

Implementing Portfolio Assessment in Project-Based Courses

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As more educators turn to the project-based learning and teaching (PBLT) approach to language learning in their classrooms, the issue of assessment in PBLT is also receiving more attention. This paper proposes that portfolio assessment, based on the language portfolio developed for the Common European Framework of Reference is the perfect tool for providing accurate assessment in PBLT courses, as both approaches focus on documenting and reflecting on the process of learning. The paper discusses the curricula and the portfolio assessment implementation in two courses, an Advanced Speaking and Listening course using *TED Talks* as content material, and a Pre-Advanced Business English course focused on developing business presentation, resume writing and job interview skills. The portfolios students assembled throughout these two courses were instrumental in students' progress and also brought them one step closer to autonomy in language learning.

INTRODUCTION

Although the portfolio-based approach to assessment and the project-based learning and teaching (PBLT) approach to curriculum design do not at first glance appear to have much in common, this paper argues that together, these two approaches can provide learners with the tools to consolidate their English language skills, achieve greater fluency, develop other skills inherent to learning, such as public speaking and group work, and ultimately reach autonomy.

This paper describes an attempt to use the learning portfolio as the only tool for assessment in PBLT courses. First, a brief background to the fields of portfolio assessment and project-based learning and teaching is presented. Next, the courses in which portfolio assessment was implemented and the curriculum design processes for these courses are described in detail. Finally, the actual implementation of the portfolio assessment in the two courses, as well as a number of issues with the implementation, are discussed.

Portfolio assessment in the language classroom

Portfolio assessment in the language classroom has its origins in the European Language Portfolio (ELP), which was conceived in 1991, together

with the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages (CEFR), and officially introduced for the first time in Switzerland in 2000 (Kuhn & Perez Cavana, 2012). Although not as prevalent as they are in Europe, CEFR and the language portfolio have begun to be recognized and used in Japan as well (Sugitani & Tomita, 2012).

Kuhn and Perez Cavana (2012) describe the language portfolio as having a three-part structure, with a formal assessment of the learners abilities based on CEFR, a record kept by the learner of their learning experiences, and examples of the learner's work. On the other hand, Zubizarreta (2009) has a broader view of possible components of the learner portfolio, and he suggests seven general categories: reflections on learning, achievements in learning, evidence of learning, or outcomes, assessment of learning, relevance of learning, learning goals, and appendices. This paper subscribes to this latter view.

Project-based learning and teaching in the language classroom

As the EFL field began moving away from traditional teaching methodologies, such as the grammar translation method or the audio lingual method and more towards student centered approaches, project-based learning and teaching (PBLT) was put forth as a way of creating a classroom environment in which students could be more involved in the process of learning (Hedge, 1993). PBLT has only received recognition as an effective educational pedagogy in the last twenty years (Beckett, 2006) and it is generally described in terms of its characteristics (Beckett, 2006; Stoller, 2006). Thus, PBLT should 1) maintain a focus on the project content; 2) consist of a series of manageable tasks, progressing in complexity and structured to provide opportunities to recycle knowledge and skills; 3) allow students to make some of their own choices throughout the project; 4) stimulate students' interest; 5) afford each student the opportunity to contribute equally and to use their individual skills during group work; 6) ensure all students take responsibility and are held accountable for their work; 7) include activities which focus on practicing both linguistic form and skills throughout the project; 8) provide students with continuous feedback and opportunities for reflection (Stoller, 2006).

PBLT is particularly relevant to language learning and teaching in Asia due to current trends moving away from traditional teacher-centered instruction and towards communicative, learner-centered language education (Muller, Herder, Adamson, & Brown, 2012). PBLT provides one possible framework for this shift and is already attracting attention from researchers and practitioners across Asia: in Japan (Kobayashi, 2006), China (Guo, 2006), Thailand (Boondee, Kidrakarn, & Sa-Ngiamvibool, 2011), Korea (Lee & Lim, 2012), and Turkey (Kemaloglu, 2010), among others.

As the name of the approach suggests, projects are the main focus of PBLT. The structure of a project can be roughly separated into two big parts, the content input stage and the content output stage. These two stages represent the

comprehensible input and meaningful output which are considered essential for effective language learning (Stoller, 2006). Within a project, both the input stage and the output stage must be carefully planned in several steps or tasks of progressing complexity, and they must be followed by a reflection stage, in order to maximize the project outcomes for the students.

