

STUDENTS' ACCEPTANCE OF PORTOFOLIO ASSESSMENT IN AN ENGLISH FOR SPECIFIC ACADEMIC PURPOSE (ESAP) COURSE AT A POLYTECHNIC IN CHINA-REFLECTION ON LECTURERS' BEST PRACTICES

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ABSTRACT

Learning portfolio records the dynamic learning process of individual learners as a form of formative assessment. Portfolio evaluation system has attracted great interest from language educators as it could train learners and improve their language proficiency. This paper set out to explore the potential benefits that could be gained in language learning via the implementation of learning portfolio assessment. This paper uses a case study of the teaching and learning of a course in the major of business English in a vocational college to show the significance of portfolio evaluation system in increasing students' interest and their learning autonomy. The students showed positive response via survey questionnaires that registered a mean of 3.90 with all items being recorded above 3.50 and via the structured interviews where the students expressed strong receptiveness to the range of benefits that they could gradually gain via such a dynamic teaching, learning and assessing process. Recorded observations by the author also showed positive signs of development in key areas like learners' autonomy, self-confidence, critical thinking and self-reflection abilities. This study has positive implications for the teaching and learning in vocational college and will be useful for educators to take up as a dynamic teaching and learning approach.

Key words: *Portfolio Evaluation System; English Teaching and Learning in Vocational College; Evaluation Reform; Autonomy*

INTRODUCTION

In recent years, higher vocational education in China has developed vigorously. The basic requirements for English Course Teaching in higher vocational education emphasizes "taking quality as the basis and ability as the core". This demands modern higher vocational English teaching to be student-centred and application-oriented in order to improve learners' ability to use the language and help them form the habit of autonomous learning (China MoE, 2000). How to fundamentally stimulate students' interest, change their learning concept, and really integrate them into teaching activities to cultivate their autonomous learning ability has become a common topic of discussion among colleagues in Higher Vocational college English teaching circles. Learning portfolio evaluation or commonly described as portfolio assessment is a formative and developmental evaluation. According to Singh and Samad (2013) portfolio assessment is a tool used to document students' learning via a series of tasks and has the potential to help improve their learning of English by developing their ability to self-evaluation and reflection abilities to understand their strengths and weaknesses. Moreover ESAP has different approaches and purposes of learning from English for General Purpose (EGP) by aiming to "communicate a set of professional skills and to perform particular profession-related activities" (Rahman, 2015). It is an important evaluation method via exploratory-based learning which contains the idea that learning is a process and continuous evaluation is an organic part of the learning process. In this sense, it is identified

as a form of authentic integrated assessment and serves as a good platform to cultivate learning autonomy within students. Hung (2012) recommends the portfolio-based assessment for assessing language due to the unique and complex nature of linguistics and language learning that demands for alternative assessment tool. Moreover, learners have varying levels of proficiencies and their progress cannot be accurately measured via a single test. Learning portfolio assessment fits the validity construct better than others.

There is still a big gap between the current higher vocational English teaching process and teaching evaluation and the realization of this goal. In teaching, the concept of student-centred education has not been truly reflected and students' participation in the organising the teaching content, the curriculum schedule and the selection of teaching materials is far from enough. Teaching evaluation still mainly adopts the mode of summative evaluation, which leads to the students' developing exam oriented, backwash mentality and inadequate language mastery. Insufficient mastery and lack of English proficiency among undergraduates were inherited from previous learning at schools normally affect the successful teaching and learning in the ESAP courses at tertiary level as some students are not prepared for it (Ahmadet al., 2017). In foreign research literature, the introduction of formative assessment, the construction of English learning portfolio and the participation of students in the process of learning and evaluation have achieved some results. In recent years, there have been theoretical and empirical studies on the evaluation of learning archives in China. However, the application of portfolio assessment in higher vocational teaching is still limited. Evaluation is often the first and most important concern for many stakeholders among all the components of English for Specific Purposes (ESP) (Anthony, 2018). In this context, the authors resorted to the use of portfolio assessment in Higher Vocational English teaching. Due to the prevalence of traditional education approaches it could be observed that many students fail to make good self-planning and set appropriate learning goals. The motivation for learning may sometimes be lacking and they could not taste the fun of learning and realize the significant value of learning. Generally, teachers are found to use technology to support their existing practices rather than alter or integrate them in a more active and holistic. Studies have also shown that much of 21st century active learning and blended learning has not changed much pedagogical practices (Cherry, 2010).

