

TOOLKIT FOR PORTFOLIO WORK

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PREFACE

Portfolio is a collection of student's tasks and exercises representing his/her skills. Portfolio is compiled by the student him/herself. In the portfolio, a student introduces the best pieces of work, as well as states the criteria for selection. Moreover, portfolios always contain final assessment, i.e. student's own description of the process of learning.

The Toolkit for Portfolio Work is a collection of articles written by four partner organisations during the Socrates Lingua D project "Portfolio Assessment in language training for adults" 1996-1998. The main objectives of the project were to develop methods and strategies for building student as well as teacher portfolios, to integrate national examination systems and evaluation systems into portfolios, and to develop the portfolio method as a basis for continuing language learning, i.e. to promote lifelong learning.

This collection consists of experiences and knowledge of adult education institutions, two of which are Finnish (The Vocational Adult Education Centres in Mikkeli and Seinäjoki), one English (Flexible Learning Centre) and one German (Bildungswerk der DAG). The Vocational Adult Education Centres of Mikkeli (MAKK) and Seinäjoki (SAKK) offer further vocational training for unemployed people, and self-motivated courses, e.g. so called 'pure' language courses for both employed and unemployed people. Additionally, both colleges specialise in tailor-made language courses for enterprises.

Bildungswerk der DAG (BW) is one of the big institutions for continuing vocational training with 50 colleges and about 280 training centres all over Germany. Many centres offer language courses, and foreign languages play an important role in most curricula, such as travel and tourism and courses for post-graduates.

Flexible Learning Centre (FLC) is a department of Weymouth College, which has 2,500 full-time and 4,000 part-time students. FLC has a reputation for its work in the use of new technologies in training and distance learning.

The starting point in the project varied a lot from organisation to organisation. MAKK had already used portfolios in language courses. Both MAKK and SAAKK had experiences with developing personal study plans and the project was also to continue this development. FLC had used portfolios in qualifications but not in language learning yet. Portfolio assessment was a new method for Bildungswerk der DAG, as well.

The Finnish partners share the same educational values and standards, based on student-orientedness, except for a slight variation in viewpoints and target setting. The German partner strongly emphasises the needs of the labour market and employer acceptance of this new method in the evaluation of language skills. The English partner in turn had the view of national standards as the starting point for the project. The understanding of these differences, accepting them and forming a productive overview of them was both an achievement and an aim in the project.

The project was very fruitful. The partner organisations shared a lot of experience on the impact of different educational cultures and contexts on portfolio work. The results on portfolio work varied for many reasons: on one hand, they vary according to the type of organisation, on the other hand, the influence of the teaching methods is crucial. In England and Germany, the use of portfolios as tools for assessment is ruled from the top; portfolios may not replace the national evaluation systems in the respecting countries. In Finland, teaching methods used as well as the freedom of teachers leave the frames of assessment more open. In Finland, the development is towards self-directedness; students are encouraged to take more and more responsibility for

their learning. In England, self-directedness of students will take time: portfolios are often compiled by the teacher. This will very likely change in the future, as pupils at schools now have their "records of achievement", which they will bring with them to the college. The German partner found it difficult to "sell" the method to teachers, who consider it too laborious.

The project has shown that the most important impact on the successfulness of portfolio work in language learning is the role of the guiding teacher. Neither the educational background of an adult student nor the level of knowledge is crucial for successful work: it is more a question of attitude and personal motivation of teachers, who then inspire and motivate the students. It was exactly the devotion and openness of partners and teachers involved in the project that guaranteed the mutual understanding and fruitful cooperation, not to mention the good results of the project.

The purpose of this product is to share experiences and to aid in either starting or developing portfolio work in other educational institutions. The articles consist of experimental studies in vocational adult education and are meant especially for the use of vocational language teaching with adults. *Introduction to Portfolio Building* (MAKK) gives profound background information on portfolios and assessment. *Experiences in Guiding Portfolio Work with Adult Learners* (SAAKK) deals with the problems of starting and guiding portfolio work. *Advantages and Disadvantages of Portfolios and National Certificates* (MAKK) is a comparison of the results of portfolio work with the results of the national examination system in Finland. *The German Experience* (BW) is an examination of the value of portfolio-building in Germany, where the main objective of the project was to find out whether this method can be accepted by students, teachers and employers. *Portfolios for Assessment in the UK* (FLC) tells about development of language portfolios, training and assessment in England.

Parts of the collection have been revised by the Finnish experts in the field, Ms. Pirjo Pollari and Mr. Sauli Takala from the University of Jyväskylä. Our thanks are extended to them for their valuable contributions to the project.

Mikkeli, 15.12.1998

Anu Aholainen

The project coordinator (first year)

Teija Pylkkänen

The project coordinator (second year)

**I Introduction to Portfolio Building in Adult
Language Learning
The Vocational Adult Education Centre in Mikkeli,
Finland**

Introduction to Portfolio Building in Adult Language Learning

Marja Anttalainen, Pirkko Kärkkäinen, Teija Pylkkänen

The Vocational Adult Education Centre in Mikkeli

FOREWORD

The idea of learning is becoming more and more student-oriented. This tendency emphasises the experiences and meta-cognitive skills of the learner. Therefore there has been a need to find new, fresh ways for assessment, which are nearer to everyday life and the authentic learning environment of the student. One such approach that has gained popularity is the use of student portfolios. Besides being an assessment tool, the portfolio is an essential part of the learning process. While compiling their portfolios, students learn to develop their working methods and to assess their work. When learners select material, follow their progress and get feedback, they gradually develop a skill for assessing their own learning and demonstrating their strengths. (Linnakylä 1994)

1. PROBLEMATIC ASSESSMENT

1.1 What is assessment?

The word 'assessment' often sounds negative to us. Moreover, we have different, sometimes very conflicting, expectations regarding assessment. Therefore, it is understandable that the assessment of learning results is often very difficult and problematic. Virtually everything around us is assessed. Hence, assessment is an essential part of our everyday life. It is a process defining the value or the merit of the object assessed. It can be claimed that assessment is the most precious intellectual function of ours. It is appropriate when it has a meaningful purpose. The fact that assessment is possible in the first place does not guarantee its reliability: there is always a certain amount of error and inaccuracy involved in assessment. (Takala 1994)

1.2. Assessment - how and when?

As already mentioned above, everything related to human activity is assessed. All through the history of mankind, students have been assessed in schools and colleges. Assessment naturally plays an important role in the fields of teaching and education. The system of assessment has to be consistent with the goals, syllabus, and teaching methods of the school in question. Assessment is carried out in different stages of learning and teaching. Firstly, the teacher assesses students as individuals and groups. Secondly, the teacher assesses his/her own work and the students' results. Thirdly, students assess their teacher, their own work and their class.

1.3. What can assessment be like?

Assessment can be qualitative or quantitative. Qualitative assessment means that the teacher, the student, or a group of students assesses their own work or their own results. Hence, it is observation of essential parts in a certain situation and conclusions drawn by these observations. On the other hand, quantitative assessment is measuring the object being assessed; e.g. we want to clarify how the student has progressed in his/her studies. In other words, qualitative assessment pays attention to the student's personal ways of data processing, whereas quantitative assessment focuses on his/her final products.

1.4. What should be assessed?

According to the traditional point of view, assessment should be reliable and concentrate on the most essential. Nevertheless, in recent times more emphasis has been laid on the fact that assessment should reflect the psychological structure of things. Moreover, attention has been paid to ecological validity (joining assessment with its natural uses) and the consequences of assessment from the student's point of view.

The teacher should assess the learning of the student and not the student him/herself. The main task for the teacher is to help students in their learning process and, first of all, support them in seeking information independently.

1.5. Assessment - how should it be done?

Since assessment is carried out by human beings, it is always subjective to a certain extent, and, in addition, dependent on the assessor's own personality. However, students should be assessed as equally as possible, and any

unfairness should be avoided. Naturally, the assessor should not let his/her own preferences affect the assessment.

Before starting the assessment process, the assessor must carefully assess the object of assessment. If the teacher wishes to assess the students' language skills, he/she has to first clarify what defines language skills and what the most reliable method to assess them is. Moreover, the teacher must be consistent and only assess what he/she teaches. Assessment must naturally be reliable and permanent. Every student has also the right to know the criteria of assessment.

1.6. What does assessment affect?

Assessment and marks normally have far-reaching consequences for the student: attaining a student place or a new job can depend on his/her marks. Similarly, assessment has an effect on the student's self-esteem. It is obvious that poor marks affect negatively the student's self-esteem and motivation. Although assessment could be perfectly equal, it does not necessarily have as positive an effect on every student; the teacher should take this serious problem into account and try to promote the positive effects of assessment. If the learning environment is favourable and confidential, assessment is an excellent tool for strengthening the student's self-esteem.

1.7. How has assessment changed?

The concept of learning is in the process of renewal: the socio-constructivist view of learning emphasises the students' facilities, their active role in studying, their abilities to assess and realise their own experiences, as well as learning how to learn. There are new, fresh winds blowing in the field of assessment, as well. Firstly, the criteria of assessment are specified in a more accurate way than they were before. The methods of assessment are chosen on the basis of these. However, assessment is still an essential part of learning and all

activities in general. Assessment and self-assessment deal with meta-cognitive skills, i.e. guiding the student to learn and do things. In addition, assessment has become a wider concept in recent times, dealing with goals and the whole process of learning, not only the results or the final product.

Secondly, the relationship between teaching and assessing has been reconsidered lately: traditionally they have been too far from each other. Learning is, however, maximised if teaching and assessing are in harmony with each other. Therefore, teaching and assessing should have a common basic idea of effective teaching and the essence of the matter being studied.

Thirdly, assessment must not be merely carried out by outsiders, but all persons concerned should have the opportunity to get involved in it. The more individuals can influence setting the goals, the more they engage themselves in learning. Hence, the more teachers and students can influence the form and contents of assessment, as well as the methods of application, the more they are willing to engage themselves in it.

Fourthly, it is important to realise the social nature of learning. We all learn from each other as well as support each other. Co-operation skills are important both in and outside school. Assessment should take this into account and develop new solutions that allow co-operation.

1.8. What is student-centred assessment like?

As seen above, the new student-centred view of learning sets new standards for assessment, as well. Current concepts of learning emphasise the experiences of the student, as well as individual and co-operative learning processes. This applies to modern methods of assessment, too. The learner should have the opportunity to control his/her own learning in a realistic context. Instead of assessing according to strict criteria set from outside, learning results

should be assessed by developing the students' skills of self-assessment, self-reflection and self-direction.

Learner-centred assessment is based on methods close to the learning context and authentic tasks of the student. They are an integral part of learning, not only tests or exams. Furthermore, they are directed towards both the learning process and the results of it. These methods stress the ability to apply information, think critically and solve problems. In addition, the student's own production is considered crucial. They consist rather of wide, versatile, project tasks than narrow, separate tests. Besides assessing skills, they are targeted at learning strategies and developing studying attitudes, as well. Learner-centred assessment methods aim at demonstrating the quality and strengths of learning, not the quantity and defects of it. The principles of portfolio-based learning are parallel to the ones of the new concepts of learning and assessing. It has been successfully used as a tool for a new kind of learning and assessing. (Linnakylä 1994)

2. PORTFOLIOS IN A NUTSHELL

2.1. What is a portfolio?

Portfolios are versatile collections of students' tasks, exercises, display pieces, and projects representing their progress and skills as learners. *They are compiled by the students themselves.* In their portfolios, students describe their learning contexts and introduce their best pieces of work, as well as state their criteria for selection. Moreover, portfolios always contain *final assessment*, i.e. students' own descriptions of the entire process of learning and their comments on it. Similarly, students illuminate their strengths and progress, in general, as well as their plans for future studies, in their portfolios. In addition to self-assessment, portfolios may include comments of fellow-students, friends, the

teacher, or some other expert. However, self-assessment plays the most important role in portfolios whereas assessment of others is more of a supportive quality. (Linnakylä 1994: 10-11)

Portfolios are not only a random selection of student work but a collection of information put together for a certain purpose. These purposes may vary a great deal according to the compiler of a portfolio and the context in which the portfolio is compiled. In other words, there is no single model for a portfolio but every individual student creates a portfolio that best suits his/her own goals and learning context.

