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Practical Implications of a Constructivist Approach to EFL Teaching in a Higher Education Context

Montserrat Iglesias Xamaní

School of Hospitality and Tourism Management CETI-UB, University of Barcelona, montserrat.iglesias@cett.es

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Practical Implications of a Constructivist Approach to EFL Teaching in a Higher Education Context

Abstract

Traditional pedagogical approaches may not be the best way to cater for the specific needs of learners in higher education settings, particularly those of university students with special expectations and professional prospects. The question of enhancing language learning awareness as a means of fostering the acquisition of a foreign language certainly is a key issue for future professionals within the tourism industry. This article analyses the introduction of portfolios in the English class through an action-research experience which was carried out among students of a Bachelor's Degree in Tourism and Hospitality Management in Spain. The participants were asked to express their opinions on their progress in terms of key competences, the ability to reflect critically about their strengths/weaknesses, and the importance of taking an active part in their learning process through peer/self assessment.

Keywords

oral competence, EFL, assessment, portfolio, higher education

Introduction

The higher-education community in Europe has been preparing in the last few years for the March 2010 introduction of the European Higher Education Area (EHEA), as the main objective of the Bologna Process. Since its inception in 1999 the EHEA has aimed at ensuring more comparable, compatible and coherent higher-education structures across Europe through the European Credit Transfer System (ECTS), thus fostering student mobility and employability.

According to the Final Report of the 2008 Bologna Seminar, 'Development of a Common Understanding of Learning Outcomes and ECTS', the shift to ECTS may represent a paradigm change towards a more learner-centred approach to education involving pedagogical methodologies based on constructivism. Current educational practice is largely based on the works of a number of authors such as Piaget and Vygotsky (Moll 1990), as constructivist learning is usually associated with students' active participation in meaningful activities.

To sum up some of the main aspects of constructivist learning and teaching according to Wilson and Cole (1991), Lebow (1993), Jonassen (1994), Ernest (1995) and Honebein (1996), learning environments and tasks are relevant, realistic and contextualised, and educators play the role of facilitators of knowledge. Multiple perspectives and representations of content are encouraged, and knowledge complexity is reflected in an emphasis on conceptual interrelatedness. A wide range of activities, tools and settings are provided to promote metacognition, reflection and awareness, sometimes through autonomous exploration and through errors, which are regarded as part of the process.

This enables students to construct knowledge, integrate it and transfer it to new situations, taking their prior knowledge and experience as a basis, and to benefit not only from interaction and collaboration with their teachers and peers, but from a wide range of resources to develop their critical thinking, among other key competencies. In this process, students are considered to be responsible for their own learning (Von Glasersfeld 1989).

More specifically, this pedagogical conception should entail decentralising the classroom as a learning context and preparing the students for autonomous, lifelong learning, as well as incorporating competencies in curricula to promote knowledge transfer in a professional environment. Moreover, this should be accompanied by a coherent assessment conception (Colén, Giné & Imbernón 2006).

The introduction of the EHEA created great expectations at the University of Barcelona's School of Hospitality and Tourism Management CETT-UB (EUHT CETT-UB), which offers vocational and higher education in Barcelona (Spain). This was the opportunity for applied research aiming at pedagogical innovation. More specifically, the field of study that seemed to require full attention because of its inherent complexity was the assessment of oral communication in English as a Foreign Language (EFL). The importance for the hospitality and tourism industry of training proficient English-speaking professionals who can communicate with different English-user profiles (such as customers, providers and colleagues) is clear, particularly for employment in non-native English-speaking tourist destinations.

In the academic year 2007-2008, two groups of 18 students of EFL participated in a research project for one term (four months), an experience totally integrated into the curriculum of their three-year degree in tourism. This research aimed to analyse the use of the portfolio as a teaching-learning-assessment tool to develop the oral competences of tourism students at EUHT CETT-UB.

The results would have implications for the curriculum design of EFL credits within the new Degree in Tourism and Hospitality Management, a four-year bachelor's degree implemented in the academic year 2009-2010.

Theoretical Framework

One of the key concepts in this research was communicative competence. An examination of different models of communicative competence, starting from that of Canale and Swain (1980), revealed that the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages (CEFR) seemed best to meet the requirements of our approach, as it is common in higher-education settings around Europe. According to the CEFR, published by the Council of Europe in 2001, "competences are the sum of knowledge, skills and characteristics that allow a person to perform actions. Communicative language competences are those which empower a person to act using specifically linguistic means" (p9).

