



Students' Beliefs about Portfolio Evaluation and its Influence on Their Learning Outcomes to Develop EFL in a Spanish Context

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ABSTRACT

There is a significant world-wide apprehension concerning perceived deficiencies in university students' performance and a resulting decrease of knowledge level and competency development. This paper analyses the benefits of using a portfolio as a means of evaluating student progress and the beliefs from which students draw their learning and motivation, a key issue for the incorporation of former curricular elements into the European Space for Higher Education consolidation process. Two studies conducted at two universities in Spain to explore students' opinions of portfolio use surprisingly revealed that students found effort and daily work as the main beneficial aspects for their learning and motivation. Successful replication of this study in diverse contexts would imply that portfolio implementation can be a powerful instrument to empower students' motivation to learn. Other results related to portfolio use will also be discussed.

KEYWORDS: Evaluation, portfolio, effort, European Space for Higher Education, active methodology, English Studies, students' beliefs, competence.

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I. INTRODUCTION: THE PROCESS OF EDUCATIONAL CONVERGENCE

The developmental process of the European Space for Higher Education (ESHE here) began with the Sorbonne Declaration of 1998, and it was subsequently amended by the following declarations: Bologna in 1999, Prague in 2001, Berlin in 2003, Bergen in 2005, and London in 2007. A reorganization of the university system is being undertaken in order to build up a joint European model. One of ESHE's main objectives is to create a flexible map of studies that promotes international student mobility, labour opportunities, and higher international competition. This educational endeavour requires the coordination of diverse curricular elements, such as methodological techniques and evaluation systems. The new system is structured to fit into the European Credit Transfer System (ECTS), which is based on the convention that 60 credits measure the workload of a full-time student during one academic year. This system has already been established in many European member states and is regarded as a primary component in the process of ESHE consolidation, which is to be completed by 2010.

A new educational principle has also been drawn for universities: to adopt a formative perspective which should generate competent, informed, responsible, reflective, critical and adaptable professionals. Also, the emphasis of learning has shifted from the teacher to the learner, who becomes an active agent capable of developing competencies under guided self-learning. This formative principle affects most prominently the process of evaluation, and is characterized by a continuous and democratic style of evaluating. As Batalloso (2000) explains, a democratic evaluation means having the possibility of making a diagnosis of malfunction and needs, and to take corrective action in all elements that occur within the educational system. Also, a democratic evaluation is not only carried out by a teacher, but also by students and even outside committees. Self-evaluation is emphasized in order to make the learners aware of their process of learning and to be honest about their work. From a style of evaluation in which students have to expose factual knowledge, there is a shift to ascertain what students are capable of doing with that knowledge across competencies; and tests are designed to measure what students know, rather than what students do not know (Cornella, 2002). A formative evaluation makes the teacher and learner cooperate actively from the beginning to diagnose how correctly the process of learning is going in order to ensure good results. A continuous assessment then requires the use of different instruments for evaluation, so the traditional paper and pencil final exam is replaced or complemented by other instruments, such as portfolios and interviews.

This process of change, which has meant a top-down approach put forward by the Council of Europe, has received special attention from universities and a considerable budget is currently being employed to achieve the appropriate level of European consolidation. However, there are two problematic issues in many contexts. First, it seems that the time given for consolidation is short. Actually, students participating in these two

studies have used the portfolio system for the first time. Prior to this, they were used to doing the traditional final written exam. Second, not much focus has been placed on students' opinions about what this change means to them, and their beliefs about what optimum learning is. This paper addresses this second issue, and specifically aims to reveal what students' think about the use of portfolios in two subjects of English Studies, Grammar and Didactics. Their opinions will serve to determine whether the use of portfolios leads to a better learning and higher motivation.

II. PORTFOLIO AS AN INSTRUMENT FOR EVALUATION

Evaluation is a very important part of the teaching-learning process because it affects the whole process, as Pérez-Paredes and Rubio (2005: 606-607) make clear: "Evaluation considers the teaching and learning program as a whole, and seeks to obtain feedback that can serve different purposes for the different agents in education, from teachers to curriculum designers".

