

ASSESSING LEARNING THROUGH PORTFOLIO USE BY UNIVERSITY STUDENTS. THE EXPERIENCE OF AN ESP CLASS IN VENEZUELA

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Abstract

Portfolio use has widely been recommended for facilitating learning as well as for assessing it. However, in Venezuela this tool has scarcely been used and explored, especially in the ESP field. Hence, the objectives of the present research were, in the first place, to describe portfolio use by university undergraduate students enrolled in an ESP course and secondly, to know their perceptions about its use. In this sense, the study had a descriptive, transversal design. Participants were 95 students taking ESP as part of their subjects in the first year of their careers. Data were gathered directly from students' portfolios and through a Lickert 20-item questionnaire. The analysis of the data was descriptive. Students had a media score up to 14,74 in their portfolios (Standard deviation= 4,24). Besides, it was possible to observe that students perceive portfolio as a useful tool for learning and assessing learning, even more useful than a regular written test. It was also observed that some students admit that they did not follow instructions for building portfolios properly and that that might have negatively affected the elaboration and helpfulness of it. It was concluded that portfolio happens to be helpful for students with tight schedules like dentistry students because it let them to manage better their time for evaluations. Hence, it is recommended to inform ESP teachers and students more about learning tools like portfolio that enhance students' autonomy and that let them to manage their own progress, especially in higher education levels.

Key words:

Portfolio, ESP, university students, higher education.

1. INTRODUCTION

The historic evolution of teaching of English as a foreign language in Venezuela has faced several methodological changes. Among these changes it is possible to name the conception of the learning and teaching processes which are currently conceived in a student centered approach characterized by a constructivists learning environment.

The conception of learning as a constructive process has generated changes in the selection of teaching strategies and techniques by teachers as well as the selection of evaluation tools. As a consequence of the assumption of a constructivist approach, the evaluation process has also been considered differently. In this sense, evaluation is not longer seen as product based but as process based. Is in this context that portfolio emerges as a choice suitable to the current teaching approaches in the country in which students are supposed to be evaluated in the aforementioned terms.

Portfolio in the context of language teaching is defined as a collection of tasks done by the student that show performance and improvement [1]. These tasks are organized according to some criteria that can be set by the teacher, the students themselves or by a consensus among them. Evidence shows that portfolio use encourage the development of students' skills and let students get a higher control of the achieved tasks [2]. Regarding the purpose of the portfolio, it is necessary that the students clearly know its purpose and criteria for the tasks before starting to do it [3]. In this sense, it is better if the students have some written guidelines to complement the verbal explanations. That written material should include contents to add, amount of tasks per content and objective, available resources to research and accomplish the tasks and finally, the procedures to follow to reach the goals.

In the formal education context, portfolios become an alternative for teaching and for evaluation, giving teachers and students the chance of going beyond the use of quantitative possibilities only. When used for evaluative purposes, portfolios as processes evaluators are just an evaluating procedure based on performance and final products got by the students. Even more, they incorporate added value to students' potential for learning [2]. It is important to point out that the use of portfolios, as well as the tasks to be included into it will be directly influenced by the subject area in which it is being used and also by the educative level in which it is being used [3].

Many teachers have included portfolios in their teaching practice for several purposes such as students' qualitative self assessment and to qualitative and quantitative evaluation of students' progress. There are several kinds of evaluation that involve portfolios use. In the first place, when portfolios are used to assess learning and secondly when they are used to assess for learning. Besides, portfolios can help students to understand their own learning process and provide a broader and richer sample about students' work and how it changes and grows through time. However, Barret highlights that the issue has scarcely been researched and that the few published literature is still quite limited [1]. This statement is consistent with the opinions given by Delmastro [4] who is one of the few researchers that have studied the use of portfolios in English teaching setting in Venezuela.

