

The Eportfolio: How can it be used in French as a second language teaching and learning?

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Practical paper presenting online experience

Abstract

Originally used in artistic circles, the portfolio is quickly gaining ground in French as a second language teaching and learning. For example, the European Language Portfolio (ELP), under the auspices of the European Council, is a tool that is rapidly adaptable to advances in Web 2.0 technology. In this context, we draw a portrait of the portfolio in French as a second language (FSL) education and cite the advantages of the electronic portfolio. Finally, we draw on empirical results, from a specific eportfolio, eduportfolio, to illustrate its potential for FSL teaching and learning.

Keywords

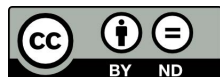
Eportfolio, portfolio, second language teaching, reflexive practice, teaching, learning

Résumé

Initialement utilisé dans le monde artistique, le portfolio électronique connaît un essor rapide en éducation. À titre d'exemple, le Portfolio européen des langues (PEL), élaboré par le Conseil de l'Europe, forme un outil intéressant et facilement adaptable aux avancées technologiques du Web 2.0. Dans ce contexte, nous commencerons par dresser un portrait du portfolio en enseignement-apprentissage du français langue seconde (FLS) avant de présenter les avantages de la version électronique. Nous nous appuierons ensuite sur des résultats empiriques portant sur un eportfolio particulier (Eduportfolio) pour illustrer le potentiel du portfolio électronique pour l'enseignement-apprentissage du FLS.

Mots clés

Eportfolio, portfolio, enseignement des langues, pratique réflexive, enseignement, apprentissage



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Introduction

This paper presents a reflection on potential uses and implementation of the eportfolio in French as a second language (FSL) education. The portfolio is gaining ever-greater acceptance as a pedagogical tool in educational circles. A polymorph tool *par excellence*, it supports learning in primary and secondary schools, the development of professional competencies in universities, and the renewal of professional practice in continuing education. The language education field is no exception, especially since the advent of the European Language Portfolio (ELP). This article attempts to draw a portrait of eportfolio use in FSL classes. We review the literature on the main functions and concepts of the portfolio. We then present the advantages of the eportfolio over the paper version and some empirical research results that argue for the implementation of the eportfolio in FSL classes.

1. The portfolio in education

This section presents a general overview of the portfolio, including its functions in education, and more specifically, its pedagogical use in FSL classes.

1.1. Functions of the portfolio in education

The portfolio originated in artistic circles, the idea being that artists could get their works exhibited by presenting a set of representative examples. It was first applied for pedagogical purposes by P. Elbow and P. Belanoff (State University of Stony Brook, New York, NY) in the early 1980s as an alternative to standardized tests (Bräuer, 2009). Since then the portfolio has assumed a multitude of functions, the main ones being presented below.

- Exposure function: The educational portfolio showcases students' learning and progress with examples of their schoolwork (Council of Europe, 2004). Its progressive nature allows insight into both learning processes and outcomes (Belanoff & Dickinson, 1991; Goupil, Petit, & Pallascio, 1998), as it represents the student's learning path. This function can also be exploited professionally: job candidates can show potential employers how their skills have evolved (Bucheton, 2003).
- Assessment function: The portfolio is often used as a complementary assessment tool (Grosso & Lomicka, 1999). Because it provides access to both process and outcome, it can be used for ongoing formative and summative assessments. It also provides teachers with an additional source of information with which to confirm or moderate their judgement. Furthermore, the portfolio, accompanied by a self-assessment grid, can be used as a self-assessment tool to foster learner autonomy and responsibility for the learning process (Little, 2005).
- Reflective function: The above-mentioned self-assessment function is part of the reflective function whereby students adopt a critical attitude toward their learning (Grosso, & Lomicka, 1999). Aside from the use of predetermined self-assessment grids, reflection on the learning process can be fostered through frequent writing of feedback reports (e.g., "What I have learned," "My strengths and weaknesses," "If I could do it over") (Eyssautier-Bavay, 2004). Moreover, students must exercise their reflective capacity to select the most representative examples of their learning. The portfolio therefore departs from an archival record in that students continuously input relevant and representative content.
- Social function: The portfolio also provides a social function when it acts as a mediation tool between learners, teachers, and parents. Importantly, it enables parents to gain a better understanding of their child's learning path, which may encourage them to get more involved in the process. Note that the paper version does not provide this social function, which emerged only with the technological advance of the electronic portfolio, and is therefore specific to the eportfolio.

