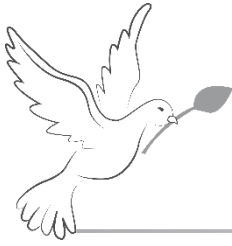


# Using E-portfolios to Assess University Students' Learning Success\*



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## Abstract

E-portfolios are considered an effective way of motivating learners to review language and help reflect on their own objectives of learning and achievement. This paper describes and discusses core aspects of the e-portfolio assessment instrument used to evaluate students' learning in an English for Specific Purposes (ESP) course at a Thai university. It is the writer's motivation to explore e-portfolio assessment to try out an optional formative assessment instrument which could provide guidance on students' progress and check how far students have mastered what they have learned in their English course each semester. This way, assessment of learning can be used both to measure and promote learning. The instrument, in its pilot stage, if successfully implemented, can be optimized in other language courses offered at university.

**Keywords:** E-portfolios; University Students; Assessment

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## Introduction

E-portfolios are a repository of students' work provided within an online and offline environment. For online access, many websites today offer free space which can be used in e-portfolio development for educational purposes. If intended, students can also work offline and post content to e-portfolios by design. One of the important aspects to consider when developing e-portfolios is to identify students' and teachers' technological needs and access (Ali, 2005). Therefore, it is relevant to point out that in the writer's setting, every classroom is equipped with a computer with internet access. Also, most students and teachers have access to connected smart phones and/or tablets at their fingertips. The issue of having access to computers or devices necessary for completing e-portfolios is not a concern from the writer's stance. It is common to see that students at all levels including tertiary education enjoy technology-driven activities. With the increased role of digitalisation and innovation in teaching and learning, learners are using more PDAs, tablets and mobile phones to help them learn from a wide range of sources accessible. EFL teachers are thus encouraged to use innovative teaching methods to engage with students. Blended learning, the combination of asynchronous and synchronous learning activities in a course, helps ensure that students are exposed to the opportunity to benefit from the best of both worlds (Pazio, 2010). Most of the researchers who have studied a blended learning approach and its application in enhancing English language learning pinpoint a great number of positive effects, including an improved vocabulary range and effective mastery of grammatical knowledge. On the contrary, a little empirical research revealed that teaching through blended learning had no effect on learners' learning progress.

When it comes to technological inclination, it is important to choose a platform suitable for a particular group of learners and teachers. It is also about what kind of information to be stored: written, oral or non-verbal student production or a combination of these. In most cases, the written form of information is formal and more preferable in academic contexts.

## Sections of the e-portfolios

The e-portfolio can be composed of three salient sections: Course Information, Assignments and Comments. For online e-portfolios, which are more challenging these days than offline counterparts, what teachers can do is to have these components designed as

PowerPoint slides and upload them to a master account of the host platform. The master account allows creation of one account per group/teacher involved and teachers are, thereafter, allowed to create individual accounts for their students. All the slides uploaded through the master account are to be made available to every student concerned. The sections are limited to three so as to facilitate the process of e-portfolio making to be less complicated and more user-friendly.

### **Course Information**

The objective of including this section in the e-portfolio is to engage both learners and teachers in the learning process (NcKay, 2006), hence, sharing with them the accountability for learning for students and teaching for teachers. In addition, the concept of assessing through an informal tool such as an e-portfolio may be facing with some questions about reliability and availability of resources (McKay, *ibid.*). Thus, it is important that content, structure, and criteria be made clear to stakeholders to increase levels of reliability and validity of the instrument. Reference materials also need to be easily assessable for teachers who are experimenting with e-portfolio assessment for the first time.

### **Assignments**

This is the section in which students keep their work. Even though teachers encourage students to create their own content, they also have suggested tasks available just in case as at times students lack ideas on what to come up with for details. The topics of the suggested tasks have to be personal and within the conceptual capacity, interest, and experience of learners. In the end, topics are better to be planned and well-selected so they are likely to promote and access language use which involves interaction and authenticity. Interaction comes from the fact that an e-portfolio is naturally built for an audience. While students work mostly independently to create content, they will have their teachers and classmates to help validate and acknowledge their work periodically as planned, creating an authentic learning environment. After all, portfolios make students work visible to the community as evidence of teaching and learning (Stefanakis, 2002).

In fact, many EFL educators over the past years have been in support of using more formative assessment in securing learning success (Asghar, 2013). The objective of formative assessment is to monitor student learning to provide continuing guidance that can be used by teachers to develop their teaching and by students to better their learning. In particular,



formative assessments assist learners in identifying their pros and cons and direct attention to areas that need improvement. Moreover, formative assessments help teachers recognise where students are having difficulties and address complications instantaneously. Examples of formative assessments involve asking students to develop e-portfolios, draw a concept map to represent their understanding, identify the main point of a lecture, and even turn in a proposal for initial schema building. In line with the implementation of the Common Core State Standards, formative assessment is necessary and becomes an even more fruitful tool for student success to better prepare students to meet higher academic demands for university or career pursuits (CCSSO, 2010).

