

The Use of Portfolios in 355112 Foundation English II at Kasetsart University Self-access Language Learning Centre

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Introduction

Foundation English courses (355111, 355112, and 355113) are compulsory courses arranged by the Department of Foreign Languages, Faculty of Humanities, Kasetsart University as basic courses to improve the English-language skill proficiency of Kasetsart University students. In recent years, about 5,000 new undergraduate students have enrolled annually to study in the University, which provides academic programs in thirteen faculties, namely, Agriculture, Fisheries, Forestry, Science, Engineering, Education, Economics, Social Sciences, Veterinary Medicine, Agro-Industry, Humanities, Business Administration and Architecture. Placement of new students in Foundation English courses is determined by their scores on the English entrance examination, which varies from year to year. In the first semester of the academic year 2004, there were around 3,500 students studying 355112 Foundation English II.

It is not easy for the Department of the Foreign Languages to deal with the difficulties posed by the large number of students and the small number of teachers. Furthermore, most of the students who study Foundation English II have quite low levels of English proficiency. Meanwhile, the teachers who teach this course have to take on heavier duties and responsibilities in terms of teaching large groups of students, correcting many assignments, and spending considerable time in consulting and in evaluation procedures. No doubt, the more students in an English class, the less benefit each receives because time for practice and exposure are required for students to acquire English language skills.

Nevertheless, to cope with these problems in learning and teaching 355112 Foundation English II, the Department of Foreign Languages has tried its best to help KU students. First, because the Department of Foreign Languages would like to give the students an opportunity to study the compulsory English course in the first semester and because of the limited number of teachers and classrooms and the large number of students, each group has to consist of approximately 40 students, although a class of this size is quite big and not appropriate for language learning. Time is also limited to three

hours of class per week. Realizing that this is not enough, the Department of Foreign Languages has sought ways to give students a chance to practice the use of English outside class. For this purpose, the Kasetsart University Self-access Language Learning Centre (KU SALL) was established in 1997. The aim was to encourage KU students to do foreign language learning activities outside class in order to develop and improve their skills in foreign languages, especially English. KU SALL supports the following characteristics of foreign language learning:

- Each student has achieved a different level of language skill proficiency.
- Each student is interested in different subject areas.
- Each student has different language learning problems.
- Each student has his own objectives in learning a language.
- Each student learns at a different pace.

KU SALL, which has an area of about 360 square metres, provides a friendly atmosphere for self-access language learning. It is well equipped with a wide range of high technology equipment, including computers with ready-made CD language learning software; audio-visual aids including televisions, videos, satellite receivers, tape cassettes, karaoke; and worksheets on vocabulary, grammar, writing, listening and reading. Therefore, the learning materials and resources provided at KU SALL encourage self-learning activities. KU students can learn foreign languages, particularly English, themselves. They can select the skills they wish to work on, they can pursue their own interests and their own objectives, and they can proceed at their own pace in solving their language problems. However, self-learning activities in Foundation English II can be considered only partly self-directed since the teachers still play an important role in assigning the scope of the activities the students do.

In the first semester of academic year 2004, every KU student who studied Foundation English II was assigned to do at least eight self-learning activities and record their work in portfolios at KU SALL. This work was valued at 5 out of 200 points (2.5%) in computing their grade for the course. Each student received a portfolio, a book specially designed by the KU SALL committee and staff and used as a repository for the students' work. The details about how to do self-access language learning activities (i.e., the regulations for KU SALL members, the number of tasks, the content related to the 355112 course and the appropriate materials available at KU SALL) were explained by the teacher in each section at the beginning of the semester. During the second week, from Monday 7th to Friday 11th June 2004, KU SALL held an "Open House" for 355112 students during which they could try using all materials and resources provided under the supervision of KU

SALL committee and staff. The remainder of the semester was divided up into periods of two weeks, and each 355112 section was assigned to one period. The students had to complete their eight activities within that two-week period, recording their work in their portfolios. After that, they handed in their portfolios, and their teachers gave feedback.

Purpose of the Study

The study was conducted in order to find out information relevant to the use of portfolios by 355112 Foundation English II students. Thus, the study addressed the following questions:

1. What did the students think about the layout of the portfolio booklet?
2. What were the students' opinions of the use of portfolios in 355112 Foundation English II?
3. What language skills were improved after doing the activities?
4. To what extent should the use of portfolios be improved in order to encourage the students' autonomous language learning in future?

Significance of the Study

The information related to students' reflections on the layout of the portfolio booklet, the use of portfolios in 355112 Foundation English II will assist the students, the teachers, the KU SALL committee and staff as well as the administrators to make adjustments and provide more effective means for learning English in the future.