The following table shows some ways of evaluation proposed by the European Higher Education Area (EHEA here):

Concepts	- Control of the theoretical concepts related to the subject - Clarity in the description of the theoretical concepts requested - Application of the theoretical concepts to real texts in English	There will be an exam at the end of the semester with a grade between 0 and 5	50%
Portfolio	Teachers will pay attention to: - Originality - Spelling and presentation - Bibliography used - Structure and conclusions - Critical argumentation and evaluation of the ideas	- Submission of the materials requested by the teachers and of the practical exercises - It will be submitted at the end of the first and the second semester	30% (15% the activities of the first semester and 15% the second semester)
Attendance and participation	- Active participation in the classroom - Participation in the debates organized in the virtual campus - Participation in the group practices	- Teacher's observation and notes	20%

	- Preparation of the exercises proposed in the classroom or in the virtual campus		
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Table 1. Evaluation procedures according to the EHEA.

A portfolio consists of a folder in which students keep several tasks to accomplish certain objectives and competencies selected by teachers; it may help students develop their written skills, as Celce Murcia and Olshtain (2000:159) indicate: "The portfolio, which is usually an ongoing collection of different writing assignments kept by the student in a folder or workbook, has become an important concept in developing writing skills and in giving teachers a fairer and more perceptive way to evaluate".

O'Malley and Valdez Pierce (1996) differentiate three types of portfolios: "Showcase portfolios", "collection portfolios" (also called "working portfolios"), and "assessment portfolios". In this paper we are referring to the use of assessment and collection portfolios, that include all the tasks, drafts or final versions of all student works.

The portfolio is a very effective tool to show students' progress and their achievements. Following Brown (2001: 418), the portfolio can include essays, compositions, poems, book reports, video or tape recordings, and any other activity that teachers decide to include. Martínez Lirola and Crespo (2007: 5) make clear that the portfolio is a useful tool in Higher Education because it is composed of materials which show students' progress, the degree of assimilation of the contents and the ability to develop certain competencies previously established by the teachers. In this sense, the portfolio is an authentic form of evaluation because it establishes a link between theory and practice. Besides, following Colen et al. (2006: 108), a portfolio evaluation is very reliable if it seeks the following objectives:

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

However, using portfolios requires a set of requirements:

- It requires compulsory tutorials.
- It requires more effort for lecturers than traditional lessons.
- It requires that students are able to use certain tools, including ITC.

- It requires having generic capacities and abilities that can be used in any learning situation (using different sources of information, knowing how to organise information, etc.).
- It requires a new attitude on the part of lecturers and students.
- It requires technological and didactic infrastructures.

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

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

The implementation of new ways of evaluation in which the students are the protagonist of their evaluation process and in which the exam is not the only grade is an essential requirement of the EHEA (Race, 2003: 78). This new form of evaluation must have very clear criteria; it has to be related to the competencies that students have to accomplish during their learning process (they must have been previously established by the teachers). In addition, it should promote interaction between students and teachers so that the different criteria and activities can be improved during the evaluation process if students or teachers consider it necessary. Following Brown (2003: 26-27) the reasons for evaluating students are the following:

- Establish a relation of feedback so that they can learn from their errors.
- Classify or grade their understanding.
- Motivate them and focus their understanding.
- Help them apply abstract notions to practical contents.
- Guide their choices.

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

- Choose tasks according to the main learning objectives and competencies.
- Define the evaluation criteria clearly.
- Design a pattern of self-evaluation so that students can perform different tasks and evaluate their results.
- Let students select the best tasks and write a report explaining why they have selected those tasks before they come to an individual tutorial.
- Evaluate students' tasks according to the criteria that have been previously established, which are known by the students and by the lecturer.
- Talk about the portfolio in an individual tutorial.

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

III. LITERATURE REVIEW

Portfolio evaluation has been used in North America and in some European countries for over a decade, and there has been a lot of research regarding portfolio use carried out in different fields of study. In Europe, many of the studies have taken place in universities under pilot ECTS system implementations. Concretely in Spain much of the literature has been dedicated to the analysis of the situation and to foresee the eventual effects of educational consolidation (Alba, 2005; Cruz de la, 2003; Gata, Bautista & Mora, 2003; Hernández, 2003; Pereyra-García, Sevilla & Luzón, 2006; Sánchez, 2006; Sánchez & Zubillaga, 2005; Teichler, 2006; etc.).