Several reasons support portfolio use in educational contexts. Among these reasons, it is found that as an evaluation instrument, it makes possible to reach the following goals: 1) assess process and product, 2) to motivate students to think of their own learning process by participating in the evaluation process, 3) to develop collaborative skill among students, 4) to promote problem solving abilities, 5) to label properly the learning tasks (i.e., to establish what is mandatory and what is not), and 6) to provide teachers information to adjust contents to students real needs [2].

It is surprising that in spite of the benefits and advantages of portfolio as described by Delmastro [4,5] it is an underused academic tool in Venezuela, specially in higher education and more particularly in the field of EFL teaching. This misuse may obey to the fact that teachers handle both little or no knowledge about it and its usefulness in language teaching. In this sense it is necessary to progressively incorporate portfolio in EFL and ESP settings.

While portfolio is being incorporated to educational environments, it is necessary to conduct research about the optimum conditions for its use as well as students perception about using portfolios for didactic and evaluation purposes. Among the authors that have researched and published studies on portfolio use in higher education in Latin American contexts it is possible to name Barragán [2]. Besides, in Venezuela the majority of studies (whish do not happen to be many) have been conducted by Delmastro [4,5]. Those studies have specifically been related to the use of portfolio in EFL teaching.

Hence, in the described context emerged the present research which objectives were 1) to describe the use of portfolio by first year college students enrolled in a ESP course and 2) to know their perceptions about the use of portfolio. This study is expected to contribute to spread information

about the usefulness of portfolio in ESP environments and to let teachers to know how students feel and think about using it.

2. MATERIALS AND METHODS

Participants were 95 students taking ESP as part of their subjects in the first year of their careers. Those students were distributed in five groups. All the groups had classes with the same teacher.

At the beginning of the course, students were informed that they would be evaluated by using a portfolio and were given written instruction about how to build and present it. All the questions were answered by the teacher. Those questions were mainly related to percentage of the total score given to the portfolio, the possibility to use material obtained from books and other printed materials and from the Internet.

The selection of tasks and materials to be included in the portfolios as well as the ideas for its elaboration were based on Barragán's guidelines [2]. In this sense, tasks: 1) were related to the experience of the students and hence perceived as relevant to their interests, 2) enhance students' complex and critical thinking, 3) adjusted to the duration of the classes and the course as a whole, 4) enhance individual and group work, 5) perfectly structured and with a clear identification of the competences that are intended to develop in order to facilitate their evaluation.

Besides, students' portfolios showed the characteristics indicated by Barrett: 1) the purpose of the portfolio was established by the teacher; 2) it was delivered at the end of the course, even though it was filled through it; 3) it was structured around specific objectives; 4) finishing it required extrinsic motivation; 5) evaluation was mainly summative and retrospective, in other words, portfolios registered all they had learned and performed to deliver date [1].

For the second objective (to know their opinions about the use of portfolio) a Lickert scale type 20-item questionnaire was used. It was designed by the author and validated by experts (linguists with a broad experience on research). The reliability was established through Cronbach's Alpha. After the test the instrument showed to be very reliable (coefficient = 0.82).

Students were asked to fill in the questionnaire after the portfolios were evaluated and students had been notified of the results. It was self administered after being read aloud by the researcher (who was their teacher). Average time for providing the information was 15 minutes.

3. RESULTS

Data were processed by using SPSS 13.0. Frequencies for answers in each item were established. Mean for age was equal to 19.4 ($s=2.15$). In relation to gender, 25 were male and 70 female.

When checking grades from the portfolios, students got a Mean of 14,74 with a standard deviation of 4,24. The evaluation was as follows: a score in the 0-20 scale for each activity and for portfolio presentation (grades for the portfolio were based on organization, realization of assignments according to the instructions, and including all the activities). After having all those grades, the Mean was calculated for each student and it became a final grade.

The instructions given by teachers were also studied from the students' point of view. Results are shown in Table 1.

Table 1. Students' answers about instructions given by the teacher.

