

Evaluation proposal based on the ECTS: evaluating the four skills in a University core subject with a portfolio

MARÍA MARTÍNEZ LIROLA

University of Alicante, Spain

University of South Africa (UNISA)

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ABSTRACT: This study will concentrate specifically on the use of the portfolio as an element of evaluation in the core subject English Language IV in the degree English Studies at the University of Alicante as an answer to the changes that the European Higher Education Area (EHEA) requests in the teaching-learning process. This paper will emphasize the importance of the portfolio for evaluation to be a continuous process and its consequences in students having to assume the responsibility for their learning process.

This article will present a detailed evaluation proposal with a portfolio, paying special attention to the different activities that are part of it. The grades students got with it during the academic year 2009-2010 being evaluated with a portfolio will be compared with those they got in 2008-2009, when the evaluation proposal was based just on a traditional final exam. The data will show that, using a portfolio, students get better grades, although this implies a considerable amount of extra work for teachers and students.

Keywords. Portfolio, evaluation, European Higher Education Area, teaching-learning process, English Studies.

Propuesta de evaluación basada en el ECTS: evaluación de las cuatro destrezas por medio de un portafolio en una asignatura obligatoria en la Universidad

RESUMEN: Este estudio presta atención al uso del portafolio como elemento de evaluación en la asignatura obligatoria Lengua Inglesa IV de la Licenciatura en Filología Inglesa en la Universidad de Alicante, como respuesta a los cambios que requiere el Espacio Europeo de Educación Superior (EEES) en el proceso de enseñanza-aprendizaje. Este artículo enfatiza la importancia del portafolio para que la evaluación sea continua y sus consecuencias en que el alumnado asuma la responsabilidad de su proceso de aprendizaje.

Se presenta una propuesta detallada de evaluación basada en el portafolio, prestando especial atención a las diferentes actividades que lo componen. Se compararán las notas que el alumnado obtuvo durante el curso académico 2009-2010 siendo evaluado con el portafolio con los obtenidos en el curso 2008-2009, cuando la evaluación de la asignatura consistía en un examen final. Los datos muestran que el alumnado obtiene mejores notas con el portafolio, a pesar de que requiere mucho trabajo para el profesorado y el alumnado.

Palabras clave: Portafolio, evaluación, Espacio Europeo de Educación Superior, proceso de enseñanza-aprendizaje, Filología Inglesa.

1. INTRODUCTION

The creation of the European Higher Education Area (EHEA) highlights the importance of an effective teaching-language process in which teachers and students share responsibility (Cruz, 2003; Gata et al., 2003; Pereyra-García et al., 2006; Sánchez, 2006). For the said process to be effective, it must pay attention to evaluation as a crucial component of the whole process. In this sense, special attention should be paid to new methods of evaluation in which the whole grade does not depend on a final exam, as has traditionally happened in Spanish universities (Martínez Lirola and Crespo, 2007; Martínez Lirola, 2008a, 2008b).

Evaluation should be a continuous process. Moreover, it should not just measure contents but it should concentrate on how students learn, i.e., the different strategies that students use to do the proposed activities and to apply theoretical knowledge to practice. Consequently, evaluation should be formative, so that teachers can improve their didactic proposals and provide students with certain indications so that they can improve their learning process (Colen, Giné and Imbernon 2006: 36).

In addition, evaluation should also pay attention to the techniques and strategies that teachers use in the teaching-learning process, which implies that evaluation affects not only students but also teachers and the process itself. In this sense, evaluation affects the whole teaching-learning process, as Pérez-Paredes and Rubio (2005: 606-607) make clear: «Evaluation considers the teaching and learning program as a whole, and seeks to obtain feedback that can serve different purposes for the different agents in education, from teachers to curriculum designers.»

Following a formative evaluation at the university level implies the necessity of promoting students' autonomous learning, in other words, university students should become the protagonists of the teaching-learning process so that it is easier for them to acquire certain competences and have an integral and complete knowledge that allows them to be active citizens in society (Hernández, 2003; Teichler, 2006; Zabalza, 2002). In order to achieve this, students will require personalized attention from teachers, which makes it necessary to highlight tutorials so that they become an active part of the students' learning process. In this way, understanding evaluation as a whole and using tutorials as part of the evaluation process implies that attention is paid to supporting students and to correcting students' errors and deficiencies during the teaching-learning process, whereas in the traditional evaluation based on just one exam the whole process of students learning and the difficulties in the process were neglected (Brown, 2003; Esteban and Madrid, 2007).