In order to examine studies reporting the advantages and disadvantages of portfolio evaluation we need to refer again to studies conducted in different learning fields. To quote a few, McWethy and Gradwell, 1998; Jensen and Harris, 1999; Wright, Knight and Pomerlau, 1999; LaBoskey, 2000, etc. have reported the benefits of portfolio use but also have highlighted the incompatibilities that it may entail for some contexts where class ratios are elevated (among the weaknesses of portfolio is the amount of time required to plan the activities, to correct them and to give students some feedback in tutorials or in class) and the consequent conflict with traditional university structures.

Although most studies report positive results of portfolio use, much research is still needed, especially contextualizing the fields where particular learning experiences may occur. That is the case of English Studies where some courses, such as those related to grammar, may have a lesser scope of opinion for students and require different portfolio elaborations. Scarce literature is reported within the field of English Studies, and because the influence of portfolio evaluation can be studied from different perspectives (methodological side effects, teachers' roles and attitudes, learners' opinions, learning efficacy, etc.), the options to find similar studies are drastically reduced.

Martínez Lirola (2008) offered a general vision of portfolio evaluation in a third year grammar course in English Studies. In her study she found a positive correlation between portfolio evaluation and learning results. Apple and Shimo (2004) also found portfolios encourage learner autonomy and increase linguistic competence while assessing the learning process over an extended period of time in foreign language courses.

Referring again to studies about students' opinions, most of them have used students' official opinion questionnaires designed by the University as a way to evaluate teachers' classroom practices, with questions such as the following: Is your teacher punctual?, Does your teacher explain clearly? Or do you receive information regarding evaluation at the beginning of the academic year? (see Molero, 2007). Moreover, some lecturers gather students' opinions by using specific questionnaires designed as the main way of getting feedback in pilot studies (see Apple & Shimo, 2004; Martínez Lirola, 2008).

IV. OBJECTIVES AND METHOD OF STUDY

This paper includes two studies made in two different Spanish universities where students use portfolios for the first time as a means of evaluation. Both studies aim to ascertain whether students believe the use of portfolios has enhanced learning efficacy, compared to traditional methods of evaluation where a final written exam was the main evaluation instrument. Their motivation and opinions about portfolio's advantages and disadvantages have also been surveyed.

Three courses were selected for the study: English Grammar III (University of Alicante), English Didactics, and Applied Linguistics (University of Huelva). These subjects were taught by the authors of this paper during the spring 2007 semester and fall semester of 2007/2008 academic year. At the end of the course two questionnaires were administered. Questionnaire 1 included open-ended questions asking about students' opinions regarding the use of portfolio learning efficacy, and their motivation and attitude about it. Questionnaire 2 was only administered at the University of Huelva and asked about the development of competencies and learning efficacy of specific contents of the course. As recommended in this type of studies in which opinions are surveyed, a Likert-type scale was used. Qualitative data was then obtained from questionnaire 1 and quantitative data from

questionnaire 2. The analysis of the data has been made observing the frequency of responses which have been organized according to semantic similitude.

A total of 55 students participated in the study, 30 from University of Alicante and 25 from University of Huelva. For all students portfolio evaluation was new, except for 8 Erasmus students from England, Germany and Belgium that had had that evaluation procedure before. Because the treatment has been slightly different in both contexts, and also the courses have a very different profile within English Studies, two different sections are going to be examined.

V. STUDY 1: PORTFOLIO EVALUATION IN ENGLISH GRAMMAR III (UNIVERSITY OF ALICANTE)

English Grammar III is a core subject taught in the third year of English Studies. Portfolio evaluation was implemented in the spring 2007 semester, and three units were taught out of the ten units that compose the course syllabus. This semester the subject was worth 5 ECTS credits. The portfolio was worth fifty percent of the final grade and the other fifty per cent was for the final exam in June. In this way, students could apply all the theory and practice they had learned with the different activities of the portfolio to the final exam. The portfolio had three parts: a student presentation in which they introduced themselves and explained the reasons why they had decided to study English Studies, three tasks to evaluate the three units of study (see below) and students' self evaluation.

The first task covered unit seven which dealt with "compounding" in English. It was worth twenty percent of the final mark. Once students had studied the bibliographical references presented in class, they were asked to prepare an outline including an exhaustive classification of English compounds. In addition, students had to write an essay presenting the main characteristics of the classifications of each author seen in class.

The second task covered unit eight which dealt with "derivation" in English. It was worth fifteen percent of the final mark and was prepared in groups. Students had to work with the main characteristics of some prefixes and suffixes in order to present them orally in class.

