An Evaluation of Using E-Portfolios in Teaching and Learning IELTS Vocabulary – a Case study at TUEBA

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Abstract
At TUEBA (Thai Nguyen University of Economics and Business Administration), vocabulary seems to be never less problematic or more appealing although tremendous efforts and concern have been invested. Both TUEBA teachers and students agree on the necessity of building and enriching the vocabulary, otherwise, the graduation requirement on IELTS band score of at least 5.5 for students of the advanced program may become extremely impossible. The main target of this research inquiry is to examine the usability, adaptability and flexibility of employing e-portfolios to develop EFL students' lexis at TUEBA. The findings of this proposal are supposed to function as a fundamental framework and innovative guidelines for both teachers and students at TUEBA regarding the application of e-portfolios in their teaching and learning of IELTS vocabulary.

I.   Introduction

Being a newly-established, non-English majored and local educational institution, the management at Thai Nguyen University of Economics and Business Administration (TUEBA) has shown enormous concern and interest towards promoting an efficient environment for English teaching and learning though. Since 2015, IELTS has been decided the official test for the students at TUEBA to be qualified for graduation approval. To be specific, while students of other disciplines are required to obtain the IELTS scores of as low as 4.5, those attendants of the advanced program at TUEBA need to achieve at least 5.5 IELTS – a far more challenging band.

After 4 years of IELTS application, recent surveys reveal that a noticeable proportion of as high as 65% of TUEBA students failed to attain the target scores at their first attempt and over four fifths of them laid the blame on the mixed variety of vocabulary in the IELTS tests. The question as how to boost the students' vocabulary was seriously taken into account with the hope that their overall performance on IELTS test will be enhanced. Accordingly, heading for a more fruitful application of e-portfolios TUEBA and better prepare students for the IELTS test, this research proposal was piloted.

Rationale

Obviously, besides grammatical structures, vocabulary, known as Lexical Resource as per IELTS marking sheet, plays an extremely crucial role, which significantly influences the performance of students on all four integrated skills of the IELTS tests. Meanwhile, the majority of surveyed participants confessed that the approaches currently employed to teach and learn lexis at TUEBA proved inoperative. It could be said that vocabulary not only frightens TUEBA students with massive anxiety but levies substantial tension on teachers of English as well. Therefore, series of professional meetings and seminars have been organized at TUEBA with the hope of designing an effective tactic and fruitful materials to deal with IELTS vocabulary and thus better prepare students for the actual tests. Striking improvements in the English proficiency of TUEBA students, particularly in terms of lexical repertoire, have been noted thanks to the recent application of modern technological tools in the teaching and learning process, among which e-portfolios are praised to make a profound contribution. In comparison to traditional paper-based methods, the advantages generated by e-portfolios vastly outweigh as they stimulate natural digestion of even technical terminologies while providing ample chance for media experience. In this inquiry, the author conducted a small-scale research on 16 lecturers from the Department of English and 155 students at TUEBA regarding their employment of e-portfolios in the teaching and learning of IELTS lexis.

Theoretical perspectives

Abbas Ali Zarei (2014) conducted a small-scale research at a language institute to investigate the validity of five internet-based vocabulary portfolios, including *word map*, *word wizard, concept wheel, visual thesaurus* and *word rose* on students' L2 lexical comprehension and production. In his study, Abbas (2014) employed both qualitative and quantitative data collected from three specified sources namely structured

questionnaires, test scores and interview. The results reveal that a significant change in the means of visual thesaurus, students' participation, vocabulary improvement and the concept wheel could be witnessed in every technique application. The majority of participants praised these technology-based vocabulary portfolios as an independently innovative learning strategy via creating a vivid connection between the existing vocabulary and learners' background knowledge (Chau & Cheng, 2010). However, certain flaws are associated with this research of Abbas (2014), most noticeably is that it cost a huge amount of resources in terms of time, finance and mental ability since the study was operated throughout the whole academic year. In addition, those statistical differences in terms of the students' vocabulary capacity generated in the regression results due to the dissimilarity in the sociocultural and educational settings are tough to be well explained.

Another notable research done by Parinaz and Behdokht (2015) also presents exhaustive evaluation on the merits as well as drawbacks when using portfolios for EFL students' lexical development. The most significant virtue of the above study lies in the theories and taxonomies of vocabulary teaching-and-learning in EFL field nothing new, however, only recently has the inclusive perspective on technology integration as well as autonomous learning caught increasing concern. Thus, the authors' effort to examine an innovative analysis on vigorous impact of portfolios on EFL learners' lexical development and motivation is highly appreciated. Moreover, the literature and theoretical framework introduced in the article obviously lay a firm ground for future study of affecting items and effective schemes towards learners' vocabulary capacity. Accordingly, EFL practitioners are recommended to select suitable lexical tasks and closer to their learners' needs and interests (Hunt & Beglar, 2005). These results echoed earlier findings in the literature that portfolio assessment did significantly improve students' vocabulary achievement (Elahinia, 2004). In short, portfolios allow students to become autonomous learners and critical thinkers (Aly, 2000).

