ELOPE

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Implementing Portfolio Assessment
in Lower-Secondary School

Summary

Since alternative assessment embraces highly authentic tasks consistent with classroom goals and instruction, its implementation in the language classroom is believed to promote collaboration with peers, transfer responsibility to the learners and, consequently, foster learner autonomy. This paper presents the results of a research study aiming to determine whether portfolio assessment contributes to the development of autonomy in adolescent learners. In order to collect the data, qualitative and quantative methods of research were applied. The research results reveal that the implementation of portfolio assessment failed to affect the overall level of learner autonomy. Introducing one selected pedagogical procedure does not suffice to foster learner autonomy. Teachers need to be ready to pass a portion of their authority to the learners, who, in turn, need to know how to use the new privileges judiciously.

Key words: alternative assessment, portfolio assessment, learner autonomy, adolescents

Uvajanje ocenjevanja s pomočjo portfolija
v nižji srednji šoli

Povzetek

Alternativno ocenjevanje sestoji iz avtentičnih nalog, ki direktno odražajo način in cilje poučevanja, njihovo uvajanje v razredu pa naj bi spodbujalo sodelovanje med učenci, njihovo samostojnost ter prenos odgovornosti na učence. Namen predstavljene raziskave je bil ugotoviti, ali uvedba ocenjevanja s pomočjo portfolio prispeva k večji avtonomiji učencev v najstniški starosti. Pri zbiranju podatkov smo uporabili kvalitativne in kvantitativne raziskovalne metode. Rezultati raziskave kažejo, da ocenjevanje s pomočjo portfolija ni vplivalo na učenčevo samostojnost. Uvajanje enega samega pedagoškega postopka ne zadošča za razvijanje učenčeve samostojnosti. Učitelji morajo prenesti del svoje avtoritete na učence, ti pa se morajo zavedati nove odgovornosti in jo premišljeno uporabljati.

Ključne besede: alternativno ocenjevanje, portfolio, avtonomija učenca, najstniki

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1. Introduction

As Nunan (1988) observes, modern democratic societies should aim at developing and promoting learner-centred education. The Council of Europe, in *Common European Framework* (2001), underscores the strategic importance of fostering autonomy and adapting curricula to learners' individual needs. In Poland both the educational reform of 1999 and the introduction of the new curriculum delineating foreign language education of 2009 assume that the general aim of education on the lower secondary level is to develop learners' intellectual independence to enable them to make educational choices that would be compatible with their individual abilities and personal interests. In order to meet these objectives, schools should create optimal conditions in which the learners would be empowered to acquire and retain knowledge, develop the ability of observation and reflectiveness as well as seek opportunities for self-education.

Learners attending lower secondary school undergo a transition from childhood to adulthood; therefore, the development of autonomous learning and the ability to take responsibility for their own decisions seem vitally important in the process of holistic development of an individual. The aim of the research presented in this article is to determine whether the implementation of a selected pedagogical procedure, that is portfolio assessment, is conducive to the development of autonomous behaviours in reference to seven aspects of learner autonomy selected for the purposes of this research: selection and implementation of relevant resources, collaboration with other members of the group, the ability to establish learning aims and objectives, engagement in outside classroom learning, capability to evaluate their own learning process, implementation of appropriate learning strategies and attitudes toward the teachers and their role in education.

2. The role of autonomy and assessment in language learning

The notion of autonomy in second language acquisition emerged in 1971 as the result of the Council of Europe's Modern Languages Project aiming to establish guidelines for individual setting of learning goals. Holec (1981) defines autonomy as the learners' ability to take responsibility for their own learning. It can be shaped in three areas: control over the learning process management, control over the cognitive processes and control over the content of learning (Benson 2011). An autonomous learner takes over the responsibility for taking all decisions concerning the learning process as well as their practical implementation. Such a learner is able to define the aims and the content of learning, independently direct the learning process and select the most advantageous methods and techniques of learning. As Little (1991) observes, autonomous learning is reflected not only in the quality of the learning process itself but also in the application of the acquired knowledge in the meaningful context. Autonomy can, to a large extent, determine success in language learning, hence the need to develop learners' responsibility for their learning process.