In practice, portfolios can be folders, albums, boxes, video cassettes, audio cassettes, diskettes, or even a collection of objects or pictures. A portfolio can also consist of some, or all, of the elements mentioned above. However, the main emphasis is by no means on the form of the portfolio but on the process during which students assess the contents and the quality of their work, select the most suitable examples and consider the criteria for the selection. (Linnakylä 1994: 11)

2.2. What is the aim and significance of portfolios?

It can be claimed that a portfolio has two major significances: on one hand, it is *a method of assessment*, and, on the other hand, *a tool for the learning process*. It is tightly bound with the student's learning context as it is compiled of his/her authentic pieces of work. Thus, portfolio-based assessment is not based on scattered or untypical material, as it is often the case in tests and exams. Since portfolios are usually collections of material over a longer period of time, one of their major aims is *monitoring the students' progress*. This is of great importance for both student and teacher. Moreover, *strengthening the students' self-esteem* is another significant goal: when students represent their

best and most prominent pieces of work in their portfolios, they can be, with reason, proud of them.

In addition, *developing meta-cognitive skills* plays an important role in compiling a portfolio. Students learn a great deal about their learning process while working on a portfolio, selecting the most suitable material for it and assessing their own learning. In the best cases, portfolios *strengthen self-direction* and encourage learners to take responsibility for their own learning. Students become aware of the fact that their own work, efforts and the use of appropriate learning strategies have a great impact on the results of their study.

2.3. How do portfolios develop self-direction and self-assessment?

Portfolio-based learning enables the development of self-direction in many ways. Firstly, students realise and accept their roles as active learners. They learn to plan their actions by becoming aware of their weaknesses and setting their goals, as well as selecting the most suitable learning strategies. While compiling portfolios, learners become interested in their learning, i.e. they find an internal motivation for their work. Similarly, students learn gradually to assess and control their work and to take notice of other people's assessment. They become more open to new experiences like receptiveness, curiosity and tolerance for problems. Moreover, students develop their skills to be flexible when needed and, for example, to change their goals and try new learning methods. Portfolio-based learning encourages students to become more independent and set their own goals, as well as choose their own criteria for the results of their study. The learners' readiness for fruitful co-operation with their peers, the teacher and other people becomes higher. Consequently, compiling a portfolio also trains students to accept the principles of co-operative learning.

The use of portfolios is an effective method to develop self-assessment: while working on their portfolio, students debate and assess the quality and goals of their tasks and projects. At the same time, the students reflect their own working methods. Gradually they become independent and responsible learners. Students are not only guided to assess their own learning but also their learning techniques, effectiveness and capability to reach their goals. In addition to self-assessment, portfolios can contain comments on the teaching methods and assessment of the teacher.

2.4. For what purpose are portfolios compiled?

The nature and the contents of portfolios vary according to the goal of the study. Firstly, a portfolio can be *a process portfolio (a working portfolio)* describing the learning process of the student and containing all his/her exercises, sketches, working plans and notes. Secondly, a portfolio can be a *showcase portfolio (a product portfolio)* representing only the best works and the self-assessment of the student. This kind of portfolio can be used as a tool for assessing the results of learning. In addition to the best, most representative material, a showcase portfolio can also contain sketches of unaccomplished pieces of work, as well as new ideas and plans. If the aim of a portfolio is to follow the student's progress and development it can be called a *growth portfolio*. Thus it consists of material that succeeds well in illuminating the progress of the student over a longer period of time. An adult learner can compile a *presentation portfolio* for him/herself containing the student's diplomas and certificates as well as the best samples of his/her skills. This type of a portfolio is meant for situations when the student is applying for a job or a student place.

Every portfolio should have both a physical structure and a conceptual structure. By physical structure, it is meant here the order of the material that shows the student's progress. For example, a portfolio can be compiled

according to the chronological order, context, or style of the material.

Conceptual structure, however, deals with distinctive goals the learner aims to achieve. These goals should be clearly seen in a portfolio.

2.5. What kind of material can a portfolio contain?

A portfolio can contain both individual and co-operative material in one or more areas, or pieces of work that are linked to a certain unity of skills. This material can be literal or artistic, collaborative works or projects. However, it should be as versatile as possible to represent all learning contexts, subject matter, and means of communication. Otherwise, all the learner's skills are not necessarily presented in the portfolio. The collection of works and items should primarily contain material that describes the progress of the student. This can be made more illustrative by including in the portfolio, a series of works completed at different times. Besides the subjects learnt at school, a portfolio may contain items connected to the student's leisure activities and hobbies, which might illuminate his/her personality from a totally different point of view.

2.6. What is portfolio-based learning like in practice?

Students compile their portfolios together with the teacher, their peers and possibly some other people connected to the project. When starting work on it, the teacher's guidance, support, encouragement and responsibility are of vital importance. Gradually, the responsibility should be transferred, first to the group of students and then to each individual student. Nevertheless, it is important to keep in mind that students should not be left alone in the beginning of the project but they must first be given the chance to study independently at their own pace. First, the teacher gives students a model of a task, then students practice according to the principles of co-operative learning and under the teacher's guidance. After this stage, the responsibility is gradually given to the individual students. It is desirable that there be a 'portfolio

celebration' at the end of the studying period, where students present their final portfolios to the teacher and their classmates.

3. PORTFOLIOS IN FOREIGN LANGUAGE EDUCATION

3.1. What benefits do portfolios have in foreign language teaching?

In the field of foreign language education, the use of portfolios undoubtedly has several advantages. Firstly, students are provided with opportunities to display good work to others. Thus, also the students with weaker language skills strengthen their self-esteem and self-concepts. It is not detrimental if students slightly overestimate the level of their language skills; students can only learn when they believe in their own progress. Secondly, portfolios serve as an efficient vehicle for learning critical self-analysis and self-assessment - while working on their portfolios students learn to monitor their progress, set goals for their future studies, realise their own strengths and weaknesses, and identify the most efficient and suitable learning methods and contexts. Contrary to customary and traditional methods used in foreign language teaching, the use of portfolios offers students practical opportunities to show their mastery of a foreign language.

3.2. What do language portfolios aim at?

A language portfolio may have several functions. It can concentrate purely on assessing and showing the mastery of a foreign language, or it can be integrated into a wider, vocational portfolio. The most significant factors of portfolio-based language learning are the learner's skills to use the language actively, to establish a baseline of his/her target language ability, and to document the growth in the four language skills of speaking, writing, listening

and reading. When documents are gradually placed into the portfolio over time, the reader is, for example, able to see the increased knowledge of vocabulary, the greater accuracy in pronunciation, as well as the growth in using language for oral and written purposes.

A portfolio can be used to document certain kinds of language skills that standard assessment methods fail to measure. For example, the audiotapes and videotapes in students' portfolios can help the teacher in assessing the level and progress of learners' communicative competence.

Furthermore, the contents of students' portfolios can provide information to teachers that can help them while making decisions about curriculum. If, for example, the teacher notices several similar grammatical errors in students' oral and written exercises, he/she may decide to pay more attention to these things in the future.

3.3. What are the contents of a language portfolio like?

Although it is of vital importance to consider what to place in a portfolio, two fundamental decisions have to be made first: what is the purpose of a portfolio, and what is its primary audience. However, a portfolio does not necessarily have to have only one purpose or audience: it can have several. Similarly, the purpose of a portfolio may change during the period of study. For example, a student can keep some items showing his/her weak points in the portfolio all through the course, but at the end of the studying period the portfolio may contain only the material that the student wishes to present to others.

As the primary object of a language portfolio is, however, to demonstrate the student's mastery of the target language, a portfolio should capture the learner's skills as a language user in as many ways as possible. All the four language skills of reading, writing, listening and speaking should be presented from various points of view in a portfolio. An ideal language portfolio might contain material on different subjects and, in addition, these items, projects

and exercises could be composed in various ways. The products linked with the development of reading and writing skills - such as letters, reports, conclusions, character descriptions - are of course a significant part of a student portfolio. However, listening and oral exercises - for example interviews, meetings, negotiations and debates - play an important role in language learning, as well. These could be captured through the frequent use of video and audiotapes.

Moreover, a portfolio can contain material that shows rare or unusual abilities. If, for example, a group of students is interested in drama, they can write and then perform a short play or a sketch, which can be videotaped and included as a part of their portfolios. Some other students might have artistic talents and produce a comic strip, a poem, or a song in the target language.

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II Experiences on Different Approaches to Guiding Portfolio Work

**The Vocational Adult Education Centre
in Seinäjoki, Finland**

Experiences on Different Approaches to Guiding Portfolio Work

Tiina Mäntymäki

Seinäjoki Vocational Adult Education Centre

Portfolio in Language Learning: Starting for the First Time

I got my first experiences of making portfolios in the spring of 1997 when I started to compile them with a group of adult learners of English. At that point I had more questions than answers in my pocket and the spring term became a learning process not only for my students but for myself as well.

When I started to compile portfolio folders for the first time with my students I had a great deal of theoretical knowledge about different types of portfolios, their contents and criteria for good portfolios, but practical knowledge about the description of the process with adult learners and particularly about practical problems I could encounter during the process I had not yet found in literature.

I hope this article fills this gap. My aim is to concentrate on the questions that possibly occur when starting to work with portfolios. I will try to deal with things I consider important when defining the function of the portfolio and starting the actual work. In addition I want to launch a point of view that is practically non-existent in the literature written about portfolios, namely portfolio from the adult learner's point of view. All students I have worked with and compiled portfolios with have been adults and most of them have been studying in the evening after work on a self motivated basis with their own needs as their starting points.

My article is based on this everyday experience with my students. I do not want to set any criteria of scientific research on it. I will mostly concentrate on

describing my absolutely first experiences of portfolio work with groups of students and I hope that it will be of use for those of my colleagues, who are possibly struggling with the kind of basic questions concerning portfolio work like to start or not to start, how to start and who possibly feel the same kind of uncertainty that I did when I started the process for the first time.

Background

Here in Finland using portfolios in language learning has traditionally not been very common. Portfolio as a method of learning and basis for assessment has been used mostly in vocational education in fields in which it otherwise would be difficult to gain proof of the students' real skills. Cooks, designers and other professionals of this kind have already for a long time compiled showcase - types of folders which with the help of photographs and other documents presenting the vocational skills of the student. Only some pioneers have started to adapt portfolios for language learning.

