

The Language Learning Journal and Portfolio for Promotion of Language Learner Autonomy

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ABSTRACT

Examined in this paper is the role of language learner journals and language learning portfolios as second language learning instructional tools for increasing self-direction and motivation in the language learner and thereby leading to better study practices and increased learning. To test this assumption for the Korean EFL learner, university students were asked to keep, for one semester, English journals reflecting on their own English study process and progress, and as well, upon how they could improve upon their present study habits. The participants were also asked to keep English learning portfolios for reflection on, recording, and displaying their own English study progress and results.

Questions posed in this study are: do students perceive language learner journal writing and portfolio keeping as helpful in improving their language study program and proficiency, and will the student continue these activities after the course is completed? The initial survey reveals a positive change in student attitude toward language learning journal writing and portfolio keeping as well as a desire to continue such practices in the future. These results suggest that introducing language learners to reflective journal writing and portfolio keeping can have a positive effect on learner motivation and self-directed language learning.

Keywords: Language learning journal, portfolio, learner autonomy

I. Introduction

Education in Korea has traditionally been teacher-designed, teacher-directed, teacher-centered, and test-driven. There was very little decision-making available to the student concerning their study. This is still true to a large extent in Korea's high school education system. Accordingly, many students enter the radically different university education system discovering that they need much more concentrated English language study than that built into the curriculum of required courses, but are unsure as to how to go about it. They find themselves lost, directionless, not knowing exactly what to study or how. Consequently, they also become demotivated. As reflective learner journals and student portfolios have been promoted as both creating motivation and fostering autonomous learning, it was decided to examine their effectiveness as language learning tools to increase motivation and nurture self-direction the English study of Korean university students.

II. Literature Review

1. Language Learning Journals

Journal writing is considered to be a beneficial mechanism to encourage students to be more critical and reflective in a growing body of research across a range of disciplines (Jarvis, 2001). Journals are able to provide a means for reflection before, during, and after a learning experience (e.g., Mills, 2008). Paton (2006) concludes that reflective journals help foster critical thinking, while Connor-Greene (2000) and Kerka (1996) show that students can use journal writing to enhance their learning by asking questions, engaging in higher order ideas, and making connections between theory and practice. Dymont and O'Connell (2003) recognize that journal writing holds great potential for enhancing learning in experiential education, and Anderson (1993) concludes that journal writing helps students develop their writing skills through experimentation with less-structured writing that may be highly personal and speculative. Fritson, Forrest, and Bohl (2011) found that through reflective journaling, university students were more successful at thinking about and finding ways to make course material relevant to their lives, applying the material to their lives, and finding ways to make the material more interesting. Compared to classes without journal assignments, the students in classes with journal writing reported a greater desire to learn the material. Additionally, the students in Dymont and O'Connell's (2008) study generally agreed that journal writing is a helpful form of reflection. In the language-learning environment, it has been found that as both a research tool and an extended classroom activity, strategy journals help provide access to the often hidden processes that ESL and EFL learners use to accomplish their goals. The effectiveness of the learning journal in generating motivation and directing autonomous English language learning in Korean university students is examined in this study.

2. Language Learning Portfolios

The learner's portfolio has been widely regarded as a tool that has the potential to increase student motivation (e.g., Apple & Shimo, 2005) as well as self-direction in one's studies (e.g., Davies, 2003), providing the language learner with better study practices (e.g., Shimo & Apple, 2006; Smith, 2002) and providing the teacher with an additional assessment tool (e.g., Delett, Barnhardt, & Kevorkian, 2001; Shimo, 2003). One of the aims of this study is to gauge the effectiveness of the learner's portfolio in promoting motivation and self-directed learning for the English language learner at the university level in Korea.

III. Method

1. Participants

The participants in this study were 73 EFL students at a large private university in Korea. The participants broke down into 21 males (29%) and 52 females (71%), and their mean age was approximately 22.5 years. All the participants were juniors or seniors majoring in an English language-related major.