The ability to direct one's own learning can be developed by a number of specially designed pedagogical tools. Assessment is an important element of the classroom procedure and it does not only serve as feedback on the learners' success or failure in the learning process, but it also

provides valuable insight into the effectiveness of the teaching practice and indicates the areas that need further development and improvement. In recent years a shift from the *culture of testing* to the *culture of assessment* can be observed (Birenbaum 1996; Fox 2008). The *testing culture* is rooted in the structuralist view of language and psychometric methods of measurement. Focusing on obtaining quantitative results of learners' achievement and proficiency, tests ensure high objectivity and reliability of measurement. They fail, however, to take into account the process of learning and the uniqueness of individual language performance. The *assessment culture* offers solutions to these problems as it emphasises:

> (1) the centrality of the classroom (teaching practice and learning process); (2) the active role played by students/learners in assessment processes including standard setting, identification of evaluation criteria, procedures, etc.; (3) a heightened valuing of process; and (4) outcomes characterized by summaries of learner competencies which are detailed, descriptive and informative, rather than a single, quantifiable score. (Fox 2008, 102)

Being an alternative to the traditional assessment, the new approach underlines the process, as opposed to solely the product, of learning and the importance of integrating assessment with the instruction. Paper-and-pencil tests are replaced by meaningful, authentic and communicative assessment tasks which are smoothly incorporated into the ongoing classroom practice. The results, rather than being limited to a numeric grade, provide meaningful feedback and promote learning.

Although a portfolio has been traditionally used by artists and architects to collect examples of their best work, nowadays this technique is widely applied in education as an innovative method of assessing learners' achievement and progress. A portfolio can be defined as "a purposeful collection of student work that tells the story of the student's efforts, progress, or achievement in (a) given area(s)" (Arter and Spandel 1992, 32).

In order to fully understand the nature of successful portfolio assessment, it is worthwhile discussing five characteristic features enumerated by Kemp and Toperoff (1998):

- *Joint effort*: portfolios should be an outcome of cooperation between the teacher and the learners at all stages of portfolio assessment: from planning to the discussion of the results. Peñaflorida (2002) emphasises the role of conferencing between learners and the teacher – regular revisions allow an ongoing adjustment of instruction to the learners' needs.

- *Selection of work*: a portfolio is a selection, and not just a collection of random pieces of student work. Portfolio authors need to be trained how to judge and justify their own choices of materials.

- *Reflection of growth*: portfolios are longitudinal in nature and a wide range of materials accumulated over a longer period of time enable both the teacher and the learners to observe progress and identify strengths and weaknesses. Being able to self-reflect on their work, learners are ready to establish future learning objectives. Because problems and mistakes provide the evidence of development and progress, the content of a portfolio should not be limited to the best pieces of work only.

- *Clear criteria:* portfolio assessment can provide valid and reliable results only if learners are familiar with criteria concerning selection of work samples and organization of a portfolio. Criteria used to assess a single task and a portfolio as a whole should be established in cooperation between the teacher and the learners.

- *Multiple skills:* a portfolio is a selection of diverse materials aiming to assess different skills. The teacher can limit the content of a portfolio to one skill or may decide to display a wider, multidimensional view of the learner's progress.

The content and the structure of a portfolio vary, depending on the application (classroom assessment, university/college admission) and the audience (parents, headmasters, other teachers, general public). It can be used to assess the content of one subject or can adopt an interdisciplinary character. Due to its universal nature, a portfolio finds application on all levels of education: from kindergarten to the university level, and also in teacher training programmes. The use of portfolios is not limited to the in-class teaching as there have been attempts to apply this method on a large-scale in external assessment. In language learning portfolios are mainly used to assess writing (Peñaflorida 2002); however, if designed appropriately, they may also focus on other skills, and thus provide evidence of different aspects of language competence (O'Malley and Valdez Pierce 1996).

