

Helping Chinese EFL students develop learner autonomy through portfolios

Zhenhui Rao
Jiangxi Normal University

ABSTRACT

Recent English teaching reform in China has witnessed a promotion of autonomous approaches to language learning. To facilitate the process of making students become autonomous learners, this paper suggests using portfolios as a learning tool. It first introduces the notions of learner autonomy and use of portfolios, and considers the relationship between the two. Then, it presents some guidelines for preparing a portfolio to raise students' awareness of autonomous learning, and enhancing their self-directed learning. Finally, it summarizes the advantages and limitations of using portfolios as a tool in developing learner autonomy.

Introduction

For a long time, English teaching in China has been dominated by a teacher-centered, book-centered, grammar-translation method and an emphasis on rote memory (Hu, 2003; Rao, 2002). Instead of learning English as a tool for survival in business and every-day life, English language education continues to be a required academic subject which is a part of state education program, and shaped by rigid and mandatory top-down educational policies and teaching practice sanctioned by tradition (Liu, 1998). Teachers at all levels in China are expected to cover the curriculum developed by the government. Based on this centralized curriculum, almost all English textbooks are designed to teach grammar, reading, and writing, with little emphasis on listening and speaking. Although the examinations are locally set, there are strong expectations on the part of the students and the school administration that the content and form will be similar to that of the traditional national examinations. Such a teacher-dominated classroom teaching and centralized examination system in China result in students' strong reliance on teachers in English learning. It is teachers that tell students what to do and students just listen and obey (Liu & Littlewood, 1997).

Undoubtedly, this essentially passive way of learning greatly inhibits most Chinese students from learning English efficiently. To help them become autonomous learners, researchers and teachers have made numerous efforts in reforming language teaching and learning. On the one hand, they try to improve the learning environment by redesigning the curriculum and assessment system, reorganizing classroom activities, and altering the teacher's role from being an authority to an organizer or a facilitator (e.g., Judy & Crookall, 1995). On the other hand, they attempt to train students to be active and independent learners

by encouraging them to design their own learning plan(s), seek learning materials, keep learning diary, and cooperate with others in their learning (e.g., Littlewood, 1999).

In this paper, I intend to explore another way to facilitate students' learning and develop learner autonomy, i.e., the use of portfolios as a learning tool. Since most of the previous works on portfolios and autonomous learning dealt with either westerners studying foreign language in their own countries or groups of mixed nationalities studying English as a second language in Western countries, this paper aims at discussing how to employ portfolios to help Chinese students develop their autonomous learning. The paper is divided into three sections. First, I will briefly introduce the notions of learner autonomy and use of portfolios, and consider the relationship between the two. Then, I will present some guidelines for preparing a portfolio and a teaching schedule which demonstrates how portfolios can be used to raise Chinese students' awareness of autonomous learning, facilitate their learning process, and enhance their self-directed learning. Finally, I will summarize the advantages and limitations of using portfolios as a tool in developing learner autonomy.

Learner autonomy

Learner autonomy is seen as a capacity for active, independent learning. Little (1991), for example, sees autonomy as a "capacity—for detachment, critical reflection, decision making and independent action" (p. 4). The basis of learner autonomy is that the learner accepts responsibility for his/her learning. This acceptance of responsibility has both socio-affective and cognitive implications: it entails at once a positive attitude to learning and the development of a capacity to reflect on the content and process of learning with a view to bringing them as far as possible under conscious control. Students who are encouraged to take responsibility for their own work, by being given some control over what, how and when they learn, are more likely to be able to set realistic goals, plan programs of work, develop strategies for coping with new and unforeseen situations, and evaluate and assess their own work. They are able to learn how to learn from their own successes and failures in ways which will help them to be more efficient learners in the future (Crabbe, 1993).

In addition, learner autonomy can be seen as an attitude on the part of the learner towards taking control of the language learning process and assuming responsibility for the process. The ability to exercise autonomy requires the learner to have an understanding of the nature of language learning and of his/her role in that process. The understanding of learner autonomy as a capacity or attitude rather than as overt action (where, for example, the autonomous learner is seen as one who necessarily implements the decisions referred to above), is important since we want to be able to conceive of learners maintaining learning autonomy in a teacher-centered classroom teaching as well as in settings such as self-directed learning. Autonomy then is something which is internal to the learner and which is not necessarily tied to particular learning circumstances.

