

Training students' self-expression in English through portfolio assessment: A trial in English literature

Nguyen Thi Thu Ha*

Faculty of Linguistics and Cultures of English-speaking Countries, College of Foreign Languages, Vietnam National University, Hanoi, Pham Van Dong Street, Cau Giay, Hanoi, Vietnam

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Abstract. The recent approach to language teaching and learning has been focusing on communication as getting things done in the utilitarian sense. However, the core of communication, if it wishes to mean anything significant to the world at all, should be self-expression. The ultimate aim of foreign language teaching, therefore, should be to create individual learners who have their own foreign language personalities and know how to express themselves in the target language. Making use of primarily qualitative methods, this study is an investigation into the implementation of the literature portfolio and its effects on students' self-expression in written and spoken English. With a carefully developed portfolio design and assessing criteria, the portfolio implementation not only uncovered the students' problems but also brought about highly favorable learning processes and results regarding self-expression ability. In this study, the literature portfolio was used not only as a fair process assessment tool but also as a way to train students' self-expression in English.

Keywords: Self-expression, portfolio assessment, literature, qualitative research.

1. Introduction

The teaching of ESL/EFL has recently been dominated by the utilitarian point of view, which sees language as a mere tool to get things done in a practical world. At its extreme, calculative thinking views language teaching as no more than a mass-production process, with students as the input and automated communicating learners-entities as the output (Lehtovaara, in Kohonen et al 2001, p. 145). However, since language learners are unique human beings who inevitably bring into the learning process their own life experiences,

interests, thoughts and feelings, such a view as to deny them voice and identity only frustrates and hinders learning. Thus, the natural need to allow and encourage self-expression in language learning has become urgent.

Portfolio assessment can provide just the opportunity to meet this need. In English and American Literatures, by working on a regular basis on their own portfolios, students are given every chance to exercise greater initiative and autonomy in responding to great literatures and expressing their feelings and opinions for themselves. The literature portfolio is worth trying out precisely because it would train students' self-expression in the target language.

* Tel: 84-953305997.
E-mail: thuhavh288@yahoo.com

Looking back at the literature, many studies have focused on different humanistic elements of language teaching and learning (e.g. language anxiety and fear of negative evaluation; the role of affect; improvisations in the classroom), but no systematic study exists which explores learners' self-expression in the target language. Also, while there are abundant studies on the use of English Literature to approach whole-person development (e.g. Prodromou 2000; Sivasubramaniam 2006) and on the portfolio approach to instruction and assessment (e.g. Porter and Cleland 1995; Chen 2006; Hung 2009), a gap still opens for a study that researches the portfolio approach in English Literature towards the goal of students' self-expression.

This study is, thus, an investigation into the implementation of the literature portfolio and its effects on students' self-expression in written and spoken English. The literature portfolio was implemented with one group of 24 senior students in the teaching and learning context of the English Department, Hanoi University of Languages and International Studies.

2. Review of literature and working definition

The concept of portfolio has been around for a long time and has been the subject of accumulating studies. Different researchers provide their own definitions of portfolio, but these definitions always boil down to three words: collect, select, and reflect. Basically, a portfolio is a collection of works selected by the student, with some form of reflection on the process and/or the products.

Regarding the concept of self-expression, the literature is much more limited. Dufeu (1994) recognizes self-expression as a function of language, and the language of a true self-expression "is the language of the inner being and its relationship to the outside world, the language of sensations, feelings, emotions, the expression of needs and desires, observations, intentions, inter-personal relations, etc. - a

relational language." (p.212).

Savignon (2002, p.5) suggests that learners' self-expression can be encouraged by promoting personal language use, which means teachers should focus on meaning rather than form whenever appropriate in order to give students enough linguistic freedom to venture self-expression in the target language. Moreover, learners "should be encouraged to develop an English language personality with which they are comfortable." (p.5) While this is challenging, it can be exhilarating at the same time, as learners may discover a new freedom of self-expression in their new language. Speaking, writing, and responding to the world in a new language can be compared to "putting on a new dress" (a comparison used by Savignon). Expressing themselves in English, hence, can make students feel fresh, see themselves in a new way, and can offer them freedom to experiment.

