Reflecting the Practice of Foreign Language Learning in Portfolios

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Portfolios as a means of documenting and assessing learning are well-situated in the foreign language classroom. A broad variety of portfolio approaches developed out of the intention of making language learning more visible in order to better guide the learner (pedagogical notion) and evaluate the learning (institutional notion). Nevertheless, the original core idea of the portfolio, to further develop the student's practice of learning, has hardly become mainstream. This is due to the lack of a theoretical underpinning of the notion of reflective practice applied to portfolios and the accompanying pedagogy. This article will identify the levels of reflective practice and describe the discourses and genres in which the quality of reflective practice can be developed in the context of foreign language education.

1. Introduction[1]

When I was hired by the German Studies Department at Emory University in Atlanta in 1995, my colleagues didn't hesitate to make clear that they selected me for my strong profile in the field of language pedagogy in general and for one of my research interests, portfolios, in particular. They expressed their hope that I would be able to introduce portfolio work into the daily teaching in the department.

Having been invited to join a department with a strong emphasis on interdisciplinary work between language, literature, history, philosophy, political science, film and gender studies, I clearly saw the potential for portfolio work as a means of reflecting on one's own learning path through all the disciplinary intersections offered in this rich curriculum. When I asked my colleagues what they hoped for in particular when they thought about portfolio work in the department, they expressed their desire to get a better understanding of what students actually do and learn when working on an assignment so that they could gear themselves

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towards these students and their learning. At that time I considered this an almost ideal point of departure for developing a departmental portfolio concept together.

Nine years later, in 2004, when I left Emory University to return to my home country, Germany, for good, I had a different opinion on that. I was disappointed about the fact that the only area we did indeed set up portfolios was in the introductory section of the department's curriculum, where teaching is mainly focused on language acquisition. What we did with the portfolio there was assessment, based on the shared principles of all foreign language departments of the university and supplemented with a few specific aspects of the German Studies Department. This kind of portfolio work presented, therefore, a clearly one-sided institutional notion. It was situated in the tradition of the so-called showcase portfolio, an approach focusing on the outcomes of learning and getting stronger in the 1990s in English Composition Studies as a counter movement to the already established learning portfolio approach initiated almost a decade before by advocates of the process writing movement (Belanoff & Dickson 1991). Also in the 1990s, the European Language Portfolio model (Little 2002), a concept that hit US foreign language education around the time I started to set up portfolio work at Emory University, supported the strong focus on the learning outcome in my department, where students' performance was measured by criteria based on the institution's guidelines. Even though my colleagues and I focused heavily on the "dossier," a section of the European Language Portfolio that tries to provide each portfolio a personal face, we set the stage for rather uniform products with most students at a highly prestigious university eager to please the instructor's expectations in order to receive a grade of A in the final evaluation.

In the upper divisions of the curriculum, portfolios were almost nonexistent besides in a few exceptions in project-based classes like The German Play or Collaborate Creative Writing, where project work was documented and summarized mainly for the purpose of making visible the individual student's impact on a group effort. Even in this case portfolios weren't used with a pedagogical notion which would have focused on incentives for self-guidance and facilitation of the learner by the instructor throughout the process of working on a project.

What went wrong? Why was I not able to convince my colleagues to use this other side of portfolio work as well, the pedagogical, which fosters aspects of self-monitoring, feedback, and planning, including goal-setting and reflection of the learning tools and methods in use – anything that enhances the student's practice of (language) learning within the framework of the institution (institutional notion)? Instead we got stuck in figuring out how to apply the Common European Framework of Reference for Language Learning and Teaching (Council of Europe 2005) to the outcome of the language learning in our department, an effort which is undoubtedly worth doing in order to clearly define portfolio work in the existing context of an institution, but not enough to foster learner-centered instruction, a goal we actually kept high on the department's teaching agenda as the basis for reaching a level of language learning that meets the demands of the professional fields for which we were trying to prepare our students.

It was only in one case when I, so to speak, in the ex-territory of an independent study course with one lone student, initiated a kind of portfolio that tried to bridge the gap between the needs of the learner and the demands of the institution. Through the use of personal diary, learning log, and a collection of work that received frequent comments by the student, his peers from other courses, and myself, it was possible to put together a portfolio understood as in Häcker (2006: 36) as a means of assessment *and* student development that is being used as a tool for adjusting both the institutional framework and the individual teaching toward the needs of the learner.

