



The Impact of Assessing Tertiary Students' Speaking via E-Portfolios Within Blended Learning

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Abstract. The 21st Century education presents both opportunities and challenges in teaching and learning domains. Blended learning mode, integrating digital elements in conventional learning enjoys increasing popularity among stakeholders. Digital classrooms have been enriched by the use of e-portfolio, as a powerful tool for capturing students' work and enabling assessment of learning. This study explores the impact of implementing E-portfolio to keep record of students' online learning process and as a form of formative assessment to evaluate learners' speaking proficiency in an ESP course. Via a DELPHI based method and stratified purposive sampling, data was elicited from 140 s-year Business English majors at a Chinese vocational college. Three significant findings emerged using online questionnaire, semi-structured interviews and document analysis of examination results. First, e-portfolio assessment had a significant impact on improving pronunciation, discourse and interactive communication of speaking. Second, most students reported taking initiatives and becoming independent. Third, the majority of students viewed e-portfolio as an assessment approach that objectively gauges and records learning in a dynamic way. Recommendations were put forth for improvement and to mitigate existing challenges. This study provides useful insights and positive implications on effective online assessment practices for blended learning within vocational education context.

Keywords: E-portfolio · Blended learning · Assessment strategy · Speaking

1 Introduction

In recent years, higher vocational education in China has developed vigorously. The basic requirements for English Course Teaching in higher vocational education emphasize "taking quality as the basis and ability as the core". This demands modern higher vocational English teaching to be student-centered and application-oriented in order to improve learners' ability to use the language and help them form the habit of autonomous learning.

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With the wide application of information technology, blended learning has emerged as a new form of teaching mode which calls for corresponding assessment means. Flipped classroom, as current classroom teaching innovation, serves as an approach promoting student-centeredness (Amiryousefi 2019). Flipped classroom practices require students to review course contents before coming to the class (Adnan 2017; Yeo 2018). Besides the washback of assessment on learning, as an integral part of teaching, proper design and implementation of academic performance assessment is conducive to the effectiveness of teaching and learning. As a learning tool for learners and assessment tool for instructors, e-portfolio has come into full play possessing a number of advantages in developing competency, marketability, self-confidence, critical thinking, problem-solving skills (Bolliger and Shepherd 2010; Yastibas and Yastibas 2015), support metacognition and reflection on learning (Bolliger and Shepherd 2010; Nguyen and Ikeda 2015; Sharifi et al. 2016). This has made it a heated topic both in research and education.

This empirical study mainly aims to find out the impacts of e-portfolios on college students' ESP speaking skill and their motivation and autonomy in learning itself. It focuses on the administration of oral presentation, which is part of main project conducted in the ESP course—*Business English*. The artifacts assigned to be included in students E-portfolio are closely related to teaching contents ranging from written assignments, lesson plans, group projects, reflective pieces of writing, group projects, tests, dictation, videos, audio files, presentations, photographs and images of coursework. The current study will focus on speaking assignments.

2 The Comprehensive Theoretical Basis

Dougherty and Coelho (2017) pointed out the characteristic of e-portfolio as digital resources where learners collect course materials, projects, and achievements and store them in a cloud storage for easy accessibility. As to the implementation of e-portfolio assessment, quite a few studies have been conducted on the application of e-portfolio on assessing learners' English writing skills in higher education (for example, Baturay and Daloğlu 2010; Barrot 2016; Nicolaidou 2013; Tonogbanua 2018; Karami 2019). It is widely reported that e-portfolio implementation functions in improving English learners' writing proficiency (Erice 2008; Karami 2019), and fostering self-regulated learning skills and even critical thinking skills. This is because works in e-portfolio can keep the track of learning process and students get timely feedback to identify their strong points and weakpoints (Baturay and Daloğlu 2010; Welsh 2012). Students' positive attitudes toward the application of e-portfolio assessment have also been developed as its positive role in promoting.