Use of portfolios

Interest in portfolios as assessment devices first emerged in the field of composition instruction, but it evolved almost concurrently in other disciplines in language teaching such as reading, literacy, and oral language development. EFL teachers have also used portfolios to evaluate and enhance student learning. As the use of portfolios may encourage students to take more initiative and control of learning and to reflect on their learning, portfolios may be a useful tool for fostering learner autonomy. (Graves & Sunstein, 1992; McNamara & Debra, 1998; Tierney, Carter, & Desai, 1991).

Portfolios are collections of students' work selected by the students (with the teacher's guidance) to represent their learning experiences. They usually involve students selecting and gathering samples of their language use into a folder to show peers, parents, and others. However, portfolios are not just a collection of materials stuffed into a folder. Each piece of the portfolio must be created, collected, and organized in such a way as to demonstrate certain competencies. A portfolio should include information about the activities that produced the portfolio, the process of development (possibly including drafts and revisions), and a narrative in which the student reflectively describes the learning that took place. Materials in the portfolios can be direct or indirect evidence of the student's use of a language. Examples of direct evidence for English students, for example, are their English reading portfolios, vocabulary logs they keep, weekly listening logs, weekly learning journals, etc. An example of indirect evidence is a short written description of a time they use English (e.g., a conversation with an American friend, an e-mail with an Australian pen pal). As a purposeful collection of student work, portfolios show student effort, progress, achievement, and self-reflection in one or more areas. They provide a type of personal assessment that is directly related to classroom activities. That is why they are considered particularly appropriate for assessing language learning processes and promoting learner autonomy.

Guidelines for preparing portfolios

In working with teachers and students, I have noticed that portfolio design, contents, and purposes take on many forms. I obtained these data from several sources, including descriptions in books and published articles, responses to a recent questionnaire I sent to selected Chinese EFL teachers, and my own teaching experience in China. There is no single way of developing or implementing portfolios; rather they tend to represent many different intents. As a means of clarifying the variety of portfolios, their audiences, and their uses, I propose three prototype portfolio categories: Collections, Reflections, and Assessment. Each portfolio type signifies a distinctive stage of development and has a set of specified criteria that shape its function.

Developing collections

Teachers should begin their exploration of portfolios as a collection of students' work. To gain an understanding of the portfolio process, I suggest confining collections to one area of the instructional program such as oral language development, reading competence, or listening comprehension. First, brainstorm with students and other teachers to generate a list of tasks, projects, or exhibits for the selected learning area. Process oriented excerpts from students' journal may also be included.

Second, think of the ways students will be able to provide evidence of learning; the use of multimedia such as audiotapes, videos, cameras, computers, as well as work samples of authentic writing and illustrating should be encouraged. Third, work together with students to formulate a set of guidelines for choosing collection pieces. Ask students to go over the work they did during the week or month and decide which activities (either course work or learning experiences outside class) were the most meaningful to them and from which they learned the most. Keep in mind that hands-on, interesting activities that draw from the students' experiences and background, require the use of higher level thinking, and connect the students with the real world should be criteria for selection. To document progress over time, it is important that all entries be dated.

Encouraging reflective practice

As a means of reflection, portfolios focus on the student learning process, as reported by students. The teacher's role is to enhance the students' metacognitive and affective awareness in learning. The centerpiece of this portfolio type is the students' perceptions, interpretations, and strategies utilized in acquiring knowledge. How students learn and what their attitudes and reactions might be are as valuable as what they learn.

Response journals, in which students react to literature, and learning logs, in which students react to new concepts, are two means of encouraging reflection. However, before starting these journals, students need to familiarize themselves with the type of analytical questions which they need to answer in order to organize their portfolio: *What work am I proud of? What are my goals? When do I know I've done good work? What does my portfolio reveal about me and my learning styles?* At first, it may be advisable to ask the students to answer one or two of these questions in learning journals, or in conference(s) with teachers. Take the students in my comprehensive English class as examples. In answering my question about how well they could use the target language to communicate with others, one student¹ stated:

I find I am more confident in writing an English composition this semester. This progress has resulted from my constant email contacts with my friends in English. My English learning experience once again proves that practice makes perfect. I will continue improving my English writing in this way.

¹ Quotes are from students who are second-year university majors. They are unnamed to protect their identity.

Another student wrote that:

My oral English has improved a lot recently. I can now express myself in English on most occasions. One way I find especially useful is to use simple sentences and simple words when talking with my classmates in English.

Examples like these illustrate that students' answers to a question can initiate them to think about their progress in English learning, explore why they have made such an improvement, which will eventually make it possible for them to organize their portfolios. As students become more comfortable with answering these questions, they can work towards organizing their thoughts into reflective essays. In addition, as a way to facilitate their reflection, students should be asked to write a letter to the teacher, describing:

- How much they have completed their plans for improving their weakest area or increasing their skills in English;
- The area in which they made the most progress this semester and the reason they improved so much;
- Any new area of English in which they feel they need further improvement;
- An assessment of their effort in the class this semester;
- The grade they would give themselves for the portfolio; and,
- Anything they feel like telling the teacher.

