Revitalizing Thai EFL Classrooms through Electronic Portfolios

Suphawat Pookcharoen

Abstract

Electronic portfolios are an innovative means of organizing, summarizing, and sharing artifacts and ideas about learning. The reflective process of portfolio development can be as valuable as the final product. Despite its widespread use among practitioners in western instructional contexts to promote students' growth, little attention has been paid to the potential implementation in the Thai EFL curriculum.

This paper investigates how electronic portfolios can be beneficial for students' learning, particularly in Thai EFL contexts, by discussing advantages and disadvantages of electronic portfolios based on recent studies. It also proposes three steps for the electronic portfolio development process: pre-implementation, implementation and post-implementation. Finally, I pinpointed several issues pertaining to successful electronic portfolio development for learning purposes that teachers need to take into consideration.

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> "Portfolios can become a window into the students' heads, a means for both staff and students to understand the educational process at the level of the individual learner."
>
> Paulson, Paulson, & Meyer (1991, p. 62)

Introduction

Throughout the history of English language teaching in Thailand, the Thai government has launched several initiatives in all domains of the educational system, including curriculum development, materials, and teaching and learning facilities in attempts to fulfill the demands of globalization (Wongsothorn, Hiranburana, & Chinnawongs, 2003). Thai learners' English performance, however, fails to meet the standard required despite these substantial efforts. Foley (2005) elucidates that some of the factors responsible for limited success of English language teaching and learning in Thailand include lack of proper curricula, ineffective teaching approaches that overly focus on grammatical structures, learning media, inappropriate texts, and testing and evaluation. This paper argues for the revitalization of the status quo by recommending portfolios as a more appropriate instructional tool and method that deserves our attention.

The adoption of portfolios is gaining popularity in the education field as teachers and students seek to demonstrate their skills through artifacts collected. Paulson, Paulson, and Meyer (1991) describe a 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 participation in selecting contents, the criteria for selection, the criteria for judging merit, and evidence of student self-reflection" (p. 60). More recently, increased attention has been paid to electronic portfolios as a more economical and dynamic alternative to traditional paper-based portfolios. According to Barrett (2000), an electronic portfolio, also known as an e-portfolio, a digital portfolio or a Webfolio, includes "the use of electronic technologies that allow the portfolio developer to collect and organize artifacts in many formats (audio, video, graphics, and text)" (p. 15). The main difference between the traditional portfolio and the electronic portfolio lies in the way students' work is collected and compiled. Their work in an electronic portfolio is displayed and made accessible on the World Wide Web or simply on a CD-ROM, and multimedia can be used (Kahtani, 1999). An electronic portfolio generally serves two academic purposes: learning and assessment. Even though the use of an electronic portfolio in Thailand is widespread in some professions (e.g., advertising, photography, and architecture), they are not extensively adopted as an effective tool to showcase learners' progress and achievements in the EFL curricula.

This article, therefore, seeks to investigate the ways in which electronic portfolios can be beneficial for students'

learning, particularly in Thai EFL contexts. Electronic portfolios, as a model for learner-centered classrooms, provide students with opportunities to become more active learners by encouraging them to have ownership and responsibility for their own learning (Hewitt, 2004). Electronic portfolios are also described here as a reflective tool that demonstrates learners' growth over time. Making well-informed decisions on how to integrate electronic portfolios into the curriculum requires rigorous attention to pedagogical and technological considerations. Thus, these two critical aspects are also addressed in this article.

Advantages and Disadvantages of Electronic Portfolios

Several research studies and articles investigate the effectiveness and the role of using electronic portfolios at different educational levels. Kahtani (1999) summarizes the advantages of electronic portfolios in comparison with their paper-based counterparts. First, whereas issues associated with traditional portfolios including storage, cost, handling, loss, evaluation, and time prevail, increased interest in alternative assessment, computer access and the availability of user-friendly software have advocated electronic portfolios as a novel tool for both instruction and assessment. Also, information can be presented in a variety of forms such as graphics, videos, sounds, images, text, or any other multimedia format.

