

Portfolio as an Assessment Procedure

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Abstract

This paper provides an overview of the work carried out over a period of four months with groups of students taking Portuguese 325 at the University of Arizona. The first group taking PORT 325 consisted of 25 students and the second group taking PORT 325 consisted of 26 students. Thus, both sessions had a total of 51 students enrolled in PORT 325. It argues that by using portfolio assessment in Portuguese as a Foreign Language (PFL) classroom, the teacher can not only stimulate knowledge of students' interests related to the target culture but also be more aware of their overall progress during the development of their portfolio. In addition, it supports Nunes' claim that the learning strategies used to overcome their difficulties and how the instructor's input are beneficial in guiding them in the performance of their task becomes apparent (Nunes, 2004). This paper first presents the rationale for the use of portfolios as an assessment tool according to current literature. Then it reports on the students' feedback from a questionnaire survey conducted in PORT 325, including important information on why the topics were chosen according to their perception of the overall knowledge of the Portuguese language and culture obtained through the portfolio production. Finally it draws some preliminary conclusions that suggest how portfolio feedback from students' perspectives can help teachers build a more efficient teaching-learning process.

Introduction

According to Stader and Hill-Winstead., (2002) the Educational Leadership Constituent Council (ELCC) used the revised standards developed by the Interstate School Leaders Licensure Consortium (ISLLC) to encourage candidates and professors of educational leadership to use authentic performance activities as assessments rather than traditional tests. Such performance assessments should be as authentic as possible, present a challenge to the student, and require fairly high-level skills. Authentic, in this context, signifies that the tasks should bear a resemblance to real-world challenges, such as using data for school improvement. A portfolio, for example, is a collection of authentic tasks organized in a way to demonstrate student competency in various standards. Portfolios are used in different ways in order to measure students' skills, including portfolios for a specific course, a prescribed block of courses, or a complete program as an assessment organizer

to demonstrate the knowledge, skills, and dispositions gained from selected learning activities (Stader and Hill-Winstead 2002; Gómez, 2000). The format of a portfolio can be in traditional paper and pencil design, in electronic format or some combination of these two formats. As portfolios may be created on the computer, the necessity to understand how to use technology not only for performing web searches but also to better plan the portfolio can be an excellent way to improve or introduce students to a wider range of media-literacy skills (Banfi, 2003). A portfolio is a very valuable tool to help students integrate and apply linguistic skills and knowledge they have acquired and developed throughout the course development.

A portfolio is a collection of evidence, usually in written form, of both the products and processes characteristic to learning (Webb et al, 2003; Gwo-Dong et al, 2000; Barootchi, 2002). These include students' work and self-reflection (Anderson, 2003). It attests to achievement and personal and professional development by providing critical analysis of its contents. Therefore, students' portfolios enable teachers to assess student performance and learning processes (Gwo-Dong et al, 2000) and to find out new ways to address students' needs from their perspectives (Wald, 1999). However, it is critical to know students' perceptions concerning the use of a portfolio as an assessment instrument. Thus, in this paper I try to investigate 1) in which aspects of the target language PORT 325 students at the University of Arizona feel they have improved, 2) which strategies they used in order to overcome any difficulty they found through the portfolio development process and 3) what kind of help they considered valuable or what help would have been valuable to them if they had received it. These research questions intend not only to promote more efficient portfolio feedback to students by the instructor, but also to learn how instruction should be improved during students' portfolio development.

The course

The portfolio work presented in this paper was part of the curricular requirements for PORT 325, a 16-week course of two and a half contact hours per week for students who need to practice conversational skills, review grammatical aspects of Brazilian Portuguese, and learn more about cultural aspects specifically concerning the Brazilian culture. The general consensus is that the students in this course may have taken Portuguese 305, Portuguese 102 or have received permission from the department to enroll in the course. Portuguese 305 is a course for students who have taken at least three semesters of Spanish or students who are heritage Spanish speakers. Portuguese 305 is also designed for Spanish speakers due to the similarities between Spanish and Portuguese. Thus, instructors teach Portuguese highlighting the differences between Spanish and Portuguese. When students enroll in PORT 325, they have knowledge of basic grammar of Brazilian Portuguese, have learned vocabulary from different types of activities such as reading and chatting on line, and have developed some writing skills by writing reports on the reading assignments. Thus, intermediate students who take PORT 325 are expected to expand their linguistic abilities and achieve more control of not only oral abilities at the advanced

level but also written abilities improving their overall language output.

