

Portfolio as an Assessment Tool in French Foreign Language Classroom



Education

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ABSTRACT

This research paper investigates language assessment in terms of teaching and learning of French as a foreign language. Teachers and scholars today are experimenting with alternative techniques and procedures of evaluation to traditional test which is held at the conclusion of a unit of study. However, researchers have started questioning the adequacy of the single test at the end of the course as no single measure seems capable of estimating the diversity of skills, knowledge, processes, and strategies that combine to determine students' progress. Marks or grades do not adequately capture the level of understanding of the language competence of the students. Thus teachers have begun to incorporate alternative non-test assessment techniques such as portfolios to yield more useful information about students' achievement. This article discusses about the construction of portfolio as an assessment tool in a French foreign language classroom for self-assessment and teacher evaluation

Introduction

In the foreign language learning process, assessment plays a very important role. According to Moya and O'Malley (1994) where standardized or traditional tests such as quizzes and term papers are used to serve a purpose in education, they are neither infallible nor sufficient. They believe that any single score, whether it is a course grade or a percentile score from a norm-referenced test almost always fails to accurately report student overall progress. Therefore, in recent years language teachers have started using non-test assessment options such as portfolios. According to Archbald and Newmann (1992: 169), "a portfolio is a file or folder containing a variety of information that documents a student's experiences and accomplishments." The portfolio is a useful teaching and learning tool in language learning classrooms. Hamp-Lyons (1994) concludes that in portfolio assessment the focus is on the learners and what they are doing in the classroom. Assessment portfolios consist of items students choose to include according to certain assessment criteria. Portfolios are potent devices in assessing language learning and writing. In addition, a portfolio approach provides students with opportunities to revise, edit, and ask for help, and they can evaluate what they have learned about language learning.

History and Literature Review

In the Middle Ages at the University of Paris students studied under a master who set daily exercises for the students to learn grammar and philosophy before being admitted to the higher schools of medicine or law. Masters put one student in competition with another as a learning exercise; and, in this way, assessment happened daily, ending with one student being praised and the other ridiculed. It was not until the 1960s in the United States, as demands for more accountability in education increased, that interest in more authentic methods of assessment returned. This was jump-started in 1966 by James Coleman's report, *Equality of Educational Opportunity*, which examined the distribution of resources in education and found an inequity in their achievement scores. The 1970's and 1980's saw a shift toward focus on direct measures of writing. This meant looking at actual samples of students writing for assessment and evaluation. The Portfolio was introduced as a means to respond to these growing needs. Pat Belanoff and Peter Elbow first introduced portfolio assessment at Stony Brook University of New York in 1983.

They implemented the use of the portfolios in place of a writing exit exam. Their portfolio system was a pure experimentation that took off. Today portfolios are used in a wide range of places for multiple reasons.

In keeping with the current emphasis in language learning assessment on performance (McNamara, 1996), the portfolio appropriately offers a good measure of a student's performance in the foreign language. It also satisfies the considera-

tions of authenticity and of the context in which the performance takes place which are inherent to the communicative approach to language learning (Milanovic & Saville, 1996). In portfolio writing, students become aware of and use the strategy of editing when revising their work. Zamel (1982) suggested that this includes not just editing for mechanical errors such as grammar and vocabulary, but also looking a larger element of text organization and meaning; the process that the learners go through from prewriting to drafting, revising and final writing. The authors feel that portfolios are a good method for evaluating students "because it places responsibility on students ... to develop a representative body of work and ... to select appropriate samples of that work and present them according to certain guidelines" (Hill & Parry, 1994: 265). It includes information from every phase of instruction through a reflective working process: preparation, lectures and discussions, and learning outcomes. This total learning philosophy and the emphasis on learning through doing are fundamental in simulation and, therefore, make portfolio assessment a logical follow-up to a learning experience involving simulation.

A qualitative research carried out by Marefat (2004) in Al-lameh Tabatabai University indicated a number of recurring themes, patterns of student's reactions. In all, it was suggestive of a general positive toward portfolio use. When students reviewed their works, they were mainly obsessed with grammar and spelling i.e. surface level correction. Portfolio made students and teachers accountable to support process. Also portfolios helped students to become actively involved in assessing their needs, progress, achievement, and effort. Portfolio would be an instructional tool to help students to become independent learners who could judge their own learning.

Purpose of creating a teacher portfolio

Portfolio serves a number of purposes. First, it provides a demonstration of how a teacher approaches his or her work and presents evidence of the teacher's thinking, creativity, resourcefulness, and effectiveness. The portfolio can thus be submitted to a supervisor or manager as evidence of the standard of the teacher's performance.

