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To cite this article: Rima Bahous (2008) The self-assessed portfolio: a case study, *Assessment & Evaluation in Higher Education*, 33:4, 381-393, DOI: [10.1080/02602930701562866](https://doi.org/10.1080/02602930701562866)

To link to this article: <http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/02602930701562866>



Published online: 23 Jul 2008.



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The self-assessed portfolio: a case study

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This paper reports on a successful attempt to use the portfolio as a sole assessment tool for an upper level language arts course at an English-medium university in Lebanon. Over four consecutive years in the spring semester, the teacher/researcher devised a special syllabus based on the teaching/learning of text discourses and other language tasks emphasizing skills to improve the English language of the learners. Only students' portfolios were used to evaluate students' work. The learners, majoring in Education or English, worked on various language tasks. They presented and assessed their work according to rubrics. Learners had to self-reflect on each task, have a one-to-one conference with the class teacher, and assign a letter grade to their work. Results indicated that though using only portfolios for assessment purposes was a rather difficult task, it was still more effective than traditional assessment. Working on self-assessed portfolios actively engaged learners in the learning process.

Introduction

Assessing and evaluating student work at any class level is far from straightforward. From the 1990s onwards, there has been a shift from traditional classroom assessment to alternative approaches partly because traditional assessment could be perceived to have a negative impact on the teaching/learning process (see Klenowsky 2002). According to McMillan (2004), the main characteristics of traditional classroom assessment can be summarized as follows: the emphasis is only on outcomes, it tests isolated skills or facts, has secret standards and criteria, little feedback is given to learners, and it tests individuals after instruction. Practitioner researchers have been keen to experiment with different assessment techniques in order to establish more effective means of assessing students' learning (Mabry 1999). The latter take into account more recent theories of learning that promote student active engagement in the learning process. This has led many researchers to investigate a range of alternative assessment strategies in order to come up with a more comprehensive evaluation tool that would be fairer to all, reduce students' anxiety, and lessen the teachers' burden while grading the learners' work. Generally, this led to a system of multiple assessments whereby the marks of the regular tests and projects were added together according to a preset percentage, and the grade was then assigned (Gronlund 2002; McMillan 2004). This has become the trend in many school subjects and universities with the result that a large part of the teaching time is devoted to test preparation and test follow-up. The portfolio as one type of alternative assessment has mainly been used as a tool to follow students' progress (e.g. in writing skills), for interdisciplinary purposes (mainly at schools), as a display (to show students' best work), or in the arts (at the tertiary level).

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Lynch and Shaw (2005) point out that in order to consider portfolios as alternative assessments the latter should exhibit these features:

- students' active participation;
- students' reflection;
- students' peer and self-assessment;
- students' involvement in deciding on and selecting criteria for evaluation.

Purpose of the study

The use of portfolios as a sole means of assessment for a language arts course was a radical step to undertake. Traditional assessment is still considered to be the method mostly used as teachers are cautious about trying 'new' instruments. This is despite the fact that traditional assessment clearly has considerable limitations, which frequently hinder the progress of the students in acquiring and consolidating their language skills. The use of portfolios was not new to the university: in the past few years, education and language faculty members have been using portfolio assessment in their courses alongside other, more traditional assessment tools (see for instance Bahous and Habre 2002). In this paper, the researcher reflects on whether using the portfolio without the traditional tools would be a more effective means of assessment, serve to enhance motivation and ensure better language learning/teaching.

The main goal of this paper is to document what the learners assimilated during a semester. The aims of this experiment were broad: the teacher/researcher hoped that the portfolio would:

- encourage and develop skills in self-assessment (such as the ability to identify strengths and weaknesses as well as improved understanding of the assessment criteria);
- provide varied and broad perspectives on language use;
- serve the goals and objectives of most of the language arts instruction already in place;
- offer authentic experiences for many students;
- give learners the opportunities to reflect on their learning;
- demonstrate students' creativity and personality.

In other words, the use of portfolios as the sole means of assessment of a course would promote a new perspective on learning and allow for the analyses of achievements and learning to be combined. Teachers play the role of mentors and facilitators of the learning process, and their role is to encourage their students to self-reflect and evaluate their work.

