

Learners' Perceptions of Portfolio Assessment and Autonomous Learning



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Portfolio use has great potential to promote learner autonomy. To understand this potential better, I explore two questions in a university-level English class: (a) How do learners perceive portfolio assessment as a means to promote autonomous or independent learning?, and (b) How can portfolio assessment promote learner autonomy more effectively? I found that many students appreciated the benefits of portfolio use, such as the sense of responsibility, ongoing evaluation, and freedom in what to learn. It seems that portfolio use provides greater opportunity for regular feedback from the teacher, self- and peer-evaluation (including goal-setting), as well as deeper reflection on learning. Various portfolio tasks—(a) optional tasks which allow students to make choices, (b) decision-making tasks which enable students to plan and organize their learning, and (c) language tasks related to both in- and outside-class activities—all help to encourage learner autonomy better. It is also important for a teacher to take students' reactions or opinions into account and modify the tasks when necessary. I conclude by looking at how such task types can be better integrated into future portfolios.

ポートフォリオの使用が学習者自律を高めることにつながる可能性は非常に高い。この可能性をより理解するため、大学レベルの英語のクラスにおいて、(1)学習者は自律的または自主的な学習を促進する手段としてのポートフォリオ評価をどのようにとらえているか、そして(2)ポートフォリオ評価はどうすればより効果的に学習者の自律性を向上させることにつながるかという二つの問題を検討する。本研究では、多くの学生が責任感、継続的な評価、学ぶことにおける自由といったポートフォリオ使用がもたらす利点を高く評価していることが明らかになった。ポートフォリオの使用により学生は教師からの定期的なフィードバック、自己評価や学生間の評価(目標設定を含む)、学習についてのより深い内省への多大な機会を得ることができる。(1)学生が選択することができる任意のタスク、(2)学習を学生自ら計画、準備させる決定タスク、(3)教室内外の活動に関連した言語タスクが学習者の自律性を促すのに役立つ。教師が学生の反応や意見を考慮して、必要に応じてタスクを修正することも大切である。そのようなタスクを今後いかにうまくポートフォリオに取り入れることができるかを考察する。

INTRODUCTION

I began to realize the possible effectiveness of portfolios on learner autonomy when I was studying in the TESOL Master's program at the State University of New York, at Buffalo. Portfolio creation was a partial requirement of two courses I was taking, *TESOL Practicum* and *Teaching Reading in a Second Language Context*. While working on my own portfolios and observing my classmates preparing theirs, I felt that portfolios were helping us to monitor our learning better and be even more responsible for our studies—in short, to learn more autonomously.

Realizing the effectiveness of portfolios, I started to implement portfolio use extensively in my own language classes. In this chapter, I will report one case from an English class at a Japanese university. The discussion will be based on the students' statements about portfolio assessment, which I hope will provide teachers with insights into more effective portfolio use. Although portfolio use has not yet become a substantial assessment or instructional tool at any level of education in Japan, I hope that my qualitative exploration of portfolios can help make a modest contribution to promoting them further.

WHAT IS LEARNER AUTONOMY?

The term autonomy is used differently according to context (Benson & Voller, 1997, pp. 1-2). In this chapter, I use the term to mean the learners' ability to plan ways of learning, choose materials, monitor their learning process, and evaluate their progress (cf. Wenden, 1991).

In order for learners to be autonomous, they need to engage in independent learning. Sheerin (1997) describes factors in independent learning, which I took into consideration when designing the portfolio tasks. These factors include the disposition and ability to (a) "analyse one's own strengths/weaknesses, [and] language needs," (b) "set achievable targets and overall objectives," (c) "plan a programme of work to achieve the objectives set," (d) "exercise choice, select materials and activities," (e) "work without supervision," and (f) "evaluate one's own progress" (p. 57).

WHAT ARE PORTFOLIOS?

O'Malley and Valdez Pierce (1996), while saying that portfolios can mean different things to different teachers, illustrate the following basic three types: showcase portfolios, collections portfolios, and assessment portfolios. According to those authors, "showcase portfolios are typically used to display a student's best work to parents and school administrators," whereas collections portfolios (also called working folders), "literally contain all of a student's work," and "assessment portfolios are focused reflections of specific learning goals that contain systematic collections of student work, student self-assessment, and teacher assessment" (p. 37). Basically, assessment portfolios are different from the others in that students go over their previous and present work, and choose items to put into their folder according to certain criteria. The items are usually not only the best work, as is the case of showcase portfolios, but include various kinds of work to show ongoing learning processes, too. This type of portfolio was used for the portfolio assessment in the class discussed in this chapter.

