

THE USE OF PORTFOLIOS AS AN INSTRUMENT OF SELF-ASSESSMENT IN THE TEACHING LEARNING PROCESS OF FOREIGN LANGUAGES

EL USO DE PORTFOLIOS COMO INSTRUMENTO DE AUTOEVALUACIÓN EN EL PROCESO DE APRENDIZAJE DOCENTE DE LENGUAS EXTRANJERAS

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Abstract

The present research came about as a result of the need to develop students' ability for self-evaluation in the Foreign Languages Major at the University of Las Tunas from the first year of their training courses. Its purpose is to offer a set of procedures to introduce portfolios to enhance self-assessment and to contribute to the fulfillment of the goals established in the curriculum as well as to favor the students' preparation to face their professional practice. In order to diagnose the students' specific needs and to elaborate the procedures suggested, different methods were used: analysis- synthesis to study the theoretical underpinnings of the process of self-assessment and the use of portfolios; observations, interviews and a survey to collect information about teachers' and students' attitudes and knowledge about self-assessment as well as some of its instruments.

Key words: Foreign Languages, evaluation, self-assessment, portfolios

Resumen

La presente investigación surge como resultado de la necesidad de desarrollar habilidades para que el estudiante realice su autoevaluación del aprendizaje desde el primer año de su formación en la carrera Lenguas Extranjeras en la Universidad de Las Tunas. El objetivo de la misma es ofrecer un grupo de procedimientos para introducir los portafolios, como instrumento de autoevaluación, que permitirán perfeccionar el proceso de autoevaluación y contribuir al cumplimiento de los objetivos establecidos en el currículo así como favorecer la preparación del estudiante para enfrentar su práctica profesional. Para realizar el diagnóstico de las necesidades específicas de los estudiantes y para la elaboración de los procedimientos antes sugeridos, diferentes métodos fueron utilizados: análisis-síntesis para realizar un estudio sobre los fundamentos teóricos del proceso de autoevaluación y el uso de los portafolios; observaciones, entrevistas y encuestas para obtener información sobre las actitudes y conocimientos de profesores y estudiantes sobre la autoevaluación y sus instrumentos.

Palabras claves: Lenguas Extranjeras, evaluación, autoevaluación, portafolios

In language teacher education it is widely understood that evaluation, assessment and testing are three concepts that are related but which should not be used interchangeably. The first one is the process by means of which there is a systematic collection of information about aspects of the language classroom or program in order to make decision about how to proceed. Assessment is concerned with the collection of information about students' abilities and is carried out through testing but also through self-assessment, peer-assessments, portfolios, teacher observations (Wedell, 2008).

If teachers want to develop their students' active role in learning, they should give them opportunities to participate in the evaluation of their program of study and also in the assessment and self-assessment of their skills, knowledge and values.

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According to the results of interviews, observations and surveys that were carried out, it can be stated that most of the students granted huge importance to self-assessment but were not able to express clearly what it was; they did not know how they could use it and they were not able to identify possible self-assessment instruments. On the other hand, English teachers sometimes used self-assessment techniques but they did not give enough importance to these so they did not include their students' perceptions in the summative assessment of the subject.

The above problems point to limitations to favor students' self-assessment in class which affects students' active role in learning when trying to achieve one of the goals established in the curriculum; that is, that at the end of the year the students should be able to reflect on their own learning process. So, the present study analyses the main results of a study about the use of portfolios to enhance self-assessment in the teaching learning process of foreign languages at the University of Las Tunas.

Some theoretical considerations about evaluation, assessment and self-assessment

Richards (1996) considers that evaluation may be defined as a systematic process of determining the extent to which instructional objectives are achieved by students; a definition he widens up later on when he states that it is the process of collecting and interpreting information in order to make judgments about a particular program or programs and includes students' assessment information (Richards and Nunan, 1997).

Assessment is concerned with the collection of information about students' abilities and is carried out using procedures such as: testing, self-assessment, peer-assessments, portfolios, teacher observations (Brown and Hudson, 1998). Assessment may be informal when it is integrated to classroom tasks in the form of unplanned comments or responses given by the teacher and it is inherent to the responsibilities of the teacher in class but should not be confused with the types of classroom tasks that are especially planned for assessment purposes (Álvarez de Zayas, 1995). Assessment may take the form of tests, portfolios, systematic observations, role-plays, interviews, among others.