Allen (1987) discusses the close connection between writing and self-expression. Meanwhile, on the role of literature in the development of self-expression ability, Prodromou (2000) maintains that while the language of literature may be impracticable in real life, it opens the learner's mind to a whole new world of fresh, brilliant, inspiring expressions of the Self, sharpening the learner's awareness of how language can be manipulated to reveal exactly the individual identity they want to reveal. Inspired and enriched by literature, learners would inevitably seek new ways to express themselves more freshly and convincingly in the target language.

Based on all the literature presented above, the researcher arrived at her own working definition of self-expression ability: In the context of this study, self-expression ability means the ability to express in written and spoken English one's identity in the form of one's analytical power, shrewdness of discussion and argument, critical thinking and deep feeling; the ability to express one's understanding of and original ideas and

comments on literary texts. To be clearer, “self-expression” here means two things: first, the expression of oneself (one’s thoughts and feelings, one’s convincing power) and second, expression by oneself and for oneself (i.e. not copying teachers’ or friends’ ideas or ways of expression in parrot fashion; independent thinking and individual, self-initiated ways of expressing it). Self-expression ability is assessed in two interconnected aspects: the quality (i.e. criticality, originality, depth and persuasion) of one’s ideas, and the overt verbal expression, or the externalization, of these inner qualities and processes (e.g. organization of ideas, idea development and support, language use, writing skills, etc.)

3. Design of the American Literature Portfolio (ALP)

The ALP is closely related to class activities. Each portfolio consists of:

1. 15 class notes (one note a week) and students’ own responses. There are two parts to each note: key information/discussion points in class, and what the student himself thinks about them;
2. 03 best lesson assignments;
3. 01 essay on a chosen topic, to be presented orally in class (both first draft and final essay);
4. 01 graded outline for oral presentation;
5. 02 peer reviews for the essay;
6. 01 written reflection on what they have learned doing the portfolio project;
7. (optional) 01 extension project. e.g. a critique on a American literature text etc.

The aim of this design is to encourage students to express their own ideas and impressions about literature, and through this, to help improve their self-expression. The finished portfolio is assessed according to the criteria specified below.

Assessment Criteria for American Literature Portfolio

- (1) Class notes
 - 15 class notes (1 note a week)
 - 2 parts to each note: discussion points and personal responses
 - discussion points are important and interesting
 - personal responses reflect deep, innovative, critical thinking
- (2) Weekly assignments
 - 03 weekly assignments signed and graded by teacher
 - 2 parts to each assignment: answers to course book questions and further comments/responses
 - answers and comments/responses are rich in personal feeling and thinking.
- (3) Essay
 - About 1000 words long
 - On a topic approved by teacher
 - 02 versions: first draft and final essay
 - There must be significant differences and improvements between the first draft and final essay.
 - (final) essay shows thorough comprehension of literary text, ability to keep to the point, deep feeling, logical, critical thinking, original ideas and strong analytical power.
 - good discursive writing skill, good organization of essay.
 - strong support of discussion points with evidence from the text.
 - brief, effective oral presentation of essay (10 minutes)
 - 01 graded general outline for presentation.
 - 2 parts to oral presentation: summary of literary text and analysis
- (4) 02 peer reviews for the essay
- (5) Written reflection
 - Honest feeling and thinking about your own portfolio, its strengths and weaknesses.
 - What you have learned or gained through doing the portfolio project

(6) Portfolio appearance

- Portfolio is bound together with cover papers
- Portfolio is neatly typed or handwritten
- Portfolio is organized according to a certain order

-(7) Reward for extra work

- Extension project has high quality in terms of the richness of resources, personal feelings and ideas, analytical and discursive power.

(8) Punishment for cheating/plagiarism

- Each spot of cheating/plagiarism in the whole portfolio subtracts 5 points from the total score.

4. Methods and materials for data collection

This research makes use of primarily qualitative methods. The ALP was implemented with one group of 24 senior students in order to see how it worked in relation to the students' self-expression ability and how the students experienced the portfolio building process. Of the greatest importance to the research outcome is the researcher's observations and evaluations during the process, as well as the students' reflections and actual work collected in their portfolios, which were examined closely to detect emerging patterns. Although there were portfolio scores and exam results, these are not the focus of this study because the researcher hardly believes in measuring quantitatively something of such an intrinsically subjective nature as self-expression in a discipline so detached from numbers and the right-wrong answer distinction as literature.

