Jones & Shelton, 2011).

In fact, using portfolios in language assessment is gaining more popularity and support among teachers, teacher-trainers, learners, stakeholders, material designers, educational boards and researchers (Mitchell, 1992). It has been shown that these tools provide excellent opportunities for learner self-assessment (Genesee & Upshur, 1996). For that purpose, considerable body of research has been devoted to find out how to use them interactively to promote learners' self-reflection and thus autonomy along their process of learning. Still, the formative function of portfolio assessment is under-explored especially in the EFL context (Lam & Lee, 2010).

For this reason, the present research aims to investigate the effects of portfolio training on the students' learning autonomy within an EFL context. This is through investigating their learning beliefs and attitudes before and after such training. It is worth noting, that the process of training these students into portfolio development involves the following stages:

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

Research Method

In the attempt to find out about the effects of portfolio development on the students' learning autonomy, there is a need to conduct an experimental research so that variables can be controlled and manipulated. This is since experimental research "is concerned with studying the effects of specified and controlled treatments given to the subjects usually found into groups" (Seliger & Shohamy, 1989, p.136). The treatment, thus, refers to the controlled and intentional experience which the groups are going to be involved in order to measure its effect (Seliger & Shohamy, 1989). In this study, portfolio development is the treatment (the independent variable) which the researcher tried to measure its effect on their learning autonomy (the dependent variable) through the use of control group design where one group received a treatment, i.e., portfolio training while the other who represents the same population (the experimental subjects) did not receive such training.

The control group and the treatment group were compared at the beginning of the experiment by means of pretests, and were later compared at the end of the experiment by means of post-tests which were the same (or very similar) to the pre-test. The participants include four pre-existing groups of first year undergraduate students (48=) who were attending the Written Expression course at the department of English (university of Abdelhamid Ibn Badis, Mostaganem). Three groups of students (=33) were trained into using language portfolios during the academic year 2013-2014

Portfolio Assessment and Students' Autonomy in Language Learning

from 10th November to 19th May while the other group acted as the control group who received no training. It is worth noting, that 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, assess this process and reflect continuously over their progress as well as their learning needs and goals. It covers both functions: reporting (a form of alternative assessment) and pedagogical functions (a reflective tool to foster student autonomy and learning to learn in foreign language education).

Within this experimental research the pre- and post-tests consist of the Learner Autonomy Questionnaire (Kashefian, 2002) (See the appendix). This questionnaire includes 40 items on a 5- point Likert scale about the role of autonomy in L2 learning. The choices range from 1 (*strongly agree*) to 5 (*strongly disagree*). The questions ask for the learner's perceptions about the roles of the teacher/the learner, self-evaluation, the learner's goal, planning, ability, progression, and mistakes in the course of learning, all of which contribute to the development of learner autonomy. Kashefian (2002) confirmed the presence of five factors of learner autonomy in this questionnaire: learner independence, dependence on the teacher, learner confidence, attitudes toward language learning, and self-assessment. As far as the reliability and validity of this questionnaire is concerned, the former was measured through applying Cronbach's alpha. The internal consistency reliability coefficient turned out to be .78, showing that the questionnaire functioned well in

terms of consistency. Regarding the latter, two experts in the field inspected the questionnaire and confirmed its validity (Hashemian& Fadaei, 2013).

Results

The data obtained from the pre-and post-tests were analysed via statistics which were performed with the Statistical Package for Social Science or what is known as SPSS (version 20). Indeed, an independent sample *t*-test was used to evaluate the difference between the means of the experimental and control groups. Before introducing the portfolio training process (the treatment) and after administering the Learner Autonomy Questionnaire (Kashefian, 2002) to both groups, a *t*-test analysis was conducted on the data obtained from this questionnaire in attempt to find out whether there is a difference or not between these two groups in terms of autonomy. These results are presented in table.1 below.

Independent Samples Test

	Levene's Test for Equality of Variances		t-test for Equality of Means						
	F	Sig.	t	df	Sig. (2-tailed)	Mean Difference	Std. Error Difference	95% Confidence Interval of the Difference	
								Lower	Upper
Autonomy	.270	.606	.730	46	.469	.063	.086	-.110	.236
			.697	24,437	.492	.063	.090	-.123	.249

Table.1: Independent Samples *t*-Test for Autonomy before the treatment

Portfolio Assessment and Students' Autonomy in Language Learning

As shown above, the significance level (Sig.) of Levene's Test for Equality of Variances is ,606 which is greater than .05, then one can assume that group variances are equal. By referring to the column labeled Sig. (2-tailed), the *p*-value of the test is ,469. Because it is greater than the level of significance .05, it can be concluded that there is not any significant difference in the mean scores of the two groups with respect to their autonomy. Thus, using the pretest indicates the homogeneity of the experimental and control groups. Yet, after being trained in using language portfolios, is there a significant difference between the experimental and control groups? In attempt to answer this question, the post-test was administered to both groups and an independent sample t-test was performed.