Communicative competence is composed of linguistic competencies (including lexical, grammatical and phonological knowledge and skills), sociolinguistic competencies (concerning the socio-cultural conditions of language use) and pragmatic competencies (related to the functional use of linguistic resources). Communicative strategies are needed to carry out both written and oral communicative activities, such as message production and reception, interaction and mediation (i.e. the use of limited linguistic resources to process information and handle meaning equivalences). Thus, language users turn to communication strategies to plan, execute, assess and repair their utterances.

Oral language is a natural code that does not follow the artificial rules of written language, yet has some phonological, lexical, syntactic and text organisation features, albeit idiosyncratic (Calsamiglia & Tusón 1999; Luoma 2004). It would not exist without the pronunciation of sounds, bearing in mind that such sounds are not connected in a lineal way; rather, they are structured in groups according to a hierarchy in relation to suprasegmental features (the intonation, stress and rhythms of speech). This must be taken into account in language pedagogy.

A relevant aspect in foreign-language acquisition is pragmatic fluency, defined by House (1996) as a "dialogic phenomenon that combines both pragmatic appropriateness of utterances and smooth continuity in ongoing talk" (p228). On the other hand, one of the main aims when working on learners' pronunciation should be the comfortable intelligibility of their speech to enable efficient communication (Kenworthy 1987): it is not just a question of pronouncing sounds accurately, but also being able to grasp speakers' intentions. Hence it is crucial to pay enough attention to suprasegmental features, on the one hand, and building up learners' self-confidence as foreign language speakers, on the other hand, since excessive pausing and self-correction may turn them into less fluent –and therefore less communicative – language users.

With respect to assessment – another key concept of this research – Colén, Giné and Imbernón (2006) point out that in the present higher-education context, the teaching, learning and assessment processes should be integrated. They should be learner-centred, with teachers playing the role of learning promoters instead of just transmitting knowledge. The teaching-learning-assessment process should therefore be active, constructive, cumulative and dynamic. Moreover, it should help students learn how to learn by themselves, thus fostering lifelong learning.

Assessment in this setting can serve a double purpose: it can guarantee that the curricular objectives have been fulfilled, and it can be formative, i.e. "an ongoing process of gathering

information on the extent of learning, on strengths and weaknesses, which the teacher can feed back into their course planning and the actual feedback they give learners” (Common European Framework of Reference for Languages: Learning, Teaching, Assessment 2001, p186).

Assessment can then be continuous throughout the course, and multidimensional, focusing on competencies. It can also be context-oriented to enable applicability in professional environments, as well as cooperative, prioritizing the provision of feedback.

In the area of language for specific purposes, communicative assessment requires a realistic approach and authentic materials, as well as special attention to pragmatic competence (Douglas 2000). As the main aim is the transfer of knowledge in a professional setting, the assessment criteria should derive from an exhaustive analysis of the language-use situation the learners will be facing once they have finished their training period. Moreover, learners should be requested to bring their non-linguistic background knowledge concerning a specific professional domain to bear on the assessment tasks, as both their linguistic and non-linguistic abilities should be engaged to show representative, real-world performance.

As for the assessment of oral skills, Luoma (2004) states that undue focus on native-like pronunciation causes interference. Oral speech usually entails the misuse of linguistic resources, such as inadequate vocabulary, hesitation or inaccurate sound production. Such deficits are often overlooked in native speakers’ discourse, and yet are scrutinised and penalised in foreign language learners. Therefore, when setting up communicative oral assessment tasks it is important to be fully aware of what oral speech consists of. Valid assessment processes should involve defining clearly which type of oral discourse will be assessed in a specific context, particularly in relation to situational and social needs. Such processes should also entail designing coherent tasks and criteria, informing the learners of every aspect that will be taken into account and ensuring the implementation of consistent assessment and scoring procedures.

One of the methodological tools that may best fit this type of approach is the learning portfolio, since, according to Delett, Barnhardt and Kevorkian, “portfolios provide a portrait of what students know and what they can do, offer a multidimensional perspective of student progress over time, encourage self-reflection and participation, and link instruction and assessment” (Delett, Barnhardt & Kevorkian 2001, p559).

Language portfolios, thus, promote active learning and self-assessment and the reporting of the development of students’ communicative competence through the provision of work samples and with the support of authentic documents. Nevertheless, they must be distinguished from the European Language Portfolio, related to the CEFR as a pedagogical language-learning tool with three sections: the language passport, the language biography and the dossier (Kohonen 2007).

So far, the focus of portfolio-based language pedagogy has been mainly centred on writing skills (Tierney, Carter & Desai 1991; Frazier & Paulson 1992; Freedman 1993; Wang & Cheng 1993; Murray 1994; Gearhart & Wolf 1997; Song & August 2002; Hirvela & Sweetland 2005). Hamp-Lyons and Condon (2000) refer to the main features that typify a model portfolio. To start with, it must judge more than a single performance, and its contents must show different areas of expertise by including written productions in several genres.

