

Benefits and Challenges in Utilizing E-Portfolio among Ucas Students' EFL Classes in Palestine

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Abstract

The widely spread usage of technology at tertiary level has stimulated professors and policymakers to search for new methods of assessment that fit the new digital generation. Therefore, the purpose of this study is to identify the benefits and challenges students get from utilizing e-portfolio in UCAS students' EFL classes. The total number of students in English Language social work classes under the humanitarian department at UCAS is 60 (30 males and 30 females). Those are officially enrolling in English Language course (DIPL 1303) at first semester of 2017/2018 academic year. A qualitative method was used to collect data for one semester. The results from the qualitative data indicated that students got four benefits from utilizing e-portfolio: Promoting feedback, improving ICT skills, enhancing quality of e-portfolio's content and holding responsibility as well as independence in the learning process. However, the students were reported to have faced some problems during implementation of e-portfolio such as: time factor, lack of efficiency and effectiveness of utilizing e-portfolio, lack of infrastructural facilities, and inability to speak English fluently. Therefore, it can be concluded that integrating e-portfolio at the tertiary level would facilitate the learning process and create a real change among the new digital generation.

Keywords

E-portfolio; benefits; challenges; UCAS & Palestine



I. Introduction

According to Jalambo (2012) Gaza Strip, the study platform, located in the south-west of Palestine, as it is 360 kilometers along the Mediterranean Sea and about 8 kilometers wide. The Gaza Strip area is mainly classified into four governorates: The North, Gaza City, Middle area, and The South governorate. Even the Israeli occupation forces withdrew from inside the Gaza Strip in 2005, the Gazian boundaries, sea, and airspace are still under the control of the Israeli occupation. All in all, Palestine is still an occupied country.

Unfortunately, in spite of the great attention given to teaching English language, exams and tests are still the permanent traditional assessment at schools and universities. Moreover, according to the state wide assessment conducted by Ministry of Education in Palestine, the achievement of student in local schools is not encouraging (Al-Serhani, 2007). Therefore, classroom portfolio is intended to enhance teaching and learning in a learning centered framework (Hirvela & Sweetland, 2005). The absence of new alternative methods of teaching and learning deprives students from enjoyment and engagement. This will affect their motivation and attitudes towards the English learning process (Klenowski, 2002; Nunes, 2004).

In this regard, Mourtaga (2005) explained that the important issue and the only motivation for students in studying English language are to pass the final exams in order to move to the next level. To do so, students would memorize questions and answers and successfully regurgitate them word by word in the final exam. Furthermore, Sobeh (2007) in his study concluded that most teachers still rely on the traditional methods in assessing their students' writing and he also recommended to adopt the contemporary methods of assessment that suit the context in Gaza. Moreover, El-Helou (2010) also found that one of the problems that occurred in Palestinian English language teaching and learning is the absence of interaction or engagement between the learners and the English language. Learners study the language just to pass exams.

The research aimed at investigating the purpose of this study is to identify the benefits and challenges students get from utilizing e-portfolio in UCAS students' EFL classes. This aim is translated to the following questions:

- What are the benefits students get from utilizing e-portfolio?
- What problems exist in the implementation of e-portfolio in UCAS students EFL class?

It is noted that there are a lot of studies about e-portfolio in the developed countries. So, one of the significances of this study is that it is conducted at Palestine, which is not only a developing country but also under occupation. Consequently, the results of this research could be a guide and an essential step for future researchers to discuss such new alternative assessments in learning process. The findings of this study will enhance the traditional method of English language assessment in Palestine by using e-portfolio & investigate of the benefits & implementation problems for the e-portfolio.

The researchers would like to shed light on a number of limitations including context, sample, and data in order not to overgeneralize the findings in this study. Only English language students who enrolled in the first semester of the academic year 2014-2015 at UCAS participated in the current study. In this vein, only 60 male and female students equally who registered General English (DIPL 1303) considered as the sample of this study. Furthermore, data collection period is limited within one semester. Because of such limitation, generalization to the larger populations with different academic background is not within the scope of this study.

II. Review of Literature

Accordingly, using traditional methods of assessment indicates that students may have low motivation towards learning English (Klenowski, 2002; Nunes, 2004). They attend their English language classes not for enjoyment or engagement but for the goal of passing tests. Students are usually given numerical grades for their end of term writing assignment, which may not be the accurate indicators of their writing ability (Ghoorchaie, Tavakoli, & Ansari, 2010). Therefore, there is a pressing need to integrate alternative assessment in the learning process to motivate students in their learning and change their attitudes towards English language. In this respect, McDonough (1983, p. 142) stated that "motivation of the students is one of the most important factors influencing their success or failure in learning the language". In addition, motivation is the force that inspires and empowers individuals to perform activities and it plays a large part in the interest and enjoyment of study to reinforce them to do their best (Atta & Jamil, 2012; Axton, 2012; Martin, 2003).

