

ONLINE ENGLISH LANGUAGE LEARNERS' PERCEPTIONS OF PORTFOLIO ASSESSMENT

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Abstract

Portfolio assessment has been implemented in many core disciplines for quality assurance and consistent assessment of learner outcomes. For English language learning, for which varying proficiency levels of learners exist, portfolios are suggested to assess individual learners' progress. The current study was carried out in an online English language course at a higher education institution in Turkey. After the portfolio implementation, the researcher collected learners' perceptions regarding it as an assessment tool through open ended questions. The findings indicated that learners had very positive feelings towards portfolio use in the course because it helped them to see how they were using the target language. They were able to reflect on what they learned, acquired ownership of their work, and took responsibility of their learning process with enthusiasm and enhanced motivation towards the online English language course.

Keywords: assessment; language teaching; online learning; perceptions, portfolio

1. Introduction

A portfolio is a tool that provides a clear picture of learners' growth and development. Chang, Tseng, Chou and Chen (2011) state that a portfolio covers the multi-faceted nature of the learning process, enabling teachers and learners to reflect on their progress. Reflection on work in portfolios allows students to see their own improvement over time, resulting in a sense of accomplishment. Using portfolios allows learners to establish learning goals and to identify their strengths as well as their weaknesses (Chang, Chen & Chen, 2012).

The current study examines behaviors and attitudes of learners during implementation of portfolio assessment as a part of an online English language course at a higher education institution in Turkey. As Chang, Chen and Chen (2012) point out, student self-assessment of portfolios is a highly reflective activity and, as Hawkes and Raminowski (2001) discover, those who engage in computer-mediated reflections may be more engaged in discussions with peers and reflection than those in face-to face classes.

In this study, students' assessment portfolios consisted of three writing assignments (or drafts) completed in their online English Language class. During the course, learners were

asked to share their perceptions of portfolio assessment through responses to open-ended questions. It was hypothesized that learners who actively participated in preparation and evaluation of a work file would demonstrate more positive attitudes regarding English composition.

2. Literature review

2.1. Benefits of portfolio use in foreign language learning

Apple and Shimo (2004) classify portfolios according to three categories: (a) documentation portfolios (collection portfolios) which include all the works of a student through one course; (b) assessment portfolios in which students exhibit systematically selected works for assessment according to the criteria provided by their instructor; (c) showcase portfolios into which learners put their best work.

Assessment portfolios provide a practical alternative to standardized testing and have been implemented for quality assurance and consistent assessment of learner outcomes in many core disciplines (Cummins & Davesne, 2009). Using portfolios fosters student-centered learning, increases motivation and prepares students for life. Similarly, Akar (2001) reported portfolio assessment may address higher-order thinking by having learners work on items that are authentic rather than pre-determined tasks. Learners have positive perceptions towards portfolio assessment in that it provides more authentic and valid assessment of their achievement; encourages them to become independent and self-directed as well as enhances communication and interaction between students and between students and teachers (Birgin & Baki, 2007). Moreover, it gives learners a chance to reflect on what has been learned (Cummins & Davesne, 2009), accepts them as active participants in the learning, gives them the responsibility to build upon their previous knowledge in a constructive fashion (Akar, 2001) and finally assesses higher order cognitive skills such as problem solving, critical thinking and reasoning (Romberg, 1993). Another advantage of qualitative portfolio assessment is that linguistic outcomes and cultural competence may also be evaluated (Ockey, 2009). Thus, learners prefer portfolio assessment to multiple-choice tests which do not reflect what they have actually learned (Dutt-Doner & Gilman, 1998).

Online learners do not favor computerized tests because the technology involved in administering the assessments might create problems for them (Cummins & Davesne, 2009). The same applies to instructors: in addition to technical problems, there is always the possibility of cheating. The main problem is that an online environment cannot provide a

secure atmosphere for testing and measurement of learning outcomes. With consideration of reliability and validity, Wijekumar, Ferguson and Wagoner (2006) state that web-based distance learning environments present unique challenges to the assessment of learning. Learners are isolated from their peers and do not get immediate feedback in this environment. Reeves (2000) suggests that alternative assessments such as portfolios which develop problem solving, intellectual curiosity, and critical analysis should be used in online learning environments. Similarly, Hung (2012) states that e-portfolio assessments generate positive peer relations, enhance learning of content knowledge, promote professional development and inspire critical thinking.

