"THIS IS MY PORTFOLIO"

Portfolios in EFL teaching in Finnish upper secondary school

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This article describes a portfolio experiment in the teaching of English as a foreign language in two Finnish upper secondary schools. We wanted to try out portfolios as a new vehicle for teaching, learning and assessment as well as a means for students to negotiate their own syllabuses within the given framework. The topic area of the portfolio course was culture. As student empowerment, learner-centredness and self-directed learning were the key concepts of this experiment, the article attempts to bring in authentic student experiences by quoting student comments. The comments are unedited and they were written in English by the students themselves.

> *My portfolio includes: a poem, a song, a human-analysis, a fairy-tale and a radioplay. They are, I think, a bit unusual, but it's just what I wanted, because I want to be different. I like writing poems and songs.*
>
> *I know these works are myself.*

BACKGROUND

Learner-centredness and self-direction are some of the keywords of contemporary educational discussion in Finland. Learning is currently seen as a process of knowledge and meaning construction based on the learner's own activity and on his or her prior learning. Emphasizing the student's own active role in learning requires a paradigm shift from teacher- or textbook-centred "transmission of knowledge" to a more student-centred and self-directed approach. It also requires a shift from a basically quite uniform curriculum towards more individual curricula. But how to do all that in practice?

Portfolios have proved to be one of the promising alternatives not only for promoting performance-based assessment but also for learner-centred and self-directed learning. In a school context, a portfolio is a purposeful selection of student work usually collected and selected by the students themseles. The portfolio exhibits the students' efforts, progress, and achievements over a period of time. Usually the work also exhibits the students' own choice and interests. The portfolio should include a description of its purpose, goals, and criteria for selection and assessment. Preferably, it contains the students' own reflection on and evaluation of both the selected work and the process of studying and learning. (See De Fina, 1992; Linnakyla~, 1994; Paulson et al, 1991; Tierney et al, 1991.)

A portfolio experiment in EFL teaching

In spring 1994 we - three upper secondary school teachers and I as a researcher - tried out portfolios in the teaching of English as a foreign language. We planned, carried out and monitored the portfolio experimentation in close co-operation, and it was supported by the Institute for Educational Research of the University of Jyvaskyla.

The participating students were all in the second grade of the upper secondary school - aged 17 or 18 - and they had been studying English for almost nine years, 2 - 3 lessons a week. During the three years of upper secondary school the students have 6 - 8 thematically based compulsory English courses, each consisting of approximately 35 lessons. We chose one of those courses - the "culture course" - for the portfolio experiment. This particular course and grade level were chosen mainly for two reasons. First, culture as a topic area was considered to provide an interesting and fruitful basis for students' portfolios fostering their cultural interests, knowledge, and understanding. Secondly, despite considerable individual differences among students, the average proficiency level at that stage, a year before taking their final examinations, is usually quite high. Thus, teaching could more easily focus on the experiental use of the language and more demanding communicative tasks (Clark, 1987). Furthermore, the students of that age already have quite a lot of prior knowlegde, skills, experiences, and interests to build upon and are perhaps more mature for an experiment like this.

In addition to studying English and some aspects of culture, one of the central

ideas of the portfolio experiment was to promote learner-centred and self-directed learning. (For defining learner-centredness, see eg. Tudor, 1993). We wanted the students to take greater responsibility for their own work but also to have the freedom and power to make decisions concerning their studying. We also wanted them to learn to set their own goals as well as to assess their work and state their criteria. Furthermore, we thought it important to encourage students to work together and to give feedback to each other. And, most importantly, we wanted our students to feel ownership of their learning and of their abilities to communicate in English. What would be the use of all those years of studying English if they did not feel able and willing to use the language, to communicate in it, and to keep learning more?

The theoretical framework

The ideas mentioned above are mainly based on the constructive and socioconstructive views of learning. Many of them are also supported by progressivism-oriented curriculum design (Clark, 1987). According to them, teaching should be flexible and it should emphasize the learners' capacities. Students should be active agents of their learning, not just passive receivers of information. Learning is a product of the learners' own actions and it is based not only on the learners' prior skills and knowledge but also on their experiences and interests. Effective, meaningful learning is usually goal-oriented and self-regulated: the students are committed to the goals and, thus, takes control over their learning in order to reach those goals. If the learner has a say in defining the goals and deciding the content and methods, learning is usually more relevant to the learner and, thus, more effective (De Corte, 1993; Tudor, 1993: 23-24). Learning is also a situated and social process. Social interaction, negotiation, and collaboration as well as authentic learning tasks and contexts are all believed to be characteristics of effective learning. (See eg. De Corte, 1993; Linnakyla, 1994; von Wright, 1993.)

