

Innovations in ELL Assessment: Using Portfolios to Showcase and Evaluate Learner Progress

Sarah Elaine Eaton, PhD

University of Calgary

May 27, 2015

Abstract

Portfolios offer innovative opportunities for English language learners (ELLs) to receive formative feedback that not only helps assess current achievements, but also documents developmental progress over time.

This paper examines the use of portfolios in terms of formative assessment and developing learner autonomy for English language learners (ELLs). Benefits include increased self-confidence, motivation and a sense of personal agency for the learners. Benefits for teachers include a deeper understanding of individual learners' needs and progress. Different types of portfolios are explained, including both paper-based and electronic options, along with typical component elements. Challenges of using portfolios with ELL learners are explored. Finally, concrete recommendations for classroom practitioners are offered.

Key words: English language learners, portfolios, assessment

The use of portfolios and e-portfolios is quickly emerging as a method of alternative assessment for learners in a variety of educational contexts (Barrett, 2010; Brear, 2007; Dominguez, 2011; JISC, 2008; Mueller, 2011). Scholars have become particularly interested in how portfolios can be used in language learning contexts (Babae, M., & Tikoduadua, M., 2013, Shao-Ting & Heng-Tsung, 2010, Cummins, 2008) and organizations such as the British Council (2010) and the Council of Europe (2006) have begun advocating for their use among language learners at various levels.

This paper examines the use of portfolios in terms of formative assessment and developing learner autonomy for English language learners (ELLs). Different types of portfolios are explained, along with typical component elements. Challenges of using portfolios with ELL learners are explored. Finally, concrete recommendations for classroom practitioners are offered.

Formative Assessment for English Language Learners

Researchers have attempted to situate formative assessments within more comprehensive theories of pedagogy (Black & William, 2009, p. 6), and while teachers may agree that formative assessment is important, they are often unsure precisely how to incorporate it into their practice (Corcoran, C. A., Dersheimer, E. L., & Tichenor, M. S., 2004, p. 213). In traditional summative assessment including tests and essays, the locus of control remains with the teacher. The student performs an act, such as writing a test or an essay, which is then graded by the teacher. In this model, the learner is largely a passive recipient of an evaluation (Black & William, 2009, p. 11). The teacher interprets the learner's success or failure on a given task. The learner's role is that of a recipient. There is often an expectation that the learner will use a summative assessment to identify gaps in his or her own learning and improve for next time.

Formative assessment not only judges a learner's current accomplishments, but also assesses the developmental progress a student has made throughout a given time frame. Formative assessment provides a less stressful evaluation experience for the learner (Babee & Tikoduadua, 2013, p. 50). Rather than the outcome being a pass or fail, formative assessment documents how far the learner has come, how much progress has been made and what the student has learned throughout the process.

Learner Autonomy

In formative assessment, the role of the learner shifts. He or she becomes more actively involved in the assessment process. Both learner and teacher reflect on the learner's progress in a dialogic process where the points of view of both the learner and the teacher are considered and operative (Black & William, 2009, p. 12). This process may be both powerful and difficult for English language learners who are unaccustomed to having a sense of autonomy.

In their study on how blogging can be used to develop the reflective writing skills of ELLs Bhattacharya & Chauhan (2010) found that key elements of learner autonomy, including cognitive skills, research skills and self-editing skills improved, as did the subjects' sense of independent decision-making around their own learning.

While working with ELLs to develop their sense of personal autonomy Cho (2007) asserts that, "Whether students are aware of it or not, (students) are capable of deciding what they think is best for them in order to achieve their personal goals, especially in a real-life situation. Students in fact often have very good ideas for making learning better" (p. 227). Cho notes that students can develop a sense of understanding about their own learning without an explicit focus on changing or even improving (p. 233). In other words, a learner's sense of autonomy and personal power develop in a positive way through the act of reflecting on his or

her own learning process. In Cho's (2007) study, it was observed that as ELLs' self confidence developed, so did their enjoyment of learning the language (p. 235). Babee & Tikoduadua (2013) assert that the use of portfolios for ELLs can facilitate productive learning and help students learn to engage in self-evaluation throughout the learning process (p. 50). Finally, "a range of unintended skills such as innovativeness, creativity, lateral thinking, divergent thinking, recording, note-taking, introspection and reflection are made possible" (McDonald, 2012, p. 337) through the use of portfolios.