To recap, portfolio assessment is advantageous in both online and face-to-face learning environments. However, as pointed out by French (1992), portfolio assessment is not easy and requires a paradigm shift in the roles of teachers, learners and assessment criteria. It could be a great burden for teachers to access and assess a large number of portfolios of students in crowded classes; there is a need of technology to facilitate portfolio implementation.

2.2. Portfolio assessment in EFL writing

Hung (2012) suggest portfolio-based assessment is best for language assessment because of the unique nature of linguistic tasks. As Hung (2012) claims, the complex nature of language learning demands an alternative assessment tool. Because learners have varying levels of proficiency, their progress cannot be accurately measured by a single test. It is pointed out that a portfolio fits such a validity construct better than others. As Hinkel (2004) points it out, although they participate in courses aiming at improving ESL (English as a second language) writing proficiency, non-native speakers are often not adequately prepared to produce acceptable academic writing. The wide-ranging problem is that although learners are able to produce a few sentences in the target language when it comes to writing a paragraph, they are confused about where to start, how to progress and when to stop. This may be because writing competence is related to linguistic and sociolinguistic knowledge, knowledge of discourse patterns, knowledge of the world and strategic competence, including knowledge of writing skills, strategies and process (Duong, Cuc & Griffin, 2011). Clearly writing, which requires a number of complex competencies, cannot be measured by a unitary test.

3. The study

3.1. The aim of the research

The study was qualitative in nature. In a qualitative study, participants' perceptions of their experiences are gauged by collecting their responses to open-ended questions (Yıldırım & Şimşek, 2005). During the portfolio implementation, learners were asked to respond to the following questions:

- How do you find portfolio as an assessment tool?
- What have you learned in the process of portfolio implementation?

Learners were asked to write their ideas regarding their portfolio experience asynchronously in their online English language course and returned their answers through e-mails. Later, the researcher coded the qualitative data and then divided it into themes. Next the themes were enumerated, through an account of how frequently they appeared in the raw data.

Because the portfolio assessment was implemented through an online course as a self-study activity, the researcher also measured learners' Internet Self-Efficacy and Self-Efficacy for Self-Regulated Learning scores. For the first measurement, the Internet Self-Efficacy Scale adapted from Joo, Bong and Choi (2000) was used. This scale's internal consistency is high, as demonstrated by the Cronbach alpha of .90 (Baturay & Bay, 2010). It includes five-point Likert type of potential responses: very true, mostly true, somewhat true, mostly not true, and not true at all, with assigned values between 5 and 1. The answer 'very true' received a score of 5 and the answer 'not true at all' a score of 1. The scale included 13 items and was administered shortly after the semester began. At the same time, the learners' Self-Efficacy for Self-Regulated Learning scores were also obtained in order to learn more about learners' perceived capability to use a variety of self-regulated learning strategies within the portfolio implementation. The scale was developed by Bandura (1989) and included 11 items. Cronbach's coefficient alpha of the scale was measured .92 in another study (Baturay & Bay, 2010).

3.2. Participants

The participants of the study were enrolled in the online elementary level English language course at a higher education institution in Turkey. 27 online learners participated and returned the open-ended questions. The demographics of the participants are presented in Table 1.

Table 1. The demographics of the participants.

		Frequency
Gender	Female	10
	Male	17
Age	<18	1
	19-25	19
	26-35	6
	>36	1
Employment	Unemployed	13
	Full time employed	14
School of Graduation	General High School	3
	Super High School	1
	Industrial Vocational High	8
	Commercial High School	7
	Anatolian High School	2
	Science High School	1
	Other	5
Level of Computer Use	Beginner	-
	Medium	13
	Advanced	14
Year of Computer Use	<1	1
	1-3	4
	4-7	9
	>8	13

3.3. Design and procedure

The online English language course was administered via a Learning Management System (LMS). The course was given completely through the web; thus, the learners did not meet with the course instructor at another place. The course included teaching of English vocabulary and grammar and included tutorials and drill and practice of reading, writing, listening and speaking. Portfolio scores were determined through evaluation of writing assignments. The total sum of scores the students' got from each assignment was evaluated as portfolio scores. To evaluate the assignments more objectively and to avoid bias, the instructor got help from another instructor of ELT. A rubric was used for evaluating the assignments; not only the grammar and vocabulary but also the fluency, unity, coherence of students' written works were evaluated.