Literature review

Definitions of portfolios

Over the years, portfolios have been defined differently by many researchers. Some, such as Polin (1991) and Hamps-Lyons and Condon (2000) did not consider portfolios to be essential assessment tools. In fact, Polin (1991) stated that, up to the early 1990s, using portfolios as an assessment tool was only talk. Hamps-Lyons (2003) defined them as a collection of a student's work compiled during a certain period of time. McMillan (2004) viewed them

more seriously and labeled the portfolio as ‘a purposeful, systematic process of collecting and evaluating student products to document progress toward the attainment of learning targets or show evidence that a learning target has been achieved’ (235). Porter and Cleland (1995) defined portfolios as ‘a collection of artifacts accompanied by a reflective narrative that not only helps the learner to understand and extend learning, but invites the reader of the portfolio to gain insight about learning and the learner’ (154). Wolf (1989) claimed that portfolio proponents insist that portfolios provide more effective assessment measures because of their inherent monitoring of process learning and students’ development. Farr and Tone (1998) stated that the portfolio has become ‘a powerful tool for managing the student’s development as a language user and a thinker’ (10).

Researchers have identified different kinds of portfolios. Some view them as talk (Danielson and Abrutyn 1997); others as display (Cole and Ryan 2000), and assessment (McMillan 2004); Seely (1996) discusses showcase, documentation, process and evaluation; Campell et al. (1997) emphasize working and presentation of portfolios while Burke et al. (1994) divide them into personal, academic and professional types. Whether showcase, academic, process (Cole and Ryan 2000), assessment, or display all kinds of portfolios share three main core elements: collection, selection and reflection (Hamps-Lyons and Condon 2000). However, Hamps-Lyons (2003) and Taylor (2003) point out that the purpose of the assessment portfolio is not only to collect, select and reflect; it must also involve criteria and means to evaluate the work presented and translate these criteria into the scores and/or grades adapted by the institution where such assessment is used.

Assessment portfolios

In the past decade, many researchers have investigated the use of portfolios in language teaching and learning (see for example Farr and Tone 1998; Gronlund 2002; Weigle 2002; Hamps-Lyons 2003; Penafiora 2002; McMillan 2004). Teachers are encouraged to use the various kinds of portfolios because they promote self-directed learning, enlarge the view of what is learned, foster learning about learning, demonstrate progress toward goals, provide a window into students’ heads and hearts, intersect instruction and assessment, provide a vehicle for students to value themselves as learners, and offer opportunities for peer-supported growth. In other words, the portfolio both informs and persuades while documenting student learning in areas that do not lend themselves to traditional assessment such as skills of self-evaluation and reflection. Further, it exposes the learners to more sophisticated use of the library, internet and other possible sources (newspapers, archives, authorities, etc.) and engages them more deeply in learning content while offering broad opportunities for learner-centered control.

Weigle (2002) lists the considerations one should keep in mind when using portfolio assessment; these considerations include the following: purpose, contents, scoring procedures and logistics. This assessment portfolio is in a way similar to performance assessment (see Gronlund 2002; McMillan 2004). However, various principles should be taken into consideration if such a portfolio is used in the classroom. These principles involve:

- determining the curricular objectives such as the purpose and the learning targets (Weigle 2002) (in this paper, the course objectives are stated in the syllabus);
- clarifying the decisions to be made based on the portfolio (which may be pre-established guidelines – language arts syllabi spring 2002, 2003, 2004, and 2005);
- designing and defining clear rubrics (assessment criteria) for each assessment task (see for instance, Arter and McTighe 2001) (see Appendix 1 for a sample of the

rubrics used to evaluate each task and the portfolio in general in the language arts course and Appendix 2 for a sample of the tasks students have to work on);

- determining who is going to evaluate the portfolio and training these evaluators (in this case, the students have to evaluate, self-assess and defend their portfolio work, and the course instructor has to confer with each student before assigning the final course grade to each [Arter and Spandel 1992; Johns 1997; Rotheiser et al. 2000; McMillan 2004; Lynch and Shaw 2005]).