Many researchers agree that portfolio use can promote learner responsibility and independence. According to Smolen, Newman, Wathen, and Lee (1995, p. 22), "one of the

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major advantages of the process of collecting and assessing students' performance is that it empowers students to become partners and decision makers in their learning." Smolen et al. (1995) introduce one example approach in which goal-setting and self-assessment techniques were promoted through portfolio creation. They point out that the assessment partnership that students engage in helps them to be more independent learners. Many other studies, while conducted in different contexts, also suggest that portfolio use will help learners take more responsibility and control over their own learning (Antonek, McCormick, & Donato, 1997; Gottlieb, 1995; McNamara & Deane, 1995; Mineishi, 2002; O'Malley & Valdez Pierce, 1996; Santos, 1997). In fact, when considering what the portfolio is, Paulson, Paulson and Meyer (1991) assert that "... a portfolio is a portfolio when it provides a forum that encourages students to develop the abilities needed to become independent, self-directed learners" (p. 63). In other words, portfolio use should be planned and integrated to help learners take more responsibility for their learning and develop better autonomous learning.

In addition to this sense of responsibility, students can experience meaningful growth through reflection in the process of making portfolios, whatever types of portfolios are used (cf. Mineishi, 2002; O'Malley & Valdez Pierce, 1996; Santos, 1997). Santos (1997) cites one of her students' remarks: Without reflection, the portfolio remains merely a "folder of my all paper" (p. 10). Reflection can be understood as one of the most significant features of the creation of a portfolio.

Learner reflection leads to self-evaluation. Through creating a portfolio, students are required to examine, analyze, and evaluate their work and progress, so that they can learn how to assess themselves. Moreover, learners can develop the ability to set achievable goals, since goal-setting and self-assessment are closely related. Smolen et al. (1995) point out that once learners learn to examine their work critically and judge it against certain standards, they will learn how to set reasonable goals for themselves. Similarly, Antonek et al. (1997) report, in their study of student teachers' portfolios, that self-reflection helped the student teachers to develop their professional identity. Perhaps their point can also be extended to language learners. Reflection on their own learning processes may lead to their growth as independent and responsible learners and even as human beings—as learning beings.

To summarize, portfolios are collections of students' work which allow them to enjoy responsibility and independence in their own learning in the process of preparing their collections of work. Learner reflection is an important element in the process, which helps learners to monitor and evaluate their learning processes.

THE STUDY

STUDY QUESTIONS

Although it is clearly possible to say simply that portfolio use promotes learner autonomy, the important question is how we can make it do so. I posed two questions here:

1. How do learners perceive portfolio assessment as a means to promote autonomous or independent learning?
2. How can portfolio assessment promote learner autonomy in language learning more effectively?

Investigating learners' perception of portfolio use is important because how learners think and feel about learning materials is closely related to their learning outcomes. I expected that their perceptions would provide useful implications for the better use of portfolios.

LOCAL CONTEXT

Portfolio assessment was integrated into an English as a foreign language class for Japanese university freshmen. The class consisted of 17 female and 25 male students who were all Applied Biology majors. Their English level was not very high. Many of them had failed to master or had forgotten high-school level English. However, they generally showed interest, and their attendance in class was relatively good throughout the semester, with a maximum of three students being absent from any given class except the last class.¹ The class focused mainly on enhancing the students' English communication ability, with more emphasis on listening and speaking, but reading and writing activities were also provided. This was because I considered being able to use integrated skills important for communication.

Thirteen 90-minute classes were given in the semester. Questionnaires to survey what the students thought of portfolio assessment (see Appendices A and B on the *Autonomy You Ask!* website) were provided in Weeks 10 and 13 (i.e., the last class). Questions were written in the students' first language, Japanese, and they wrote their responses in Japanese to lessen constraints in expressing themselves. Forty-one responses were collected for the first questionnaire, and 35 for the second. Responses were kept anonymous.

TASKS FOR THE PORTFOLIO

The following tasks were prepared, with instructions given at the beginning of the semester:

- Task 1: Choose two favorite conversations among those you have created in class.
- Task 2: Write three reports about English movies you have watched at home.
- Task 3: Make a list of useful expressions that you came across in class and that you would like to learn by heart.

