

DIGITAL HUMANITIES: THE ELECTRONIC LANGUAGE PORTFOLIO AS A TOOL FOR INSTRUCTION AND EVALUATION

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Abstract - This article intends to make evident that the electronic language portfolio can be both an excellent mechanism for evaluation as well as a didactic tool. The language portfolio is well recognized internationally, both by all the members of the European Council, Russia, Georgia, Turkey, the United States as well as in Canada, and has been the impetus behind various projects. An electronic portfolio is a digital version of a paper portfolio promoted by the European Council. This article will also analyze different classifications of learning strategies which will demonstrate that the electronic language portfolio can be considered a very useful and efficient learning tool.

Keywords: *electronic language portfolio, language learning strategies, second language acquisition, foreign language learning and teaching.*

I. INTRODUCTION

A digital language portfolio is an electronic document which serves students of a foreign language as a means to present information related to their linguistic skills. It documents any experiences and skills gained in the foreign language, whether obtained in a formal educational setting or through extra-curricular contact. It is owned by students. It consists of three parts: a language passport, a language biography, and a dossier. The language passport provides a general overview of students' linguistic skills in one or more languages, as well as information on the results of the language tests, diplomas, and certificates that the students included in the language dossier. The language biography helps students to set and evaluate their goals related to language learning and reflect on their intercultural and educational experiences. The language dossier contains digitized copies of diplomas, certificates, as well as documents written by the student in the foreign languages studied. Audio and video files can also be included so as to demonstrate oral

production and further establish the student's linguistic skills and achievements.

II. EUROPEAN AND AMERICAN LANGUAGE PORTFOLIOS

An electronic portfolio is a digital version of a paper portfolio promoted by the European Council. The European Language Portfolio (ELP) was created and piloted between 1998 and 2000 by the Language Policy Division of the Council of Europe in Strasburg. It was launched as a support tool to promote multilingualism and multiculturalism during the European Year of Languages. The ELP is based on the Common European Framework for Languages and includes six levels of reference for the organization of language learning and public recognition.

The European Language Portfolio stirred great interest in the United States. In 2003 members of the National Council of State Supervisors for Languages (NCSSFL) were invited to Germany to learn more about the Common European Frame of Reference for the Languages and the European Language Portfolio. Between 2004 and 2007 two interesting pilot projects were executed as a result of that visit and were aimed at adapting the European Language Portfolio to the American standards, in particular to the 5 C's of Language Learning (Communication, Cultures, Connections, Comparisons and Communities) and the levels of linguistic skills of the ACTFL (American Council on the Teaching of Foreign Languages).

This is how the Linguafolio of Virginia and the LinguaFolio of four other states (North Carolina, South Carolina, Georgia and Kentucky) began. These two portfolios were a starting point for the Global Language Portfolio at Virginia Commonwealth University which was designed

specifically for university students. Its electronic version was inspired by the Dutch electronic portfolio and EAQUALS-ALTE ePortfolio approved by the Validation Committee of the Council of Europe.

Cummins and Davesne (2009) observe that “what makes electronic language portfolio different from paper-based portfolios is the type of *artifacts* that the EP can contain and the interactivity that digital portfolios allow. Unlike paper-based portfolios, EPs are capable of storing a wide variety of media files (e.g., audio files, video files, movies, photos, text files, PowerPoint) in a single location, organized chronologically, thematically, or according to a specific purpose.”

As mentioned earlier, the language portfolio is well recognized internationally, both by all the members of the European Council, the United States, and Canada, and has been the impetus behind various projects. Cole, Ryan, and Kick (1995) prove that portfolios provide a real world estimation, an authentic assessment, and can be applied to any discipline.

III. LANGUAGE E-PORTFOLIO AS A DIDACTIC TOOL

Besides being a cutting-edge tool for evaluation, the electronic language portfolio can be used as an excellent didactic tool. It can be classified as a metacognitive learning strategy according to Rubin (1987), O'Malley and Chamot's (1990) and Oxford (1990), as well as a management and planning strategy following Stern's classification (1992).

According to Wenden and Rubin (1987:19) learning strategies are “... any sets of operations, steps, plans, routines used by the learner to facilitate the obtaining, storage, retrieval, and use of information.” In addition, Stern (1992:261) proposes the following definition: “the concept of learning strategy is dependent on the assumption that learners consciously engage in activities to achieve certain goals and learning strategies can be regarded as broadly conceived intentional directions and learning techniques.”

The classification of learning strategies has caused numerous controversies. The variety and disparity of criteria has made said classification a very difficult task. In the following paragraphs of this article the author has listed different classifications of learning strategies as suggested by various linguists. The typology of said strategies serves as a frame of reference to demonstrate that electronic language portfolio can be considered one of them.

Rubin (1987), who initiated and promoted the research on language learning strategies, identifies three main types of strategies:

Learning strategies

- **Cognitive strategies** such as clarification, verification, guessing, inductive inference, deductive reasoning, practice, memorization, monitoring
- **Metacognitive strategies** which include planning, prioritizing, and setting goals
- **Communication strategies** are centered on getting meaning across, clarifying and making sure that the speaker understood the intended message
- **Social strategies** such as asking questions, initiating conversations, listening to L2 media, etc.

O'Malley and Chamot (1990:422) propose their own language learning taxonomy:

- **Meta-cognitive strategies** such as advance organizers, directed attention, selective attention, self-management, functional planning, self-monitoring, delayed production, self-evaluation
- **Cognitive strategies which include:** repetition, resourcing, translation, grouping, note taking, deduction, recombination, imagery, auditory representation, key word, contextualization, elaboration, transfer, inferring are among the most important cognitive strategies
- **Socio-affective strategies** such as cooperation and asking questions for clarification.