For this small-scale research, it is believed that alternative forms of language assessment are those that are easily integrated into classroom activities and are more integrative than tests. They are formative in function and they are more responsive to learners' needs since they are used to determine strengths and weaknesses to point future courses of action and their scoring is carried out by the people who participate in the process -teacher and students- (Brown and Hudson, 1998). In this sense, assessment is used with the purpose of deciding what students have to learn, what they have not been able to learn so as to bring new strategies to the teaching learning process to work with their difficulties and strengths.

These elements have to be with the students' abilities to acquire a specific knowledge. According to Tejeda and Borrero (2011, p. 5) "to know the students' intelligences and to facilitate their development are significant elements to be taken into account in order to achieve students' integral education and it is one way to achieve quality in the language lesson".

Assessment may be carried out before, during and after a course, or it may not even be connected with a course. It may be of individual students, or it may be to check the

capabilities of a whole class. This means that assessment is concerned with the quality of teaching as well as the quality of learning (Richards, 1996); it provides teachers with relevant information about students' knowledge, skills which should be used to prepare the lesson according to the different levels each group and student might have and it helps students identify their needs to organize their study and to set priorities in learning.

Self-assessment becomes more authentic and direct when students are allowed to know and to practice talking about their daily activities and responsibilities; giving opinions; asking for some information; listening, writing, etc. not only with the purpose of communicating with someone but also to learn from the experience and to monitor what they can do with the language.

The use of self-assessment in class helps students develop knowledge and skills as well as notice their difficulties and success. However, nowadays, students are often passive in their approach to learning, and may become unmotivated if they do not see any clear reason why they are doing and learning something. According to Alderson and Banerjee (2001) the reasons for using self-assessment have to do mainly with involving the learner in his/her learning process with the goal that he/she becomes an autonomous learner. Self-assessment in class can be used for a variety of purposes, including appropriate placement, diagnosis and feedback to the students, program evaluation, assessment of attitudes and socio-psychological differences. It can also be used to raise students' awareness of the language they study, the effective ways of learning, and their own performance and needs; to increase motivation and goal orientation in learning; to assess aspects of language learning such as effort and learners' beliefs and to reduce teachers' workload.

If a goal in learning is for learners to be self-sufficient and independent in language use, then training and experience in self-assessment are needed. These reasons imply that self-assessment can be used as part of the input in generating students' scores during a course.

Saito (2001) in an overview about self-assessment explains the use of development-oriented self-assessment of the learning process (usually in a classroom environment). The students are encouraged not only to be test takers, but also to be active participants in the assessment process; students as well as teachers acknowledge assessment as a mutual responsibility, and not as the only responsibility of a teacher.

Systematic self-assessment provides an ideal springboard for other learner development activities: organizing and planning learning, thinking about learning styles, discussions of learning and communication strategies. A number of empirical studies cited by Saito (2001) that were carried out by Dickinson (1987), Ellis (1994), O'Malley and Pierce (1996), indicate the presence of increased productivity and autonomy, higher motivation, less frustration, and higher retention rates among students when development-oriented self-assessment is used.

Through the findings of these studies the implementation of self-assessment sounds plausible, but issues regarding its validity and reliability need to be addressed because self-assessment is implemented with different instruments. Their use may bring about a lot of subjectivity in scoring derived from students' expectations, past experiences and lack of training which in the end may affect the reliability of the results.

Some self-assessment instruments can be used for learning purposes. They may include students' diaries and journals, folders of learning and portfolios. These assessment instruments 'require students to rate their own language, whether through performance self-

assessments, comprehension self-assessments, or observation self-assessments' (Brown and Hudson 1998: 665).

A portfolio is a collection of students' work that demonstrates their efforts, progress and achievement in a period of time (Alderson and Banerjee 2001). As students put together their portfolios, they must evaluate their own work; this is a key feature and one of its main purposes has to do with promoting learner autonomy and thus, responsibility for their own learning (Little 2005), and it may be used to assess students in different dimensions of language learning (Brown and Hudson 1998). The strongest benefit of portfolios is probably the insight they provide into performance and progress in learning.

There are several approaches to compiling and evaluating portfolios and they can be used both formally and informally; ideally, portfolios capture the evolution of students' ideas, knowledge and skills so that students and teachers analyze their progress.

Contextual background of the study

The teaching learning process of a foreign language in the National System of Education specifically in the Foreign Languages Major in Cuban universities responds to the political, economic, and social importance of foreign language nowadays. The multilateral education of future teachers require that they should know not only a foreign language as a way to expand their knowledge and evaluation of the universal culture, but also as a way to develop the knowledge, habits, skills and values which are inherent to the language teaching profession.