O'Malley and Valdez Pierce (1996) note that the key elements of portfolios are: samples of students' work, students' self-assessment, and clearly stated criteria which are agreed on both by the teacher and the learners. A portfolio is claimed to be both an assessment and a self-assessment method as it involves the teacher's verification and grading of the collected work and, at the same time, it gives the learner an opportunity to observe and reflect on the progress achieved over a certain period of time.

Brown and Hudson (1998) discuss the advantages of using a portfolio from three perspectives relating to the impact on the learning process, teachers' position and assessment procedure. As portfolio assessment focuses not only on the product but also on the process of learning, the teacher and the learners involved in portfolio assessment collaborate to attain certain assessment standards and develop metalanguage to facilitate discussions about the learning process. Portfolios also improve teachers' work as a wide range of language samples gathered in a portfolio give valuable insight into learners' language development and individual progress. Moreover, as a result of the ongoing cooperation at various stages of assessment, for instance, during one-to-one conferences, learners start to perceive teachers as guides and counsellors. Finally, the use of portfolios enhances the meaningfulness of the assessment process as both the teacher and the learners are actively involved in assessing tasks that encourage real-life language use in authentic situations. The multitude of tasks enables the teachers to focus on various dimensions of language learning, which can be further reflected on and discussed by teachers and learners. Birenbaum (1996, 10) summarises the impact of portfolio assessment on language learning: "it helps the students develop personal dispositions that are considered essential for effective learning, namely, self-regulation, self-efficacy, self-discipline, and self-assessment, as well as intrinsic motivation, persistence, and flexibility." Moreover, one of the most valuable assets of portfolio assessment is its content validity as the elements collected in learners' files relate directly to the instructional goals and classroom activities (Birenbaum 1996).

Despite numerous advantages of using portfolio assessment, before its implementation in the classroom a number of possible difficulties need to be considered. Birenbaum (1996) points out that as learners are free to select pieces of work, portfolios vary in terms of their constituent parts, and consequently it is difficult to devise a set of standard assessment criteria that would provide consistent and replicable interpretation of the results obtained by individual learners. This problem can be overcome, as suggested by Birenbaum (1996), by applying more detailed scoring rubrics comprising various aspects of performance by well-trained raters. Another risk involved in the use of portfolio assessment is the way it is handled by the teachers and applied in practice. It is the method of implementation that proves portfolio to be an alternative method; nevertheless,

some teachers tend to disregard this prerequisite and treat portfolio as a means of external control directed at grading and emphasising the product, not the process of learning. Instead of developing self-reflective learning, a teacher-centred application of portfolios leads to ranking the learners, and thus loses its formative value (Fox 2008).

3. The research

3.1 The aims of the research

Students of lower secondary school (that is, teenagers of between 13 and 16) undergo rapid emotional and physiological changes. Being aware of their own needs and capable of independent thinking, they are ready to become conscious members of the learning process. The development of autonomy at this age is difficult and requires that the teacher adjust the teaching methods to the learners' stage of cognitive development. Fostering autonomy in this age group can serve as a motivational factor and facilitate learners' personal and social development at school as well as in outside-classroom situations (Komorowska 2001).

The new core curriculum introduced in Poland in 2009 underscores the importance of language learning as a life-long process and, apart from the linguistic aspects, it enumerates a number of key competencies that need to be developed in a language classroom. Consequently, the teacher, apart from teaching the language, additionally needs to focus on non-linguistic elements, such as learning to learn, learners' reflectiveness and independence, ability to cooperate or apply diverse learning resources. The curriculum also mentions that one of the techniques to be used in the classroom is a language portfolio.

As both autonomy and portfolio assessment aim at individual development of a learner, an attempt was made in this research to establish the relationship between the two concepts. The research study presented in this article aims to determine whether portfolio assessment applied in a lower secondary school exerts any effect on adolescents' level of autonomy over the period of one school year. Learner autonomy is a multifaceted concept; therefore, the instruments applied in the research focused on the overall level of this construct as well as its seven subcomponents selected for the purposes of this study enumerated in the subsequent section. Such an approach helped the researcher to analyse the changes in the level of learner autonomy from a number of perspectives. Moreover, the application of qualitative research instruments, i.e. monthly classroom observations and interviews with the subjects aimed to provide insightful information about how the new assessment method was introduced in the classroom by the teacher, and how it was approached by the learners.