### **Comments**

This section aims at making room for self-reflection and self-assessment, based on the objectives of using e-portfolios stated earlier. If EFL teachers want their students to take responsibility for their own learning, promoting learner autonomy, it is the teachers' job to make this clear right from the beginning. Since students are young, it might be the first time they have experience with self-reflection and self-assessment; therefore, the activities are meant to foster their sense of achievement in the current level in a very straight-forward aspect. Mortari (2015) indicates that reflection is a very vital mental activity, both in academic and professional life.

### **Research objective**

The objective of this paper is to shed light on the possible use of e-portfolios to assess students' learning English at a Thai university. It is the writer's intent to explore e-portfolio assessment as a formative assessment tool to systematically monitor the student learning progress in learning English each semester. Likewise, language teachers benefit from this as well since when they work with students who are building e-portfolios and reflecting upon the work in them, language teachers learn to engage with students electronically in addition to having to creatively design and assess the assignments included in student e-portfolios. In this study, a platform called Microsoft Teams was initially employed to develop e-portfolios. With various features on it, it was possible to organise and assign student assignments and divide the students into small groups to promote collaborative learning.

## **Preliminary implementation results and next moves**

Using e-portfolios is a novel approach in a Thai EFL context and should be regarded as a pilot scheme to be used initially with relatively small groups of learners. During the first phase of the pilot, it was found that EFL teachers reported great student involvement and enthusiasm in developing their e-portfolios. One aspect which was noted was that self-motivated students would encourage their peers to keep on working, since they would always want to share their latest updates on the e-portfolios, which fostered a sense of pride and commitment.

From the preliminary investigation with two small groups of students in September 2019, it was found that the teachers resented not having more time to work on the e-portfolios in class. This shows that one aspect of teacher development which cannot be overlooked is how to foster learners' autonomy and develop learner training skills, a part of heutagogy (Sophie, 2017), which is also connected with successful lifelong learning, a skill required for learners to have in the 21<sup>st</sup> century. Blaschke (2012) indicates that the aim of heutagogy is self-determined learning closely related to student-centred learning which indicates that the learner is the main catalyst in their way of acquiring knowledge, which emerges through individual cultivation.

It was also found that among other positive aspects of using the e-portfolios included the perception of assessment tasks as being part of effective classroom practice and the development of self-correction skills among the students in both groups. The use of e-portfolios as a means of fostering interaction was actually salient from the writer's observation in addition to having the potential for evaluating student performance and measuring the appropriateness of the learning ambience.

## **Creativity in the Language Classroom**

It is extensively accepted that creativity is one of the 4C learning skills required in the current century apart from communication, critical thinking and collaboration. This means that learners and educators in any field are to some extent to be equipped with some creative concepts in their learning and teaching practices. It is crucial in the current global economy propelled by data, technology and innovation. Therefore, all must be able to cope with vagaries fast, fruitfully and above all creatively. Language classroom creativity is thus vital and not a new occurrence because it increases motivation, empowers learners, helps create self-

esteem, builds a sense of excitement, supports collaboration in group work, provides opportunities for repetition and reinforcement and constructs class community (Avila, 2015). As some of the perceived barriers to creativity are routine, close-ended tasks, fear of making mistakes, stiff rules and the idea that fun is not conducive to learning, teachers are then to vary what they do in the classroom. They should use open-ended tasks, create a safe environment for taking risks, have adjustable discipline according to objectives and allow for experimentation to take place. These obviously are some ways of creating an atmosphere where creativity can arise freely.

Employing e-portfolios can help develop creativity as learners will be allowed to be exposed to different uses of language in addition to being able to express who they are in different ways. In this regard, learners can openly show their interests and talents through creative tasks assigned. Because of this, promoting creativity in the classroom calls for an open-minded instructor, who has an important role in introducing different ways of doing activities. The instructor has to be open to suggestions from his/her students and guide them as to how they can achieve what they want to do. In the end, the instructor would be able to discover that the students are a rich source of creative power that can be unleashed under the instructor's mindful guidance.

### **Further Implementation**

The writer is in process of moving on to phase two of the pilot before attempting full actual implementation in order to further unpick the effectiveness of alternative assessment through e-portfolios in the ESP classroom in an EFL context. The second phase focuses on trying the e-portfolios with three more groups of students, about five to six in each, learning with two other ESP teachers. The teachers will have been instructed carefully before they work with the students to ensure the protocol of e-portfolio utilization. After the second phase is conducted, then it is expected that the e-portfolios will be used by all the teachers and students of the ESP course.

### **Conclusion**

It is the writer's deliberation and belief that e-portfolio assessment is likely to encourage the use of English inside and outside the classroom, in a more dependent and creative way, through an engaging, interactive, stimulating and meaningful process. Still, there is a need for careful planning and very well-assisted deployment and monitoring schemes as

key aspects if it is eventually to be integrated to a university assessment policy, which could in turn pave a way for e-portfolios to be adopted for use in other English courses.

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