It has as its main goal that students develop an initial level of communicative competence in English that may allow them to reflect on their own learning process and model in the language class different moments of their future activity as teachers.

Assessment is usually carried out through classroom activities and tasks although there are units of review, intended to provide students with opportunities for integration of knowledge and skills. Assessment is formative so it is mainly used to evaluate students' progress in every lesson; an integrated mid-term test and a final examination are also used. The overall assessment of students encompasses, firstly, the results of the students' participation in classroom tasks (role-plays, interviews, problem solving), independent activities, project works as well as integrated tasks with other subjects or disciplines of the curriculum. Teachers are required to encourage students' self-assessment; there is no specific reference to the procedures teachers should use in the classroom.

Main characteristics of the students who participated in the study

When analyzing the main characteristics of the group of students who participated in this study, it was determined that most of them try to accept and overestimate themselves; they usually have emotional conflicts and shifts of temper that affect their concentration during lessons. Students always have the need to make new friends; they care too much about their physical appearance and may sometimes be rude to show their personality and to call other people's attention. They are also very sensitive and critical towards adult people, especially their teachers.

- Planning self-assessment: after surveying teachers and students (5 teachers and 20 students) about their knowledge on self-assessment it was determined that the majority of students (18 out of 20) showed a low level of knowledge about this process; they were not able to provide a definition about self-assessment or some of its instruments. Teachers (4 out of 5) expressed that there are techniques to develop students' self-assessment but 3 out of 5 were not able to identify them clearly. It seemed that there is spontaneity in this process. Four of the teachers did not have a previous plan or organization about how they used self-assessment in class.
- Implementing self-assessment: it was determined through lesson observations that some teachers (3 out of 5) did not use techniques to develop self-assessment in class with a specific purpose in mind; they were mostly embedded in each learning activity but they made no influence in students' final assessment. Teachers made emphasis in the result of the activities they used which caused students' lack of involvement in planning, monitoring and assessing their own learning. There was a contradiction between what students said about the importance of self-assessment in class and what teachers said about it; the teachers (5 out of 5) expressed that they granted importance to this process so they said they used different forms in class. On the other hand, 13 out of 20 students expressed that teachers did not use it in class.
- Assessing learning: Teachers and students were generally focused on the final product of the activities in class. There was also a tendency to limit self-assessment only to linguistics aspects. After surveying teachers about the way in which self-assessment had to be assessed, 4 out of 5 said that the best way the students can assess their own learning is through their knowledge about grammatical structures, vocabulary and pronunciation. The majority of the teachers did not include the final product of students' self-assessment in the final evaluation of the syllabus because they believed their students did not have the knowledge to evaluate their own learning.

So, in order to favor self-assessment in the teaching learning process of foreign languages the following procedures to introduce portfolios were introduced.

Procedures to use portfolios as an instrument of self-assessment

For the purposes of this study, the procedures that are suggested are based on the characteristics of our context but also on the suggestions given by Little (2005) in reference to the European Language Portfolio (ELP) for the development of self-assessment in foreign language learners.

General aspects to consider

The portfolio that this author suggests will focus mainly on the integration of contents in the different subjects of the curriculum to facilitate the production of accurate results in students' self-assessment. So, students and teachers should choose the appropriate moment in which they want to work with the portfolios. In order to get a wider perspective about this, teachers should be clear that students may select works for their portfolio daily, weekly, according to the contents to study and/or the 1st or 2nd term of their course of study.

The selection of the appropriate works to include in the portfolio will depend on the students' opinion but they should be relevant to the goals set by the teachers for a specific moment of

their course of study that needs to be assessed. Teachers should consider a variety of activities and tests with different levels of knowledge, so that students can choose which ones they are going to include in their portfolios. Teachers should promote interaction, cooperation and independence of the students during the realization of the portfolios.

Objectives of the portfolio

In general sense, the main objectives of using portfolios relate to those of increasing self-assessment during the foreign language course; achieving learner autonomy and skills for long-term learning from the very beginning of their studies so that student teachers can face their teaching practice successfully. In order to attain this, the specific objectives of their formation should be considered so that students can self-assess their skills and knowledge to:

- Understand oral information either in monologues or dialogues in the different languages of the carrier.
- Express themselves orally in dialogues or monologues about their everyday activities or academic ones in relation to their future roles as teachers.
- Understand written information about different technical, pedagogical, socio-political and literary topics.
- Express themselves in written form about different technical, pedagogical, socio-political and literary topics using appropriate and accurate language forms according to different types of texts: notes, short messages, letters, reports, summaries, descriptions, narrations and so forth.
- Carry out their independent study and project works.
- To reflect on their strengths and weakness in language learning.
- To plan, monitor and assess learning.
- To use different learning strategies.