3.2 The procedure

The research lasted 9 months, that is, one full school year. Two groups took part in the research – one experimental and one control group. Both groups were comparable in the number of subjects and their level of language competence (beginners and pre-intermediate learners). All subjects attended three hours of English per week and the lessons were based on the same syllabus and course book. Apart from being assessed according to standard assessment regulations established in the school in which the research took place, throughout the duration of the study the subjects in the experimental group were additionally exposed to portfolio assessment. The research can be referred to as an interventionist study since the subjects were exposed to certain pedagogical measures that were supposed to achieve a specific aim. This intervention in the routine assessment procedure was applied

with the aim of observing the emergence of changes in the level of learner autonomy. All the lessons were taught by the regular English teacher, while the researcher remained an objective observer.

The study is an example of mixed methods research as it comprised both quantitative and qualitative data elicitation tools: a questionnaire, monthly classroom observations and semi-structured interviews with the learners. All the instruments were developed for the purposes of the research by the researcher and helped to observe the changes in the overall level of autonomy as well as the emergence of autonomous behaviours in the following areas:

- selection and implementation of relevant resources (subscale 1)

- collaboration with other members of the group (subscale 2)

- the ability to establish learning aims and objectives (subscale 3)

- engagement in outside classroom learning (subscale 4)

- learners' ability to evaluate their own learning process (subscale 5)

- implementation of appropriate learning strategies (subscale 6)

- attitudes toward the teachers and their role in education (subscale 7).

The quantitative data was gathered by means of a pre- and post-questionnaire prepared on the basis of autonomous behaviour lists (Boud 1988; Legutke and Thomas 1991; Dickinson 1992; Breen and Mann 1997; Sheerin, 1997), and acknowledged autonomy questionnaires used in the Polish educational context (Michońska-Stadnik 2000; Pawlak 2004). The questionnaire consisted of 35 items graded according to a Likert-type scale where 1 indicated 'strongly disagree' and 5 – 'strongly agree.' To supplement the numerical data with qualitative information, the researcher observed the groups once a month in a variety of classroom procedures focusing on language instruction, practice, production as well as assessment. The observations were conducted on the basis of a pre-designed observation sheet corresponding to the abovementioned questionnaire. Finally, towards the end of the research, randomly selected subjects from each group were interviewed with the use of an interview scheme prepared by the researcher. Apart from the questions concerning the subscales referring to different aspects of autonomy, the subjects were additionally requested to voice their own opinions about the new assessment method they were exposed to.

It is important to underline that the learners had never used portfolio assessment in the course of education; therefore, a thorough introduction to the new assessment method was necessary. Before explaining the premises of a portfolio as an assessment method, the teacher asked the learners to recall some examples of portfolios used in non-educational settings. Although the learners were familiar with the application of this method in the professional world, it turned out that they had never used it as a form of classroom assessment. Once the aims and the structure of a portfolio were provided, the teacher encouraged the learners to establish their own criteria, which were further used in the course of the research. The learners and the teacher agreed on the following criteria: neatness, grammar and lexical accuracy, the amount and the form of work, a variety of tasks and systematic work. The list of criteria was attached to each portfolio so that the learners would be able to refer to it at all times. Moreover, the criteria were repeated each time the outcomes of a portfolio were presented to the class. The teacher suggested also some examples of additional tasks that could be placed in the portfolio, e.g. translations of songs, new vocabulary, newspaper articles,

etc. The obligatory elements were assigned by the teacher on a regular basis and were connected with the learning content discussed in the classroom (e.g. extension of vocabulary introduced in the course book, written weather forecasts, reports of a classroom survey, letters and other forms of written texts). The learners were asked to prepare a special file with a table of contents in which they would list all obligatory and optional tasks with the date of submission. After a larger portion of material was covered in the classroom, the learners were asked to reflect on their own learning process through open-ended questions or mini-surveys prepared by the teacher. The portfolios were collected twice a semester, and the feedback was provided in form of a grade and a written comment about the weak and strong points of the collected work. The teacher decided to grade individual pieces of work and no overall grade was given for the entire portfolio. The outcomes were then summarised by the teacher and discussed in front of the class.