The third task covered unit nine which dealt with "shortenings" in English. It was worth fifteen percent of the final grade. To prepare it students were asked to read several texts in search of examples of clippings, blends and acronyms. After that, they also wrote a brief summary describing the characteristics of each word.

This course had two groups. Group 1 was composed of 30 students that participated for portfolio evaluation, and Group 2 had 27 students that only took a final exam as the only instrument of evaluation at the end of the semester. In the first group all students passed the course with the following grades: 3 students got an A, 21 got a B and 6 got a C. On the contrary, out of the 27 students that were evaluated with an exam, only one got an A, 4 got a B, 11 got a C and 11 got a D.

The only reason why this manner of evaluation was not implemented during the whole academic year and for all students is because the teacher had 146 students in the first semester, which would have made impossible to cope with all the corrections and tutorials that portfolio requires.

VI. STUDY 2: PORTFOLIO EVALUATION IN ENGLISH DIDACTICS AND APPLIED LINGUISTICS (UNIVERSITY OF HUELVA)

The design of this study differed slightly from study 1 due to contextual circumstances. Since the number of students taking English Didactics and Applied Linguistics was very low ($n=21$ and $n=9$ respectively) it was not appropriate to have an experimental and control group partition. Both courses took place during the Fall 2007/2008 semester and were credited 5 ECTS. The programs were identical in their methodology and evaluation and only differed in their syllabi. Students were in the third and the fifth years of English Studies.

The evaluation system for both courses followed the same procedure. Students could choose option 1 or 2, depending on their availability to attend the course. Option 2 was for students that were not able to attend at least 80% of classes and had a final exam as the only instrument for evaluation, which is the traditional system in Spanish university contexts. This option was chosen only by one student. Option 1 had four instruments for evaluation: a portfolio (65%), a teaching unit (10%), a final exam (20%), and active participation (5%). A minimum of 50% was required to pass the course.

For option 1, the final exam mark had to be over 50% to pass the course. This was thought as to make sure that students had a final review and also to prove that the level exposed in portfolios were similar to the exam. The portfolio contained five parts with the following objectives and marking systems (maximum 10 points mark):

1. Abstract: To be able to synthesize in less than 200 words the contents of the unit. (1 point).
2. Mind-map: To be able to structure and expose the main elements of the unit. (1 point).
3. Reflections: To reflect upon the contents, draw conclusions, and produce critical judgments based on internal and external criteria. (5 points).
4. Written task: At the beginning of every unit students were given a written task to search for information and answer some questions to review previous knowledge, create interest and raise motivation. (2 points).
5. Works cited: To learn to list the sources used and develop heuristic competency. (1 point).

In sum, option 1 would entail more work and effort for students than option 2. Obviously, this type of continuous assessment with opportunities to correct work and

attitudes during the learning process gives students a better chance to pass the course than having just one final exam.

Three instruments were used to collect data. At the end of the course, students were administered a four Likert-scale questionnaire to fill out. A neutral marking (neither agree nor disagree) was eliminated to force a choice and to avoid faking. The questionnaire has 26 items grouped into two parts: general competencies and specific competencies. The main aim was to know students' opinions about the learning efficacy of the course.

A five-question, open-answer survey was also administered to acquire information about the advantages/disadvantages and positive/negative aspects of portfolio use. Finally, students' official marks were used to complement their opinions about the learning process.

VII. RESULTS

This section includes results from both studies. All numerical and non-numerical data obtained are going to be interpreted qualitatively, as the general literature recommends in educational research.

Students were asked in the first item of the open-answer questionnaire if they had found the portfolio evaluation system to be positive. All students in Huelva, except for one that marked a "yes and no" response item, agreed, and when asked about changes three students suggested the elimination of the final exam, one student suggested the inclusion of oral expositions and two students requested a reduction in workload. The results in Alicante were even more uniform because all the students found this manner of evaluation to be very positive, and they were adamant that no changes to the formats of the course and the portfolio were necessary.

The questionnaire continued by asking for their opinions about the advantages and disadvantages about portfolio implementation. The following list enumerates the main advantages pointed out by students, which appear according to frequency of answers of the category items. These are the results in Huelva:

1. Daily-basis work.
2. Feedback from the beginning and opportunities to improve.
3. Learn more.
4. Less pressure than having just one final exam.
5. Development of a more critical awareness towards the learning matters.
6. All contents in the course are included for study.
7. Learn to organize.
8. Other advantages:
 - a. It's long-term learning.
 - b. Learn to summarize.
 - c. Learn to draw mind-maps.
 - d. Learn to write abstracts.