Although self-assessed portfolios have many advantages, one has to be aware of their drawbacks. McMillan (2004) points out that assessing portfolios is time-consuming (see also Lynch and Shaw 2005). A lot of time is needed for both designing the portfolio and preparing rubrics for scoring. Also, the teacher has to train learners to self-assess their work adequately, which often entails a one-to-one conference with each student so that portfolio implementation is done properly. As McMillan puts it, portfolio assessment 'requires time, expertise, and commitment' (2004, 238). Furthermore, Lynch and Shaw (2005) discuss the notion of 'fairness' (276). Each portfolio entry 'reveals a different aspect of the students' knowledge and ability' (277) leading to inconsistency/unfairness in grading, thus making inter-rater reliability very difficult to obtain (McMillan 2004).

Methodology

Participants

The experiment outlined in this paper took place at a private English-medium university in Lebanon where the teacher/researcher, after careful planning and cautious implementation, used the portfolio as the only assessment tool in a language arts class. The learners at the university who major in Education and English are strongly advised to take the language arts course, which is designed to strengthen their English-language skills. It is, in fact, a content course that reviews the general theories, strategies and principles involved in English-language teaching/learning from different perspectives. The course follows an integrated approach that reviews the skills and sub-skills of language teaching and learning from a discourse analysis perspective (course syllabi spring 2002, 2003, 2004, 2005). Students are required to work on their own language portfolio and strengthen their language skills. They have to look at language teaching and learning from a pragmatic and discourse analysis perspective that should eventually lead to materials development, assessment and research. Farr and Tone (1998) point out that education should be to help learners develop as persons and keep on learning and improving themselves without the direct contact with the teacher. Thus, by working on their portfolios, the students are already in charge of their own learning as they have to collect, categorize and present their own work in the best possible way. Students have to present, defend, self-assess and submit their language portfolio at the end of the semester as the central focus of assessment.

Data

The data-collection methods used to investigate this issue were group interviews/conferences with students enrolled in the course in spring 2002, 2003, 2004 and 2005; students' reflexive journals in this new experience where there are no traditional exams in the classroom; and the teacher/researcher as a participant observer noting down on paper every instance related

to the portfolio assessment inside and outside the classroom (Table 1). All the students (104 females and two males) registered in the course in spring 2002, 2003, 2004 and 2005 were included in the study. Also, the course assessment method was clearly written in the course syllabi:

By the end of the semester, everything discussed during the semester, all activities worked on, all research conducted, all homework, group work, class work done should be first assessed by students then should be presented in a course portfolio for assessment purposes. (Language Arts Course Syllabi 2002, 2003, 2004, 2005)

Procedure

At the beginning of the spring semesters 2002, 2003, 2004 and 2005, learners were thrilled to read on their syllabi that no final exam was scheduled for the course and that they had to reflect on and self-assess every entry in their portfolios. However, throughout the semester, they noticed that the course involved an increasing amount of work that included text analysis (basic discourse analysis), materials development (most of the time learners had to create their own), and a thorough practical review of the four major skills (listening, speaking, reading and writing) as well as an emphasis on the sub-skills. Students had to conduct their own research to complete successfully the tasks set, and they had to learn to work alone, in pairs or in groups. Each student at the end of the course not only had to grade each of the tasks he or she had worked on, and the different class presentations they attended during the semester but also to reflect in writing on each activity and their classmates' presentations. Self-reflection is an important aspect in the course as it helps build students' self esteem (Weigle 2002). 'Such reflections can be especially important for students who forget that they did some distinguished work during the course of the semester...' (Burke 2003, 192). Also, self-reflection and assessment is one of the key features in portfolio assessments (Lynch and Shaw 2005). Students had to present and defend their portfolios and assess their own work (See Appendix 1: sample rubrics used for assessment in the language arts class). Finally, they had to submit a reflective piece of writing that included their comments on the course and the assessment method used to grade them. Each course was given over a period of 15 weeks, two sessions of one hour 15 minutes per week. Learners were required to start and whenever possible complete one task per session. They were also required every four weeks to work either individually, in pairs or in groups on a preset task that involves research and materials development. They were then required to present their work to their classmates during one of the class sessions. Finally, they had to reflect on the work they have done and grade it according to preset criteria. Considering the load, it is not surprising that students objected to the amount of work they were expected to do.

Table 1. Data collection methods.