COURSE DESCRIPTIONS AND CURRICULUM DESIGN

This paper describes the portfolio assessment method used in two courses, an advanced listening and speaking course (AD) and a pre-advanced business English course (Pre-AD). For the AD course, there were 16 students (13 female, and 3 male) enrolled, with TOEIC scores ranging between 700 and 865. The Pre-AD course was smaller, with 4 female students enrolled. Their TOEIC scores were between 565 and 730.

Although the curricula for the two courses were quite different due to the established course goals and aims, a PBLT approach was adopted for both courses. Below follows a detailed description of the curriculum design for each course.

AD course curriculum design

The goals for the Advanced Listening and Speaking course stated that students would:

1. improve their critical thinking skills by considering a wide variety of topics from different parts of the world;
2. become familiar with the process of preparing a presentation;
3. improve their English skills and fluency.

Because the level of the students enrolled in this course was relatively high, improving academic presentation skills was one of the main focuses of the course. This was achieved in two ways, first, by using *TED Talks* as content material, which allowed the students to observe high quality presentations, and second, by guiding students through the process of preparing their own presentations. In order to achieve the course goals, a series of projects of progressing complexity was designed to guide students from preparing and delivering a short poster presentation to a small audience group, to a complex group presentation delivered in front of the entire class.

The first project in the course, called the *Language Learner History* project (Cusen, 2014), was meant to allow students to get to know each other better, and also to introduce the steps of preparing a presentation. Students had to prepare a poster with a timeline of the main events in their language learning experience, and deliver a short five-minute presentation to a small audience group in a poster carousel format, which entailed audience groups rotating to different posters throughout the session.

The next short project was designed to introduce students to the *TED Talks* presentations series. In pairs, students browsed the *TED Talks* website

(ted.com), chose one talk of particular interest to them, and prepared a presentation in which they gave the summary of their chosen *TED Talk*, explained their reasons for choosing it, and also what they learned from it. In this way, each pair's presentation was not only the final product of this short project, but also introduced new content to the class, and led into the next more complex project.

The final project of this course extended over a longer period and had clearly separate content input and content output stages. In the content input stage, students studied three *TED Talks* in detail, by completing a series of vocabulary, comprehension and discussion tasks. In the content output stage of the project, students chose an issue related to those discussed in one of the three *TED Talks*, and prepared a group presentation based on the research they did on their chosen topic.

Table 1 below provides a short summary of the AD course weekly syllabus described in detail above.

TABLE 1
AD course syllabus

Weekly syllabus	
Week 1	Course introduction Language Learner History project
Week 2	Language Learner History project What are TED Talks?
Week 3	What are TED Talks?
Week 4	Kiran Bir Sethi TED Talk
Week 5	Kiran Bir Sethi TED Talk
Week 6	Aimee Mullins TED Talk
Week 7	Aimee Mullins TED Talk
Week 8	Majora Carter TED Talk
Week 9	Majora Carter TED Talk
Week 10	Final presentations preparation
Week 11	Final presentations preparation
Week 12	Final presentations preparation
Week 13	Final presentations
Week 14	Project and course reflections

Pre-AD course curriculum design

The goals for the Pre-Advanced Business English course stated that students would:

1. improve their critical thinking skills and their business knowledge by considering a wide variety of business-related topics
2. become familiar with the process of preparing a presentation
3. become familiar with the process of writing a resume
4. become familiar with the process of preparing for a job interview
5. improve their English skills and fluency

Due to the business focus of this course, the projects designed for the course were also based on business topics and skills, and culminated in mock job interviews. These were particularly relevant as the students enrolled in this course were in their final two years of university, when Japanese students are actively engaged in looking for employment.

Similar to the AD course described in the previous section, this course also began with the *Language Learner History* project (Cusen, 2014), which had the same aims of allowing the students to get comfortable with each other, while introducing them to the necessary steps for preparing a presentation.

The second project in this course, the *Business History in the News* project, was meant to consolidate the presentation preparation steps, and also to develop students' critical thinking skills, by having them analyze the cause-effect relationships between current news and past news. In pairs, students chose a current piece of business news, researched connected past news and prepared a class presentation.

