

The effect of portfolio assessment on Iranian pre-intermediate EFL learners' autonomy

Hassan Soodmand Afshar¹

Assistant Professor, Bu-Ali Sina University, Hamedan

Toran Bastami

Islamic Azad University, Central Tehran Branch

Received on February 21, 2012

Accepted on June 28, 2012

Abstract

The present study set out to address the issue as to whether the implementation of portfolio assessment would give rise to Iranian pre-intermediate EFL learners' autonomy. Participants comprised 60 pre-intermediate female learners within the age range of 16 to 28 studying English in a private language institute, a Cambridge Open Centre (IR056). They were randomly divided into two groups each consisting of 30 participants. An independent sample t-test confirmed their homogeneity in terms of language proficiency at the outset of the study. Moreover, they were homogenized in terms of autonomy through employing a validated questionnaire. The portfolio assessment was integrated into the experimental group while traditional assessment was assigned to the control group. The study adopted a mixed-method approach for the purposes of data collection and analysis. Data were collected by means of a questionnaire, a semi-structured interview, and participants' portfolios. Quantitative data were analyzed using independent samples t-test. Qualitative data were analyzed inductively through

¹ Corresponding Author: Department of English Language, Bu-Ali Sina University, Hamedan
E-mail: hassansoodmand@yahoo.com

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content analysis. The recurring themes emerging from the interview and participants' portfolios were compared with the findings of the questionnaire. The results of both quantitative and qualitative data analyses revealed that portfolio assessment significantly enhanced learner autonomy in the experimental group, and offered them an opportunity to reflect upon their learning process, growth, and progress overtime. Drawing upon the findings, some pedagogical implications are presented and finally, some avenues for future research are highlighted.

Keywords: learner autonomy, portfolio, portfolio assessment

1. Introduction

Following the paradigm shift occurring in ELT toward learner-centered approaches, the area of assessment has also been heavily influenced by these alternative approaches. Opposed to traditional assessment, alternative assessments are “holistic, student-centered, performance-based, process-oriented, integrated and multi-dimensional” (Gottlieb, 1995, p.12). The rationale behind this change contributes to the fact that conventional ways of teaching and testing suffer from some limitations and pitfalls. They focus namely, on lower-level skills and less cognitive efforts; they do not truly reflect students' overall progress in the application of English language and they focus on products rather than process.

Alternative assessment looks at the process of learning and teaching from a different angle; new roles are assigned to both learners and teachers. Nunes (2004) emphasizes the major role that learners play in identifying their weaknesses and strengths, as well as monitoring, evaluating and taking responsibility. Among so many popular alternative assessments, portfolio assessment is regarded as an ongoing process which has gained much interest especially within the framework of communicative language teaching (Brown, 2004).

Unlike traditional tests, portfolio can evaluate students holistically and give them a chance to build up their experience in language learning. Accordingly, in the light of knowledge, skills, and strategies students acquire under the guidance of their teacher they

can eventually turn into autonomous and responsible learners (Yang, 1998).

Learner autonomy has increasingly been a crucial concept in the field of language learning for the last three decades due to the development of classroom-based approaches in education (Dickinson, 1995; Littlewood, 1996; Yildirim, 2008; Reinders, 2011). The idea underlying learner autonomy is based on the philosophy that if the students are encouraged toward decision making, goal setting, and reflecting in their process of learning, they, eventually, become more enthusiastic and purposeful about their learning and consequently learning can be more enjoyable, focused, and fruitful for them (Chan, 2003, LittleJohn,1985, both cited in Balcikanli, 2010).

2. Literature Review

Assessment is a crucial aspect of any educational system since it supplies beneficial data both for the teachers and the learners to reconsider their own way of learning and teaching. Having assessed students' performance, teachers can identify weak and strong points of their teaching methods and techniques so that they can adopt effective ways by making necessary adjustments. Assessment and instruction are intertwined so much so that it is not feasible to suppose one without taking the other into account. According to Hedge (2000), assessment is an "interactive and collaborative process in which information is collected in natural classroom instructional encounters" (p. 395). Moreover, he asserts that "assessment is a multi-faceted concept that links together the different issues and keeps track of learners' progress" (p. 395).

Today, thanks to the development in educational thinking and the dramatic changes in instructional methods, teaching and learning all over the world have undergone much effort and change to move beyond the traditional instructional practices that commonly ask students to work individually on exams and to respond to some questions usually within a limited time. There has been a movement toward innovative ways of evaluating that help personalize learning.

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Creating such a system of personalizing learning demands alternative forms of assessment that enable learners to involve actively in this process (Price, Pierson, & Light, 2011). Perhaps one of the main reasons for the appeal of alternative assessment to educators is the fact that standardized tests do not elicit actual performance on the part of the test takers (Brown, 2004). This seems to be mainly due to the fact that traditional assessment does not take into account individual differences based on the philosophy that one test can fit all students despite the individual differences.