2. Instruments

The instruments administered in this study were two online surveys created through the web-based survey provider SurveyMonkey. The first survey was administered at the end of the journal and portfolio projects. The participants were provided with the survey's URL and asked to complete the survey online and submit it as instructed. The survey contained biographical questions about the participant and questions about the participant's impressions of both the language learning journal and portfolio projects, and about the contents, amount, and frequency of their journal writing and portfolio keeping. The journal- and portfolio-related questions were multiple-choice type, several with Likert-scale type responses. The second online

survey was administered three and a half months after the first. It was a follow-up survey, asking in multiple-choice format whether the participants had continued keeping a journal and/or portfolio, why they did or did not continue, and whether they planned on future journal writing and/or portfolio keeping. All survey items appeared in Korean so that the possibility of misunderstanding the items would be minimized.

3. Procedure

In a classroom situation, the participants were asked to keep a language learning journal as part of the course requirement of the English oral-aural skills course that they were taking during the second semester of 2011. They were told that the minimum requirement was writing two entries per week for the remaining thirteen weeks of the semester and that the minimum word count was 200 words per week. They were informed that the main purpose of this journal-writing project was for them to reflect upon their individual language-learning programs through writing about them in their journals, and through their reflection, to assess the effectiveness of each element of their language study program, and make adjustments to their study program as they felt necessary; examples were given. They were told to include in their journal their English study plan for the semester and to also include any changes that they made to that plan throughout the semester.

The participants were also asked to keep a language learning portfolio as part of the course. They were informed that the main purpose of the portfolio project was for them to reflect upon their individual language-learning programs through making additions to their portfolio throughout the semester, and through their reflection, to assess the effectiveness of each element of their language study program and make revisions to it as they felt necessary; examples were also given.

The participants were told that their journals and portfolios could possibly be checked during the semester, and it was stressed that the contents were of primary importance, not the grammar or spelling of written text. They were also told that the percentage value of their final grade that the journal-writing and portfolio projects would carry would be determined in consultation with the students at the end of the project. During the semester, random spot checking was administered, students' questions about the two projects were answered, and the journals and portfolios were collected and assessed at the end of the semester. It was at this time that the participants were instructed to complete the online survey concerning both their journal-writing and portfolio-keeping projects. The follow-up survey, which checked on continuance of journal-writing and/or portfolio-keeping activities, was administered three and a half months after the first survey, a time interval spanning the participants' winter vacation period.

IV. Results and Discussion

1. Language Learning Journal-Writing Results

Project-completion survey results showed that 84.9% of the participants wrote in their journals 2 to 3 times per week and 12.3% once a week (see Survey Item 2 of Table 1). They also showed that 35.6% of the participants wrote 100-200 words per week, 28.8% wrote 200-300, 19.2% wrote 300-600, and 16.4% wrote less than 100 (Item 3). These figures were in general confirmed during assessment, though the 19.2% figure in Item 3 seemed slightly high. The participants wrote on average near the minimum requirements set for the journal project. The participants indicated that they wrote in their journals about various areas of English study (much = 56.2%; some = 39.7%) and that they wrote about various study methods in each area of study (much = 56.2%; some = 31.5%) as shown in Items 7 and 8.