Content of the portfolio

The content of the portfolio might include among other relevant aspects students might desire:

- Works that best represent the students' progress in learning. This might take a variety of forms such as: transcript of oral conversations or presentations they have been able to do; reports of project works; completed tests, tasks or exercises related to particular skills; vocabulary lists or grammar summaries they have been able to put together in an original way and so forth.
- Students' short-term and long-term learning targets and the possible ways to attain them as well as the specific moments in which they will be revised.
- Reflections either in Spanish (at the very beginning of the use of the portfolio) or in English where students describe their progress in learning the foreign language; accounts of strengths and weaknesses which might point to future courses of action. Students are going to focus mainly in the development of the linguistics and professional skills, vocabulary and grammatical range and use as well as accuracy in pronunciation.

Methods and procedures to work with the portfolio

Initial preparation of teachers and students to work with portfolios is needed. Both participants need to know what a portfolio is, why it is necessary to introduce in this context; how it is going to be introduced; when it will begin and for how long; among other important aspects.

For the students to become aware and control their own learning with the use of the portfolio they need to be trained in using metacognitive skills. During the planning process the objectives or goals to attain in a specific stage of the teaching learning process will be explained by the teacher so that students may determine the knowledge or concepts they need, the plan of action to attain the goals and the strategies to use; the characteristics of the topic, the abilities that should be enhanced, their feelings, points of view and experiences about the activity also need to be considered.

Once the goals are clear, students start compiling the information they need for their portfolio. They should monitor their progress; check if what he/she is doing corresponds to what was planned, or if he/she found any difficulty; determine if the strategies used are effective and appropriate to reach the set objectives.

Based on the works of Barell (1991), Félix and Tejada (2002) summarized different questions that may guide students to develop metacognitive skills:

- Planning: What is my problem or task? What was the orientation that the teacher gave me? Are there feelings involved and this situation that I should recognize? Is my purpose clear, significant and real? Which information is important and which one is not? How am I going to do this task? What steps do I have to follow, and what for? How much time do I need to solve the task? Which are the expected results?
- Monitoring: How am I doing the task? What am I doing and why? Which are the steps that I have done? Do I understand the ideas and the main concepts related to the task?
- Evaluation: Did I finish the task? How do I know that I finished the task? Which are the things that I learned through the task? Can I solve the task in another way?

Evaluating the portfolio

- Students are going to analyze their portfolios according to the objective and the content that is being analyzed.
- Students are going to self-assess their progress according to the descriptors for the initial communicative competence that they need to achieve in relation to the particular contents included in the portfolio. They have to determine their strengths and weaknesses to suggest future actions. Their analysis has to be conscious and precise.
- At least two hours should be devoted every week to analyze the portfolio (students and teachers) making emphasis if students need a lot of help, some help or no help to work with their portfolio for self-assessment purposes.
- Teachers should help student that cannot self- assess their own learning and favor the use of strategies for doing so and promote self- and peer-assessment so as to enhance the evaluation of the portfolio.
- Teachers should ask students to share their experiences during the development of their portfolio, and to explain the most difficult moments and the most important moments in this period of time.

- The final results of the portfolio should be integrated to the overall assessment of each student.

At the beginning of implementing the use of portfolios, it was not easy for students to follow the procedures to work with them. The students' self-assessment was very poor, because they were not able to deeply identify their difficulties and their strengths in the language learning. There were some students that, in fact, needed help to self-assess their own learning, because they did not have a clear opinion about the way in which they learned. Besides, they had problems becoming aware of the mistakes they committed in English.

This study provided initial evidence that students can self-assess their learning process with the use of portfolio. Its completion involved relevant metacognitive processes (planning, monitoring and evaluation) and showed how students perceived their learning process. The value of this instrument lied in its emphasis on self-assessment.

Self-assessment instruments such as portfolios can be used to assess students' knowledge and skills in language learning. They can also be used as a guide to show students how they can put it into practice in their future teaching practice. With the use of portfolios students can be motivated to look at their strengths and weaknesses and to use learning strategies in order to help them become autonomous learners.

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