

PORTFOLIO AT TERTIARY LEVEL – LIFELONG LEARNING TOOL

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The use of electronic language portfolios has been preferable to the use of common paper portfolios for ease of application – there is no need for accumulating a number of files of written papers, which solves the problem of storing space and, to some extent, helps reduce students' and teachers' workload.

The study investigated learners' perceptions of employing electronic language portfolios for conducting various assignments in English for Specific Purposes. The research involved university students of different specializations. Learners' experience of employing portfolios and opinions on their benefits for improving language skills have been analyzed and statistically treated using SPSS software. The results show that students are positive about application of electronic portfolios in ESP classes. The use of online portfolios for various assignments helps teachers foster students' learning, encourages critical thinking, develops creativity, motivates learners to use digital technology, encourages collaboration of learners, and in the long run, leads to lifelong learning.

Keywords: English for Specific Purposes, electronic portfolio, lifelong learning, reflections.

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Introduction

The use of electronic language portfolios has been preferable to the use of common paper portfolios for ease of application – there is no need for accumulating a number of files of written papers, which solves the problem of storing space and, to some extent, helps reduce students' and teachers' workload.

The object of the research is application of electronic portfolio for teaching English for Specific Purposes (ESP) at tertiary level.

The aims of the research are to investigate learners' attitudes to the application of electronic portfolios in learning ESP, and analyze students' opinions on learning online in view of fostering sustainable lifelong learning.

The methods of the research include designing an appropriate survey, its administration and analysis of the obtained responses.

The intended outcome: implications for language teachers on the use of online learning.

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results show that students are positive about application of electronic portfolios in ESP classes. The use of online portfolios for various assignments helps teachers foster students' learning, encourages critical thinking, develops creativity, motivates learners to use digital technology, encourages collaboration of learners, and in the long run, leads to lifelong learning.

Brief overview of background literature

The European Language Portfolio (ELP) was developed and piloted by the Modern Languages Division of the Council of Europe and was launched during the European Year of Languages 2001 as a tool to support the development of multilingualism. The portfolio has become an important part of language instruction due to its multiple opportunities such as authentic assessment of learners' knowledge and skills, their active participation in the evaluation process, and development of skills of critical thinking. The European Language Portfolio for Higher Education conforms to the common Principles and Guidelines of the Council of Europe. However, it differs from the ELP (Vosicki 2003) by containing some supplementary checklists that include specific descriptors for the linguistic skills required to study in the higher education sector. Moreover, it consists of the examples of records of progress in professional learning.

The most common feature of portfolios is the support of reflective learning, i.e. learners' self-assessment plays a central role. There are three reasons for engaging learners in self-assessment: first, it is a learner-centered learning; second, self-assessment is an integral part of evaluation processes which aim at encouraging learners to take responsibility for their learning; third, it is a tool for lifelong language learning (Little 2005). Portfolios usually include a wide variety of materials such as students' written essays, summaries, presentations, their reflections

on progress, and recordings of student talks. Portfolios provide teachers with a wealth of information upon which to base instructional decisions and to evaluate students' achievements. Portfolios can serve as a means of motivating students and promoting their self-evaluation.

In higher education, a portfolio is a collection of student work over an academic year. Apart from paper portfolios there are so-called electronic or digital portfolios, i.e. technology-based portfolios. With traditional portfolios, files or binders holding papers, pictures, drawings take up a lot of space. With an electronic portfolio, information can be easily stored in a computer hard drive, floppy disk, CD or on the worldwide websites. Electronic portfolios take up little space and hold a great deal of information which can be easily retrieved and used for collaborative student work. Recent innovations of electronic learning include weblogs, i.e. individual websites that can be used by learners for writing various contributions. The advantages of blogging in language classes comprise instant publishing online, awareness of having a readership, and creating an online portfolio of student written work (Kavaliauskiene *et al.* 2006). The portfolio is part of an assessment program, which either includes a record of students' achievements or simply documents their best work. The portfolio documents the students' learning process, and can be used as a tool which promotes learner reflection.

The most common areas of students' reflections presented by Nunes (2004) are: syllabus (7%), instruction (36%), learning (43%), and assessment (14%). Majority of researchers agree that the main benefit of portfolios is promotion of learner reflection, because without reflections the portfolio remains a folder of the accumulated papers (Coombe & Barlow 2004). The learners' experiences using the portfolio framework were investigated by examining their written reflections (Beckett and Slater 2005): various items were analyzed such as learners' weekly entries on their

research projects, end-of-term reflections, and interviews. It was found that only one fifth of the 73 participants enjoyed project work; one quarter had mixed feelings, and 57 % perceived it negatively. Moreover, the high drop-out rate from the course existed because some students found the course too difficult or believed English classes should be limited to the study of language and resented being asked to accomplish non-linguistic tasks because they did not see the value of such assignments.