[TABLE 1] Participant Responses to Language Learning Journal Survey Questions

Question	Response	Percent
1. What was your impression of the language learner journal writing assignment at the beginning of the semester?	Beneficial	16.4
	Beneficial but hard	76.7
	So-so	4.1
	Hard/not beneficial	2.7
2. On average, how often did you write in your journal? (times/wk)	< 1	1.4
	1	12.3
	2-3	84.9
	4-5	1.4
3. How much did you write in your journal each week? (wds/wk)	< 100	16.4
	100-200	35.6
	200-300	28.8
4. Did you include your English study plan for this semester in your journal?	300-600	19.2
	Yes	64.6
	No	35.6
5. Did you include changes to your English study plan in your journal?	Yes, a lot:	8.2
	Yes, a few	41.1
	No	38.4
6. Did you write about various areas of English study in your journal (ex. speaking, listening, vocabulary, TOEIC)?	No, no change	12.3
	Yes, a lot	56.2
	Yes, a little	39.7
7. Did you write about various study methods for each area of study (e.g., Speaking: (1) taking an English course, (2) speaking with a friend)?	No	4.1
	Yes, a lot	56.2
	Yes, a little	31.5
8. Did you alter your English study plan in any way because of keeping a journal?	No	12.3
	Yes, a lot	54.8
	Yes a little	32.9
9. Will you continue to keep a journal after this course finishes?	No	57.5
	Yes	38.4
	Not sure	4.1
10. Will you continue to keep a journal in Korean after this course finishes?	Yes	48.0
	Not sure	41.1
	No	11.0
11. Do you think that keeping a language learning journal was helpful in improving your English study methods?	Yes	93.2
	Not sure	5.5
	No	1.4

12. Do you think that keeping a language learning journal was helpful in improving your English proficiency?	Yes	91.8
	Not sure	4.1
	No	4.1
13. Do you think that keeping a language learning journal was helpful in improving your English communication skills?	Yes	74.0
	Not sure	23.3
	No	2.7
14. What is your impression of the language learner portfolio assignment after one semester of keeping a portfolio?	Beneficial	34.2
	Beneficial but hard	61.6
	So-so	4.1
	Hard / not beneficial	0

Note: N = 73

The survey showed that 64.6% of the participants included their English study plan for the semester in their journal (Item 4) and that 49.3% (many = 8.2%; a few = 41.1%) made changes to that plan during the semester (Item 5). It may very well be that a similar percentage of changes would have occurred without the journal project, but it may also be the case that the actual changes were better informed because of the reflection that the journal project afforded. Indeed, 67.1% of the participants indicated that at least some of the study plan changes that they made (many = 12.3%, some = 54.8%) were influenced by keeping a journal (Item 8).

Participant impressions of the journal-writing project improved with participant familiarity with the actual project. When the project was announced, 93.1% of the participants thought the project would be beneficial (of whom 76.7% also thought it would be difficult). However, at the end of the project, 95.8% of the participants thought it was beneficial, and only 61.6% of them thought it was difficult (Items 1 & 14). Of the participants, 93.2% thought that the journal writing was helpful in improving their English study methods, 91.8% thought that it was helpful in improving their English proficiency, and 74.0% thought it was helpful in improving their English communication skills (23.3% were not sure) as shown in Items 11-13. It is assumed that because of these positive feelings about the journal, 57.5% of the participants indicated that they would continue to keep a language learning journal after the project ended, but 48.0% indicated that they might keep it in Korean rather than in English (Items 9 & 10).

[TABLE 2] Participant Responses to Language Learning Portfolio Survey Questions

Question	Response	Percent
1. What was your impression of the language learner portfolio assignment at the beginning of the semester?	Beneficial	27.4
	Beneficial but hard	64.4
	So-so	5.5
	Hard/not beneficial	2.7
2. On average, how often did you add items to your portfolio?(times/wk)	< 1	17.8
	1	28.8
	2-3	50.7
	4-5	2.7

	< 10	26
3. How many items did you include in your portfolio?	10-20	24.7
	20-30	30.1
	> 30	19.1
4. Did you include your English study plan for this semester in your portfolio?	Yes	46.6
	No	53.4
5. Did you include changes to your English study plan in your portfolio?	Yes, a lot:	12.3
	Yes, a little	11
	No	76.7
6. Did you include items from various areas of English study in your portfolio (ex. speaking, listening, vocabulary)?	Yes	95.9
	No	4.1
7. Did you include items representing various study methods for each area of study?	Yes	87.7
	No	12.3
8. Did you alter your English study plan in any way because of keeping a portfolio?	Yes, a lot	8.2
	Yes a little	50.7
	No	41.1
9. Will you continue to keep a portfolio after this course finishes?	Yes	58.9
	Not sure	34.2
	No	6.9
10. Do you think that keeping a language learner portfolio was helpful in improving your English study methods?	Yes	89.0
	Not sure	8.2
	No	2.7
11. What is your impression of the language learner portfolio assignment after one semester of keeping a portfolio?	Beneficial	45.2
	Beneficial but hard	49.3
	So-so	4.1
	Hard/ not beneficial	1.4
12. What four items did you most often include in your portfolio?	Vocabulary-related	(42)
	Newspaper /Magazine	(30)
	TV-related	(23)
	TOEIC & TOEFL	(21)
	Grammar-related	(20)