The materials for data collection include field notes, checklists, ongoing judgments and evaluations; and the students' portfolios.

5. Implementation

The implementation of the portfolio project spanned the whole the semester (15 weeks) and consisted of three phases. Phase one (week 1) was the project orientation, when the purposes, components, criteria, and all other aspects of the portfolio were clarified and discussed with the students. Phase two (week 2-15) was for portfolio building, whereby the students built up the components of their portfolios and

constantly reflected on their work. During this process, the teacher provided class instruction, guidance and prompts for discussion, monitored the students' progress, and made frequent evaluations of their work. As they proceeded with their portfolios, most of the students reacted with eagerness; their concern was shifting from marks and grades to the actual quality of their work. Phase three of the project implementation happened at the end of the semester, when the students handed in their finished portfolios and the teacher started assessing them according to the established marking criteria.

Data analysis: Insights into students' self-expression during the learning process

Self-expression problems

One of the most important things that the ALP did was to cast greater light on our students' problems in expressing themselves in English. As reflected clearly in their own portfolios, many students made alarming expression errors, ranging from language use to idea development. As a result, their writings were at many points awkward, unnatural, and sometimes completely incomprehensible. The most frequently encountered self-expression problems in the students' portfolios concerned the areas of language use; idea organization, support and development; relevance of ideas to the point being discussed; the flow of writing; and the depth and criticality of analysis. More often than not, the errors the students made did not belong to just one of these areas but cut across many of them to become really complicated expression problems. For instance, when writing about Buck's transformation

from a civilized dog into a wild beast at the price of his morality (*Call of the Wild* by Jack London), a student made a mess of her idea and language:

“... Buck lost himself or got cunning himself was a big question. In fact, he both lost himself because he lost his morality and he got cunning of himself because he was step by step coming to his source, wild life which he had never known before.” [Thu Nga]

Right from the beginning of the ALP implementation, the students’ self-expression problems were seriously attended to by different means: the teachers’ frequent, on-going comments and suggestions, remedial sessions in class, and peer reviews. For example, responding to their peers’ essays, some observant students discovered subtle and complicated expression problems as they wrote:

“... this essay has some weaknesses in writing skills that the writer should take into consideration. To start with, her writing style is not so natural. Sometimes I feel that she is thinking in Vietnamese and translates into English. Additionally, she seems to have difficulty in expressing her ideas clearly sometimes.” [Ha My]

“... Overall, I think her analysis is not very deep. Giving details to the ideas is good; but more importantly, I think, she should help the readers understand more by explaining why and how those details support her ideas. Last but not least, I would like to hear about her personal feeling toward the matter she raises.” [Mai Hoa]

In their written reflections, nearly half the students admitted having difficulty with self-expression in English. Even a more able student in the group wrote: “... writing my ideas in a logical and readable way can be considered the main obstacle.” [Mai Anh] Class discussions and presentations also reveal the same problem with spoken English.

Invaluable practice and effort in self-expression

Despite their problems, the students made overt and ample efforts to express themselves convincingly in English. Regardless of their weaknesses, the pieces of writing, the presentations, and the class discussions that the students conducted while building up their portfolios were by far the most thoughtful, interesting, and original ones that the teacher had ever known with all the groups that she had taught. The overall impression is that the students had a challenging but precious time to practice expressing their own identities, their inner qualities in words. They as a group showed great concentration, effort, and inspiration in doing it, perhaps because they all realized this was a good chance for proving the depths of their intellectual and emotional worlds.

The students’ practice with self-expression can be seen in their efforts to manipulate words to serve their purposes, and in their exploration and development of new, individual ideas and impressions, although these two aspects often intermingle.