Another benefit is related to how electronic portfolios assist teachers with their lesson planning. In an attempt to accommodate the different needs, interests, and proficiency

levels among students, teachers can encourage students to upload their portfolios on the web before they do the planning for the semester or academic year. Motivation plays a crucial role in the portfolio development process as publishing students' work on the web can dramatically heighten their motivation to showcase their masterpieces for a broader audience in the online environment. In addition, students can have access to their electronic portfolio anytime they want. They can edit and update the target information without having to revise the whole portfolio.

Kahtani further elaborates on how electronic portfolios can be implemented to benefit teaching and learning in writing and reading classes. Students have opportunities to explore the use of hypertext to reinforce the contents of their writing assignments rather than simply posting their writing assignments in an electronic format. Another advantage is the peer response forms in which students directly respond to their peers' writing. Some questions used to prompt this response form include: "What is the strongest part of this writing?", "What are your suggestions for revision?" and "What questions do you have for the author?" (p. 264). The third possible advantage is how electronic portfolios facilitate teachers' comments and feedback.

In the realm of reading, students should be asked to include their reading journals in their portfolios next to where they place their weekly written journals based on the readings they undertake for the week. They can also insert a hypertext link or include any other related materials to what

they have read. Most importantly, for each entry, they should write a brief paragraph justifying the reasons why they chose that particular information. Lau (2005) asserts that these activities promote students' learning and foster their sense of creativity.

Video technology is regarded as one of the potential benefits of electronic portfolios in a conversation class (Master, 1998). The major components in a portfolio for this type of class include an oral dialogue journal, tapes of a class discussion, a taped outside-of-class interview, and tapes of a formal presentation in class. The oral dialogue journal is of great value when students wish to overcome the concern that they have little or nothing to say in a conversation or people who listen to them have difficulty understanding the conversation. To produce an oral dialogue journal, students first choose a topic of their interest and talk about it in front of the video camera. Teachers then respond to them on the tape being recorded by the video camera while listening to students' talk. Not only would students' anxiety level be lowered when they communicate in English in everyday situations, but students would also be allowed to self-monitor their own learning and progress.

More recently, Fahey, Lawrence, and Paratore (2007) describe a project for using electronic portfolios as a forum for establishing collaborative learning environments. They claim that by using electronic portfolios, teachers and students can not only collect and share works but also change the ways of thinking and talking about the works. Motivated

by the use of technology, the participants shared their thoughts and reflections with peers. They built a community that supports good literacy practice and communicated about more authentic texts.

With regard to an L2 context which is more similar to the Thai EFL environment, Hung (2006), in his dissertation research, implemented electronic portfolios as a learning and assessment tool in a Taiwanese EFL writing class. During a semester, the thirty-nine college students were asked to submit three required essays based on the assigned class readings and some self-chosen artifacts. They were also invited to participate in (1) self-assessment by articulating strengths, weaknesses, and areas for improvement in the checklists and (2) peer-assessment by identifying their peers' strengths, weaknesses, and areas for improvement and dispatching feedback on their peers' essays in their electronic portfolios. He asserted that the students responded to the portfolio adoption in a strongly positive fashion, echoing the results reported by several research studies (e.g., Chang, Wu, & Ku, 2005; Wang & Liao, 2008). The development process also stimulated students' awareness of the academic writing genre and fostered applicable writing strategies.

Despite several benefits, there are some obstacles confronted during the implementation of electronic portfolios. According to Kahtani (1999), one significant drawback is the limitation to students who are illiterate in technology. Students need to have the right equipment, software and other necessary resources in order to successfully develop an electronic portfolio. Furthermore, students might spend

plenty of time focusing on the design rather than on the content of the portfolio. Tosh, Light, Fleming, and Haywood (2005) document the concerns that many students had with the software they were using. They complained it was anything from too complicated to lacking in functionality. They lamented the time taken to learn the software and to customize it to their needs, articulated concern over the privacy of their material in a web-based platform, and wanted control over what was publicly accessible and what was private. Therefore, an electronic portfolio system needs to be flexible so that it can be adapted to fit students' levels of technical skill, improvements in their skills and confidence over time and their preferred styles of working.