This paper attempts to study the role of learning archives evaluation in stimulating higher vocational students' learning interest and cultivating higher vocational students' autonomous learning ability. The research questions to be answered from this endeavour are first is that learning archive evaluation a good and practical to do in English language class. The second is that whether learning archive evaluation spur students' learning interest and cultivate learning autonomy or not.

Scholars in China and abroad (Kohonen, 2000; Snowman & Biehler, 2000; Zongjie & Aifeng, 2005) have conducted some research on learning portfolio. This is important as student-centred and active environment has become part of the hallmarks of 21st century active learning and blended learning. According to Demirel & Duman (2015) portfolio had positive effects on students' achievement in terms of writing, listening and reading skills as the students liked the learning portfolio activities. The analysis of the open-ended questions revealed that students liked the portfolio application and they had positive attitudes towards learning English in general. On the other hand, the interview with the students made it clear that students like portfolio activities. They regard learning portfolio as a record of students' dynamic learning process and a growth history of students' learning. Learners use learning files to store all kinds of learning materials and assignments they have done in a certain period of time, and then reflect on their learning

under the guidance of teachers, evaluate the learning content and learning process. Learning portfolio integrates learning and evaluation. It can not only cultivate and improve language learners' language skills, but also cultivate learners' autonomous learning ability, help to enhance learners' self-awareness in the learning process, and cultivate their ability of self-evaluation and learning arrangement. Kohonen (2000) compared the evaluation of learning portfolio with the traditional standardized examination evaluation, and pointed out that the evaluation of learning portfolio regarded the evaluation as an organic part of teaching, and each learner was fully respected as a unique person. Evaluation focuses on the strengths and advantages of learners, that is, what they can do and further improve in those aspects. The content of evaluation is richer and more comprehensive than a single examination, and can reflect the learning process of learners from multiple angles. The evaluation process presents the characteristics of dynamic and development, rather than "one stroke".

The results of learning portfolio assessment implementation are of great benefit to both teachers and learners. Yacizi and Ulcar (2021) found in their implementation of portfolio assessment that the students are capable in compiling and developing the learning the content while the portfolio sharing activities created chances for them to learn good English via assistance from their classmates. The students also viewed the tasks like self-evaluation and peer evaluation beneficial as well as the need for active participation and continuous language skills development was considered useful. Via learning portfolio assessment, teachers will also get enough space to discuss with students the establishment of meaningful learning tasks and activities in the language courses. Students can gradually improve their language skills, thinking ability and cooperation ability among themselves while stimulating their learning motivation.

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

Purposive samples for the study selected based on English language proficiency level comprise students from an ESAP course. The samples chosen are 74 students of Business English Major Students comprising 62 females, 12 males who are in Grade 07 from the School of Foreign Languages of Ningbo Vocational and Technical College, in China.

Survey questionnaires on students' perception of portfolio based learning comprise 19 items representing three domains namely students' interest and enthusiasm in establishing portfolio, students' participation in class and students' attitudes towards learning outcomes. The questionnaires validity was enhanced to prior use via piloting and improving vague and ambiguous questions items. Cronbach Alfa recorded an acceptable level of $\alpha > 0.7$, indicating high internal consistency. In addition the items are significant without redundancies as questionnaire items recorded value of $p < 0.05$ for all 19 items which is at an acceptable level.

Structured interviews were also used to elicit more detailed information from the students. Ten students were interviewed (5 from each class) to probe their opinions and perceptions on the use of portfolio in language learning. The interviews were recorded, transcribed verbatim and shown back to the students to verify the accuracy.