4. Results and discussion

First, the results of the questionnaire will be accounted for. Table 1 illustrates the mean scores obtained before and after the treatment by the experimental and control groups in respect to the overall level as well as the 7 areas of learner autonomy. In order to determine whether the observed differences were statistically significant, a dependent t-test was calculated for the overall level of autonomy, each subscale as well as each individual questionnaire item.

In the case of the overall level of autonomy in both groups the difference between the mean results of the questionnaire administered on two occasions appeared to be too small to be of statistical importance; consequently, a null hypothesis stating that administration of portfolio has no impact on the overall level of autonomy can be accepted.

In the next step there was an attempt to examine the results obtained before and after the treatment in the experimental group on the subscales referring to different aspects of autonomy. With dt=26, alpha decision level set at α=0.05, and t_{crit}=2.056, the difference between the results obtained in the pre- and post-test on subscale 1 appear significant as t_{obs}=2.541 (p=0.017). The observed value of *t* on subscale 1 suggests that portfolio exerts a positive impact on learners' ability to select and implement relevant resources.

Subscales	Experimental group Pre-test	Experimental group Post-test	Control group Pre-test	Control group Post-test
Subscale 1	2.76	3.10	2.81	2.82
Subscale 2	3.30	3.34	3.56	3.67
Subscale 3	2.83	2.60	2.85	2.85
Subscale 4	3.11	3.17	2.99	3.05
Subscale 5	3.50	3.64	3.25	3.10
Subscale 6	3.69	3.64	3.68	3.76
Subscale 7	3.27	3.33	3.55	3.37
Total	**3.21**	**3.26**	**3.24**	**3.23**

*Table 1. **Mean results obtained by means of the pre- and post-questionnaire on learner autonomy in the experimental and control groups.***

The second subscale on which the difference between the mean results in the pre- and post-test proved significant in the experimental group was subscale 3 (with t_{obs}=2.165; p=0.04), whose aim was to measure the learners' ability to establish learning aims and objectives. As the results after the treatment are lower than the ones before, it can be concluded that a portfolio as an assessment method exerts a negative effect on learners' ability to set their own learning objectives. The differences on the remaining subscales were insignificant and therefore it can be stated that the applied method of assessment did not affect other areas of learner autonomy.

To obtain more insightful information concerning the emergence of autonomous behaviours in the experimental group, similar calculations were performed for each questionnaire item. The differences between the results before and after the treatment proved to be statistically significant only in terms of 3 questionnaire items: 2 (t_{obs}=2.658; p=0.013), which shows that the learners wanted to have a bigger say in the choice of the course book, 20 (t_{obs}=3.232; p=0.003), which indicates that they tended to be less prepared for classes after the experiment, and 30 (t_{obs}=2.114; p=0.044), which points to the increased use of learning resources in solving language problems.

Similar calculations conducted in the control group did not reveal any statistically significant differences in the overall level of autonomy or the 7 subscales. Some changes, however, were observed in the case of individual questionnaire items. Question 7 (t_{obs}= 2.134; p=0.045) reveals a fall in the level of autonomy, indicating that towards the end of the experiment the learners tended to perceive their progress as conditional on the attractiveness of the lessons. A significant difference was also observed in question 14 (t_{obs}=2.89; p=0.009), which indicates that the subjects were less aware of their strengths and weaknesses when the questionnaire was administered on the second occasion. A rise, on the other hand, was visible in item 11 (t_{obs}=3.215; p=0.004), which suggests that at the end of the research the subjects more frequently sought the possibilities of using L2 outside school.

In order to supplement statistical analysis with qualitative data, let us now proceed to present the results obtained by means of qualitative tools, i.e. monthly observations and semi-structured interviews with the learners. These results will also help to account for the significant differences revealed by the questionnaire.