Types and content of portfolios

Portfolios have traditionally been used in performance disciplines, such as visual art and design, clothing and textiles, or architecture, but are increasingly being used to assess other subject areas as well (McDonald, 2012, p. 338). Babee & Tikoduadua (2013) identify two types of portfolios (p. 51). Formative portfolios include samples of student work throughout the term. The materials included demonstrate progress, growth and development. This traditional type of portfolio contains tangible copies of work which can either be hand-produced or hand-written, or hard copies of work produced using a word processor or other digital technologies. McDonald (2012) calls this a "process portfolio" since its intention is to "document all phases of the learning process with special emphasis on metacognition and reflection" (p. 336).

The second type of portfolio is the electronic portfolio, also known as an e-portfolio. These are designed to include proof of student skills. E-portfolios may include elements of both formative and summative assessment, where as traditional portfolios are almost always designed to be formative in nature. Some learning management systems (LMSes) such as Desire To Learn (D2L) include an e-portfolio option. The materials included in an e-portfolio are entirely digital, with no hard copies produced. Babee & Tikoduadua (2013) suggest that web-based e-portfolios

may provide learners with more flexibility because they can often be accessed from all over the world, offering parents, caregivers and others the opportunity to monitor a learner's progress from afar (p. 51).

Both traditional and e-portfolios contain a collection of the learner's work, called artifacts, as well as learner reflections. Lopez-Fernandez & Rodriguez-Illera (2009) note that student reflections in e-portfolios enhances learning (p. 609) and this is true of traditional portfolios as well, providing that written reflections are included and the portfolio is not simply a collection of artifacts. McDonald (2012) notes that a portfolio must be purposeful (p. 336) and its contents, selective.

Harris (2009) notes that a portfolio may contain additional elements including a teacher's systematic observations of a learner's development; nonjudgmental anecdotes about the learner's progress; checklists or inventories to help the learner stay organized when preparing their portfolio; rating scales to help teachers and learners track progress; and notes from interviews with learners or parents to document progress (p. 83). These are supplementary evidence, however, not intended to replace the two fundamental elements of authentic artifacts and a learner's own reflections on the process of learning.

Challenges using portfolios with ELL learners

Lopez-Fernandez & Rodriguez-Illera (2009) conducted a study with 88 university students implementing e-portfolios for the first time. In their study, they found that computer literacy plays a role in the learner's experience of using e-portfolios and even those with competency in information and communication technologies (ICT) reported varying levels of satisfaction using electronic or web-based portfolios (p. 614). Just because an e-portfolio option

may be available, does not mean that all learners may prefer it, even if they have high levels of computer literacy.

Bhattacharya & Chauhan (2010) noted that learners became frustrated with technical issues that had nothing to do with their learning task, such as how to set up their own blog (p. 381). Limited computer time and access to the Internet were identified as additional challenges (p. 381). Aoki & Molnar (2010) found that language students using technology to enhance their language learning process experienced frustration and diminished motivation due to technical issues (p. 5), however their level of comfort increased as they gained experience using the technology.