Class observations were also undertaken via jotting of field notes. The author observed and made notes during and after every class session with the respondents. Attention was paid on students' performance during all class activities and their work output via the portfolio. Verbal and written peer comments were also noted by the researchers namely their self-comment and peer comment on their presentation, and their summary of their presentation and self-reflection on their own performances, group members performance and classroom atmosphere. Among the learning activities done, recorded and reflected in the portfolio are dictation practice, written answers, summary of tasks, their feelings at that time,

the lessons they learned from each other, their summary of the term learning. I recorded students' feedback on their own performance and their self-reflection on their performance, such as how to improve further. All available findings were collated and subjected to detailed analysis via inductive and deductive analysis model (Seidman, 2006).

Based on the course objectives of different stages of Comprehensive English, the content of students' learning portfolio is divided into three modules namely language knowledge module, language application module and reflection evaluation module. The language knowledge module mainly includes the students' exercises and assignments in listening, speaking, reading and writing, and the language knowledge collected after class. The language application module mainly includes various activities carried out by students, including early reports ten minutes before class and group performances in class. The reflective evaluation module includes students' semester learning plan, self-evaluation and feedback after quiz, learning diary, teaching suggestions, and self-evaluation and other evaluation of learning files at the end of the term. In the process of developing learning portfolios, the authors guided, inspected and supervised the students regularly to ensure its smooth implementation, gradualness, authenticity, and prevent loss of time. The learning portfolios are kept by the college students as individual learners.

At the beginning of the semester, the lecturer asked the students to write an English letter to her, stating their semester learning plan, pointing out their strengths and weaknesses, and specifically describing what they want to improve. At the same time, it lecturer suggested that the students write a weekly diary. The students who did not show serious attitude are advised, counselled and asked to redo the given tasks. At the end of the two semesters, the lecturer get the students to evaluate the portfolio files of the two semesters implementation via self-evaluation, peer evaluation and teachers' evaluation, so as to comprehensively and objectively reflect the students' learning process and learning results of the two semesters. Students' self-evaluation and evaluation of their peers are written in the form of English letters. In the self-evaluation, the students summarized their achievements in one semester, point out their shortcomings and deficiencies, and put forward corrective measures and solutions. When conducting peer evaluation, each student should write to at least one peer. The lecturer required them to form an attitude of responsibility towards their peers and in seeking truth from facts, when reading and browsing their peer's learning portfolio files. This happened when reviewing their various performances in a semester, and then making an objective evaluation. After that, the lecturer makes the final evaluation, focusing on the learners' efforts, sense of responsibility, enthusiasm to participate in activities and the improvement of various abilities.

RESULT AND DISCUSSION

The data for this research is elicited via mix method case study that includes survey questionnaire, individual structured interviews and classroom observations. The data presentation start with demographic information of the ESAP Course and the students as respondents.

Students' English Proficiency and ESAP Course Profile

Findings from the demographic survey showed that 86% of the respondents achieved National College English Test Band 4 certificate after 1 year study of English at college. Descriptors for Band 4 certificate specifies range of commands such as vocabulary-know more than 4000 English words for general purpose. As for listening the students can listen and understand daily conversation and academic lectures at 130-150 words per minute.

Reading capabilities demand that students can read articles by skimming and scanning on life and work at 70 words per minute, As for writing, students must be able to write an essay on daily topics with no less than 120 words. While for translation, students should be able to translate from Chinese to English with 250 Chinese characters within an hour. The research course is the main course of business English major for grade one and grade two - Comprehensive English, which lasts for two semesters of one academic year. Each class has 6-8 class hours per week, which is responsible for cultivating students' Comprehensive English ability and laying down basic language skills for the study of business English courses. Assessment of the course comprise formative and summative evaluation whereby formative evaluation accounts for 70% of the total score, while summative evaluation accounts for 30%.