Because I described this case in depth elsewhere (Bräuer 2003), I will not go into detail here about my collaboration with this student but, instead, point out aspects of reflective practice that became clear to me at that time and later on in regard to portfolios in the foreign language classroom.

In this article I first want to briefly outline a few theoretical aspects of text production that will certainly resonate with elements of part one of this journal issue but hopefully present theory through the lens of a pedagogically inclined practitioner. Based on that, I will later on apply the cognitive notion of the writing process to the levels of reflective practice and describe the discourses and genres in which the quality of reflective practice can be developed in the context of the foreign language classroom.

2. Implications of research in cognitive science for reflective writing in L2

I would like to start off this article by summarizing some of Kellogg's findings related to the functioning of working memory (WM) in text production, because I am convinced that writing for portfolios – especially in a foreign language – is highly complex and special attention needs to be paid to the role of WM in order to make the right decisions on how to use the portfolio in the foreign classroom.

As we know from writing research in cognitive science (e.g. Hayes & Flower 1980, Hayes 1996), the complex nature of written composition as an interplay of memory, thinking, and language has the tendency of activating a cognitive overload in the working memory (WM). There are two reasons for the actual unfolding of the cognitive overload: a) the writer is young of age and his/her WM is premature on a physical level; b) the writer is not able to use the capacity of his/her WM due to lack of strategies in text production. In other words, the writer mentioned in b) has not yet learned to make full use of what he/she would be able to on a mental level.

One of the most significant insights from writing research in cognitive science (e.g. Kellogg et al. 2007), at least from the perspective of writing pedagogy, seems to be the correlation between information load and quantitative and qualitative output of the writer: The more information a writer has to keep ready to be used in his/her WM, the more he/she will slow down in the speed of writing, and the more basic this writing will get.

Since the appearance of his model of WM in writing (1996), Kellogg urges writing instructors, coaches, and tutors to foster the development of routines in the basic procedures of text production, such as planning, drafting, and revising, in order to free the mental capacity of the WM for specific demands related to the situatedness of a certain writer and writing task.

Specific demands of the writing process can relate, for example, to the fact that someone composes in L2 facing certain limitations due to his/her actual level of language acquisition. Another specific demand appears when the student writes in a reflective mode as part of a portfolio. For this not only content knowledge and the linguistic ability to express the latter is supposed to be kept ready for use in the WM, but also procedural

knowledge and associated language on how this knowledge was originally gained and processed by the writer.

While the level of the physical development of the WM cannot be manipulated (Kellogg et al. 2007), dealing with additional constraints related to L2 text production and reflective writing in a portfolio shall be trained until routines emerge in the person's working patterns. In addition, the main phases in the production of L2-texts, respective reflective pieces, can be broken down in several smaller steps in order to reduce the chance of cognitive overload in the WM.

2.1 Practical implication for the nature of the writing task

Based on this knowledge mentioned above and from a pedagogical perspective, I want to suggest in general the assignment of smaller writing tasks of the same or similar kind, such as reflective pieces for the portfolio, that gradually move from simple (e.g. first person, for a diary entry documenting the making of a learning process) to more complex (e.g. analytical, for a final reflection on the reasons for a certain learning outcome). What this means in detail in organizing portfolio writing in the foreign language classroom, I will explain in the following chapters in more detail. Let me first continue with my pondering of Kellogg's research findings by two additional analytical moves.

When Kellogg urges us to focus the training of L1 and L2 writers more on the level of building up routines, he seems to ignore what we know about the transfer of learning. Even though the theoretical discourse about transfer of learning appeared already with Vygoskky (1978) – it picked up momentum just a few years ago as an applied approach in writing studies (e.g. Beaufort 2007),when it became clear that knowledge about writing and writing skills will only be long-lasting if the activity leading to a certain insight about writing becomes personally relevant. Anne Beaufort (2007) speaks of the mindfulness of writing tasks in order to create fertile ground for the transfer of writing competence not only from one task to the next, but also from one writing domain to another. Mindfulness here means meta-cognition or, as Beaufort puts it, "thinking about thinking" (ibid.: 152). She emphasizes the importance of generalization drawn from individual writing experiences and vise versa, when she writes: "We cannot possibly teach all genres students might need

to know in the future, but we can teach the concepts of genre and ask students to apply the concept to analysis of several text types." (ibid.)