- e. Teacher knows students better.
- f. Learning by discovering.
- g. Good for self-learning.
- h. Encourages research.

All items from Alicante appeared in at least 15 surveys, or at least 50% of the students that were assessed with the portfolio. The following list is composed of student responses from Alicante:

1. Development of students' critical ability and creativity through bibliographical research.
2. Long-term learning.
3. Possibility of applying theory to practice, which allows students to observe that their current learning outcomes are useful and necessary for their future educational endeavours.
4. Clear relationship between the tasks to be done and the competences to be achieved.
5. Increase of students' motivation.
6. Better grades.
7. Daily class-work and effort is taken into account.
8. Fair way of evaluation because there is not just one final grade.

Based on the results taken from both lists, we can now assert that frequent, periodic work, development of critical thinking skills and continuous assessment are three aspects that the students surveyed insisted were the most beneficial regarding portfolio evaluation. It is interesting to note that some of the answers give evidence of the development of a higher awareness towards the learning process, such as number 4 in list 2, when students mention the competencies to be achieved, or number 8 in list 1 when students indicate the advantages of learning by discovering or the encouragement of doing research. The following paragraphs offer some representative commentaries from students that make clear the main advantages they find in this means of evaluation:

Student 1: "Being evaluated with a portfolio is one of the best ways to study a subject since the student works with the theory step by step and not only for the final exam. The fact that the lecturer considers students' daily work with portfolio seems to me a way of motivating students to learn".

Student 2: "To prepare a portfolio, the teacher and the student have to be implicated in the teaching-learning process, both parts have a huge importance".

Student 3: "Using portfolio makes students an active part of the learning process; they are motivated to learn and their learning process is progressive".

Student 4: “Using portfolio motivates me due to the variety of activities and because I can practice every topic of the programme and see a connection between these activities and the ones of the exam”.

Student 5: “I think the portfolio is a good and innovative way of evaluation, not only because the student has to deal with the real sources of information and use different bibliographical sources but also because he/she has the opportunity of being creative. I have never felt so confident to give my opinion based on my work and the research done in the different activities proposed”.

Students’ responses about disadvantages compose the following list for Huelva’s study:

1. It takes up a lot of time.
2. It requires hard work.
3. Corrections about reflections can be very subjective.

In Alicante’s study, similar responses were obtained:

1. Doing the activities is time-consuming.
2. It involves more effort.
3. The activities must be handed in before the deadline.
4. It is difficult to keep up group work.

Since a portfolio is not only an instrument of evaluation, but also a methodological procedure, this paper also aims to discover what perceptions students have about the learning efficacy of the portfolio use. When students in Huelva and Alicante were asked about the development of their general competencies, the following table shows the results that have been obtained in the Likert-scale questionnaire with these values: 4= totally agrees; 3= agrees; 2= disagrees; 1= totally disagrees.

	Mode	Average
I have improved my abilities to analyze and synthesize information	3	2,88461538
I have improved my abilities to organize information	3	3,03846154
I have improved my abilities to search for academic information on internet	3	2,88461538
I have a wider perspective about what teaching is	4	3,5
I am more critical about different teaching issues	3	3,26923077
I am able to apply theoretical knowledge to teaching practice	3	3
I can write an abstract	4	3,46153846
I can draw a mind-map	4	3,46153846
I can explain reflections about what I have learnt	3	3,42307692
I can include references on my work	3	3,26923077

Table 2. Students’ beliefs about the development of general competencies in Huelva

Students were also asked about their perceptions of specific competencies they had developed. The following results are taken from specific contents of the English Didactics course in Huelva. These questions were not asked at the University of Alicante due to the fact that English Grammar III is a different type of subject:

About specific competencies: LEARNING	Mode	Average
I have learned about different methods of teaching languages	4	3,44444444
I have learned about adolescent classroom behaviours	3	3,22222222
I have learned about learner styles (visual, auditory, kinaesthetic)	3	3,27777778
I have learned about the Spanish Secondary Curriculum	3	2,61111111
I have learned about different syllabi	3	3,22222222
I can now prepare a lesson plan	4	3,33333333
I know how to teach speaking activities	3	2,77777778
I know how to teach listening activities	3	2,72222222
I know how to teach pronunciation (phonetic chart)	3	3,11111111
I have learned how to teach by means of new technologies (websites, programs)	3	3,33333333
I have learned how to evaluate	3	2,94444444
I can now design an exam	3	2,94444444