In Task 1, students created a conversation in pairs and submitted it to me in written form at the end of the class. I commented on each piece of work in terms of both content and expressions, and shared good pieces with the whole class in the next class meeting. Task 2 was amended after consideration of the feedback from the students and ongoing evaluation of their English language performance in activities in and outside class. The revised instruction was to write two movie reports, plus one other movie report or report on an English song of their own choice. The students were to submit the first movie report to me so that I could evaluate their work and give feedback. They were also encouraged to turn in and revise their other reports before including them as the final product in their portfolios. For Task 3, they were told to make their vocabulary list more helpful for them in remembering the expressions by adding example sentences and/or explanations of usage.

Each task was prepared with the following objectives, many of which relate to Sheerin's (1997) characteristics of independent learning:

Task 1: Two Favorite Conversations

- 1) Students will evaluate their progress and/or analyze their own strengths and weaknesses by looking back on their work in the process of choosing their two favorite pieces.
- 2) Students will actively engage in the classroom activity (conversation creation), as this task is based on such activity.

Task 2: Movie/Song Reports

- 1) Students will engage in learning activities outside the class, as this task is an outside-class activity.

- 2) Students will plan their own learning program, as this task allows the students a certain freedom to decide when and how they work on it.
- 3) Students will experience the freedom of choosing learning materials, as they can choose movies or a song they like.
- 4) Students will analyze their level, as they have to find materials that suit their level.
- 5) Students will become aware of learning tools that they can make use of outside the class.

Task 3: List of Useful Expressions

- 1) Students will experience a certain extent of freedom in choosing language to be learned, as they decide on expressions they would like to remember.
- 2) Students will set achievable goals in their learning, as they choose the expressions to be consciously learned.
- 3) Students will engage in classroom activities more actively, as they have to make the list based on what they cover in class.

The students were encouraged to revise the first products for both Tasks 1 and 2 based on the teacher's feedback, and they were expected to evaluate their own progress and analyze their strengths and weaknesses in the process of comparing their earlier and later work (Tasks 1 and 2), and in the process of making choices for their portfolios (Task 1). Regarding Task 3, students made use of their own and classmates' work for Task 1, as well as other materials and activities from the textbook. I explored my students' reactions to these tasks by using questionnaires.

STUDENT PERCEPTIONS OF THE PORTFOLIOS

To answer my first research question (*How do learners perceive portfolio assessment as a means to promote autonomous or independent learning?*), I would like to continue by sharing some of my students' comments about portfolio assessment and learner autonomy. These are taken from their responses to the two questionnaires, and I have translated the students' Japanese comments into English to convey accurately the original meaning. I will first present comments pointing to active involvement with learning so that we can get a better view of their increased sense of responsibility. We will then look more closely at the students' perspectives on the relationship between learner autonomy and portfolio use.

PORTFOLIO ASSESSMENT AND STUDENTS' ATTITUDES

Many of my students showed favorable attitudes toward portfolio assessment itself. They appreciated it as ongoing evaluation throughout the semester, which cannot be done with a single, end-of-semester examination. Mineishi's (2002) study also indicates that her study participants, Japanese university students, favored portfolio use. In addition, my Anthology project first-stage partner, Steve Davies (personal communication, April 8, 2003) said, "We introduced the portfolio idea to the students today, and they seemed happy to do them, especially when I told them they wouldn't be having any tests."

Students are likely to have the impression that a class without tests sounds easy. However, once they start working on their portfolios, they find it challenging. At the same time, they find it worthwhile. According to the survey, they seem to have developed positive attitudes towards English learning due to the portfolio creation and therefore engaged in learning activities more actively. My students' responses about portfolio creation and classroom activities include:

- *I have become able consciously to use as many new expressions we've learned as possible when creating conversations.*
- *I am especially conscious [about making a portfolio] when we make conversations and when we write reports. In order to make a portfolio, I think I should not make a lukewarm one, and I engage in classroom activities, planning to make a product completed with high quality.*
- *When we had conversation practice in class, I was able to engage in the class, wondering whether I could use the conversation as the one for my portfolio.*
- *When creating a conversation, I feel I should do well, because it is not just mine.*
[Author's note: The conversation may become one of the pieces in his partner's portfolio.]

These comments indicate that the students participated with more attention and a higher sense of responsibility in the activities that could be included in their portfolios later. They were conscious about their portfolios as a final product, and they eagerly engaged in their work in progress.

