

Self-reflection on one's own learning: using the Language Portfolio in a Japanese university EFL class

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This paper explores how self-reflection on one's own learning takes root within the Language Portfolio (LP) and its benefits for learning. Twenty-eight first-year and two second-year Japanese female university students participated in a three-month study and the majority of these students acknowledged the benefit of the LP, which aimed to enhance self-reflection on their own learning process. Timely and appropriate instructions to stimulate regular self-reflection in the class were found to be indispensable particularly for students with low English proficiency.

Introduction

The European Language Portfolio (ELP), designed for use in university language education has been put into practice at 250 language centers in 21 countries (Imig and O'Dwyer, 2010). In recent years, the introduction of the ELP in Japan or more specifically, the adaptation of the ELP to Japan's English as a foreign language (EFL) contexts, has been noticeable (Naganuma, 2010; Majima, 2010). The Language Portfolio (LP) encourages teachers' and learners' involvement in learners' self-planning for, self-reflection on, and self-recording of, their progress in learning activities (Imig and O'Dwyer, 2010). Given the effective implementation of the LP in the author's teaching context, addressing the related practice of self-reflection in the class is crucial. This paper begins with an outline of the background of this study, including the ELP's principles and key components. A discussion of the methodology employed, including the specific procedure and participants then ensues, followed by the results. Finally, instructions are provided for facilitating self-reflection within the LP, as are some preliminary conclusions.

Background

ELP

The ELP was first introduced in 2001 as an application of the Common European Framework of Reference for languages (CEFR) and comprises three key components: the Language Passport, Language Biography, and Dossier (Little, 2012). The Language Passport serves as 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 self-assessment of their learning process. The Dossier constitutes examples of learners' personal work evidence of their language competences (Martyniuk, 2012). Learners' self-assessment can be done with 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 Kanken Project, 2012). Against this background, the following research questions are posed: How can the ELP, which emerged in the context of plurilingualism and pluriculturalism within the EU-EC model, (Little, 2012) be effectively modified and introduced into Japanese university EFL classes? What are the expected outcomes of the introduction of the LP?

Think about learning

Of the ELP's three components (the Language Passport, Language Biography, and Dossier), the Council of Europe stated in 2012 that the Language Biography serves to facilitate learners' involvement in the planning and the assessment of, and reflection on, their learning process and progress. For Cavana (2012), planning, reflection, and assessment lie firmly within the domain of metacognition, and she regards "learning to think about the process of learning" as "learning metacognitive knowledge and skills", and further mentions that "the development of metacognitive skills would make the ELP a stronger pedagogical tool and a more flexible tool to use in different education settings, such as blended or distance learning" (p. 144). Nunes (2004) also states that "transforming the portfolios into a curriculum for thinking about learning, that is a central curricular framework for the development of the students' metacognitive awareness" (p. 329, cited in Herbert 2001, emphasis added). The adoption of these Language Biography principles in the author's teaching context seemed a valuable opportunity to enhance students' metacognitive awareness of their learning process.

Self-reflection within the LP

At the beginning of the 2012 spring semester, the author first introduced the LP into her two English comprehensive classes with 13 and 18 first-year Japanese female university students respectively ($n = 31$). Their English proficiency level was beginner, approximately a TOEIC score of 200 or less. It was predominantly the "Dossier" component of the LP that was employed throughout the semester, with students creating a portfolio of work in class. Despite this focus, "can-do" checklists were also introduced as a self-assessment tool. These were similar to the "I can" descriptors, made by the author according to students' learning competency or achievement. The "can-do" checklists themselves appeared, from the students' point of view, neither to be part of the LP, nor to be understood as an indication of expectations of achievement; rather, the majority interpreted them as a kind of questionnaire. This particular interpretation of the LP brought students' study attitudes to light, given that it could have been utilized more effectively as a pedagogical tool. The students did not seem to form a study

habit that promoted systematic and constructive learning, and the most serious deficiency appeared to be an absence of reflection on their learning process. Reflection skills are essential as they enable learners to 1) monitor progress, 2) discover suitable learning techniques, and 3) develop self-awareness and meaningful self-assessment (Päkkilä, n.d., p. 7). The failure to self-reflect may have resulted in an absence of self-assessment. In the following autumn semester, daily worksheets that highlighted consistent monthly goals and considerable opportunities for self-reflection were introduced into the two classes, with the aim of helping students acquire reflection skills.