Early Semester 1 General Observation

They are the source of ordinary high school students. Most students have relatively good foundation of English, have strong learning initiative, and have formed good language learning habits. As higher vocational students, they also have the characteristics of active thinking and strong practical ability. At the same time, there are also a small number of students with poor English foundation and weak learning initiative. They lacked enthusiasm during the experiment. In the first week of school, the teacher used four class hours to tell the students of the two classes about the significance and necessity of the reform of curriculum evaluation methods, so as to win the students' understanding, support and cooperation. Because it is different from the traditional way of only summative assessment, and it is also different from the way that some teachers use half of formative and summative assessment, teachers introduce the specific contents of formative assessment to students. According to the percentage system, attendance accounts for 5%, ordinary quiz accounts for 15%, and the score of learning archives accounts for 80%, of which the proportion of learning archives is the largest. Then, the teacher also introduces the contents of learning archives, the methods, requirements and precautions of building learning archives to students. At the same time, excellent learning file samples are displayed to students and commented on.

Data from Survey Questionnaire

Table 1 below shows survey questionnaire items used to elicit responses from the students as respondents of this present study, in terms of their receptiveness, interest and enthusiasm towards the use of innovative teaching, learning and assessing approaches in the form of learning portfolio assessment.

Table 1: Students' interest and enthusiasm in establishing learning portfolio

No	Questionnaire Item	Mean	Standard Deviation
1	I'm interested in learning English.	3.7027	1.09457
2	I always spend as much time as I can studying English in and after class	3.6216	1.19017
3	I am very interested in establishing my own portfolio.	3.8514	1.09397
4	This is my first time to make a portfolio for English class	3.8919	0.90004
5	I am very interested in establishing my own learning portfolio by listening carefully to the lecturer in class.	3.7703	0.73181
6	I try my best to finish the course homework after class.	3.7027	0.87162
7	I put all work I've done into the portfolio	4.2838	0.60862

8	It's a good practice for my lecturer to check our portfolio progress periodically	3.9459	0.73823
9	I will make active preparations before it's my turn to make a presentation in class	3.8378	0.759
10	I like the way the lecturer allows us to choose presentation topics by ourselves.	4.1757	0.62719
11	I will work with my group members on the presentation	4.1351	0.74621
12	We discuss the content together and share the job	4.0676	0.6689
13	I feel very nervous to make a presentation on stage.	4.027	0.73973
14	For topics I am interested, I will actively think and ask presenters related questions.	3.8649	0.83296
15	Portfolio gives me a strong sense of achievement by recording my learning process.	3.8649	0.81635
16	Portfolio contributes to the improvement of language skills (listening, speaking, reading and writing).	4.0135	0.76737
17	Classroom preparation improves their hands-on ability and autonomous learning ability.	3.7703	0.85283
18	The classroom presentation process has improved our oral ability and self-confidence.	3.8108	0.83872
19	The learning process helps us learn to unite and cooperate with others	3.7703	0.76833
	Average Mean :3.9004		

The students generally gave positive response to the implementation of the learning assessment portfolio as indicated by the results of the survey. The average mean was recorded at 3.90 with 6 items registering above 4.0 and the rest of the 13 items all registering above 3.5. The standard deviation was also small not exceeding 1.2 for each of the items. This first round survey on the students has yielded very encouraging results and has motivated the authors as lecturers to intensify the initiative on learning portfolio assessment.

Qualitative Responses on Impact

In the learning files accumulated online by students, from the personal learning plan at the beginning of the semester to the quiz feedback and monthly summary at the end of the semester there were clear signs of change in learning interest. Evidence of personal touches and going the extra mile in upgrading their archive or work profile could be clearly seen as signs of their effort, hard work and growth footprints. It could be generally observed that when students read the final self-assessment they developed a sense of achievement and pride in them

Sample 1

Teacher: *What do you think of our classroom activities, such as portfolio? Have you benefited something from them?*

Student: *"it is very useful to make early reports and establish learning portfolio. We can learn a lot from them, especially learning portfolio. I think I am glad to see that I have done so many things and made so many good works this semester. This may be the process of our growth".*

Sample 2

Teacher: *What do you think of classroom presentation? Have you improved yourself with it?*

Student: *"Sure, sure, every student has an equal opportunity to show himself in front of the stage. This can not only improve our oral English, but also broaden our horizons and let us know a lot of knowledge that we can't learn from books",*

Sample 3

Teacher: *Can you sum up your study during this semester briefly?*

Students: *"Yes, ok, I think this semester is a semester of harvest and progress, I hope I can do better to be perfect in the next semester".*

Sample 4

Classroom observation of one group presentation.