Contents of Electronic Portfolios

There is a consensus among educators that there is not necessarily a set of fixed components to be included in a portfolio. Lau (2005) posits that the decision as to the components of portfolio can be made by teachers, students, or through an agreement between teachers and students. According to the general guidelines proposed by Yang (2003), the materials in a learning portfolio can be direct or indirect evidence of the student's use of English. For an EFL classroom, examples of direct evidence include, but are not limited to, the following artifacts: reading portfolios, vocabulary logs kept by students, weekly listening logs, weekly learning journals, news story summaries, free journal writings, any reactions students posted on the course website, the preparation materials for an oral report, a script of a role play, and a photo of the presentation students participated

in. As for indirect evidence, students should be encouraged to include a short written description of a time they used English (e.g., a telephone call, a conversation or an e-mail with a native speaker of English). Nunes (2004) argues that a portfolio could also include materials that have special meaning for the students in their learning process (e.g., newspaper articles, pictures, and articles or pictures from magazines). Regardless of materials to be included, teachers have to introduce the use of a portfolio and clearly communicate its contents to students at the beginning of the course.

Steps for an Electronic Portfolio Development Process

Based on previous research studies that have offered valuable insights into the potential uses of electronic portfolios in the Thai EFL context, in the following section I attempt to suggest some pedagogical implications for teachers. The implications provided below are divided into three stages of implementation: pre-implementation, implementation, and post-implementation. Each of these three stages is discussed in some detail as follows:

Pre-Implementation Stage:

- Define the purposes and goals of using an electronic portfolio

Prior to the implementation procedure, teachers should clarify the purposes and the goals so that students gain an understanding of the reason why teachers plan to integrate electronic portfolios in the curriculum as well as how they will implement a systematic process rather than collate an arbitrary or random collection of work. Unlike traditional methods of teaching, a portfolio in education might not be

very familiar to many EFL students. Nunes (2004) suggested that the students' failure to understand the objective of doing reflections was because they were not used to thinking about their own learning. A large number of Thai EFL students, based on my observation, have an impression that most assignments in class serve an assessment purpose, which usually means that students invest their time and energy only to get a high score in a particular test. This belief tends to contradict the basic concept of a portfolio in that the focus is on the students' growth and development over time. This step is, therefore, very important in a sense that setting the purposes and goals frames the rest of the portfolio development process.

- Guide students to choose appropriate websites and/or tools for an electronic portfolio

There are several issues that need to be addressed before teachers choose a tool for students to use to create an electronic portfolio. The literature on portfolios (e.g., Canada, 2002; Tosh et al., 2005) posed these fundamental questions. What resources are available for electronic portfolio development? What kind of tool do the students have access to? What are the technology skills of the students? Who are the target audiences? These questions help make a decision about the format of the electronic portfolio. Some general suggestions might be to select a user-friendly tool such as a blog that allows students without a very sophisticated background in technology to create an electronic portfolio. This can alleviate the widely existing problem that an electronic portfolio is not successfully implemented due to students' unfamiliarity with technology, which inevitably

forces them to spend more time on the design or the format rather than on the content of their portfolios.

- Provide instructional guidance on the use of technology

Once the selection of the appropriate tool for an electronic portfolio has been made, teachers should model the possible ways to create an electronic portfolio with the focus on the basic skills needed. In case EFL teachers are not familiar with the technology, they should consider seeking assistance from technologists in the school setting. This will allow teachers to allocate valuable time to help students with questions and concerns about the content of the portfolio. However, some of the factors that potentially affect the instructional sessions in many EFL contexts are lack of technological resources at school, a large class, and limitations stemming from available class time (Hung, 2006). It is, thus, wise for teachers to promote learner autonomy by providing students with some useful resources that enable students to consult and take part in their independent learning outside of the classroom.