Following the shortcoming mentioned above and due to the significant modifications taking place in pedagogical theory toward student-centered communicative approaches, many educators concurred that traditional assessment could not be compatible with the process of learning and they began to incorporate alternative ones (Moya & O'Malley, 1994). Unlike the traditional forms of assessment like multiple choice, fill-in-the-blank, and true/false that demand a low level of cognitive effort due to solely focusing on memorization and recalling, alternative assessment provides an effective and strong means to measure higher order thinking skills and complex problem solving abilities (Palm, 2008). Some examples of alternative assessment tools and strategies are rubrics, journals, language learning logs, performance-based assessment (PBA), portfolios, peer assessment, and self-assessment. These are not all innovative assessment strategies but the most important ones (Price, Pierson, & Light, 2011).

The rationale behind the innovative assessment is based on the assumption that classroom assessment should primarily support ongoing teaching and learning as well as the needs of learners (Bryant & Timmins, 2002; Heritage, 2010). It is believed that alternative assessment provides a strong link between instruction and assessment by creating a condition in which teachers continuously monitor and modify instruction due to the feedback they receive from students (Paulson, Paulson, & Meyer, 1991; Barootchi & Keshavarz, 2002; Caner, 2010, Sharifi & Hassaskhah, 2011). Besides, many of these alternative assessment techniques and strategies are formative in nature; the information resulting from

their application can be used as an informative tool for teachers to make instructional decisions and modify or adjust their methods of teaching. For example, information obtained from portfolio can be helpful in making teachers aware of the appropriateness of their own teaching while providing them with a good opportunity to make decisions about their next instruction.

An analysis of an extensive review of recent literature on alternative assessment indicates that the use of alternative authentic assessment such as portfolio assessment enhances student learning and teacher professionalism to a great extent; portfolio is numerously suggested as a dependable means of individualized and student-centered evaluation (Moya & O'Mally, 1994; Gottlieb, 1995; Bryant & Timmins, 2002). The implementation of portfolio assessment stimulates students' self-reflection and provides valuable feedback to both teachers and students. Besides, it provides the possibility of assessing broader range of skills and abilities (Gottlieb, 1995).

"A portfolio is a purposeful collection of student work that exhibits the students' effort, progress, and achievement in one or more areas" (Paulson, Paulson, & Meyer, 1991, p. 2). The underlying philosophy of portfolio is thus, to help students become more autonomous learners and to take responsibility for their own learning. Given the fact that students take more responsibility and become self-determined in their learning, we can regard portfolios as student-centered rather than teacher-fronted, something which is considered as the main salient feature of portfolio as a reflective tool.

Although the use of language portfolios by teachers and learners does not have a long history and dates back only to mid 1990s (Gonzalez, 2008), they have been used for a relatively longer period of time by experts of other professions such as artists, designers and architects "as means of collecting samples of their work and documenting their achievements" (p. 373).

In sum, the pedagogical task is how to enable learners to take control over their learning. As Benson (2001) contends, the notion of control over learning is at the core of autonomy. Besides, the provision of opportunity for the development of learner autonomy through which autonomy can be exercised is crucial. Autonomy,

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according to a great number of empirical researchers in social psychology, is a basic human need through which one can develop the skills of reflective self-management, and strengthen one's intrinsic motivation accordingly (Little, 2000). Also, there have been substantial evidence from cognitive motivational studies like 'attribution theory' of Dickinson (1995) that learning success and enhanced motivation depend on learners' ability to take responsibility for their learning, to control their own learning and to know that their learning success or failure is to be attributed to their own efforts and strategies rather than to factors outside their control. Thus, autonomous learners engage themselves in the process of learning more thoughtfully and purposefully.

3. Purpose of the Study

In the field of language learning, learners can learn by choosing what and how to learn, and by reflecting on their choices. In other words, only by taking steps toward autonomy and exercising that autonomy, learners become autonomous. The task of teachers is to assist learners to do so and portfolio is seen as a dependable method for fostering autonomy. Therefore, this study attempted to investigate whether portfolio assessment enhanced EFL learners' autonomy. To this end, the following research question was posed:

Does implementing portfolio assessment have any significant impact on Iranian pre-intermediate female EFL learners' autonomy?

4. Method

4.1 Participants

This study was conducted with 60 pre-intermediate level female participants studying English in a Cambridge Open Centre (IR056) in Iran. The age of the participants ranged from 16 to 28. They were selected from among 90 learners studying in the same centre. To

ascertain the homogeneity of the learners in terms of language proficiency, KET proficiency test already piloted with the students of the same level and of similar characteristics to those of the study was employed. Those students whose scores were between one standard deviation above and below the mean were selected for the purpose of the study and were randomly divided into two groups. They were also homogenized in terms of autonomy by employing a validated questionnaire as explained below in Instruments section.

4.2 Instruments

The data for this study were collected through employing KET proficiency test, a questionnaire, a semi-structured interview and participants' portfolio.

Key English Test (KET) is a multi-skill adult elementary level proficiency test designed by Cambridge ESOL. This test was used at the beginning of the study with the aim of homogenizing the sample in terms of their level of language proficiency.