Likewise, the students' responses to the following questions show their active involvement with outside-class learning activities:

- *When I had to write a 200 word report after watching a movie, [I was thinking about my portfolio]. I've come to watch movies besides the homework, as I want to get more used to English.*
- *I remember [that I have to make a portfolio] while taking a rest at my part-time work place. When I watch movies, I try not to look at the subtitles though I don't understand the meaning.*
- *I've come to try to comprehend the conversation as much as possible when I watch movies.*
- *When I rent videos, I used to always rent Japanese dubbed ones, but I've recently rented only subtitled ones. Subtitled ones are more fun as I occasionally come across expressions I know. So, now I enjoy two good points, pleasure in watching the movie and pleasure about [English] language expressions.*

It seems that the positive changes in the students' attitude are more related to the nature of the tasks than to the act of preparing a portfolio. However, the benefits of portfolio use manifest themselves in its continuous production. Such sustained engagement continuously encourages learners' active involvement in planning their learning program. One of my students neatly articulated this challenge when he/she ventured, "*[making] a portfolio is tough for those who cannot plan things.*"

A further factor which the students highlighted in their responses was the additional freedom in choices and decisions which the portfolio assignments provided. This point appears in comments such as the following:

- *When we have exams, it seems that we study only to get credits, but for the portfolio, we have to think of English sentences by ourselves, and it feels that I am studying English.*
- *Compared to tests, we can study English more freely. (But, we've got to do a lot more than we do for tests and so it's challenging.)*
- *We don't have a certain, set frame [about what to study] like tests and we can work relatively freely, so I think it is not painful to learn things by heart and think, so it's good.*

- *It is good that we do things on our own initiative instead of doing things as we receive them.*

Other positive comments about portfolio assessment include:

- *We can tell what and how we did in class this semester just by a quick look [at the portfolio].*
- *We can feel a sense of achievement.*
- *I've come to have more time to expose myself to English.*

Such comments appear to show that portfolio assessment has enhanced the students' favorable attitude towards learning English. We can see that this type of assessment gave satisfaction to the students by providing them with ongoing evaluation processes, freedom in learning, and a sense of responsibility. In fact, activities that allow the students more freedom in using English or that encourage them to express their own ideas freely are possible in the form of tests, too. However, portfolios have an advantage in that both teacher and student can be involved in assessment of all learning processes. A further point is that portfolios can motivate students to engage in English learning or use activities over a longer period of time, not just before the test takes place. Students can thus continuously receive benefits from the portfolio creation.

PORTFOLIO USE AND LEARNER AUTONOMY

The students' responses to those questions probing their awareness of Sheerin's six factors of independent learning are presented in Table 1 below. Using a 5-point Likert scale, students were asked to indicate the strength of their agreement with a number of target questions: (1) *I don't think so at all.* (2) *I don't think so.* (3) *Neutral.* (4) *I think so.* (5) *I strongly think so.*

Table 1 Students' Awareness of the Portfolio-Autonomy Relationship

Questions	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)	(5)	*	Total
1. Do you think that creating a portfolio has led to independent or autonomous learning?	2	4	7	19	3	0	35
2. Did you analyze or think about your strengths and weaknesses in the process of making your portfolio?	0	5	9	17	4	0	35
3. Did you set achievable targets and overall objectives in the process of making your portfolio?	5	9	14	6	1	0	35
4. Did you plan what you should do in order to achieve the objectives set in the process of making your portfolio?	7	9	12	6	0	1	35
5. Did you make your own choice of materials, activities, and contents that you would use in the process of making your portfolio?	2	6	9	14	3	1	35
6. Did you work without others' (your teacher's) supervision in the process of making your portfolio?	1	2	8	15	8	1	35
7. Did you evaluate your own progress in English or think about it in the process of making your portfolio?	2	8	13	7	4	1	35

* = No response.

A number of points can be made about the questionnaire results. First, the survey itself seems to have helped the students to evaluate their strengths and weaknesses, but the students' responses also showed their awareness of self-evaluation was not very strong. While many students referred to their English language ability in written responses in the survey, scarcely one third of the students answered that they evaluated their progress in English (Question 7). Secondly, their awareness of goal-setting was not very strong, either (Questions 3 and 4); only 7 students answered that they (strongly) thought they had set achievable targets and overall objectives, and 6 answered that they thought they had planned what they had to do in order to achieve the objectives.

Whereas quite a few students were not aware of existing independent-learning factors in the process of creating a portfolio, they provided insightful comments regarding how portfolio assessment can promote autonomous or independent learning. For example, the students said that portfolio use can do so because:

- *The act of thinking on our own and creating something on our own [the act of making a portfolio] allows us to show our attitudes towards learning by the completeness [of the final product, the portfolio], and allows us to discover ourselves;*
- *I thought English was more fun when I could make my own choices and think for myself than when we worked on provided questions without thinking much;*
- *I looked up words with which I would like to express myself in English in the dictionary and I was able to learn those expressions. The hours I am exposed to English have increased.*

These comments imply that the portfolio assessment succeeded in integrating the characteristics that Sheerin (1997) listed, namely making one's own choice in learning materials and evaluating one's own progress.