The following procedure was followed throughout the portfolio implementation:

1. The instructor informed the learners about the portfolio implementation in the course, the assessment of individual pieces of work, the rubric to be used for evaluation of writing task drafts, and the instructions for keeping portfolios. The assessment was carried out via a rubric, so that, as suggested by Birgin and Baki (2007), specific, clear and measurable criteria for each item are identified and applied.
2. A portfolio assessment committee that included the course instructor and another instructor from the same institution was assigned the assessment of writing tasks that were a part of the portfolios.
3. Learners were offered some topics to choose from and were asked to write on their chosen topic. The topics offered were a description of the place where they previously lived, a description of a famous person or their friends, writing a CV/formal letter/informal letter, and retelling a book/story/film/memory. Also some controversial topics chosen to pique student interest were added, including violence at football matches or the pros and cons of dating a friend's "ex." Learners were informed about the submission date of their drafts, the word limit (50 words), and the resources they could benefit from (dictionaries and other online and printed materials).

The process of portfolio assessment, indicated in Table 2, was as follows. First, the researcher (the instructor of the class) presented learners with the topics to choose from. Then the instructor with the help of his colleague collected, assessed and returned reviewed drafts of assignments. Each time the instructors reviewed the drafts they sent them back to their owners. The learners improved their work by correcting the mistakes and making additional revisions before resubmitting the pieces online. This continued for three cycles. Although the course was run by one instructor, the writing task drafts were all evaluated by two instructors via a rubric.

Table 2. Timeline of portfolio assessment.

Tasks	Weeks														F	F	
	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	11	12	13	14			
1. Announcement of e-portfolio assessment	<input type="checkbox"/>																
2. Assignment of portfolio committee	<input type="checkbox"/>																
3. Announcement of topics	<input type="checkbox"/>																
4. First writing draft submission				<input type="checkbox"/>													
5. Committee assessment of the first draft					<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>											
6. Returning assessed draft to learners							<input type="checkbox"/>										
7. Second writing draft submission									<input type="checkbox"/>								
9. Committee assessment of the second draft										<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>						
10. Returning assessed draft to learners												<input type="checkbox"/>					

- | | |
|---|-----|
| 11. Third writing draft submission | □ |
| 12. Committee assessment of the third draft | □ □ |
| 13. Returning assessed draft to learners | □ |
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3.4. Findings

Because the portfolio implementation was an online and self-regulated learning task, it seemed important to measure the learners' Internet self-efficacy scores and self-regulated learning levels. The findings demonstrated that the learners had high Internet competency skills ($M=59$) indicating that using the Internet as the media for assessment would not present a barrier for the learners. Further, the learners were found out to have above average self-efficacy levels for self-regulated learning ($M=58$), which indicated that they were able to plan, prepare and produce writing drafts effectively and punctually.

When learners' replies to open-ended questions were examined, it was observed that all participants had positive perceptions regarding the portfolio assessment. They declared their various positive feelings by pointing out some typical and specific case-based advantages of portfolio assessment (Table 3).

Table 3. Participants' perceptions regarding the effectiveness of portfolio implementation.

	Frequency	Percentage
Vocabulary improvement	13	46
Seeing own mistakes and deficiencies	11	39
Grammar improvement	9	32
Seeing own progress and increased success	7	25
Increased motivation in learning English	6	21
Expressing oneself in the target language	5	18
Reinforcement of learnt items	4	14
Improvement in writing	3	11
More effective than multiple choice tests	3	11
Increased self-confidence in learning English	3	11

Results indicated that learners felt that portfolio assessment helped them to improve their vocabulary (46%), grammar proficiency (32%) and the writing skill (11%). They appreciated opportunities to review their own mistakes (39%) through their revised drafts evaluated by the instructors. One learner reported that "seeing my own mistakes and improving my drafts in time were very helpful to my learning". Similarly, as another participant stated, "It enabled us to learn through seeing our mistakes and correcting them. This has accelerated

our learning and made us study the course with an enthusiasm. And it helped our learning very much.”