1.2. Main concepts of eportfolio use in language classes

In language education, the eportfolio is generally associated with the notions of plurilingualism and self-regulated learning. Rather than a detailed explanation of these concepts, we present a brief overview and relate them to eportfolio use in language classes.

Plurilingualism is defined as communicative language competences in a number of languages, in which the languages interrelate and interact (Council of Europe, 2004). From a plurilingual perspective, the individual language repertory remains unique and flexible. It evolves by building on direct, personal experience, in which skills in one language may outweigh skills in others. From this viewpoint, the eportfolio is widely perceived as a good support for plurilingual competence, as it constitutes a fully personalizable on-line identity that can realistically reflect individual pathways in the development of plurilinguistic competence.

Self-regulation is defined as the process in which individuals pay attention to all their own needs, emotions, and thought, and figure out how to take care of them either simultaneously or successively in order to meet personal objectives (Boekaerts, 1999). In this regard, the eportfolio fosters language education by providing a space where learners can review previous learning, identify and adjust their learning needs, and anticipate future pathways. In terms of Zimmerman, Bonner, and Kovach's (1996) model of self-related learning, the eportfolio can be used to self-monitor language-related communication competence, set objectives for specific aspects of this competence, and assess shortfalls between set objectives and actual outcomes. However, when using the eportfolio for self-regulated learning, teachers must provide adequate guidance.

1.3. Pedagogical use of the portfolio in FSL classes

The above-presented functions demonstrate that the portfolio is a tool with strong potential to support learning in any subject, and particularly FSL. It allows students to review their progress in second-language learning. Moreover, this can be done in the French as a second language, and particularly through second-language writing, which helps students reflect on their learning (Minuth, 1999). Thus, students can reflect on their advancement in FSL while working in that linguistic mode.

There are many ways to organize portfolio content. For example, the ELP comprises three parts: the Language Passport, which provides an overview of the individual's proficiency in different languages at a given point in time in terms of the common reference levels; the Language Biography, which provides a multilingual perspective on the learner's experience with different languages; and the Dossier, where the learner documents examples of personal works to illustrate the competencies listed in the Language Passport and Language Biography. Note that these three parts can be combined in various forms and used at various times throughout the FSL program.

Other content organizations are equally possible. For instance, it could be advantageous to arrange the portfolio according to assessments of French as a second language notions. For example, following the competency-based approach used in Canada, a student's portfolio could be organized to reflect the different competencies specified in the FSL program. Students could then select accomplishments that are directly related to the required competencies. This would also make it easier for teachers to assess the different competencies.

2. The eportfolio in education: advantages and conditions

Armed with this overview of the portfolio in education, we may now turn to the eportfolio in particular. First, we look at some advantages of the eportfolio over the paper version. We then draw on empirical research results to consider various ways to implement the eportfolio in a language class.

2.1. Advantages of the eportfolio

The electronic portfolio has a number of significant advantages over the paper portfolio, as outlined below:

- Greater social function: Because it usually includes a comments function, the eportfolio enables greater communication between students and other parties in the education process (teachers, parents, other students), which provides opportunities for feedback. This increases the social function of the portfolio and adds the potential to set up learning communities.¹ The cyberportfolios of the *Institut St-Joseph* are an excellent example of the role that the eportfolio can play in a learning community. Similarly, Eduportfolio, which will be presenter later, has several network functions that support this type of collaboration.
- Flexibility of content organization: The electronic portfolio also allows flexible content organization, which in turn fosters portfolio evolution. In other words, learners can adapt their portfolios to their learning path, adding new sections and changing old ones as they go along. In this respect, paper portfolios such as the ELP are limited in that they require all learners to adhere to the same content organization, and for the entire duration of their FSL program. However, it is arguable that a preschool and a secondary school student might not have the same needs in terms of content organization. The same holds true for beginner and advanced students.
- Flexibility of content: The eportfolio also provides flexibility in what it contains. For example, using a computer, one can delete, replace, cut and paste, and correct texts as desired, all without hindering the readability. This delinearization of the typical writing process (Anis, 1998) has a significant impact on FSL teaching and learning, because learners can review their work to their heart's content and publish a number of versions of the same text to track their progress longitudinally. □
- Large storage capacity: The eportfolio typically has enough storage capacity to host a vast number of texts that are nonetheless simple to manage. To illustrate, Eduportfolio provides an initial 100 Mo of storage space. In contrast, a voluminous paper portfolio would be heavy, unwieldy, and possibly confusing. In this sense, the eportfolio appears to have the long-term advantage.
- Aesthetics: The eportfolio is an aesthetic tool owing to two features that paper portfolios generally lack: first, it usually offers a wide choice of templates, colours, and images, for plenty of style options; and second, writing on a computer produces texts that are uniform and legible, for consistent readability.
- Accessibility: When the eportfolio is posted online, it provides universal access, as long there is an Internet connection. Unfortunately, this is the eportfolio's one major drawback: unlike the paper version, it requires technological support. In other words, the eportfolio can be used only in FSL classrooms where students have access to computers and the Internet.