Stern (1992:263) distinguishes five major groups of language learning strategies:

- **Management and Planning Strategies** which require a commitment to make to language learning a priority, setting himself/herself reasonable goals, deciding on an appropriate methodology, selecting appropriate resources, and monitoring progress, evaluating his achievement in the light of previously determined goals and expectations
- **Cognitive strategies** among which can be found: clarification/verification, guessing/inductive inference, deductive reasoning, practicing, memorization, monitoring
- **Communicative – Experiential strategies** divided into: circumlocution, gesturing, paraphrase, or asking for repetition and explanation
- **Interpersonal strategies** such as monitoring development and evaluating

performance by contact and cooperation with native speakers

- **Affective strategies which require** positive attitude and willingness to integrate into the linguistic community, as well as overcoming emotional difficulties.

Oxford (1990:239) proposes the most systematic classification of language learning strategies and distinguishes two main groups: direct and indirect, which are divided into six smaller groups: memory, cognitive, compensation, meta-cognitive, affective and social strategies. Here is Oxford's taxonomy presented in more detail:

Direct Strategies

Memory Strategies

- Creating mental linkages
- Applying images and sounds
- Reviewing well
- Employing action

Cognitive Strategies

- Practicing
- Receiving and sending messages strategies
- Analyzing and reasoning
- Creating structure for input and output
- **Compensation strategies.**
- Guessing intelligently
- Overcoming limitations in speaking and writing

Indirect Strategies

Meta-cognitive Strategies

- Centering your learning
- Arranging and planning your learning
- Evaluating your learning

Affective Strategies

- Lowering your anxiety
- Encouraging yourself
- Taking your emotional temperature

Social Strategies

- Asking questions
- Cooperating with others
- Empathizing with others.

As mentioned earlier a language portfolio, either paper or digital can be classified as a metacognitive learning strategy, since it teaches students how to evaluate their own knowledge, organize better the material that they wish to acquire, determine their long and short term objectives, as well as identify strategies to reach those goals.

IV. ADVANTAGES OF THE LANGUAGE PORTFOLIO

Cummins (2011) identifies some of the advantages of this important tool for "educational institutions, especially in the area of student outcomes, assessment, and quality assurance. It will allow them:

- to measure learner progress in five language skill areas (listening, reading, writing, spoken production, and spoken interaction)
- to summarize skill levels and document both certifications and diplomas, as well as university degrees
- to document language learning experiences inside and outside the classroom
- to document results of standardized tests and official oral interviews, to provide samples of writing and speaking in the dossier
- to view personalized audio files, video files, PowerPoint presentations, and other media files that illustrate the progress that was made during a course of study."

Apart from that, the electronic version of language portfolio offers great advantages in comparison with the paper portfolio. It is easy to update, print and transport. All the information that it contains can be downloaded and can be used by teachers and educational institutions in order to be carefully studied and researched.

Students have access to their portfolio and see their progress via Internet. The digital portfolio can be personalized according to the level of its users and the language standards both in the US and Europe. Its digital structure allows the coexistence of many languages and the uploading of numerous images. It also permits storing multimedia documents. Therefore, students can upload not only hardcopies or scanned copies of their work but also videos and audios. A digital language portfolio is easy to send via mail as an attachment or as a link. It is easier to fill out and modify than a paper portfolio. It allows the student to conduct an ongoing evaluation of the learning process and promotes quick feedback and motivation. It shows progress on short and long term objectives and makes success evident. It offers a low-cost and cutting-edge tool to evaluate and keep track of students' learning process. It allows college and university students to create portfolios that they can use as their multimedia resume and send out to their future employers.

V. IMPLEMENTATION OF THE LANGUAGE PORTFOLIO

The Global Language Portfolio created by Virginia Commonwealth University has served as a model to numerous colleges and universities, including Messiah College. All our students with a foreign language major must submit a portfolio at the end of their university career and this forms part of the required coursework of the Senior Seminar. It consists of a project that they have to turn in at the end of the fall semester of their last year and serves them as a digital multimedia resume that they can send out to their future employers.

The digital platforms that our students used to create their portfolios have been Blackboard and Sakai, both of which are intuitive and easy to use. Nevertheless, they present a significant disadvantage: students don't have access to their portfolio when they graduate. Therefore, we decided to use Google Site, which is even more user-friendly and allows our students to always have access to their portfolio and be able to modify it at any point in their careers.

VI. CONCLUSION

The projects that involve the European Language Portfolio in the European Union, the United States, and Canada clearly demonstrate the interest in this tool at the international level. The electronic language portfolio is an excellent way to aid in the teaching and learning of foreign languages as well as to provide a means to accurately assess language ability in a more dynamic and multidimensional way than simple test results. Numerous educational institutions use it to assess their students; however, it should also be used and thought of as a language learning strategy. Yancey (2001:83) states that "the engaged learner, one who records and interprets and evaluates his or her own learning, is the best learner" and this is the type of student that any teacher would like to have. An electronic language portfolio helps students to achieve that level of autonomy and maturity in language learning, as well as makes the success of students, teachers and educational institutions more evident, more visible easier to measure and to document. Although considerable headway has been made, an effective training model and teachers' instruction on how to use and incorporate the electronic language portfolio into their curriculum and syllabi need further development and research. In particular, easy to use and practical guides and didactic

material that any language instructor could apply directly in their language classroom are demanded.

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