In her most recent research on the nature of reflective practice, Beaufort (2009) demonstrates that writing tasks, in order to initiate transfer learning, have to be, on the one hand, specific and guiding toward the usage of certain knowledge and skills but also, on the other hand, open in a way that the individual learner is invited to carry out responsibility in making decisions about his/her own learning. Beaufort speaks of so-calledmid-range prompts that in an assignment combine firm structure provided by the institution and space to move and breathe for the learner.

With this in mind, I want to specify what I suggested in general for writing assignments that gradually move from smaller writing tasks of the same or similar kind to more complex ones by urging instructors to base not only each single writing task on an authentic reason (*What for?*), but also to combine these smaller pieces of writing for a reason the individual learner is able to make sense of: *Why do I want to move from my first person diary entries to an analysis of what actually happened and why during the time I described in my diary?*

An important part of this reasoning of writing tasks is to provide learners with opportunities to make him/herself aware of the different audiences for whom these pieces are being written. Kellogg (e.g. et al. 2007) keeps mentioning in his research the difficulty of less experienced writers in picturing the specific expectations of an audience he/she may target with a piece of writing. Therefore, information activating the writer's imagination of a specific audience, needs to be provided through the writing task: *What were your expectations as the only reader of your diary? What additional information does the audience of your portfolio need now in order to be able to contextualize and understand excerpts of your diary you want to include in your portfolio?* This method of anticipatory response as one way of facilitating audience imagination will be further described in the next section of this chapter.

2.2 Practical implication for feedback to the writer

Two additional arguments that enable us to make more sense of the findings by Kellogg and other cognitive scientists on a pedagogical level come from Wood et al. (1976)

introducing the metaphor of *scaffolding* and from Vygotsky (1978) introducing his idea of the *zone of proximal development* (ZPD). Scaffolding describes the type of assistance offered by an instructor or peer to support a current learning process. The person providing the scaffolding offers assistance with only this information or those skills that are beyond the student's current performance ability. This way scaffolding bridges the gap between what Vygotsky calls in his model of ZPD "actual developmental level" and "potential developmental level" of the learner. (ibid.: 86-91)

To initiate what Vygotsky , (1978: 89) calls "good learning" between the actual and the possible of a learner's competences can happen with help of *anticipatory response*, a term borrowed from biological psychology and used more frequently now in the discourse on response theories in L1 and L2 writing instruction (e.g. Prior & Looker 2009) which is understood here as facilitating someone's learning by tapping into his/her zone of proximal development with comments like the one below focusing on the process of writing of a complex piece such as an analysis, as mentioned above. This is a comment I wrote to an L2-student in a college course on journalistic writing:

> When you go ahead and draft your analysis of what happened during the current writing project, I'd like you to remember the benefits you experienced in your analysis of the previous writing project when you came up with an outline first. Go ahead and check your portfolio about the previous project if you need to remind yourself about what strategy you used to get your outline. I also wanted to let you know that providing yourself with an outline for the report you will have to write now will help you to draft another text later on, a journalistic feature. As you know a journalistic feature does require reporting as the basis for any further exploration of your topic. In other words, ififhis you proceed as suggestedsuggested, you will be done with half of your work for the next assignment.

Another anticipatory response, this time aiming for a more specific sensation of what an audience will expect from a certain piece of writing could draw on past experience made with a specific audience:

> When you write the conclusion for your current portfolio, remember the feedback you received after the presentation of your previous portfolio and the kind of questions they asked you in order to better understand your work! This time, try to answer these questions already through your conclusion. In order to help yourself to picture these questions, you can actually include them in your draft and find answers for them. Later on, when you revise your conclusion, you can take out the questions and keep the answers.

Anticipatory responses, such as the ones above, tie together previous, current, and future writing tasks, making visible what Bazerman (2004) calls *genre systems*, and initiate transfer learning that is personally relevant or, in Ann Beaufort's term (2007) mindful, and therefore becomes part of a sustainable competence.

Based on this knowledge and extended from a pedagogical perspective, I want to suggest creating what I call task arrangements for text production (*Schreibarrangements*), which Bazerman (ibid.) calls genre systems, that can help optimize the usage of a person's working memory capacity, due to two things:

a) the gradual buildup of constraints to be juggled with during the composing process in general and for reflective writing in L2 in specific and

b) the multimodality of these tasks arrangements for text production which supports the strengths of different types of writers/learners.