Students must be able to revise their work and participate in the selection process, as they are responsible for their success and should self-assess and reflect on their learning. Finally, because

assessment is contextualised, evaluators must be able to assess the learners' growth along specific parameters by tracing the development of each artifact.

Current research tends to assume the use of electronic portfolios (Abrami & Barrett 2005; Tosh et al. 2005; Ali 2005; Gibson 2006; Haag et al. 2006; Lane 2007; Dorninger & Schrack 2008; Wang 2009; Üstünel & Deren 2010; Luchoomun, McLuckie & Van Wesel 2010; Zawacki-Richter, Hanft & Bäcker 2011; Tosun & Baris 2011). However, literature on using portfolios especially oriented towards the development of oral skills has been comparatively scarce, so this area remains unexplored.

Methodology

This study was undertaken as an action-research project, since this methodology enables practitioners to improve a real and problematic situation by exploring it in an educational context. The teachers involved can also take part in the process as researchers in search of innovation to enhance their day-to-day practice.

Different action-research models can be found, although all of them have a basic pattern in common: a research cycle composed of three phases – planning, acting and assessing – originates subsequent research cycles with a similar structure. The model provided by Strickland (1988) was used as the basis for this research.

In the academic year 2006-2007, a research purpose was identified and related information was gathered. At that time teachers and students at EUHT CETT-UB were not familiar with the learning portfolio, so a first contact with that tool, having in mind the forthcoming introduction of the EHEA, was perceived as a need. Portfolio implementation was planned as a pilot action to be carried out with one group of 18 students of the Degree in Tourism at EUHT CETT-UB. After collecting and processing qualitative data, the results were analysed and led to a review of the initial plan. This gave birth to a second research cycle, with the main objective that was mentioned in the introduction: analysing the use of portfolios, with a special focus on the assessment of oral skills.

The second research cycle began in the academic year 2007-2008. A new action was planned and put into practice with the participation of two groups of tourism students. They were required to develop a portfolio including different types of evidence related to diagnostic tasks, projects, writings (which were not regarded as research materials), oral presentations, pronunciation activities and other oral-production tasks. The main pedagogic objectives consisted in setting out a competence-oriented approach to teaching-learning-assessment, designing and undertaking a wide variety of oral tasks and carrying out complementary oral assessment procedures.

The learners' portfolios contained an index, a short introduction, a number of compulsory components and an optional appendix with optional components. More specifically, the students were presented with a list of 25 compulsory artifacts, which included an initial agreement between the teacher and the learner, self-assessment sheets to be completed at the beginning, in the middle and at the end of the term and initial and final samples of oral production.

In addition, some of the components were related to a research project the students were required to carry out, such as the project outline, a recorded conversation dealing with project description and task planning, a recording of an interview with a tourist and an oral progress report, as well as

reports including oral comments on their own performances and their classmates' performances when presenting their projects at the end of the term.

The students also had to make other oral presentations halfway through the term; this incorporated additional reports with oral comments on their own and their classmates' performances in their portfolios. Moreover, they were required to submit the first and last versions of a number of tasks, such as their personal CV, a pronunciation activity and a sample of written production accompanied with a self-assessment report.

Furthermore, the students exchanged their portfolios in the middle of the term and provided peer assessment reports, and provided one more recording of an oral activity of their choice. To finish with, the portfolio had to contain a sample of dossier exercises they had done throughout the course and a report including oral comments on their dossier work.

Some of the portfolio tasks were individual, while others were the result of group work. At least half of the tasks involved oral production, so the students were offered the possibility to record their tasks on a tape, a CD or a thumb drive, which had to be included in the portfolio; they could also e-mail their recordings to the teacher or even upload them to YouTube.

The learners had to show their portfolios at different periods throughout the term. They were systematically informed of submission deadlines and provided with feedback on their work by the teacher. They were encouraged to ask for teacher supervision and counseling at all times and were told that they would be asked to redo those components that did not meet the basic standards set for each task. As already mentioned, during the term there were opportunities to review other classmates' portfolios to report on their peers' progress.

The students had to submit their portfolios by the end of the term, and they were responsible for assessing their own work, including checking the quality of their portfolio contents to make sure they met the basic requirements and deciding which mark they deserved according to the number of components they had included. As each one of the compulsory components was worth 1 point, the highest mark they could obtain was 25, and no points were achieved for the index, the introduction or the appendix.

The teacher also marked the students' portfolios out of 25 using the same checklist and assessment criteria. Ideally, both the students' own marks and the marks provided by the teacher would coincide. This was not always the case, since occasionally a small number of students misunderstood some assessment procedures. In those cases there was an opportunity for negotiation, and the teacher and the students met to exchange their respective points of view and reach an agreement.