In terms of curriculum design, the new Finnish curricular guidelines promote learner-centred approaches and individualized curricula and study programmes within a given framework. For example, the aims and syllabus of the culture course are defined in the Framework Curriculum for Senior Secondary School (1994: 63) as follows:

Students concentrate on self-directed oral and written work. The subject matter and types of activity are chosen according to students' interests and preferences, and carried out eg. as projects. The topics may include eg. arts, literature, music, film, and theatre.

Students creating their portfolios

All participating groups - altogether about 100 students - had a similar framework which outlined basic requirements for the portfolios. First of all, the pieces of work were expected to be diverse both in their content and form. Both oral and written language - listening, speaking, reading, and writing - were to be used either in the product or in the process. Self-assessment as well as giving and getting feedback were also considered important.

First, the students compiled four or five different pieces of work in their *working portfolios*, and then, at the end of the course, they assessed their work choosing two or three pieces for their *final showcase portfolios*. The showcase portfolios were then presented and celebrated in the class. Afterwards they were evaluated also by the teacher and the students' course grades were based on that. No other tests or exams were taken during this course.

Setting goals and defining criteria

At the very beginning of the course, we discussed the framework and basic requirements of the portfolio course with the students. We also discussed the criteria for assessing student portfolios: the work should exhibit a variety of topics and modes, it should display the student's involvement in and responsibility for his or her work, and use of English should be fairly clear and fluent. Accordingly, grammatical correctness and good vocabulary alone were not the most important criteria for outstanding work.

The students were also given some ideas and background materials to help them set their own goals, choose their topics and plan their work. The development of the actual syllabus for this course thus became a collaborative effort between the students and teachers (Nunan, 1988:2). Nevertheless, even though the teacher and other students were there to help, setting one's own goals and planning one's work

was not easy for everybody. Students' abilities as well as their willingness to take control of their own learning varied a lot.

> *When I started this course my head was really empty, I didn't know what to do.*

> *I am not very good at English and culture is not my hobby (except for listening the music and watching TV), so at first the whole portfolio looked very difficult. I started to think: " What to do?" and then I (with my friends help) found these four subjects.*

> *All the time, during this course, I was very in this portfolio-working. The theme, arts, was the best possible for me. I was full of different kinds of ideas, so it was easy for me to start working.*

The teacher's role was far from easy and simple. Even though the teacher did not have as many classroom lessons as usual, her responsibilities increased. As Tudor, for instance, says (1993: 24-29), in a learner-centred approach the teacher performs many different functions, such as helping students develop awareness of learning goals, options and themselves as learners, analysing their needs, transferring responsibility and involving learners in the learning process. This all, of course, requires many skills in addition to those needed in more traditional modes of teaching - as well as a lot of time and energy (Tudor 1993: 29-30).

Self-directed work

> *About the schedule: ... err, as you know writing a story can only be done when the moment is right. So I'll be waiting for it. Don't worry, I'm quite sure it will come soon.*

During the course of about 35 lessons, the students were expected to attend about 15 lessons. Most of these 15 lessons dealt with the portfolios but there were a couple of grammar lessons and language laboratory lessons as well. Otherwise, the students were free to study when and where they preferred. In order to monitor

their work, the students were asked to write down notes about their studying in their working logs. Both inside and outside the classroom, the students worked both on their own and in pairs or small groups. In case of any problems, they were encouraged to come and ask the teacher for help.

Feedback in class conferences

Class conferences were held once a week and there the students were asked to go through each other's work and comment on it in small groups in order to improve it. The teachers also tried to monitor and comment on the students' work while the work was in progress and thus provide immediate feedback as well as support and additional help if needed. In larger groups, the teacher having more than 30 students, this was, however, sometimes quite difficult.