For autonomous learning to be effective, i.e., for students to develop their capacity to regulate their learning, it is necessary that students are motivated to assume that they are the protagonists of the teaching-learning process and to share power with teachers (Martínez and Sauleda, 2005; Sánchez and Zubillaga, 2005). This implies that students are willing to be leaders at the university and stop being passive students who merely sit in the classroom just to take some notes. Lo (2010: 89-90) highlights that it is very important that students become aware of the concept of autonomous learning, the learning process and the available resources.

The previous statements imply that university students are capable of creating their own working outline based on their rhythm of learning (Rico Vercher and Rico Pérez, 2004: 15). Helping students to be autonomous in their learning process implies that teachers have to help them to be aware of the different strategies that can help them to improve their skills, taking into consideration their individual characteristics (Benito, Bonson and Icarán, 2005: 21).

The portfolio is an evaluation tool that facilitates autonomous learning and that makes it possible for students to develop certain competences (McWethy and Gradwell, 1998; O'Malley and Valdez Pierce, 1996; Wright et al., 1999). The different activities that are part of the portfolio have to be selected in order that students can work at their own rhythm to get the competences selected by the teacher, as the following sections will make clear (Apple and Shimo, 2004; Martínez and Rubio, 2009).

The main research question of this paper is the following: do students get good grades when they are evaluated with a portfolio? To answer the question, a detailed evaluation proposal with a portfolio will be presented and the grades students got with it during the academic year 2009-2010.

An extended collection of scholarly research and practitioners' reports has now documented the benefits of portfolios and supported their use in EFL classrooms (Padilla, Aninao, and Sung, 1996; Hamp-Lyons and Condon, 2000; Delett, Barnhardt, and Kevorkian, 2001; Allen, 2004; Nunes, 2004; Lo, 2010).

2. METHODOLOGY

This section deals with the main methodological principles that frame this research. In order to cover the main aspects dealing with methodology, the section is divided into the following three sub-sections: participants and context, research design, and procedure.

2.1. Participants and context

The course English Language IV's main aim is to further students' mastery of the four skills for advanced students in English (listening, speaking, reading and writing), paying special attention to academic writing. This study comprises 40 portfolios written by students who were studying this subject in the last year of the degree in English Studies during the academic year 2009-2010. Most of them wanted to be English teachers at High School. There were also students who wanted to work as translators or interpreters. All of them have studied English in primary and secondary education and at the university in the three previous years of the degree. The subject English Language IV is a compulsory subject in the last year of the degree. There were 32 female students and 8 male students, all of whom were Spanish. Students had a one-hour class every week to improve their writing, and there were three other one-hour classes where attention was given to the other skill areas (reading, listening and speaking).

2.2. Research design

The preparation and design of this research had three main different phases as the following paragraphs make clear:

- Observation and preparation phase. After having observed as teachers the high number of students who had failed in the last years, it was deduced that the traditional final exam¹ made it difficult to reach the proposed goal in the Bologna model of Higher Education in this subject. For this reason, it was decided to elaborate an evaluation proposal based on the use of the portfolio. In this phase it was important to consider how to organize the different periods, the schedule in which students must have the different activities ready, the index of quality, etc.
- Elaboration of materials in the portfolio phase. In this second phase the catalogue of products making up the portfolio was created, and the main practical aspects for its implementation were established (see section 4). In order to do this, the main principles that appear in the EHEA were taken into consideration. Special attention was paid to student's autonomy and the practice of «knowing how to do things with what they learn» more than to «knowing contents», and consequently, the portfolio promoted an active, participative approach, and one that encourages dialogue between teacher-students and between students.
- Analysis of results phase. Finally, the results obtained after putting into practice the evaluation with a portfolio were analysed in order to observe if any students have failed and how many got A or B as a grade.

2.3. Procedure

The portfolio is a useful tool in the EHEA because it offers materials that show the students' progress, the grade to which contents have been assimilated, and the capacity to develop competences (Race, 2003). Specifically, the portfolio allows, in first place, the integration of the tasks of the learning process within the evaluation; in second place, it helps to evaluate the students' achievements and their grade of maturity and autonomy; in third place, it offers teachers more information about the effort students make and about each of the different tasks being accomplished. In this way, the portfolio illustrates the whole learning process and reflects how, when and where the different concepts, abilities and competences have been acquired by students.