As mentioned above, this research aimed at designing a teaching-learning-assessment proposal focusing on the development of oral communicative competence in EFL by means of portfolios, implementing such a proposal and analysing its validity and viability. For our research purposes, data were collected through three different sources: a research diary, opinion questionnaires completed by the students and recordings of their oral speeches. The qualitative information they provided was processed by means of descriptive statistics and other techniques and then triangulated; i.e., contrasted for verification. The analysis of the results led to the final conclusions. This article focuses on the findings from one of the research tools in particular: the opinion questionnaires.

Research Questions

The participants in both group A8T111 and group A8T211 were asked on several occasions to consider different aspects of the course through questionnaires. The beginning-of-term and end-of-term questionnaires henceforth referred to as Q1 and Q2 respectively, were selected as particularly meaningful data sources. The following questions were raised:

1. What were the participants' opinions concerning the use of portfolios?
2. Did the participants consider that the portfolios had allowed them to work on communicative competence satisfactorily?
3. What did the participants think about the development of other competencies?
4. What were the participants' views with respect to their teaching-learning-assessment process?
5. To what degree did the participants say they profited from the experience?

Data analysis

Both Q1 and Q2 consisted of a number of grids, including multiple-choice items on a three-point scale, and a set of open questions. At the beginning of the term the students were encouraged to record their oral comments about their expectations, but at the end of the term they were required to write them down so that the information relating to their final opinions was easier to process.

The students expressed their point of view with respect to different issues: the course, the use of portfolios and their perceptions in terms of competence development, including the evolution of their oral skills. They also provided feedback on other key aspects of the research, such as to what extent they had benefited from the experience and whether they had felt comfortable and involved throughout.

The fact that the first and second grids of both Q1 and Q2 were identical made it possible to contrast their initial expectations and their final considerations on a longitudinal basis; a third grid was incorporated in Q2 (see Appendix). These questionnaires yielded a body of data that enabled qualitative evaluation at the end of the research period.

Not all the items were suitable for our research purposes. Only two items were selected from the first grid: the ones referring to the students' ability to do a formal oral presentation [IT1] and to provide statistical information [IT2].

The items selected from the second grid related to the learners' capacity to analyse and argue [IT3]; become involved in their learning process [IT4]; follow guidelines to achieve an objective [IT5]; organise information coherently [IT6]; pay attention to fluency and pronunciation [IT7], language register and socio-cultural conventions [IT8] and their language problems and those of their classmates [IT9]; take part in their own and their classmates' assessment [IT10]; use communicative strategies [IT11]; use learning and research resources autonomously [IT12]; and use their grammar and vocabulary knowledge to speak in English [IT13] and understand spoken English [IT14] quite accurately.

Finally, the selected items from the third grid engaged the students in stating whether by the end of the academic period they considered that their progress had been remarkable [IT15]; they were more aware of their strengths and weaknesses [IT16]; they were more self-confident as language

users [IT17]; they had profited from the classes [IT18], their work outside the classroom [IT19] and their classmates' feedback [IT20]; they were satisfied with the use of the portfolio to develop their oral skills [IT21]; and they had felt comfortable with using the portfolio [IT22].

The students had to decide whether they agreed with these statements (these responses received a numerical value of 3), had a neutral opinion (2) or disagreed with them (1).

All in all, the questionnaires from 30 participants were analysed: 14 in group A8T111 and 16 in group A8T211. The numerical data from the first and second grids in both Q1 and Q2 were transferred to tables, and mean values (*M*) and standard deviations (*SD*) relating to each item were worked out (Table 1). This made it possible to determine the evolution of the learners' competences from their own perspective.

TABLE 1: First and Second Grid Values from Q1 and Q2 (N=30)