Students to present: *"Do you have your lucky number in your mind?"*

Audience: *"Yes".*

Monitor: *"Do you think our lucky numbers can really bring us luck? Why do you think so?"*

Other students: *"What is your lucky number? Why you choose it?", "People all over the world spend much time and energy to find their lucky numbers. Do you think it's meaningful?", "Do you think we are superstitious to believe lucky numbers can bring us luck?"*

From the above activities, it can be found that group activities help students learn to cooperate to complete tasks, and strengthen the ability to collect data, analyze and integrate data. At the same time, in the process of question and answer and discussion, the students changed the situation of "passive learning". In the active classroom atmosphere, they not only exercised their courage and improved their English expression ability. More importantly, they have gradually developed the ability of autonomous learning, mastered the learning methods and learned how to learn. They feel that great progress has been made and there is a great sense of achievement. Learning portfolios confirmed their learning process and enhanced their sense of achievement. They became more interested in the learning portfolios and were more willing to do it.

Active Participation in Courses

The main characteristics required from higher vocational students are active thinking and strong practical ability. The process of building learning portfolio fully takes into account the students' personal interests and abilities, provides them with a space to publicize their personality, and greatly mobilizes their enthusiasm for activities. Each student can display his / her own style in his / her own study files. Some students are good at English calligraphy, and many beautiful articles have been excerpted from his learning portfolio while others who are good at drawing cartoons and his learning portfolio are like a cartoon story book. As for some students who like pop songs the lecturer could see many pictures of pop stars that they adore in their study files. For students who like creative and elegant styles, the layout of his study files is very creative and stylish. The students actively participated in the learning process and truly become the masters of their learning as they realized that the particular semester was a semester of harvest and progress, and they hope to be better in the coming semester. In their spare time, they actively formulated personal learning plans, summarized and gave feedback on time while adjusting the plans in time and accordingly. Being able to participate in learning evaluation makes them become their own masters, improves their

sense of responsibility and mission, enables them to find their shortcomings, puts forward solutions, and exercises their learning autonomy. Alawdat (2013) examined learning gains of the students in his study and concluded that using e-portfolios motivated them and enhanced their writing skill and language learning.

Improvement of Students' Ability

In the whole activity of building learning portfolio, many tasks are carried out in groups. This process is conducive to the overall improvement of students' ability. For example, the students were able to divide the task to be done equally and cooperate well to search for materials and to make electronic courseware. The students believe that;

"every student has an equal opportunity to show himself in front of the stage. This can not only improve our oral English, but also broaden our horizons and let us know a lot of knowledge that we can't learn from books", which helps to improve their ability to cooperate and communicate with others. The process of students presenting content in front of the podium helps to exercise students' courage and improve their English expression ability.

Signs of Autonomous Learning Initiatives

The progress of students in the early reporting stage was very obvious. In terms of task content many students used the paper, poster or blackboard to write and explain. Later, with the improvement of their computer operation skills, more and more groups made multimedia powerpoint for their incisive display and the content became more and more vivid. At the beginning, most groups mainly explained fragmentary knowledge, and individual groups explained around a topic, which was affirmed by the lecturer. Gradually, the groups began to prepare and show around their own favourite topics. From the perspective of classroom atmosphere, the presenter in the groups has gradually mastered the interaction skills with other students as audience. This enabled the classroom atmosphere to become more active. In the second semester, the lecturer added class discussion after the group report. The other students can ask any questions on this topic for the presenter to answer. If a student cannot answer, he or she can have a discussion with the other students. The increase of one question and one answer trend has changed towards improvement due to the effect of early reporting and presenting activities. On the one hand, in order to avoid embarrassing scenes in class, the reporter and presenter would collected more comprehensive information and prepared more informative slides to be shown. On the other hand, the questions raised by the students as audience are becoming more and more profound.

The above survey data and qualitative data from subsequent interviews and class observations show that the highest vocational students hold a positive attitude towards learning portfolio assessment, which is undoubtedly a driving force for English teaching. At the same time, while improving students' language skills, the advantages of learning portfolio are also reflected in a number of essential aspects.