A learner autonomy questionnaire was applied to achieve two goals, first, to examine the homogeneity of the groups in terms of autonomy and second, to collect data on the results of the treatment on learners at the end of the study. Considering different notions of autonomy, the researchers based the questionnaire mainly on that used by Conttia (2007) which, in turn, was drawn from two existing inventories proposed by Cotterall (1995; 1999, cited in Conttia, 2007). In other words, thirty-one items of the whole 40 items belong to this learner autonomy questionnaire. The rationale behind using this questionnaire was that beliefs and attitudes, according to Cotterall (1995) can be a strong indicator of learner autonomy and have a profound influence on their behaviors.

Also, nine items were selected from another inventory by Chan, Spratt, and Humphrey (2002) as employed in the study of Sorumluluk, Yetelilik, Etkinlik, and Dilogrenimi (2009) with the aim of examining the extent the participants engage in activities related to autonomy. The internal consistency of the questionnaire came out to

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be 0.75. Its construct validity was examined by running a factor analysis as well.

The interview type employed in this study was a semi-structured interview with the aim of eliciting more information from the participants. The interview was conducted with ten participants chosen randomly from each group at the end of the study in order to triangulate the results obtained for validation purposes and to shed more light on the results gained from the questionnaire.

In addition to the above-mentioned instruments, the researcher evaluated the participants' portfolios to see the probable development of autonomy happened within them over time and provide evidence to prove the results of two other instruments as well. O'Leary (2007) suggests, assessing autonomy through students' output and feedback that can be manifested in a portfolio-based assessment might be more fruitful in comparison to other instruments since portfolio-based assessment becomes both a means of promoting autonomy and also a means of assessing autonomy as opposed to a measuring tool which would be only an assessment of autonomy.

4.3 Research Approach and Design

The study employed a mixed-method approach for collecting and analyzing the data. It is considered quantitative in that an experimental design was adopted; the participants were randomly assigned to one of the two conditions (portfolio assessment-traditional assessment); it is regarded qualitative in that, participants' growth over time was discussed and justified through analyzing their portfolios. Moreover, their attitudes and perceptions on some key notions of learner autonomy were elicited and recorded via semi-structured interview to reinforce other findings.

Portfolio assessment was regarded as the independent variable and the learner autonomy was considered as the dependent variable of the study. To ensure unambiguous results, the researchers homogenized the participants in terms of language proficiency

through employing KET, and learner autonomy through applying a learner autonomy questionnaire. The statistical procedures of independent samples t-test were used to determine if there existed any significant differences between the two groups. As for the qualitative data, the themes emerging from the data were discussed.

4.4 Data Collection Procedure

As mentioned earlier, the KET proficiency test was administered to 90 learners studying English in the same centre to confirm the homogeneity of participants in terms of language proficiency. An independent sample t-test was run to confirm the homogeneity of their proficiency level. Then, the participants were randomly divided into two groups. They were homogenized in terms of learner autonomy as well through the questionnaire explained in the Instruments section.

Having been selected, the participants were assigned different assessments. The experimental group participants experienced portfolio assessment while traditional assessment was assigned to their counterparts in the control group. The study was conducted nearly throughout two forty-five-day intensive terms in the centre beginning from 28th June to 27th September, 2011.

The portfolio model utilized in this study was based on the model “best work portfolio” as recommended by Rolheiser, Bower, and Stevevahn (2000). The portfolio contents included compulsory and optional items and both written and recorded tasks selected by the participants to show their best work to give them a sense of autonomy. Therefore, the procedure included collecting, reflecting and selecting the best sample learning demonstrating their interests, growth, and progress.

Since portfolio was a new concept for the participants, at the very beginning of the study, the second researcher (i.e. the teacher researcher) provided them with a handout that explained the purpose and nature of portfolio. They were informed that the score devoted to portfolio would be 30 out of 100 total marks (as prescribed by the centre as class participation score).

4.5 Data Analysis

Considering the curriculum planning and course goals, the researchers focused on four skill categories for portfolio organization to provide a conceptual framework helping participants collect learning samples. The participants, therefore, were asked to identify them in the table of content and on the reflection sheet which accompanied each learning sample and to include two representative samples of each areas in their portfolio to be handed in at the end of the term. Also, they were supposed to do some tasks such as goal setting, self-assessment, and peer-assessment.

With regard to the participants in the control group, the teacher researcher asked them to do some tasks similar to those of experimental group in four skills based on curriculum design and course objectives of the centre. Contrary to the experimental group, they were not asked to reflect, redraft, set goal, and assess their products. Finally, the same questionnaire was administered to both groups and ten participants from each group were randomly chosen and interviewed.

5. Results

5.1 Quantitative Analysis

As it was mentioned earlier, the main purpose of the study was to investigate whether participants under portfolio assessment performed better in terms of learner autonomy than those who experienced the traditional assessment. Therefore, a research question was posed to be examined in the light of the study. In order to investigate the research question the following null hypothesis was set out to be tested.