Let me now specify what I outlined so far in more detail with regard to reflective practice and the use of portfolios by introducing the different levels of reflective practice and describing the discourses and genres in which the quality of reflective practice can be developed in the context of the foreign language classroom. I will do so with the goal of complying with Kellogg's (1996) challenge to straighten out the specific complexity of writing for reflective purposes in L2 in order to not only clarify the reflective language for the audience of the portfolio, but also to deepen the personal meaning and implication of what the student has to say about his/her own practice.

3. The term *reflective practice*

Let me first briefly define the term *reflective practice* and apply its meaning to the foreign language classroom. The term *reflective practice* emerged from the works of Donald A. Schön (1987), George Hillocks (1995), and Gillie Bolton (2005), and it denotes stimuli for perceiving or reflecting back on one's own activity, which can occur for example when students are asked to read instructions on how to manage their L2 text production**.** A learner may nevertheless ignore these outside stimuli if he/she is not aware of the effectiveness of his or her actions. This can be true because of a low level of experience where self-

reflection is a rare phenomenon. It can nevertheless also be true for high level experience where procedural routine often shuts off self-reflection. Learners in both scenarios tend to repeat any ineffective strategy, ultimately allowing it to become part of an internal value system. The learner will eventually accept ineffective patterns of, for example, L2 writing, as given and thus become less motivated to revise a draft or even relearn different and perhaps more effective ways of producing texts. When students in such situations are confronted with suggestions for revision or alternative writing strategies, they often react negatively, sometimes in connection with the excuse: This is the way I always do it! The repeated behavioral pattern conveys a sense of flow to the learner, an air of familiarity, regardless of any inefficiencies perceived by peers or the instructor. The pattern facilitates the growth of a positive emotional attachment, which inevitably provides the learner with reinforcement. An intuitive departure from the routine would here require first a conflict of such magnitude that the student can no longer avoid or ignore the discrepancy. Based on these circumstances, the learners would have to react not in the sense that they want to alter such habitualized behaviors but rather feel themselves forced to do so. In contrast, an action that stems from one's own critical reflection about a particular behavioral pattern can, on an intrinsic motivational level, lead to progressive and lasting development in a certain competence, L2 writing for example.

As long as non-reflected routines and extrinsically imposed changes in practice dominate in learning and teaching processes, they will continue to impede not only attempts to optimize current behaviors but also attempts to transfer effective strategies into other tasks or even different fields of activity. If the reasons remain unclear to the learner why a strategy was unsuccessful for a particular assignment, then it will be very difficult for him/her to identify these hindering conditions related to another assignment.

To sum up this term explanation, practice carries within itself reflective elements according to Hillocks (1995), whereby these elements must necessarily be made known and operationalized in order to optimize a given behavior in a planned and sustainable manner. Based on these conditions, changes even to already routinized behavior would not necessarily be impossible to implement, because even an old hand retains control of his/her decisions with the help of a critical perspective.

For a description of the learning potential inherent in reflective practice, Hillocks (1995: 29) borrows from Stephen North (1987: 33): One speaks of practice as inquiry, (altered) practice as a stimulus for its own habituation, when the basic situation of the routinized activity, for example outlining in L1 before drafting in L2, becomes alienated. In other words, the routinized activity is confronted with an unfamiliar context (e.g. collaborative brainstorming in both native and target language before individual outlining solely in L2) or with different standards (e.g. no assessment of language accuracy during drafting stage), so that the previously used skills, in this case L2 writing skills, must be adapted or supplemented in some way.

This example of how to reconstruct students' behavioral routines also creates an incentive to critically consider any routinized professional attitude that the instructor may have developed in connection with L2 writing instruction. Thus in the new context of drafting in the target language, it also becomes necessary for the instructor to consider modifying the content, approach, set of personal values or pedagogy of a particular lesson plan and assessment strategy.

