

The Use of Portfolios through Collaborative Project Work

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ABSTRACT

The purpose of this study is to explore the effect of portfolios from collaborative learning to interpret English texts on reading performance of Korean high school students in an EFL (English as a Foreign Language) classroom learning environment of a rural area. The focus is mainly on the confidence and autonomous learning of 24 third-year high school students in interpreting English texts. Most of the students who participated in this study lack motivation to study English and show an unsatisfactory English reading literacy performance. The researcher works as facilitator, evaluator and coordinator in students' collaborative project activity. The data were collected using a range of qualitative elicitation methods and the results obtained were interpreted and explored in depth. Analysis of students' contributions to collaborative works shows obvious implications for both Korean EFL teachers and learners, revealing that working on self-assessed portfolios actively engaged learners in their confidence and interest in English learning. The study found that portfolios raised students' awareness of learning strategies, facilitated their learning process, and enhanced their self-directed learning.

Key Words: portfolio, collaborative learning, self-directed learning, learner autonomy, self-assessment

I. Introduction

Although much effort has been made to improve the teaching of English, traditional teacher-centered instructions including careful explanation of word meaning and usage followed by drilling and interpretation couldn't attract unmotivated learners' interest in their English study. However, what teachers can do to facilitate their students learning and develop autonomy has been one of the major concerns in second language instruction.

This study was carried out to investigate the use of portfolios from collaborative learning as a tool to facilitate student reading comprehension and develop learner autonomy in an EFL classroom learning environment. Teacher's role as a facilitator has also changed from passive students to active participants in the collaborative performance. This article reports a successful attempt about how unmotivated EFL learners are improving interest and confidence in studying English through collaborative works to interpret texts, which leads in turn their self-directed learning. Research questions are as follows:

- 1) How can unmotivated EFL learners enhance self-directed learning?
- 2) How can unmotivated EFL learners complete their collaborative project works?
- 3) What do students reflections on the pieces in the portfolio indicate about their understanding and control of their own learning?

To answer these questions, a class of 24 students was asked to produce portfolios from collaborative learning in groups.

II. Literature Review

The literature on collaborative learning, portfolio use, and learner autonomy has identified a range of behaviors that characterize successful collaborative learning in face-to-face situations.

2.1 Portfolios in the EFL classroom

A language Portfolio is a document or an organized collection of documents, in which individual learners can assemble over a period of time, and display in a systematic way, a record of their qualifications, achievements and experiences in language learning, together with samples of work they have themselves produced.

A portfolio is a useful bridge because teachers need to do more than just transmit knowledge to students. Teachers should show students how to acquire “knowledge, skills, and strategies” so that they can eventually turn into autonomous and responsible learners for their own learning (Yang, 2003: 293). Therefore, the purpose of portfolios in an ESL/EFL classroom is to increase the level of students’ motivation and to give them a their own learning (Crosby, 1997).

As a general guidelines, Crockett(1998) suggested five different groups of materials that may be included in the portfolio of students: a) samples that are considered class assignment requirements; b) “processed samples” that were “previously graded by the teacher”; c) “revisions of student work” that are “graded and then revised, edited, and rewritten”; d) reflections that are associated with the “processed samples,” and these reflections give students opportunities to identify their own strengths and weaknesses; e) “portfolio projects” that include work mainly designed for students to put into their portfolio(p.1).

2.2 Collaborative Learning

“Collaborative learning” is an umbrella term for a variety of educational approaches involving joint intellectual effort by students, or students and teachers together (Nunan, 1988). Usually, students are working in groups of two or more, mutually searching for understanding, solutions, or meanings, or creating a product. Collaborative learning activities vary widely, but most center on students’ exploration or application of the course material, not simply the teachers’ presentation or explication of it.

In collaborative classrooms, the lecturing/ listening/ note-taking process may not disappear entirely, but it lives alongside other processes that are based in students’ discussion and active work with the course material. Teachers who use collaborative learning approaches tend to think of themselves less as expert transmitters of knowledge to students, more as expert designers of intellectual experiences for students-as coaches or mid-wives of a more emergent learning process.