Hourigan & Murray (2010) conducted a study with 45 language students who used blogs to engage in reflective practice about their language learning process. Of particular note, is their assertion that even “digital natives”, a term coined by Prensky (2001) may not be “digital learning natives” (p. 212). Their study found that the assumption that digital natives adapt to technology-enabled learning effortlessly is a myth. Learners who are experienced using technology for recreational purposes such as social media, may still require significant support to use a particular technology for learning (p. 218). The subjects in Hourigan & Murray’s (2010) study required extensive and explicit instructions on how to set up and use technology for their specific learning tasks and processes. Their results also showed that teachers were required to invest significantly more administrative time to prepare for and support students to integrate technology on an ongoing basis (p. 215), adding that technical support is a “crucial consideration” (p. 216). Moreover, students required significant reassurance and support throughout the process, but particularly at the beginning when they were unfamiliar with the technology or what was expected of them (p. 217).

Finally, privacy issues became a concern when learners using a web-based platform preferred to have their digital reflections private instead of public. This became problematic for both students and teachers when invitations sent by students to allow only their teachers to view their work became invalid (p. 216). With growing awareness around individual privacy rights, care needs to be taken when considering web-based learning assessment tools and platforms and risk assessments may need to form part of the decision-making process.

While traditional paper-based portfolios may be less flexible in that they cannot be easily shared across the web with others, they may present fewer pedagogical issues and less administrative load for the teacher who is interested in using portfolios with ELLs. For some learners, the task of building both their own sense of autonomy and self-regulation while simultaneously building their competence and comfort using technology for learning may prove overwhelming. It is important for the teacher to decide what the primary purpose of implementing a portfolio is: introducing the notion of formative assessment and increased learner-autonomy, building the learner's capacity to use digital tools for learning, or a combination of both.

For teachers, an understanding of what formative assessment is and a willingness to engage in alternative assessment that does not produce a concrete test mark are critical pedagogical elements necessary for portfolios to be successful. The teacher must be willing to set aside notions that summative assessment is the only valid form of evaluation. Teachers must embrace, or at least be willing to entertain, the notion that formative assessment provides significant value. A commitment to helping learners build their sense of autonomy and self-empowerment is critical. Teachers can develop richer and deeper communication with learners

(Harris, 2009, p. 84), but this may require a willingness to invest more time in the formative evaluation process.

Recommendations for ELL Educators

The theoretical arguments and research evidence may provide ample grounds to introduce and implement portfolios into the ELL classroom. But theory alone is insufficient for the classroom teacher. Here are five practical recommendations for educators who want to use portfolios with ELLs:

Recommendation #1: Decide Whether a Traditional or an E-portfolio is Better

The choice of whether to incorporate technology into the portfolio process may vary from class to class. Factors to consider include the technology literacy levels of both the learners and the teacher, access to computers, reliable Internet connectivity, the type of e-portfolio platform available and privacy considerations for students.

This decision needs to be made before portfolios are introduced to the class. If an e-portfolio is chosen, working with tech support to install and test an appropriate platform or system is advisable before introducing it to students. Teachers may want to set up their own “test accounts” and learn the nuts and bolts of the system themselves first.

For teachers who decide to implement a traditional portfolio, building a sample prototype, using a folder or binder to show students helps them to visualize what their own portfolio may look like. Teachers will need to decide what supplies the school can provide and what materials students must provide for themselves. Supplies for a traditional portfolio may include binders, plastic sleeves where artifacts can be inserted, paper, scissors, tape, staplers, pens, markers, etc.

Recommendation #2: Help Learners Understand Formative Assessment

Even though traditional testing is often not authentic and teacher-made tests tend to be unreliable (McDonald, 2012, p. 337), it is not uncommon for ELLs to value traditional summative testing or “performance evaluation” above all other types of assessment. The perception among some ELLs’ that traditional testing may be the only credible or acceptable form of evaluation may lead to objections of formative assessment. ELLs in particular may view formative assessment as a waste of time.

McDonald (2012) notes that “students have to buy into the virtues of the exercise sufficiently to make it work successfully” (p. 343). Teachers will want to open a conversation about what formative assessment is and why it may be beneficial. Focusing on the goals of increasing self-confidence, motivation and autonomy can be part of the conversation. Then, introduce the concept of the portfolio and let students know that you will be working with them every step of the way, not only to give them feedback, but also to help them learn the process of building a portfolio through the experience of doing it. Depending on the level of pushback a teacher receives from students, it may be necessary to clearly communicate that the decision to incorporate formative assessment is non-negotiable. What is negotiable is how students go about individually constructing their portfolios.