Again similar to the AD course, the final project of this course was more complex and it was divided in four main parts. In the content input phase, students learned about one of the most influential companies in the world, Apple. In the content output stage, students chose another major company of particular interest to them and prepared a long class presentation to introduce the company to the class. Following the presentations, students learned how to write a resume for a job application with the companies they presented about. Finally, they went through a mock job interview for the same company.

Table 2 includes a short summary of the Pre-AD course curriculum.

TABLE 2
Pre-AD course syllabus

Weekly syllabus	
Week 1	Course introduction Language Learner History project
Week 2	Language Learner History project Business History in the News project
Week 3	Business History in the News project
Week 4	Business History in the News project
Week 5	Most Influential Company project
Week 6	Most Influential Company project
Week 7	Most Influential Company project
Week 8	Most Influential Company project
Week 9	Most Influential Company project
Week 10	Resume writing
Week 11	Resume writing
Week 12	Mock job interviews
Week 13	Mock job interviews
Week 14	Course reflections

IMPLEMENTATION OF PORTFOLIO ASSESSMENT

Although PBLT has been suggested to be an efficient approach for the EFL classroom (Beckett, 2006), many teaching professionals have had problems with the assessment of student progress (Slater, Beckett, & Aufderhaar, 2006). This paper proposes that portfolio assessment, as described by Zubizarreta (2009) could be an effective answer to this problem for a number of reasons. First, a portfolio is meant to include examples of student work, such as assignments, drafts, presentation notes, creative work, etc., organized according to certain criteria. In a PBLT classroom, these guiding criteria can be the successive tasks that make up the projects themselves. Secondly, because PBLT is a process-based approach, documenting the process through portfolio assessment could be very beneficial for students by helping them retain the process steps. Finally, and perhaps most importantly, both the PBLT approach

and portfolio-based assessment place great importance on student reflections of their own learning (Beckett, 2006; Zubizarreta, 2009).

Before describing the portfolio components for the advanced and the pre-advanced courses that this paper is concerned with, a more detailed explanation of the process involved in creating the final product for a project is necessary, as most of the portfolio components are based on this process approach. The process steps for preparing a presentation below are based on Cusen (2013). Depending on the projects chosen, some of these steps were skipped for the two courses.

1. Choosing a topic
2. Brainstorming
3. Research
4. Outline
5. Feedback on outline
6. Presentation draft
7. Feedback on draft
8. Final presentation
9. Practice presentation

AD course portfolio

The first document to be included in this portfolio was a *Beginning Survey*, in which students considered what their strongest English skills were, what skills they needed to improve, as well as their goals for studying English. They also gave their input on the types of activities they would like to take part in during this course.

Next, work from the first project of the course, the *Language Learner History* project, was inserted in the portfolio, namely the brainstorming chart of significant events in the students' language learner history, the draft of the poster, the speech notes they prepared for the presentation, and the final poster itself.

For the *TED Talks* introduction project, students included the presentation outline and presentation reflections in the portfolio. This particular project was shorter, which is why the presentation made no use of visual aids.

Finally, the extended *TED Talks* project in this course made up the bulk of the student work in the portfolio. The three *TED Talks* covered in the content input stage of the project were on three different topics, with a common theme: overcoming adversity. The tasks that students completed for each *TED Talk* were: note taking, vocabulary and comprehension activities and a group discussion circle. For the discussion circle, each student in the group had one of three different roles: discussion leader, summarizer and connector. The corresponding worksheets for each role that students completed to prepare for the discussion were included in the portfolio. In the content output stage of the

project, groups completed the steps for preparing a presentation and most of the work they produced became part of the portfolio, as follows: two outlines for the presentation - the second one more detailed, a draft of the PowerPoint slides in the form of a storyboard, speech notes, a printout of the finalized PowerPoint slides, and presentation reflections.

During the last class of the course, an *End Survey* was carried out, which was meant to allow students to reflect on their progress over the semester, and which also became part of the portfolio. Students answered questions on what English learning goals they had achieved at the end of the semester, what skills they felt still needed improvement, and their positive and negative experiences during this course.