Collaborative learning produces intellectual synergy of many minds coming to bear on a

problem, and the social stimulation of mutual engagement in a common endeavor. This mutual exploration, meaning-making, and feedback often leads to better understanding on the part of students, and to the creation of new understandings for all of us.

2.3 Collaborative Learning and Portfolios

The portfolio assembled by high school students will almost always be made up of work accomplished with a great amount of teacher and peer assistance. Following Vygotsky's principle that "instruction is only useful when it moves ahead of development," teachers design classroom experiences that allow students "to do in collaboration today [what they] will be able to do independently tomorrow" (Vygotsky, p.211). Therefore the works included in the portfolio are often the products by the students. Even in the cases where the pieces are similar in form to ones that the student has been producing for a considerable time, the teacher expects that in some way the piece will represent a new level of challenge or accomplishment for that student.

2.4 Self-assessment and autonomous learning

It is widely accepted that self-assessment is a key learning strategy for autonomous language learning, enabling students to monitor their progress and relate learning to individual needs. But there are few studies on the role of self-assessment in formal educational settings, where there is less room for self-directed learning. Paradoxically, it is perhaps in these settings that self-assessment is most needed to focus learners' perceptions of progress. Students are often passive in their approach to learning, and may become demotivated if they cannot see any clear progress. Self-assessment produces learners who are more active and focused, and better placed to assess their own progress in terms of communication. This study will also discuss these issues, and make some practical suggestions for carrying out self-assessment at secondary school level.

III. The Study

3.1 The Context and Participants

The participants in this study were 24 third-year high school students from a comprehensive high school in an agricultural area. They consist of 13 female and 11 male students. Their level of English language competence ranged from low-intermediate to low (on average, one student with grade 6 to five students with 9 in mock Collage Scholastic Academic Tests) and most of them didn't show interest in English learning while taking teacher-fronted instructions. They have performed the collaborative works for reading comprehension in their English classes for more than one year. For the first time when they were asked to perform collaborative works in groups, their resistance was strong and nothing was produced. One year later, they enjoy their performances and ask so many voluntary questions to complete their works that the teacher is busy helping them. They have performed the collaborative project with one English article once a week. The article usually comes from a university magazine including topics popular to high school students such as 'love', 'food safety', 'idol stars' in popular TV dramas, and so on.

3.2 Data Collection and Data Analysis

A pilot study with a class of 24 high school students in 2008 and then a formal study with the same students during the first semester in 2009 were conducted. The data is made up of the students' portfolios from collaborative project work, their self-assessment reports and an evaluative questionnaire administered to the learners towards the end of the semester. Information about students' beliefs and attitudes about using portfolios and collaborative learning style **REFERENCES** was collected by both open-ended and Likert-scaled questionnaires. Portfolios were integrated into the framework and procedures – i.e., diagnosis, preparation, instruction, and evaluation – for structural approach.

3.3 Tasks and Structural Approach

Reading topics were chosen from university magazines, which were delivered randomly to the school and included popular topics to the students. The student number of a group depends on the length of the text. Students have to read and translate the given text in groups. A preparation part serves as a warm-up for students to know more about the background knowledge of the special topic and to further lead to the passage reading. Students are put into a group and assigned a project to complete per week. The following methods (Yuan & Wang, 2006: 14) are applied for collaborative work.

- Task dividing: Dividing the learning passage into several parts. Each group is responsible for one part. Student may discuss all the learning points, the comprehension problems together.
- Focused learning: Studying the part carefully until they feel sufficient. Dictionaries and other learning **REFERENCES** are encouraged to be used as “experts”. Information gap thus is created.
- Reporting and reshaping: Then within teams, members can take turns explaining their portion, comprising answer sand build understanding together. During the report, members are encouraged to pose questions. As students work through understanding each other's part, they begin to reshape their understanding of the whole.
- Individual accountability: Each member should actively contribute to one part of the presentation or the comprehension.
- Integration and evaluation: The teacher may design the whole-class activity with which students can actively integrate their learning. Presentation or demonstration task can be carried out. The teacher can ask questions, correct misunderstandings. Finally, evaluation work should be accomplished.
- Reward: Quiz can be used to test how well they master the learning. The success f the group depends on everyone's performance.