Recommendation #3: Anticipate Additional Preparation and Learning Time

The process of working with students to build understanding of the benefits of the portfolio may require extra class time or after school consultations to answer questions. Teachers who commit to using portfolios with ELLs may need to spend significant time helping them understand the point of the exercise.

As well, formative assessment requires the teacher to give more individualized and in-depth feedback than correcting a test for which there is an answer key.

Teachers who opt for the e-portfolio need to be prepared to coach students through the nuts and bolts of how to use a given technology for learning step-by-step. This may include repeating instructions, showing students how to use the technology, preparing “how to” sheets with clear and detailed instructions and giving students ample time to learn how to set up their accounts or profiles and use the technology for themselves.

Regardless of whether teachers opt for a traditional or an e-portfolio, spending time in class to talk about both the purpose and the mechanics of the portfolio can help learners understand the process and outcomes of their formative assessment work. Students may also learn from one another as they build their individual portfolios in a classroom setting, getting ideas about what to include and how to customize their individual work. As students build deeper understanding of what the portfolio is and how to build it, they may become more autonomous. Eventually, portfolio-building may be done during individual learning time outside of class, but in the early stages, learning to do it in class may be the most effective way to start.

Recommendation #4: Develop Learners’ Reflective Skills

Learners may require explicit and clear guidance on how to prepare the reflective component of a portfolio (Davis et al., 2009, p. 96). Focus on helping the learner track his or her own developmental changes over time, cultivating a sense of metacognitive awareness and valuing their own original contributions to their portfolio. Encouraging a student to become aware of himself or herself as a language learner, while simultaneously reflecting on how to improve may be useful first steps.

Recommendation #5: Provide Authentic and Individualized Feedback

Written feedback from teachers needs to be meaningful, individualized and relevant. Prompt questions written in the margins may be perceived by learners to be artificial (Davis et al. 2009, p. 92). Instead, teachers might ask questions designed to probe the strengths and weaknesses of each individual student. McDonald (2012) suggests that teachers focus on key areas including: presentation; precision of documentation; appropriateness of artifacts; evidence of learners' understanding, growth, development, and achievements (p. 338)

Conclusions

Research conducted with students using portfolios shows an increased metacognitive understanding of the learning process; heightened motivation and self-confidence; and a more developed sense of learner autonomy and self-autonomy (Davis et al. 2009; Lopez-Fernandez & Rodriguez-Illera (2009); McDonald, 2012). However, more significant investment of time is required to prepare for and engage in ongoing formative assessment. For ELLs in particular, overcoming objections about the validity of portfolios as a legitimate form of assessment may be a necessary and ongoing requirement of helping them to value formative assessment in general. Portfolios can present innovative opportunities for ELLs to develop greater confidence in both their English language competence, as well as their sense of learner autonomy. The investment of time and patience required for the teacher may have long-term benefits that extend beyond the classroom.

References

Aoki, K., & Molnar, P. (2010). International collaborative learning using Web 2.0: Learning of foreign language and intercultural understanding. In Z. W. Abas, I. Jung, & J. Luca (Eds.), *Proceedings from GLAP 2010: Global Learn Asia Pacific* (pp. 3782–3787). AACE.