At the moment it seems, however, that interest for using portfolios is spreading from traditional handicrafts to humanist fields. Portfolio is discussed, research work is done not only at universities but also in comprehensive schools and in schools of secondary education. In the college where I work, The Seinäjoki Vocational Adult Education Centre, portfolio as a document and proof of studies, as a part of distance learning and tool for assessment has increased a great deal during the past two years. One reason for that can be the positive publicity I have tried to make of my experiences with portfolios within the college. Support, discussions and exchange of ideas and a material bank where I have collected not only literature dealing with research but also my own material connected with compiling and assessing portfolios has probably also helped my colleagues to introduce the idea of portfolio in their own fields. In the spring of 1997 I started for the first time to compile portfolios with my students. The students were all adults, aged between 20 and 70 and they

represented many different occupations from engine driver to cheesemaker and from designer to a retired nurse. The course that they took part in was approximately defined according to level two of the National Language Certificate, but as it often happens with groups of adult learners, the language profiles of this group of students were as varied as their occupations. There were 17 students in the group and 12 of them accomplished a portfolio.

At the beginning of the project I confronted a great challenge: Only a few students had heard the word portfolio and even fewer knew what the word meant. The starting point with me and my students was approximately the same. There was one difference: I had read through several writings about other people's experiences whereas the students sat behind their tables with open minds and full of confidence in me. I did not feel very confident, however, because other people's experiences had not yet become mine - I lacked my own experience. I was theoretically wise but in practise I saw a great dilemma before my eyes. Portfolio seemed something grand and I did not know how to grab it. At times I felt very uncertain with the new challenge and I explained the situation to my students. I told them that in this research both they and I are equally involved in a learning process. We rolled our sleeves and set forth.

What an Earth is a Portfolio?

Before presenting the idea of portfolio to my students I made a thorough plan of how the presentation should be carried out so that they would get a relatively clear picture of what portfolio is all about. Should I talk them off their feet and confuse them with theoretical jargon, pour on them all the information I had found in literature dealing with the topic or should I take it easy? Finally, I decided to take it easy and give the students a soft landing to the world of portfolio. This was because the idea of portfolio was new for everybody and I thought that time should be reserved for reflection before starting the actual work.

A slow start proved to be a good choice. I had time to follow and reflect and look for answers and the students, when they had time to think, came with questions that otherwise would probably never had been asked. I did not try to answer these question as an authority or an expert, quite the contrary. I discussed with the students and tried, as well as I could, to help them to find their own solutions, that is help them forwards on the road they had chosen. This way, when there was enough time for reflection and support at the beginning of the project, making portfolios became a deep project and simultaneously a factor that added to motivation. Questions like "What an earth is a portfolio?" gradually transformed to other types of questions: "How would you say I should do this", or "Could I make coloured copies, you see I need them because I'd like to do this that way?".

Reflection at the beginning

At the beginning one of the most central problems was the question of the portfolio type. Questions like how could I define what type of portfolio my students would make and what would be the grounds for my choice went around in my head. In addition I reflected upon the question if I in general should define what kind of portfolios my adult, relatively self-directed and well educated students would make.

Finally I decided to give the students a certain but relatively free framework within which I expected them to operate. My choice was based on the assumption that because the students were making portfolios for the first time in their lives, it would be good to define certain common starting points and cling to a certain amount of teacher directedness in order to avoid a feeling of insecurity and panic caused by too much freedom. It was also easier for myself to move within a certain framework because in fact, I was in the same boat with my students, learning how to guide and make portfolios. On the other hand I

did not want to restrict my students too much because they were taking part in a self motivated course and common factors between the students were few, maybe only one, that is the motivation to learn English. Squeezing 17 different individuals in the same form did not feel like a good idea particularly because in this case it was a question of studies based on the students own motivation with no press for formal exams.

Why this way?

The idea of portfolio is based on the socio-constructive approach to learning, where the learner is understood as an active agent of her/his own learning process. This means that the learner her/himself constructs what s/he learns, studies, deals with and structures as parts of her/his schemes of knowledge. The learning process is guided by some goal but what the learner really learns depends on what s/he her/himself does. The new, internalised in other words learned knowledge is constructed through reflection, understanding and applying. This means that individuality and a personal starting point connects the portfolio to the already existing and constructs new knowledge from the old and the new material. With these things in mind I went on defining the type of portfolio they would compile.

Pirjo Pollari states that different goals require different portfolios¹. The students' individuality and own starting points mark the definition of the portfolio type. As I have stated before, defining the portfolio type of a heterogeneous group of adults who take part in a self-motivated course in detailed parameters is maybe not necessary. This was precisely the reason why I decided to give the students a great deal of space and possibilities for own discoveries.

1 Pollari for instance at a seminar held in Mikkeli on 13-14 March 1997

What Did We Do in Practise?

When introducing the idea of portfolio for my students I used a compact information leaflet made by a colleague of mine, Merja Annola (see Appendix 1). In the Finnish version of this leaflet the word 'portfolio' was replaced by the Finnish word "salkku". We thought that a word of our own language would sound more familiar than 'portfolio', which a Finnish student does not necessarily associate with anything concrete, and concrete is something very essential with portfolios, concrete, documented proof of existing skills.

The first point in the leaflet was: "Think, what you need the portfolio (salkku) for: you will make it for yourself, not for the teacher! Choose the tasks according to your own interests and needs". This starting point forces the student to get actively involved in the process of reflection right from the start. When the aim has to be defined individually within a relatively free framework, the student is grabbed by the process right away. This kind of starting point makes the student take responsibility for the learning process - if s/he does not do it, s/he will not proceed.

In practise I had to help my students a great deal. They could not possibly know at this stage, the meaning of portfolio and therefore they could not see all the possibilities it contained. I gave hints, showed videos, presented examples of different types of portfolios not, however forgetting to emphasise the ownership qualities of the starting point. This was simultaneously a way of defining the students' works inside the framework of 'Ownership Portfolio' ².

² See also Wolf & Siu-Runyan: *Portfolio, Purposes and Possibilities*

In addition to Ownership portfolio Wolf & Siu-Runyan give a list of other types of portfolios, for instance feedback portfolio and accountability portfolio. They emphasise however, that in practice most portfolios do not fall within a certain clearly definable category. They are combinations of different models of portfolios.

I did not leave my students alone, although the definition of the portfolio was done teacher-directedly. I tried, in all possible ways, to support the reflection it required concerning own needs and starting points and naturally also recognition of own strengths and weaknesses. In addition I set other clear restrictions for the work. These restrictions concerned the contents of the portfolio and the time-table. I required the following things:

1) Presentation of myself

The contents and the form of the presentation were free. I gave the students some hints and advice I had found in literature.

2) Learning log

The learning log or diary was a form with ready made questions connected with what the students had done and some reflection.

3) Presentation of the portfolio

The aim with the presentation was reflection connected with each individual task contained in the portfolio. Essential questions were for instance: "Why did I decide to do this piece of work?", "Why I did it", "What was the process like?" and "What does this piece of work mean to me?".

4) Final thoughts

The last part of the portfolio contained thoughts about the process of compiling the portfolio. I wanted to help the students by designing a form with questions about the project. This form and possibly other reflection were then included in the final portfolio.

5) The actual tasks

Two out of three tasks were chosen for the final portfolio. In addition there was a requirement of an oral presentation on video.

This was the framework; the aim, the contents and the form of the contents were left up to the students to define. Merja Annola's information leaflet contained also practical ideas for a portfolio and in addition to that, while the students were struggling with questions of definition and contents during the first weeks of the project I had the pleasure to repeat matters connected with how to start and answer their many questions.

Giving the students the responsibility in defining the aim and the detailed contents proved a good idea. The framework guaranteed certain security while contents defined and compiled from individual starting points gave the project the kind of personal touch that is often asked for when working with adult learners but which for some reason often remains unrealised. The students compiled portfolios which looked like themselves and according to the feedback we got, they were mostly satisfied with the project.

We tried to make a feedback form that would be as student friendly as possible. In other words, we tried to ask questions that were concrete enough, that would be easy to answer and that would tell us the essential matters we, Merja Annola and myself, would like to know about the project. The feedback form contained for instance questions about definition of the portfolio type, finding material, time put into the actual work, the working process itself and the meaning of the portfolio for the learning process as well as for the student as a whole. Moreover, the aim of the form was to remind the students of the learning process after the work had been done and help them to reflect upon its results from two points of view: learning itself and becoming aware of the learning process.

At the beginning defining the aim and planning the contents were regarded as difficult tasks by the students, but when the concept of portfolio and particularly my expectations from them began to become clear for them, making the

portfolio became a challenge. one of the student wrote in her feedback about defining the aim: "Very difficult at first but when it became clear for me, it seemed easy". The same student went on commenting about making the portfolio in the following way: "After it became clear for me about what and why I would make the portfolio, everything that I did with it was only positive, I was really enthusiastic about this portfolio work".

However, for all the students the meaning of making the portfolio did not become quite clear. It was for some reason not seen as a part of the studies; it was regarded as something that belonged outside the learning process, as something extra. One student wrote: "It's a good thing this portfolio as long as it does not take too much of the studying time". The conclusion I drew was that in the future I should have to emphasise the role of the portfolio as an essential part of the learning process even more.

During the spring of 1997 I learned a great many new and essential things about guiding portfolio work and when in the autumn of the same year I started to make the next portfolio with a group of students I felt more confident and I felt I already had some grasp of the process. What I had read and studied had become internalised knowledge through experience and doing. Now, it was time to do something new and when I began the work I no more had butterflies in my stomach and I felt great curiosity towards the next project.

The Next Portfolio

When I started this time I wanted to avoid the difficulties I had met with when starting for the first time. Therefore I decided to make even a slower and more careful start. I wanted the idea to become clear for the students right from the start without any extra complications. So I created an extra simple model.

This time my students were students of Swedish and their language skills were on the average better than with the earlier group of students of English. Otherwise the heterogeneity of the group was about as great as before; there was great variety both in ages and professions. The students in this group had no earlier experience of portfolio work, either. This meant that the starting point for the work was approximately the same as during the spring with the difference that one of the central goals for this course was to take the level three National Language Certificate exam and this became clearly visible also when defining topics for the portfolio tasks.

With this group I started by giving up all terminology. At the beginning I did not even call the portfolio 'portfolio', but wrote and printed out an A 4 paper with 'more extensive homework', the topics of which were based on the topics of National Language Certificate, YKI. I gave the handout to the students and discussed its contents with them. The hand out listed out six alternatives for tasks:

1. Essay

The students could choose the topics from the list of topics for the 'YKI'. The length and the genre was free. The text could be a short story, a poem, a newspaper article etc.

2. Book

The students had the possibility to read a book in Swedish and write a report about it. The report was to contain more than just a summary of the plot.

3. Summary of a text

The only requirement was, that the text should match the topics of the YKI.

4. Translation Swedish - Finnish

The topic as above. in addition I required a vocabulary for the text.

5. Oral presentation

The topic and the length were completely up to the students.

6. Other exercise

The students came up with many creative ideas, for instance dramatised dialogues on audiotape and other audiovisual material.

The students chose four tasks from the list. making the choice did not seem to cause difficulties for them, which was at least partly due to the fact I had to a relatively high degree already defined what I wanted my students to do. Choosing more extensive homework from a list that on the surface looked rather restricted, but which actually included the same, or at least almost as extensive freedom as with the first group, made it easier for the students to begin their work this time. Also defining the topics inside the YKI -topics was more or less like drawing a line in water, because these topics comprehend the whole world. However, clear lines made it easier for the students to get an idea of the whole. There was no uncertainty about the expectations and we avoided completely questions like "What should I do?" and moved directly to the next state and the next set of questions: "Is it OK if I do it this way?"