Studies have been found on the use of e-portfolio for teaching English speaking skills (for example, Cepik and Yastibas 2013; Huang and Hung 2010), but they are quite limited when compared with related research on the application of e-portfolio assessment on writing. Cepik and Yastibas (2013) reported that students formed positive attitudes toward the e-portfolio implementation in speaking courses. Likewise, Yastibasa and Cepik (2015) stated through their study that teachers, like students have positive attitudes toward the implementation of e-portfolios in speaking classes, though there are some challenges to overcome.

Strivens (2009) made it clear that the e-portfolio was being used in professional settings to standards of performance and competency. This has helped to expand the application scope of e-portfolio to ESP courses which stress authentic, professional context. As one ESP course, Business English speaking ability within business context is one of top skills for course learners and its acquisition matters much for their future job application and career development. Yastibaş (2013) utilized an e-portfolio software environment web-based e-learning and course method tools (lore.com) and stated that electronic portfolio can be used for speaking skills' purposes in evaluation. His findings showed that with e-portfolio assessment, students have not only improved their speaking, grammar, pronunciation, and vocabulary, but students' attitudes towards speaking skills were affected positively and showed improvement. What's worse, there is a lack of empirical studies on the application and its impact of e-portfolio on speaking skills within blended learning context.

Kusuma (2021) demonstrated a significant effect of e-portfolio in flipped classrooms on students' speaking performance. Besides this, students showed active behavioral, cognitive, and affective engagement. With 63 high school twelfth-grade students as participants, he asserted that E-portfolio and flipped classrooms were found to have the potential to encourage students' engagement while learning a language. This is congruent with the finding of Efe (2016) that e-portfolio implementation provides more time for in-class activities as required by the e-portfolio. Adnan (2017) has studied this combination, and the students taught by the method were found to have outperformed others in the control group. Nevertheless, very few empirical studies on e-portfolio assessment within blended learning context have been conducted and these studies indicate that inadequate teaching experience and immature application strategy plus lecturers' lack of technological literacy and technical support have contributed to the result that the potential of e-portfolio in assessment have not been sufficiently utilized.

3 Method

3.1 Research Questions

This study will major discuss the following questions:

- (1) Are there any differences in speaking abilities of students' with and without e-portfolio assessment?
- (2) Has e-portfolio assessment effectively improved students speaking levels and what aspects are manifested?
- (3) What are students' comments on e-portfolio assessment?

3.2 Subjects

The samples chosen are 140 students of Business English Majors comprising 108 females, 32 males who are Sophomore from International Business and Tourism Department of Ningbo Vocational and Technical College. They come from four classes, of which girls account for the vast majority. Class 1 and class 2 are the experimental group and

creating e-portfolio is a requirement of the course assessment while for control group of class 3 and 4, assessment was conducted in the traditional way. The researcher conducted teaching of experimental group and the other senior English teacher taught the control group. Before experiment, all students have taken college English test and there was no significant difference in test scores ($P = 0.13$).

3.3 Research Method

3.3.1 Research Procedure

The experiment lasted for 16 weeks. Students were assigned speaking tasks twice a week to select and upload to online e-portfolio, which is built on the course platform called “Zhi Jiao Yun”. Speaking tasks include unit speaking assignments, BEC (Business English Certificate) speaking test mini-presentation, impromptu speech, reflective pieces of speaking, etc. There are 8 major speaking and feedback activities in total. During the first week, the teacher made it clear to students course teaching arrangement, speaking tasks, assessment, stressing that all artifacts selected and collected in e-portfolio would work as formative assessment and accounted for 50% of the final score, drawing students’ attention paid to each speaking task fulfillment quality. The teaching content and speaking tasks for the four classes are completely identical, but assessment and feedback were provided differently. Class 1 & 2 (the experimental group) adopted e-portfolio assessment. Class 3 & 4 (the control group) continued traditional way of assessment by submitting assignments directly to the teacher and the teacher marked them. E-portfolio creation and construction was not a requirement.