Table 3. Students' beliefs about the development of specific competencies in Huelva

Finally, the questionnaire included a third part about the development of attitudes. The following results were collected:

	Mode	Average
I have felt motivated by this subject	4	3,67385515
I have put a lot of effort in this subject	4	3,86488538
I have attended most of the classes	4	3,72153745
I would recommend that other students take this course	3	3,43923562

Table 4. Students' beliefs about the development of attitudes in Alicante

	Mode	Average
I have felt motivated by this subject	3	3,15384615
I have put a lot of effort in this subject	4	3,38461538
I have attended most of the classes	4	3,46153846
I would recommend that other students take this course	3	3,26923077

Table 5. Students' beliefs about the development of attitudes in Huelva

In order to have a more realistic result about students' beliefs and learning efficacy of portfolio evaluation, we have also used the students' official marks. 28 students chose the portfolio evaluation system in Huelva's study. 25 passed the course with an average mark of 78 (out of 100; 12,14 standard deviation). 3 students failed the course because they had less than 50% in the final exam.

VIII. DISCUSSION

After analyzing the results of both studies, we have found that portfolio evaluation can benefit different aspects within the educational realm. Six thematic categories have been identified:

- I. Development of attitudinal competencies
- II. Curricular elements: methodology and evaluation
- III. Learning efficacy
- IV. Learning awareness
- V. Development of writing and critical thinking skills
- VI. Development of autonomous learning habits

I. Development of attitudinal competencies

If we assume that students' knowledge levels have decreased in the past years and one of the contributing reasons is that students invest most of their time in leisure activities, then frequent, periodic portfolio activities can be a powerful instrument to cope with this problem and to encourage students to adopt a daily work habit. It is interesting to note that students that used the portfolio system for the first time reported the fact that it requires hard work as a disadvantage, whereas students that were used to compiling portfolios (Erasmus from Germany, England and Belgium) never identified that as a disadvantage. This suggests that portfolio evaluation is connected to a more intense academic dedication. The hypothesis that students' time management is improved with portfolio evaluation is confirmed when most students in the sample complain that *it takes up a lot of time*.

Therefore, students realize that daily work together with other methodological procedures, such as tutorial revision and constructive feedback, are strongly connected to obtaining successful results. This accurate and realistic picture allows students to perceive their educational development as a valuable process which ends up cultivating positive attitudes towards learning, empowering effort and promoting a high sense of motivation, as results in Tables 4 and 5 show. In the long term, these phenomena could become integrated into both their personal and professional set of values.

Nevertheless, this positive outcome of portfolio evaluation can turn negative if student workloads are not measured taking into account student workloads in other courses, probably resulting in procrastination and ultimately in withdrawal from the class.

II. Curricular elements: methodology and evaluation

Students have also reported that active methodology leads to a better learning experience. On the one hand, as one student suggests: "To prepare a portfolio, the teacher and the student have to be implicated in the teaching-learning process, both parts have a huge importance". The role of both is to collaborate, rather than to control or to uniquely serve the teacher's requirements. The fact that self-learning is promoted supports the active

participation of students and the guiding, counselling and sometimes prompting role of the teacher.

On the other hand, the perception of a seamless, continuous process gives students the possibility to continuously correct and consequently improve their work. Also, as discussed above, students emphasize that this type of methodology allows them to be more aware of the whole process of learning, which enables them to have a “clear relationship between the tasks to be done and the competences to be achieved”. It is important then to specify in the course syllabus all procedures and guidelines for the students to follow; otherwise, students can experience anxiety or decreased motivation when presented with a vague, unclarified task.

Students' perceptions about the evaluative process in both studies are also positive. They indicate that this system is less prone to provoking anxiety than having just one final exam, and it is also “more fair”. In this sense, students also believe that portfolio evaluation leads to achieving better grades, which is confirmed by the official results in both studies. Two possible causes for this have been identified in the study, first, when students “see a connection between these activities and the ones of the exam”, adding content validity to the instrument, and second, the aforementioned effects of frequent, periodic work together with increased effort.