Item	Percentage of answers		
	Agree	Do not know	Disagree
The teacher explained in class each activity to be included			
The teacher explained that portfolio would be part of the final evaluation	96	2	2
The teacher explained about the portfolio at the beginning of the course	97	0	3
The teacher provided written explanations for each assignment	81	4	15

Results were divided into categories for the analysis and discussion. Findings related to students experience with portfolios are presented in Table 2.

Table 2. Students' opinions about their experience using portfolio.

Item	Percentage of answers		
	Agree	Do not know	Disagree
I had worked with portfolios previously in other subjects	21	9	70
Working with the portfolio was interesting	62	21	17
Working with the portfolio helped me to improve learning progressively	51	32	17
I prefer portfolio rather than written tests	75	11	14
Success in the portfolio depends on doing activities progressively and not at the last moment	92	6	2
Reading written explanations help to be successful in the use of portfolio	86	4	10

In relation to when the activities were finished, results are shown in Fig. 1 and 2.

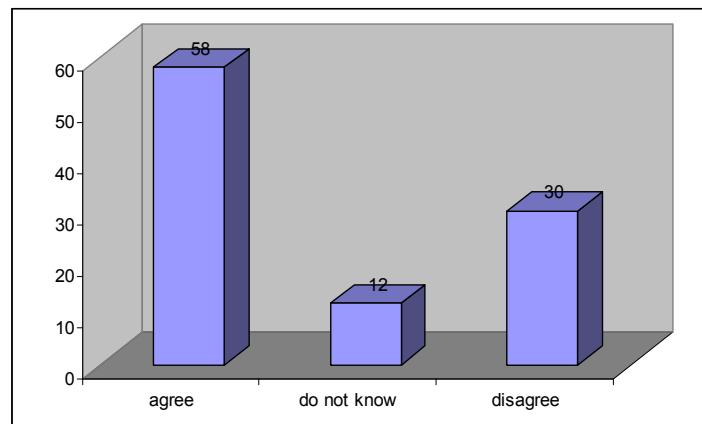


Fig. 1. Percentage of answers to the statement: *Activities to include in the portfolio were partially done in the classroom.*

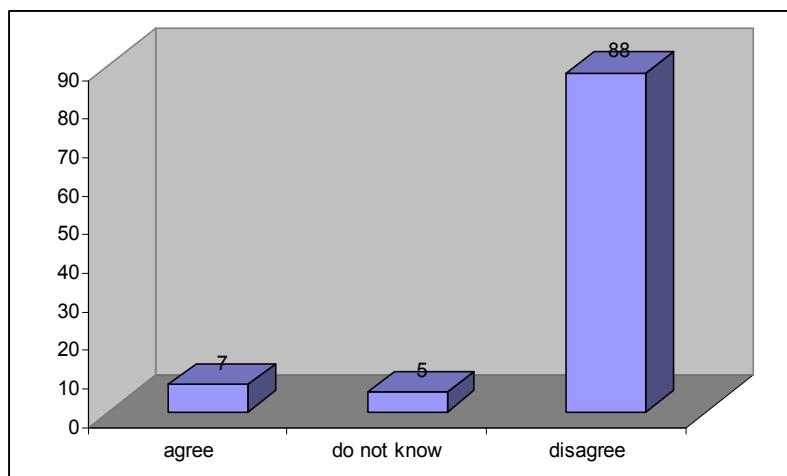


Fig. 2. Percentage of answers to the statement: *Activities to include in the portfolio were finished in the classroom.*

Answers related to attention paid to instructions and students commitment with the assignment are presented in Table 3.

Table 3. Students' perception of their commitment with the activity.