After having reflected for a while upon the questions what tasks to chose and how to carry them out I introduced the idea of compiling a portfolio. I made an A 4 again - black on white, or in this case black on yellow, is always good, concrete way to take up new things. On this paper I asked the students to choose four tasks from the earlier list. The time marginal between the two handouts was about one week, which meant that reflection around choice of tasks has already taken place. I asked the students to continue with their reflection processes and pay attention to the questions of what they as individuals felt would be useful and enjoyable, because the aim with the portfolio would be to support the personal language learning needs of every single student. At this point I wanted to integrate the portfolio as a clear part of

the studies and I emphasised often its significance in the language learning process during the course.

The final portfolio was to include:

1. Introduction

I emphasised that the introduction should look and feel like the writer.

2. Working log

I wanted the students to pay especially much attention to why they chose a particular task. In addition I wanted them to reflect upon their own learning process, what and how they learned during the project.

3. Three tasks out of four

I asked the students for a presentation and assessment of each task. I gave them some questions to help them to make the choice and carry out their self assessment. The questions were:

What was your best work, why?

Why did you start to do it?

What problems did you encounter?

How did you solve the problems?

How does your best piece of work differ from the least good one?

What kind of goals did you have?

How well did you reach your goals?

What will be your goals in the future?³

Self reflection exceeded the boundaries of this project with the aim to integrate compiling the portfolio as a part of future language studies, as well.

³The questions were chosen from questions presented by Linda Rief in her article *Finding the Value in Evaluation: Self-Assessment in a Middle School Classroom* and adapted to our needs.

4. Final thoughts

Final thoughts were to consist of thoughts and feelings connected with the portfolio project.

We set forth. the students seemed to know what I expected of them and with smiling faces they accepted my requirements. Compared with the previous group, the feeling was more relaxed - uncertainty and desperation before a task which seemed impossible did not exist, because awareness of the expectations and confidence in support freed the students to start working right away instead of time and energy consuming uncertainty. I felt more confident and relaxed myself - I had been through all this before and I had apparently drawn the right conclusions of my earlier experience.

When I again, now for the third time, started to guide portfolio work, the starting point was slightly different. All my students were educated in business administration, they were unemployed and taking part in a more or less obligatory course. The focus on the course lied on Business English and the students knew already when applying for the course that one of the central contents would be compiling a portfolio. When I started to introduce the idea for them, I could only notice, that they already had some knowledge about the fact that in order to pass the course they would be required to do some kind of project work. This time there was an external requirement enforced with the sanction of losing the unemployment allowance in case the requirements would not be met with.

A Different Kind of Portfolio

When I met these students for the first time, they wanted to know everything about portfolio right away. Experience had taught me that clear written material is a good starting point. In addition I discussed the matter with them. With the

help of a transparency and a handout I tried to explain as clearly as I could what a portfolio is, what the aim could be and what it should contain.

This time the aim was defined by me. Because all the students were unemployed and the most important aim of the course was to increase their possibilities to find a job, I considered it almost self evident that the portfolio they would compile would be a Showcase -type of folder. This kind of portfolio does not contain exercises or unfinished work. It does not illustrate the student's development but gives proof of what the student can do.

Though the aim was defined by the teacher and the students had no part in the process, I tried, however, to pay attention to the individuality of each student's portfolio. I supported their reflection by asking them to think about what they wanted the portfolio to tell about themselves. I emphasised this all the time. The students were allowed to choose the actual tasks freely, but there was one absolute criterion: I wanted each student to be able to give grounds for how each individual task would present and prove their skills and what its function would be when looking for work.

The function of the portfolio was defined by the teacher and the tasks, their topics, contents and form was left up to the students to define. The crucial difference between this and the earlier projects was that this time the students had no choice if they wanted to pass the course. This did naturally have some effect on the results of the portfolio work. The students seemed to be really motivated when they could do something they would have use of when looking for work. They thought that a folder with concrete proof of their personal language skills and other skills would give them confidence in the demanding situation of a job interview. In addition, the students stated that employers would probably respect a folder as proof of self directedness and capability of taking initiatives.

Finally

I chose to write about three different processes because they were the first ones in my career and because they all describe the progress that took place in me as a teacher. In this piece of writing I have almost only concentrated on the questions of starting portfolio work in practise and left unmentioned many important things, like the role of the individual study plan at portfolio work, the significance of guidance and the role of the group during the actual process. I have wanted to deal with the practical matters I met with and the solutions I came up with.

To put it short I would like to say: Do not hurry. It is not wise to start the process in a hurry and try to conquer the whole world in three days especially if the concept of portfolio is unknown for the students. There should be time for reflection and listening to oneself. the process should grow to a learning experience common for all the students, because each group have their own questions and there are necessarily not ready made answers to them. Motivation, curiosity and sensitive antennas are good to have.

III Advantages and Disadvantages of Portfolios and National Certificates

**The Vocational Adult Education Centre in Mikkeli,
Finland**

Advantages and Disadvantages of Portfolios and National Certificates

Mechtild Kostamoinen, Pirkko Kärkkäinen, Teija Pylkkänen

The Vocational Adult Education Centre in Mikkeli

1. Background

The main objective for the Vocational Adult Education Centre in Mikkeli (MAKK) in the project in 1998 was to make a comparison between the results of portfolio work and the National Certificate system in Finland. The present article consists of a description of portfolio work in our college (MAKK), an introduction to the National Certificate of Language Proficiency (Yleinen kielitutkinto, YKI) and the comparison of the YKI results and the students' portfolios, as well as the conclusions of this pilot study.

In MAKK, portfolios have played an important part in the language training since 1995. Two types of portfolios have been used: firstly, in self-motivated, so called 'pure' language courses and secondly, in courses of vocational further training. In the latter courses, students compile showcase portfolios, where a language portfolio is only a part of the whole portfolio. All the courses of this pilot study were self-motivated evening courses where the English language was the only subject studied. The length of these particular courses was 3-4 months. In practice, the number of lesson-hours was 200 – 230, and 80 % of them were contact lessons. Three groups of students compiled portfolios during the spring term –98: they were three groups of Working English, one of which was pre-intermediate and two advanced elementary. The age of the students varied from 25 to 55. The great majority of the students were employed in various fields and professions (such as manual workers, clerks, office workers, nurses, teachers, engineers and entrepreneurs). In addition, there were some full-time students and unemployed persons in the groups.

Out of 41 students more than a half (22) completed a portfolio and 20 of them took the National Certificate (YKI) in April 1998. All the students passed the exam and received the YKI certificates in June. With the permission of the students and the Institute of Applied Language Studies we were able to see the actual answer sheets of the students in order to make a comparison between the completed portfolios and the test results.

2. Use of portfolios in language teaching in MAKK

2.1. Advantages of using portfolios

When dealing with adult learners the groups are always heterogenous to some extent. In MAKK, for example, the students come from different backgrounds and age groups, they differ a lot in language skills and interests both at work and in hobbies. In order to enable the students to achieve their personal goals there is very often a need for differentiation. Personal goals and interests are listed in personal study plans at the very beginning of the course (see Appendix 3). The plans can be put into practice by compiling portfolios, where the students can concentrate on their own areas of interest and vocational needs. As a matter of fact, experiences in MAKK have shown that portfolio based language learning is the only reasonable means of bringing the vocational aspect into the syllabus. Furthermore, a portfolio shows particularly well the student's development as a language learner over a longer period of time (in the past, at present, in the future) and offers the student the possibility of building on his/her earlier experiences and knowledge.

The portfolio is also a means which can help in developing and supporting the metacognitive and self-assessment skills of the students. Once the students get started they often find the portfolio a motivating and inspiring way of learning. Teaching that involves portfolio building also brings the language

studies nearer to students' real life than traditional teaching that focuses on passing a test or an exam. A portfolio can even be structured especially for the needs in working life: a toolbox portfolio consists of special vocabularies and phrases that can function as a kind of "crib sheet" at work.

2.2. Disadvantages of using portfolios

When thinking about the pros and cons of portfolio work, the benefits of portfolios mentioned above are the first that come into mind. Yet, there are certain aspects that need to be recognised in order to be able to guide the portfolio work properly. Firstly, students often tend to concentrate on just a few areas of interests, which leads to a limited range of topics in their portfolios. The most common topics are home, work and hobbies. Yet, all 9 topics of the YKI (see 3.1.) form the syllabus of the course.

Secondly, students often stress certain fields of language. Writing and text comprehension exercises are often the most common evidence in portfolios. Speaking skills seem to be difficult to include in a portfolio. Thirdly, the final products of the students often lack the self-assessment as well as reasoning for the selection of evidence, i.e. exactly the parts that make a portfolio a portfolio. This makes assessment difficult. There are no such clear criteria for assessing and evaluating a portfolio, such as there is for examination systems. In MAKK, teachers are not obliged to give numerical evaluation; assessment of a course is agreed in cooperation with the student. When it comes to written verbal assessment, as it often is the case with assessing portfolios in MAKK, there is always a danger that it is not understood by the student the same way as it was meant by the teacher.

As we have already mentioned in this chapter, there are both advantages and disadvantages concerning the use of language portfolios. However, the disadvantages seem to be problems that can be solved by proper guidance by

the teacher. Also the YKI system, which we will introduce in the following chapter, has its two sides.

3. National Certificate of Language Proficiency

3.1. Introduction to the Finnish National Certificate

The Finnish National Certificate was introduced in 1994 by the Finnish Board of Education and its daily operations are managed by the Institute for Applied Language Studies at the University of Jyväskylä. It is a language test for adults and can be taken in the following languages: Finnish and Swedish (the two national languages), English, French, German, Italian, Russian, Spanish and the Lappish language Saami. Language proficiency is assessed on a nine-level scale in line with other European models.

The tests are arranged in several places in Finland once or twice a year; on demand a special test for a larger group of participants can be arranged. The tests cost FIM 400-750. Since 1994, 9028 tests have been taken; the biggest group being English with 4186 test takers.

The test consists of 5 subtests which are reading comprehension, writing, structures and vocabulary, listening comprehension and speaking. Each subtest comprises 3-4 different tasks. The tasks are sampled from 9 topics:

- A. I and My Family, Background
- B. Home, Housing
- C. Work
- D. Society
- E. Finland, Environmental Questions
- F. Social Relationships
- G. Everyday Life
- H. Travel and Tourism
- I. Health and Well Being.

From the point of language activities (functions) the student should be able, among other things, to give and ask for information, to express his/ her opinions, to speak and write about feelings, to ask, propose, warn, and negate.

The test can be taken in one of three levels: basic, intermediate and advanced. The time allowed for the performance is from 3 hours (basic) to 5 hours (advanced). In the intermediate and advanced level, the tasks demand knowledge of colloquial and formal language. Understanding of slang or strong dialect is not required. The advanced level comprises an interview with a native speaker which is videotaped.

3.2. Assessment of the YKI

A group of trained teachers and translators, some of them native speakers, assess the tests. Tests of the basic and intermediate level are assessed by one person with a sampled second assessment. Tests of the advanced level are always assessed by two persons. There is the possibility to phone one of the

test designers for further advice. In follow-up meetings after the test, the assessors meet and discuss problems which have arisen. The results of these meetings are taken into account in developing the test. For the sake of objectivity, the assessor cannot be the test taker's own teacher or an acquaintance.

A test co-ordinator at the Institute of Applied Language Studies does the final assessment and produces the certificate. The certificates are signed by the main assessor, sent to the institution where the tests have taken place, and from there sent to the individual test takers. The certificate is delivered 1-2 months after the test.

