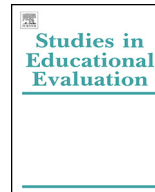




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## The potential formative benefits of portfolio assessment in second and foreign language writing contexts: A review of the literature

Tony Burner\*

Buskerud and Vestfold University College/Norwegian University of Science and Technology, P.O. Box 7053, 3007 Drammen/NO-7491, Trondheim, Norway

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### ABSTRACT

This article identifies the potential formative benefits of using portfolio assessment (PA) in second/foreign language classrooms by reviewing the up-to-date research. Three methods were used to search for relevant research: database search, manual search, and citation search. According to the literature, PA has potential benefits due to its process-oriented, authentic, integrated, interactive, and learner-centered characteristics. PA leads to increased motivation, learner autonomy, and improved writing performance. However, not many studies include observation as a method of collecting data. Through observation a researcher can investigate how the benefits of PA are acted upon and negotiated. There is a need for more empirical research in the juxtaposition of PA and formative assessment, particularly in primary and secondary education.

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\* Correspondence to: Faculty of Humanities and Education, Buskerud and Vestfold University College, Drammen, Norway. Tel.: +47 95877126.  
E-mail address: [tony.burner@hbv.no](mailto:tony.burner@hbv.no)

## Introduction<sup>1</sup>

Portfolios have been used to foster intercultural awareness in foreign language contexts (Allen, 2004; Rantz & Horan, 2005; Su, 2011), to assess teachers' professional development (Moore & Bond, 2002), and to encourage teachers' professional development (Banfi, 2003; Hurst, Wilson, & Cramer, 1998) and teacher autonomy (Cakir & Balcikanli, 2012). Portfolios have also been utilized for student assessment. There is no one definition of a portfolio; the purpose behind using the portfolio as a tool for assessment decides the type of portfolio (Klenowski, 2002). The formative (learning portfolio) and summative (showcase portfolio) functions of portfolio assessment are not mutually exclusive. This review article aims to investigate the potential formative benefits of student portfolio assessment (PA) in second language (SL) and foreign language (FL) writing contexts.

## Background

In Norway, the context most familiar to the author, PA is more frequently used in Norwegian (the first language in Norway) and arts lessons compared to SL/FL lessons (Burner, 2014). Moreover, there is a plethora of research on PA from general pedagogical perspectives (Allern, 2005; Dysthe, 2003; Gorset, 2006; Torp, 2009; Wittek, 2007) compared to research on PA in subject-specific contexts. This has triggered the author to critically review the international literature, where it also is apparent that PA is more widely used and researched in first language contexts (Belanoff & Dickson, 1991) and often defined in general pedagogical terms (Johnson, Mims-Cox, & Doyle-Nichols, 2010). This underscores the importance of shedding light on the uses of PA in SL/FL contexts. Thus the purpose of this review article is to examine the formative uses of PA in SL/FL contexts.

## Research question and objective

Hamp-Lyons (2007) states that there is a need for more research on the impact PA has on teaching and learning of writing in SL/FL settings. A few years prior to this, Delett, Barnhardt, and Kevorkian (2001) claimed that even though the benefits of PA are well-known, the benefits specific to FL education are not. Lam and Lee (2010) call for more research to shed light on how PA can be used productively in the ESL/EFL context. This highlights the need to establish exactly what research has recently been conducted on the beneficial uses of PA in SL/FL contexts. Assessment is beneficial when it is formative, i.e. it has learning as its primary aim (as opposed to assessment for purposes of measurement or ranking). For this reason, the research question pursued in this review article is:

*How is portfolio assessment used formatively in second and foreign language writing contexts?*

The significance of the present article is that it contributes to bringing together and discussing findings concerning the beneficial uses of PA in various SL/FL educational contexts. In the next section, the epistemological underpinning of PA will be outlined and related to FL learning before conceptualizing the writing portfolio and its potential benefits.

## Portfolio assessment and foreign language learning

FL writing assessment has developed through the years in correspondence with research and development in the fields of

<sup>1</sup> The following abbreviations are used frequently in this article: PA (portfolio assessment), SL (second language), FL (foreign language), EFL (English as a foreign language), ESL (English as a second language), L2 (second language), ELP (European Language Portfolio).

applied linguistics and educational psychology. The more current approach to language learning is social constructivism, which emphasizes the dynamic nature of the interaction between students, their peers and their teachers (Brown, 2000). Vygotsky's Sociocultural Theory of Mind (Vygotsky, 1978) is the theoretical foundation of the social constructivist approach. According to Vygotsky (1978, p. 86), the Zone of Proximal Development "is the distance between the actual development level as determined by independent problem solving and the level of potential development as determined through problem solving under adult guidance or in collaboration with more capable peers". The concept of ZPD helps to identify "those functions that have not yet matured but are in the process of maturation, functions that will mature tomorrow but are currently in an embryonic state" (ibid.). Potential benefits of PA emanate from this zone, because learning is enabled through formative assessment. Assessment types such as PA, where students can interact with their text multiple times, with their teacher, and/or their peers, can truly function formatively, i.e. promote learning. In Vygotskian terms (Vygotsky, 1978, 1986), assessment is used as a mediating factor in students' learning (Fig. 1).

Thus, PA finds its roots in the social constructivist learning theory (Alleman & Brophy, 1998; Klenowski, 2002), which views learning as ongoing – a learning theory that also supports the way scholars view language learning today (Brown, 2000).

The use of portfolio as an assessment tool is not new. However, from a language learning perspective, Brown and Hudson characterized PA as a "fairly new type of assessment" in 1998 (Brown & Hudson, 1998, p. 664). In the same year, Black and Wiliam published their highly influential review article entitled "Assessment and classroom learning". They provided substantial evidence for the benefits of formative assessment (Black & Wiliam, 1998). As a consequence of this, alternative ways of assessment have been embraced by educationalists, such as PA. The European Language Portfolio (ELP)<sup>2</sup> (Council of Europe, 2001) has played a key role in European language classrooms and reflects this development (Little, 2005, 2009). PA can be defined in several ways. For the purpose of this review, a closer look at how oft-cited assessment literature defines PA is needed. In the context of the current paper, the use of the writing portfolio in SL/FL classrooms will be discussed.

## The writing portfolio

A writing portfolio is defined here as a collection of texts which the student has had the opportunity to develop and reflect upon over a long period of time. A writing portfolio functions as a key assessment tool enabling learning as it focuses on process and progress (Klenowski, 2010). Hamp-Lyons and Condon (2000, p. 32ff) suggest nine characteristics for the writing portfolio: collection of texts, range of performances, delayed evaluation promoting time for revision, selection of texts, student-centered control, reflection and self-assessment, growth along specific parameters (e.g. spelling), and development over time which provides evidence of progress. From these characteristics, Hamp-Lyons and Condon (2000, p. 118ff) suggest three main categories that define the portfolio, namely collection, reflection, and selection. Collection does not mean merely collecting texts, but keeping track and working to improve drafts. Self-assessment is often mentioned as an example of reflection, i.e. training to reflect over one's own texts. Selection is also a form of reflection, where students have to take a stand as to which texts they are most satisfied with and what they have learned over a long period of time. This is where students need to create

<sup>2</sup> Named *LinguaFolio* in the United States.

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