H_0 : The implementation of portfolio assessment does not have any significant effect on learner autonomy.

To test the null hypothesis, applying inferential statistical procedures, the independent sample t-test was used. To further validate the study through triangulation, the qualitative data were

gathered through the semi-structured interview and the participants' portfolios.

5.2 Language Proficiency Test

As mentioned before first, KET proficiency test was piloted with 30 participants. The reliability came out to be .795. After piloting, KET was administered with the aim of selecting homogenous participants. The results of the t-test are shown in Table 1. The results of the t-test revealed that the two groups did not differ significantly based on p value of $0.357 > 0.05$.

Table1: Independent t-test comparing the mean scores of both groups in KET proficiency test

KET	Levene's Test For Equality of Variance		t-test for Equality of Means			
Equal Variances assumed	F	Sig	t	df	Sig.(2-tailed)	Mean Difference
	.025	.874	-.928	58	.357	1.5333000
Equal Variances not assumed			-.928	57.84	.357	1.5333000
KET					95% Confidence Interval of the Difference	
Equal Variance assumed	Std. Error Difference				Lower	Upper
	1.65212				-1.77375	4.84041
Equal Variance not assumed	1.65212				-1.77394	4.84060

5.3 Autonomy Questionnaire

As it was explained, the questionnaire was also piloted with a group of 30 participants similar to those of the study to ensure its reliability. The Cronbach's Alpha for the autonomy questionnaire was calculated. The internal consistency of the questionnaire came out to be .75.

Also, to investigate the homogeneity of items and the construct validity of the questionnaire, a factor analysis was conducted. Table 2 displays the results of KMO and Bartlett's tests in this regard.

Table 2: KMO and Bartlett's Test

Kaiser-Meyer-Olkin Measure of sampling Adequacy		.689
Bartlett's Test of Sphericity	Approx. Chi-Square	1751.03
	df	280
	Sig	.000

The results of factor analysis identified five factors. The Cronbach's Alpha for all subscales was also calculated.

Having ascertained the reliability and validity of the questionnaire, the researchers administrated it to both groups to examine them in terms of learner autonomy as well. Moreover, this questionnaire was administered at the end of the study to see the effect of the treatment on experimental group. Tables 3 and 4 show the results.

Table 3: Independent samples t-test comparing the mean scores of two groups at the start of the study

Variable Learner Autonomy	Levene's test for Equality of Variance	t-test for Equality of Means
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	F	Sig	t	df	Sig 2- tailed	Mean Difference
Equal Variances assumed	90.6	.345	.685	58	.495	.8333
Equal Variances not assumed			.685	55.009	.495	.8333
Learner Autonomy		Std. Error Difference	95% Confidence Interval of the Difference			
Equal Variance assumed		1.21569	Lower	Upper		
Equal Variance not assumed		1.21569	-1.60013	3.26679		
			-1.60295	3.26961		

Table 4: Independent samples t-test comparing the mean scores of two groups at the end of the study

	Levene's Test for Equality of Variances		t-test for Equality of Means			
Equal Variances assumed	F	Sig	t	df	Sig- 2tailed	Mean Difference
Equal Variances not assumed	1.76	0.189	-4.465	58	.000	-6.13333
			-4.465	57.41	.000	-6.13333
Learner Autonomy		Std. Error Difference	95% Confidence Interval of the Difference			
			Lower	Upper		

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Equal Variance assumed	1.37353	-8.88276	-3.3839
Equal Variance not assumed	1.37353	-8.88336	-3.38331

As it can be depicted from Table 3, the p value of $.495 > 0.05$ shows there is no significant difference between the two groups in terms of learner autonomy at the outset of the study. However, the p value of $.000 < 0.05$ shows a significant difference in terms of learner autonomy between the two groups at the end of the study as it can be observed in Table 4. Therefore, the null hypothesis of the study postulating that portfolio assessment did not have any significant effect on learner autonomy was rejected indicating the fact that the experimental group outperformed the control group.

6. Discussion

One reason in support of the findings of the study may be due to the fact that the participants in the experimental group, undergoing treatment, experienced activities and tasks which required them to collect, reflect and select. Having received regular feedback from their classmates and teacher, they revised their work during the term and finally, selected their perfect pieces and put them in their portfolio. This continuous procedure of collecting, reflecting, and selecting equipped them with strong abilities and skills needed in an autonomous learning. They were given a chance to build up their experience in language learning and finally, as a result of doing so many tasks, they felt they had control over their learning rather than depending on their teacher to tell them what to do. The teacher researcher, of course, played a crucial role in offering this experience to them by allowing more room for negotiation, decision making, assessing, and reflecting.

In addition, a close look at the nature of the tasks provides a good justification for the positive performance of experimental group. What promotes the value of portfolio assessment is the sound application of appropriate tasks which creates a balance between “teaching, learning and testing” (Moya and O’Malley, 1994; Nunes, 2004). This balancing function of portfolios is highlighted by Lam and Lee (2010), citing Huot, 2002 and Klenowski, 2002) that portfolio assessment can establish an interactive relationship between and integrate teaching and assessment which can affect learning positively.