3.3. YKI skill level descriptions

The tests are assessed on the basis of the following skill level descriptions:

1. Knowledge of language is sufficient for coping with the simplest oral and written tasks and situations. Can understand the topics in newspaper articles and conversations that deal with familiar subjects. Knows some of the structures of the language.
2. Manages to communicate in simple and routine tasks and situations. With the help of a dictionary can understand simple written messages and without one can get the gist. Limited language proficiency causes frequent breakdowns and misunderstandings in non-routine situations.
3. Manages to communicate in the most familiar oral and written tasks and situations but new situations cause communication problems. Understands slow and careful speech and can normally understand the gist of an easy text, such as a short newspaper article.
4. Manages familiar oral and written tasks and situations related to work and freetime adequately. Interference from other languages can be intrusive.

Vocabulary, grammar and fluency generally adequate but variable. Consulting a dictionary may sometimes be necessary for understanding main points of ordinary text, for instance, a newspaper article.

5. Manages familiar oral and written tasks and situations related to work and freetime rather well. Knows the basic structures and vocabulary and only occasionally needs to resort to requesting repetition or using a dictionary. Inaccuracies or interference from other languages only occasionally hinder communication.

6. Communicates appropriately in familiar oral and written tasks and situations and manages adequately even in socially or lexically demanding situations. Occasional inaccuracies and inadequacies, which nevertheless seldom lead to misunderstandings. On demanding subjects may occasionally need repetition or to consult a dictionary.

7. Communicates rather effectively and appropriately even in many demanding oral and written tasks. Usage is quite versatile and fluent. Slight inaccuracies and influence from other languages are not intrusive. Understands with ease both writing and speech even on demanding subjects.

8. Communicates naturally, effectively and appropriately even in demanding oral and written tasks and situations. Fluent and in many ways native-like. Occasional problems with subtle stylistic distinctions and idioms.

9. Has a full command of the language. Communication is fluent, appropriate and well organised. An exceptional level of language proficiency, which is normally attained by well-educated language professionals in situations specific to their profession.

In the certificate, a verbal assessment is given to the test-taker in addition to the numerical scale. For instance, when the Reading comprehension is 4, Writing 3, Structures and Vocabulary 2, Listening comprehension 2 and Speaking 4, the overall assessment will be 3, but in the verbal assessment the different levels of proficiency will be mentioned.

Each of the test designers drafts assessment guidelines for the tasks they have constructed. In multiple choice tasks, the number of right solutions are the obtainable points. In open questions or gap-filling tasks the test constructor proposes the maximum points for each part of the task. Oral tasks and most of the written tasks are assessed using the skill level description.

3.4. Problems of the testing methods used

Many sorts of language tests are used in Finland. Though the gap-filling and multiple choice tests are not necessarily highly appreciated by the pedagogical community, they are still used. They are test-forms which Finnish students who have written their baccalaureat from 1970 onwards are used to. Older participants do not know these forms well, and they rarely occur in an adult person's life. Translations from mother tongue into the target language were widely in use up to 1970, but neglected for some time: quite a few of the participants translate the gist of the sentence, but not every word - something which is absolutely appropriate in adult life. From the point of view of a test constructor sentence-transformations are a very good test form, but the test taker do not always readily understand what they are supposed to do. Among younger participants the knowledge of proverbs, sayings and idioms is much less developed than among the older ones, probably because their text books stress those parts of the language less than in times gone by.

In the reading comprehension tasks, the test taker should understand the main content and the most important details; in the open questions tasks, he/she should - if in his/her opinion the answer is no - give the reason why it is no. Sometimes the test-taker does not follow the text but his/her own experience and does not write what the text says. In adult life one is always expected to think independently, but in some tasks such a behaviour is almost forbidden. A

“testwise” test taker should be able to anticipate what the test constructor wishes him/her to do.

On the advanced level, one of the reading comprehension tasks is a summary of the text in question. The art of summarising articles, letters, shorter or longer papers is very useful in adult life, but little practised in Finnish schools.

Therefore test-takers have real problems with this task and good résumés are rare. Most Finnish people prefer intensive reading to extensive reading. On the other hand, there are some who get the gist of the article at once, but do not bother or are not able to describe the development of ideas in the article.

On the advanced level, during the interview with the native speaker, the differences between people’s behaviour interferes with the testing. There are some who speak in short sentences because they do so in their own languages, who reflect on what to say, who pause between their sentences. The interviewer cannot press them to speak more and the produced language material is relatively small. Then there are others who like to speak, who leave the given subject and wander on their own paths, who do not really communicate with their partner, but produce a lot of language material. In both cases, the character of the test-taker influences the language material which the assessor has to assess.

Quite generally there is always the question: what is the common level of knowledge which the test designers can expect. Is the traffic code general knowledge, does everybody know the main characters of the most popular TV series? How much of the cultural background of the target language is known to the test-takers?

One special problem are the instructions given to the test-takers. The test constructors know what they want, they have given the same instructions (or similar ones) over and over again. The test takers do not know them and sometimes they do not understand them, because they have not been in a similar situation and because they are nervous. The instructions say clearly (at least in the eyes of the test constructor): “*write the answer in Finnish*” - and the test-taker answers in the target language. The answers are good ... but how should the assessor assess?

Instructions in the speaking tasks are crucial. This part of the test is carried out in a language studio and the test-takers have only a very short time for each task. If they do not react in the appropriate way quickly, there is not enough time. This situation is unlike those in normal life where one can ask if one does not understand a question or an instruction.

Naturally, the instructions are continuously being developed by the test designers. Despite the improvements there will perhaps never be a system without gaps.

3.5. Pros and cons of the YKI

It seems that the YKI test is becoming more and more popular among Finnish adult language learners. As an adult, it is the only national test where it is possible to show one's skills as a language user. It can be described as a demonstration exam, where the learner can prove his/her knowledge of languages regardless from where the knowledge was acquired. In some fields, the certificate can even be required in order to be able to proceed higher in one's career.

The YKI test is graded with precise numerical information which is appreciated and approved by employers. Compared with the assessment of portfolios, a certificate where the grades are based on a certain numerical scale may be seen as more objective and reliable. As every field of language is graded separately it is easy for the employer to get a picture of a job seeker's skill even if he/ she himself/ herself cannot speak or understand the language. In practise, the evaluation on the certificate is, however, mainly assessed by one person only - hence, again, it leaves a question of reliability and objectivity.

If portfolio work is considered as a possible replacement for tests and exams, a test can be claimed to have certain disadvantages: an exam is always an exam. It is not an authentic situation as such and already the fact that the test takes place at a language studio makes it artificial. The test is constructed by a relative small number of people. Planning a test is by no means easy. From the teacher's point of view it seems that the level of difficulty may differ from test to test.

In addition, a test is always an on-the-spot situation. The main problem with this test as with all tests which test the knowledge at a given point of time is: the test taker needs not only knowledge but also luck and a good physical and mental condition. He/she has to know the tasks and has to have practised tasks similar to those in the test. The test favours a certain type of test-taker: good knowledge, quick reactions, legible handwriting, some empathy (what does the task require from me?), ability to understand and follow given rules.

4. Procedure of the pilot study

4.1. Approach

The aim of the study was to find out whether it is possible to assess the level of a student's language skills on the basis of his/her portfolio. The comparison was made from two points of views: both language skills and the contents of the portfolio were observed. On one hand, it was studied whether the level of language skills, that can be obtained in the test, can be "foreseen" from the results of different exercises in the portfolio: writing including structures, grammar and vocabulary already gives a picture of the skills, although students often use a dictionary, along with grammar books etc., to complete exercises. On the other hand, the contents of a portfolio (topics selected etc.) may give an idea of which topics could be preferable for the student in the test. There is always a chance that someone's vocational vocabulary or special interests compiled in the portfolio appear e.g. in the reading comprehension task of the test. If a student concentrates on a few special topics or fields in his/ her portfolio, he/ she may benefit if these topics occur in the test, too.

4.2. Procedure

In the study, the following steps were taken:

1. In order to get a more objective picture of the students' language skills each teacher read portfolios compiled by the students of her colleague. Thus it prevented background knowledge from affecting the study. The final product of a student was compared with the aims and wishes of the student documented in the personal study plan. In the personal study plan used in MAKK, the question of which level a student wishes to achieve in the actual YKI test is asked. This point was also noted when studying the contents of a portfolio.
2. The teacher gave an overall assessment of a student's skills and tried to evaluate all fields of language (reading, writing, grammar and vocabulary, text

comprehension, listening and speaking) as far as they were included in the portfolio. The evaluation was done according to the language skills descriptions of the YKI system.

3. The test papers of each student were looked at and the taped material listened to. There again, the teacher tried to evaluate the results of different tasks according to the descriptions given by the test designers.
4. An overall comparison was made. It was studied whether the contents of the portfolio was extensive enough to cover all fields of language, i.e. whether it showed the same skills as the YKI test. It was also estimated whether the results of the portfolio work and the test correlate.
5. The test results of a real test assessor were looked at and compared with the evaluation given by the teacher.

The study was time-consuming but rewarding. The next chapters introduce the data used in this study (4.3.) and the main results that can be drawn from the data (4.4.)

4.3. Description of the data

12 completed portfolios were chosen in the pilot study, four from each group. One of the portfolios is presented in Appendix 3 as an example. The contents of the portfolios varied a great deal due to each teacher's personal style of guidance. In one group, the students had concentrated only on written exercises and had not included any oral exercises in any form in their portfolios. Due to this fact, nothing could be said about the student's speaking skills. In the other, students tended to leave out the self-assessment part of the portfolio. This part does not tell about the language skills in itself as it is written in Finnish, but it could help the teacher to draw his or her own conclusions of the skills if they are assessed by the student him/herself. In the third group, personal study plans were not included in the portfolios, which meant that the contents of the portfolios did not necessarily reflect the needs and aims set at the beginning of

the course. In order to be able to say something of a development of a student, it is important to see the starting point documented in a study plan.

All material was on paper, there was no recorded material in these portfolios. Members of one particular group had, however, commented upon their participation in speaking exercises either in the classroom or in the language studio. This group was also instructed by the teacher that including listening or speaking skills does not have to mean recorded material, but can be added in a written form in the self-assessment part. This was done due to the fact that students often find recording difficult and frightening.

On the whole, writing was popular; portfolios included examples of CVs, short essays, presentations of jobs and work, letters, postcards, invitations and vocabulary lists. However, writing was restricted to just a few topics, mostly descriptions of everyday life, work, home and hobbies, which could be seen in the titles of students' written work: *My dream house*, *My working day*, *My work*, *Curriculum vitae* etc. Topics like Finland and environmental questions, society, social relationships, health and tourism occurred in portfolios, but only occasionally. Most of the written exercises were narrative stories, and different styles and registers were a rarity. Some functions of the language, though, occurred very often, e.g. invitations, perhaps again due to preparing for the YKI. However, it has to be born in mind that the skills of the students at the elementary level are not good enough to make a difference between different styles and registers.

In addition to writing exercises, there was often evidence on collecting the grammatical rules and structures that were found important to an individual. When studying the grammatical structures in the writing exercises more closely, it could be noticed that a student tended to repeat the same mistakes from one exercise to another despite corrections by the teacher.