Item	Percentage of answers		
	Agree	Do not know	Disagree
I clarified my doubts in class before starting the next objective			
I did every activity in the right time as teacher indicated them	70	9	21
I finished the activities some days before the deadline	30	11	59
I read the written explanation given by the teacher to finish each activity to be included in the portfolio successfully	94	2	4
I did the activities according to my classmates instructions	13	17	70
I got confused because I did not clarify my doubts in the appropriate moment	57	11	32
I did my best for each activity	89	6	5
I copied from my friend to complete the assignments	21	4	75

As it can be observed in the tables and figures, the items covered four major issues related to portfolio use: students experience with portfolio, teachers instructions, moment in which the activities were completed (classroom or home) and students' perceptions of their commitment to finish the assignment successfully. In this sense, the aspects considered in the literature as relevant when researching about portfolio use for language teaching and learning were considered in this study.

3. DISCUSSION

A critical aspect of portfolio is student's thoughts about the tasks to be included. Another one is the information about the students that portfolios can give to teachers [1]. Results in this study are important for the teacher to plan activities according to students' needs and abilities. In this sense, assessment was beyond to what it was thought. In relation to the first objective of this research, students' use of portfolio was not as accurate as expected; however, it was a positive experience considering that it was the first experience with portfolio for most of them. It was also observed that students' attitude towards portfolio as an assessment instrument was positive even when some of them did not establish a real commitment and did not follow instructions properly.

Several authors [5, 12] share the opinion that portfolios are useful for providing a diagnosis of the groups, as they did in this study. Checking the portfolios provided the teacher information about students achieved knowledge and opened a window for further planning of contents and strategies for the following course.

Results indicated that students had not had previous experiences working with portfolios. This situation might have influenced students negatively generating lack of interest for doing it according to given instructions; being this one the causes of failure in the assignments according to students' self perceptions, but more research on the issue is still needed. Nevertheless their attitude towards portfolio use was positive and promising for future ESP courses in their career.

In agreement to Barragán [2], students indicated that they prefer evaluations like portfolios rather than written tests and other conventional written evaluations. Those students who did not agree were those who failed in most of the activities and had answer that they did not followed instructions properly. It indicates that portfolios are useful for evaluation and are generally accepted by students, lowing affective filters and letting them to be more successful. However, like students are not used to work with this strategy, some of them felt frustrated (as they expressed themselves during additional non planned interviews). This frustration can also result from the complexity of the tasks when it is used for the first time [6]. This aspect requires more inquiry because there is not enough empirical data to support that claim. However, more research on the issue is being required.

Portfolios are still recommended in the ESP context for three major considerations: the limitations of single measure assessment, the complexity of the construct to be assessed, and the

need for adaptable assessment techniques in the ESL classroom. Results in this study indicated that portfolio use can be successful in the higher education context in ESP classes.

To conclude, it is important to highlight that portfolio assessment is not the panacea in ESP [7]. Instead, it is a promising alternative assessment and teaching procedure having strengths and weaknesses that need to be studied for proper implementation. More research is needed in relation to portfolio use in language teaching. One of the issues that would contribute to portfolio implementation in the classroom is teachers' attitude towards portfolio use, which in Venezuela has scarcely been studied. As using this instrument demands more time and effort from teachers [8], it is harder to accomplish successfully the task with 80-90 students enrolled. Therefore it would be necessary to receive some help for reviewing portfolios and for guidance to students during the course [9]. In the Venezuelan context this is hard to achieve due to the constant budget problems faced by the universities.

The pedagogical implications of this research go beyond the description of students' use of portfolio as evaluation tool. Through that description it was possible to realize that students need to be motivated to follow instructions for better results. It is also possible to say that portfolio can happen to be powerful strategy for university students assessment in ESP courses, but it would be advisable not to include all the activities in the portfolio in order to low teachers' effort. In this sense, just more complex activities should be included, giving students time to finish the tasks and go back to the teacher if needed.

Teachers need to emphasize more on the instructions and they should be given orally and written. The technologies for communications and information can be useful in this context too. That is, teachers can place instructions on a Web site and some clarifications related to the activities can be done through chats and blogs, among other.

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