Use of portfolios also helps learners develop “metacognitive awareness” of language (i.e. becoming aware of one’s learning processes) by correcting their “common misconceptions about language learning” (Gonzalez, 2008, p. 381) which could finally result in language “reflection” which seems to be a prerequisite for autonomous learning. Accordingly, this study employed some ways which, in the relevant literature, have been proved to be effective in autonomous learning. For instance, the researchers employed self-assessment checklist which according to Gardner (1999) “does not always demonstrate success but where it does, even on a small scale, learners’ motivation will be enhanced” (p. 52). Additionally, he emphasizes the significance of self-assessment for learner autonomy.

As Bullock (2011) argues, since it is in practice impossible to impart to learners everything they need to learn and since learning continues to take place outside classroom environment, it seems necessary to equip learners with self-evaluation and assessment tools so as to get “learners to view learning in personal terms” (p. 115). Although there exists arguments in the literature for the contribution of self-assessment to learner autonomy (Little, 2005; Nunan, 1988, both cited in Bullock, 2011), and although teachers mostly acknowledge the effectiveness of self-assessment, concerns are still voiced against the way it can practically be implemented in EFL/ESL classroom environments (Ekbatani & Pierson, 2000).

Another factor which might have contributed to the development of learner autonomy in the experimental group is that portfolio assessment can indeed furnish opportunity for the learners to “have

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some say over what they are taught” (Reinders, 2011, p. 47). It seems that learners' voice is heard in portfolio assessment process (McNamara and Dean, 1995) and that might become possible through constant reflection they have on their work. Reflective portfolio according to Gottlieb (1995), gives students a chance “to compare their present level of achievement with their prior performance level. Thus, students become involved in self-evaluation and begin to monitor their own progress over time” (p. 13).

Furthermore, the learners in the experimental group were trained in such an environment that their ideas were warmly welcomed and their whole individuality was respected. Also, portfolio assessment provided a cooperative environment rather than a competitive climate which is usually prevalent in traditional approaches. Working cooperatively, the participants in the experimental group felt safe and easy to take risk and make mistakes which, in turn, might have increased their self-esteem as Mullin (1998) claimed.

Participants in the control group, on the other hand, did not show a high level of autonomy most probably because they were deprived of a system of instruction and learning including reflection, self-evaluation, metacognitive awareness, and all basic requirements for developing learner autonomy. Another reason for the low level of learner autonomy in control group which seems to be the most noticeable one was that the participants usually depended on their teacher in the area of assessment; they waited to be taught and assessed by teacher. Therefore, as stated by Cotterall (1995), “the learner's expectations of teacher authority can present an obstacle to accepting autonomy” (p. 195). Given the fact that in such contexts, terms like self-assessment, reflection, goal setting are absent in most cases, the participants cannot be expected to show autonomy whereas such terms are familiar ones in portfolio-based assessment contexts since the learners mostly deal with them to do the required tasks and activities.

Such being the case, the control group did not actually acquire the necessary skills and capability to perform autonomously. Another reason which might be related to the issue is the point that the participants in control group were trained in an instructional

system governed by some erroneous beliefs that encouraged them to mainly get good marks. What is focused on is getting good mark and having good performance on tests, that is, on how well both teacher and students have performed. Teaching in favor of testing is the immediate consequence of such beliefs governing the educational system. Dickinson (1995) believes that giving high value to grades and tests shifts the locus of control to the teacher and decreases the 'learners' self-determination'. Additionally, he points out "doubt is cast on the efficiency of using frequent testing and grades to encourage learning". Furthermore, given the fact that the participants in control group are evaluated by traditional tests, individual differences immensely accentuated in portfolio-based assessment, are ignored to a high extent (Moya & O'Malley, 1994; Reinders, 2011). However, as indicated by Lam and Lee (2010, p. 62) adopting a portfolio-based classroom can "change students' ingrained attitudes about the primacy of grades" especially in exam-oriented EFL situations like Iran.

6.1 Qualitative Analysis

As it was mentioned previously, a semi-structured interview was conducted with ten participants from each group selected randomly. In the interview, certain questions, which were conceptually compatible with the items in the questionnaire, were selected to explore in more details issues addressed in the questionnaire, and to compare the compatibility of the answers with those of the questionnaire; a triangulation process mainly carried out for validation purposes. The major themes emerging from the interview are discussed in line with the results of the questionnaire. Also, the findings are supported by means of additional comments of participants in both groups about each notion.

Regarding the participants' portfolio, a content analysis was adopted in which students' written reflection, entries in different areas, and teacher and peers' comments were analyzed inductively. The recurring themes emerged are discussed in the light of other portfolio-based studies.

6.2 Interview

The participants were interviewed in their mother tongue (Farsi) for about 10-15 minutes based on their desire to talk. Transcripts of the interview in both groups were analyzed inductively and the major themes emerging from the data were identified which were then translated into English. The major patterns were *independent learning, self-assessment, and taking responsibility* as explained below.