4. Levels of reflective practice

Before discussing the implementation of reflective practice in the L2 classroom, this section will first point to the levels at which reflective practice on a language level occurs and can therefore be observed, evaluated, and, if needed, further enhanced. Between 2003 and 2005, evidence was collected through research on portfolios leading to a job application as part of the project, "Neue Wege in die Ausbildung [New Paths to Education]" (Iwan 2006). Up until then, very little research existed that would explain why the more complex levels of reflective practice were hardly ever achieved in students' written accounts in both L1 and L2. Nevertheless, based on conversations with the students of the project quoted down below, most of them L2 learners between 16 and 18 years of age, it can be assumed that the levels of reflection missing in students' written or oral accounts do not appear, or are only weakly defined, in their cognitive perception as well, which is, first of all, probably due to the stage of their cognitive development in general and

the working memory in particular. Therefore, this cognitive perception needs to be trained to the point of becoming routine in order to, following Kellogg et al. (2007), free mental capacity of the cognitive working memory for specific demands related to the situatedness of a learner and a specific task, e.g. putting whatever has been worked on into L2 writing. As the description of the levels of reflective practice will demonstrate, routine in cognitive perception can be reached by anticipatory feedback – taking in perspective past, current, and future actions of the writer – with the stance of a reader who is genuinely interested in understanding what has been expressed in a piece of text. In the project mentioned above, this feedback was provided by a writing tutor who was asked to push the quality of reflective writing for the application portfolio with the underlying assumption that a portfolio adds a broad range of detailed information that is highly valued in the job selection process by many hiring companies.

4.1 Documenting and describing

At the first level of reflective practice, characterized by documenting and describing, the individual collects impressions in a diary of the experience he/she has had. Those who do not pursue their reflections any further remain at the level of private discourse and are therefore only able to discuss their experiences with other learners in a very restricted way. Naturally, they receive feedback about the quality of their own work in the same limited manner. Here is a journal entry from a student participating in an internship (Bräuer 2009):

> We had to drill holes.

The student presents the activity neither with reference to its context nor to his individual performance and capabilities related to this particular activity. In response to this meager information, the writing tutor can only ask: “So what? What did you drill the holes for?”

In response, the student supplied the following addition and revised his diary entry:

> We had to drill holes needed for a screw connection to the holder.

Now the student describes his activity part of a broader scheme but again doesn’t relate it to his individual performance and capabilities.

In the light of what anticipatory response requires (e.g. Prior & Looker 2009) , namely to relate feedback not only to the current experience, but also to past and future activities in order to make the feedback more meaningful to the learner, one may hope to read a more comprehensive feedback from the tutor asking also, for example, about a comparison to other drilling experiences the student may have had before or about what he would do differently next time.

Keeping in mind the limited cognitive capability of the working memory (Kellogg 1996), especially in the light of L2 text production with its additional challenges for the student, the outcome of this complex intervention would be rather questionable. Studies on feedback and revision (e.g. Ferris 2003) have shown the drawback of feedback that is overwhelming to the L2 writer. If feedback doesn't tap into the individual's zone of proximal development (Vygotsky 1978), the response is often little or no text revision and growing frustration. Instead, feedback needs to be used to scaffold toward the next level of ability. If this can be done within an authentic response as a reader being truly interested in the information that is missing, motivation for revision in order to satisfy the needs of a real existing reader will grow strong.

Therefore, it is only at this point of the interaction between tutor and writer that the tutor would ask who concretely did the drilling. The student replies and reaches for the threshold to the next level of reflective practice:

> I drilled the holes for screw connections to the holder

4.2 Analyzing and interpreting

At the second level of reflective practice, characterized by analyzing and interpreting what has been documented or described based on a personal view, the individual starts to question the quality of his or her performance and, by doing so, gives meaning to what he or she has experienced. Newly acquired experience is connected to existing knowledge, which leads to new insights. The quality of reflective practice achieved here deepens the individual's current learning process, which becomes visible and therefore comparable to other peers' achievements.

By saying "I drilled […]," the student started to understand the activity not only as part of a broader scheme but also related it to his own individual performance; however there is still no mention of the quality of the student's performance.

In response to the writing tutor's inquiry about the outcome of his work, the student supplied the following addition:

> Unfortunately the screws did not fit after the first try, so I had to re-drill the holes

Triggered by the feedback, the student understands the activity as part of a broader scheme, relates it to his individual performance, and discusses the quality of his performance – however, without mentioning any possible alternatives.

After being asked for future alternatives in his way of carrying out the drilling, he hits the next level of reflective practice and his journal then reads:

> I drilled holes for the screw connected to the holder. Unfortunately the screws did not fit after my first try, and I had to re-drill the holes. The next time, I will check the size of the drill I am going to use before actually drilling.