		1	2	3				
		Disagree	Neutral	Agree	Mean	Median	Mode	SD
		(%)	(%)	(%)				
[IT1]	Q1	6.7	46.7	46.7	2.40	2	3	0.61
	Q2	0.0	13.3	86.7	2.87	3	3	0.34
[IT2]	Q1	36.7	53.3	10.0	1.73	2	2	0.63
	Q2	7.1	39.3	53.6	2.46	3	3	0.63
[IT3]	Q1	0.0	53.3	46.7	2.47	2	2	0.50
	Q2	0.0	20.0	80.0	2.80	3	3	0.40
[IT4]	Q1	0.0	27.6	72.4	2.72	3	3	0.45
	Q2	0.0	23.3	76.7	2.77	3	3	0.42
[IT5]	Q1	6.9	44.8	48.3	2.41	2	3	0.62
	Q2	0.0	23.3	76.7	2.77	3	3	0.42
[IT6]	Q1	0.0	30.0	70.0	2.70	3	3	0.46
	Q2	0.0	20.0	80.0	2.80	3	3	0.40
[IT7]	Q1	6.9	37.9	55.2	2.48	3	3	0.62
	Q2	0.0	13.3	86.7	2.87	3	3	0.34
[IT8]	Q1	16.7	70.0	13.3	1.97	2	2	0.55
	Q2	0.0	46.7	53.3	2.53	3	3	0.50
[IT9]	Q1	0.0	33.3	66.7	2.67	3	3	0.47
	Q2	0.0	20.0	80.0	2.80	3	3	0.40
[IT10]	Q1	6.7	13.3	80.0	2.73	3	3	0.57
	Q2	0.0	10.0	90.0	2.90	3	3	0.30
[IT11]	Q1	20.0	46.7	33.3	2.13	2	2	0.72
	Q2	0.0	23.3	76.7	2.77	3	3	0.42
[IT12]	Q1	6.7	63.3	30.0	2.23	2	2	0.56
	Q2	0.0	48.3	51.7	2.52	3	3	0.50
[IT13]	Q1	0.0	50.0	50.0	2.50	3	2	0.50
	Q2	0.0	34.5	65.5	2.66	3	3	0.48
[IT14]	Q1	0.0	53.3	46.7	2.47	2	2	0.50
	Q2	0.0	24.1	75.9	2.76	3	3	0.43

For the selected items from the third grid of Q2, the numerical values were again transferred to tables and mean values and standard deviations relating to each item were worked out and represented graphically (Table 2).

TABLE 2: Third Grid Values from Q2 (N=30)

	1	2	3				
	Disagree	Neutral	Agree				
	(%)	(%)	(%)	Mean	Median	Mode	SD
[IT15]	0.0	23.3	76.7	2.77	3	3	0.42
[IT16]	0.0	26.7	73.3	2.73	3	3	0.44
[IT17]	0.0	13.3	86.7	2.87	3	3	0.34
[IT18]	0.0	23.3	76.7	2.77	3	3	0.42
[IT19]	3.3	30.0	66.7	2.63	3	3	0.55
[IT20]	0.0	33.3	66.7	2.67	3	3	0.47
[IT21]	3.3	20.0	76.7	2.73	3	3	0.51
[IT22]	3.3	23.3	73.3	2.70	3	3	0.53

The answers to the open questions formulated in Q2 were also scrutinised. Twenty-eight participants replied to them (13 in group A8T111 and 15 in group A8T211). To facilitate data processing, the questions were itemised and reformulated so as to find out the most helpful, interesting and motivating aspects of the course; the changes suggested by the students; their satisfaction regarding the work on oral skills; the pros and cons of using the portfolio; the difficulty or usefulness of working with a portfolio; their satisfaction with their time management and work and with the information they had received from the teacher about assessment procedures; the pros and cons of doing a research project; their views concerning working in teams and their own contribution to the group project; and the use of information and communication technologies (ICT) in the English class.

The last questions invited the students to consider whether their opinions at the end of the academic period were different from the ones they had had at the beginning of the course, and whether they regarded themselves as future users of English in a professional context. Finally, they were asked to explain the impact this experience had or would have on their learning of English or another foreign language.

The learners' comments were then analysed. Due to the wide range of answers to certain questions, some were discarded as being not sufficiently representative. The items from the three grids featured in the questionnaires and the most representative itemised open questions were then interrelated and classified in five categories: the use of portfolios in general, the work on communicative competence, the development of other competences, the teaching-learning-assessment processes (teacher/peer/self-assessment) and the usefulness of the experience.

Results and Discussion

The results from processing the selected items in the first and second grids of Q1 and Q2 (Table 1) show that the mean values for all the item responses in Q2 were higher than the neutral score

(2). This suggests that in general the students held positive opinions by the end of the academic period.

Table 3 displays the combined survey results from Q1 and Q2 and the *t*-values (paired *t* test) of the students' attitudes regarding the use of portfolios, with a 95% of confidence interval (the reliable range of values expected to contain the difference between Q1 and Q2 averages). This table shows that items [IT1], [IT2], [IT3], [IT5], [IT7], [IT8], [IT11], [IT12] and [IT14] reached statistical significance at $p < .05$. More specifically, items [IT1] (make a formal presentation), [IT2] (provide statistical information), [IT3] (analyse and argue), [IT7] (pay attention to fluency and pronunciation), [IT8] (pay attention to language register and socio-cultural conventions) and [IT11] (use communicative strategies) showed the greatest score differences between Q1 and Q2; in other words, for those items the students' attitude changes were large enough to be statistically significant at the $p < .01$ level, and the values increased considerably at a 95% confidence interval. However, even though these items show the most substantial differences in opinion with respect to Q1, other items reached the highest mean values at the end of the period.