The current study creatively adopts Delett et al. (2001) 7-step framework for portfolio assessment by integrating features of online resources. One task of the Business activity project module—*Sales report during Chinese shopping festival Double 11th* is taken as an example to illustrate the application of e-portfolio assessment (See Table 1).

3.3.2 Data Collection

Before and after teaching experiment, basic data collected through tests, questionnaire and interview and post-test data focusing on Business English speaking test grades, autonomous learning competence, and learning motivation, etc.. Data analysis software SPSS 24.0 and Nvivo were adopted for quantitative and qualitative data respectively to objectively test the effectiveness of e-portfolio assessment mode.

In week 17, all students of four classes were organized to take turns to take final speaking test. The test scores were counted as final test scores, accounting for 50% of summative assessment. All students tests were video-recorded without personal information such as names, class number. They were copied to another two senior BEC test oral examiners to assess adopting percentage grading system. BEC assessment criteria and rubric were taken for this test, including 4 dimensions of Grammar and Vocabulary, Discourse, Pronunciation and Interactive Communication. Each dimension accounted for 25% and scores for each dimension and final test were averaged from the two teachers’ grades.

After test, experimental group students were required to do online questionnaire. There are 15 questions, mainly representing 3 domains namely students’ interest and

Table 1. E-portfolio assessment steps and procedures

Steps of e-portfolio assessment	Procedures
Step 1 Plan the assessment purpose	To gauge if students have mastered the skills of presenting product sales performance during a given period.
Step 2 & 3 Determine e-portfolio outcomes and match with tasks	Students investigate sales performance of the brands by surfing online and p field visit to the stores. 4 parts in the report in detail---company introduction, best-selling products, sales performance.
Step 4 Determine organization of the e-portfolio	Pre-class: students fulfil online tasks in-class: prepare their report and presentation after-class: upload written report online
Step 5 Establish criteria for assessment	The final score comes from self-assessment (20%) \ peer assessment (30%) and teacher assessment (50%).
Step 6 & 7 Monitor and evaluate the portfolio process	Teachers monitor and evaluate all the time with internet connectivity.

enthusiasm in establishing e-portfolio, students' participation in self and peer assessment, students' attitudes towards e-portfolio on learning outcomes, motivation and self-confidence. All questions are multiple choice questions in the form of Likert five level scale (option 5-1 represents from "completely agree" to "completely disagree").

After questionnaire was done, two students from each experimental group were selected for interview. One of them was higher middle-level and the other, lower middle-level. All interviews were recorded; transcribed verbatimly, coded and analyzed for emerging themes.

4 Results and Discussion

4.1 Experimental Results

4.1.1 Comparison of the Overall Scores of Speaking Tests

The overall scores of the two groups of students in the speaking test were tested by independent-sample t test using SPSS 24.0 software. The test results (see Table 2) show that after one semester of study, the average score of the experimental group is higher (82.12) than that of the control group (78.14). The standard deviation of the experimental group is lower (5.29) than that of the control group (5.83); The difference in the mean value reached a significant level ($P < 0.05$), indicating that e-portfolio assessment had a significant impact on the speaking achievement.

Table 2. Independent-sample t test results of overall scores of speaking test

Groups	Sample size	Average value	Standard deviation	F	P
Experimental group	70	82.12	5.29	0.109	0.000
Control group	70	78.14	5.83		

Table 3. One-way ANOVA difference test results of individual scores of speaking test

Dimensions	Group I	Group II	Mean difference(I-II)	F value	Significant value(P value)
Grammar and Vocabulary	Control group	Experimental group	0.34	1.715	0.193
Pronunciation	Control group	Experimental group	2.47*	53.56	0.000
Discourse	Control group	Experimental group	-3.23*	83.727	0.000
Interactive Communication	Control group	Experimental group	-3.34*	70.11	0.000

* $p < 0.05$

4.1.2 Comparison of Individual Scores in Speaking Test

In order to understand the specific effects of e-portfolio assessment on students' speaking, one-way ANOVA difference test was conducted on the individual scores of two groups of speaking tests. Table 3 test results show that there were significant differences between the two groups in three of four dimensions of assessment criteria, that is, Pronunciation, Discourse and Interactive Communication ($P < .05$), but there was no significant difference between the results of experimental group and control group in the dimension of Grammar and Vocabulary.