Together with writing, reading comprehension was also often included. Students commented and assessed these tasks to widen their vocabulary, but also to encourage them to read difficult texts without dictionaries and to help to endure gaps in understanding. Texts had sometimes been translated, mostly from English into Finnish. These texts were very often articles from magazines or brochures of special interest. Some students had included a book review in their portfolios, as well.

When studying the portfolio as a whole, final products were, after all, mostly distance exercises that had been given as an assignment for the whole class. However, there was also quite a lot of evidence on the student's own ideas and imagination. Some students had clearly found their best ways of learning, which could be seen in using visual material, photos and pictures, e.g. together with word lists and essays.

The students use the portfolio as a means of self-assessment and documentation of their personal achievements and the improvement of their general language skills. But as mentioned before, portfolios are also a means of bringing the special needs of each student into the syllabus. The vocational aspect is one of the main objectives in the language courses in MAKK, and this aspect can be clearly seen in portfolios, as well. With very few exceptions, descriptions of work and special vocabularies were generally included in portfolios. Some parts of a portfolio can even be used as "toolboxes" at work.

In the self-assessment part of the portfolios, very many students had been amazingly well aware of their strengths and weaknesses in different fields of language. Ironically, the weaknesses had not been practised in the portfolio. On the whole, the idea of portfolio was clear to most students. The main objective was to learn the language, to get inspired and to stay motivated. The goal, that the portfolio should remind the outsiders of its owner, was achieved. To make

the portfolio look nice, students had shown, besides language skills, other skills, too - like computing, drawing and artistic skills.

5. Results of the comparison

On the whole, most fields of the language skills could be compared by studying portfolios and the YKI test side-by-side. One was able to predict the results in reading comprehension and writing in the test. Also the competence of vocabulary and grammatical knowledge showed quite clearly, especially in writing exercises. Thus, one positive aspect in portfolio building is that it allows the combining the evaluation of different skills, unlike the YKI test, where the subtests are tested and also evaluated as their own separate sections. One may, naturally, not be certain of how much of the vocabulary is the student's own knowledge and how much comes from dictionaries or perhaps from other members of the family. In that sense, the YKI test gives a more reliable picture of the skills. It is, for instance, possible to avoid difficult structures when writing for the portfolio, but this is not allowed in the grammar parts of the YKI any more. But, on the other hand, on very rare occasions we are not allowed to look words up in a dictionary in real life. In addition, some grammatical structures in the YKI test are tested in cloze tests, and the role of techniques in these kind of exercises is fairly significant. For instance, in quite many cases, students seemed to know grammatical points like articles or prepositions when they did the writing part in the test, but they were could not fill in the gaps in the test.

In general, writing skills in portfolios and in the exam correlated quite well. If a student had concentrated on writing in a portfolio, it showed in the test, too. On the whole, writing in portfolios was better than in the test. This seems quite natural since both time and access to use any helping sources of information in the exam is limited. Practising the writing skills in a portfolio did not, however, always guarantee success in the test. One interesting finding of the comparison was that there were some students who had a lot of written material included in

the portfolio, but they could not produce much, if anything, on paper in the test! Without knowing the background, it is hard to give reasons for this. It can only be guessed that they either ran out of time in the test or found it too difficult to write without dictionaries, or were not motivated enough to take the test .

Again, maybe due to absence of dictionaries, there were a few cases where the level of writing was much lower in the exam than in the portfolio. There were cases where a student had made clear spelling mistakes and errors in homophones, such as *hear/ here*. Moreover, opinions of a colleague were asked because of the big difference in grades given on one hand by the teacher and on the other hand, the assessor. In these cases, the teacher would have given a lower grade than the assessor. On the whole, the assessment the teacher gave after studying the exam papers matched the ones given by the assessor.

One problem concerning the portfolio is how to incorporate along speaking skills. Very few of the students in the pilot study had included speaking or comprehension of speech in the portfolio. Yet, some had assessed their own success in the language studio or speaking exercises in the classroom. Speaking is after all a skill that the teacher can assess by observing the student in the classroom over a longer period of time. Problems in assessing arise if the assessor of the portfolio is an outsider, someone else than the student's own teacher, as it was the case in this pilot study. As the basis of the assessment of the student's skills in the classroom, it is often enough that speaking is mentioned in the form of self-assessment. It does not necessarily have to be in the form of cassettes and tapes. Compared with the YKI test, the studio part of the YKI gives quite a good picture of the student's speaking and comprehension skills. These skills seem to correlate quite clearly with the skills shown in the classroom.

There were clear cases of students who practised certain topics or structures for their work, and those students did well in these particular parts in the exam, too. For example, a female student who, because of her job, wanted to concentrate on numbers, dates and time expressions, did not do very well in oral comprehension or reading comprehension, except the parts where numerical information was given. Her portfolio lacked comprehension tasks totally.

6. Conclusions

The purpose of this study was to find out whether it is possible to draw any conclusions on the basis of portfolios of how well a student may do in the YKI test. In theory, the portfolio work could give the same kind of information as the YKI test. In practise, it rarely covers all the fields of the language, which, on the other hand, the YKI does. The biggest difference can be found in speaking and listening comprehension which can seldom be found in portfolios. There are no big differences in other fields of language.

The intention of the study was not to find out whether portfolios could replace the YKI test – the idea is that both portfolio and the test prepare for the needs of language side by side. To assess the student's work is always problematic and difficult, no matter if it was a test or a portfolio. As the YKI test is evaluated section by section, it is not possible to make an overall view of the student's skill which, on the other hand, could be done when assessing a portfolio. This kind of assessment of portfolios depends of course on the resources and willingness of the evaluating teacher. For the assessor of the test it would be too time consuming. At the moment, this is not even possible as the optical forms are assessed by a machine which means that the assessor is able to see certain parts of the test only.

Portfolios are assessed with written verbal assessment rather than with grades. An example of written verbal assessment given by the teacher is included in the example portfolio (see Appendix 3). The problem is, however, that this kind of assessment can be interpreted in a different, even in a wrong way, by the student, or even worse, by an outsider, e.g. an employer. At least from the employers point of view, the YKI certificate is a clearer piece of evidence. Not many employers have time and energy for reading through portfolios, or they may even not possess the language skills themselves. Yet, there are several factors that can have an effect on the results of a test, e.g. stress, sickness and other factors in personal life which leaves a question. For the students who do not to take a test just because they do not get good results in them, a portfolio is a suitable alternative.

Problematics of the assessment leaves a question whether a portfolio should be assessed section by section, as it is done in the YKI test. This study showed quite clearly how the YKI test covers all the language skills needed (oral comprehension, speaking, text comprehension, writing, grammar, structures and vocabulary). Despite guidance (see Appendix 2), portfolios very rarely cover all these. If the written verbal or numerical assessment of a portfolio was given separately in every field of language, it could encourage the student to include the missing parts, i.e. evidence of oral comprehension and speaking skills, in the portfolio. Hence, portfolio based assessment and the YKI certificate would support each other better.

Experience and further development of portfolio work could help in improving the contents of a portfolio. MAKK is planning to develop the pilot study further in the near future and as portfolio building is included in almost every language course, the experience will grow.

IV German Experience
Bildungswerk der DAG e.V.,
Hamburg, Germany

The German Experience

By Peter Rother, Matthew Anders and Henning Prüß

Approach

The German approach to the project was in at least one important respect different from the Finnish and British approaches. Other than in Finland and Britain portfolio assessment is not a common method, in fact it is hardly known at all, the exception being artists, photographers, graphic designers etc., who collect samples of their creative work to show to potential customers, agents or employers. In language training, as well as in vocational training in general, assessment is usually based on tests, oral and written.

Another difference lies in the fact that in Germany there are no national standards for language competence. The standards used are various, e.g. the “VHS Zertifikat”, a certification system used by the *Volkshochschule* (“people’s highschool”), the “Goethe Sprachdiplom” by the *Goethe Institut* (for German only), the standards of the London Chamber of Commerce and Industry Examinations Board (see Appendix 5).

This situation of course makes it difficult to compare language skills of people with different language certificates, especially for potential employers who expect certain language skills of their future employee. This has led to a number of efforts to make certificates comparable, non of which has so far been very successful.

A different approach could be to document the acquired language skills directly, not by way of a certificate alone, which brings the portfolio into the discussion. The question is whether this method could become an accepted way of documenting language skills in Germany, as it obviously already is in Finland, Britain and the United States.

The question of acceptability concerns different target groups:

- Students of foreign languages
- Young learners
- Adult learners
- Language teachers
- Employers and others who have to judge language skills as entry requirements

The main objective therefore for the participation of Bildungswerk der DAG (BW) in the project was to examine the value of portfolio-building in Germany and to establish the extent to which these methods are acceptable to students, teachers and employers.

Procedure

The following steps were taken:

- introduction of language teachers into the methodology of portfolio building and portfolio assessment
- development of student portfolio models for German learners of English as documentation of their individual language competence
- development of a teacher portfolio
- discussion of the method with learners, teachers and employers.

Introduction of language teachers into the methodology

During the first year of the project four colleges were involved as “pilot colleges“ (Frankfurt, Offenbach, Munich and a private language school in Hamburg).

Workshops were organised in Frankfurt and Munich. The aims of these workshops were:

- Introduction of teachers into the methodology

- Involvement of teachers and students in the project
- Identification of language courses as pilot groups

None of the teachers involved had heard about Portfolio Assessment before, and some were rather reluctant to use the method. This is in part due to the fact that towards the end of a training course there is usually a high pressure on students and teachers which has to do with the external examinations (Chamber of Commerce and LCCI) and also with administrative work for the Labour Authority which funds the courses.

Development of student portfolios

As an institution for vocational training BW focused its approach on vocational language skills in different sectors. During this project period we worked with three different pilot groups:

1. Adults on a business training course who spent a four weeks' work placement in the UK (Offenbach),
2. A group of trade unionists who take part in a language course "English for European Works Councils", which was part of a Leonardo project (Hamburg),
3. A group of learners at the DAA Munich between the ages of 15 and 22 taking part in a "Grundausbildungslehrgang für Jugendliche" (basic commercial training course for teenagers).

The planned impact of this approach on the students was in general to develop models for portfolio development, and in particular:

- for Group 1 to use their portfolios to document their level of English towards potential employers in UK companies for their work placements as well as potential employers in Germany after finishing their course;
- for Group 2 to develop portfolios as a (self)assessment tool of language skills in the area of trade unions and works councils;

- for Group 3 to stimulate the students to take responsibility for their own learning and to view learning as an on-going process and to use their portfolios to document their level of English towards potential employers when applying for a training position in a German company.

Reports on portfolio building

Group 1:

The group consisted of 10 learners from DAA Offenbach (Frankfurt) on a full-time training course "Euro-Business-Assistant", who went to Weymouth on a four-week work placement which formed the final stage of their course. They spent one day per week in college for English language tuition and assessment. The German students had been prepared for their assessment both by an English teacher who had visited the group in Offenbach in February 97 and by their English teacher in Offenbach.

All learners were assessed in England at NVQ Level 2 (see Appendix 6). They took away their completed portfolios as evidence of their competence in English.

Group 2:

Group 2 was an English language course for trade union officials and works councillors which was organised as a combination of face-to-face tuition and self-study. The whole course ran for one year. It started with the first of three one-week language courses (face-to-face), after this there was a self-study-period of ca. 5 months, where the students worked on tasks set to them by the language teachers to whom they reported back. This was followed by the second course (one week) and this again by the next self-study-period. The whole programme finished with a one-week course in England in March 1998. There were three groups of students, one in Austria, one in Denmark and one in Germany, which were in contact all the time and exchanged experiences, information and opinions in the common target language.