TABLE 3: Paired *T*-test Values

	<i>t</i>	<i>p</i>	95% Confidence Interval	
[IT1]	3.59	0.001	0.205	0.728
[IT2]	4.36	0.000	0.395	1.067
[IT3]	2.81	0.007	0.095	0.571
[IT4]	0.37	0.714	-0.189	0.274
[IT5]	2.51	0.015	0.07	0.635
[IT6]	0.89	0.380	-0.126	0.326
[IT7]	2.88	0.006	0.114	0.653
[IT8]	4.12	0.000	0.291	0.842
[IT9]	1.16	0.250	-0.097	0.363
[IT10]	1.39	0.173	-0.076	0.409
[IT11]	4.09	0.000	0.322	0.945
[IT12]	2.02	0.048	0.003	0.565
[IT13]	1.2	0.235	-0.104	0.414
[IT14]	2.37	0.021	0.046	0.538

Whereas [IT2] ($M = 1.73$, $SD = 0.63$) and [IT8] ($M = 1.97$, $SD = 0.55$) had the lowest initial scores, the items concerning the students' capacity to organise information coherently [IT6] ($M = 2.70$, $SD = 0.46$), become involved in their learning process [IT4] ($M = 2.72$, $SD = 0.45$) and take part in self- and peer assessment [IT10] ($M = 2.73$, $SD = 0.57$) reached noteworthy initial average values. This is relevant because it suggests that the students had already thought highly of their capacities at the beginning of the term, and in some cases there was little room for statistical improvement.

At the end of the term the students highly rated their ability to engage in self- and peer assessment [IT10] ($M = 2.90$, $SD = 0.30$), pay attention to fluency and pronunciation [IT7] ($M = 2.87$, $SD = 0.34$) and make a formal presentation [IT1] ($M = 2.87$, $SD = 0.34$). Conversely, the lowest mean

values from Q2 (all > 2) related to their ability to provide statistical information [IT2] ($M = 2.46$, $SD = 0.63$), use learning and research resources autonomously [IT12] ($M = 2.52$, $SD = 0.50$) and pay attention to language register and socio-cultural conventions [IT8] ($M = 2.53$, $SD = 0.50$).

As a matter of fact, these results are consistent with the areas that were strengthened more systematically throughout the term. To facilitate the students' first contact with portfolios, the approach was very structured and teacher-directed; while learner autonomy at this stage was promoted, it was not a major priority. Similarly, although the students worked on their sociolinguistic competencies, other attitudinal aspects like involvement, critical thinking and self-confidence received special attention, with the main focus being on orality.

The items included in the third grid of Q2 are particularly relevant to obtain a better picture of the students' opinions at the end of the term (Table 2). The key items aimed at finding out if they felt satisfied with the use of the portfolio to develop their oral skills [IT21] ($M = 2.73$, $SD = 0.51$), they had felt comfortable while using it [IT22] ($M = 2.70$, $SD = 0.53$) and they considered that their progress had been remarkable [IT15] ($M = 2.77$, $SD = 0.42$). These items were highly rated; in particular, 76.7% of the students strongly agreed, and none disagreed, with [IT 15] and [IT21], and 73.3% of them agreed with [IT22].

As Table 2 shows, 86.7% of the students felt more self-confident as language learners [IT17] ($M = 2.87$, $SD = 0.34$), 76.7% believed they had profited from the classes [IT18] ($M = 2.77$, $SD = 0.42$), 73.3% thought they were more aware of their strengths and weaknesses [IT16] ($M = 2.73$, $SD = 0.44$), 66.7% considered they had profited from peer feedback [IT20] ($M = 2.67$, $SD = 0.47$) and 66.7% regarded their autonomous work as profitable [IT19] ($M = 2.63$, $SD = 0.55$). Once more, the item related to learners' autonomy received a low score.

The fact that the mean values for all the items in this grid were higher than 2.6 is meaningful, particularly in relation to the key items. Moreover, these results are in line with the outcomes of the contrast between Q1 and Q2.

On the other hand, the qualitative analysis of the answers to the open questions from Q2 showed that the members of both groups had very similar opinions, a tendency that had also been remarked when comparing the selected items from Q1 and Q2 in both groups.