Description of research context

As a local public school in a mountainous province, the resources for EFL teaching and learning at TUEBA are of average quality. Fortunately, the school has been modernized with 2 language labs sponsored by an ODA project from Japan. However, both the teachers and students have to pay for the wi-fi service in case they want to access the internet at TUEBA. TUEBA has to follow the curriculum specified for English subject issued by the Ministry of Education and Training in which: all formal students have to take 6 compulsory modules of English and IELTS preparation course is the last one. Since 2015, the IELTS test (target 5.5) has been decided the graduation requirement for full-time formal students of the advanced program at TUEBA. According to the survey result conducted annually, between 60 and 87% of respondents chose "vocabulary" as the main factor influencing their overall performance on all other English skills as well as on IELTS tests. Though paper-based portfolios have proved to produce marked progress for students' lexical development within the years of application, they seemed to burden more duties for both teachers and students. Therefore, e-portfolios were introduced with the hope of enhancing the IELTS vocabulary while reducing the workload for all stakeholders. The project participants include 16 lecturers from the Department of English and 155 students. All of the project participants have had experience with portfolio-work; most of them have had a little or more technical literacy.

Evaluation Methods

This study is mostly based on the evaluation model proposed by McGrath (2002), with reference to other relevant documents in the field. Since the core purpose of this study targeted at examining the suitability (Brown, 2010; Rea-Dickens & Germaine, 2001) of a modern education app, the evaluators were expected to be those with frequent exposure and experiences, both convenience and challenges, with the teaching technique. In other words, the judgement and remarks of the insiders (Morgan, 2009) were of the utmost significance during the evaluation process in this research. A combination of qualitative and quantitative is constantly considered a perfect research approach which produces more convincing analysis (Shenton, 2006). After studying the evaluation checklist for self-access materials suggested by Reinders and Lewis (2006) as well as considering the assessment model developed by Jin and Cortazzi (2011), both types of statistics were employed to guarantee higher reliability for this research. In fact, the data from the students were gathered via questionnaires and focus group interviews, while those from the teachers were collected through questionnaires and classroom observation. In comparison to the research scales in those aforementioned studies, this paper involved a bigger number and more inclusive set of participants, focusing on only e-portfolios for vocabulary rather than a separate language skill or integrated skills.

II. Data collection and analysis:

Structured questionnaires, focus group interviews and class observation were conducted pre-while-post the application of Vocabulary portfolios in the surveyed semester with *16 teachers* from the Department of English and *155 EFL students* at TUEBA.

Questionnaires were the preferred channel of data collection in this study thanks to their research-based merits, including but not limited to time-saving, convenience, straightforwardness, and increased autonomy for respondents (Gillham, 2000). Two series of questionnaires were utilized: one for teachers and the other for students.

Focus group interviews were conducted every 3 weeks to gather the evaluation and feedback from students towards the effectiveness and appropriateness (Stewart, 2007) of tasks and activities in the portfolios, based on which necessary adjustments could be made. The data were then statistically analysed and evaluated by teachers, laying the foundation for further alteration and modifications.

III.   Research Findings

Even with the intensive support of 8 colleagues as well as willful engagement of 155 students, it really cost me time and effort in collecting, decoding and analyzing the data. Before presenting the key findings of the 14-week study, brief descriptions of the survey samples (i.e. the condition prior to the study period) were as follows:

Table 1: Description of survey samples

No. of samples	Gender		Majors		Portfolio experience		English & IT capacity	
	Male	*Female*	*Advanced program*	*Others*	*E-based*	*Paper-based*	*Language*	*IT*
16 (Teachers)	2	14	-	-	6	16	9/16 (6.5-7.5 IELTS);	16/16 (MOS)
155 (Sophomores)	65	90	83	72	83	155	105/155 (Elementary); 50/155 (Pre-intermediate)	140/155 (basic); 15/155 (MOS)
8 (Questions)	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-

(Source: Author's self-synthesis)

The questionnaire results in terms of experience with e-Portfolios

As mentioned in the methodology, by responding to the questionnaires, participant teachers and students were invited to demonstrate their opinions and attitudes towards the suitability and efficiency of employing e-portfolios compared to the paper-based in teaching and learning IELTS vocabulary.

From the teachers' side, only a third (6) of the participants had had pragmatic experience with e-portfolios by the time this study was first operated while 100% of them were used to paper-based portfolios for at least 3 years. These six teachers were also in main charge of IELTS class for students in both regular and advanced program at TUEBA. Though IT capacity seemed to similar among the teachers, over 43% of them had had little or even no experience in taking IELTS tests as well as delivering IELTS vocabulary lessons.