Delett, Barnhardt, and Kevorkian (2001: 559) highlight that the main benefits of using portfolios are that they provide «a portrait of what students know and what they can do,

¹ By traditional final exam we understand the exam that takes place at the end of the semester or at the end of the academic year; it is normally just a written exam that pays attention to the evaluation of contents and not to the evaluation of competences. This traditional exam is part of traditional evaluation, in which evaluation was not understood as part of the teaching-learning process. Therefore, evaluation took place only at the end of the said process, students were not active in it and nothing apart from the exam was used in order to evaluate students.

offer a multidimensional perspective of student progress over time, encourage student self-reflection and participation, and link instruction and assessment». The use of the portfolio is related to *project-based learning*, i.e., there are small research papers that become part of the students' portfolio and that constitute another reliable index of evaluation.

Escobar (2001: 349) and Gibbs (2003: 68) proposed steps have been followed in order to help students create and maintain their portfolio in such a way that its utility in the learning process could be observed by students at all stages of the teaching-learning process:

- To choose tasks according to the main learning objectives and competences.
- To define the evaluation criteria clearly.
- To design a pattern of self-evaluation so that students can perform different tasks and evaluate their results.
- To let students select the best tasks and write a report explaining why they have selected those tasks before they come to an individual tutorial.
- To evaluate students' tasks according to the criteria that have been previously established and which are known by the students and by the lecturer.
- To talk about the portfolio in an individual tutorial.

Taking into consideration the previous pieces of advice implies that evaluation has to support the whole learning process and has to be a tool that facilitates judgement of what students have learned, i.e., there has to be a clear and direct relationship between the tools used for evaluation and the grades that students obtain. Consequently, it is not only students who should be evaluated but also the methodology used in the classroom, which has been chosen to help students acquire certain competences.

A very important part of the procedure of this research is the subject organization. This is directly related to the evaluation proposal and makes it possible for us to use the portfolio to evaluate students' work. The following paragraphs show how each of the one-hour class was devoted to a different section and, consequently, attention was paid to the four skills:

- *First Hour: Oral presentations.*

This hour will consist of student class presentations based on current events and/or issues related to English Studies (education and professions). At the beginning of the first semester students will receive instructions on how to carry out an effective oral presentation. In each class there will be individual and pair practice in giving different parts of an oral presentation, short «mini-presentations», speaking in front of an audience, and other oral activities. This will lead up to the second semester where each week there will be at least four students giving 10-minute presentations. Students will work in pairs. At the end of each presentation there will be a class discussion and/or debate. Once students have all carried out an oral presentation there will be other oral activities conducted by the lecturer and/or students.

- *Second Hour: Essays.*

For this hour, students will be required to have read essays and/or articles that will have been found in newspapers, journals, books or the internet. In each session we will

analyze the essays and articles. We will deal with the basic elements of essays (and the moves of academic articles) as well as structural and stylistic features. The texts will also be used as a source for vocabulary and writing assignments. During this hour, students will be introduced to techniques to improve their own writing. In the first semester the emphasis shall be on paragraph writing, leading up to the essay. Students are encouraged to write as often as possible and to improve their essays/paragraphs by writing more than one draft. To this end, students must hand in practice writings on the dates specified in class (which will be part of a writing file) as an obligatory part of the course work.

– *Third Hour: Form-focused activities.*

The purpose of this hour is to review and consolidate language knowledge and to apply the theory to practice. Class activities will be derived from: error correction handouts, exercises from the different textbooks, and students' texts. For example, the students will be asked not only to correct a text, but to explain why it is wrong (as if they were teachers guiding their students).

– *Fourth Hour: Practice activities.*

The purpose of this hour is to review and consolidate language knowledge covered throughout the degree and to apply the theory to practice. Class activities will be based on oral practice, and grammar consolidation.

3. OBJECTIVES OF EVALUATING WITH A PORTFOLIO AND THE PORTFOLIO IN THE FRAME OF COMPETENCES

Following Colen, Giné and Imbernon (2006: 108), a portfolio evaluation is very reliable if it seeks the following objectives:

- To help students assume the responsibility for their own learning because they have to be involved in the evaluation process.
- To give teachers detailed information about students' work and progress.
- To integrate evaluation into the learning process.
- To encourage teachers and students to introduce changes in the way of teaching and learning.
- To organize and give coherence to the information that students have prepared.

However, the preparation and putting into practice of this research has shown that using portfolios requires a set of requirements, such as the following ones:

- It requires compulsory tutorials.
- It requires more effort for lecturers than traditional lessons.
- It requires that students are able to use certain tools, including computers for their learning process.
- It requires having generic capacities and abilities that can be used in any learning situation (using different sources of information, knowing how to organise information, etc.).

- It requires a new attitude on the part of lecturers and students.
- It requires technological and didactic infrastructures.