However, as a student points out, “corrections about reflections can be very subjective”, a fact that is difficult to avoid when dealing with qualitative data. For that reason, it is strongly recommended to make clear in the course syllabus what are the evaluation criteria for all the evaluating instruments and how all items are going to be marked. With this provided, the assessment of qualitative data can even be perceived as beneficial by students. A student comments in the Alicante study that students have the “opportunity of being creative. I have never felt so confident to give my opinion based on my work and the research done in the different activities proposed”.

III. Learning efficacy

Apart from “learning more”, students in both studies believe that portfolio evaluation leads to “long-term learning”. Some students explain that portfolio use provides them with the opportunity to apply theoretical issues to practical matters, and that gives a sense of realness to what they are studying. Theoretically, having critical reflections as an important part of the portfolio activities promotes a commitment to active learning and personal involvement in the contents of the course: “Using portfolio makes students an active part of the learning process; they are motivated to learn and their learning process is progressive”.

Students were specifically asked questions regarding learning efficacy. Tables 2 and 3 clearly show that students perceive that portfolio evaluation is strongly connected to learning efficacy. Data obtained from the questionnaire corroborates the fact that generic, instrumental, cognitive and attitudinal competences have been developed, according to

students' beliefs.

Regardless of student opinions, official marks reported are relevant to show a successful connection between the learning process and results.

IV. Learning awareness

It is interesting to note that portfolio evaluation helps students be more aware of the learning process and pedagogic issues. For instance, when students point out a "clear relationship between the tasks to be done and the competences to be achieved", they are using technical terms as *competences* and showing learning awareness. Another sample where students' learning awareness can be seen is a student reporting that portfolio evaluation develops "a more critical awareness towards the learning matters".

The active role in which students participate and the transformation from a teacher-centred approach to a learner-centred approach, for example substituting or subtracting lectures for active, participatory tasks, has been noted by students as well.

V. Development of writing and critical thinking skills

Many studies have confirmed the strong correlation existing between portfolio use and the development of writing skills (i.e., Apple and Shimo, 2004), which has also been reflected in the results of the studies presented in this article. Learning to summarize, to draw mind-maps, to write abstracts, etc. (see Table 2) as well as other tasks has been viewed as positive by students in both types of questionnaires administered (closed and open-answer questionnaire).

Students in Alicante believe that they go through a process of "development of critical abilities and creativity through bibliographical research". This is consistent with the theoretical assumptions of formative evaluation, in which the process aims to ascertain what students have learnt, rather than what they have not learnt. A development of critical thinking skills can be facilitated by allowing students' reflections and creativity be an important aspect of students' learning. This is not necessarily in conflict with the acquisition of knowledge or rote memory learning.

VI. Development of autonomous learning

The use of a portfolio in the classroom is connected with autonomous learning, i.e., with a kind of learning in which students assume responsibility for the completion of tasks. In other words, students adapt their tasks to their own timing and to their own way of learning (Rico Vercher & Rico Pérez, 2004: 15). Autonomous learning requires a new attitude from students because it demands more effort than traditional methodologies and it is also necessary that students are able to use new learning tools such as TIC. Moreover, students are expected to develop different capacities, which they can use in any learning situation, such as the following: the use of different sources of information, the distinction of primary

information from secondary information, finding different bibliographical references appropriate for the topic of study, etc.

The students' answers to the surveys indicate that they are autonomous learners, i.e., they are students with the following competencies: they are able to organise their work or make a decision on their own; they can organize a realistic work plan and achieve the plan; they contrast different sources of information, they understand these sources and summarize the information that is useful for their tasks; in other words, they set their own goals and do what they have to do to in order to achieve them; they are willing to learn new things and to apply their new learning to new situations; they take responsibility for their role in the learning process; finally, they are also able to evaluate their own work.

At the beginning, some students were not very comfortable with the idea of preparing a portfolio, as they had to work in groups, prepare written and oral tasks, work daily, go to the library, etc. As a result, the completion of the different activities that were included in the portfolio constituted a change in the teaching-learning process. Consequently, students were confronted with not only individual tasks but also group tasks as well, which allowed them to exchange ideas, debate topics, and learn from each other. At the end of the semester, the results obtained were very successful and all students were pleased with this manner of working and learning.

The different activities in the portfolio helped students to become more critical thinkers due to the fact that they had the opportunity to express their own opinions and to discuss them in groups. This aspect of the portfolio was very innovative because it compelled students to take a much more active role in the learning process than they had done before, which helped them become autonomous learners. The portfolio also favours autonomous learning because it measures individual students' progress rather than the product.