Implementation Stage:

- Discuss creating criteria with students

Lau (2005) stressed that teachers have to be sensitive to students' adjustment to the concept of the portfolio to avoid confusion and frustration at the very beginning. Teachers should also work with students to discuss criteria for the development of electronic portfolios. In the criteria, some features of electronic portfolios may be emphasized while developing a learning portfolio. Students might collect digital portfolio artifacts that represent their efforts and

achievement throughout the course of their learning experiences, write reflective statments, and identify learning goals. Once students are involved in creating criteria, they have a better understanding of what to do while creating their own electronic portfolios.

- Allow flexibility in self-expression

As portfolios are based on the constructivism paradigm, knowledge is constructed through activities integral to the portfolio development (Abrami & Barrett, 2005; Chang, 2001). Because students' ownership comes from choosing artifacts to express themselves, teachers should allow flexibility for students to select artifacts to represent them. Students will more actively engage with their own electronic portfolios if they feel in control of the process. Teachers should encourage students to be more creative in self-expression rather than restrict them to certain ways of gathering and presenting artifacts. Moreover, a student-centered electronic portfolio focuses on the student's authentic voice. Thus, it would be more appropriate for students to engage personally with the topic and express their thoughts and reflections in their own way.

- Direct students to focus on content rather than design

Many studies indicate that students spend more time on the visual appearance rather than the content in their electronic portfolios. MacDonald, Liu, Lowell, Tsai, and Lohr (2004) carried out a case study investigating graduate students' perspectives on the development of electronic portfolios. They found that students spent the majority of the time on the interface design, redesign and reselection of

portfolio artifacts. Hence, teachers should be aware of the phenomenon whereby students are overly concerned about the visual appearance of their electronic portfolios rather than actually using the electronic portfolio for its intended purpose. Teachers should also provide clear guidelines so that students spend more time reflecting on their language development in their electronic portfolios.

- Encourage self-reflection

Self-reflection of the electronic portfolio development process plays a pivotal role during the implementation stage. Billings (2003) gives the view that a portfolio without reflections is simply a multimedia presentation or an electronic resume. Teachers should ask students to regularly report on their progress and give self-reflection in journals as one element within their electronic portfolios. Self-reflection encourages students to develop their metacognitive learning strategies. In this process, students have opportunities to examine which areas of language learning and skills should be improved. They can pay attention to their learning process and outcomes, set goals and objectives, and plan the process of their learning. Keeping eyes on the objectives of their own learning, students have to plan and monitor their progress. Simply put, self-reflecting increases students' awareness of their learning process and improvements.

- Enhance peer collaboration

Besides self-reflection, peer collaboration also assists and influences the learning process for electronic portfolio development. Social interaction is an essential context for learning, and literacy practices cannot be isolated from the

social context (Gee, 1996). Students can share thoughts, challenges, and reflections together and get improvement through interaction and communication with peers. The comments they receive can help learners think out of the box and brainstorm new ideas. Furthermore, peers' feedback and comments can enhance students' motivation through the sharing and discussing of the same topics. Feedback from teachers can assist students' language learning and keep students on the right track. In order to enhance peer collaboration, teachers can ask students to explore each other's electronic portfolios and to give comments. They can provide a checklist for students to give concrete feedback and suggestions. Through examining others' work, students not only support peer learning but also self-reflect their own learning process and outcomes.

Post-Implementation Stage:

- Set goals for improvement

In the post-implementation stage, setting a long-term goal of improvement is essential for maintaining autonomous learning. Yang (2003) posits that the use of an electronic portfolio can develop students' autonomy in their own learning, and it can be developed as a form of long-term learning regarding language practice, learning process management, and organizational skills development, which are all powerful skills for future careers. Students should be encouraged to build habits in learning and to create an electronic portfolio that can be applied to their future field of work. They can list challenges they faced and what aspects they should overcome in language learning and using

electronic portfolios, so teachers can assist them accordingly to the goals they have set for their improvement and future learning.