Methods

Participants

In order to carry out the study, 39 students from the University of Arizona answered a 6-question survey. The subjects consisted of students ranging from 18 to 36 years old, both male and female. There were 26 female undergraduate students, 17 male undergraduate students, 3 female graduate students, 1 male graduate student and 1 university employee. Both classes had a total of 47 students. The level of proficiency of the students is considered Intermediate but they display a lot of transfer from Spanish into Portuguese which is expected to decrease during the course. In order to expose students to the language and culture through authentic or quasi-authentic situations, students have the chance to participate in conversational meetings every other week with two instructors, complete web assignments where they have to do a web search and participate in quasi real-life activities in the classroom. The experience of portfolio assessment that some students had, came from their Spanish courses or the PORT 102 course.

Instrumentation

The data for this study was collected through a questionnaire-survey which was given in order to explore students' perspectives concerning the process of writing a portfolio. This was a self-evaluation questionnaire-survey. In week 13 of PORT 325 students were asked to take a few minutes and answer a questionnaire-survey giving their feedback about their portfolios. Students were told that the questionnaire survey was anonymous and they would not be evaluated nor graded for answering it. The questionnaire-survey consisted of 6 questions in English, and students could answer the questions in English or Portuguese (see Appendix A). The questions referred to the students' process pertaining to each phase of the creation of their portfolio.

The portfolio assessment model for PFL followed the course syllabus. Students selected an area of interest (music, literature, sports, cooking, religion, behavior, history, economics, theater, tourism) and they began collecting material through the Internet. Students used the information collected to elaborate their essay and oral presentation. The students were guided using the following steps in developing their portfolio:

- (a) The objectives of the portfolio procedures were identified in the syllabus.
- (b) Portfolio structure was elucidated to students.
- (c) Students' were informed about Instructor's feedback procedures after each part of their written work in order to guide them along in their research.
- (d) The final written report and oral presentation had to stick to the criteria explained in the syllabus.

Procedure

During the process of developing their portfolio, students went through three steps.

During week 5 students had to write a paragraph stating the topic of their portfolio

project and what they wanted to research about. During week 8, they had to hand in between one to two pages about the topic of their choice. During week 11, they handed in two to three pages outlining the content of their portfolio including the electronic pages they had been researching. During week 14, they had to hand in their final portfolio report. After receiving each assignment, students' grammatical errors were corrected and suggestions were given on how to improve their assignment. I believe that assisting students along the process of writing their portfolio and making corrections as they write the portfolio guides them to check if they are following the criteria established in the syllabus each time the assignments are turned in. The criteria required listing 3 major aspects of the topic they wanted to research, to describe the findings and their personal reflection about those findings. They also had to submit copies of supporting materials and an annotated bibliography evaluating the sites they visited.

When all students had already handed in the final draft of their portfolio and given their oral presentation, the instructor asked them to answer a feedback questionnaire-survey during week 14. The anonymous questionnaire forms were collected so that the data could be collated and analyzed. Eleven students could not answer the questionnaire on the day it was given due to Thanksgiving holiday. A possible percentage of answer frequency was calculated for each question. In question number one students could choose more than one answer so the percentages did not correlate with the number of participants but with the number of items chosen. In the last question a Likert scale was used so that students could measure their overall knowledge in aspects of the Portuguese language and culture. The scale ranged from 1 (not at all) to 6 (a great amount).

Results

This section details students' reactions to the portfolio in both groups of students. The primary data analysis of students' perceptions and attitudes concerning the development of the portfolio was based on the questionnaire mentioned above. The evaluation attempted to elicit student reactions regarding the process of developing their portfolio during the following phases:

- Choosing a topic;
- Improvement in writing one paragraph to one page;
- Improvement in writing two to three pages of the portfolio;

Overall contribution of the portfolio as an assessment procedure.

Choosing a Topic

Students were free to choose any topic that appealed to them, so in the questionnaire, 26 students (66%) chose a particular topic because it reflected their curiosity about the culture. They explained their choice stating that it helped them understand the culture better and it also reflected their personal interest. One interesting comment made by a student was: "*My ART #320 course only*

focuses on European Modern Art, mainly French art but I wanted to research something different. My Art History teacher, after I asked her about her knowledge of Brazilian artists, gave me one name Vik Muniz because she actually met him and worked with him in New York.” So, this emphasizes students’ interests and shows the students’ attempt to use the portfolio in order to connect with disciplines of their interests by using social strategy (Oxford, 1990). In this case the strategy was to get help from an art professor from an Art class. 9 students (23%) said that the topic was related to their personal interests and another 7 students (18%) said that it was linked to their majors. The students that used the portfolio for general interests (sports, music, health, entertainment world, etc.) made comments such as the following:

“I wanted to know more about Pelé”.