Table 2: Teachers' assessment on their experience with e-portfolios

Criteria	Disagree (%)	Uncertain (%)	Agree (%)
User-friendly	0	6.2	93.8
Vastly accessible	31.2	0	68.8
Time-consuming	0	12.5	87.5
Relevant to the task (IELTS vocabulary enrichment)	0	25	75
Highly Interactive	0	0	100
Multifunctional		12.5	87.5
Positive influence on other IELTS skills	0	18.7	81.3
Overall suitability to the course objective	0	25	75

(Source: Author's survey, Jul 2019)

The figures in table 2 indicated that a high proportion of teachers showed their preference for e-portfolios thanks to the advantages they generate, especially the strong relevance to the teaching and learning of IELTS vocabulary. However, a fourth of the teachers were still confused about whether e-portfolios outweigh the paper-based ones. These teachers argued that the vocabulary would be better embedded and memorized when written rather than typed (or copied and pasted). Also, a vast majority (87.5%) of the teachers confessed that it took them a considerable amount of time reviewing, editing and commenting on the students' portfolios outside class hour.

One noticeable feature is that over 81% of teachers recorded enhancement in the performance of their students on other IELTS skills and attributed this positive change as a result of their vocabulary enrichment thanks to e-portfolios. Meanwhile, the rest 19% of teachers claimed that paper-based portfolios produced no less significant influence.

Meanwhile, the picture was rather different from the students' perspective.

Table 3: Students' assessment on their experience with e-portfolios

Criteria	Disagree (%)	Uncertain (%)	Agree (%)
User-friendly	29.1	58	12.9
Vastly accessible	61.3	6.5	32.2
Time-consuming	0	26.5	73.5
Relevant to the task (IELTS vocabulary enrichment)	11.6	22.5	65.9
Highly Interactive	0	23.8	76.2
Multifunctional	0	32.9	67.1
Positive influence on other IELTS skills	6.1	14.5	79.4
Overall suitability to the course objective	9.6	14.5	75.9

(Source: Author's survey, Jul 2019)

The figures in Table 3 seem to well reflect the research settings and ethical considerations stated in previous sections of this study. Since the majority of TUEBA students come from low-resource regions, many of them could not afford to have their own laptop or computer. Although free school wi-fi was provided during the research time, it was challenging for almost all students to process their digital portfolios on smartphones. Understandably, only a small proportion of students (12.9%) agreed on the friendliness of e-portfolio compared to 58% uncertain and around 29% opposing votes.

For the same reason, over three fifths of the students found it challenging to access and operate on e-portfolio platform. Like the teachers, roughly 73.5% of respondents claimed that they had to spend far greater amount of time composing their e-portfolios while the rest 26.5% admitted that it cost them considerable volume of time on other external activities rather than the digital portfolio itself.

The most significant result might catch the 79.4% and 75.9% of the students who confirmed the suitability of the new type of portfolio which brings them positive changes in their language skills. Specifically: faster reading speed, greater fluency for speaking, better comprehension of given texts, more coherent sentences, more sophisticated meanings and more efficient guessing in the IELTS tests were key benefits exhibited as the students' lexical resource developed.

IV. Discussion

Thanks to the development of information technology, especially in the technology 4.0 era, a great many apps and tools are available to support EFL teachers and learners in their teaching and learning process. Feedback by participants at TUEBA regarding e-portfolios suggests that this innovative technique provides ample vocabulary learning experiences for not only the students who construct the portfolios but also for those who view them (Brandes, 2008). This reflection, as Wakimoto and Lewis (2014) stated, promotes what is so-called a community of practice where students are encouraged to share their own digital portfolios as well as evaluate those compiled by their peers. For the same token, these portfolios offer the teachers efficacious means to reinforce and regulate their students' learning (Parker, Ndoye & Ritzhaupt, 2012) in line with the course expectation. The application of IT in general and e-portfolios in particular fuels the efficient teaching and learning. In the case of IELTS related vocabulary, high level of engagement and active learners are rewarding results. Thus, changes in the learning environment expand and enrich classroom practices and influence students' view of integrating learning and technology. Moreover, EFL teachers can rely on this genre of assignment as a platform to assess their students' progress.

V. Conclusion

E-portfolios are highly complimented at TUEBA thanks to the opportunities of interaction and sharing knowledge they foster among teachers and students. Though the sample scale was quite modest, this study was really honored since it not only pioneered the application of modern technology in EFL education but triggered the incentive in teaching and learning IELTS lexis at TUEBA as well. Given some disadvantages, regarding the functions and potentials towards the teaching and learning process, e-portfolios are worth applying in more and more EFL settings beyond TUEBA, especially among those who wish to master IELTS vocabulary to achieve conceivable band scores on the IELTS tests.

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