Implementing the Language Portfolio in a Japanese University EFL Class: Keeping Personal Learning Records for Self-Reflection

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Introduction

The European Language Portfolio (ELP), designed for use in university language education, has been implemented at 250 language centers in 21 countries (Imig and O’Dwyer, 2010). In recent years, the ELP has been widely adapted to Japan’s English as a foreign language (EFL) contexts (Naganuma, 2010; Majima, 2010). The Language Portfolio (LP) encourages teachers and students’ involvement in learners’ self-recording of, self-reflection on, and self-planning for their learning activities (Imig and O’Dwyer, 2010). To ensure effective implementation of the LP in the author’s teaching context, addressing the related practice of self-recording in class is crucial to understanding how such strategies affect learning. This paper begins with a review of the literature relevant to the study, including the ELP’s principles and key components, and its adaptation to teaching contexts in Japan. Next, the methodology is described, including the specific procedure and participants, followed by the results. Finally, this paper analyzes teachers’ involvement in facilitating the practice of self-recording for self-reflection in the LP, and some preliminary conclusions are provided.

Literature Review

ELP

The ELP was first introduced in 2001 as an application of the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages (CEFR). The purpose of the Common European Framework is to enhance cooperation among educational institutions in different countries, gain a mutual recognition of language qualifications, and assist learners and teachers in coordinating their efforts. The ELP comprises three key components: the Language Passport, Language Biography, and Dossier (Little, 2012). The Language Passport serves as a certification of learners’ language competences, which are described in accordance with common criteria accepted throughout Europe. The Language Biography describes learners’ language experiences based on self-planning and a self-
assessment of their learning process. The Dossier is a collection of examples of learners' personal work to illustrate their language competences (Martyniuk, 2012). Learners can perform self-assessments using checklists of "I can" descriptors based on the CEFR self-assessment grid (A1 – C2) (Little, 2012).

In Japan, the ELP has attracted those engaged in English language education contexts (Naganuma, 2010; Majima, 2010). In particular, the "I can" descriptors have garnered attention from English language professionals involved with proficiency tests such as TOEIC, TOEFL iBT, and EIKEN, and have aided the development of competency descriptors that indicate candidates' proficiency levels for each test (Naganuma, 2010). Like the "I can" descriptors, the CEFR self-assessment grid has been modified to Japanese EFL contexts. Version 1 of the CEFR-J, which divided the original six levels of the CEFR self-assessment grid into twelve sub-divisions, was published in March 2012 for the purpose of wider use at all educational levels, from primary through tertiary (The FLP SIG Kaken Project, 2012). The Language Biography component seems to be the key contributor to the increasing popularity of the ELP here in Japan. To promote learner autonomy, including self-reflection, self-assessment, and self-regulated learning, the ELP adapted for Japanese university EFL classes has been introduced (e.g., Collett and Sullivan, 2010; Sato, 2010; O'Dwyer, 2010; among others).

Self-recording for self-reflection

Self-recording is vital to the effective implementation of the Language Biography component. Compiling self-recorded documents corresponds to the Dossier component of the ELP. Unless students collect their work to look back on what they have done, it will be difficult for them to reflect on their learning process. Esteve et al. (2012) adopts the Dossier as the first step to develop self-regulatory learning in university foreign language learning contexts, stating that "the Dossier seems to make up the basis for acquiring awareness of their ‘evidence of progresses’... it helps to document the development of linguistic competences clearly" (p. 83). On the other hand, a possible downside of the LP is that it may become simply "one more copybook which no student would open himself" (L’Hotellier and Troisgros, 2003, p.13). Moreover, teachers’ involvement in the LP’s implementation is crucial to its success as a learning tool. For Esteve at al. (ibid.), the ELP is a mediation tool whose impact can depend on how teachers mediate students’ learning. Corno (2008) also raises the question of how low-
achieving students or even those without special learning needs become better learners, emphasizing that teachers’ appropriate involvement helps students to acquire work habits that enhance their volitional competency. Against this background, the following research questions are posed: How can students’ self-recorded documents in the LP benefit their learning? How can teachers encourage and facilitate students’ self-reflection and help them to become autonomous learners?

Method

Participants

The participants were 22 second-year Japanese female (n = 16) and male (n = 6) university students majoring in business administration. Their English proficiency level was high beginning, corresponding approximately to a TOEIC score between 400 and 500. They met with the author once a week for 90 minutes in their elective “English for studying abroad” class, which encouraged them to formulate their own opinions on controversial topics, such as “stalkers,” “sexual harassment,” “smacking kids,” and “the death penalty” by offering basic information on these topics and engaging the students in pair and group work to share their opinions. These learning activities are expected to offer a learning environment similar to what might be found in a foreign country. The majority of the students, however, did not appear to have a particular desire or aim to study abroad but had registered for the course for credit accumulation.