The key drawback of portfolios is the additional demands on teachers and students. Teachers need extra time for planning, developing strategies and materials, meeting with individual students and small groups, and reviewing and commenting on student work. Portfolios have been characterized by some teachers as a worthwhile burden with tangible results in instruction and student motivation.

Language learning is a lifelong activity, and learners need to be equipped with strategies and techniques to continue learning throughout the life. The electronic learning initiative is part of the European Community's overall e-Europe strategy. E-learning can make a significant contribution to lifelong learning.

Participants and methods

The respondents in this study were the university students of 2 different specializations (social work, and law and penitentiary activities) studying English for Specific Purposes (ESP). In this project there were 62 participants involved, aged 19 to 21, predominantly females at intermediate level. The research methods include a survey of students' attitudes to electronic portfolios and reflections on their experiences in online learning. A questionnaire, which was designed to study learners' attitudes to electronic portfolios as a tool for learning ESP, is shown in Appendix.

Results

The frequencies of the learners' responses to the questionnaire on learning online have been researched on the five-point Likert scale: strongly disagree (1), disagree (2), not sure (3), agree (4) to strongly agree (5). Frequency of responses are presented in Table 1. The responses have been processed statistically by means of inferential statistics in order to determine the level of significance. Internal consistency reliability was met by satisfying two conditions: multi-item scales were used, and items were measured in the same target area (Dornyei 2003).

Table 1. *Frequencies of learners' responses (in %) on Likert scale to the questionnaire (Appendix). Two groups of respondents of different specializations (law and penitentiary activities, and social work), were involved in this study*

Specialization	Law & Penitentiary Activities					Social Work				
	1	2	3	4	5	1	2	3	4	5
Points of Likert scale										
Writing entries to e-portfolios fosters active and creative learning	0	0	17	58	25	0	0	25	65	10
Reading peers' contributions helps to develop critical skills	0	0	17	58	25	0	0	15	55	30
Writing creative essays is useful for autonomous learning.	0	0	17	25	58	5	0	15	60	20
Personalizing one's own e-portfolio motivates the creative use of digital technology.	0	0	8	50	42	5	0	20	50	25
Writing comments to peers' entries into their e-portfolios encourages collaboration in learning.	0	0	25	42	33	10	20	0	65	5

Table 2. Average values *M* and Standard Deviations *SD* computed for responses by students of each specialization

Specialization	Law & Penitentiary Activities		Social Work	
	<i>M_{pn}</i>	<i>SD_{pn}</i>	<i>M_{sw}</i>	<i>SD_{sw}</i>
Writing entries to e-portfolios fosters active and creative learning	4.08	0.64	3.85	0.57
Reading peers' contributions helps to develop critical skills	4.08	0.64	4.15	0.65
Writing creative essays is useful for autonomous learning.	4.42	0.76	3.90	0.89
Personalizing one's own e-portfolio motivates the creative use of digital technology.	4.33	0.62	3.90	0.94
Writing comments to peers' entries into their e-portfolios encourages collaboration in learning.	4.08	0.76	3.35	1.15

Table 3. Frequencies of positive responses

Specialization	Frequency of responses, %		
	Psychology	Law & Penitentiary Activities	Social Work
Positive Responses	≥ 4	≥ 4	≥ 4
Writing entries to e-portfolios fosters active and creative learning	88	83	75
Reading peers' contributions helps to develop critical skills	94	83	75
Writing creative essays is useful for autonomous learning	88	83	80
Personalizing one's own e-portfolio motivates the creative use of digital technology.	75	92	75
Writing comments to peers' entries into their e-portfolios encourages collaboration in learning.	62	75	70

The means values *M* shown with the appropriate index of specialization (*M_{pn}* for law and penitentiary, and *M_{sw}* for social work) and Standard Deviations (*SD_{pn}*, and *SD_{sw}*) have been computed. The data of statistical processing of the students' responses are presented in Table 2.

Statistical analysis carried out by means of ANOVA method has proved that in spite of

the small sample of respondents the data are statistically significant, and evaluation of all questions in Appendix 1 is positive in a two-tailed statistics with significance level $p = 0.025$. The percentage of positive responses 'agree' and 'strongly agree' for each group of respondents is evident by their scoring which is displayed in Table 3.