Note: N = 73

2. Language Learning Portfolio-Keeping Results

Portfolio project-completion survey results (see Table 2) showed that 55% of the participants put 10-30 items in their portfolios, and 51% added items to their portfolios 2-3 times per week (Item 2 & 3). English study plans were included in the portfolios by 47% of the participants, and 23% made revisions

to the study plan (Items 4 & 5). However, many more prepared their study plans and included them in their reflective language-learning journals. Various areas of English study were represented in the portfolios of 96% of the participants, and 88% included various study methods for each area of study (Items 6 & 7). The items most often included in the portfolios were related to vocabulary, newspapers/magazines, TV, TEOIC/TEOFL, and grammar study, in that order (Item 12), and included both structured (guided) and unstructured activities. As many as 59% of the participants altered their English study plans as a result of the portfolio project, and 59% stated that they would continue keeping a portfolio after the semester was finished (Items 8 & 9).

Participant impressions of the portfolio project improved with participant familiarity with the actual project. When the project was announced, 91.8% of the participants thought that the project would be beneficial (of which 64.4% also thought it would be difficult). However, at the end of the project, 94.5% of the participants thought it was beneficial, and only 49.3% thought that it was difficult (Items 1 & 11). In particular, the percentage of participants who thought the project to be “beneficial but difficult” decreased substantially. Of the participants, 89% thought that keeping a portfolio was helpful in improving their English study methods (Item 10). These figures reveal that the participants had considerably high opinions of the portfolio project.

V. Conclusions

1. Language Learning Journal Writing

This study has shown the language learning journal to be an effective tool in helping Korean university students reflect on and make informed alterations to their individual language-learning programs as a teacher-initiated course project. It is projected that journal writing would also be effective in giving a reflective voice to the language learner in more autonomous language-learning environments. A considerable number of the participants continued employing journal writing voluntarily after the project ended and many more plan to in the future, indications that journal writing is motivating, fosters self-direction, and is sustainable. It is therefore recommended that journal writing be strongly considered for inclusion in university student and other young adult English language learning programs.

Dyment and O’Connell (2010) suggest that making sure that the expectations of a journal-writing project are clear is an enabling factor; i.e., the purpose, the fit into the program, the readership, assessment criteria, and specific requirements. Additionally, Dyment and O’Connell (2003) recommend that for journal writing to be more effective, it should include detailed feedback and journal-writing scaffolding for the students. These items are being considered for inclusion into a similar journal-writing study to be conducted in the future to compare their impact on journal writing with the favorable results obtained in the present study.

2. Language Learning Portfolio Keeping

This study has shown the language learning portfolio to be an effective tool in helping Korean university students reflect on and make informed alterations to their individual language learning programs in a teacher-initiated course project. The results of this study lend support to Apple and Shimo (2005), Hamp-Lyons and Condon (2000), and Shimo (2003), who conclude that through language learner portfolio keeping (a) learners can reflect over their learning processes; (b) it is possible to make a continuous assessment over a long period of time; (c) learners can make original products, and they can

feel a greater sense of achievement than with traditional tests; (d) learners can take control over their learning and feel more responsibility for it; and (e) learners can assess weaknesses and strengths in their language learning, increase their proficiency, and set and reset goals more effectively by viewing their work. The follow-up survey results also suggest that the portfolio has sustainability as a language learning tool beyond the period that it was required and becoming a motivational language learner tool of choice in the learners self-directed language learning program. It is therefore recommended that language learning portfolio keeping be strongly considered for inclusion in university student and other young adult English language learning programs.

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