In the third session of the 2012 fall semester (15 sessions), the author began to teach the “English for studying abroad” course. Because the course enrollment was higher than the intake quota, the students were divided into two groups before the third session. All the enrolled students were taught by another teacher in the first two sessions. A few students in the author’s group did not purchase the textbook, but had instead copied pages from a textbook that they had previously used. All students in the group were given handouts covering the learning units. However, the majority of them did not organize these documents well and took them out of their bags without due care when asked to show them to the author. The students’ attitude toward their own work revealed their need to compile self-recorded documents.

Procedure

A daily worksheet outlining the day’s tasks was distributed at the beginning of
every class. Classroom activities and the aim for that day were also written on the board so that the students would understand the expectations for achievement. The students were required to reflect on each day’s learning at the end of the class (what they had learned, what the most difficult task had been, or what they had achieved) and to write their reflective comments on their work on the daily worksheet. At the beginning of the following class, they were given a review quiz on the previous class contents to assess their learning performance. The review quiz mainly asked about lexical items and fixed or situational phrases in a certain context covered in the previous class. The quiz was also aimed at encouraging the students to revisit their LPs and reflect on their learning for the day.

In the middle of the semester (mid-November), the students consolidated their work from the first half of the semester and had their LPs examined under the following grading criteria: “organization” (how well worksheets had been organized), “completion” (whether the worksheets had been completed), and “autonomy” (whether extra work or information to enhance autonomous learning had been added). They also participated in an individual interview with the author to reflect on their learning so far, to set their individual targets for the rest of the semester, and to find ways to achieve their learning targets.

At the end of the semester, the students consolidated their work from the latter half of the course based on their LPs. Individual interviews were also conducted to encourage the students to reflect on their learning and share with the author their self-judgment of the learning achievements they had made over the course of the semester. A questionnaire was then distributed to investigate whether and how much the LP containing the daily worksheets had facilitated their learning and enhanced self-reflection and learner autonomy. The questionnaire contained six items that were graded on a 5-point Likert scale (1: very much – 5: not at all) and two open questions. These six items were related to expectations of achievement, self-reflection, work confirmation, individual efforts for students’ learning targets, revisiting the LP, and the efficacy of the LP. The two open questions explored how the LP contributed to students’ learning and what they had achieved during the semester.

Results

Of the 22 students who completed the questionnaire, the majority answered either
“very much” or “to some extent” when asked if they had understood the day’s plans and expectations for their performance, and if they had confirmed their achievements (n = 19: 86% and n = 16: 73%, respectively). Further, 81% (n = 18) acknowledged that the LP had contributed positively to their learning (Table 1). When asked how the LP benefited their learning in one of the two open questions, 59% (n = 13) said that it helped them to review what they had already learned. For 32% (n = 7), the LP served as a concise reference book. Regarding their learning achievements asked in the other open question, 68% (n = 15) said that their listening skills had improved, and 23% (n = 5) reported an achievement in their writing skills. Table 1 also shows mixed results for whether or not the students revisited their LPs. Half of the respondents (n = 11: 50%) often looked over their LPs, whereas the other half (n = 11: 50%) did not have much opportunity to do so. Setting individual students’ targets did not encourage them very much, as only 36% (n = 8) made efforts to achieve their learning aims.

Table 1. Questionnaire results

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Questions</th>
<th>1</th>
<th>2</th>
<th>3</th>
<th>4</th>
<th>5</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>n (%)</td>
<td>n (%)</td>
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<td>n (%)</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>1. Did you understand the day’s plans and what you were expected to do?</td>
<td>9 (41%)</td>
<td>10 (45%)</td>
<td>1 (5%)</td>
<td>2 (9%)</td>
<td>0 (0%)</td>
</tr>
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<td>2. Did you reflect on the day’s work?</td>
<td>3 (14%)</td>
<td>10 (45%)</td>
<td>5 (23%)</td>
<td>3 (14%)</td>
<td>1 (5%)</td>
</tr>
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<td>3. Did you confirm what you had achieved?</td>
<td>5 (23%)</td>
<td>11 (50%)</td>
<td>5 (23%)</td>
<td>0 (0%)</td>
<td>1 (5%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4. Did you make efforts to reach your own target?</td>
<td>2 (9%)</td>
<td>6 (27%)</td>
<td>8 (36%)</td>
<td>5 (23%)</td>
<td>1 (5%)</td>
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<td>5. Did you often revisit your portfolio?</td>
<td>1 (5%)</td>
<td>10 (45%)</td>
<td>5 (23%)</td>
<td>3 (14%)</td>
<td>3 (14%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6. Did your portfolio benefit your learning?</td>
<td>10 (45%)</td>
<td>8 (36%)</td>
<td>1 (5%)</td>
<td>2 (9%)</td>
<td>1 (5%)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Note. 1 = very much; 2 = to some extent; 3 = neither yes nor no; 4 = not very much; 5 = not at all*
Discussion