On the other hand, several students were critical of its potential in promoting learner autonomy. Six students answered that "I do not think so (at all)" to the question, "Do you think that portfolio creation has led to independent or autonomous learning?" (See results (1) & (2) for Question 1 in the Table 1.) Three of them attributed their responses to their failing to complete the portfolio tasks satisfactorily (e.g., "because I didn't have time to do [the tasks] in detail"), but one ironically pointed out another reason for his (or her) critical view of the portfolio, "Because [the portfolio] was something we were forced to do. It is just like homework."

The other two students mentioned that they had found the tasks too easy, as they engaged in "more independence-promoting assignments" such as writing a 200-word report once a week in another English course. Therefore, the portfolio assessment did not help them develop their autonomous learning. Most of the students in the class found the tasks quite demanding, but more attention could have been paid to these students who found the tasks too easy. Giving them other optional tasks might have motivated them to work on outside-class learning activities more actively, and prevented them from just being frustrated by the easy requirements. At the Anthology Writers' Retreat, Akiko Takagi and Stacey Vye suggested that I did not have to limit the number of movie/song reports, but rather just set the minimum required number. This had also been suggested by one of my students in a questionnaire response.

Furthermore, a couple of students suggested that they wanted more freedom in what to do for the portfolio, while many others appreciated the freedom in what to learn. For example, one said that they could have written reports not just about movies or songs, but also about books or any topics interesting to them. The portfolio assignments could have better promoted learner autonomy if they had provided tasks which allowed students more freedom in choices

and decisions. One student said critically, "... *you can't study autonomously anyway, if you don't have interest in learning English first of all.*" Choices and self-decisions may be able to enhance students' interest. The next section discusses further the better use of portfolios.

FOR BETTER USE OF PORTFOLIOS

How can portfolio assessment promote learner autonomy in language learning more effectively?

The previous discussion has already suggested some answers to this question (i.e., Research Question 2). Furthermore, extensive idea exchanges with Steve Davies, who was then using portfolio assessment in his Content-Based-Instruction class, together with feedback and opinions from other Anthology project members, have enabled me to approach this issue from a wider perspective.

HOW MUCH OF THE FRAMEWORK SHOULD THE TEACHER PROVIDE?

The teacher is responsible for preparing a framework, specific guidelines, or requirements for the portfolio, as he/she is the one who grades the students' work, usually with numerical values and/or letter grades. However, if the teacher prepares too rigid a framework, it will deprive the students of their own personal responsibility. How much control should the teacher exert over the portfolio creation? How specific should the teacher's guidelines be? To what extent should the teacher decide on what the students should do for their portfolios?

As one of my students' critical comments on portfolios and learner autonomy implied, portfolios should not be like homework, given one-way from the teacher as something that students feel forced to do. Ideally, the teacher and students cooperatively decide what to do for their portfolios (in class, too, as portfolio content should relate to classroom activities). In the process of making their own choices and decisions about tasks, students will find something that stimulates their interests and will feel stronger personal involvement with the portfolio creation. They may thus better develop learner autonomy.

I have realized the simple fact that portfolio tasks become student-centered activities when they provide students with choices, self-decisions, and responsibility for learning. I have then continuously integrated portfolio assessment into different teaching contexts, trying to implement much more student-centered tasks, in which students get actively involved. In the meantime, however, I encountered another problem. I was faced with the dilemma that I always took the initiative by proposing what the students should do, even though my purpose was to provide student-centered activities and the activities appeared 'student-centered enough' to involve the students' active participation.

Through exchanging ideas with the project members, however, I have come to think that it is natural that the balance between the two features, *student/teacher-centered* and *teacher/student-directed*, can be maintained differently according to local context. In the case of a classroom with less autonomous learners, student-centered activities may have to be prepared as completely teacher-directed activities. Providing student-centered activities is the first step towards eventually giving initiative to the students. The teacher has to transfer initiative gradually or partially in the process of promoting learner autonomy. When the students can work in completely student-directed and student-centered activities, they will have fully developed learner autonomy (to the extent that they no longer need a classroom teacher!). The shift from teacher-centered to student-centered, and the shift from teacher-directed to learner-directed, do not occur at the same rate, but the former precedes the latter. The teacher can contribute positively to the transformation by providing the students with choices and chances for decision-making in their own learning.