Method

Participants

The participants were 28 first-year and two second-year Japanese female university students whose majors were interior design ($n = 14$) and clothing ($n = 16$). They met the author once a week for 90 minutes in their obligatory comprehensive English class, which covered various learning activities and tasks related to listening, extensive reading, vocabulary building, and reading comprehension based on EIKEN.

Procedure

A daily worksheet outlined the day's tasks was distributed at the beginning of every class. "I can" descriptors for each month (October — December, 2012) were written at the top of the worksheet, to raise students' awareness of the learning goal for that month. Students were required to reflect on each task they completed, particularly those related to listening and EIKEN reading, and each day's learning at the end of the class (what they had learned, what the most difficult task had been, and what they had achieved). All the self-reflection had to be recorded in writing on the worksheet. At the end of each month, there was a test to assess students' learning performance. The test also sought to encourage them to revisit their LPs and reflect on their learning for the month. In the middle of the semester (late November) students consolidated their mid-semester work, had their LPs examined, and had an individual interview with the author to reflect

on their two-months of learning and to set their individual targets for the rest of the semester. A questionnaire was given to each student at the end of December to discover whether and how much the LP with the worksheet had enhanced self-reflection and facilitated their learning. The questionnaire contained eight items that had to be graded on a 5-point Likert scale (1: very much — 5: not at all) and two open questions. The first five questions to be graded were related to self-reflection, and the last three questions dealt with revisiting the LP, students' efforts in achieving the monthly goal, and individual targets. The two open questions explored how the practice of self-reflection contributed to students' learning, and what they had achieved over the three-month period.

Results

Of the 30 students who completed the questionnaire, the majority answered either “very much” or “to some extent”, when asked if they had reflected on each task and the day's work within the LP ($n = 23$: 77%, and $n = 25$: 83% respectively). Further, 83% ($n = 25$) acknowledged the benefit self-reflection had on their learning (Table 1). Asked how self-reflection benefited their learning, 33% ($n = 10$) said that it helped them to discover their weaknesses and strengths in language learning. For another 33% ($n = 10$), self-reflection offered the opportunity to review and confirm the completed work, and some of them also mentioned that the review process prepared them well for the test. Through self-reflection, 17% ($n = 5$) enhanced their memory retention.

Table 1 also shows a contradictory result about revisiting the LP. Slightly more than half ($n = 16$: 53%) often looked over the LP as preparation for the monthly test, whereas the rest ($n = 14$: 47%) did not have much opportunity to do so. Setting a monthly goal and individual students' targets encouraged the majority ($n = 22$: 73%, and $n = 23$: 77% respectively) to make efforts to achieve these aims.

Questionnaire questions		1	2	3	4	5
Table 1. Questionnaire results		n (%)	n (%)	n (%)	n (%)	n (%)
1.	Did you understand the day's plans and what you were expected to do?	9 (30%)	18 (60%)	2 (7%)	1 (3%)	0 (0%)
2.	Did you reflect on each task you had done?	8 (27%)	15 (50%)	7 (23%)	0 (0%)	0 (0%)
3.	Did you reflect on the day's work?	14 (47%)	11 (37%)	5 (17%)	0 (0%)	0 (0%)
4.	Did you confirm what you had achieved?	8 (27%)	16 (53%)	3 (10%)	3 (10%)	0 (0%)
5.	Did self-reflection benefit your learning?	10 (33%)	15 (50%)	4 (13%)	1 (3%)	0 (0%)
6.	Did you often revisit your portfolio to prepare for the monthly test?	3 (10%)	13 (43%)	12 (40%)	1 (3%)	1 (3%)
7.	Did you make efforts to achieve the monthly goal?	4 (13%)	18 (60%)	7 (23%)	1 (3%)	0 (0%)
8.	Did you make efforts to reach your own target?	5 (17%)	18 (60%)	5 (17%)	2 (7%)	0 (0%)