6.2.1 Independent Learning

Taking different notions related to independent learning into account, the participants mentioned their attitudes about it. The percentage of the participants in experimental group who stated they had awareness of the concept of independent learning and the percentage of those participants saying that they were independent learners were equal (80%). As one of them said:

I think the learner has the highest responsibility in learning and the teacher just facilitates learning and lights the way. Unless the learners try hard, it would be fruitless and useless to make good progress in learning even if they have the best teacher.

They also mentioned their ideas on the importance of having planning and making decisions and regarded them as key factors in an independent learning. 90% of participants in experimental group said they had a clear purpose and special planning to meet their aims. The following extracts from the students' interview captured some of the significant responses to this question.

My goal is to succeed in different exams, so I have planned to learn eight new words every day by writing them on a piece of paper and then practicing them while I am on the bus,

My main goal is to be able to speak English without much problem since I am going to travel abroad. I think there is a long way for me to reach my goal, but I am determined to achieve it.

These comments highlight the characteristics of an active learner reminiscent of a good language learner. “A willingness to set goals and take risks is central to good language learning, whereas these behaviors may be less important in other types of learning (Cotterall, 1995, p. 199). As Dickinson (1995, p.165) states, “personal involvement in decision making leads to more effective learning”. Making decision, self-determination, resistance and having an explicit aim are salient features of autonomous learners.

Regarding participants’ attitudes on independent learning in control group, about 70% of them were not familiar with the term independent learning. In most cases, the participants neither knew the meaning of independent learning nor had a sound belief about it. They thought that independent learning meant they should study solely on their own without any interaction with teacher; that is, learning by oneself. Below is a comment highlighting their perspectives:

I cannot learn without my teacher’s help. If I learned without my teacher’s help, would it be necessary to take part in these classes?

As it is evident from the above, the responses of the participants in the control group confirm Little’s (1995) statement that “It is sometimes thought that learner autonomy necessarily entails total independence of the teacher, or of the learners of formally approved curricula but this is not so: total independence is not autonomy but autism” (p.178). A number of obstacles according to Cotterall (1995) to learner independence have been identified in the literature, one of them is having the experience of being trained in a traditional educational context which may make learners adopt a dependent behavior as the participants in the study might have adopted. With respect to planning and decision making, about 50% of participants in control group stated that they had plans but they did not specify their decisions.

A similar result was also obtained through the analysis of the questionnaire (item 18) as is clear from Table 5. Item 18 which is directly related to the concept of independent learning provides a

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clear picture. A great number of learners in experimental group responded well to this item. Nearly 86% (26 out of 30) of the participants had an understanding of this concept while about 23% (7 out of 30) of the participants in control group had such awareness.

Table 5: The participants' responses on concept of independent learning in questionnaire in both groups

Items		SD	DA	N	A	SA	N
18. I know what independent learning means.	E	1	1	3	6	19	30
	C	2	5	16	2	5	30

Scales used: SD: Strongly disagree, DA: Disagree, N: Neutral, A: Agree, SA: Strongly Agree, N: Number of Participants, E: experimental, C: control

6.2.2 Self-assessment

Asked for their opinions on the importance of self-assessment, the majority of the students in experimental group found it useful. The percentage of the students who had positive attitude toward self-assessment was 80%. They had the following comments:

It gives me self-confidence and makes me aware of my mistakes. It also reinforces my learning since I have to review all material I have learned to check my understanding.

I think it is useful since a learner can realize her mistakes and take action to solve them.

As it can be understood from their responses, the participants in experimental group perceived the value of self-assessment. The main point they referred to was the importance of self-assessment in helping them to understand their problems, a comment supported by Gardner (1999) who points out "Autonomous learning is about individualization of learning and self-assessing helps learners

monitor their individualized progress” (p. 51). This finding is in accord with a number of studies like that conducted by Hadidi Tamjid and Birjandi (2011). Based on the results of their study, they recommend self-assessment as a beneficial tool for fostering learners’ outcome and independent learning. Therefore, self-assessment is assumed to be effective in learning since it provides opportunities for learners to assess their own progress and promote their ‘self-regulation and autonomy (Butler & Lee, cited in Hadidi Tamjid & Birjandi, 2011).

In addition, most of the participants in experimental group (90%) mentioned that they became aware of their weak and strong points through getting involved in self-assessment. Also, they believed that they themselves were responsible for identifying their strengths and weaknesses. Here are two reports highlighting this:

I find myself responsible since I believe nobody can help me except myself. I usually become aware of my mistakes when I have to review the materials to check my understanding.

I recently have recognized my weaknesses and strengths especially when my teacher asked us to complete a form in which we were asked to write our strengths and weaknesses. I think I myself am responsible since I can better understand myself.

Regarding their comments, it can be inferred that the participants in the experimental group have become aware of their strengths and weaknesses, most probably due to the exposure to portfolio assessment.