“I would love to travel to Brazil.”

“I have read about the topic before.”

“It reflected my involvement in Capoeira and my personal interests.”

Thus, I believe that the choices made by the students reflect their motivation for writing their essays in topics that reveal their interests. According to Anderson (2003), the motivation to write is an important tool that leads students to succeed in their writing process. When students choose their topics and write about real-life situations, these make writing more meaningful to them.

Improvement from writing one to two pages

In the second question of the questionnaire 21 students (54%) mentioned that they developed their vocabulary tremendously. One student also mentioned that writing between one paragraph to two pages gave him/her the opportunity to express himself/herself better and expand his/her vocabulary. Another student mentioned that she definitely broadened her vocabulary and learned art jargon that only art historians and perhaps anthropologists ever use. Twelve students (31%) said that they improved their grammar skills because they could correct their errors identified by their instructor in Portuguese. They also mentioned writing longer pieces helped him/her utilize more grammar and vocabulary that he/she learned in class. Another student said: *“I first developed the idea, then corrected the grammar as I read it again and found errors.”* Ten students (26%) mentioned that they improved in organization. Some comments were:

“As you rewrite you become better organized and more concise.”

“Expanding seemed to help with organization and vocabulary most.”

“It helped to turn one page and then the next because it makes the project seem easier, being able to review corrections help.”

In addition, another four students (10%) also mentioned that they improved their writing

skills for the better and also their translation skills through translating English sites into Portuguese. It is important to mention that students reported more than one aspect of improvement e.g., vocabulary and organization or vocabulary and grammar or improved writing skills (vocabulary and grammar) and the development of long arguments.

Thus, in this second step students could see their progress through their own work as students were taking ownership of their work and progressing through stages of writing such as revising, expanding their initial writing, etc. (Anderson, 2003).

Extra help received in writing one paragraph to one page summary (linked to the previous question)

Students were also asked to mention any extra help they received in writing this assignment. They could also mention the kind of help they thought would have been valuable to them. In this section, the responses varied substantially. Fifteen students (38%) mentioned the help of their instructors as a valuable tool in assisting them go through this process. Students made comments such as:

“Corrections returned by the instructor made me cautious of what aspects of grammar I needed to check for.”

“Feedback from the instructor was valuable because I had overlooked some grammatical errors and she had helpful suggestions.”

Four students (10%) reported that they had received help from friends. Eleven students (28%) did not answer the question or said they did not receive any extra help. Other answers varied between the Internet, web assignments, on-line translators, spell-checks in Portuguese at the Science library, tutors, dictionaries and books or the help of an art history teacher.

According to Boston (2002; 3) the feedback that learners receive on tests and homework give valuable insights concerning what they need to change or improve besides encouraging learners to focus their attention thoughtfully on the task rather than on simply getting the right answer. Thus, the feedback that teachers give to students helps them be aware of the type of writing skills they need to work on.

When the students commented about the kind of help that would have been valuable to them, they gave suggestions such as: peer editing, feedback from other students, more clarification as to what was expected, more tutors in Portuguese, knowledge of key words, and sample presentations from other students. Suggestions, such as clarification as to what was expected and sample presentations are very important, I believe, in order to guide students in performing their tasks and help them become independent in knowing how to structure their essays. Suggestions such as peer editing and feedback from other students show that some students will work collaboratively to assist each other with writing, revising, editing and illustrating (Anderson, 2003; 28).

Improvement in writing two to three pages of the portfolio

The answers to this question varied a great deal. However, 9 students (23%) mentioned that their vocabulary developed very much. Eight students (20%) mentioned things such as organization, writing skills and grammar skills also improved. Seven students (18%) asserted an increased understanding of the topic and enhanced an ability to express themselves in Portuguese. Other students reported that 1) they developed reading skills, 2) they became more attentive to spelling, 3) they put a lot of work and effort into the task but it was a very positive assignment because they could understand more about the topic, 4) they increased their capacity to express ideas in Portuguese, and 5) they became more aware of their conflicts between Spanish and Portuguese. Some of the difficulties students found in this task were referred to as:

- Language skills (not too strong)
- Finding valid and useful information in the web sites
- Not sure on what to include or exclude in the Portfolio
- Difficulty in finding web pages related to the topic
- Hard to translate some thoughts correctly into Portuguese

“Portfolios gave students a chance to evaluate their progress and reflect on their work” (Donovan et al, 2002, 31). This statement by Donovan just emphasizes what has been said so far and can guide teachers, professors, instructors and parents on how the learner is progressing in this kind of assessment. Additionally, educators can learn to create mediation so that learners may overcome their difficulties while developing their activity.