The main focus of this study was to have students keep their personal learning records for self-reflection in the LP. Self-reflection led to self-assessment, self-judgment, and self-planning for the students’ future goals. The teacher’s appropriate involvement in and instructions for a successful implementation of the LP was considered essential in guiding the students to recognize the necessity of self-recording for self-reflection to further develop their learner autonomy.

First, keeping personal records in the LP had to be an integral part of the class and also had to benefit the students’ learning process. The students were required to complete a daily worksheet, which included writing self-reflective comments at the end of each class. They were asked to write these individual self-reflective comments on a separate piece of paper so that the author could collect them after every class and analyze them. Problems and struggles that the students had encountered in the process of the task completion were then identified, and solutions were introduced and attempted in the following class. The problems often related to the absence of learning strategies, such as the following: the reconstruction of a text using knowledge of grammar, fixed phrases, and collocations for listening tasks; the acquisition of appropriate English word order and the recognition of world classes for writing and speaking tasks; and prefixes and suffixes for vocabulary building. The introduction of learning strategies contributed to their later positive self-assessment. Zimmerman (2008) maintains, “Students who focus on acquiring advantageous learning methods or strategies engage in more favorable self-evaluations” (p. 284). Teachers’ attentiveness to students’ learning problems promotes students’ reflection on their learning process.

Second, the LP had to be revisited to remind the students of the importance of keeping their learning records. Therefore, review quizzes covering the content of the previous class, which was compiled in their LPs, were given at the beginning of every class, and in the middle and at the end of the semester, the students consolidated their work, which they had done during the first and second half semesters, respectively. Such opportunities did not encourage them to revisit their LPs as much as expected, as indicated by the mixed results of students revising the LP. For a majority of the students, the LP promoted review practice, and for some students, it served as a reference book. However, there should be other ways for teachers to encourage more frequent revisitation of the LP. For example, teachers could give students an
opportunity to evaluate their LPs by themselves under established grading criteria or even under their own grading criteria and to think retrospectively about their reflective comments in order to observe their learning process.

Third, the practice of keeping learning records in the LP needed to be monitored and fostered by an orientation toward self-planning for the students’ personal learning targets. To achieve this, individual interviews with the author were held in the middle and at the end of the semester. The students were asked about their own learning targets and how to achieve them in the first interview, and they were asked to self-judge their learning achievements in the second interview. Among the grading criteria (“organization,” “completion,” and “autonomy”), “autonomy” in the LP was rarely identified, and the students’ out-of-class learning did not seem to have taken root very well. The majority of the students admitted that their individual learning targets had not motivated their out-of-class learning unless these targets were directly related to credit accumulation. However, the interviews helped the author to understand their learning interests and challenges. Social comparison, the act of comparing one student’s progress with that of other students, can be counterproductive if students fail to evaluate their own progress (Zimmerman, 2008). Social sharing, however, can be beneficial for students’ learning. During the interviews, the students often expanded the scope of their self-reflection to include areas beyond the class contents, choosing to consider how to improve their English competency, such as by focusing on learning grammar and using a monolingual dictionary, or improving their learning strategies for English proficiency tests (e.g., TOEIC). In response, the author offered learning advice and materials individually or to the entire class.

**Conclusion**

Although this was an exploratory study of classroom research, the results showed that self-recording within the LP benefited students’ learning by, for instance, promoting the review process of their learning and serving as their own reference book. Self-recording also seemed to provide a transition for some students to then move on to self-assessment, self-judgment, and self-planning for their future learning. However, the long-term effect of self-recording in the LP on students’ learning process remains to be explored. The study also indicated mixed results regarding students’ revisiting the LP. Further research will help to identify ways for teachers to encourage this practice.
other than conducting review quizzes and work consolidation. Finally, more research is needed on how to better promote learner autonomy by keeping personal records for self-reflection in the LP.

References


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