In terms of attempts at language manipulation, there are two levels: on level one are attempts at good, appropriate and effective, though simple, language; and on level two are the more demanding attempts at beautiful, literary language. In terms of individual literary exploration, there are ample instances of fresh self-expression on both the intellectual and the emotional level. The following extracts from a student’s essay on the theme of humanism in *The Last Leaf* by O’Henry are not only exquisite in language but also original in idea:

“... Behrman’s death is not a normal death but an incarnation into his masterpiece, the picture of the last leaf...”; “The death of the kind-hearted old artist is not the end of everything; on the contrary, it gives birth to a true masterpiece and rebirth to a young artist with a beautiful dream to fulfill (...) Where art comes, there rebirth happens.” [Kim Dung]

There are countless other examples of the

students' exploration into their own intellectual and emotional realms, with their little discoveries of new ideas and impressions about literary works. The following comments reveal sound, individual thinking and shrewd analysis:

[Commenting on the ludicrous, glory-thirsty Sunday-school superintendent in chapter 4 – *Adventures of Tom Sawyer*] "... The superintendent is very typical of the whole community in St. Petersburg. Mark Twain ironically described the superintendent and through that he wanted to satirize the hypocrisy and corruption of the society." [Mai Hoa] (1)

[Commenting on the nature of Mildred's philanthropic work in Scene 2 - *The Hairy Ape*] "... Mildred is the representative of the bourgeois society. She is a big show-off, an artificial girl. She is always fretful because she doesn't know how to enjoy life and how to find the real value of the things she did." [Ha My] (2)

[Commenting on the character Robert Jordan's language in chapter 43 - *For Whom the Bell Tolls*] "... We usually use imperative sentences to order, ask or force somebody to do something for us. In this extract, Jordan used a series of imperative sentences. He used them to show the urgency of the situation. He did not want to waste time discussing or explaining. These sentences seemed to be his last requirements and demands, so they persuaded the others to obey." [Linh Nga] (3)

Extracts (1), (2) and (3) are all fruitful efforts of self-expression on the intellectual level, where the students asserted their critical insights about different literary subjects. Extract (1) critically looks from one typical character to the whole community and thus has the power of generalization; extract (2), meanwhile, provides convincing proof of the student's profound understanding of the character; and extract (3) is an observant comment on the effects of the language that Hemingway put into his hero's mouth.

During the course, the students approached and experienced literature not only

intellectually but also emotionally. And many of them found exhilarating ways to express their exultant emotional experiences. For instance, on the same subject of the tragic parting between the two lovers in chapter 43 – *For Whom the Bell Tolls*, two individual voices spoke of their own sentiments:

"... the moment between Jordan and Maria is short. However, when reading it readers were so moved that they felt hurt..." [Kim Dung]

"... War forces lovers to separate from each other but war cannot prevent lovers from thinking of each other, sacrificing for each other. Regardless of the horrors and sufferings caused by war, the love between Jordan and Maria is so great that it is worthy of everybody's respect and admiration." [Minh Trang].

There are also passages in the students' writings that capture both their reasoning power and their emotional depth, such as the following reflection on Robert Jordan's inner struggle during his last minutes in chapter 43 – *For Whom the Bell Tolls*:

"... The negative thoughts that appeared in his mind when he was left alone at the end of the chapter was not a signal of weakness but an indication of humanity. Jordan is a beloved character to readers not only because of his great sacrifice for others but also because of his love for life as a human being." [Kim Dung]

Overall, the criticality, intelligence, depth of feeling and power of discussion that many portfolios show bespeak a big investment of time, effort, as well as interest in self-expression. It is fair to say that the majority of the students had an invaluable, inspiring time exploring literature, exploring themselves and expressing their best intellectual, emotional and linguistic powers. They had a good practice and a good experience with the portfolio, which are unveiled in their own words:

"... To me, writing an essay on a favorite

topic is the most interesting part of the portfolio. This task gives me the chance to write about my favorite author, who is not introduced in our literature textbook, O'Henry. I can share my feeling of the story with others and then receive feedback from them..." [Kim Dung].

"... One important thing is that I did the work with all my effort and I really paid attention to the criteria given by our teacher. Sometimes I had some difficulties (...) but I didn't lose my way and tried harder." [Duy Ngoc].