Reflections

Students' reflections on learning experiences make an important contribution to improving learning outcomes and might have a positive

context in lifelong learning. A few excerpts from students' reflections are reproduced below.

Student A. Portfolio contributions helped me a lot. It is very important to collect all entries in a file (a dossier) and analyze my learning

progress throughout the academic year. **Student B.** Making portfolio contributions was easy because I knew the requirements, i.e. exactly what and how I should do. I think it is useful to keep the contributions in a dossier because the portfolio content shows what I have done during the course and how I progressed. **Student C.** At first I did not understand what a portfolio is and why it might be useful, but later I realized how important to have all my works in one place and to reflect on my achievements or failures. I am learning how to learn. **Student D.** All materials that we are collecting in portfolio help us to observe our progress or regress. I can evaluate my work of several months and decide if I make enough efforts to improve my language skills. I am pleased with my progress – I work hard. **Student E.** Portfolios were very useful to me. I have improved my writing & reading skills, built up vocabulary. I learned how to use different online dictionaries, monolingual and bilingual. E-portfolios helped me to improve my English skills. **Student F.** Portfolios are very good ways of learning a language and being able to choose what to contribute gives me a feeling of satisfaction with my learning. They helped me to consolidate what I was learning.

The language has not been corrected for the sake of authenticity, and the names of students have been withheld in order to preserve anonymity. Learners are very positive about their experience because they realize the importance of self-monitoring and self-evaluation in learning and critical thinking about one's achievements. It should be pointed out that not all learners like employing digital technology for improving language skills. Some students prefer learning during face-to-face communication. Nevertheless, the findings of this study allow suggesting that in the future learners might use the strategies of learning they have mastered through the application of electronic portfolios at tertiary level.

Conclusions

The following two conclusions can be drawn from the data of this study. Firstly, learners are positive about application of electronic portfolios for improving language skills at tertiary level. Secondly, students' reflections on the experiences of using e-portfolios offer insights into engaging students in self-assessment as a tool for lifelong learning.

The implications for language teachers: online learning is the most useful tool for students who enjoy using digital technology. For learners, who are reluctant to learn online, face-to-face learning is preferable. Teachers must adjust their methodology for catering to the learners' needs.

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Appendix. Questionnaire on electronic portfolios

1. Writing entries to e-portfolios fosters active and creative learning. 1) strongly disagree, 2) disagree, 3) not sure, 4) agree, 5) strongly agree.
2. Reading peers' contributions helps to develop critical skills. 1) strongly disagree, 2) disagree, 3) not sure, 4) agree, 5) strongly agree.
3. Writing creative essays is useful for autonomous learning. 1) strongly disagree, 2) disagree, 3) not sure, 4) agree, 5) strongly agree.
4. Personalizing one's own e-portfolio motivates the creative use of digital technology. 1) strongly disagree, 2) disagree, 3) not sure, 4) agree, 5) strongly agree.
5. Writing comments to peers' entries into their e-portfolios encourages collaboration in learning. 1) strongly disagree, 2) disagree, 3) not sure, 4) agree, 5) strongly agree.

APLANKO METODAS UNIVERSITETUOSE – BŪDAS MOKYTIS VISĄ GYVENIMĄ

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Nagrinėjamas besimokančiųjų pasirengimas taikyti elektroninius aplankus, atliekant įvairias anglų kalbos užduotis. Tyrime dalyvavo skirtingų specialybių universiteto studentai. Straipsnyje pateikiamos statistiškai apdorotos ir išanalizuotos studentų nuomonės apie jų patirtį, naudojant aplanką, bei aplanko privalumus, gerinant kalbos įgūdžius. Rezultatai rodo, kad besimokantieji teigiamai vertina elektroninio aplanko taikymą anglų kalbos specialiams tikslams užsiėmimuose. Elektroninio aplanko taikymas įvairioms užduotims padeda dėstytojams skatinti studentų mokymąsi, jų kritinį mąstymą, lavina kūrybiškumą, motyvuoja besimokančiuosius taikyti skaitmenines technologijas, skatina studentų bendradarbiavimą ir laikui bėgant skatina mokymąsi visą gyvenimą.

Reikšminiai žodžiai: anglų kalba specialiams tikslams, elektroninis aplankas, mokymasis visą gyvenimą, refleksija.

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