As pointed out before, in the group subjected to portfolio assessment a significant difference was noted in the case of subscale one, referring to the learners' ability to select and apply additional resources. This might result from the fact that almost all items included in the portfolio exceeded the content of the course book and compelled the learners to look for information in other sources. If the learners wished to obtain a better grade for an additional entry in a portfolio, they had to make all decisions concerning task completion independently. Consequently, they were responsible for selecting a task type as well as choosing relevant resources and evaluating the final outcome. Learners' increased interest in learning resources was also reflected in the abovementioned questionnaire items 2 and 30. The results of the observations and the interviews revealed that the teaching and learning processes in both research groups were to a large extent based on the course book and workbook. The tasks done in the classroom as well as those assigned as homework tightly followed the sequence of exercises in these two books. The learners were encouraged to use additional resources only when they had to submit assignments to their portfolios. Conversely, the control group had hardly any opportunities to employ additional resources in their learning.

Another area of autonomy in which a significant difference was noted in the experimental group was the learners' ability to set their own learning goals. As the mean results after the experiment in

this area are lower than before the treatment, it can be concluded that the applied method hindered learners' ability to establish learning aims and objectives. Taking into consideration the fact that the learners were given relative freedom in the choice of resources and selection of optional tasks to be placed in a portfolio, such results might be surprising. However, the classroom observation and interviews with the learners revealed that although portfolio assessment offered the learners a chance to submit additional tasks, its ongoing implementation was, to a large extent, dominated by the teacher, who was responsible for its planning, administration and feedback. Moreover, the interviewed learners reported that they did not understand the aim of the new method and perceived it merely as an additional burden. Despite the teacher' explanation that one of the aims of this assessment method is to observe the growth of their language competence over time, this premise did not seem to be pursued and the learners were not able to reflect on their own performance. The learners had access to their files at all times, but they were not trained in how to self-reflect on their previous tasks. The negative beliefs about the new assessment method were reflected in learners' actions: some learners failed to set up their own portfolio or did not submit it on a regular basis. Neither the questionnaire nor the qualitative instruments revealed any changes on this subscale in the control group.

The questionnaire shows that the overall level of autonomy on the remaining subscales was not affected as the result of the applied treatment; still, the emergence of some incidental autonomous behaviours could be observed in situations in which the subjects were engaged in the portfolio assessment. For instance, before the learners started using a portfolio, they were requested to set assessment criteria to be later applied during the experiment. The subjects were eagerly engaged in the process and were able to suggest reasonable solutions. Although the teacher needed to guide them, provide suggestions and evaluate the final list, all the criteria used in the course of the treatment were put forward by the learners. Another aspect worth mentioning is that portfolio assessment prompted some of the learners to prepare diverse additional assignments which were later placed in the file. Apart from these tasks, the learners appeared to be reluctant to engage in any other extracurricular tasks or initiatives.

Even though some positive aspects of implementing portfolio assessment were observed, the research revealed also some important problems that need to be attended to. One of the most serious pitfalls was the fact that self-assessment was sorely neglected by the learners. Although both open- and closed-ended instruments were offered, they were not completed and attached to the portfolios by the learners. It might reflect the importance of grading as the major factor motivating learners to work – self-assessment tools were not graded, so the learners did not submit them. On the other hand, such a situation may have resulted from the fact that learners were not accustomed to self-assessment of any type as the ability to reflect on one's learning process is not promoted in the traditional system of education in which the research took place. Even though the subjects were provided with introductory explanation when a self-assessment instrument was used for the first time, they might not have understood the aim of such a procedure and, being left without the teacher's assistance, they simply were not able to interpret their language performance and, consequently, abandoned the unfamiliar task.