Gardner (1985) considered attitudes as the components of motivation in language learning. According to him, "motivation ... refers to the combination of effort plus desire to

achieve the goal of learning the language plus favourable attitudes toward learning the language” (p.2). However, Wenden (1991) gives a broader definition of the concept attitudes. He states that the term attitude includes three components namely, cognitive, affective and behavioural. A cognitive component is made up of the beliefs and ideas or opinions about the object of the attitude. The affective one refers to the feeling and emotions that one has towards an object, 'likes' or 'dislikes', 'with' or 'against'. Finally, the behavioural component refers to one's consisting actions or behavioural intentions towards the object.

It is obvious that students' motivation in language learning is influenced by their attitudes towards learning the language. In this sense, Atta and Jamil (2012) stated that motivation has a major importance to students' success as it helps individuals to overcome inaction and laziness, and reinforces students' attitudes towards the learning process. Thus, this study will try to solve this problem by utilizing e-portfolio to enhance students' motivation and change their attitudes towards the English language. In supporting and reinforcing the problem statement of this study, the researcher conducted a preliminary study to confirm the urgent need to integrate alternative techniques in the learning process.

Carmean and Christie (2006) mentioned that electronic portfolios (also known as e-portfolios) contain the same type of information as the traditional, paper-based portfolios; but the information is collected, stored, and managed electronically. This enables the student to capture artifacts of different media types such as electronic documents, multimedia presentations, graphics, or videos. Pimentel (2010) also defined e-portfolio as a purposeful collection of student work that exhibits the student's efforts, progress, and achievements in one or more areas. The collection must include student's participation in selecting contents, the criteria of selection for the judging merit, and evidence of the student's self-reflection.

Most of the literature on the use of portfolios comes from the first language writing and there is little literature on the use of portfolios for L2 learners either in teaching and learning or the assessment domains (Hamp-Lyons & Heasley, 2006). Moreover, with regard to the use of e-portfolio, there has been little research on exploring the students' responses regarding the use and value of e-portfolios. In this study e-portfolio means the collection of the students' work that indicates their progress, effort, achievement, and all documentations of English Language subject within the frame of one semester which affects positively on the student's benefits and challenges. However, the information is collected, stored, and managed electronically via Facebook.

III. Research Method

3.1 Definition of Terms

The following definitions are developed by the researchers operationally to remove any ambiguity in understanding these terms through the research:

Electronic Portfolio: In this study e-portfolio means the collection of the students' work that indicates their progress, effort, achievement, and all documentations of English Language subject within the frame of one semester which affects positively on the student's attitude and motivation. However, the information is collected, stored, and managed electronically via Facebook.

Sample techniques & sample size : The whole 60 students' respondent to the questionnaires for the quantitative data collection. Whereas, 10 students were interviewed for the qualitative data collection. The 10 students were selected by a simple random sampling technique.

Research Instrumentation : This study aimed at examining the outcome of using e-portfolio on the UCAS students to evaluate the benefits & challenges for e-portfolio towards English language learning. Two instruments were utilized to collect the required data: interviews with 10 students as the main source for the qualitative data and a 5-level Likert scale questionnaire for the quantitative data.

Interview: First instrument of this study is an interview. The interview Protocol was conducted with 10 participants from the social work students who are under the humanitarian department of UCAS. The data from interview was coded “P-I” meaning ‘Participants interview’, using a separate file for every student, with his name and date of the interview clearly written on the file.

Findings

Results of the first question: What are the benefits students get from utilizing e-portfolio?

To answer to this question, the analysis of interview conducted with ten participants gives insights in the benefit of e-portfolio in the learning process. During the course, the participants mentioned a lot of benefits they used to get in utilizing e-portfolio in learning process. As shown in table 1, there are four main identified themes from the benefits of utilizing e-portfolio:

Table 1. Identified themes from the benefits of utilizing e-portfolio

Themes	Subthemes
1 Promoting feedback.	More organized and more encouraged. Ability to arrange English subject well
2 Improving ICT skills	Sharing of knowledge with teachers and classmates.
3 Quality of the content of e-Portfolio	Getting the core of the course. Improving English language and outcome.
4 Holding responsibility and being independent in the learning process.	Becoming the center of the learning process Improving a practical way of learning.

Results of the second question: What problems exist in the implementation of e-portfolio in UCAS students EFL class?

To answer to this question, during the course, the participants mentioned a lot of problems exist in the implementation of e-portfolio in UCAS students EFL classes. As shown in table 2, there are four main identified problems facing the participants:

Table 2. Identified themes from the problems of utilizing e-portfolio

Themes	Subthemes
1 time factor	Time consuming Heavy load
2 Lack of efficiency of utilizing e-portfolio	Low experience Poor ICT skills

3	Lack of infrastructural facilities	Lack of laptops and computers. Technical problems
4.	Inability to speak English fluently	Weakness at speaking skill Utilizing the mother tongue

IV. Discussion

According to the researchers, students became aware of their strengths and weaknesses in their e-portfolios because e-portfolios require self-assessment and self-reflection. The researchers added that students try to overcome their weaknesses and reflect on what they have done in their e-portfolios. The present study also was supported by (Le, 2012; Birgin and Baki, 2007; Stefani, Mason, & Pegler, 2007) who mentioned that e-portfolio can encourage students to take responsibility for their own learning. Unlike the findings of Erice and Ertaş (2011), the researchers explored the effect of e-portfolio use on developing the writing skills of English language learners who are at the pre-intermediate language proficiency level. The results of their findings suggest that the digital environment contributes to language writing skills and recommend integrating e-portfolio into foreign language teaching curricula. The study also contradicted with Fakir (2010) who confirmed that some students felt uncomfortable assessing themselves and preferred their instructors' assessment.