The idea of portfolio production blended very well with the project's productive approach, which was clearly apparent in the letter-writing, the memo-sending communication activities as well as the task of creating a subject related glossary for works councillors. Therefore it did seem like a very 'natural' addition to the course's syllabus.

The students were encouraged to produce a number of materials, ranging from descriptions of their workplace to presentations of the workings of the European Works Councils Directive, and to communicate these materials to their colleagues in Germany, Denmark, Austria and the United Kingdom. All materials were collected for the course documentation as well as by the students individually, in order to make a selection for every individual portfolio.

Some participants made extensive use of this, two to such an extent that the resulting portfolios have turned out far too massive.

Portfolios include examples of

- Letters/Emails
- CVs
- Reports
- Presentations
- Discussions
- Exercises partly on paper, partly as recorded video material.

The selected portfolios all contain samples of work and some substantial information about their creators. What all of them are lacking, however, is a clear structure. It is obvious that the three basic questions students should ask themselves prior to this work were not answered in a satisfactory manner:

1. What do I create a portfolio for?
2. Which essentials should be included?
3. Who is the addressee of the portfolio?

Therefore, all of them seem to be less than presentable. With the exception of two, the portfolios handed in by this particular group do not cover background information or work samples from areas 'outside' the WoCoCom language course, not counting the CVs included. The group of students understood portfolio production to be an integral part of the course, and did not see its importance beyond the course. From the two extensive stacks of material handed in by two participants, we do learn a lot about their professional background, and their command of English. With some extra effort, concise portfolios can be made from this rather cryptic material. The apparent weaknesses of the portfolios handed in are best explained in connection with the set-up of the language course:

The approach for this group was slightly different from the first one, as no formal assessment was required here. As the students were very interested in working towards a target, in this case towards increasing their language competence with regard to international communication between trade unionists and works councillors, it was obvious that they had some difficulty 'seeing the point' in producing portfolios for themselves. Those of the students who did produce a portfolio used it as a means of self-assessment and documentation of their personal achievements and the improvement of their (rather specialised) language skills.

In some cases it may be that a student will use his or her portfolio to justify the effort (and costs) of their participation to their employers. Furthermore, as the didactical approach for this group was based on a combination of face-to-face and distance learning, technology played an important part here. The use of email for communication between students and tutors and the Internet as a

means of information and research in the area of trade union issues was an integral part of the project.

Group 3:

The group consisted of 45 German learners between the ages of 15 and 22 from the DAA Munich. The participants, who were taking part in a “Grundausbildungslehrgang für Jugendliche” (basic commercial training course for teenagers), were split in three groups and were studying a range of commercial subjects including computing, business studies, bookkeeping, typing skills, German and English. Each subject was allocated approximately 4 teaching hours per week. This training course began in September 1997 and ended in July 1998.

Approach

Fundamental to the pedagogical approach was the independence and self-direction of the learners in their portfolio-building. As many of the participants had had difficulties with English at school, stimulating the students to take responsibility for their own learning and to view learning as an on-going process have also been important aims. Consequently the emphasis during this pilot project has been on the value of toolbox/process portfolios.

Although the majority of the learners have already found employment (or a training position) for the end of the course it was hoped that a number of the students might also use the portfolios as a proof of their language skills when looking for work and that the contents might delineate their vocational competence. Accordingly the value of showcase portfolios will also to be considered.

Portfolios are unlikely to become a general method of assessment in Germany. As such, the value of portfolios as assessment tools was not considered with this pilot group.

Comments

Initial attempts at portfolio-building have been promising and generally well received by all involved. The learners have mostly been interested in this method of learning and have been co-operative in the process.

Early attempts at developing toolbox portfolios encountered some difficulties in that the learners felt uncomfortable with the self assessment aspect and seemed highly dependant on any direction given by the teacher. This response is undoubtedly related to the relatively young age of the learners and their previous, more structured learning experiences at school, as well as the teacher's own lack of experience in working with portfolios.

Whilst most students have completed an amount of high quality work, it would be an exaggeration to claim that all learners have taken over responsibility for their own learning. Early attempts at a relatively free, unstructured approach seemed to have left the students somewhat confused and lacking in direction. In some cases motivation for a task that "won't be graded anyway" was a problem.

However these early difficulties diminished in later weeks and the learners became more comfortable with the idea of portfolio-building. Most learners developed their own portfolio structure and were increasingly able to work alone. Clearly the visible process of compilation began to motivate a number of learners and increasingly they introduced their own ideas into their work. It is highly likely that several learners will take their portfolios with them after the completion of the course and will continue to process material for the language

portfolio. Portfolios have already demonstrated their effectiveness in starting learners on the ladder of life-long learning.

Up until now, none of the learners have used their portfolios as a marketing tool at job interviews, although a number have expressed an intention to do so. Whilst the impression that such portfolios will make on German employers has yet to be seen, discussions with employees from the Job Centre suggest that the portfolios may be a useful additional means for demonstrating an applicants competencies. Portfolios have also shown themselves to be excellent tools in the development of teamwork in the groups. Learners are keen to draw on each others ideas and knowledge and then subsequently incorporate these into their own portfolios.

Conclusions

Experiences were discussed with students and teachers who had been involved in the project and with some representatives of enterprises in Germany who take on students on work placements and who are also potential employers. The evaluation of these discussions led to the following conclusions.

On the basis of the experience of the two years of the pilot project the following conclusions can be drawn:

- The PA method is not common in Germany and it will be difficult to establish it as a formal assessment method in this country, as far as training courses are concerned which require a formalised examination according to the rules of examining and funding institutions. As mentioned above, the pressure on students towards the end of their courses is very high and the additional work and time spent on the portfolios was not received well, neither by the students nor by their teachers.

- Employers in Germany are used to look at examination results on reports and the person him/herself when it comes to the decision of employing a person. Portfolios could be used as an additional means to document language skills to a potential employer, but they will never replace formal qualifications and reports.
- Where courses are concerned which do not involve a formal examination, there is a completely different picture. Especially for language courses which put their focus on communicative skills (like the course described above under Group 2) and which follow a task- or action-oriented method, portfolio assessment seems to be a very fitting method.
- At present it seems sensible to integrate portfolios in language courses which are not part of a vocational training scheme but in courses which do not foresee a formal examination and where Portfolio Assessment is “in line” with the prevalent teaching method. With this kind of courses (e.g. group 3) experiences regarding portfolio-building have been very positive and the use and development of portfolios will continue beyond the current pilot project. Numerous ideas relating to the future use of portfolios have come forward from learners, other teachers and employees from the Job Centre. It is particularly hoped that in the future there will be increased interaction between different subjects.

For example it has been suggested that portfolios could be presented in CD-ROM format rather than as a paper-based folder and that their development could be carried out in co-ordination with the student’s computer training. Equally interesting is the idea of linking portfolios with international ‘practice business companies’ whereby groups in different countries correspond with each other regarding their ‘virtual businesses’, drawing on their English, German and business studies skills.

From the German experience it is evident that the production of portfolios may be especially helpful for students who seek to compensate professional or personal disadvantages. These may be either the result of a lacking

professional training, or of a substantial lack of self-esteem, both of which are often closely related. Concerning the target groups in Germany, there were considerable differences; the trade unionist/works councillors' group was able to relate to a professional training and background as well as experiences which did not seem to make any further assistance in building up their self-esteem necessary. This is certainly an important point concerning this particular group's reluctance to the method. The Munich students, however, obviously grasped the chance of improving both their self assessing capabilities, and, in effect, their biographies, quite readily, giving their personal portfolios the rank of an 'official' assessment and a tool for proving capacities.

**V Portfolio for Assessment in the UK
Against National Standards**

**The Flexible Learning Centre, Weymouth College,
England**

Portfolio Assessment in the UK Against National Standards

Philada Rogers
Flexible Learning Centre

1. INTRODUCTION

1.1. Personal Experience

This article draws upon experience as a language trainer and assessor in industry, and an external verifier for a UK awarding body. I have worked with the concept of language portfolios for the purpose of demonstrating competence since 1993. My first project was the management of a pilot assessment scheme for National Vocational Qualifications (NVQ) at Level 1 in German, where employees of a manufacturing company produced portfolios over a period of six months to evidence their competence in listening, speaking, reading and writing skills. I have worked on similar programmes ever since.

I have also worked as a teacher and assessor on NVQ programmes with teachers and trainers. These programmes involve both a taught element and assessment via direct observation of teaching/training sessions, assignments, simulations and other evidence. The teacher portfolio which I submitted as part of the project contains 2 Units of an NVQ training qualification. This aspect of my work has developed my assessment skills. This experience is broadly typical of language portfolio application in the UK.

1.2. UK Team Socrates Project Work

During the SOCRATES project, relevant portfolio work with my colleague Diane Brewer (language trainer) on behalf of the Department of New Technologies and Flexible Learning (Weymouth College) in the UK has involved:

- two qualifications: the National Vocational Qualifications (NVQ) at Levels 1-3, and the Foreign Languages At Work certificate (FLAW) at Level 2 (see 2.2. and appendix 6)
- three languages: English, French and German
- four sources of learners

1. visiting German students (NVQ English Level 2) on work experience for one month; assessment role only.

2. lorry drivers (FLAW French Level 2) employed by a local fashion company. Fifty hours of training over a period of 6 months on college premises. The drivers regularly drove in France making deliveries to shops and expressed very specific work-related language needs. Their portfolios included a reference section, termed “toolbox”.

3. employees (NVQ 1 French, FLAW Level 2 French) from a range of departments of a foundry. On-going training programmes with individuals and small groups as required by the company, with 1-2 hours' tuition per week on company premises.

4. employees (NVQ 1-2 German) from a range of departments of a fibreglass weaving company. On-going training programmes with small groups, 2-3 hours' tuition per week on company premises.

This article considers the approach underlying the development of language portfolios (content, preparation and presentation), training and assessment procedures in the four contexts outlined above. These learner groups displayed difference characteristics and needs, discussed below.

2. PORTFOLIOS

2.1. Methodology and Outcomes

The portfolio approach requires a departure from the traditional external examinations, and a move towards learner-centred, flexible learning and assessment. This reflects contemporary trends in education.

The flexibility of content encouraged by the use of criterion-referenced assessment can have positive backwash on the learner and increase her/his sense of empowerment and motivation. Lack of structure, clarity and understanding can undermine the learner and the trainer. This point is supported by anecdotal and personal evidence of lack of interest in developing new approaches, lack of support and preparation, or at worst, fear of change.

A positive outcome of the flexibility and individualisation is that learners can include specialist technical or work-related language into a portfolio. Thus, authentic documents and experiences at work can be used to credit language competence and gain a national award. This has been particularly beneficial in the 3 local companies involved in project work. An example is the different language used for telephonists/secretaries dealing with calls and visitors, and for methods and quality engineers in a specialist foundry dealing with technical specifications.

The individualisation makes significant demands upon learner and trainer time. Portfolio-based assessment of languages and other vocational subjects has been criticised for the huge increase in paperwork and record-keeping for learner and trainer. This has been our experience.

Development work in the UK on portfolio-based assessment has been largely driven by government policy and funding in response to a perceived need to

improve UK economic performance. The NVQ system of vocational qualification in over 150 occupational areas (including languages) has been driven by government funding, rather than learner or trainer motivation at grassroots level. Learners and trainers have not been consulted about the implications of developments.

