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Telling ELT Tales out of School

‘Learning Portfolio (LP)’ to Enhance Constructivism and Student Autonomy

İlke Büyükduman[a], Selen Şirin[b]

[a]*Özyeğin University, Kuşbakışı Cd. No: 2 Altunizade-Üsküdar, Istanbul 34662, Turkey*
[b]*Özyeğin University, Kuşbakışı Cd. No: 2 Altunizade-Üsküdar, Istanbul 34662, Turkey*

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Abstract

A learning portfolio (LP) can be broadly defined as a purposeful collection of student work that exhibits the students’ efforts, progress and achievements (Smith & Tillema, 1998). At Preparatory Programme at Ozyegin University (OzU), a new evaluation system is being implemented. This paper describes the components of LP practice at OzU, relating the process to the principles of constructivism and learner autonomy. Also the outcomes of a survey that has been conducted to find out the perception of the students regarding the LP practice are presented and interpreted.

Keywords: Learning Portfoli; Learner Autonomy; Constructivism; Students’ Perception; Alternative Assessment

1. Body

1.1 Literature Review

Throughout the past two decades, education has been experiencing a revolution. Currently, theoretical and empirical studies in education are favouring a knowledge construction model over the traditional information transmission model. Constructivism is a theory about how people learn. The main proposition of constructivism is that learning means *constructing, creating, inventing,* and *developing* our own knowledge. Learning in constructivist terms is, as quoted by Marlowe and Page (2005:7):

- the process and the result of questioning, interpreting, and analyzing information;
- using this information and thinking process to develop, build and alter our meaning and understanding of concepts and ideas; and

- integrating current experiences with our past experiences and what we already know about a given subject.

Constructivist learning has received considerable attention in the world of education because it has been perceived as a more natural, relevant, productive and empowering framework. Although there are various approaches considered to be constructivist, the major principles that are common among most constructivist approaches are summarized below (Marlowe and Page, 2005; Akar and Yildirim, 2004; Maypole and Davies, 2001; Philips, 1995; Page, 1990):

- Learning is the active creation of knowledge structures (schemata) from personal experience and interaction with the environment. Direct experience, making errors, and looking for solutions are vital for the assimilation and accommodation of information. How information is presented is important. When it is presented as an aid to problem solving, it functions as a tool rather than an arbitrary fact.
- Knowledge must be constructed by the learner; it cannot be supplied by the teacher. It is acquired through the involvement with content instead of imitation and repetition. In constructivist classrooms, learners are given opportunities to construct knowledge through their own experiences; they are not told by the teacher. There is less emphasis on directly teaching specific skills and more emphasis on learning in a meaningful context.
- Meaning is intimately connected with experience. Students come into the classroom with their own experiences and a cognitive structure based on those experiences. Learners construct their own reality or interpret it based on their perceptions of experiences. Therefore, individual knowledge is a function of one's prior experiences and beliefs that one uses to interpret events.

Even though constructivism has been considered as a learning theory, rather than a teaching theory, several pedagogical implications are drawn from it to facilitate learning and assessment. As this paper focuses on the assessment aspect of constructivism, the major principles to foster constructivist assessment are highlighted. The purpose of learning in constructivism is to construct his or her own meaning, not just memorize the "right" answers and regurgitate someone else's meaning. Since education is inherently interdisciplinary, the only valuable way to measure learning is to make the assessment part of the learning process, ensuring it provides students with information on the quality of their learning. Therefore, in a constructivist classroom, student learning is assessed in the context of teaching. Despite the proficiency tests, the real purpose of assessment should be to assist the teacher in determining how well the student is mastering the concepts being taught. Students' performance should be monitored continually while the lesson is being taught. If the lesson is not working, the teacher should be prepared to determine the cause of students' lack of comprehension and make adjustments to address the problem. Assessment of student performance in constructivist classrooms requires development of a variety of techniques for assessing the process of learning higher-order thinking skills and knowledge construction rather than an assessment of task completion and factual knowledge through standardized tests (Jonassen, 1991; Tynjälä, 1998). Jonassen (1991) makes twelve points about appropriate assessment in constructivist learning theory:

1. Technology can and will force the issue of constructivism.
2. Assessment will have to be outcome based and student centered.