The participants in control group, on the other hand, in general remarked that they were not competent and skillful enough to evaluate their learning. The number of the learners who thought they knew the meaning of self-assessment and the number of the learners who said it was useful were equal (4 in each, 40%). They remarked as follows:

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I am not expert enough to assess and correct my errors. My teacher has the responsibility of evaluating us. She knows better and I think she can.

These comments reveal that few of the participants had the experience of self-assessing. This lack of experience and awareness might derive from the condition they were trained in. In other words, in their teacher-fronted climate this term was absent. Cameron suggests that “cultural and educational background interact as they contribute to learners’ belief about the role they should play” (1990, cited in Cotterall, 1995, p. 200). Learners who present such a view do not correspond to the profile of the autonomous learner since the role which they assign to their teacher (i.e. evaluating) is central to the behavior of autonomous learners. Therefore, they are unlikely to acquire it without extensive support and practice.

This perspective is also evident in the results obtained from the questionnaire. Considering item 4 in Table 6 for instance, which is related to the concept of self-assessment, one can see that 26% (8 out of 30) of the participants in control group agreed or strongly agreed that they had their own way of testing their learning while nearly 70% (21 out of 30) of the participants in the experimental group had positive attitude about this skill. Therefore, learners with more positive beliefs are more likely to have internalized the self-regulated behavior and manifested those beliefs in their actual practice.

Table 6: The participants’ responses on concept of ‘self-assessment’ in questionnaire in both groups

Items	SD	DA	N	A	SA	N	
4. I have my own way of testing how much I have learned.	E	1	2	5	18	3	30
	C	0	9	13	7	1	30

This finding accentuated that self-assessment was not common among the control group as opposed to their counterparts in the experimental group who were actively involved in it.

6.2.3 Taking Responsibility

The majority of students responded positively to this question indicating that they were less unlikely to depend solely on their teacher. 70% of participants in the experimental group found themselves responsible for their own learning.

This result provides insight into learners' view of their role in learning. Taking responsibility is a crucial concept in learner autonomy as pointed out by Holec (1981, cited in Benson, 2006, p.22) who maintains, "Autonomy is taking charge of one's own learning". Therefore, those who show a strong perception of this notion were more willing to pick up autonomous behavior.

A close look at the same item displays the following results in control group. A great number of them shifted almost all responsibility to teacher with the justification that they lacked necessary knowledge and skills regarding learning; they declared that teachers knew the best. In sum, 30% of them found themselves responsible for their learning. These findings can be interpreted in the light of the truism that learners who assigned total responsibility to teacher saw teacher's role in language learning as dominant. It shows that they are not ready to initiate learning or seek help and according to Cotterall (1995) they considered teacher as "authority figure –someone who acts as authority on the target language and on language learning as well as directing and controlling all the learning in the classroom" (p. 197).

6.3 Participants' Portfolio

The main themes emerging in the content analysis were: *The evidence of a mutual interaction, goal setting development, the*

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evidence of reflection, self-assessment, and taking responsibility. They are explained briefly below.

6.3.1 The Evidence for a Mutual Interaction

The analysis of participants' portfolios revealed a mutual interaction which happened between, on the one hand, learners and the teacher and, on the other, between the learners and their classmates. Besides, an interaction happened within each learner and herself continuously. This finding highlighted Nunes' (2004) first principle which focused on the 'dialogic nature' of portfolio. In his study, he reported such interaction happened at different levels. He pointed out that this interaction took place "not only at an interpersonal level between teacher and student, but also at an intrapersonal level and inter-textual levels, between the students and himself/herself, between the student and his/her writing" (p. 330). Research studies examining this mode of assessment have revealed the development of such interaction (Wang & Liao, 2008).

6.3.2 Evidence for Goal Setting Development

At the beginning of the study the teacher researcher asked the participants to set their personal goals. The assumption was that incorporating such activity would affect their metacognitive awareness. Although they faced some problems at the beginning of the study, their goal setting sheet in the second term showed a change in their belief on the issue indicating that teacher's feedback and dialogue with them facilitated the process. Also, reviewing the goals during the term was found to be effective.

6.3.3 Evidence for Reflection

In sum, the content analysis of participants' portfolio showed that almost all participants had reflection on their work, but 56% of them showed a high level of thinking.

6.3.4 The Evidence for Self-assessment

An examination of participants' portfolios revealed, 20 out of 30 portfolios included self-assessment sheet. Having compared the results of participants' portfolios with those of other two instruments which showed that about 75percent of participants in experimental group agreed with the effectiveness of self- assessment and indicated a positive attitude toward it, one can claim that the participants gained a good understanding of the importance of self-assessment. Self-assessment encourages students to act independently "so that they develop a critical awareness of their learning process" (McNamara & Dean, 1995, p. 17). A number of studies reveal the positive effects of self-assessment on learners' achievement, motivation, and learner autonomy (Ross, 2006; Andrade & Valtcheva, 2009). In this study also, it did help the participants in experimental group to enhance their awareness and develop a sense of responsibility for their own learning.