Portfolio assessment also provided the learners with opportunities to observe their own progress and increase success in English (25%). Regarding this one learner stated: “...I was very pleased with writing what I was feeling. I improved my grammar by supplying the deficiencies...”. Another one said the same thing while expressing his positive feelings:

Offering various topics enabled us to choose the most suitable one to express ourselves... assignments specific to each student enabled us to self-compete and work towards our goals. Learning of my mistakes and deficiencies in this language enhanced my effort in improving myself. I did not feel being derided or bad for seeing my mistakes and deficiencies; on the contrary, I felt very peaceful. It made me stronger and increased my motivation. I recognized that the same thing could be stated and explained in various ways and I forced myself to find the best way among these.

Learners declared that their motivation in learning English has increased (21%). Regarding this, one learner stated: “Honestly, it has been a practice for me which I have delayed through the years. It made me open the dictionary and make up sentences. Portfolio was very helpful to my learning.”

Learners were very pleased with expressing themselves in the target language (18%). One learner wrote:

While doing this assignment, expressing myself in English enhanced my enthusiasm and motivation towards learning English and also increased my self-confidence. The continuous feedbacks our instructor made to us enabled us to self-evaluate ourselves. My efforts and explorations to enrich my expressions and to use a variety of words in the assignment improved my English.

Some of the learners believed that portfolio assessment reinforced learnt items (14%). They found this kind of assessment more effective than multiple-choice tests (11%) and their self-confidence in learning English improved in time (11%). As another learner reported, “We have seen our mistakes in grammar, in tenses. Therefore [the portfolio] is good since it is not easy to understand them [mistakes and corrections] in tests. We can see the results in tests but cannot understand why [the correct answer] has been written in that way.”

Scored less than previous findings, learners also experienced some other positive feelings towards portfolio assessment and implementation as indicated in Table 4.

Table 4. Participants’ perceptions regarding the effectiveness of portfolio implementation.

	Frequency	Percentage
Helps to reach one’s own goals	2	7

Active learning	2	7
Encouraged learning	2	7
Enthusiasm to learn new things	2	7
Gradual improvement	1	4
Enhanced motivation towards online learning	1	4
Improvement in formal writing (business)	1	4
Enthusiasm to produce better work (self-compete)	1	4
Flexibility to choose own topics helped explaining oneself	1	4
Learning and development focused	1	4
Increased instructor-learner cooperation	1	4
Support for research-based learning	1	4
Supports practice in English	1	4
Gained self-evaluation ability	1	4
Improving oneself culturally	1	4
Development in explaining oneself	1	4
Facilitates learning	1	4
Accelerates learning	1	4
Eradicates 'the distance' in online learning	4	4

For some learners this implementation encouraged them to learn enthusiastically (7%) in an active learning environment (7%) and helped them to reach their pre-defined goals (7%). One learner emphasized that “The portfolio as an assessment method facilitates learning through the reinforcement of learnt items and leading to research for the enrichment of drafts [assignments]. Differing from the method of studying on certain patterns, it forces you to produce sentences on your own specific to your work.”

Another one stated how enthusiastically they worked on the drafts:

Me and my friends are very pleased with this implementation. While we are doing other course assignments we often feel that we should throw off the burden of those assignments as soon as possible; whereas, in this course we enjoyed doing these assignments. My friends did not criticize the scores they got, instead they overrated and took care of it and tried to get a better score next time in the next one [draft]. We did not feel the distance of distance learning through portfolio implementation.

They found this method of learning more helpful to their development and learning than other methods. One stated: “You are not stressed with getting the highest score but you focus on learning and improvement. The only criterion in your drafts is you, so you can state what you feel. Instead of competing with others by some questions, there is a specific training for you and this makes you self-confident and pushes you to learn more.”

Another participant reported his positive feelings with the following statements:

I have had an opportunity to research many subjects while preparing the portfolio drafts. This portfolio [implementation] increased my ambition to learn English. Opposite to ordinary

methods, a learner and an instructor contributed to the development of one common thing which was very effective. I wish the implementation was longer for more learner improvement. The implementation of this method in our other vocational courses would be a great opportunity for us.

And another expressed his feelings with a highly assertive statement: “This study has been the most effective learning I have had so far...” They were very pleased with the ongoing instructor-learner cooperation throughout the process. Regarding this, one stated that “...With the instructor’s continuous feedback, people can follow their own development and discover their weaknesses...”