	Data collection
Methods	Frequency
Interviews/conferences	Three times per semester
Students' reflexive journals	Four times per semester
Teacher as participant observer	Every class session
	Twice a week during office hours
	Teacher wrote reflections in a diary (weekly entries)

Rubrics for assessment

There are three different rubrics for assessment used in the language arts course. Type 1 is the assessment of each task the learners are expected to complete. Each task is worth 60 points. Samples of such tasks vary from text analysis, materials development related to various language skills, essay or poem writing, to simple data collection for research, speech presentation, etc. Then, each student has to reflect on his/her completed task and assess it in terms of language use, originality and interest, as well as organization and presentation. Type 2 assesses various class presentations. Each presentation is worth 100 points divided among language use, originality and interest, organization and presentation, appropriate exercises, and overall grading. Learners assess their own presentations as well as their classmates'. Type 3 grades the overall presentation of the portfolio, which is worth 100 points. Later, students are expected to assess their own final product, tabulate the points, change them into a percentage, and assign the letter grade they believe they deserve for the course (A = 90–100; B = 80–89; C = 70–79; D = 60–69, and F = 50–59).

Discussion

Using the assessment portfolio in the class was frequently a difficult task. Some students tried to resist this test-free experience as they felt it was rather awkward for them to wait until the very end of the course to know how well (or badly) they had performed. Some other students felt that the course was an 'easy' and 'fun' course because of its structure. However, many students enjoyed the course and reiterated the importance and relevance of using assessment portfolios in this course.

Students' comments in the course evaluation were varied. Many complained that they were either disappointed or surprised with their final grade. Wolf (1989) states that grading a portfolio usually includes the following criteria:

- completing basic assignments;
- handing in quality work;
- showing evidence of growth;
- demonstrating the ability to self-assess.

The Language Arts course grading system is different from what the students are used to. Most university courses follow a multiple grading system: traditional classroom assessment, projects, presentations, etc. The grading used in the Language Arts course was based only on the portfolio at the end of the semester. Students who kept track of the work done in class daily were more or less able to present a complete portfolio; others who left their work to the last minute probably had some missing assignments; thus, they were disappointed with their final grade. The student and the teacher graded the portfolio according to the set rubrics without checking each other's final grade. Later, each learner had a one-to-one conference with the class teacher to discuss the final grade for the course (see Appendix 3). In most cases, the conference was straightforward; however, in some cases, students complained about unfairness and asked for clarification as they expected a different grade. The whole process proved to be extremely time-consuming. (interviews/conferences; observation)

I worked so hard, I thought I would get an A but you gave me a C, that's not fair.

One missing assignment, and that's it! I did not get the A. It is not right, but I guess I deserve it.

I have an A in the course. I thought that my work was not complete. I was expecting a lower grade. I like this!

Some students' comments were unexpected. Throughout the semester, the teacher reminded the learners to keep track of all assignments and tasks done in class. She warned them more than once about the importance of being organized and not leaving things to the last minute. She distributed the list of the tasks that have to be included in the portfolio. Many learners followed the instructions and were able to complete the work on time, but other students lost some of the assignments (due to lack of organization).

Other students compared the work involved in the Language Arts course with other Education or English-language courses they had taken at the university (reflective journal). Though the nature and the content of the courses offered at the university differ from one another, more than one learner mentioned the same two courses: History of the English Language, where the assessment consists of three one-hour short-answer tests and a five- to seven-page term-paper, and Educational Technology, where the assessment consists of a number of projects (five to seven), and two one and a half hour exams consisting of multiple choice, true and false, and short-answer questions:

It is much more interesting than the History of the English Language course. At least here we have to work all the time; there, we only had to listen and take notes.

I would never regret taking this course even though it needs a lot of hard work and attendance but I really enjoyed it. I was glad at the beginning that we have no exams but now I prefer to have exams than having to submit a portfolio at the end. They told me Educational Technology is a very hard course but what I discovered was that Language Arts needs much more work than the first, since the latter has no limited number of projects or activities while the technology does....

Some students commented on having or not having final exams (reflective journal/observation). Students were overjoyed at the beginning of the course when they were told that the course did not require a final exam; however, throughout the semester, many changed their minds as the course requirements were very demanding:

I liked the idea of not having to do exams.

I won't trust a course without a final exam anymore.

I'd rather have a final exam.