3. Assessment techniques must be developed which reflect instructional outcomes.
4. "Grades" must be contracted where they are required.
5. There must be non-graded options and portfolio assessment.
6. There must be self and peer evaluation as well as teacher assessment.
7. Performance standards must be developed.
8. A grading system must be developed which provides meaningful feedback.
9. Students will be videotaped as they work as part of their portfolio.
10. The focus must be on originality rather than regurgitation; it is important to evaluate how the learner goes about constructing his or her own knowledge rather than the product.

However, it should not be forgotten that it is essential to identify meaningful and clear criteria for acceptable knowledge construction (Airasian and Walsh, 1997).

In traditional instructional understanding, assessment is viewed as distinct from learning. It is usually conceptualized as something that teachers do to students after they learn. However, in constructivist terminology, assessment does not occur separately from learning. In fact, assessment in a constructivist class often occurs simultaneously with the learning process (Marlowe & Page, 2005). Thus, some constructivist evaluation techniques, in line with constructivist learning process could be portfolios, rubrics, error logs, quality indicators, and anything that requires demonstration of student understanding.

Although constructivism has been a favoured learning theory in the last few decades, it has also been realized that its implementation in the classroom has some challenges that should be considered and evaluated carefully. That is why teachers might find using constructivist learning principles and evaluation techniques in their classrooms hard and often unrealistic (Marlowe & Page, 2005).

1.2 Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this study was to investigate how the constructivist assessment tool, the learning portfolio (LP) was perceived by the students. The research question of the study is stated as follows:

- How was the LP in a university English preparatory program perceived by students?

The LP components used in this particular context were stand-alone writing task, process writing, oral presentation and collocations notebook. The students had to read an academic article on a topic they had chosen, listen to an academic podcast on the same topic and write an essay of about 350+ words. Finally, they gave a 10-minute oral presentation again on the same topic. As for the collocations notebook, the students had to record the words they had learnt throughout the course with their collocations and a sample sentence of their own.

The study tried to find the answer to the core question by gathering data on the different components of LP. Thus, the study sought to find the answers to these questions:

1. How did the students perceive

- the writing,
- the reading,

- the listening,
- the speaking and
- the vocabulary strand of the LP?

2. To what extent did the students benefit from the LP?
3. To what extent did the students enjoy the LP?
4. To what extent did the LP make the students autonomous learners?

1.3 Significance of the Research

Up to present there have been numerous studies on the usefulness of constructivist instruction. However, majority of them had shared the same common point that if constructivist instruction is not followed by constructivist evaluation, neither students nor teachers would be eager to carry on doing such learning practices. The present study analysed a constructivist evaluation technique the Learning Portfolio to see how students perceived it and how much they benefitted from it. The most important parameter of constructivism being student autonomy, this study tried to reveal whether LP could make them more autonomous. The comments and suggestions of the students on constructivist evaluation techniques revealed implications about the factors that should be considered to make evaluation more constructivist in nature in other institutions as well.

1.4 Research Design

In order to address the research question, a 5-likert survey comprised of 14 questions was prepared. The distribution of the questions in the first part of the survey is shown in table 1.

Table 1. Survey Parameters and Number of Questions

Parameters in the Survey	**# of Questions**
Affective domain of LP	1
Beneficial Value of LP	1
Student Autonomy	7
Different Components of LP	5
Total	14

To analyse the data, frequencies and percentages were taken into consideration.

1.5 Participants

The participants of the study comprised of 60 students in upper-intermediate module. The researchers were instructors at the program. Four different upper-intermediate classes each of which consists of 15 students participated in the survey. The age level of the students ranges from 17 to 20. The study was conducted in March

2010 at Ozyegin University School of English Language Instruction. LP was an integral part of the program which was evaluated as complete or incomplete and used as the eligibility criteria for the end-of-module assessment. As the participants were at upper-intermediate level, which is the fourth level in the program, the majority of the participants had started as pre-intermediate and went through the LP process three times until the study was conducted. This means that they had a thorough understanding of both the process and the rationale behind it. Data was gathered when the instructional process was over.

1. The Outcomes

In the process of interpreting the outcomes of the study, the frequencies and the percentages for "strongly agree" and "agree" columns have been added. The same applied to "totally disagree" and "disagree" columns.
The first question was "how did the students perceive the writing, the reading, the listening, the speaking and the vocabulary strands of the LP?" The results could be seen in Table 2.