Insights into Successful Electronic Portfolio Implementation

Using an electronic portfolio with careful consideration and implementation can provide benefits for students in language learning in Thai EFL contexts; however, there is also a downside to electronic portfolio development. The following are some issues related to electronic portfolio development for learning purposes that should be taken into account.

1. The accessibility of technological resources must be assured.

A lack of access to resources of technology becomes a problem in developing electronic portfolios. Computers and related peripheral devices are necessary, and the Internet may also be needed for many online electronic portfolio systems. These kinds of equipment may be available in school but may not be available at a student's home. Many families still cannot afford to have the equipment for electronic portfolios. Additionally, even in school, each student may not have his or her own computer to build an electronic portfolio, and students have to share a limited number of computers. The lack of access to resources of technology will inevitably hinder the implementation of electronic portfolios. Thus, assuring the accessibility of technological resources is deemed one of the most important steps for successful electronic portfolio development.

2. *The development of an electronic portfolio requires sufficient time and effort.*

Research on several portfolio project programs has demonstrated that the implementation of a portfolio requires considerable time and effort (e.g., Barrett, 2007; Hung, 2006; Tosh et al., 2005). While traditional paper-based portfolios use familiar materials and objects, electronic-portfolio creation is a time-consuming process often requiring the design of images and the assembly of digital materials such as electronic presentations and documents. Due to time constraints, students have constantly expressed a concern that such a time-consuming project would be more appropriate for personal rather than academic work. Lacking sufficient skills, teachers themselves find it difficult to quickly start implementing the system with their students. Teachers need to allow sufficient time for each student to produce a quality electronic portfolio before presenting it to a wide online audience to ensure that a learning project runs smoothly.

3. *Teachers should maintain students' motivation throughout the process.*

Incorporating electronic portfolios may decrease students' motivation in language learning. First, using English to build an electronic portfolio for students with low proficiency in English will be a great burden. Students who struggle in expressing themselves in English may have a hard time building electronic portfolios, and this will depress students, lower motivation, and even make them lose confidence and interest in language learning. Second, requiring higher

technological competence in building electronic portfolios will also frustrate students' learning. The level of technology expertise is an important factor in planning, designing, and organizing electronic portfolios. Furthermore, students may lose motivation because of peer assessments and comments. Students may be reluctant to share their work with the class for fear that their peers will evaluate their writing abilities or the content of their ideas. Likewise, students' motivation will also drop sharply if there is no comment on their electronic portfolios after working hard on it. Therefore, without constant support and encouragement from teachers and peers throughout the electronic portfolio development process, such tasks would be too daunting to some students who lack adequate motivation.

4. Teachers should use electronic portfolios as a supplement.

Finally, teachers should be well aware that electronic portfolios should not be a compulsory, solely assessed activity. An electronic portfolio should supplement, not replace, any original course plan and teaching strategies as students of portfolios still have limitations in language learning and teaching (Lau, 2005). For instance, while electronic portfolios provide many opportunities for students to practice writing, there are limited functions for students to improve their speaking skills. Thus, teachers should use electronic portfolios as a supplement and regard students' portfolios as a record and reflection that supports deeper learning.

Conclusion

This article looks specifically at how electronic portfolios can be integrated into the Thai EFL curriculum as a learning tool, rather than an assessment one. As learning is not a linear process, an electronic portfolio can provide a new dimension to learning in more ways than one. The online environment also requires that students construct meaning in an active and dynamic way, which has become one of the indispensable skills for them to cope with the complexity of literacy in the 21st century. Most importantly, students will be provided with great opportunities to reflect on their own learning experiences that will help them grow.

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