The interviews with the learners conducted after the experiment allowed the researcher to collect the subjects' opinions concerning the applied assessment method. When asked about their attitudes to portfolio assessment, the majority of learners were critical of this procedure. The most frequently repeated problem was the necessity to devote additional time to preparing new portfolio entries and carrying the file to school. Responses, such as "I didn't feel like doing it," "I've lost my file and

I don't have a new one," or "I'd rather watch TV instead" indicate that learners' negative attitudes to this method stemmed from their unwillingness to be involved in additional work rather than the nature of the method. The learners who praised the new assessment procedure underlined the possibility of getting good grades for optional work. One learner underlined that she would not have done some additional tasks if it had not been for the portfolio. They also mentioned that the method is novel and interesting. Moreover, the subjects appreciated clear assessment criteria and the practical attributes of portfolios – all pieces of their work were stored together. Even though one learner's overall opinion about portfolio assessment was positive, she complained about the obligation to choose the optional task unaided and suggested that such decisions should be made by the teacher. As negative opinions about portfolio assessment prevailed, most of the interviewees would not like this method to be used in the future.

As the observation and the interviews show, portfolio assessment was not accepted by the learners as a valuable method of verifying their achievement. Therefore, a question arises: why did the new assessment method fail to awaken the learners' interest and stimulate them to work? First of all, this method was a complete novelty to all the learners – they did not fully understand its aim and structure, and they were not aware of the added value it entailed. It seems that the implementation of the new method requires a more extensive presentation of its premises, and a particular emphasis should be placed on practical aspects and possible gains that can be derived from language portfolios. Moreover, as the research was conducted in an educational system in which the summative and grade-oriented assessment traditions prevail, it would appear beneficial to inform learners' parents about the principles of the new method. The interviews conducted with the subjects indicate that parents play an important role in the learning process as they suggest additional materials, help to solve language problems and verify their children's knowledge before tests. It is therefore reasonable to assume that if the parents had been acquainted with the new method, there would have been a bigger chance that at least some of them would impel their children to submit the assigned tasks. Another problem which significantly diminished the formative value of portfolio assessment was the fact that the learners failed to engage in the process of self-assessment. It might have stemmed from the fact that the learners had never been trained to reflect on their own performance or the language learning process. The initial introduction of self-assessment was not sufficient – self-assessment is a difficult and complex process requiring teachers' constant guidance and assistance. Moreover, it seems that more decisiveness is needed in eliciting this element of portfolio as it would not only force the learners to complete a self-assessment tool, but also provide the teacher with immediate feedback on the learners' ability to engage in self-reflection. Finally, in the experimental group both the feedback on portfolio assessment and the grading procedure were directed by the teacher – the learners were not involved in the assessment process and did not have a chance to test in practice the criteria they established at the beginning. It might be suggested that the learners would have been more engaged in building up their portfolios if the frontal feedback and written comments on each portfolio entry had been supplemented with one-to-one conferencing or other forms of direct contact between the teacher and the learners.

5. Conclusions

Portfolio assessment is widely acclaimed for its formative value, as it encourages independence and self-reflection both on the process and the product of learning. The conducted research revealed the emergence of certain autonomous behaviours in the group exposed to portfolio assessment; for instance, the learners were able to establish and implement assessment criteria or apply diverse learning materials without the teacher's assistance. Unfortunately, these elements that appeared

to be task-specific were not transferred to other spheres of classroom teaching; consequently, they were not fully developed. It can be concluded that the effectiveness of an assessment method in developing autonomy depends on multiple factors: the nature of the assessed task, learners' involvement as well as their attitude to the method. Some elements of portfolio assessment failed, but it must be remembered that it was the first time the learners had been engaged in self-assessment or the processes of setting own assessment criteria. It seems that in order to benefit from alternative methods of assessment, one needs to be already equipped with a repertoire of autonomous behaviours, such as the ability to set concrete learning goals or evaluate one's progress. Therefore, the process of introducing assessment methods different from traditional tests has to be preceded by far-reaching changes in the classroom. The teachers need to consent to invite learners to participate in the decision-making concerning at least some aspects of classroom learning so that they will be able to make appropriate choices when working on their own. Finally, unless learning to learn is not encouraged in other areas of classroom practice or is not transferred to other tasks carried out at school or at home, one can hardly expect the newly developed autonomous behaviours to consolidate and become a regular occurrence affecting the overall level of autonomy.

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