6.3.5 Evidence for Taking Responsibility

As a result of content analysis, some crucial themes emerged which manifested the improvement of participants' sense of responsibility. The first and, in fact, the most plausible was that nearly 56 percent stood back to reflect and revise what they had done based on teacher and peer's comments. Also, all the participants had completed goal setting sheet even though some of their works were problematic. Additionally, they had many attempts in identifying and reporting their strengths and weaknesses. For instance, one of them pointed out that "I Know a lot of words but my problem is that I cannot use them for speaking because I don't remember them... so I want to have more word practice until I can remember fast". Finally, nearly 70% of participants selected and organized the content of their portfolio according to their interests, and individuality which made every portfolio unique and different from others indicating participants' ownership as well (Bower & Steevahn, 2000; Chen, 2006; Nunes, 2004; Paulson, Paulson & Meyer, 1991; Rolheiser, Bower &

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Stevevahn, 2000). Nunes' (2004) study provides more support for this finding. He points out that "Although the majority of the portfolios produced by the students illustrate the idiosyncrasies of their authors, they were unique and single creation" (p. 329).

The results of the study in this regard are in line with those of Barootchi and Keshavarz (2002) who suggested portfolio assessment as a contribution to EFL learners' achievement and sense of responsibility. They maintain, "Portfolio assessment serves as a diagnostic tool which provides students with profiles of their emerging skills to help them become increasingly independent learners" (p. 286). The findings of the research project undertaken by Koyuncu (2006) based on which portfolio was shown to be effective tool for fostering autonomy as opposed to school tests also lend good support to the findings of the present study. According to her findings, portfolio was useful not only in terms of being an informative assessment tool which creates a learner-centered and learning-based climate but also as an enjoyable tool which makes learners enjoy while preparing the task for the portfolio.

The results of the study are also partially supported by Wang and Liao (2008) who reported that hence portfolio assessment helped the teacher guide the class toward learning culture instruction rather than teacher-centered instruction, portfolio assessment helped students become more reflective about their learning process accordingly.

The findings obtained from the current study are; moreover, consistent with that reported by Chen (2006) in which portfolio happened to be an effective tool. He believed that students' portfolio was a good indicator of acquiring ownership. The way of selecting and arrangement of the content of portfolio based on their interests and satisfaction, shows good evidence of this feature.

7. Conclusion and Implications

The results of both qualitative and quantitative analyses indicated that portfolio assessment could be considered as a dependable approach in respect of fostering learner autonomy. Despite some

concerns on its implementation, portfolio assessment could serve as a tool that makes learners independent enough to take control of their own learning thus, paving the way for an effective learning.

In sum, it can be concluded that, as Lam and Lee (2010, p. 62) rightly put it, portfolio assessment can “promote learner choice”, “provide a supportive learning environment”, “change students’ ingrained attitudes about the primacy of grades”, raise learners’ metacognitive awareness of language and learning, encourage self-assessment, help them discover their personal ways of learning and identify language learning strategies which best suit them (Gonzalez, 2008) all of which are supported by the findings of the study in one way or another; essential factors which make “invisible” learning factors (Kohonen, 2003) visible to learners in their long journey of the mastery of a foreign language, and which could ultimately lead to learners taking responsibility for their own learning and developing autonomy.

The results of the current study have several crucial implications for EFL language teachers and stakeholders. First, assuming assessment as a separate procedure is a wrong belief which should be modified under the light of the findings of the study since it indicates that teacher can employ assessment as a tool for teaching rather than merely measuring learners’ outcome. Second, portfolio is not just a procedure of collecting different samples; its application provides a comfortable and supporting environment that improves teacher-student interaction. Third, it raises metacognitive awareness of learners which is a vital element in autonomous learning. Fourth, it decreases the anxiety, resulting from other types of assessment, simply because learners here take risks to make mistakes.

In general, the findings of this study might be applied to all educational settings whose aims are to enhance learner autonomy, raise students’ awareness of their own learning strategies, and help them develop some kind of critical thinking.

However, various studies are needed to further verify the findings and draw more robust conclusion on the effect of portfolio assessment on learner autonomy. It can be a good idea for those researchers interested to investigate the effectiveness of portfolio

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assessment on other areas like critical thinking, and different learners' styles. Besides, the relationship between portfolio assessment and learners' motivation would be a potential starting point for further research. Also, several aspects of effectiveness need to be studied, for instance, long term effectiveness of portfolio on learner autonomy.

Certain limitations were imposed on this study. First, due to the fact that portfolio assessment is fundamentally a qualitative approach to the participants' assessment, problems such as educational policy, interpretation and reliability might arise. Second, because of the time constraint, the researchers had to limit the time span in which they conducted the study into two terms of almost three months. This also would affect the variety of the activities and tasks used. Third, due to the fact that participants were required to use target language while doing their works, participants' language proficiency might also be a constraint since their lack of knowledge might hinder them from expressing or articulating their reflective process appropriately.

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