The most representative comment, made by 100% of the students who replied to the open questions ($N = 28$), reported that oral skills had been satisfactorily worked on. The vast majority also considered that the main disadvantage of the portfolio was the considerable workload, although they felt satisfied with their work and time management. Almost all the respondents were happy with the information they had received from their teacher regarding assessment procedures, and most of them had a positive opinion concerning the use of ICT tools in the English class and the usefulness of what they had experienced for one term.

The first and last of these comments are particularly relevant, since they correlate with the rest of the results, and highlight the students' satisfaction with the use of portfolios to develop their oral skills. The remaining comments are interesting as they enable the identification of the pros and cons of portfolio use.

Obviously, encouraging open answers from the students constitutes one of the limitations of this study in terms of quantitative data processing. Moreover, using a three-point scale survey for the learners' convenience restricts the range of responses. Other limitations can be found in the data-

collection procedures. At the beginning of the academic period the participants were required to complete Q1 in the classroom so the teacher could assist them with any clarifications they might need. However, by the end of the term they had been trained to think critically and were asked to complete Q2 by themselves, with no supervision from the teacher. Incidentally, the eventual development of their analytical skills may also be considered a determining factor affecting the results linked to Q2. On the other hand, given that four months is quite a limited period of time for research purposes, time constraints should not be overlooked. Finally, using a small sample of 30 participants does not allow for generalisation.

Conclusions

One of the first and most striking findings from this study was the parallels between the points of view of both groups of students. This was a remarkable feature not only when identifying those items which had caused the most popular, representative and therefore meaningful reactions, but also when scrutinising the nature of the students' comments.

Generally speaking, the students had ascribed high ratings to the items in Q1, so the initial benchmark was very ambitious. Still, the mean values in Q2 did improve.

As for the findings from Q2 considered in isolation, the most relevant results were again very favorable, and this fact – which is in keeping with the comparisons between Q1 and Q2 – should be considered significant in itself. A closer look at them makes it possible to answer our initial research questions.

In reply to the first question, which examined the participants' opinions with respect to the use of portfolios, their satisfaction with the use of portfolios to develop their oral skills was positive. Moreover, they claimed that they had felt comfortable when using portfolios, even though their workload in such a short period of time was actually their main objection.

By the end of the course most of the learners referred very positively to being capable of giving formal oral presentations and using their communicative strategies, as well as their linguistic and pragmatic competencies, to produce and receive oral messages in English quite accurately and coherently. They also cited being confident in paying attention to pronunciation, and to a lesser extent, in their sociolinguistic competencies.

Concerning the development of other key competences, both for professional purposes and for lifelong learning, the participants felt increasingly more self-confident as foreign-language users. In global terms, they were content with the use of ICT tools in the English class, and considered that their digital competence had been fostered. Furthermore, the participants resorted to their capacity to analyse and argue, and had opportunities to articulate their critical opinions and deploy problem-solving techniques, for instance when dealing with statistics and following specific instructions to meet the objectives of their research projects. Finally, in general the participants were also pleased with their time and work management. However, an internal contradiction arises in this sense, since some of the lowest-rated aspects had to do with the way they had profited from their work outside the classroom and their autonomous capacity to use learning and research resources. Even so, these two items were still highly rated, albeit not as highly as the others.

On the other hand, the participants universally believed that they had been seriously involved in their own learning process and that of their classmates, their peers' comments had been enriching

and they had become more aware of their own strengths and weaknesses. They had therefore taken an active part in self- and peer assessment. In this respect, they considered that they had been provided with adequate guidelines by the teacher.

Generally speaking, the participants considered that they had benefited from the English class and that their progress had been remarkable; this is in keeping with the findings above. On the whole, the students stated that the experience they had gone through had had a positive impact on their learning of English.

To sum up, the learners' experience was very satisfactory and viable, although some elements needed reinforcement, such as their autonomy and initiative, as well as their development of sociolinguistic competences. However, their comments revealed a key aspect that should be reviewed: planning and setting tasks and making realistic estimates of the time for their completion. A future approach to portfolios should take these conclusions into account.

Pedagogical Implications

The pedagogical implications of this research on the curriculum design of EFL credits within the new Degree in Tourism and Hospitality Management came to fruition in the academic year 2009-2010. The use of portfolios as a teaching-learning-assessment tool was widely introduced in every English course, although with some modifications, and therefore the English students and professors at EUHT CETT-UB became familiar with it. Professors obviously needed to get used to using portfolios, so before the start of the classes a number of briefing sessions were held and assistance was available throughout the year. Despite some initial reluctance, they engaged in this new approach progressively and managed to motivate their students.