McNamara & Debra (1998)

Building reflective activities in the classroom is another way to encourage students' reflective practice. In my classes, students form discussion groups on a general topic such as characteristics of successful language learners, their learning goals, and their purpose of getting education. Each time, I provide a scenario or a list of questions to prompt the students' discussion. In my oral class, for example, I divide students into different groups in which they are required to talk about the best ways to improve communicative competence. The students work in small group for about 30 minutes, and then present their discussion results to the whole class. Later, as a homework assignment, the students write reflective essays based on what they had discussed in their groups. These portfolio activities enable students to work on language skills while gaining an opportunity to reflect.

Assessing the portfolios

Before assessing the portfolios, teachers should set up assessment criteria. There are two ways to determine these. The first is technical; for example, *does the portfolio have a goal statement and a reflection statement? Does each piece of evidence have a caption?* The second is substantive; for example, *am I convinced that the student has met or made progress towards the established purposes?* If the answer is no, the question then becomes: *What would I need to see added to this portfolio in order to be convinced that the purposes have been met?*

For portfolios to be considered an alternative assessment tool, the reliability and validity of the contents need to be established and maintained. Whereas in collections and reflections, a portfolio consists of various work samples or entries in an assessment portfolio, this primary evidence should be coupled with specified

criteria in the form of a rubric or descriptive scale to provide the necessary secondary evidence. In collections and reflections, selection of entries often rests on students who are encouraged to submit their showcases. However, this practice can result in an imbalanced representation of the curriculum and a biased portrayal of the student's abilities. In portfolios designed for assessment purpose, data collection should be systematic, based on the alignment of curricular objective/outcomes with assessment tasks and rubrics. Consequently, required entries are often interspersed with supplemental, optional ones.

There tend to be two ways that students fail to provide enough evidence of growth. Either they include too little information in the portfolio or they fail to demonstrate an explicit link between the evidence provided and the established purposes. To maintain some sense of inter-rater reliability, the same faculty who establish the purposes for the portfolios should be involved in assessing whether or not the portfolios meet the established purposes. In my own classes, I find that when I am explicit with students about what I want, I tend to get it. And, when I am clear with myself about what I am looking for, I find that my professional judgments are more than adequate for assessing my students' portfolios.

Teaching schedule

In this section, I will demonstrate how we can use portfolios to develop students' autonomous learning by introducing a teaching schedule I have followed in the first semester of each new English class. The portfolios are integrated into classroom activities, and students' work and assignment.

1. Specify the purposes of portfolios in the following three aspects:
 - a) to reflect on progress in an English course,
 - b) to assess strengths and weaknesses in learning English,
 - c) to establish goals and plans for future independent learning.Match the purposes of portfolios with instructional goals, and integrate portfolios into classroom activities and students' work and assignments; develop course design and course materials (1st month).
2. Introduce the guidelines (see above) to students for preparing portfolios (2nd month).
3. Integrate portfolios into class instruction; record students' progress and performance (3rd—5th month).
4. Arrange for mid-semester portfolio showcase and students' self-reflection; allow students to look at each other's portfolios to help them understand what makes a good language portfolio (4th month).
5. Allocate time for end-of-semester portfolio presentation and final peer and self-evaluation (6th month).

While students are preparing their portfolios, I constantly prompt them to take the three criteria into consideration:

1. Have you included all the required materials in the portfolio? That is,
 - a. learning journals and reflections;

- b. representative samples of your work during the semester in listening, reading, writing, speaking, and vocabulary;
 - c. a written explanation (cover sheet) for each sample describing its significance to your progress in leaning English; and,
 - d. a letter to the instructor describing your progress this semester, strong and weak areas, your plan for improving weak areas, and a self-assessment of work during the semester?
2. Do the representative samples and the written explanation demonstrate your progress in learning English this semester?
 3. Does the portfolio show evidence of your thoughtful reflection on the material and activities of the course and careful assessment of progress and leaning in the course?

Advantages and limitations of using portfolios

From what is described above, we can identify a number of different features between portfolios and traditional assessment, which are summarized in Table 1.