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 three-month study was to have students reflect on their learning within the LP. Self-reflection was required at various stages: after individual task completion, at the end of the day, at the end of the month, in the middle of the semester, and at the end of the entire study. As a result, self-reflection within the LP was an integral part of the class, one that benefited students' learning. Timely and appropriate instructions to stimulate regular self-reflection in the class were essential for students with low English proficiency.

First, the wording of self-reflection instructions had to be chosen carefully. Schneider and Lenz (2001) suggest that self-reflection on the learning process leads to autonomous learning through answering questions on checklists, such as "How I learn words," or "How I revise and further develop my text." Although such questions seemed to appeal to metacognitive awareness and help with the

development of learners' autonomy, the students in the present study needed more straightforward wording for self-reflection to function. Instead of "how" questions, "what" questions were written on the worksheet for reflection on particular tasks: "What I learned from the day's vocabulary items" ; "What steps I took to do the word-order task" ; and "What I did before starting the listening task." However, the results still showed self-reflection on each specific task to be much harder than that on each day's work. This can be because the former requires close reflection on the process of task completion within the domain of metacognition, whereas the latter serves as a memory prompt to look back generally on the day's work.

Second, care had to be taken with the way in which learning strategies were introduced. The advantages of explicit learning strategies rather than the implicit presentation of strategies have been discussed elsewhere, and others have claimed that explicit learning strategies provide a wide variety of techniques for learners to choose from (Dörnyei, 2005), and promote learner-regulated strategies for one's own goal achievement (Mariani, 2002). Nunes (2004) clearly states, "We also dedicated classroom time to the explicit training of learning strategies" (p. 329). However, participants in the present study had little knowledge of learning strategies or techniques, let alone experience of using them. The influx of learning strategies or techniques into the class seemed to overwhelm and bewilder them. Therefore, learning strategies chosen by the author were introduced, attempted, discussed, and analyzed in the class. These strategies were applied to tasks, such as the following: skimming and scanning for reading tasks; prefixes, suffixes, and synonyms for vocabulary building; and pre-reading questions and choices with attention to specific information before listening, and determining the main idea of pictures ahead of listening tasks. The carefully selected learning strategies seemed to help the students to build confidence in their ability to complete assigned tasks, since their reflective comments on the three-month learning period indicated the usefulness of such learning strategies for students' achievements. Explicit learning strategy presentation was also advantageous because it prevented excessive individual work, and encouraged peer interaction. It is therefore recommended

that teachers always create opportunities to try out new learning strategies and to reflect on their efficacy.

Third, the practice of self-reflection within the LP needed to be fostered by encouragement and orientation toward self-planning. In addition, self-reflection itself should be monitored. When asked what they did to find out the correct answers to the listening task, some students mentioned in their LPs that they had focused on the key words. They did not go into detail about the following, however: What were the key words? Were they interrogative pronouns, content words, or certain action verbs? The students reflected on the process of completing the task, but did not do so to the extent that metacognitive awareness was raised. Teachers' regular and timely interventions scaffold and foster students' self-reflection within the LP.

Conclusion

Although this was an exploratory study for a three-month period, the results showed that self-reflection within the LP benefited students' learning, for instance, helping them to discover their strengths and weaknesses, promoting the review process of their learning, and enhancing their memory retention skills. Self-reflection also seemed to provide a smooth transition for some students to then move on to self-planning and self-assessment. However, it was difficult to detect the development of learners' autonomy through self-reflection in this study. It is necessary to create an environment and opportunities that promote students' self-reflection, particularly for students whose learning motivation is not very high. The study also indicated a contradictory result regarding revisiting the LP. Further research will help to identify other ways to encourage this practice, rather than conducting review tests. Finally, more work is also needed for better promoting learners' autonomy through self-reflection.

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