Scope of the Study

Because of time and budget constraints, the study was limited to only some KU students studying 355112 Foundation English II in the first semester of the academic year 2004, obtained by random sampling of the various sections.

Definition of Terms

1. KU SALL = Self-access Language Learning Centre, Department of Foreign Languages, Faculty of Humanities, Kasetsart University
2. KU students = Kasetsart University students
3. Portfolio activity = any task done by the 355112 students and then recorded in their portfolios

Review of Related Literature and Research Studies

Since the Ministry of Education initiated the reform of national education in Thailand in 1999, education institutions nationwide--from primary schools to secondary schools, and also universities--have had to adapt themselves in order to adopt the new educational system--the learner-centered curriculum, which focuses on the learner's roles in planning, implementation and evaluation of their education ultimately leading to students' learning autonomy. One of the most accepted learning activities to promote self-directed learning is to use portfolios in the course.

The use of portfolios in educational settings has increased tremendously in many countries in the world during the last decade. In defining a portfolio, Hamp-Lyons (1996) as well as Genesee and Upshur (1996) agree that a portfolio is a purposeful collection of student work that exhibits the student's progress and achievements in one or more areas. The collection must include students' participation in selecting contents, the criteria for selection, the criteria for judging merit and evidence of students' self-reflection. Weijdema (2001) states that a portfolio is a place to show not only a student's product, to prove what he has learnt, but also show processes of how he has learnt it. This is why the portfolio is a learning and teaching tool for both students and their teachers. According to O'Malley and Valdez Pierce (in Gomez, 2000), an assessment portfolio is the systematic collection of student work measured against predetermined scoring criteria. These criteria may comprise scoring guides, rubrics, checklists or rating scales. Consequently, assessment portfolios can include performance-based assessments, such as writing samples that illustrate different genres, solutions to math problems that show problem-solving skills, and so on.

There are many different kinds of portfolio systems used in schools: showcase portfolios, working portfolios, process portfolios, assessment portfolios, cross-discipline and discipline-based portfolios, graduation portfolios and so on. They all have different purposes, and there are many choices to make. The most common advice is to start by collecting students' work related to the main purpose for the portfolio as it takes time to develop a portfolio system. Crosby (1997) said there were three reasons for using portfolios in language learning and teaching. To begin with, portfolios are used as a teaching tool, especially to promote writing skills of weak students. Students are encouraged and motivated by the implementation of portfolios because they can present their best work. As a result, students are made aware of the progress they have made during the course. Next, portfolios can become a vehicle for professional development since they can inform teaching and curricula. Finally, teachers generally use portfolios in the classroom for assessment purposes as portfolios are used not only to assess and evaluate students'

specific skills and knowledge but also to help students to learn about themselves, their strengths and their needs, which is obviously different from traditional assessment. According to Smith, K. (in Krigere and Sardiko, 2002) the use of portfolios may ensure the following:

- choice of tasks (for pupils) to be assessed (optional)
- individualized teaching through the teacher's task selection and comments on the pupil's tasks (making it possible to cater to pupils having different levels of knowledge)
- various kinds of tasks to be assessed (from hand-made to recorded speech)
- pupils' feedback, reflection on their own learning shaped and focused by the teacher's questions
- possibility for pupils to learn from their own mistakes, which is done through their revising and improving their own tasks
- in general the use of portfolios may lead to the development of pupils' meta-cognitive (learning to learn) skills and it may enhance their responsibility for their own learning.

Gomez (2000) also describes the advantages of assessment portfolio systems as follows:

- increased school accountability because the assessment information is often collected to ensure that the educational system addresses the needs of all learners.
- a shared vision of students' goals and learning because the assessment portfolio system is developed by English language teachers, administrators and learners.
- authentic picture of learning as assessment portfolios can be widely designed to be inclusive of all students and provide an authentic description of what students can do.
- improved teaching and student learning because it not only improves about the students' achievement, but also makes a positive impact on teaching and learning.
- reflection of assessment reform due to advocating new measures of assessment that provide a better understanding of students' achievement.

To develop portfolio system (Nihlen, 2002) suggests that it is important for the developer to consider the following questions:

- What is the purpose of the portfolio?
- What should the contents be?
- What should the portfolio look like--a binder, a folder, or could it be digital?
- How should it be organized?
- Who is the audience?