Many learners commented on the different tasks they had to work on for the course (reflective journal/interviews/observation). In this section, learners commented on three different tasks: the first was text analysis. The second was a reflection on their experience with either the Arabic or English language; many of the students are of Lebanese origin but some have lived abroad for many years and thus had a problem learning the standard Arabic language. The third task was preparing language materials related to one topic set by the teacher:

I thought that this activity was very boring since I had to read the text thousands of time to find the similarities, antonyms, and all the other cohesive statements. But when I had to do a presentation, I saw how interesting it was....

I felt energized when I knew I had to talk about my experience with the Arabic language.... Finally someone is hearing this long story.

That is the hardest project of all. It needs a lot of work, creativity, and critical thinking. I had to think about a game board, so I had to take a look at the books in the library. The second activity was a vocabulary one, the third was a writing assignment, the fourth was a grammar one that I had no clue about....

Students also commented on the class work in general (reflective journal; interviews). Learners had to work on different tasks during the semester. They could either work individually, in pairs or in groups depending on the nature of the task; in some instances, they could choose with whom to work while at other times the decision was made randomly by the class teacher:

This course was the door to new friendship. I had to interact with my classmates.

I have always liked to work alone. I don't trust the other members in the group.

Pair work and group work are fine as long as I choose with whom to work.

I got to work with many classmates. Each one works differently. Some are fun; others are boring and slow; some are hardworking; others are extremely lazy.

Though many learners complained about the workload involved during the course of the semester, their final reflective papers were rather positive; many concluded as follows:

I benefited a lot....

When I start teaching, I will definitely use portfolios with my students.

It is a rather tough course, but I learned quite a lot from it.

Also, many tackled the issue of self-assessment:

Why should I grade my own work? I thought that was the teacher's role.

I learned a lot from the course. Spending time looking at my work, commenting, reflecting, and grading it made me want to give the best I could.

In fact, assessment portfolios are beneficial to students. They give them the opportunity to reflect, and to develop their abilities in assessing their own work and understanding. Thus, learners end up eventually taking responsibility for their own learning and have continuing opportunities for using their creativity and imagination and increasing the quality of their work (Barton and Collins 1997).

On reflection, I believe that although portfolios require considerable work on the part of both the students and the teacher, they provide a much more effective assessment tool than those used traditionally because the ongoing and developing nature of the portfolio provides a much clearer indication not only of what the learners have achieved (the learning process) but also what the teacher has enabled the learners to achieve (the teaching process and product).

Conclusion

Using the portfolio as the only means of assessment in a Language Arts course at an English-medium university in Lebanon provided a challenging innovation. The impact on

students' learning of using the assessment portfolio was significant as it showed the involvement of the learners in the course from many aspects: They had to reflect and self-assess their own work. They were engaged deeply and thoughtfully in grading and assessment practices. They were aware of and pleased with both their own learning achievement and their performance. They also had to learn to interact with their peers. Furthermore, they had to consult and confer with their class instructor regarding their own learning.

Though this exploratory study was conducted over four consecutive years, it still requires more in-depth investigation as it was conducted only in one class, i.e. 'language arts'. In order to draw reliable and valid conclusions regarding the use of portfolios as the only assessment tool in some university classes, other faculty members should implement the use of portfolios in their courses at the university, and an experimental research model would need to be designed. It is the hope of the researcher that other teachers will take up the challenge of using portfolio assessment as it has proved even in this limited study to be an effective means towards involving the students in the learning process.

Notes on contributor

Rima Bahous is an assistant professor at the Lebanese American University, Beirut, Lebanon. Her research interests are in language and society, student engagement in schools, differentiated instruction, language awareness, and non-traditional testing.

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Appendix 1: Language Arts: rubrics for assessment

Each entry: 60 points

Topic	Distinguished	Proficient	Apprentice	Superficial	Unacceptable	N/A
Language Use	20–17	16–13	12–9	8–5	4–0	
Originality/Interest	20–17	16–13	12–9	8–5	4–0	
Organization/Presentation	20–17	16–13	12–9	8–5	4–0	

Overall presentation of portfolio: 100 points

Points to consider	Distinguished	Proficient	Apprentice	Superficial	Unacceptable	N/A
Items of Work/Content	20–17	16–13	12–9	8–5	4–0	
Organization/Presentation	20–17	16–13	12–9	8–5	4–0	
Consistency/ Development	20–17	16–13	12–9	8–5	4–0	
Originality/Interest	20–17	16–13	12–9	8–5	4–0	
Reflection/ Self-assessment	20–17	16–13	12–9	8–5	4–0	
Other comments						