- Babae, M., & Tikoduadua, M. (2013). E-portfolios: a new trend in formative writing assessment. *International Journal of Modern Education Forum*, 2(2), 49-56.
- Barrett, H. (2010). Creating ePortfolios with Web 2.0 Tools. Retrieved from <http://electronicportfolios.org/web20portfolios.html>
- Bhattacharya, A., & Chauhan, K. (2010). Augmenting learner autonomy through blogging. *ELT Journal*, 64(4), 376-384. doi:10.1093/elt/ccq002
- Black, P., & William, D. (2009). Developing the theory of formative assessment. *Educational Assessment, Evaluation and Accountability*, 21(1), 5-31.
- Breiar, D. (2007). Developing Student Electronic Portfolios. Retrieved from <http://members.shaw.ca/dbreiar/dseportfolios.html>
- British Council & BBC. (2010). Portfolios in ELT. Retrieved from <http://www.teachingenglish.org.uk/think/articles/portfolios-elt>
- Chu, P.-y. (2007). How students react to the power and responsibility of being decision-makers in their own learning. *Language Teaching Research*, 11(2), 225-241.
- Corcoran, C. A., Dersheimer, E. L., & Tichenor, M. S. (2004). A teacher's guide to alternative assessment: Taking the first steps. *The Clearing House*, 77(5), 213-216.
- Council of Europe. (n.d.). Generic Checklists: For Use in European Language Portfolios (ELPs) Designed for Language Learners Aged 15+: European Language Portfolio Templates and Resources. http://www.coe.int/t/dg4/education/elp/elp-reg/Source/Templates/ELP_Language_Biography_Generic_checklists_EN.pdf
- Council of Europe, & National Centre for Languages. (2006) My Languages Portfolio: European Language Portfolio – Junior version: Revised edition. retrieved from

http://www.primarylanguages.org.uk/resources/assessment_and_recording/idoc.ashx?docid=2ff934db-45bb-4712-a051-21e8abd9d48e&version=-1

Council of Europe, & National Centre for Languages. (2006) My Languages Portfolio: European Language Portfolio: Teacher's Guide – third edition. retrieved from http://www.primarylanguages.org.uk/resources/assessment_and_recording/idoc.ashx?docid=7860836a-8905-46fb-87d1-6743420ec741&version=-1

Cummins, P. (2008). Global Language Portfolio. Retrieved from <http://glp.elenes.com/index.html>

Davis, M. H., Ponnampuruma, G. G., & Ker, J. S. (2009). Student perceptions of a portfolio assessment process. *Medical Education*, 43(1), 89-98.

Dominguez, J. (2011, May 26). E-portfolios: Del PLN al apredizaje. Retrieved from <http://juandomingofarnos.wordpress.com/2011/05/26/e-portafolios-del-pln-al-aprendizaje/>

Dominguez, J. (2011, May 26). E-portfolios: Del PLN al apredizaje. Retrieved from <http://juandomingofarnos.wordpress.com/2011/05/26/e-portafolios-del-pln-al-aprendizaje/>

Harris, M. E. (2009). Implementing portfolio assessment. *YC: Young Children*, 64(3), 82-85.

Hourigan, T., & Murray, L. (2010). Using blogs to help language students to develop reflective learning strategies: Towards a pedagogical framework. *Australian Journal of Educational Technology*, 26(2), 209–225. Retrieved from <http://www.ascilite.org.au/ajet/ajet26/hourigan.pdf>

Lopez-Fernandez, O., & Rodriguez-Illera, J. L. (2009). Investigating university students' adaptation to a digital learner course portfolio. *Computers & Education*, 52(3), 608-616.

McDonald, B. (2012). Portfolio assessment: direct from the classroom. *Assessment & Evaluation in Higher Education*, 37(3), 335-347.

- Mueller, J. (2011). Authentic Assessment Toolbox: Portfolios. Retrieved June 2, 2011, from <http://jfmuellet.faculty.noctrl.edu/toolbox/portfolios.htm>
- Prensky, M. (2001). Digital natives, digital immigrants (part 1). *On the Horizon*, 9(5), 1-6.
- Shao-Ting, A. H., & Heng-Tsung, D. H. (2010). E-portfolio-based Language Learning and Assessment. *The International Journal of Learning*, 17(1), 313-336.