Compared with traditional assessment, portfolios offer students another concrete way to evaluate their work. One of the most obvious characteristics in using portfolios, as indicated in Table 1, is that it is students rather than teachers who are responsible for their English learning and evaluation. This is exactly in line with the requirements for training students to be autonomous learners. By using portfolios, students can take an active control of their learning process by using metacognitive strategies (e.g., planning and organizing learning, monitoring and observing ones' learning, reflecting on one's learning). There is no doubt that such a use of metacognitive strategies can alter students' view of the teacher's role and their own role, enhance their learning and autonomy. Another important feature of using portfolios is that portfolios evaluate students' learning in a variety of areas. This can enhance active, multi-dimensional learning and motivate students to have a comprehensive development in language skills. The third advantage of using portfolios is that, since portfolio evaluation involves students,

Table 1

Comparison of features between portfolios and traditional assessment

Features of Portfolios	Features of Traditional Assessment
Assess students' learning in a wide range of areas	Assess students' learning in limited areas
Emphasize students' participation in the process of evaluation	Neglect students' participation in the process of evaluation
Take individual differences into consideration	Use the same test to evaluate everybody
Involve everybody in the assessment process, including students, teachers, and peers	Involve the teacher only in the process of evaluation
Stress improvement, effort, and achievement	Focus on result
Connect learning, assessment, and instruction	Separate learning, assessment, and instruction

teachers, and peers in the assessment process, the use of portfolios can help to facilitate interaction among the teacher and students. Finally, as the use of portfolios lays emphasis on students' participation, it provides students with opportunities to (1) reflect on their performance; (2) show their learning process and progress; (3) present learning results, and therefore (4) have a sense of achievement.

While the use of portfolios may result in students' active and autonomous learning, there are also some problems and difficulties when students are preparing the portfolios. The most serious problem is that it is time-consuming. In my classes, it is not uncommon to hear students complain, e.g., "It takes a lot of time", "It is too much trouble, a burden to prepare". Another problem is related to students' learning attitudes. To those who are lazy and who lack determination in English learning, using portfolios as a learning tool is a nightmare. They are simply not ready to devote enough time and energy to English learning at all. Next, there are problems in record keeping. In my knowledge, some students do not keep good records while others do not know how to record or just forget to record. For some learning, it is even not easy to keep a record. The final problem deals with information management. In the classes I taught, a number of students are short of experience in selecting and organizing their work. Though they have accumulated a lot of materials related to their English learning and assessment, these materials do not tell them much because they are not well selected and organized.

Conclusion

Despite the aforementioned limitations, I find that the use of portfolios works satisfactorily with my students. As an assessment device, portfolios not only encourage students to participate in the process of evaluation, but also motivate students to improve their English learning in a comprehensive way. In addition, portfolio evaluation takes individual differences into consideration and involves everybody in the assessment process, including students, teachers, and peers. Most importantly, portfolios connect learning, assessment, and instruction and stress improvement, effort, and achievement. With the use of portfolios, students can document the planning, learning, monitoring, and evaluation processes. This can help raise students' awareness of learning strategies, facilitate their learning process, and enhance their self-directed learning.

References

- Crabbe, D. (1993). Fostering autonomy from within the classroom: the teacher's responsibility. *System*, 21(4), 443-452.
- Graves, D. & Sunstein, B.S. (1992). *Portfolio portraits*. Portsmouth, N.H.: Heinemann.
- Hu, G. W. (2003). English language teaching in China: Regional differences and contributing factors. *Journal of Multilingual and Multicultural Development*, 24(4), 290-318.
- Judy, H. & Crookall, D. (1995). Breaking with Chinese cultural traditions: learner autonomy in English language teaching. *System*, 23(3), 235-245.
- Little, D. (1991). *Learner autonomy 1: Definitions, issues and problems*. Dublin: Authentik.

- Littlewood, W. (1999). Defining and developing autonomy in East Asian contexts. *Applied Linguistics*, 20(1), 71-95.
- Liu, D. (1998). Ethnocentrism in TESOL: teacher education and the neglected needs of international TESOL students. *ELT Journal*, 52(1), 3-10.
- Liu, N. F. & Littlewood, W. (1997). Why do many students appear reluctant to participate in classroom learning discourse? *System*, 25(3), 371-384.
- McNamara, M. & Debra, D. (1998). Self-assessment: Preparing an English portfolio. In J. Brown (ed.), *New Ways in Classroom Assessment* (pp. 15-17). Alexandria, VA: Teachers of English to Speakers of Other Languages.
- Rao, Z. (2002). Chinese students' perceptions of communicative and non-communicative activities in EFL classroom. *System*, 30(1), 85-105.
- Tierney, R.J., Carter, M.A., & Desai, L.E. (1991). *Portfolio assessment in the reading-writing classroom*. Norwood, Mass.: Christopher-Gordon Publishers.