Continuous assessment was promoted, and the students were systematically made aware of assessment criteria and procedures. Therefore, they played an active role in their own learning and were required to show and reflect on the development of their competencies in professionally oriented situations. The focus was on the learners' communication strategies and on their pragmatic and socio-cultural competencies in the context of the tourism industry. Thus, language accuracy was not the only aspect taken into account; the adequacy and coherence of their performance in a formal setting were also emphasised. Accuracy and adequacy problems were regarded as opportunities for feedback and progress on a positive basis.

Apart from initial diagnostic tasks, there was room for both formative and summative assessment, and several pieces of evidence for the students' learning were originated from different sources throughout the course. More specifically, in the light of our research a more reasonable number of components were included in the students' portfolios. The extension of the academic period from four months to nine contributed to portfolio viability. To turn some of the portfolio tasks into more sustainable tools, they were now carried out in teams, and teachers regularly provided selective feedback. However, it must be pointed out that from the teachers' perspective the workload was still sometimes difficult to manage, so this was an important aspect that required readjusting.

The learners' portfolios now consisted of 10 compulsory components. Three were diagnostic pieces of evidence based on the assessment sheets included in the portfolios at the beginning, middle and end of the academic year 2007-2008. Four were samples of the students' oral productions that had to be recorded digitally, and two components were samples of written

expression. Finally, the students had to incorporate in their portfolios the outcome of a research task that involved the use of ICT tools.

The use of portfolios in the Degree in Tourism and Hospitality Management enabled the students to show their competencies at different stages and become aware of their development. The teachers could in turn observe their students' evolution with respect to the beginning of the learning period. Furthermore, students could state their perceptions and comments relating to their motivation, the difficulties they encountered, their doubts, their strengths and their weaknesses: in other words, they could reflect on their learning process and analyse it critically. Corrective actions could be undertaken, as this information was gathered regularly throughout the course. This systematic collection of evidence not only promoted learning, but also allowed for different assessment procedures. Assessment criteria were clearly presented to students at all times and were based on the submission of the portfolio components at the times, and at the levels, required.

The potential benefits of using portfolios are not restricted to the area of foreign-language acquisition or to a higher-education context. Since the advantages of using such a powerful tool definitely outweigh the disadvantages, it can be considered for any educational setting that requires the promotion of communication and learning skills. Oral portfolios offer unprecedented investigation opportunities for researchers. Future research could examine various aspects of portfolio design, implementation and viability in different fields of study and its outstanding role in teaching-learning-assessment processes.

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Appendix 1

End-of-term assessment sheet

Date:

Name of student:

Tick the appropriate box and compare with the Beginning-of-term assessment sheet.

At the moment I can:

	+	+/-	-
Apply for a job orally			
Describe conference facilities			
Make a formal oral presentation			
Negotiate bookings for conferences and groups orally			
Promote a business package			
Provide statistical information			
Talk about sustainability in tourism			
Write a research project			
Write covering letters			
Write CVs			

At present as a language learner I:

	+	+/-	-
Analyse and argue			
Become involved in my learning process			
Follow guidelines to achieve an objective			
Organise information coherently			
Pay attention to fluency and pronunciation			
Pay attention to language register and socio-cultural conventions			
Pay attention to my language problems and those of my classmates			
Take part in my own assessment and in my classmates' assessment			
Use communicative strategies			
Use learning and research resources autonomously			
Use my grammar and vocabulary knowledge to speak in English quite accurately			
Use my grammar and vocabulary knowledge to understand spoken English quite accurately			

Use my grammar and vocabulary knowledge to understand written texts in English quite accurately			
Use my grammar and vocabulary knowledge to write quite accurate texts in English			

Now I think:

	+	+/-	-
My progress has been remarkable			
I am more aware of my strengths and weaknesses			
I am more self-confident as a language user			
I have profited from the classes			
I have profited from my work outside the classroom			
I have profited from my classmates' feedback			
I am satisfied with the use of the portfolio to develop my writing skills			
I am satisfied with the use of the portfolio to develop my oral skills			
I have felt comfortable with using the portfolio			

Please write your comments on the following aspects. Make sure you go through all of them:

Which aspect of the course has been the most helpful/interesting/motivating?

-What changes would you make? Why?

-Do you consider that oral skills have been satisfactorily worked on?

-What have been the pros and cons of using the portfolio?

-Do you think that working with a portfolio has been easy/hard work/useful?

-Are you satisfied with your time management/your work?

-Are you happy with the information you received from the teacher about assessment procedures?

-What have been the pros and cons of doing a research project?

-What's your opinion about working with a team/your contribution to the group project?

-What do you think about the use of new technologies in the English class?

-Are your opinions different from the ones you had at the beginning of the course? In what sense?

-How do you see yourself in the future as a user of English in a professional context?

-Do you think this experience will have an impact on your learning of English/another foreign language?

-Other comments.