The establishment of learning portfolio assessment has stimulated higher vocational students' learning enthusiasm, enhanced their sense of achievement and self-confidence, and cultivated their autonomous learning habits and learning ability. The overall findings from the present study reflects similar previous observations in other studies such as by Baturay (2016) where learners show positive reactions in the use of portfolio use in their academic course because it helped them to see how well they use the target language and it allows reflection on what they have. Learning portfolio also make students develop a sense of

ownership of their work, and take responsibility for their learning process with enthusiasm and enhanced motivation.

A good environment is the premise for the smooth progress of the innovative learning initiative. Before starting the learning portfolio assessment initiative the author worked out a detailed implementation plan with support from the college via encouragement and financial support. This initiative by the author cum lecturer at the High Vocational College reflects the findings by (Ahmad, et.al, 2019) where lecturers demonstrated empathy by continuously planning and ensuring that their ESAP course delivery and assessment processes follow a balance content ratio between present academic needs and future workplace needs of the students. The use of the learning portfolio assessment model enabled lecturers to pay attention to formative evaluation, emphasize on students' autonomous learning and cultivate their autonomous learning ability, which itself is a great challenge for teachers. In relation to that, Lam and Lee (2010) reported portfolio assessment is less threatening and much more supportive of student learning than timed, impromptu essay tests. In addition, the finding also mirror Hudori et al., (2020) results of study where they found that assessing writing by using portfolio assessment is good and useful as it provides positive effects to the quality of teaching and learning process in English classes. Therefore, portfolio assessment brings some benefits which can be addressed to both students and English educators.

The educators themselves could gradually change their educational concepts by shifting from the traditional classroom culture and fundamental teaching habits towards "student-centred learning". The realization of this transformation requires the understanding and cooperation of students and requires stabilizing period as being in a hurry is likely to lead to students' failure to understand the adverse consequences of failure to cooperate, leading to the failure of the experiment. Researchers has not only agreed on the role of formative assessment in frequent and interactive assessing learner's progress, but also emphasized the washback effect of assessment result on teachers' understanding to identify learning needs and adjust teaching appropriately and the joint participation of both teachers and students in the assessment process to speed up learning (William, 2011).

Utilizing learning portfolio assessment has enabled the students to have the opportunity to believe in themselves and they can create miracles. Higher vocational students have their own characteristics and strengths, but due to the college entrance examination, they have a certain sense of inferiority complex. This, when coupled with lack of encouragement and appreciation, they are easy to abandon themselves and are difficult to become useful. If lecturers can recognize this and encourage them enough, and correctly guide them to give full play to their strengths, they can also make great progress. In teaching activities, lecturers do not need to forcibly control them, rather they need to try to find and stimulate their interests. When the lecturers use appropriate tasks to drive and attract their active participation some reward and punishment mechanisms can also be used to further consolidate them.

Establishing learning portfolio for formative assessment in teaching is not a simple process. It involves many aspects, which requires teachers and students to invest a lot of time and energy and pay more effort and sweat. It requires teachers to keep thinking, repeatedly explore and boldly practice, and requires a lot of preparation and brewing process. Lecturers need not only a kind of dedication and perseverance, but also enough time and energy. Ahmad, et al.,(2021) believe that case studies on lecturers' initiative as done by this present study can offer useful insights and strategies into the running of ESAP courses and assessments for specific fields like vocational. This is because educators' knowledge, awareness, command of subject matter, experience in curriculum matters and pedagogical knowledge strongly influence their views and best practices at their respective institution.

CONCLUSION

A good external environment provides an opportunity for the development of higher vocational education. Promoting the improvement of Higher Vocational Students' quality and cultivating their autonomous learning ability should not only be a slogan, but also become the action of educators. The use of learning portfolio assessment can help stimulate students' interest, make them become active participants in the curriculum, and improve their ability in an all-round way. It can be regarded as a reference for innovative curriculum evaluation methods. However, this learning portfolio model is still new in the trial stage, and requires further exploration and practice.

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