The learners stated that they improved their writing skills: “We have at least learned how to proceed in a paragraph and we learned how to use words together, correcting writing mistakes and our deficiencies. If we write portfolios continuously, we can improve our English more.”

Similarly, another stated that: “...We have learned what to use or not use in a sentence and how to make up a sentence.” And some others supported this with “To me, apart from the structured sentences, we have learned to construct meaningful sentences and use new vocabulary...” as well as “I saw that I am able to make up meaningful sentences following each other. I have improved my English vocabulary by looking up words.”

It is clear that although learners had different feelings about portfolio assessment overall they found it enjoyable and effective for learning. They liked seeing they could produce something in the target language and their self-confidence increased. They had an opportunity to see and correct their mistakes with the help of their instructor’s ongoing feedback and videoconferencing. Besides, they were pleased with the opportunity to choose their own topics to write about. Their feelings led them to participate enthusiastically in the course.

4. Discussion

The findings of the current study indicate that learners with Internet competency and moderate level self-regulated learning skills had very positive feelings towards the implementation of portfolio assessment during an online English class. Similar results have been reported by Baturay and Daloğlu (2010). In their study, learners stated that keeping e-portfolios helped them to use English language to give their opinions (85%), to read (85%), to write (85%), to talk with their instructors (73%), to participate in online courses (73%) and in their communities (58%). Alabelwahab (2002) also found that most learners enjoyed using a

self-assessment portfolio, and they found the process of reflecting on their own learning to be helpful.

Another finding was that the students acquired ownership of their own learning and demonstrated enthusiasm and enhanced motivation towards the course. These findings are reminiscent of Chen (2006), who found learners favored portfolio implementation, considered the learning tasks to be conducive to learning and viewed portfolios as good tools for examining learning processes and augmenting learning methods. In her study, Alawdat (2013) examined learning gains of the students and concluded that using e-portfolios motivated them and enhanced their writing skill and language learning.

Some of the findings of the study indicated that portfolio intervention was very beneficial for learners' awareness of the grammatical and spelling mistakes. It provided an alternative way to learn new vocabulary and terminology and a chance to express themselves through writing. Moreover, the learners were very pleased with seeing their progress particularly in their written English, grammar and vocabulary over time and they felt active in the learning process. Regarding this, Lam and Lee (2009) suggested that the formative potential of portfolio assessment can be better utilized in the EFL writing classroom and their study confirmed this with the finding that learners think that implementation of portfolio assessment can help improve writing ability.

Learners appreciated continuous feedback from their instructors because it helped them see their mistakes and correct them. Nunes (2004) states that the reflections of students about their learning can help them to become autonomous learners and these can play an important role in activating the learners' metacognitive strategies. Similarly, Eppink (2002) stated that through reflective practicing, learners' metacognitive and introspective awareness are enhanced. When learners identify their own weaknesses they can more promptly self-monitor their learning process and try to take action to overcome those shortcomings.

Finally, learners stated that portfolio assessment was more effective for them compared to multiple-choice tests. This may be because multiple-choice tests do not adequately reflect what students have learned. (Dutt-Doner & Gilman, 1998). Also, as Lam and Lee (2010) reported, portfolio assessment is less threatening and much more supportive of student learning than timed, impromptu essay tests.

It is clear that online learners welcome new methodological implementations such as portfolio and assessment tools and they are positive about the learning experience a portfolio-based classroom provides. They believe that using portfolios eradicates the 'distance' between learners and the instructor, which online learners often complain about. They indicate that

such implementations make them feel as if they are part of a community, rather than working alone.

5. Conclusion

Portfolio implementation and assessment provide learners with a means of observing their own progress and becoming actively involved in the learning process. It not only gives learners a feeling of freedom, self-confidence, autonomy, and encouragement but also enthusiasm to learn more. This study supports similar findings in the literature regarding the advantages of portfolio implementation and assessment and also yields more specific and case-based findings. Learners found learner-centered assessment more effective than traditional achievement assessment tools such as multiple-choice and open-ended tests. They reported that they benefit greatly from instructors' continuous constructive feedback and coaching and they are able to observe their own improvement in the target language. Through portfolio implementation, they are able to express themselves in the target language without any hesitation or fear of making mistakes and getting lower scores. An additional finding regarding portfolio implementation was that learners preferred choosing their own topics for written assignments.

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