Presentation: 100 points

Presentation	Distinguished	Proficient	Apprentice	Superficial	Unacceptable	N/A
Language Use	20–17	16–13	12–9	8–5	4–0	
Originality/Interest	20–17	16–13	12–9	8–5	4–0	
Organization/Presentation	20–17	16–13	12–9	8–5	4–0	
Appropriate Exercises	20–17	16–13	12–9	8–5	4–0	
Overall grade	20–17	16–13	12–9	8–5	4–0	

Other comments: individual performance; group performance

Overall portfolio grade: _____

General Comments:

Appendix 2: Students’ extracts

1. Who Am I Poem

Ghida

Stubborn, determined, perfectionist, sensitive, and moody

Daughter of two fabulous parents

Lover of arts, nature, As, Children, and animals

Who feels satisfied when accomplishing a certain goal,

worried when thinking about the future,

anxious when meeting new people,

ecstatic when getting an A,

peaceful when drawing

Who needs assurance, guidance, time alone, comfort, love

Who gives headaches to my fiancé,

smiles to the people I know,

worries to my parents,

comfort to my friends,

bills to my sister

Who fears due dates, death, failure, sickness, and betrayal

Who would like to see the Nut Cracker in New York, Burj El Arab in Dubai, my last painting finished, my brother as a doctor, and my first baby boy

(Resident of Ras Beirut, Lebanon; Sharm Building)

Sample of student reflection and evaluation

I never thought of writing a poem about my self before. What I liked most in this activity is the adjectives that describe me. I thought about them and I realized that there are many things I thought I was, but after thinking about them I noticed that I was wrong, and vice versa.

Language use: 15

Originality/Interest: 17

Organization/Presentation: 19

51/60

2. Characteristics of an ideal ...

My ideal partner

10 personal characteristics:

- (1) Loving because I am worth it
- (2) My friend because it is the base of every relationship
- (3) Sociable because I would want him to get along with my friends
- (4) Funny because I need sense of humour
- (5) Respectful because if he does not respect himself, he will not respect me
- (6) Knowledgeable because we need to communicate on the same level
- (7) Romantic because it spices up the relationship
- (8) Caring because I am a sensitive person
- (9) Loves family life because it is a priority in mine
- (10) Outgoing because I am a party freak

10 physical characteristics:

- (1) Dark haired because I hate blondes!
- (2) Normal weight because being at the extremes is not nice!
- (3) Wears glasses because it gives him an intellectual look
- (4) Presentable because it reflects his inner self
- (5) Taller than I am according to proportions
- (6) Physically fit because it gives me a sense of security
- (7) A hairless back because it is disgusting
- (8) Neat hands because I find it unattractive if they were not
- (9) Clean skin because it shows how he takes care of himself
- (10) Beautiful smile so I would wake up cheerful every day

Sample of student reflection and evaluation

I really enjoyed this activity because I had to come up with criteria concerning my ideal partner. Sarah and I realized that we had a lot in common concerning men!

Evaluation

Language Use: 19

Originality/Interest: 19

Organization/Presentation: 19

3. My story with the English/Arabic language

I have to admit that it does bother me that I don't read or write Arabic. Not only does it bother me, but also it has a great effect on my life, especially being Lebanese and living in Lebanon. Lately it has been affecting me financially, I tried to apply for a job, I almost got hired, until they realized that I didn't know how to read or write Arabic. This is why I am just starting to teach myself Arabic, and hopefully within time I will be able to say I'm 100% Arab.

Finally I can say that gaining the English Language was a kind of journey to me. It started as a nightmare, got smoother and easier but now it is a blessing. I love it.

Sample of student reflection and evaluation

This activity helps the students to reflect on their own experience of one language or another. They must relate an incident that happened to them in the form of a story.

Evaluation:

Language use: 17

Originality/interest: 18

Organization/presentation: 19

54/60

Appendix 3: Grade distribution

Number of students: 106

Grading system at the university:

(A = 90–100; B = 80–89; C = 70–79; D = 60–69, and F = 50–59).

Number of students	Student self-assessment	Teacher final assessment
24	A	A
19	B	B
5	C	C
10	A	C
14	B	A
4	C	D
1	B	D
10	B	C
12	A	B
7	C	B
106 students		