"... The assignment writings are the efforts to think for myself. They are all my true feelings and responses for literature works..." [Ngoc Linh]

"... If I had a chance, I still would like to do it and I hope that I would do better than this one." [Thu Minh]

Progresses and gains in self-expression

Not only did the students make efforts but they also actually progressed in their self-expression abilities. The students' progresses and gains in self-expression are evident in their writings' grade improvement, the gradual reduction in the number of major expression errors, and the students' reflections on their own works, as one revealed:

"... I only got grade C for the first three assignment writings, but later I got a B for the next one and an A for the last one. So I have made some improvements in this subject, which gives me the motivation to study harder." [Minh Trang].

The students' self-expression abilities in spoken English were also trained with the process of conducting the portfolio, which was evident in their presentations and class discussions. The requirement of the essay made sure that the students had better-prepared presentations, with a richness of language and a depth of ideas, as well as an order of organization. The assignment that the students had to complete before each lesson helped

bring about much more informed and meaningful class discussions. We observed that the group that did the ALP had more heated and interesting discussions than the other groups that we taught. These students were often very active in class discussions: expressing their wonder at the details of the text or disagreement with others' ideas, defending their opinions convincingly, posing very interesting questions for the teacher and their peers about the text, which showed their critical minds at work. Others listened and tried to answer the raised questions by themselves instead of waiting for the teacher's opinions, as was usual with other groups. In fact, because the students knew the matters that they were discussing beforehand thanks to their portfolio work, they became very confident and independent in expressing themselves in class.

6. Conclusions

In general, the ALP implementation not only uncovered the students' problems but also brought about highly favorable learning processes and results regarding self-expression ability.

In this study, the literature portfolio was used not only as a fair process assessment tool but also as a way to train students' self-expression in English. The literature portfolio is a worthwhile experience for both the learner and teacher of literature. Through doing the portfolio, students learn to think and express their own ideas; they develop self-respect, self-confidence in expressing themselves and not merely repeating what the teacher says. For the teacher, the literature portfolio gives information about students' levels of success in the subject, thus helping the teacher adjust his/her own teaching. Obviously, the application of the literature portfolio has a lot of benefits, and, hopefully, this kind of project would be adopted and adapted in suitable teaching contexts.

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Rèn luyện khả năng tự biểu đạt bằng tiếng Anh cho sinh viên qua tuyển tập bài làm: Một thử nghiệm trong môn Văn học Anh

Nguyễn Thị Thu Hà

Khoa Ngôn ngữ và Văn hóa Các nước nói tiếng Anh, Trường Đại học Ngoại ngữ, Đại học Quốc gia Hà Nội, Đường Phạm Văn Đồng, Cầu Giấy, Hà Nội, Việt Nam

Phương hướng tiếp cận việc dạy và học ngoại ngữ gần đây đã và đang tập trung vào giao tiếp trên quan điểm vị lợi, nghĩa là sử dụng ngôn ngữ để thực hiện công việc thuần túy. Tuy nhiên, cốt lõi của giao tiếp, nếu muốn đạt tới bất cứ một ý nghĩa đáng kể nào đối với thế giới, phải là việc tự thể hiện bản thân. Vì thế, việc dạy ngoại ngữ cần hướng tới mục đích cuối cùng và cao nhất là giúp cho người học phát huy được những bản sắc cá nhân và thể hiện được những bản sắc đó trong ngôn ngữ đích. Phần lớn sử dụng các phương pháp định tính, nghiên cứu này tìm hiểu về quá trình xây dựng tuyển tập bài làm văn học, cũng như những tác động của quá trình đó đối với năng lực tự biểu đạt của sinh viên bằng tiếng Anh nói và viết. Với một mô hình tuyển tập bài làm và các tiêu chí đánh giá được thiết kế công phu, quá trình viết tuyển tập của sinh viên không chỉ làm lộ diện các vấn đề trong học tập mà còn mang lại những trải nghiệm và kết quả học tập rất tốt đẹp. Trong nghiên cứu này, tuyển tập bài làm văn học được sử dụng không chỉ như là một công cụ đánh giá toàn diện cả quá trình học tập mà còn như là một phương pháp rèn luyện năng lực tự biểu đạt bằng tiếng Anh cho sinh viên.

Từ khóa: Khả năng tự biểu đạt, đánh giá dựa trên tuyển tập bài làm, văn học, nghiên cứu định tính.