As previously said in this paper, the portfolio is an excellent tool to evaluate the level of acquisition of competences of students («know to do»). In fact, since the acquisition of competences is one of the key ideas in the EHEA (cf. Corominas, 2001; Barberà et al., 2006), the tasks included in the portfolio should be formulated taking into consideration the competences already established in the subject. Some of the main competences students acquire in English Language IV are the following:

- To use bibliographical sources, distinguishing relevant information for the ends of the activity from that which is complementary or anecdotic.
- To develop attitudes of responsibility in group work, division of tasks, balanced participation, consensus when taking decisions, etc.
- To defend arguments orally in English in front of a high number of persons.
- To encourage the reflexive capacity of students and to defend the work done from possible criticisms.
- To be able to apply theoretical knowledge of English grammar to practical and real situations in the classroom.
- To be able to communicate in good written and spoken English.
- To work as autonomous and critical learners and do research on some proposed topics.

Evaluation is not considered an end in itself but a means to improve the teaching-learning process in such a way that students and teachers benefit (Christie and Simpson, 2010; Martínez Lirola, 2008a). Moreover, evaluating with a portfolio follows the philosophy proposed by the EHEA because students become the centre of the teaching-learning process. Consequently, students develop the following competences:

- Students act upon their own initiative.
- They know how to organise a realistic work plan.
- Students are able to use different sources of information and they are able to contrast them.
- They are able to understand and decode the information that is found in texts.
- Students state and resolve problems.
- They are willing to know new things and to go deeply into them.
- Students can transfer, extrapolate and apply their knowledge to new situations.
- They reflect and evaluate their own work.

This new form of evaluation must have very clear criteria; it has to be related to the competences that students have to accomplish during their learning process (they must have been previously established by teachers). In addition, it should promote interaction between students and teachers so that the different criteria and activities can be improved during the evaluation process if students or teachers consider it necessary (Farr, 2011). As Brown makes clear (2003: 26-27), the main reasons for evaluating students are the following:

- To classify or grade their understanding.
- To motivate them and focus their understanding.
- To help them apply abstract notions to practical contents.
- To guide their choices.
- To establish a relation of feedback so that they can learn from their errors.

4. EVALUATION PROPOSAL BASED ON THE ECTS SYSTEM. PRACTICAL ASPECTS OF THE IMPLEMENTATION OF THE PORTFOLIO

4.1. Phases

Working with portfolios implies the distinction of different phases regarding the organization of teachers and students. As Escobar makes clear (2001: 349), the following steps are useful when helping students to create and maintain the portfolio:

- *Selection of tasks.* It is necessary to choose a number of tasks related with the main learning objectives and competences. In this case, due to the number of students, the number of tasks should not be very big so that the teacher can devote enough time to each student and monitor his/her progress appropriately. In this sense we need to be realistic and cautious.
- *Definition of the evaluation criteria.* These criteria need to be established clearly. In fact, the different tasks need to be evaluated according to the criteria previously established and they should be known by students.
- *Schedule for handing in the activities and giving presentations.* Students are requested to check their work in compulsory tutorials and in certain classes. This schedule (which should be open to possible changes) needs to be known by students as soon as possible so that they can organize their own timetable, which will favour their autonomy indirectly.

Moreover, as far as students are concerned, following Barberà et al. (2006: 58), it is necessary that students follow these phases in the preparation of the material, and they should be monitored as much as possible by the teacher:

- *Gathering information.* Once given a proposed task, students should be able to use different sources of information. In this way students will reveal to what extent they are autonomous and make progress in their learning.
- *Selection.* From the information already gathered, students should be able to distinguish the relevant data for their objectives from those which are just anecdotic.
- *Reflection.* Students should work with the data obtained, contrast them and reach some conclusions that offer an appropriate solution to the question or problem presented by the teacher.
- *Publication.* It is the final phase of the portfolio. The student presents his/her material of work in an individual tutorial, in a group tutorial or in the classroom, depending on the activity proposed in each topic.

- *Evaluation of students' work.* Once the different tasks that create the portfolio have been handed in and presented, the whole portfolio will be evaluated by the teacher, taking into consideration the different evaluation criteria already known by students and also by the students if the task is presented in the classroom. In this case, the student develops his/her critical abilities and adds the role of a teacher.