It is essential to determine who owns the portfolio, the student or the teacher, since these aspects will determine the purpose and the contents. Furthermore, Musgrove (1997) reveals that students' learning can be enhanced through self-assessment and that students' portfolios can be an effective assessment tool for students. She mentions the following steps in using portfolios in her class:

- The students composed a resume.
- They were asked to set the learning goals for the course.
- Reading and writing assignments were given. Writing was collected in the portfolios.
- The students were allowed to participate in assessment.

Channiam (1998) conducted a study of "Nurturing Students to Learn Writing Skills through Portfolios" and found out that writing assessment could increase developmental students' writing skills by identifying their strengths and weaknesses and that self-assessment was effective in raising the students' consciousness of their own learning process. She also recommended that the implementation of portfolios should be incorporated into classroom teaching as the students needed to be exposed to alternative learning strategies.

In conclusion, for the current study "portfolio" can be defined as a booklet specially designed and used to record at least eight English language learning tasks of 355112 students: two concerning grammatical structure; two involving listening skills; two including reading skills and the other two consisting of either/both vocabulary or/and crossword. The objective of the use of portfolio was basically to introduce and promote self-directed language learning rather than to assess achievement. The steps of doing portfolio activities would be as shown below:

- After receiving the portfolios, the students had to arrange their time to find out what kind of tasks they wanted to do at KU SALL.
- Next, they selected the material they wanted to do in order to improve their English skills, studied it thoroughly and tried to finish it themselves.
- Afterwards, they checked the answer and corrected their errors.
- Then, they evaluated their work to determine "how well they did;" very good, good, fair, or poor.
- They repeated this process what they did until they finished eight tasks.

Methodology

1. The instrument used for this study was a questionnaire, composed of two parts:
 - Part 1 solicited personal information of the students, i.e., their sex, age, faculty and the year they were studying in.
 - Part 2 solicited the students' reflections on the use of portfolios as a part of Foundation English II; this was further divided into general information about doing portfolio activities, the layout of the portfolio booklet, and the students' opinions about doing portfolio activities. The students responded on a five-point Likert scale: strongly agree (5), agree (4), moderately agree (3), agree only in part (2), should be improved (1).
2. To collect the data, 500 questionnaires were distributed to students by the researchers and KU SALL staff. Although the population of the study was KU students who studied 355112 Foundation English in the first semester of the academic year 2004, the number of the subjects used in this study was 500 students. After finishing their work in their portfolios, 500 students chosen by simple random sampling were given questionnaires. Of these, 370 questionnaires were returned, and 14 of these were incomplete and so excluded. Thus, 356 questionnaires (71.2%) were finally used for the data analysis.
3. To analyze the data, the percentages were calculated.
4. Interviews of four teachers teaching 355112 and the KU SALL staff followed.

Results and Discussion

The results of the study were as follows:

1. Among the 356 students used as the subjects of the study, 166 were males and 190 were females. Distribution of the sample students with respect to sex and faculty are shown in Table 1.

Table 1 Personal Information on the Students

Faculty	A	B	C	D	E	F	G	H	I	K	L	N	R	
Sex														
Male	6	15	4	32	59	13	9	4	2	4	7	2	9	166
Female	1	25	4	34	23	14	13	19	10	11	18	22	6	190
Total	7	40	8	66	72	27	22	23	12	15	25	24	15	356

Note : A = The Faculty of Agriculture B = The Faculty of Fisheries C = The Faculty of Forestry
 D = The Faculty of Science E = The Faculty of Engineering F = The Faculty of Education
 G = The Faculty of Economics H = The Faculty of Social Sciences I = The Faculty of Veterinary Medicine
 K = The Faculty of Agro-Industry L = The Faculty of Humanities N = The Faculty of Business Administration
 R = The Faculty of Architecture

In addition, most of the students were first-year students, between 18 and 19 years old, and were KU SALL members because they had to do their learning portfolio assignments for the Foundation English II course.

2. The Use of Portfolios in 355112 Foundation English II

The questionnaire had three parts asking students about doing portfolio activity.

2.1 General Information on Doing Portfolio Activities

- Most of the students gained an understanding of the objectives of implementing portfolios as a part of Foundation English II from their teachers' explanation in class, whereas a few said they came to understand the objectives of doing the activities from the KU SALL staff and the information given in the portfolios.
- Most of the students received the portfolio booklet from their teachers, who distributed the portfolios in class, while a few of them said that they had obtained the portfolio booklet from the KU SALL staff.

2.2 The Layout of the Portfolio Booklet

There were three items asking the students' opinions about the layout of the portfolio booklet as shown in Table 2.