At the same time, even though the teacher wants his/her students to take the initiative, it is also often the case that the situation simply does not allow it. In quite a few cases, the teacher has to make most of the decisions about what the students do because of various learner factors, course requirements, and institutional constraints. If the students are not aware of what they need to learn, the teacher cannot simply depend on what they want to do, as there may be something they have to learn before that. Also, a teacher may often have to use textbooks chosen by others. In addition, the school curriculum may not allow the teacher to do whatever he/she would like to do.

In short, the answer to the question of how much of the framework the teacher should provide varies from situation to situation. However, what is important is that the framework the teacher provides for the portfolio allows the students a certain amount of freedom in what they do and lets them feel that they are in charge of their work. The portfolio framework must support student-centeredness and promote student initiative, so that it will eventually become student-directed.

WHAT KINDS OF TASKS SHOULD BE INCLUDED IN THE PORTFOLIO?

The above discussion has led me to propose that the portfolio can better promote learner autonomy when it includes the following items: (a) optional tasks which enable students to make choices, (b) decision-making tasks which allow students to plan and organize their learning within them, and (c) language tasks related to both in- and outside-class activities.

Optional and decision-making tasks will promote students' personal and active involvement. Personal or active involvement will lead to enhanced motivation and eventually to autonomous learning. The students' responses in the survey show that they seem to work more actively both in and outside the class if the activities can be included in their portfolios. Furthermore, if the portfolio is to be used for assessment for the class, in-class activities should definitely include those which contribute to the portfolio in the end. Application / extension or outside-class tasks can also be helpful, as they encourage the students to work independently outside the class and plan their learning program, although students will probably need frequent or regular reminders and proper guidance in class.

Another key point is that tasks should be adaptable. In other words, it is important for a teacher to consider students' reactions and opinions when preparing tasks. If the teacher incorporates students' ideas into tasks, or if he/she amends them after consideration of their reaction to such tasks, the students will not find that things are just a one-way street controlled by the teacher: They can become more motivated towards active learning.

HOW SHOULD ASSESSMENT BE REALIZED THROUGH THE PORTFOLIO?

Ongoing assessment is crucial in the portfolio assignments. In order for the students ultimately to be able to learn by themselves, the teacher has to assist them in the process of becoming autonomous. This assistance includes giving frequent feedback on the students' work. Ongoing assessment cannot be effectively realized just by looking at student portfolios at the end of the semester. Such assessment would simply turn out to be retrospective and not provide any useful scaffolding for the next steps of learning, which should have been given throughout the semester.

In addition to the regular assessment by the teacher, opportunities for self-assessment and goal-setting, which are closely related, should be integrated into class (O'Malley & Valdez Pierce, 1996; Smolen et al., 1995). As discussed earlier, the survey indicated that my students were not very aware in analyzing their strengths and weaknesses or evaluating their progress. This implies that insufficient opportunities to think deeply about the objectives and explicit chances to set their own goals were not provided in my class, although the tasks were prepared

with specific objectives. It is important to provide students with specific occasions to articulate their classroom activity and portfolio creation goals. They will then have to think whether they have achieved the goals or not, which will lead to better self-assessment.

Goal-cards, on the front of which students write their goals for the week or the unit, and on the back of which they write about their level of achievement, can be very useful (Smolen et al., 1995). It is beneficial, too, to have students report either orally or in writing to one another what they have actually done to meet the objectives set. Peer assessment will also be helpful, as it promotes self-assessment: The students learn from assessment by others as well as from their assessment of others. Students can share their work in progress, give feedback on it, and learn from one another. When the portfolio creation process provides such ongoing, authentic assessment opportunities (including goal-setting), it can better foster capacities for independent learning such as the ability to “analyse one’s own strengths/weaknesses, [and] language needs,” “set achievable targets and overall objectives,” “plan a programme of work to achieve the objectives set,” and “evaluate one’s own progress” (Sheerin, 1997, p. 57).

After such continuous assessment, the teacher usually comes to the stage where he/she has to give numerical results or letter grades to the students’ portfolios so that they can be used to calculate the students’ ultimate grades for the class. This is really hard; how can the teacher do quantitative evaluation when the portfolio assessment is supposed to be qualitative? Validity and reliability issues also remain for further exploration.² The questions I have been faced with are the following: (a) *What criteria should we use in evaluating the portfolio?* (b) *Does the portfolio really represent what we are supposed to assess?* and (c) *How much should the students know about the scoring guidelines or prepared rubrics?*

What we should focus on in the assessment and how much we should let the students know about the scoring system vary depending on the context, the objectives of the learning, and the actual classroom activities. The advantage of portfolio assessment, again, is that it allows assessment not only of the final product but also of the individual student’s progress at different stages of learning. For example, it can allow the teacher to give credit for how much a student has learned through one task or has improved from the beginning to the end of the semester. Such aspects of assessment have to coincide with the objectives and purposes of the learning in the class.