1 For a definition of learning communities, see Legendre (2005, pp. 235–239).

2.2. Some empirical results on eportfolio implementation in FSL classes

Having noted the advantages of the eportfolio over the paper version, we now present some empirical research findings on eportfolio implementation in a university. The aim is to consider potential uses for the eportfolio in FSL classes, with a focus on a particular eportfolio (Eduportfolio: <http://eduportfolio.org/>). We begin by presenting this education tool.

2.2.1 Presentation of Eduportfolio

Eduportfolio is a free-access, multilingual electronic portfolio that is specifically designed for educational purposes. Instead of following a predefined content organization, users can structure the content by section and subsection, adding texts and documents as desired. Because the content organization varies according to the portfolio, each Eduportfolio Home page includes a Page list and navigation buttons. This allows readers to quickly view the portfolio's contents using different and complementary functions, as shown in Figure 1.

To protect their identity and confidentiality, authors can block access to specific sections and subsections and require users to supply a password to view certain portfolio content.

Note also that items posted on Eduportfolio can be published in a variety of formats (e.g., text, audio, video, PPT, image, graphics). This provides teachers and learners with a number of interesting FSL options, from written texts to oral productions using audio and video clips.

Eduportfolio also has some of the most technologically advanced Web 2.0 functions: RSS feed, invitation function, chat system, and Twitter notification of new content.

Eduportfolio offers yet another advantageous feature: downloading static versions of the portfolio. A static version requires a computer to be read and printed out, but does not require Internet access. This partly redresses the previously mentioned accessibility limitation, and provides a particularly useful option for “transporting” a portfolio.

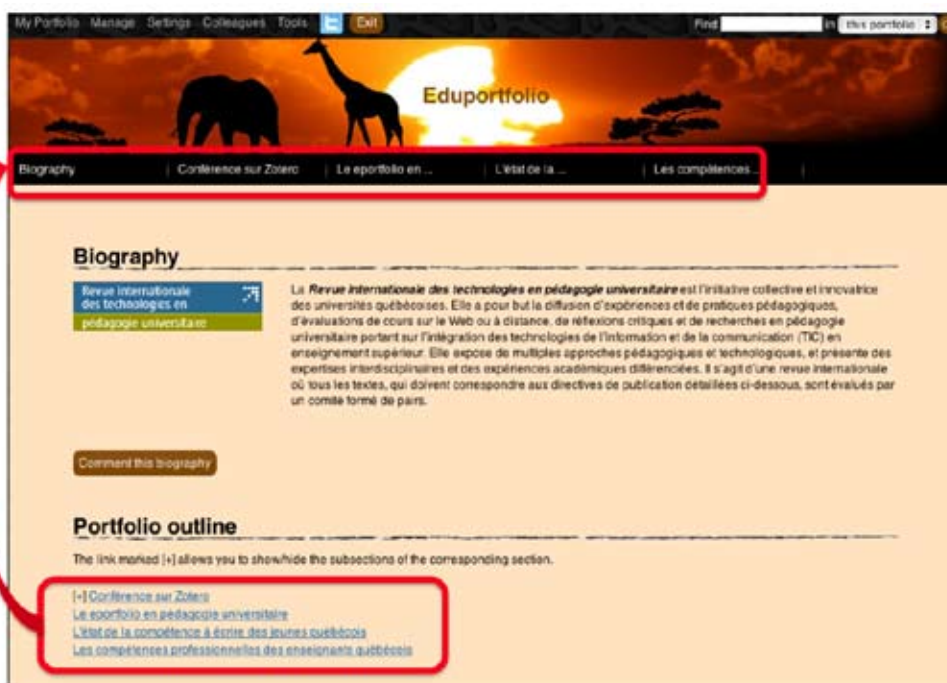


Figure 1: Page list at Eduportfolio

Finally, apart from educational applications, Eduportfolio includes a portfolio manager so that teachers can group, manage, and access all their students' portfolios on one site, in one place.