Table 2. The perception of students on different components of LP

	Strongly Agree		Agree		No idea		Disagree		Totally Disagree	
	f	**%**	**f**	**%**	**f**	**%**	**F**	**%**	**f**	**%**
Through LP tasks, my written communication skills have significantly improved.	9	15.51	33	56.89	3	5.17	9	15	4	6.66
Through LP tasks, my listening skills have significantly improved.	8	13.55	16	27.11	12	20.33	20	33.89	3	5.08
Through LP tasks, my oral communication skills have significantly improved.	6	10	21	35	12	20	15	25	6	10
Through LP tasks, my reading skills have significantly improved.	11	18.33	26	43.33	6	10	13	21.66	4	6.66
Collocation notebook component of the LP has helped me improve my vocabulary learning.	9	15	24	40	9	15	12	20	6	10

Out of 60 students, 42 believe that LP helped them improve their writing skills; 24 believe LP helped them improve their listening; 27 believe LP helped them improve their oral skills; 37 believe it helped them improve their reading skills and 33 believe keeping a collocation notebook helped them improve their vocabulary learning.

By looking at these outcomes, it could be concluded that students perceive that LP served the purpose of improving their skills of writing, reading, and vocabulary learning the most. More than half of the participants agree that LP helped them improve themselves in these three skills. When we look at the remaining two skills, listening and speaking, it could be said that the situation is half-half. Nearly half of the participants (f=23) believe that they did

not benefit from the listening component of the LP, whereas nearly the same number of students (f=24) believes that they did. As for the speaking strand of the LP, 27 of the students said that they believe their speaking skill improved through LP, and 21 said it did not help them improve their speaking. Compared to the listening strand, students' perception towards oral skills improvement seemed to be a bit better, but in general it could be concluded that students were not as happy regarding the listening and speaking skills as they were when their reading and writing skills were taken into consideration. As for the collocation component of the LP, students seemed to be fairly satisfied with 33 of them believing that their vocabulary learning improved as opposed to 30 who said that they did not benefit from it. According to the data gathered, the most improved skill is regarded as writing, and the least is listening.

The second question was "to what extent did the students benefit from the LP? The results are in Table 3.

Table 3. The perception of students on the beneficial value of LP

	Strongly Agree		Agree		No idea		Disagree		Totally Disagree	
	F	**%**	**f**	**%**	**f**	**%**	**f**	**%**	**f**	**%**
I benefit from keeping an LP.	10	16.66	27	45	11	18.33	9	15	3	5

According to the data in table 3, the majority of the students (f=37) believe that keeping an LP was beneficial for them. The number of students that think LP was not beneficial for them is 12 in total and 11 students have no idea whether it is beneficial or not. This data could be interpreted like this: although students do not seem to be so contented with some of the components of LP, most of them believe that they benefitted from it.

As for the third question, which was "to what extent did the students enjoy LP?" the results are on Table 4.

Table 4. The perception of students on the affective domain of LP

	Strongly Agree		Agree		No idea		Disagree		Totally Disagree	
	F	**%**	**f**	**%**	**F**	**%**	**F**	**%**	**f**	**%**
I enjoy keeping an LP.	7	11.66	8	13.33	12	20	19	31.66	14	23.33

Only 15 of the students (24.99%) believe that keeping an LP is enjoyable whereas 33 of them (54.99%) did not and 12 of them (20%) did not have any idea. The data gathered regarding the students' enjoyment of keeping an LP is interesting because although according to the previous question, the majority believed that LP was beneficial for them, from the affective aspect, they did not enjoy it. It could be concluded that whether it is a constructivist assessment tool, LP or any other kind of traditional exam, students do not enjoy the idea of assessment as all encompass time restraints, hard work and pass-fail decision making from teacher perspective.

The last question was "to what extent did the LP make the students autonomous learners?" and the results are on Table 5.