Independent Samples Test

	Levene's Test for Equality of Variances		t-test for Equality of Means						
	F	Sig.	t	df	Sig. (2- tailed)	MeanDiffe rence	Std. ErrorDiff erence	95% Confidence Interval of the Difference	
								Lower	Upper
Autonomy Equal variances assumed	3,349	,074	-2,082	46	,043	-,219	,105	-,431	-,007
Autonomy Equal variances not assumed			-2,409	39,086	,021	-,219	,091	-,403	-,035

Table.2: Independent Samples t -Test for Autonomy in
the Portfolio and Traditional Assessments

Looking at the output box giving the results of the t-test, the p-value is ,043 which is not very smaller than the alpha level“.05”. This implies that there is a slight difference in the autonomy of the groups experiencing the portfolio and traditional assessments in writing. That is, this kind of training has helped the participants develop certain degree of autonomy which remains low. To confirm these findings, the experimental group’s data of the pretest were compared with those obtained from the post-test. This was achieved through paired sample t-test as the following table shows. The *Sig.* (2-tailed) for equal variances is ,044. Thus, one can conclude that using portfolio assessment in the experimental groups led to a lower level of autonomy.

Paired Samples Test

	Paired Differences					t	df	Sig. (2-tailed)
	Mean	Std. Deviation	Std. Error Mean	95% Confidence Interval of the Difference				
				Lower	Upper			
Pair 1 <u>Autonomy -</u> <u>Autonomy</u>	,179	,491	,085	,005	,353	2,092	32	,044

Table.3: Paired Sample t-test for the experimental Group Autonomy Before and After the Treatment

Hence, there is a need to account for this degree of autonomy which the students have developed. As stated previously, within the Learner Autonomy Questionnaire (Kashefian, 2002), there are five factors of learner autonomy: learner independence, dependence on

Portfolio Assessment and Students' Autonomy in Language Learning

the teacher, learner confidence, attitudes toward language learning, and self-assessment. So, the question which remains to be answered is what factors have developed out of portfolio assessment. To answer this question, the researcher has compared the means score of each item of the Learner Autonomy Questionnaire, i.e., the post-test of the control and experimental groups.

It was found that, no significant difference exists between the experimental and control groups regarding their views of the teacher's role. Indeed, in spite of the awareness-raising process the experiment group's views of this role were still reflecting their dependence on their teacher. Indeed, these students seemed to agree with the control group that the teacher should help them, tell them their difficulties, how long they should spend on an activity, how to learn effectively, how they are progressing besides giving them regular tests and considering him/her the one who knows best how well they are.

Similarly, beliefs were also shared regarding their role as students. Both groups limited their learning success to the classroom context. Yet, they recognized that mistakes are part of their learning process and saw the value of peer-evaluation. Besides, their ability to write accurately was denied thereby reflecting the need to improve. Their self-confidence was apparent when they agreed that they had the ability to learn the language successfully and get the targeted score.

On the other hand, a significant difference was captured between these two groups when it comes to self-assessment. The t-test results showed that the value for equal variances is .000. for the following items: I have the ability to check my work for mistakes, I know how to plan for my learning, I know how to find an effective way to learn English, and I have my own ways of testing how much I have learned. Other attitudes were not also shared between the control and experimental groups since their p-value was smaller than ,005. These are: I know how to set my learning goals (,005), I know how my language learning progresses (,008), I know how to study languages well (,001), and I know best how well I learn (,005).

It follows from this, that there are some learning attitudes which have been developed by the experimental group as a result of portfolio assessment. These relate to their self-assessment of the learning process. Yet, their beliefs regarding the teacher and student's roles were still reflecting teacher-centered pedagogy.

Discussion

As the data gathered showed, the first pretest confirmed the homogeneity of the experimental and control groups regarding their autonomy in language learning. It was found that their learning views regarding the role of the teacher/learner were reflecting their dependence on the teacher. The latter was also apparent through their lack of self-assessment attitudes and their inability to set their learning goals, plan, and assess their progress. Nevertheless, after using their portfolios the

Portfolio Assessment and Students' Autonomy in Language Learning

participants still perceived their role in the learning process as that of the "consumer of language courses" (Holec, 1987) and the teacher as a dominant figure. It follows from this, that the awareness raising stage conducted within this experiment in a form of dialogue did not change most of the participants' views and thus convince them of the need to depend on themselves rather than on their teacher. This could imply that holding discussion may not suffice to raise an individual awareness of a given process or idea mainly in context where his beliefs and practices contradict with its principles. Introducing change within such conservative and defensive culture is likely to be conceived as queer and so unacceptable.