2.2.2 Results on the integration of the eportfolio in initial teacher training programs

We conclude by presenting an overview of the results of a study on the pedagogical integration of Eduportfolio by teachers-in-training at the Université de Montréal, including those in second language (SL) programs. The study was conducted in winter 2010 (December–March) using an online questionnaire (N=403) and semi-directed interviews (N=8) of students enrolled in an initial teacher training program. Below we present the quantitative results and draw a portrait of students' perceptions towards the use of an eportfolio in their teacher training program. We then present the qualitative results in the

aim of gaining a deeper understanding of this portrait. We will limit ourselves to presenting the most relevant results on the pedagogical integration of the eportfolio in preservice FSL teacher training.

First, we must stress that a consistent finding in this study (and in previous studies on other education programs) was the mandatory use of the eportfolio. Indeed, using an eportfolio was an academic requirement for 82% of respondents (Figure 2). On the other hand, support for learning, support for reflective practice, and professional visibility functions varied widely among respondents. Thus, respondents' answers were relatively evenly distributed (30–45% for “Strongly agree–Agree,” “Neutral,” and “Strongly agree–Disagree”) for these three functions, which suggests rather diverse perceptions of an eportfolio for academic and professional potential.

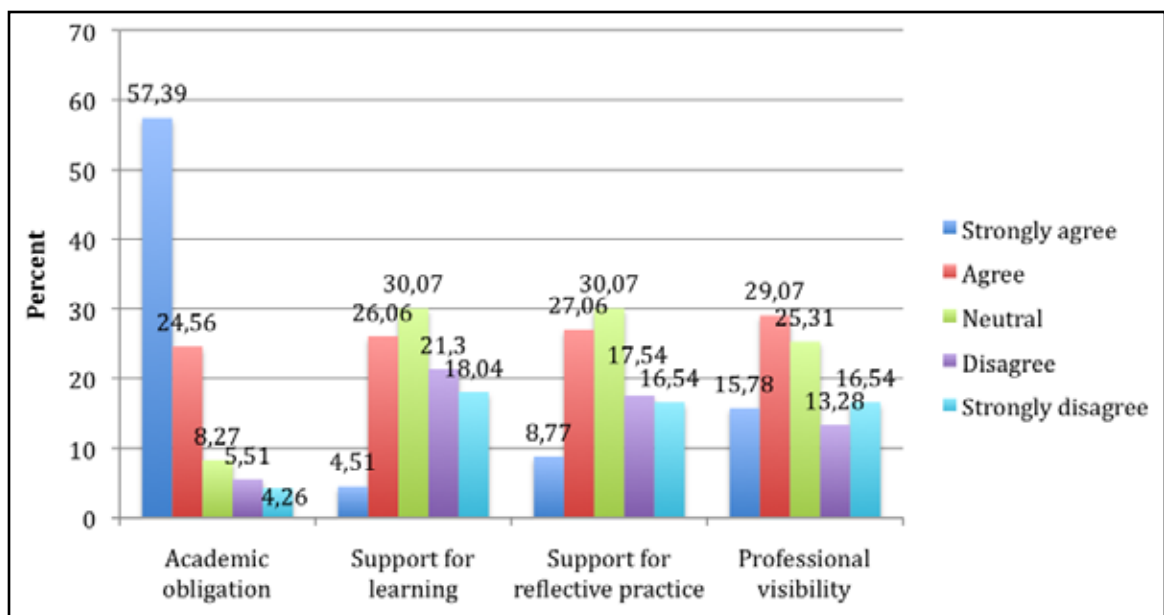


Figure 2: Motivation to use an eportfolio in initial teacher training

Based on these results, we hypothesize that future teachers experience the use of an eportfolio in very different ways, most probably due to different instructions on its use by their university professors.

Another finding is that an eportfolio was mainly perceived as an individual rather than a collaborative tool. This indicates that eportfolios' potential was underused, as presented in section 2.2 (Figure 3).