4.3 Comparing and evaluating

The third level of reflective praxis, characterized by comparing what has been learned with one's own goals and external expectations (e.g. instructor, institution, family, peers), allows individuals to evaluate not only what has been accomplished but also the path they have taken to get there. Standards and competency descriptions, understood as the collected experience and knowledge from a particular discipline, profession, or part of society, help students and instructors alike to classify their performance capabilities in an educational and professional-oriented context, to create new goals, and to plan further efforts. By thinking about next time, the student discusses the quality of his performance in the light of possible alternatives, but without further defining the competences needed to actually carry out the anticipated strategy and his capability of practicing these competences.

In response to the writing tutor's inquiry, the student supplied the following addition:

> I drilled holes for the screw connected to the holder. Unfortunately the screws did not fit after my first try, and I had to re-drill the holes. The next time, I will check the size of the drill before drilling…As my problems with drilling show, the work of a manufacturing mechanic requires foresight and attention to detail. Sometimes I show these capabilities, for example

> when driving my car. But I also want to apply these skills to my professional training more regularly.

Through this scaffolding between tutor and L2 writer along the levels of reflective practice, the student effectively improves not only the depth of his reflection, but also the linguistic quality of his writing. Due to the gradual adding of information, vocabulary and sentences can improve step by step based on whatever is possible in the realm of the student's current working memory. Wording and meaning can be further negotiated with the tutor on the spot. When this kind of gradual feedback is practiced repeatedly and made visible in a portfolio, the student will internalize its underlying procedure, which can ultimately contribute to the development of transfer competencies in regard to future writing tasks in both L1 and L2. While in instruction not based on portfolios, traces of learning processes as subtle as the one mentioned above will disappear quickly, portfolios will help capture such learning processes for further use. Nevertheless, it would be an illusion in regard to the actual limitation of the human working memory to hope this capturing of learning could be done successfully in one step. Therefore, I want to suggest making use of the different discourses triggered by the three levels of reflective practice introduced in this chapter. These discourses of reflective practice I differentiate between

a) private, a place for self-reflection in diary, learning journal, document folder;

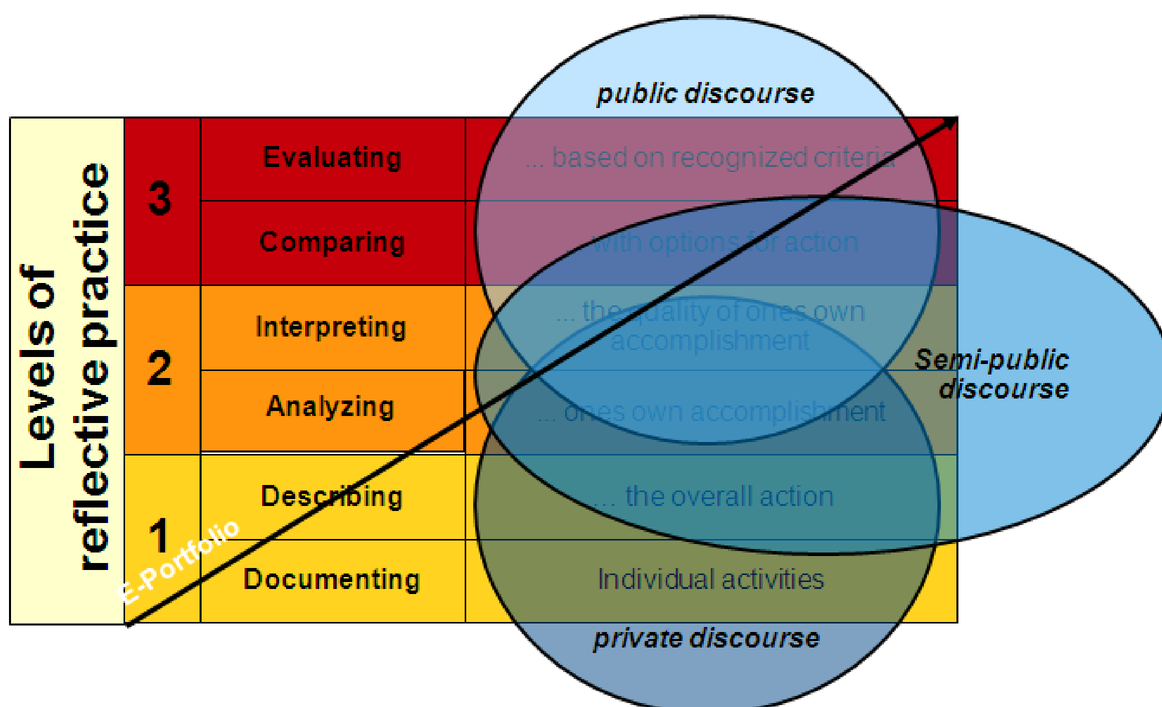
b) semi-private, a place for consultation, small group interaction, and peer feedback;