In fact, as the first posttest data revealed, the students were still at the first stages of developing their autonomy since they could attain a lower degree of it by the end of the experiment. For this reason, their dependence on their teacher and views referring to his dominating role are common mainly at those stages. However, this dependence should not be regarded as an obstacle for the development of their autonomy, but it needs rather to be exploited by the teacher to enhance their interdependence. This interdependence is demonstrated in the process of negotiations of meaning and scaffolding between teacher and learners and among learners themselves (Trinh, 2005).

Hence, using portfolios enabled the students to have certain control over their learning process. This helped them develop some self-assessment attitudes

where their reflection on their learning, planning and goal setting were involved. Involving in self-assessment is likely to help them gain more awareness of their learning needs and difficulties in writing and more interest in learning. Yet, effective training into portfolios requires time and practice which are the ingredients for making the process more familiar to both the students and the teacher.

Conclusion

The research findings within the present research indicated that training first year students into language portfolios, and using the latter as assessment and learning tools in the Written Expression course led to developing some self-assessment attitudes. But, these did not suffice to help them depend on themselves since they were still in the early stages of developing their autonomy. Thus, the time devoted (i.e., six months) for such training was not sufficient to help these students develop a degree of autonomy that enables them to depend on themselves, thereby developing more autonomous learning attitude.

Therefore, for autonomous learning to occur students need to develop the capacity to take control of their learning which goes beyond teachers' instructions and so the classroom setting. Such capacity grows by degrees out of interaction and dependence, as a consequence of the social interactive roots of learning (Little, 1991). Thus, teachers' major concern is to reach that stage and develop this capacity in their students. Portfolios can be effective tools to reach that goal because of their potential to involve students in their

Portfolio Assessment and Students' Autonomy in Language Learning

learning and sustain their interest within. Yet, this requires time to make that change, besides the need for institutional support, effective plan and teachers' cooperation.

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**Portfolio Assessment and Students' Autonomy
in Language Learning**

Appendix

Directions: *Please show how much you agree or disagree with the following statements by circling the numbers that match your answers*

<i>Strongly Agree</i>	<i>Agree</i>	<i>Neutral</i>	<i>Disagree</i>	<i>Strongly Disagree</i>
<i>1</i>	<i>2</i>	<i>3</i>	<i>4</i>	<i>5</i>

1	The teacher should offer help to me.	1	2	3	4	5
2	The teacher should tell me what my difficulties are.	1	2	3	4	5
3	The teacher should tell me how long I should spend on an activity.	1	2	3	4	5
4	The role of the teacher is to tell me what to do.	1	2	3	4	5
5	The teacher should always explain why we do an activity in class.	1	2	3	4	5
6	The role of the teacher is to help me to learn effectively.	1	2	3	4	5
7	The teacher knows best how well I am.	1	2	3	4	5
8	The role of the teacher is to create opportunities for me to practice.	1	2	3	4	5
9	The role of the teacher is to set my learning goals.	1	2	3	4	5
10	The teacher should be an expert at showing learners how to learn.	1	2	3	4	5

Zineb DJOUB

11	The teacher should give me regular tests.	1	2	3	4	5
12	I need the teacher to tell me how I am progressing.	1	2	3	4	5
13	It is important to me to see the progress I make.	1	2	3	4	5
14	I know how to check my works for mistakes.	1	2	3	4	5
15	Having my works evaluated by others is helpful.	1	2	3	4	5
16	Having my works evaluated by others is scary.	1	2	3	4	5
17	I like trying out new things by myself.	1	2	3	4	5
18	I have a clear idea of what I need of English	1	2	3	4	5
19	My language learning success depends on what I do in classroom	1	2	3	4	5
20	My own efforts play an important role in successful language learning.	1	2	3	4	5
21	I myself can find the best way to learn the language.	1	2	3	4	5
22	I know how to plan my learning.	1	2	3	4	5
23	I know how to ask for help when I need it.	1	2	3	4	5
24	I know how to set my learning goals.	1	2	3	4	5
25	I know how my language learning progresses.	1	2	3	4	5
26	I know how to study languages well.	1	2	3	4	5

**Portfolio Assessment and Students' Autonomy
in Language Learning**

27	I know how to study other subjects well.	1	2	3	4	5
28	I have the ability to learn the language successfully.	1	2	3	4	5
29	I have the ability to write accurately in English.	1	2	3	4	5
30	I have the ability to get the score I try for in my next English test.	1	2	3	4	5
31	I know how to find an effective way to learn English.	1	2	3	4	5
32	I know best how well I learn.	1	2	3	4	5
33	I have been successful in language learning.	1	2	3	4	5
34	I have my own ways of testing how much I have learned.	1	2	3	4	5
35	I am average at language learning.	1	2	3	4	5
36	Making mistakes is a natural part of language learning.	1	2	3	4	5
37	Making mistakes in harmful in language learning.	1	2	3	4	5
38	It is possible to learn a language in a short time.	1	2	3	4	5
39	Learning a language takes a long time.	1	2	3	4	5
40	I am above average at language learning.	1	2	3	4	5