In general, giving feedback was considered very difficult, yet also helpful. To make peer-assessment easier, we gave students some basic questions that they might use as a starting point: What was the best or the most interesting thing in this piece of work? Did the piece raise any questions in your mind? Was there something you would like to know more of, or something you did not quite understand? How would you improve the piece? What did you learn from it? However, more modelling and scaffolding would still have been needed.

Every week we had so called "Class Conference" (CC) meetings where we were supposed to discuss about our portfolios. It didn't work. We did talk about them, but only for five minutes, and after that we just talked about everything else.

The advices that my friends gave me were very precious.

A wide range of personal pieces of work

The pieces of work the students produced were diverse both in their choices of topic and form. Compared to our suggestions - for instance, a review of a film or a book, or a portrait of an artist and his or her art - the students' portfolios showed a much more varied and comprehensive definition of culture.

Book, film or TV reviews were very popular, though. The topics ranged from *Little Women* to J. R. R. Tolkien's whole production; from *The Bold and the Beautiful* to *The Unbearable Lightness of Being*. There were many portraits as well, ranging from Carl Barks to Toni Morrison, from Charles Chaplin to Tom Cruise and from Michael Jackson to Maurice Ravel, to cite a few.

Very many students had wanted to express themselves and create something of their own. There were poems, short stories, fairytales, cartoons, and even songs. One student had written a seven-page-long fairytale in rhyming English! Some students had taped their own radio talk shows or radio plays; some had videotaped small plays or films.

Several students had engaged themselves in finding different source materials for various project papers and essays in English. For example, one student had investigated the Celts and their culture; another student had analysed Kullervo (one of the central characters in the Finnish national epic *Kalevala*) in Finnish arts and society; and yet another one had studied Romanticism in music. In Shakespeare's footsteps, one student presented Stratford-upon-Avon; another discussed the problem of power in Shakespeare's *Julius Caesar*. An old book of American and English poetry had inspired a student to write a booklet about Emily Dickinson and her poetry imitating the 19th century handwriting and ornaments; the Bible had inspired a group of four students to analyse the stylistic differences in two Finnish and English translations of *Genesis*.

There were also taped discussions or interviews dealing with various aspects of culture. Furthermore, there were, for instance, a poster focusing on a language as part of culture (*Five Ways to Love in Greek*), another poster presenting the British and the European Union, a brochure about the sights of Guernsey, and a video introducing our local museums. There were essays analysing the students' own hobbies and cultural interests, and papers discussing the effects of violence on television or the role of sports in culture.

All in all, even though a few students defined culture in a very narrow way as only consisting of literature or arts, the diversity of student work really showed that no

standard text book could possibly define and deal with culture as creatively as students themselves could!

The showcase portfolios

Having completed four or five different pieces by the end of the course, the students were asked to choose two or three pieces for their showcase portfolios. The final showcase portfolio also included a prologue introducing the portfolio and the student to the reader.

> *I have completed 4 different pieces of work, all having something to do with me and things I like: music, literature, film, poetry... Finding yourself, as an individual, is important for every one of us. -*
> *I think that there's something about me captured in this portfolio!*

> *My works tell a lot of me and my interests. Something about my thoughts and opinions. Probably they show that my English is not perfect, but I've tried my best and I'm developing all the time.*

The students were also asked to assess the pieces they had selected. In their criteria for the selection the students often emphasized the amount of work and the working process, learning outcomes as well as personal relevance of the piece.

> *Second work I've chosen is my Picasso-work. It's my best work, it's most comprehensive. I've used several sources and did lots of work. It may not seen in this work, but I for example learned hugely new words. I also invested in works looks.*

> *Amadeus has been a truly influential film in my life and I simply wanted to share my passion with others.*

> *"The house at pooh corner", a radio-play*
> *This was a group-work and it was good for me, because my oral skills aren't too good. And it was fun doing it.*

I think my best work was movie review The three musketeers because I work it so hard. I think that these work prove that I'm not so lazy and stupid that you thought.

This work is important for me, because it was my first book, which I have read in English and it takes so much time to clear up it.

An epilogue

The last piece to be included in the final portfolio was an epilogue summing up the student's reflections on his or her learning and on the course in general. Most students - regardless of their prior success in English - considered the course a positive and encouraging, even empowering, experience.

I'm glad we decided to do something new instead of doing the same things year after another. This was absolutely worth doing.