It is necessary to prepare specific scoring guidelines or rubrics which can guide the evaluator to give points to a number of discrete items or guide him/her to evaluate the work holistically. The items to be evaluated have to be carefully prepared so they mirror what the portfolio is supposed to evaluate. I have so far presented the specific criteria to the students in advance in every context. Some teachers may argue that providing the criteria may limit the possibility of what the students can do because they may only focus on the criteria, but it enables the students to become clearer about why they are doing the tasks (i.e., the purpose and objectives of working on the tasks). The students can also contribute their opinions about which items in the portfolio should or should not necessarily be evaluated.³

CONCLUSION

My investigation for better use of portfolios is still in progress. I have so far integrated portfolio assessment in different contexts (e.g., a university English reading class, a Japanese as a second language writing class), all the while trying to make the most of the findings from the case reported here and discussion with the Anthology project members. When designing tasks for the portfolio, I now try to provide chances for the students to (a) receive regular feedback from the teacher and peers, (b) engage in more profound reflection in learning (e.g., keeping a

learning journal, sharing personal reflection with peers), (c) receive more explicit instruction on objectives of portfolio tasks, (d) articulate learning goals and objectives for themselves, and (e) analyze their progress (e.g., self- and peer-assessment).

I do not believe that portfolio integration can automatically promote learner autonomy on the part of the students. It depends on how the tasks or activities for the portfolio are designed and presented. As for tasks, I try to integrate (a) optional tasks which allow students to make choices, (b) decision-making tasks which enable students to plan and organize their learning within them, and (c) language tasks related to both in- and outside-class activities. These tasks should be modified if necessary, according to the students' reactions or opinions. In discussing classroom activities with Peter Mizuki, my Anthology project second-stage partner, I was reminded that the content of tasks and activities makes a big difference in learning outcomes, and that preparation of tasks and activities is what teachers have to put the most effort into. The benefits of portfolio use will be most appreciated when the contents of the tasks and activities are meaningful.

In closing, I would like to propose one question for future exploration: Shouldn't portfolio use be integrated into high-school level English classes, too? Learner autonomy could, and should be, promoted even before learners become university or college students. Portfolios can promote learner autonomy by helping learners to reflect on their learning and feel a higher sense of responsibility for their learning. Portfolio assessment is not free from problems, such as validity and reliability issues, and it may be difficult to depend totally on the portfolio when grading the students' English ability, if we consider large class size, the reality of entrance examinations, and other constraints. Nevertheless, it should be worthwhile to integrate portfolios into high-school level English classes; this can also be started without doing away with traditional assessment tests. Portfolio use in high school English classes still seems to be quite rare, but effective ways to incorporate it at that level should be explored.⁴

NOTES

1. Seven students were absent from the last class, which had never been the case before. The students had to submit their portfolios by that day. Some had submitted theirs before, and others later. Two of them failed to prepare a portfolio.
2. For similar problems of institutionalized portfolio assessment, see Case (1994), Herman and Winters (1994), and Wolf (1989). Nishioka (2003) also discusses how to grade portfolios.
3. Nishioka (2003) also argues in her discussion of the implementation of portfolio assessment in elementary school classes that presenting rubrics to children has disadvantages and advantages. This may deprive children of creativity and may make them too conscious about their scores. On the other hand, rubrics can make learning goals and activities clear to them.
4. Some elementary and junior high schools have been trying portfolio assessment, especially in *Sogoteki Gakushu no Jikan* [Period for Integrated Study]. See Kato and Ando (1999) and Nishioka (2003) for more information. Nishioka discusses integration of portfolio assessment both into the Period for Integrated Study and into other regular subject classes. Kato distinguishes between *evaluation* and *assessment* clearly in his chapter of the book, but I did not intend to make a clear distinction in this chapter.

CRITICAL READER RESPONSE 1

WADE CARLTON AND JOYCE CUNNINGHAM

In this chapter, Etsuko Shimo describes how she has used portfolios in a university-level class and answers two questions: (a) *How do learners perceive portfolio assessment as a means to promote autonomous or independent learning?*, and (b) *How can portfolio assessment promote learner autonomy more effectively?* Etsuko does her readers a favor by providing very comprehensible descriptions of learner autonomy and portfolios, with more than adequate references to the literature in both areas. Both are buzzwords, but probably not all readers are familiar with what they encompass.