Specifically speaking, it is obvious that the experimental group assessed through e-portfolio scores much higher in dimensions of Discourse and Interactive Communication while the control group performs better in Pronunciation and there is no significant difference in Grammar and Vocabulary between the two groups. This indicates that e-portfolio assessment plays a significant role in improving students' discourse and interactive communication while its impact seems relatively small on helping students to improve pronunciation and grammar and vocabulary.

4.2 Survey Results

4.2.1 Students' Attitude Towards E-portfolio Assessment

The questionnaire data of the experimental group was analyzed by SPSS 24.0 software to calculate the average value, frequency and standard deviation to understand the students'

Table 4. Students' attitude towards e-portfolio assessment

Assessment mode	Acceptance of new assessment mode	Learning to be independent	Familiarity with online platform	Timely completion of assignment	Self-management
Eportfolio	3.96	4.06	3.65	3.69	4.00

evaluation and attitude towards e-portfolio assessment. The data analysis results are shown in Table 4.

It can be seen from Table 4, students have a positive attitude towards e-portfolio assessment (average value above 3.0). The highest score for learning to be independent indicates that students have learnt to accept (3.96) and apply such a new assessment mode to gain independence in their academic performance. After practices through online platform, students have become familiar with its operation (3.65) instead of depending too much on their teacher. The role of e-portfolio assessment in improving students' self-management abilities is adequately shown with the high score of 4.00.

4.2.2 Students' Motivation and Professional Learning

Questionnaire has been conducted twice before and after the experiment. The results in Table 2 have shown significant changes in students' responses towards establishing e-portfolio and its assessment in speaking practices. Initially, only about 23% students showed interest in creating and updating their e-portfolio and most spoke out strangeness to the online platform where they would learn the course. Most of the time, students mainly depended on their teachers by following their instructions passively. However, their activeness can be found in the investigation after experiment. The majority of students (86.96%) reported to take initiatives and become independent in learning, which is testified by approximately 92% respondents uploading and revising their work on time or ahead of schedule. Over 89.9% respondents did online quizzes twice until they get a full mark.

Data analysis from interview and reflective journal showed, besides improving their professional skills, their replay of online videos, note-taking, initiative and comments on peers' discussions all show their strong motivation towards learning and progress.

4.2.3 Students' Engagement in Speaking Practices Online

Online platform clearly shows that students online time length steadily increased to one hour per day. About 71% students watched course videos and took notes in detail. Most of them spent time browsing through course videos and powerpoints with knowledge points before and after class. The majority of students (over 89%) finish online assignments on time, such as watching required teaching videos before class, finishing online quizzes, uploading their speaking practice video files after class, etc. The length of reflective pieces of writing has been gradually prolonged and the number of students participating

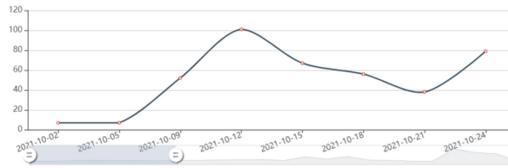


Fig. 1. Students' participation in online discussion

in online discussion and peer comments on speaking performance has increased steadily (Fig. 1).

4.3 Discussion

As a digital resource, e-portfolio has been adopted as a useful instruction and assessment tool with the advantages of “portable, easy to share with peers or teachers, and capable of storing a wide variety of media files” (Cummins and Davesne 2009) and its benefits of “promoting feedback, reflection, and self-reflection” (Yastibas and Yastibas 2015).