I really liked working this way 'cause it gives me the freedom I need to be creative.

This was a challenging job to do. I spent many hours with my projects. My portfolio looked quite good, I know there's a lot of mistakes but I tried my best.

For myself, this work gave a lot of self-confidence and I began to feel that I can do at least something in English even though my grades are so poor.
(Translated from Finnish by the author.)

Studying have been fun.

This course was very good. Not only because we didn't have lexons. I learnt to take care of those things myself.

Several students said that their writing skills had improved. For example, process

writing and feedback were new experiences to some students. Many students also mentioned that they had learnt to use dictionaries and other sources more readily in their work. Quite a few students said that reading a lot of different, authentic materials had improved their reading skills in English. Some students actually commented that the skills they had learnt during the portfolio course would probably help them in their future studies. For instance, some said that they had learnt to accept responsibility for their own work. Many students also felt that they were more willing to communicate in English and probably not as afraid of making mistakes as earlier. Feelings of having accomplished something as well as succeeding in their work at their own level motivated students: some even reported that this was the first time in years they had enjoyed studying English at school.

However, some students were somewhat cautious. For example, quite a few students said that because they had only had one or two grammar lessons; they had not really learnt anything new in English. Some also said that they had not had enough practice in speaking English. Some students suggested that portfolios should be optional. Teachers were also cautioned against getting too enthusiastic about portfolios.

> *I think portfolio is, at the end, good thing. But only when it's given as a special project. If every school subject begins to use it, the idea loses it's charm.*

Naturally, there were a few students who did not like the course at all. The course was demanding, and even too demanding for some students. Also, regardless of the teacher's or other students' assistance, the freedom in and responsibility for one's own work caused some problems. Furthermore, some students never quite realized the diversity of cultural topics.

> *I didn't like this system at all. Too much work all at once.*
> (Translated from Finnish by the author.)

> *And what it comes to studying English I would rather do a normal course of English, instead of this hell of games without proper rules.*

I didn't like this course in the begin and I don't still like it because I'm not keen in literature.

Teachers assessing the portfolios

Finally, the showcase portfolio was assessed by the teacher according to the criteria discussed at the beginning of the course. The evaluation was not always easy. In particular, the teachers found grading the portfolios difficult and even frustrating - how to transform all that work, effort, and creativity into a single grade? However, in addition to the actual grade, the teacher gave a more comprehensive verbal assessment of the portfolio focusing on its strengths but also pointing out possible areas of improvement. We hoped that we could thus make the students see the weaknesses as opportunities for further learning, not as serious flaws or mistakes. And sometimes, I think, we succeeded. Consequently, the verbal assessment, even though it took a lot of the teacher's time, was considered very important. After all, the portfolio is a vehicle for learning as well as for assessment - it is the student's process of learning that is the most important. As a student phrases it:

> *The most important thing is that I have succeeded in one way or another and even if I don't get a 10 from this course I'm not disappointed. I have already given myself a 10 from trying and crossing my limits. And the most important thing is that I am satisfied with my works and proud of them!*

(N.B. The grades used in Finland are from 4 to 10, 10 being the best.)

Conclusion

The portfolio experiment taught us all - both teachers, students and researchers - that student-centred and self-directed learning is not an easy option. First of all, some students are more willing and also more able to accept responsibility for their own learning. The teacher's role as a facilitator or counsellor of learning requires a lot from the teacher as well. The responsibility should be transferred gradually to the students - and more gradually to some than the others. The teacher should support, guide, encourage, and help whenever needed, but, then again, refrain whenever it is not needed. But it is not always easy to tell the difference. Despite

our difficulties, and our rather radically student-directed approach, we found the portfolio experiment a very positive experience. We all discovered new aspects in teaching and learning English but also in one another as persons. The teachers learnt to know their students better as persons, not only as students of English, and vice versa. We also learnt in real practice that there are various ways of learning and teaching, and different ways may work better for different people. And we all learnt to appreciate the potentials the students have, if only given a proper chance to be involved in the decision-making in order to find the goals, tasks and methods that suit them best.

And, most importantly, I am confident that most students gained a lot. At the very least, they had a chance to try their wings in negotiating their own syllabuses and monitoring and assessing their own learning in English.

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