3.4 Collaborative Project Work and Use of Portfolios

The following figure shows how students produce their collaborative project and evaluate their contribution to the group work. Each group members are given a piece of one random paragraph and asked to translate their own work and get together all the paragraphs to complete one essay as if they match all the puzzles. Then they discuss and decide what the topic, main subject sentence, and the title of the passage are. In the final stage before they submit, they assess the group members' contribution to the collaborative group work. At the

next class all the members of each group present why they make the order of the paragraph as it is and translate the passage. Teacher evaluates each member's presentation.

[Figure 1] Example of Students' Portfolio Project Work and Self-assessment

<p>주제문: Love is the most key. 소재: 사랑</p>	<p>① 사랑이란 ② 모든것의 단서, 사랑. ③ 세계의 봄날이 따뜻한 사랑</p>	<p>A 점민준, 알맹이, 장현경, 김수영, 권태영, 유승원, 최승민, 최정민 이성규, 유승원, 김남주, 박진성, 선승규, 정병기</p>
<p>Spring is a season when every creature revives again following the severe winter. What we can learn from the Spring? We can learn the spirit of love, which is one of the ways of nature. If we respect our partners and love each other, today's conflict and abhorrence will disappear. Like the sky that clears up after the rain, every natural thing on the earth will rely on each other and paint clearly. The crises and disputes among the nations will probably disappear and eventually world peace will be renewed.</p>	<p>혹독한 겨울을 지나 다시 생장하는 계절이 봄이다. 봄에 우리는 무엇을 배우는가? 사랑의 정신은 자연의 모든 방법 하나이다, 우리가 파트너를 존경하고 서로서로 사랑하고 비논리적인 말아지는 하늘처럼 서로서로 의지하고 깨끗하게 생장할 것이다, 이 나라들 사이에서 우기나 논쟁이 사라질 것이며 결국 세계의 평화가 생길 것이다.</p>	
<p>그러나, 2009년 봄 이세상은 우울한 안개의 무거운 먼지로 가려져 있다. 파란가지를 경제속에 휘둘리고 또한 귀들과 전자기의 일어난다. 더군다나 우리의 내부상황은 어둡고 막연하다. 미국에선 글로벌 경제 시스템을 지지한다. 또한 인수합병을 위기로 부터 완화하는 경향이다. 그 충돌들은 국가들의 공동 종교 또한 사건이 일어나는 원인에 대해 자금문제가 원인을 논쟁한다.</p>	<p>In the Spring in 2009, however, the world is enveloped in melancholy fog and heavy yellow dust. Likewise, there are severe economic crises and also wars between nations. Furthermore, our internal circumstances are dark and vague as well. The U.S.A, which advocated the global economic system, also consolidates its protective trade under the crisis. The collision between nations occurs frequently due to religious disputes or resource problems.</p>	

IV. Findings and Conclusion

Collaborative learning increases the amount of time students spend focusing on the topic and the opportunities to ask the teacher to work out the group's or individual's questions in the large class. In the mean time, with systematic and carefully designed structural approaches, collaborative learning can effectively provide students with the opportunities to discuss the English text. By allowing several students to talk in small groups, without disturbing others, students are encouraged to talk in a positive and relaxed learning environment. Their increased achievement in output and productivity become a reward to the teacher's hard work. Collaborative learning will be a good alternative for large class teaching in students' negotiation and understanding the text.

The use of portfolio is a valuable tool not only for teachers to use with EFL learners to better understand how they develop learner autonomy but also for students to assess themselves and

to use as learning materials for their self-study. An intentional data collection and documentation system becomes a very powerful assessment tool, one that is authentic and based on students' capabilities and strengths. Students, educators, parents, and administrators are able to see the collection of items that celebrates the student.

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About the Presenter

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