The findings of the study is related to the idea of community of practice which was first proposed and coined by Lave and Wenger (1991, p. 98). During the classes, the participants shared and discussed their English activities but in some cases they do not have much time. Therefore, it was easy for them to communicate via Facebook because the social interaction via Facebook and engagement in the CoP inspires less experienced students to master English subject and promote feedback. As a result of participation, the less experienced participants learn from experienced ones who become a part of CoP and form the peripheral in the process of learning. Over time they start holding the responsibility and taking central roles, improve their ICT skills and produce a well-organized e-Portfolio until becoming masters and experts in this knowledge. This process is called "Legitimate peripheral participation" by (Lave & Wenger, 1991). As a result, less experienced gain knowledge and experience and start again to interact with new comers. Although CoPs are different in form and style, the basic dimensions and characteristics are similar. According to Wenger et al. (2002), these dimensions are domains, community, and practice. It is very clear in this study that CoP can be seen as a group of sixty UCAS students who share passion or common feelings about a topic "the domain" which consists of six units of the English language course "Touchstone" DIPL (1303). Therefore, the participants shared, knowledge in this study by interacting via Facebook which represents the practice. Accordingly, depending totally on these three dimensions create a community that learns, rather than a community of learners (Schlager, Fusco & Schank, 2002). Lack of efficiency and effectiveness in the utilization of the e-portfolio is also one of the findings of this study when investigating about the problems of e-portfolio. The study found that most of the participants suffered from interrupted Internet connection and Lack of efficiency and effectiveness in using social media. Kabilan and Khan (2012) supported this study where they stated that there are some problems related to the e-portfolio implementation that include interrupted Internet connection. The problems of uploading and website breakdown was another problem tackled by Huang and Hung (2010) study and they added that such problems created a sense of frustration for e-portfolio users. Nowadays, ICT has vastly changed the learning style of contemporary generation (Heiberger

& Harper, 2008). In addition, there is no doubt that the new generation is fond of technology and differs completely from the previous one (Prensky, 2001).

Inadequacy of ICT instruments inside classrooms and ICT skills is considered to be another problem facing Palestinian students in utilizing e-portfolio. Results of the current study was supported by Hung (2012) study who claimed that the e-portfolio assessments bring some negative effects, such as learning anxiety deriving from resistance to technology and larger audiences. The present study is in line with Kilbane and Milman (2005) study who claimed that the teachers may suffer from the lack of required instruments such as: computer, scanner, digital camera or insufficient ICT skills.

Shepherd and Bolliger (2011) and Aliweh (2011) also observed that there was unfamiliarity and lack of technical knowledge that hinder utilizing the e-portfolios during the learning process. They also found that it is important for learners to have technical skills and knowledge to simplify utilizing e-portfolios and accelerates the pace of language development and learning gains. The findings of the study is also related to the idea of community of practice which was first proposed and coined by Lave and Wenger. According to Lave and Wenger (1991), in this study, Community of practice (CoP) is a group of UCAS students who share passion or common feelings about a topic “the domain” which consists of six units of the English language course “Touchstone” DIPL (1303). Accordingly, the discussion, participation and comments among CoP members via Facebook enhance them to learn from each other to get such benefits from utilizing the e-portfolio. In a nutshell, based on what has been discussed with regard to the present study, ranging from the title of the study, the objectives and findings of the study, one can freely assert that the study findings are theoretically related with ideologies and the findings of Gardner's theory and Community of Practice ideas in enhancing students' motivation and changing their attitude towards the English language learning by utilizing e-portfolio.

V. Conclusion

Although the idea of e-portfolio is still a fresh idea and it is not utilized in Palestine, it is essential to widen the awareness of its benefits and problems. From the qualitative and quantitative results of the study, the students got four benefits from utilizing e-portfolio: Promoting feedback, improving ICT skills, quality of the content of the e-portfolio, and holding responsibility and being independent in the learning process. However, after utilizing e-portfolio the students were reported to have faced some problems during the implementation of e-portfolio such as: time factor, lack of efficiency and effectiveness of utilizing e-portfolio, lack of infrastructural facilities, and inability to speak English fluently. Moreover, this chapter presents several theoretical, pedagogical and policy implications for instructors, universities and researchers.

Finally, it is strongly recommended to arrange e-portfolio sufficient training courses for students to get them engaged in the learning process. Therefore, it can be concluded that any innovation in promoting and integrating e-portfolio at tertiary level, requires unleashing the potentialities of researchers and policy makers to create the real change in the learning process.

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