Likewise, concerning the strategies used by students, they stated a wide range of strategies used in order to fulfill the final project. In this section, students (10%) said that they read a lot about the theme on the Internet in order to learn Portuguese and overcome their difficulties. So this indicates that students used cognitive strategies which are the most popular strategies for language learners. Additionally, the cognitive strategies are classified as a set of four types: practicing, receiving and sending messages, analyzing and reasoning, and creating structure for input and output (Oxford, 1990; 43).

Other students made comments such as:

“I found myself repeating many words so I had to have a thesaurus and dictionary at hand to change my words.” (Cognitive strategies: using resources for receiving and sending messages)

“The dictionary helps a lot with vocabulary which is what I have trouble with. After writing I started kind of thinking in Portuguese. So, I guess getting used to the language is very useful”. (Cognitive strategies: using resources for receiving and sending messages)

“It was helpful structuring the paper into various parts to make it easier to write, instead of just writing 2-3 all at once, on one topic.” (Memory strategy: associating/elaborating)

“I wrote a rough draft in English so I could organize my thoughts clearly then went over it again and translated it into Portuguese.” (Cognitive strategies: analyzing and reasoning - translating)

According to Oxford (1990) cognitive strategies are vital in gaining knowledge of a new language. Since creating a portfolio encompasses practicing the structures while writing, receiving and sending messages, analyzing and reasoning, and creating structure for input and output, these kinds of strategies can be said to be promoted in the students as they fulfill their tasks.

Extra help received and/or potentially valuable help (linked to the previous question).

In this question 8 students (20%) said that the instructor’s input was important in the development of the portfolio. Five students (13%) highlighted the dictionary as an important tool in the writing process of their portfolio. Others said tools such as access to sources, the outline of the project, friends, web browsers, books, and tutors. Another student reported a successful strategy he utilized in the process:

“I focused more on grammar to succeed in the writing.”

Other potentially valuable tools were listed as:

“I think it would be valuable to receive more individual attention in choosing, developing and writing on the topic”.

“A little more time between handing in the report and doing the presentation would have helped me.”

“I think that the Portuguese Department should have some sort of writing center because this would help us edit our papers.”

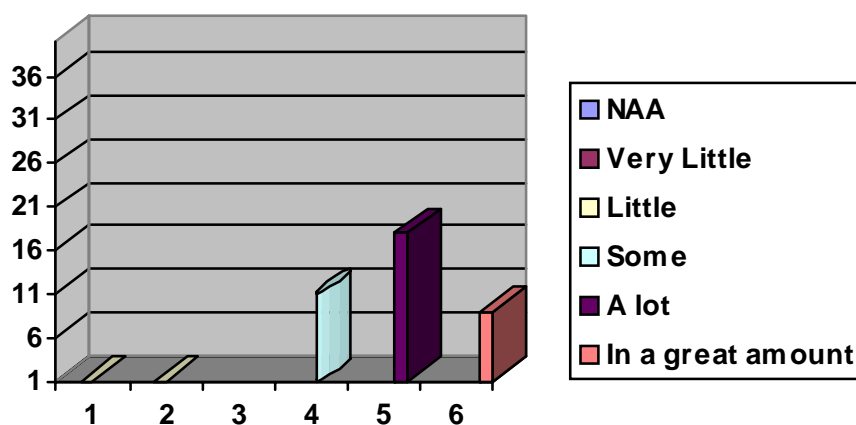
“They should have Portuguese tutors available to students more easily so they can help out w/writing...”

“It would be nice to have the opportunity to practice the oral presentation w/a person from class to help you feel comfortable. Doing a presentation in front of the class doesn’t make me feel more confident in my Portuguese speaking ability, because I get so nervous.”

Observing the comments made from students, it seems that students need more contact with experienced people that can help them in answering their questions, guide them with their tasks, and be there for them whenever necessary. Although the instructor had office hours available for them it seemed that some could not fit the available time of the instructor or they simply tried to arrange another time with her. It is possible that they needed to meet with someone such as a tutor more often. However, the idea of a writing center shows that the Portuguese Program is growing and needs to create or adjust new strategies in order to meet students’ needs.