Table 2 The Layout of the Portfolio Booklet

The portfolio	5	4	3	2	1
1. is beautiful.	8.99	43.54	37.92	7.02	2.53
2. gives the necessary explanations for doing activities.	10.39	46.35	32.30	9.55	1.40
3. has appropriate topics.	18.26	51.40	24.16	5.34	0.84

According to Table 2, most of the students strongly agreed that the general layout of the portfolio booklet was beautiful, gave enough explanation for doing activities, and contained appropriate topics. However, a few students suggested that some features of the portfolio booklet should be improved as follows:

- It should provide more space for writing and give more details about what to do and how to do it.
- It should have a heavier cardboard or plastic cover, to make it more colorful, stronger, and more durable.

These findings answer the first research question, which was what students thought of the layout of the portfolio booklet. It is obvious that the students were generally satisfied with the layout of the portfolio booklet though some aspects should be improved. In fact, to prepare the current portfolio booklet, the committee and the staff of KU SALL thought about several factors: cost, which must not be too expensive; durability, to withstand handling by students over a two-week period; and beauty of the layout in white and black; as the cost of a portfolio printed in colors would be prohibitive.

2.3 Students' Opinions about Doing Portfolio Activities

There were 18 items soliciting the students' opinions about the use of portfolios in 355112 Foundation English as shown in Table 3 below.

Table 3 Students' Opinions about the Use of Portfolios

Doing portfolio activity,	5	4	3	2	1
1. you know where to find the materials for your portfolio.	13.48	46.91	35.11	3.93	0.56
2. you did a variety of tasks.	17.98	49.72	28.37	3.65	0.28
3. you chose tasks in accordance with your problems in class.	12.33	25.48	44.93	15.89	1.37
4. you were able to solve your learning problems.	9.27	41.29	40.73	7.02	1.69
5. you chose the tasks accordance with your preference.	33.71	42.42	20.53	2.53	0.56
6. you had enough time to complete your portfolio activities.	14.61	39.61	31.48	10.96	3.65
7. you regularly did tasks and recorded your work in your portfolio.	15.73	41.01	33.15	8.43	1.69
8. you liked to do portfolio activities.	10.39	28.65	46.91	10.67	3.37
9. you think that doing portfolio activities is useful.	26.97	42.42	25.84	4.21	0.56
10. you think that the number of tasks is suitable.	19.66	47.19	28.09	3.93	1.12
11. you received immediate feedback.	10.67	34.27	45.22	7.87	1.97
12. you have gained new knowledge.	17.98	48.60	28.09	4.78	0.56
13. you have improved your reading skills.	17.70	46.07	30.06	5.62	0.56
14. you have improved your listening skills.	18.26	42.70	32.30	5.34	1.40
15. you have improved your speaking skills.	14.04	31.18	40.45	11.52	2.81
16. you have improved your writing skills.	18.82	43.54	31.46	4.49	1.69
17. you have improved your command of grammatical structure.	15.45	46.07	32.87	5.06	0.56
18. you can learn English by yourself.	24.44	45.51	26.40	3.37	0.28

The above table shows that most of the students (63.6%) strongly agreed with the following aspects of using portfolios in 355112 Foundation English II.

- They knew where to find the materials for their portfolio.
- They did a variety of tasks and were able to solve their learning problems.
- They did tasks and recorded the results in their portfolios regularly and had enough time to complete their portfolio activities.
- They thought that the number of tasks was suitable and that doing portfolio activities was useful.
- They gained new knowledge and improved their reading, listening, writing skills as well as their command of grammatical structures.
- They felt they were able to learn English by themselves.

Most of the students (44.4%) moderately agreed that they chose tasks in accordance with their problems in class, that they liked to do portfolio activities, that they received immediate feedback, and that they improved their speaking skills. A few students express their opinions that they did not have enough time to complete their portfolio activities (3.7%), that they did not like to do portfolio activities (3.4%); and that their speaking skills did not improved (2.8%). On the other hand, many students indicated that doing portfolio activities at KU SALL encouraged them develop themselves in other different ways:

- being more responsible, punctual, and enthusiastic in learning English.
- having self-discipline, and using their leisure time wisely.
- revising the lessons studied, applying classroom knowledge, solving their learning problems, as well as improving different language skills.
- having a chance to discover new knowledge, learning from their mistakes, assessing and evaluating themselves, and finally being able to experience the autonomous language learning.

These findings answer the next two questions: what the students' opinions about the use of portfolios in 355112 Foundation English II were and what language skills could be improved by doing the activities. Consequently, the researcher would like to make the following observations:

• To start with, the students understood the process of self-directed language learning. They knew where to find the materials and resources provided in KU SALL. They also understood what to do, beginning with choosing materials and tasks and proceeding on through recording their work in their portfolios. They were able to learn English by themselves.