Table 5. The perception of students on LP to enhance autonomy

	Strongly Agree		Agree		No idea		Disagree		Totally Disagree	
	f	**%**	**f**	**%**	**f**	**%**	**f**	**%**	**f**	**%**
LP makes me feel responsible for my learning.	15	25.42	29	49.15	5	8.47	7	11.86	3	5.08
LP helps me learn in my own pace.	8	13.55	20	33.89	17	28.81	11	18.64	3	5.08
LP helps me see my strengths and weaknesses.	9	15.25	24	40.67	12	20.33	12	20.33	2	3.38
LP tasks require me to do some research on my own.	18	31.03	21	36.2	11	18.96	6	10.34	2	3.44
The instructors' feedback guides me to reflect on my learning.	20	33.33	25	41.66	7	11.66	5	8.33	3	5
LP leads me to revise my own work.	12	20	24	40	16	26.66	6	10	2	3.33
I prefer LP rather than traditional paper & pencil tests.	12	20.33	16	27.11	11	18.33	17	28.33	3	5

When table 5 is examined, it could be seen that 44 of the students (74.57%) believed that LP made them feel responsible for their own learning. Taking one's own responsibility of learning, which is the heart of constructivism, has obviously geared the students towards being accountable for their learning. As for the learning in one's pace, which is another important determinant of constructivist assessment, nearly half of the students (47.44%) believed that LP helped them learn at their own speed. Still another important component of constructivism, pinpointing one's strengths and weakness more than half of the students (55.92%) stated that LP helped them in that aspect. By the nature of the LP application in Ozyegin University, students are expected to find academic articles and lectures and summarise them. The majority of the students (67.23%) believed that LP tasks required them to do some research on their own. This is another indicator that they are able to take the responsibility of their learning and learning in their own pace because again by nature some students could find proper articles and lectures related to their chosen topic more easily and quickly than the others. In constructivist terminology, the role of the teacher is that of a guide and facilitator. 45 of the students (74.99%) stated that the feedback of the instructor guided them to reflect on their learning. Leading the students to revise their work is another aspect of constructivist learning and more than half of the students (60%) thought that LP made them revise their work. Finally, the students were asked whether they preferred LP to traditional paper-pencil tests, 28 of them (47.44%) said that they did whereas 20 of them (22%) said they did not. 11 students (18.33%) had no idea on that. This could be interpreted as whatever the

assessment system is students did not want to be tested, assessed and evaluated. They could not agree on any assessment type being better than another.

3. Conclusion and Implications

This study conducted in a university English prep program investigated students' perceptions regarding learning portfolio (LP) as a constructivist evaluation tool to enhance learner autonomy. Regarding the question of the study, to what extend LP made the students autonomous learners, it obviously made them take their responsibility, do some research, be aware of their strengths and weaknesses and give them the chance to learn in their own pace. However, when it comes to whether the instructor guided them in the process, a great many of them stated that their instructor guided them to revise their work, which could be interpreted as students are still in the process of transformation from teacher-oriented learning atmospheres to being autonomous learners. Although they regarded themselves as being responsible for their learning, they still needed teacher guidance. As for their preference between traditional paper-pencil testing and LP, they seemed to have opposing views. Tests, assessment, evaluation, under whatever name they are presented no type of grading, pass/ fail judgement is considered favourable according to the students. As Marlowe and Page (2005:53) stated "....The single most important question we should really be asking about testing student learning is not *how* we should be doing assessment but *why* are we doing them. If the answer has less to do with student learning and more to do with comparative judgements, we are on the wrong track". In our context, assessment is to measure how much learning has occurred. As for making students see their strengths and weaknesses, it could easily be said that students perceive LP as a good tool to achieve that parameter. In the context, in which LP is in action, all tasks are set simultaneously with instruction. In other words, for instance once library search is taught, students are required to start their research for their academic articles at the same time. When summarising is presented, students have already chosen their articles and summary work is done through their articles. The rationale behind it is that, in constructivist terms, assessment is not something we do to students, nor does it occur separately from learning. In fact, assessment in a constructivist class often occurs simultaneously with the learning process (Marlowe & Page, 2005). Therefore, both instruction and assessment become more real, based on real life problem solving.

In a nutshell, the results of this study provide an insight into the extent to which the constructivist assessment, LP can be incorporated into the curriculum and instruction. The value of this study is to give insight to other professionals that learning portfolio is a handy assessment tool and implementation of it leads to student autonomy, and better learning. However, enjoyment on the side of the learner is not guaranteed.

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