4.2. Organization of periods

Taking into consideration that many of the activities of the portfolio request students' personal time for searching for information and preparing the activities, some of the practical sections of the subject (periodically, weekly or once every fortnight) can be used to advance in the different tasks of the portfolio. In the same way, that hour can also be used to monitor the students' work, to answer possible doubts, to orientate group work, etc. in each of the phases already mentioned. To devote this time to work on the portfolio tasks with direct help from the teacher will be, without any doubt, welcomed by the student, because it cannot be forgotten that this instrument demands a high burden in terms of time and effort for the university student. At the same time, it will also help not to have so many students in the tutorials, because these hours can be very busy in subjects with many students.

4.3. Catalogue of products of the portfolio in the core subject English Language IV

Assessment in the subject English Language IV will be an ongoing process, since the main focus of this course is on the overt productive skills of language (speaking and writing). All students are expected to have a vocabulary range and a command of sentence structures equivalent to a proficiency level of competence. This will be assessed through the writing and speaking activities. The portfolio proposed consists of the following catalogue of products:

- The essay assignment: students have to write a coherent and cohesive essay on a topic of their choice following the formal and functional characteristics of the text types presented in the classroom. The essay of each semester is worth 15 points, i.e., 30% of the final grade.
- The class oral presentation: in groups of 3 or 4, students have to prepare an oral presentation on their own interests to be presented in the classroom. As with the essay, each oral presentation will be worth 15 points, i.e., 30% of the final grade.
- The language laboratory activities. Students are requested to spend at least 5 hours in the language laboratory during each semester, listening to different registers and varieties of English. This will be 10% of the final grade, i.e., 5% each semester.
- These three products of the portfolio are 70% of the students' grade. Apart from this, there will be a written grammar exam each semester based on the grammar explained in the classroom. Each exam will be 15% of the grade, i.e., 30% of the final grade.

5. RESULTS

With the preparation of the portfolio, the student will get up to 70% of his/her grade, as has been mentioned before. The concrete evaluation of the portfolio depends, logically, on the characteristics of the subject in which the portfolio is being used and on the students' grade of personal and academic development.

During the academic year 2009-2010, the 40 students matriculated in English Language IV were evaluated with the portfolio already defined. It is very significant that all students passed the subject in June and, consequently, did not have to sit a final exam. The 40 students evaluated with a portfolio following the tasks presented in the previous sections got the following grades: 8 students got an A (20% of the students matriculated in the subject), 17 got a B (42.5% of all students) and 15 got a C (37.5%).

The previous data clearly show that using a portfolio students get good grades, i.e., more than 60% got A or B and none failed, although this implies a considerable amount of extra work for teachers and students. It is necessary to take into consideration that each activity has its own characteristics, which makes it difficult to offer guidelines in this respect. For this reason, every activity should be evaluated on its own to guarantee feedback and allow students to improve. Consequently, the following guidelines to evaluate each activity should be known by students in advance:

- To evaluate the essay assignment special attention was paid to the main cohesive devices in English (reference, substitution, ellipsis, conjunction and lexical cohesion), vocabulary and accuracy in written English.
- To evaluate the oral presentation the following guidelines were taken into consideration: adequate use and selection of bibliographical sources, use of multimodal resources, fluent presentation of the work and accuracy in spoken English.
- To evaluate the language laboratory activities it was observed if students had answered the questions proposed for each activity in correct English.

6. CONCLUSIONS

Evaluating with a portfolio makes it possible to reflect on the teaching practices and the whole teaching-learning process, which makes it possible to create a culture of the European Higher Education Area. This way of evaluating allows the adaptation of different rhythms of learning and style of students. Similarly, the portfolio allows for the development of students' critical thinking and leadership

The fact that the portfolio consists of different activities designed in order that students develop different competences implies that some of these activities, if not all of them, will please them and will contribute to students working in a motivated way on the catalogue of products proposed.

The portfolio implies that students have to be able to reflect on their own work and to share some of their reflections with teachers, which involves an increase of teacher-student interaction. Consequently, students can receive feedback during the whole teaching-

learning process and they do not have to wait until the end of the semester or until the end of the academic year to receive a grade based on a written exam, as has been traditional in university teaching.

The portfolio helps students assume the responsibility for their own learning, and it also helps them develop the ability to search for, select, analyse and evaluate information, in such a way that students have an active role in the construction and acquisition of knowledge. In this way, students are committed to their own work, to how they do it, and to the results they get. The fact that some of the portfolio activities are carried out in groups makes it possible for students to share opinions and experiences with their classmates. Moreover, the portfolio favours the development of critical thinking, collaborative activities, professional skills, and the capacity for self-evaluation.

Finally, if we understand that each portfolio should reflect the individual process of learning of each student, and since this is different, there is no portfolio which is identical to another one. The portfolio as a final product is varied and diverse, as diverse as the students and teachers in the teaching-learning process.

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