• The students were able to develop meta-cognitive learning skills as they learned how to learn. They did a variety of tasks, solved their learning problems, and improved their reading, listening, writing skills and their command of grammar structures. For instance, to practice listening, the students could select various types of activities: listening to conversations on tape cassettes or CD programs, listening to English songs, watching video recordings and movies, watching TV programs via satellite, etc.

• Apart from improving their language learning skills, the students also developed in various other areas. They were more punctual and more responsible as they had to complete and hand in their portfolios on time.

However, the researcher would like to comment here on the few students who disliked doing portfolio activities. When the researcher asked students why they did not enjoy doing the activities, they said that they had a lot of assignments in other subjects or they did not have time to do the activity. As a result, some did not do the tasks themselves; they copied their friends'; or even asked their friends to do the tasks for them. Actually, the researcher thinks that they did not have good attitudes towards portfolio activities and did not understand that doing portfolio activities was important to their learning English. Thus, to solve this problem, teachers should first try to change their attitudes, especially when the teacher introduced the portfolio activity. In addition, the students argued that they had not improved their speaking skill in doing portfolio activity. This may be due to the fact that 355112 students were not assigned to practice speaking. However, if they were, their speaking would improve.

Finally, the students also expressed their ideas concerning the last research question: to what extent the use of portfolios should be improved in order to encourage the students' autonomous language learning in future as shown:

- Most of the students suggested that the area of KU SALL be increased and that more tables, chairs, and computers be provided because sometimes KU SALL was very crowded.
- Some materials or resources needed regular maintenance; a few students complained that some materials were not in good condition.

- KU SALL should have a teacher to help in practicing speaking.
- There should be some measures to deal with students who copied their friends' tasks.

From informal interviews of four teachers and three KU SALL staff members about the use of portfolios in 355112 Foundation English II, the finding can be concluded as follows:

- Because it is the policy of the Department of Foreign Languages that all 355112 Foundation English II students do portfolio activities at KU SALL, most of the teachers agreed that the use of portfolio was useful for students. However, a teacher revealed that some of her students were confused about what they should do and what they learned in the portfolios. For instance, in the "what did you do?" part, the students should describe what they did with the selected material, such as, "I read a reading passage, 'Hot Dog.' "I did Crossword 4;" or "I did the exercises in the worksheet entitled 'Present Simple Tense'". But "what did you learn?" should include information like "I learned how to arrange the story into the correct chronological order;" "I have learnt a lot of new words from the crossword, like 'teak' and 'smear';" "I understand how to use the 'Present Simple Tense.'" Another teacher mentioned some students did not evaluate their work as to whether it was very good, good, fair or poor. Another teacher stated that some of her students handed in their work late, some did not complete eight tasks as assigned, and others did not hand in their portfolio at all. The other teacher said some of her students copied their friends' work.
- KU SALL staff complained that from 11 a.m. to 2 p.m. KU SALL was always very crowded. This could cause problem that some students took the materials to do outside the room despite the fact that this was a violation of the rules. They also stated that some students did not do the work themselves: they copied their friends'.

Conclusion

It is clearly seen that the students and the teachers agreed that doing portfolio activities in 355112 Foundation English was very helpful in learning and teaching English. It allowed the students a chance to plan, do self-study, practice and improve their

English outside the classroom; furthermore, it also supports the new trend in language learning and teaching, which focuses on learners. Nevertheless, the use of portfolios in the 355112 Foundation English course is still at the beginning stage, not a complete portfolio system, and needs some adjustment to more effectively promote efficient language learning. The researcher would like to offer the following suggestions about implementing portfolio activities in 355112 Foundation English II:

- Learning through portfolios focuses on the product as well as the process. When the students complete their eight tasks, the teacher gives them feedback. Therefore, giving feedback should be done regularly after each task.
- At present, although the students understand the steps of how to do portfolio activities, the process of language learning is partly self-directed. If the students had a chance to create their own portfolios: starting with the topic/skill they were interested in practicing through creating something themselves, the complete system of self-directed language learning would be realized.
- Portfolio activity can be used as a means of measuring students' achievement in learning English. Nevertheless, currently it has only a small part of assessment (2.5%) and cannot reveal the actual language proficiency.
- There should be the measures to help the students who have negative attitudes towards doing portfolio activities perceive the usefulness of this kind of activity so that we can reach the goal of self-directed language learning and eliminate cheating.

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