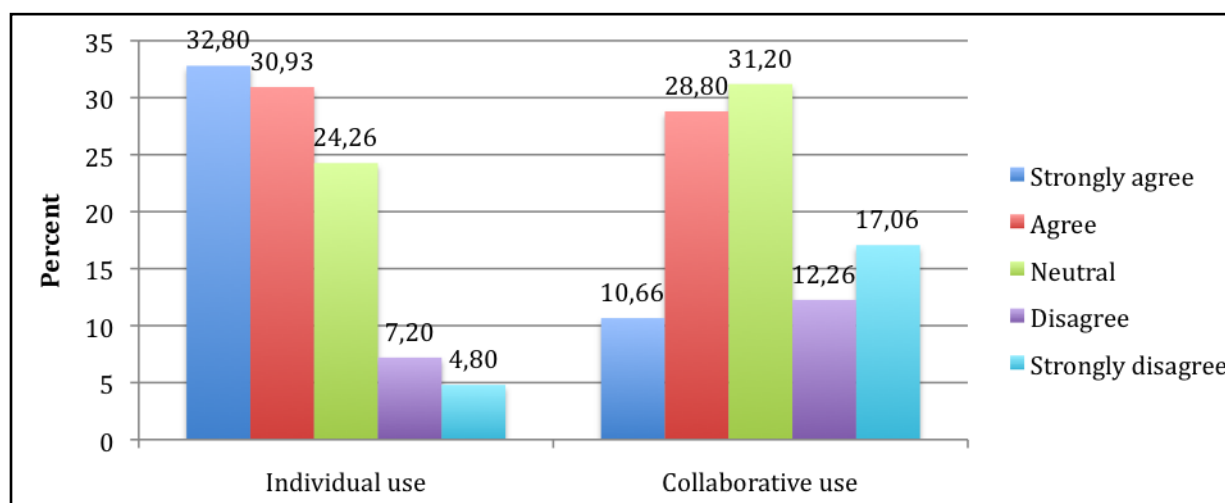


Figure 3: Individual versus collaborative perception of an eportfolio in initial teacher training

We therefore hypothesize that university professors do not direct their students to exploit the full interactional and social potential of eportfolios. This can be viewed as an unrealized gain in certain learning situations, particularly from a social constructivist perspective.

We turn now to the conditions for the pedagogical integration of eportfolios. In terms of curriculum implementation, a number of conditions are required for the effective use of eportfolios:

- **Predefined pedagogical objectives:** Before this tool is used in a language course, the pedagogical objectives should be determined. This step could be carried out by an education team, and should account for the school's particular context.

- **Complementarity with existing tools:** It is equally important to ensure that the pedagogical integration of eportfolios is not redundant with tools that are already in place. Otherwise, learners will fail to appreciate its educational value.

- **Technical and pedagogical support for teachers:** Because teachers play a primary role in the integration of eportfolios in language courses, they must be provided with the technical and pedagogical support they need to make good use of this approach.

Once an eportfolio has been introduced into the curriculum, certain conditions are required so that learners can fully appropriate this tool:

- **Pedagogical instruction for learners in the use of eportfolios, such as eduportfolio:** The eduportfolio differs from other learning tools in the largely autonomous nature of the learning process. In addition to technical training in the use of eportfolios, it is therefore necessary to provide training in the unique ways that this tool fosters learning. Moreover, this training

should be provided over time (e.g., at the beginning of each session if eportfolios are used for several years) in order to help learners familiarize themselves with the technical features and pedagogical potentials.

- Regular use and coaching in language courses: Due to its unique nature, the eportfolio gives better value in language courses if it is used regularly and with coaching. It is known that learning processes such as reflection and self-regulation—which the eportfolio particularly targets—are generally less developed in traditional, teacher-directed language programs. Moreover, to benefit from the full potential of eportfolios, learners must use it regularly and with coaching. This coaching can take many forms: self-assessment sheets, peer assessment, class and group presentations, scheduled meetings with teachers, and so on.

From this brief overview of the results we gather that the pedagogical integration of eportfolios, like any other educational tool, is subject to conditions of the curriculum as well as pedagogical conditions as such. These conditions are important to take into consideration so that learners can fully appreciate the educational value of eportfolios, and consequently fully benefit from its potential in FSL learning.

Conclusion

This paper aimed to draw a portrait of eportfolio use in French as a second language teaching and learning. We began with a literature review on the main functions and concepts of the eportfolio in language education. We then outlined the advantages of the eportfolio over the paper version. Finally, we presented some findings of an empirical study on initial teacher training, including French as a second language teaching. We identified some conditions for eportfolio implementation in language classes, and introduced Eduportfolio, an FSL teaching and learning tool. At a time when the portfolio is gaining increasing acceptance as a valuable language education support, we feel that Eduport-

folio and similar tools will play a significant role in developing communication competence, as long as they are adequately implemented.

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