Second, a portfolio serves as a source of review and reflection. The process of compiling the portfolio prompts the teacher to engage in a comprehensive self-assessment of different aspects of his or her work. By reviewing the portfolio (in consultation with a colleague or supervisor, if necessary), the teacher can make decisions about priorities and goals and areas for future development or improvement.

Third, a portfolio can promote collaboration with other teachers. For example, it can become part of the process of peer coaching; the peer reviews and discusses the portfolio and uses it to give feedback about the teacher's work. A particularly use-

ful type of portfolio is one that is part of a team-teaching collaboration in which two teachers create a joint portfolio to accompany a class they both teach. Portfolios have been embraced in a variety of contexts and have become very common in language classes and college composition programs (Yancey 1992; Belanoff and Dickson 1991).

Benefits of creating assessment Portfolios

Portfolios have the following benefits (Apple & Shimo, 2005; Hamp-Lyons & Condon, 2000;

Shimo, 2003):

- Learners can reflect over their learning processes.
- Portfolios make it possible to make a continuous assessment over a long time period.
- Learners can make their original products and they can feel a sense of achievement more compared to traditional tests.
- Learners can take control over their learning and feel more responsibility for it.
- Learners can assess weaknesses and strengths, and progress in their ability, and (re-)set goals more effectively by looking over their work.

Students are often able to receive more feedback to their work in progress, such as easy drafts, from their teacher and classmates when portfolios are used in their classes (Shimo, 2005). Moreover, portfolios can help to promote learner autonomy especially when the portfolio assignments include

- a) decision-making or choice-making tasks which enable students to plan and organize their learning,
- b) language tasks related to both in- and outside-class activities, and
- c) optional tasks to accommodate students at different levels of motivation and proficiency (Shimo, 2003).

Portfolios, unlike grades, are student centered. They include essays, poems, exercises, drawings, and, within the context of one of portfolio assessment programs, songs, videos etc. Their primary purpose is to build self esteem, the single most powerful component of learning.

A University Experience

This paper discusses an experiment carried out in three French language classes at Avinashilingam University, Coimbatore in South India. The principal purpose of the simulations used is to self assess learning French as a foreign language. Students in the French Language curriculum have a portfolio that is cumulative for all the years they study the language.

Objective

- Enabling learners acquire language learning strategies; develop critical thinking skills etc.
- To help develop a learner's language learning skills, especially self-assessment skills.

Sample

The sample comprised of 72 students who have chosen French language for Part B Undergraduate Programme belonging to various streams such as Humanities, Science and Management. All students were divided into 2 groups – Traditional Assessment Group, Portfolio Assessment Group. Traditional Assessment was done by the teacher for the traditional way of teaching and learning of grammar and Portfolio Assessment was done both by teacher and the students with Rubrics. Common stock phrases in French for communication were identified and made use of.

Methodology

Portfolio was used both for evaluating learning processes and learning outcomes. The instructors asked students to provide input on the criteria that should be included in each. This approach enabled the learners to become more comfortable with the use of alternative assessments and helped students understand how they will benefit from alternative assessment and how they can use it effectively. In the present study, Multitrait Rubrics is used as it allows for rating performance on three or four dimensions rather than just one. Multitrait rubrics resemble analytic rubrics in that several aspects are scored individually. However, where an analytic scale includes only conventional aspects such as content, organization, and grammar, a multitrait rubric involves dimensions that are directly related to the topic or work that is being carried out by students.

Results & Discussion

From the data it appears that the portfolio assessment is valid as a reflection of the overall level of the students, as well as a means for allowing students with different learning styles to generate materials in consonance with the way they learn best. It has also shown that Portfolio assessment

- Increased student involvement
- highlighted the importance of self-assessment and reflection
- enabled students to take ownership of learning; Charting own progress

Conclusion

In conclusion, portfolios are in consonance with current trends in language teaching and assessment, with pedagogical advantages that clearly tilt the balance in favour of portfolios as the most desirable form of assessment. Students are given the opportunity to show what they know and facilitators have more information on which to base their judgments of learner progress. In measuring the effectiveness of language learning with simulation, our findings indicate that portfolio assessment yields results that are comparable to those of traditional assessment. Further research is called for to ascertain the numerical validity and reliability of portfolio assessment as a language testing tool. As Sandra Murphy (1994: 150) said, "Portfolios ... offer us the opportunity to make the assessment process a learning process."

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