Etsuko's use of the students' native language of Japanese in her classroom surveys is refreshing and undoubtedly led to more detailed and accurate responses. It is a practice that we reviewers would like to pursue in the future, and, after reading examples of students' responses in this chapter, we are inspired to do just that.

It is encouraging that Etsuko believes that students' "reflection on their own learning processes may lead to their growth as independent and responsible learners..." A kind of leveraging can take place in these kinds of projects, as one student admitted some motivation to do well on a pairwork task because it (a conversation) could be selected by the other student for inclusion in his or her portfolio. Such valuable insights, direct from the students, are liberally sprinkled throughout Etsuko's chapter, adding an authentic, real-world touch that helps to support her findings.

With regards to her first research question, the findings (for her students) are quite clear from responses to the first question on her second classroom survey, "Do you think that portfolio creation has led to independent or autonomous learning?" Twenty-two out of 35 students answered either "I think so" or "I strongly think so." On the other hand, looking at Table 1, which provides specific response rates for seven of the 19 questions in her second survey, the results are slightly vague. A 5-point Likert scale was used, and the middle, neutral response was the most often selected for 3 of the questions and was the second most often for the other 4. Perhaps a 7-point scale would have produced more favorable responses; it almost certainly would have provided more clarity.

Etsuko's straightforward manner of including several less favorable responses is refreshing. There will always be some students in mandatory classes who simply don't want to be there. It is important for the teacher not to lose sight of this, whether they are employing portfolio assessment or any other kind. In addition, in her chapter, Etsuko offers several suggestions for improvement (particularly regarding task design), including some received from colleagues and students.

Overall, this is an illuminating chapter with relevance for any teacher considering the use of portfolios. It includes solid referencing to the literature, vibrant students' voices, and Etsuko's own critical thinking, all expressed in language accessible to practitioners. No doubt many readers will be convinced to initiate portfolio work in their own classes, and perhaps conduct similar research.

CRITICAL READER RESPONSE 2**ANA MARIA F. BARCELOS**

In this very interesting chapter, Etsuko Shimo reports on the use of portfolios within an autonomous learning context. In this response, I would like first to point out several interesting aspects of the chapter, and then, address some questions that the chapter raises for learner autonomy. First, Etsuko shows portfolios as a helpful instrument for encouraging learners to reflect on their own learning process. Second, besides highlighting the importance of portfolios as an alternative, ongoing form of assessment, the author also gives good suggestions for other teachers. Moreover, Etsuko shows the limitations and constraints involved in implementing portfolios, as well as students' self-evaluations and suggestions: She thus helps teachers, like myself, who are trying to implement autonomous learning in traditional EFL classrooms, to make more informed decisions. The usefulness of portfolios can be confirmed by students' statements evaluating the portfolio and highlighting its freedom and challenge. Third, Etsuko asks important questions about the issues of teacher control and teacher decisions when implementing alternative ways of assessment and learner autonomy; she then provides answers to these questions, advising teachers and students to work together in deciding and negotiating the content of portfolios. In addition, Etsuko gives instructive suggestions concerning the kinds of tasks that could be included in portfolios, which is a great help for anyone interested in doing the same in their classes.

Some of the questions which this chapter raises refer, first, to the use of questionnaires and, second, to the dilemma of autonomy. When students were asked in the second questionnaire about independent or autonomous learning, I wonder if their definitions of autonomy were similar to the teacher/researcher's. I am not arguing that their definitions should be similar. However, when using questionnaires, it is necessary to take into account the different interpretations of key terms by both students and teachers, participants and researchers, so that participants' concepts can be investigated in their own terms. The second question relates to the dilemma of autonomy (Woods, 1996). In other words, in order for students to 'act autonomously,' it is the teacher who should provide 'student-centered activities.' Etsuko's answer to this dilemma is very wise and appropriate: Autonomy is contextual, and the teacher should be aware of the particularities of his or her own context in order to situate autonomy appropriately. In other words, autonomy is not an all or nothing concept but more of a continuum. Furthermore, some teacher-centered roles may be required in order to have a more student-centered classroom.

In conclusion, I echo one of Etsuko's students who said: "You can't study autonomously anyway, if you don't have interest in learning English first of all." This comment reminds us of the importance of taking into account students' attitudes and beliefs about (learning) English when implementing autonomous learning. After all, it is always the learner who does the learning.