4.3.1 Benefits of E-portfolio for Students

Research findings showed that implementing e-portfolio-based assessment can enhance the ability of business English majors to communicate successfully in authentic business settings. The results of this study showed that e-portfolio implementation contributed to the students' English speaking ability as the average score of the e-portfolio group is higher (82.12) than that of the control group (78.14). Speaking test scores of experiment class have improved moderately and are higher. Moreover, to be specific from the four components of business English proficiency assessment perspectives, data analysis of individual scores indicated that there were significant differences in discourse and interactive communication, which is not only shown in video files, but also in their final term summary. What is worth mentioning is that no significant progress in pronunciation, vocabulary and grammar accuracy, which is possibly related to the nature of these skills themselves, being different from speaking characteristics and students' previous English foundation. Significant progress was found in students' autonomous learning performance.

Questionnaire results indicated that before e-portfolio assessment practices, students showed objection to autonomous learning and depended on teachers much, not familiar with online platform for learning and practices. After the experiment, students have adjusted to online learning and completed learning, practices and assessment according to the progress speed set online. Self discipline and management ability have been significantly improved.

The data from online platform showed that students' online learning time was steadily increasing, the use rate of micro classes and slides is high, and low rate of delaying the submission of works. The length of the reflection diary has significantly increased, and the participation in the interactive links such as discussion, voting, answering and evaluation is high. This echoes with the assertion of Chen et al. (2019), Huang et al. (2019) that the combination of e-portfolio and flipped classroom approach improved students'

active participation in the language learning process. The idea has been illustrated by the following data:

Student 1: *"This sales report is a different experience, which is very meaningful. This task not only helps us to improve our English ability, but also exercises our ability in presentation. When presenting, I always tell myself: show your best side, don't be afraid and be confident."*

The analysis of interviews and personal reflection journal showed that students' self-confidence in oral English learning has been significantly improved, and their interest in learning and training has become stronger though they are not sure about the criteria applied in the self-evaluation and mutual evaluation:

Student 2: *"Although this task is not very satisfactory, but it has brought me a lot of feelings and growth. This activity has a very positive significance, it let me understand how to introduce the sales status of a product in business occasions",*

However, the learning results and evaluation feedback recorded in the e-portfolio make students have a strong sense of achievement and achievement in oral English learning:

Students 3: *"In our group, everyone is responsible for a module. We go to the field to investigate and discuss how to explain the content of PPT. After a layer of screening and teacher's guidance, we began to have a deeper understanding of the production of PPT We are also very grateful to our teacher."*

The research results are consistent with the findings of existing studies. E-portfolio assessment can promote students' self realization of learning goals, help to improve their sense of learning efficacy. The flexible and multi-functional online platform and electronic portfolio have further deepened this learning promotion effect.

5 Conclusion

As one of major English competencies in ESP courses, speaking skills within business context plays a crucial role in modern interaction business activities. Its effective acquisition, to a large extent, determines students' learning effect of the course, or even influences their future career development. The good use of e-portfolio assessment can help stimulate students' interest, make them become actively engaged in the curriculum, and improve their abilities as a whole. This study combines the emerging information technology "online platform" and the formative assessment "e-portfolio", and integrates e-portfolio in the online environment into the Business English oral English with an aim to meet the individual needs of students' oral English learning and promote the improvement of students' learning enthusiasm and language output skills. Though ESP teachers have begun their exploration of conducting blended learning mode through the application of online courses, they still face the bottleneck of tackling students' inherent motivation and still need training for effective implementation of assessment with e-portfolio. From this perspective, this study is expected to provide useful references for e-portfolio-based learning and assessment practices in higher education. However, this evaluation model is still in the trial stage, and we still need further exploration and practices.

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