c) public, a place for presenting work processes and outcomes through portfolios and exhibitions. (Bräuer 2009)

5. Summary: Measures for enhancing the quality of reflective practice in the L2 classroom

When working toward developing students' reflective practice abilities as learning stimuli in foreign languages, one should move slowly because the levels of reflective practice become most apparent through interaction such as text feedback between peers. Competences gathered at each level (see graph 1) should be applied within changing tasks and discourses and appropriate persons such as peer, writing tutor, instructor, family member, representative of a professional field (etc.). Questions relating to what, how, and

why are the most suitable for feedback, so that one can establish both the factual background and theoretical framework for the summary arguments gathered and documented in the individual text and, later on, in the portfolio. These types of questions can also serve to orient expectations and/or conditions inherent in the different discourses in which the learners will have to convey their messages.



Graph 1: Levels and discourses of reflective practice[2]

From my experience as a writing pedagogue, we should in our teaching consistently strive to work in an audience-oriented fashion within the framework of a particular level or discourse of reflective practice. This means reflecting individuals should be able to recognize a specific and justifiable purpose in their assignments. At the semi-private and public levels, we should additionally incorporate diverse feedback opportunities, so that learners can experience the effectiveness of their reflection from different perspectives.

[2] Special thanks goes to Sabine Julia Jakobs who, after having learned about the levels and discourses of reflective practice in a seminar with me, provided this graphical representation as a visual summary to the class. Sabine Jakobs gave permission to use her graph for this publication.

I also try to remember not to focus too closely on one type of reflection. Oral and written reflection can be usefully combined, because each of these modes creates different possibilities for enhancing reflective abilities. Individual reflection, such as in a journal, should consistently occur in connection to the entire project, such as in a portfolio, so that reflection performed in a private discourse addresses the challenge of a growing audience and therefore also carries with it a responsibility for what has been accomplished.

6. Organizational components of portfolio work in the foreign language classroom

I would like to close my article with a few suggestions drawn as personal lessons from my mission not accomplished in my former workplace at Emory University.

In order to unlock the learning potential of reflective practice, we should consider the following components when setting up portfolio work:

a) Have the parameters for the particular form of reflective practice respectively the type of portfolio been defined with all people involved in the anticipated portfolio work? Let me specify this with a few sample questions which should be asked at the work place: Do you know how to keep a journal, give feedback to your peers, or create a portfolio from your own practice? Do you have time and opportunity in your teaching to use reflective practice effectively?

b) Is the targeted level and medium of reflective practice realistic in the sense of Vygotsky's "zone of proximal development?" Sample control question: Do your students have enough experience with personal journal writing, or would, for example, a dialogue journal, in which two students write back and forth to each other, better support their level of experience?

c) Is there a justifiable reason for reflection, particularly as it relates to the continued educational development of the participants? Example: Students create an internship portfolio with the knowledge that it will in the near future be recycled for a job application portfolio.

d) Is the reflective work set in a larger social context that obliges students to assume responsibility within a clearly defined public space? Example: An entry in the internship journal about a particular assignment or work station will also be sent as an e-mail to a peer who has to take over the same assignment or work station on the following day and, therefore, relies on a decent quality of the information provided to him/her.

e) Have the assessment standards of the reflection or portfolio as a whole been clearly defined and communicated among all participants? Example: The introduction to the above-mentioned job application portfolio must guide the reader through the artifacts and reflections attached. The conclusion needs to present key competences of the applicant which show specific potential for future development.

With these and, if needed, additional and detailed organizational components found at Winter et al. (2008) in mind, bridging the gap between the pedagogical and institutional side of portfolio work should be possible in the foreign language classroom.

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