IX. CONCLUSIONS

This paper has included two studies carried out at two Spanish universities: the University of Alicante and the University of Huelva. They have attempted to provide students' perspectives about the advantages, the disadvantages, and the learning efficacy of using a portfolio as the main instrument of evaluation. The results of this study corroborate those of studies conducted in other learning fields that students find the use of portfolios more beneficial than harmful to their learning outcomes, whether considered from a procedural or productive perspective. *Effort empowerment* and *daily basis work* have been the two most beneficial aspects that students have found, which are signs development of attitudinal competencies. Learning efficacy and competency development have also been recognized as strong characteristics of portfolio evaluation. Official marks confirm this belief, denoting in this case a sign of cognitive development.

All the students that have been evaluated by means of a portfolio share the commonality that they have learned much and that they have observed a close relationship between theory and practice in every activity they were requested to do. They are aware that they have learned step by step and they see working on a daily basis as something positive as opposed to working only a few days before the exam. All this has made them feel active in the teaching-learning process, leaving behind the passive role that the traditional manner of evaluation has often fostered.

Despite being a very helpful learning tool, the portfolio has some disadvantages from the students' perspective. Most students considered the process of completing each task in the portfolio very time-consuming, which implies that it is not always possible to have the portfolio updated; moreover, they found it difficult to meet the other group members to prepare the activities that the group work entailed. However, they all agreed that the experience gained and the results obtained were worth the effort.

One of the main positive aspects in the implementation of a portfolio was the students' attitude, because the success of the portfolio depended on it, i.e., students became more confident, competent and knowledgeable. They developed a receptive and positive attitude, which was essential in helping them prepare their portfolios in a creative way.

In the new model of European Education at the University level, the teaching-learning process represents an undertaking in which both students and teachers share responsibility for learning outcomes. This change is likely to affect evaluation, which must be understood as a dynamic process totally integrated in the teaching-learning process. The use of portfolios fits perfectly in the philosophy proposed by the EHEA because evaluating students in this way reinforces the idea that the central element in the new paradigm is the student and his/her learning process.

Evaluation must be an accurate reflection of the activities carried out throughout the year. Therefore, the traditional exam is unable, by itself, to fulfil the needs of the EHEA model. Moreover, there should be a clear and direct relationship between the tools employed in evaluation and the results students obtain. Consequently, alternative ways of evaluation such as the portfolio reflect the learning process as a whole and consequently democratize the evaluation process.

Innovative ways of evaluation (including portfolio use) involve students assuming new roles in the teaching-learning process. Consequently, students assume more responsibility and become active participants in the classroom, which promotes development of their critical thinking skills. Furthermore, new ways of evaluation such as the portfolio promote students' autonomous learning, which implies that they have an active role in the teaching-learning process.

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APPENDICES

APPENDIX 1: Survey to analyse the main positive and negative aspects of portfolio use for students in the core subject English Grammar III

(THIS SURVEY IS ANONYMOUS)

1. Are you happy having been evaluated with a portfolio? Why?
2. What are the main positive aspects that you observed in the use of a portfolio as a student?
3. What are the main negative aspects that you observed in the use of a portfolio as a student?
4. Would you recommend this way of being evaluated to other students?

APPENDIX 2: Survey to analyse the main positive and negative aspects of the portfolio for students in the core subject English Didactics and Applied Linguistics

(THIS SURVEY IS ANONYMOUS)

EVALUATION

1. Where are you from?
2. Has the evaluation of this course been new for you? If not, why?
3. Do you like how evaluation is usually done in your country? Why?
4. Do you find it positive to have had a portfolio as a main evaluation instrument? Why?
5. What are the advantages/positive aspects that you find using a portfolio?
6. What are the disadvantages/negative aspects?
7. Would you recommend a different way of evaluating this course? If yes, please, explain.

METHODOLOGY

8. Do you think that the methodology of this course has been appropriate? Why?
9. Do you think that the methodology of this course fosters learning?
10. What would you change about the methodology of this course?
11. Order the following teaching methods according to your preference: group work, individual work, pair work, debate, computer classroom work, lecture, oral interaction around the class.
11. Order the following elements according to what you consider more influential to your motivation to learn: teacher, classmates, class methodology, evaluation.