Overall Contribution of the Portfolio as an Assessment Procedure

In this last question students are asked to respond on a 6-point Likert-scale in order to measure their perceptions concerning the contribution of the portfolio as an assessment procedure. The scale ranged from 1 (one) to 6 (six). 1 (one) indicated that the portfolio did not contribute to students' learning of the Portuguese language and culture (1 = not at all); 2 indicated very little learning of the Portuguese language and culture; 3 indicated little; 4 indicated some; 5 indicated a lot; 6 indicated a great amount. In this section 18 students (46%) said that the portfolio contributed a lot in helping them obtain more knowledge in aspects of the Portuguese language and culture. Eleven students (28%) said that it contributed somewhat to their knowledge of the Portuguese language and culture. Nine students (23%) said that it contributed a great amount. One student said that it was time consuming.



As the chart shows, the portfolio is perceived to be a great tool to help learners develop and assess the target language and culture reasons being that they can reflect on their weaknesses, strengths, needs and learning strategies. It also gives the instructor a better understanding of students' needs, difficulties, and strategies used to overcome these difficulties, and a diagnosis of how they are improving in the target language (Nunes, 2004). Although this kind of formative assessment may be time consuming for learners and instructors the results surpass any expectations not only on the learners' part but also on the instructor's as well. The questionnaire-survey showed how the learners feel and it gives clear insight into how instruction may be improved if we are to keep using this assessment tool to measure learners' progress and knowledge.

Conclusion

It was very beneficial for me as an instructor to develop this project in both classes of PORT 325. As demonstrated, students' portfolio-related perceptions can give valuable insight into strategies or attitudes that apply when addressing students' preferences, needs, and concerns. As a

result, not only were students made more aware of their strengths and difficulties throughout the process but as an instructor I also became more conscious of their development processes, therefore enabling myself to monitor strategies for future portfolio development (Barootchi, 2002).

It is also important to highlight that not only it is key for students to be able to work alone but also collaboratively (Zone of Proximal Development – ZPD), maybe with the instructor or with their peers and to be able to share information with others and do things that are linked to their preferences (Smith, 2001). So the portfolio is one type of alternative assessment which is different from more traditional evaluations because it is able to decrease anxiety compared with high stake tests, and give students the opportunity to self-evaluate, construct self-criticism, and build self-improvement based on their own progress while constructing their research (Knop, 1972). I think that this kind of assessment should be used more frequently in schools and universities because of the benefits of meta-learning and increased student self-awareness. Additionally, the variety of information that students can learn and share with their peers is clearly valuable.

Limitations of the study

The limitations of this study are the small number of participants and the absence of some students who would have contributed to the overall input and outcome of the survey. It is also important to follow students' portfolio assessment task by task to get a clearer picture of their processes and difficulties and then use strategies in order to help them achieve the objective of the assignment. Although it is a time consuming task not only for students but also for instructors, a portfolio is an extra tool that facilitates the learning of linguistic features of the target language, increases cultural aspects of the target language and enable students to work on enjoyable topics of research. The portfolio is not only a collection of language features but also a display of student's interests, needs, motivations, goals, aptitudes and achievements (Barrette & Paesani, 2004; 136). Thus, in this study I could exclusively obtain information on students' processes of constructing their portfolio. It is necessary to conduct more research on students' actual language progress through portfolio as an assessment procedure. Therefore instructors may have more input on how this type of task may benefit and facilitate students' language learning.

Appendix

University of Arizona – Fall 2004

Portuguese 325 – Portfolio Feedback

Instructor: Verônica Fernandes

Please answer the following questions according to your experience in writing your portfolio. Write as many details as you can. This survey is anonymous. You will neither be evaluated nor graded for answering it.

1. Please circle the reasons for choosing the topic for your portfolio:

- a. The topic was related to your major.
- b. It reflected your curiosity about the culture.
- c. It was something discussed or mentioned in Portuguese 325 class.
- d. The web assignments influenced your choice.
- e. _____

Please explain: _____

2. What type of improvement did you observe between writing one paragraph and one page summary of your topic. In what aspects of language learning did it help you improve? You can mention things such as vocabulary, grammar, organization, development, search for information, etc.

3. Please mention any extra help you received in the task mentioned previously or the kind of help you think would have been valuable to you.

4. In what aspects do you think you improved after writing 2-3 pages? Did you have any difficulties with this assignment? What kind of strategies did you use to overcome your difficulties?

5. Please mention any extra help you received in the task mentioned previously or the kind of help you think would have been valuable to you.

6. Circle the number which indicates how much the portfolio assignment helped you get more knowledge of the Portuguese language and culture. Please explain.

1 (one) = not at all 2 (two) = very little 3 (three) = little 4 (four) = some 5 (five) = a lot 6 (six) = a great amount

1 2 3 4 5 6

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