2.2. Type and Purpose

Differences exist in both style and purpose of language portfolio across the project partners. The UK experience has related largely to language portfolios as an assessment tool for nationally recognised vocational language qualifications. Some development has been carried out on reference sections of portfolios, i.e. “toolboxes”.

The principle and most recent qualifications used are NVQs. We have also delivered the FLAW qualification, which defines competence and skill areas in a simpler manner than the NVQ system. This facilitates learner and trainer use. The FLAW qualification is delivered only by one awarding body (London Chamber of Commerce and Industry Examinations Board) and is not a government-initiated system. It has remained popular because it has been in existence longer than NVQs and is better understood by users. NVQs may eventually acquire this status. The FLAW system was useful to us as a pre-NVQ award at a beginner level (50 hours’ of taught time).

3. NEW ROLES

3.1. Learner Involvement

As mentioned above, lack of preparation can result in negative reaction. It was apparent that the German Offenbach group (see 1.2.) were very anxious about assessment by persons hitherto unknown to them. This was overcome to

some extent by induction by the assessors. Learners in UK-based groups had similar anxieties to a lesser degree. The presence of an assessor during a speaking assessment tends to heighten anxiety.

Once learners see their work credited they tend to act positively and can show increased confidence, self-esteem and motivation. Our experience is that learner involvement in the planning and compilation of portfolios is beneficial. We have also learnt that lengthy induction using jargon is best avoided. The most successful approach in our groups has been to use practical examples of achievement, i.e. do relevant tasks and then demonstrate how they match the portfolio requirements.

Learners can also benefit from the on-going nature of portfolio compilation. Positive effects seen include increased attendance, bringing work-related documents and preparing for presentations, visits with clients. Some learners reported a preference for a portfolio-type assessment as this avoided the stress of preparing for and taking traditional examinations on set dates. Where learners fully understood the process, they tended to be proactive in planning and completing suitable tasks.

3.2. Trainer and Assessor Responsibilities

The practitioner's role may cover facilitation of learning plus assessment. In this case, the language competence of each learner is well known. If the role is one of assessment only (eg, our experience with the German group from Offenbach), it is more difficult to be certain of the extent of learner competence. Information may be available from self-assessment checks or written evidence, for example. With our German learners of English we found that some were capable of Level 3 NVQ, but did not have the time to assess at this level with access on 1.5 days only. Accurate previous knowledge of competence will give learners fair access to appropriate achievement.

The UK system of portfolio assessment of language leading to nationally-recognised qualifications requires that assessors be trained for their new responsibility. This is costly and time-consuming. Even with 5 years' experience of using the NVQ system, I still find it clumsy in structure and have difficulty at times in interpreting the national standards (they are revised every 3 years).

4. ISSUES, NEEDS - WAYS FORWARD

4.1. Factors to Consider

A summary of factors which impact upon the process:

- preparation and previous experience of the learner and the trainer/assessor in portfolio-based work
- timescale and access for learning and assessment
- resources and media for learning and assessment
- individual learner needs and individuality of portfolios (course content for groups, assessment, "signing off" achievement)
- responsibilities of learners and trainers in assessment, administration and portfolio presentation
- purpose of portfolio (personal motivation, assessment, toolbox)
- development time for new approach (structure, training, resources)
- increase in paper (administration and portfolio evidence).

4.2. Ideas for Ways Forward

We have identified the following in response to the above factors:

- creation of portfolio exemplars and effective models for reference and guidance by new users. These could be in template format for access via information and communications technologies (ICT).
- reduced assessor profile during assessment. The recording of evidence on audio or video cassette can achieve this. Videoconferencing can achieve virtual work exchange between learners and provide authentic assessment material. As videoconferencing becomes a normal medium of business communication, this may provide further evidence of competence. Similarly, international learner communication by videoconference may provide evidence of language competence via simulated interview or meeting situations.
- use of ICT to increase access routes to assessment. One possibility is the development of distant assessment centres, with assessors available on demand
- training of trainers and assessors in delivery of portfolio-based assessment. This could include training in use of ICT (e.g. e-mail, videoconferencing, remote assessment using shared/downloaded Internet-based materials).
- reduction in paperwork and administration. The development of magnetically and/or electronically-recorded/generated media for assessment could reduce the paper in portfolios. The use of videoconferencing in working situations for “real” communication could generate video-recorded evidence. Security and confidentiality are issues to consider. E-mail application for assessment are currently being considered in the UK by awarding bodies.
- introduction of plain English into UK NVQ standards. This could be achieved when producing exemplars and portfolio skeleton formats for use by learners and assessors. This is especially important if learners, especially non-native speakers of English, are to actively use the UK portfolio assessment system.

4.3. Proposal

Many of the ways forward appear to lie in the adoption of ICT. This technology has been used by publishers for resource and materials production to great effect. Perhaps it is now time to consider application of new technologies to learning and assessment methodologies. Given that we have established contacts and now understand our partners' needs in portfolio assessment, it would be possible to extend project work along the lines described above.

Appendix 1

PORTFOLIO STUDENT GUIDE

WHAT IS A PORTFOLIO?

According to one definition a portfolio is a systematic and meaningful collection of student work. A portfolio exhibits the student's efforts, progress, and achievements in one or more areas during a certain period of time. A portfolio is also a collection of the student's work for evaluation thereby enabling student-centered learning and evaluation.

WHY A PORTFOLIO?

A Portfolio helps you to decide and set personal goals thereby individualizing teaching and learning. In addition a portfolio increases your self-directedness. You will learn how to take responsibility for your learning and become a more independent learner.

A portfolio also develops your ability for self-evaluation, because it enables reflection of your achievements and progress in your studies. You will learn to appreciate your work as well as yourself as a learner; as a result a more positive attitude towards learning will follow.

In addition a portfolio also assists your skills in processwork. The final work is a result of long-term work and studies. This will help you to set goals for future individual studies.

For your teacher a portfolio provides a more meaningful picture of your growth by providing information for evaluation from a variety of tasks. A portfolio helps the teacher to decide which pedagogical methods work best with a certain student or a group of students.

QUESTIONS FOR STUDENTS' SELF-EVALUATION

- What is your best work, and why?
- Why did you choose to make that piece of work?
- What problems did you encounter?
- How did you solve your problems?
- How does your best piece differ from your worst piece of work?
- What goals did you set for yourself?
- How well did you accomplish them?
- What are your goals for the future?

TIPS FOR THE STUDENT

1. Define your goals:
 - what do you want to tell about yourself
 - for what purpose do you want to make your portfolio
 - remember that you accomplish your portfolio for yourself not for the teacher. Choose your pieces of work according to your own interest.
2. Choose the form of your work:
 - choose the topics and the forms of your work, for example:
 - a written work, an interview, a poster, a video cassette.
 - remember that your portfolio is a proof of your skills.

3. Presentation

- present yourself in the target language
- define your aims: What are your aims at work and in your life in general?

4. Keep a course diary and write comments on your pieces of work

- what did you do?
- how long did it take?
- a description of the process

5. Feedback from you peers during the learning process.

- sharing the experiences
- the group support
- relaxed atmosphere

6. The selected pieces of work

- choose your best pieces of work
- why did you choose these pieces?
- remember a varied range of samples

7. Description of the selected work

- why did you choose this piece of work?
- what was it like to accomplish it?
- what did you learn?

8. Final thoughts

- evaluation of the process: how does it feel now?

9. Presenting the portfolio to others

- encouraging and supporting feedback

10. External evaluation

- as a criteria for qualifications

Appendix 2

OPISKELIJAN OPAS PORTFOLION MAAILMAAN

Mikä portfolio on?

Portfoliolla tarkoitetaan omaa salkkua eli opiskelutehtävien kokoelmaa, joka edustaa monipuolisesti osaamistasi. Portfolio ei ole vain töiden kokoelma, vaan töihin liittyy aina valinnan perustelua ja itsearviointia.

Miksi portfolio?

Portfolion tarkoituksena on tuoda esille vahvuutesi ja kehittymisesi kurssin aikana. Siihen valitut työt edustavat kielitaidon eri osa-alueita ja useampia aihealueita. Portfolion laajuus ja käyttötarkoitus sovitaan kurssin alussa opettajan kanssa.

Portfolio-työskentelyllä pyritään oppimaan oppimiseen, itsetunnon kehittämiseen ja itseohjautuvuuden kehittämiseen. Portfolion tarkoituksena on että

- opit analysoimaan, valikoimaan ja asettamaan itsellesi tavoitteita
- opit etsimään itsellesi sopivia työtapoja ja opiskelutehtäviä
- opit etsimään itsenäisesti tietoa ja soveltamaan sitä
- opit tarkkailemaan omaa oppimistasi ja sen tuloksia
- tiedostat omat vahvuutesi ja kiinnostuksen kohteesi
- pohdit sekä yhteistyön että oman yrittämisen merkitystä

Miltä portfolion tulisi näyttää?

Portfolio on omistajansa näköinen. Se voi olla kansio, levyke, videokasetti, valokuva-albumi jne. tai näiden yhdistelmä.

Miten kokoan portfolion?

1. Kirjaa ajatuksiasi loki-vihkoon eli opiskelupäiväkirjaan.
 - Kirjoita päällimmäiset ajatukset, sekä hyvät että huonot.
 - Mitä opit päivän/ viikon/ opiskelujakson aikana?
 - Mitä et oppinut/ ymmärtänyt ja miksi?
 - Mitkä opiskelutavat ja –tyylit ovat sinulle helppoja? Mitkä taas vaikeita? jne.

Jo se, että kirjoitat muistiin, mitä kurssin aikana on tehty, auttaa sinua muistamaan kurssin sisällön myöhemminkin ja pystyt seuraamaan oppimistasi. Voit liittää loki-kirjasi portfolioosi tai tehdä sen sisällöstä eräänlaisen tiivistelmän.

2. Valitse tietyin väliajoin tehdyistä tähänastisista harjoituksista mielestäsi paras. Joukossa on aina töitä, jotka ”nousevat esille”: opit juuri tästä tehtävästä eniten, se oli miellyttävä tehdä tai suoriuduit siitä mielestäsi hyvin. Valittu työ voi olla myös keskeneräinen tai jopa epäonnistunut, pääasia on, että olet oivaltanut jotain.

- Perustele valintasi eli kerro, miksi valitsit tämän tehtävän!
- Arvioi omaa osuuttasi tehtävän suhteen:
Oliko se juuri sinulle hyvä harjoitus? Miksi?
Kuinka paljon panostit tehtävään? Oletko panokseesi tyytyväinen?
Mitä opit harjoituksesta? jne.

3. Valitessasi portfolioon tulevia töitä huomioi kurssin alussa itsellesi asettamasi tavoitteet. Seuraa henkilökohtaista opiskelusuunnitelmaasi (HOPS) ja pyri toteuttamaan tavoitteesi (esim. ammattisanastojen opettelu portfolion sisällä). Pidä huoli, että portfoliosi sisältää näytteitä niin vahvoilta kuin heikoiltakin kielen osa-alueilta. Älä tukeudu vain tietyntyyppisiin harjoituksiin, esim. kirjoitelmiin, vaan

yrityä huomioida kaikki kielen osa-alueet, myös puhuminen ja kuullunymmärtäminen.

4. Portfoliossasi tulisi olla
 1. HOPS-lomake
 2. Sisältöesittely
 3. Sovittu määrä töitä, jotka edustavat osaamistasi monipuolisesti
 4. Töiden valinnan perustelu
 5. Itsearviointi