Additionally, just before the final week of the course, the instructor collected the portfolios and subsequently inserted evaluation sheets with the students' grades which included comments on their performance in the various projects. When the portfolios were returned to the students in the final class, the instructor held a short meeting with each student to discuss the evaluation sheets and the student's opinions on their performance.

Table 3 below provides a summary of the student work included in the AD course portfolio.

TABLE 3
AD course portfolio

Portfolio components	
	Beginning survey
Language Learner History Project	Brainstorming chart Poster draft Speech notes Poster
TED Talks introduction	Presentation outline Presentation reflections
TED Talks discussions	Discussion circle role sheets
Final presentation	Presentation outline Presentation detailed outline Power Point storyboard Speech notes Power Point slides print-out Presentation reflections
	Evaluation sheet
	End survey

Pre-AD course portfolio

As the pre-advanced course was run at the same time as the advanced course, part of the portfolio assessment implementation was repeated in both courses. Thus, the Pre-AD course portfolio also included Beginning and End Surveys, and an evaluation sheet, which was also discussed with students during a short meeting at the end of the course. Moreover, because the Language Learner History project was also part of this course, the brainstorming chart of significant events in the students' language learner history, the draft of the poster, the speech notes they prepared for the presentation, and the final poster itself were also included in this portfolio.

For the second project of the course, the Business History in the News project, the following examples of student work became part of the portfolio: the project preparation notes (prepared during the brainstorming stage of the project when students chose the current business news item they wanted to focus on and did research for related news items in the past); the presentation outline, the speech notes, a printout of the PowerPoint slides, and presentation reflections.

Similarly, for the final presentation project of the course, the Most Influential Company project, student work representative of the presentation preparation steps were included in the portfolio. These were the presentation outline, the PowerPoint storyboard, the presentation speech notes, a print out of the finalized PowerPoint slides, and the presentation reflections.

The last two samples of student work in this portfolio were the students' finalized resumes, and a worksheet with possible mock interview questions they completed in preparation for the interview.

Table 4 below provides a summary of the student work included in the Pre-AD course portfolio.

TABLE 4
Pre-AD course portfolio

Portfolio components	
	Beginning survey
Language Learner History Project	Brainstorming chart Poster draft Speech notes Poster
Business History in the News Project	Preparation notes Presentation outline Speech notes Power Point slides print-out Presentation reflections
Most Influential Company Project	Presentation outline Power Point storyboard Speech notes Power Point slides print-out Presentation reflections
Mock job interview	Resume Interview preparation notes
	Evaluation sheet
	End survey

Issues with portfolio assessment implementation

This section discusses two main problems with the implementation of portfolio assessment in the two target courses.

First, the portfolios did not include a list of ‘Can do’ statements for students to assess their skills at the beginning and at the end of the course. In its original iteration, the language portfolio was meant to include a formal assessment of the learner’s language skills in the form of ‘I can’ statements (Kuhn & Perez Cavana, 2012). Instead of the ‘Can do’ statements, the portfolios relied on the two surveys carried out at the beginning and at the end of the course. Although not necessarily formalized, these two surveys did provide an opportunity for the students to assess their skill levels, as well as their learning goals.

A second problem was that students were not given a choice as to what samples of their work would become part of the portfolio, despite the fact that most approaches to learning portfolios recommend it (Kuhn & Perez Cavana,

2012; Zubizarreta, 2009). However, this was necessary because of the process focus of PBLT, which meant that in order for students to become familiar with the presentation stages, this process had to be thoroughly documented in the portfolio. Moreover, this allowed students to progress from simple poster presentations given in front of a small audience group to very complex and demanding presentations delivered in front of the entire class at the end of the course.

CONCLUSION

A first attempt at applying the portfolio assessment methodology to courses based on the PBLT approach was described in this paper. It was argued that portfolio assessment is particularly suitable for PBLT curricula because of the two approaches' common focus on documenting the process of learning, and on reflecting on the learning achievements. However, particular constraints in implementing the portfolio assessment approach in the two courses discussed in this paper were also presented. These constraints include a lack of 'Can do' statements, and the fact that students did not have the freedom to choose which samples of their work they would include in their portfolios. Further research on implementing portfolio assessment in PBLT courses should focus on teacher and student feedback on the efficacy, fairness, and long-term learning success of portfolios as an assessment tool for the PBLT approach.

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