

# The Role of Portfolios in Student Motivation

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## 1. Introduction

Motivation has been the object of much research. It is seen as pivotal in second and foreign language education; and the same can be said about the effects of motivation on Japanese learners of English, as mentioned by Irie (2003a). Motivation refers to the process through which goal-oriented activity begins and is sustained (Pintrich & Schunk, 2002). Most experienced teachers could tell you that finding ways to motivate students with low levels of interest in a class and finding suitable teaching materials toward that end is both difficult and time consuming, especially if those students appear to be unmotivated in learning the L2. This is not to say such students are incapable of learning the material, but rather they may seem to lack the drive to study.

Apple and Shimo (2004) have shown that portfolios seem to generate an overall positive response from learners compared to other more traditional forms of evaluation. If, as their study suggests, some students prefer portfolio assessment, then perhaps portfolios may also encourage a more positive attitude toward learning the L2.

This study is concerned with this last point; can portfolios be used, not merely as an alternative form of assessment of students' progress, but also as tools that can foster motivation in lower interest learners? It is the purpose of this study to demonstrate that self-reflection through the use of portfolios can foster intrinsic motivation in a group of learners with relatively low interest in learning English as a foreign language. The first section of this study will contain a review of relevant research in the areas of motivation and portfolios will be introduced and discussed. Then a brief description of the research methods and questions as well as the results and analysis of the data will be discussed. Finally, limitations and suggestions for further study will be presented in the conclusion.

## 2. Literature review

### 2.1. Motivation

Over the years the research into motivation has been a rich one. The term 'motivation'

comes from the field of socio-psychology, and “[t]he main thrust of research efforts has been to identify psychological traits ... [of] achievement” (Lamb, 2007, p.757). This has also been done within educational psychology. There is also much support for the idea that motivation is important for the success of L2 acquisition, and also that a learner’s drive can be influenced positively or negatively by external factors as well (Ellis, 1994).

Many researchers now agree that motivation is vital in L2 acquisition. Dornyei (2005) suggests that without sufficient motivation even learners with very strong aptitude toward acquiring the second language cannot accomplish their long-term goals. The opposite seems also to be accepted; that with a high degree of motivation even students with a low aptitude can achieve acquisition. However, there is still strong debate as to how motivation functions or what exactly it is.

An early pioneer in the field of motivation in language learning, Gardner (1991), conducted extensive research into motivation which laid the foundation for his socio-educational model. This model suggests that attitude and motivation are linked together, and that, “... available evidence suggests that attitudes and motivation are positively related to tendency to pursue language study” (Gardner, 1991, 51). In other words, if one’s attitude is positive then one’s motivation to further study the second language will continue. Nakata (2006) has done research in L2 learning in Japanese universities and explains that there is no one single definition of motivation, but that it depends on the context within which it occurs. It is important to note that most agree that motivation can be divided into two fundamental types: intrinsic and extrinsic (Dornyei, 1994a; Noels, Pelletier, Clement, & Vallerand, 2000; Ryan and Deci 2000).

Ryan and Deci (2000) state that even though people are inherently endowed with intrinsic motivation, that it must be maintained and supported. They explain the need for study into this area as thus;

“In other words, [intrinsic motivation] will flourish if circumstances permit. Put in this way, the study of conditions that facilitate versus undermine intrinsic motivation is an important first step in understanding sources of both alienation and liberation of the positive aspects of human nature.” (p.70)

Through their definition of what intrinsic motivation is and how it can evolve, they suggest that it also can be fostered, increased and/or diminished. In this same study they also concluded that attempts to control behavior and, what they call “hindered perceived effectiveness” (Ryan & Deci, 2000, p. 76) can diminish intrinsic motivation. An example of such perceived effectiveness would be how a learner reacts to the perception of success or failure in the process of learning the second language.

In a study involving English-speaking Irish students learning French, Ushioda (2001) suggests that if we consider the relationship between experience and motivation as being connected, then the cycle of failure based on low motivation can be stopped. Similar to Williams, Burden, and Al-Baharna’s (2001) suggestion that a learner’s approaches to accomplishing a goal or task can be understood in terms of whether or not they see the causes

of their success, whether those causes are fixed attributes or can be changed, and whether they see those possible changes as something they have control over or they are in someone/thing else's control.

Dornyei (2005) explains that the amount and type of motivation one has is not only driven by immediate goals, but is shaped by people's past experiences and is linked with future achievement efforts. For example, if one considers past failure to be due to low ability, the chances of not being highly motivated to try harder in the future increases.

"If, for example, we ascribe past failure in a particular task to low ability on our part, the chances are that we will not try the activity ever again, whereas if we believe that the problem lay in our insufficient effort or the unsuitable learning strategies that we had employed, we are more likely to give it a try." (p.79)

Classroom settings are places where both academic and social issues must intermingle at the same time; as students' personal experiences grow and change, so does their drive. Williams and Burden (1997) describe a three stage process that motivation requires; a) needing a reason for doing something, b) making the decision to do that thing, and c) continuing that thing.

Irie (2005) conducted a study of 84 Japanese junior high school students over a three year period. Most of her results indicate that most students' motivation decreases from the start of the study to the end of the three year period. One of the possible reasons Irie offers for this decrease is the nature of English education in Japan; students are required to enroll in English classes from their first year in junior high school and on through their senior year in high school. The focus of the compulsory English classes is also geared toward passing a number of tests, and then finally preparing students for university entrance exams.

In a study conducted by Noels, Pelletier, Clement, & Vallerand (2000) further extending on Deci and Ryan's (1985) SDT they found that students with an increased perception of autonomy in learning and a level of perceived competence in the L2 are connected to more self-determined forms of motivation. They go on to stipulate that "...language programs that emphasize autonomy will likely foster student motivation and potential success" (Noels, et al, 2000, p.76) Students who feel they have ownership of their own L2 development make tend to learn more.

Ushioda (2008) states that, in terms of pedagogical contexts, if teachers are going to attempt to encourage intrinsic motivation in their students, then it is necessary to consider "...approaches to fostering self-determination" (Ushioda, 2008, p.27). This entails guiding students toward making their own choices regarding their learning, and even fostering their feelings of responsibility in their own language learning. She also notes that it is important for both the teacher and the students to not only find ways of encouraging motivation, but also of finding ways of sustaining that motivation. She concludes that there are two core elements that are vital in the support of motivation; one is that the drive to learn must come from the student, and the second is that the learner

must perceive themselves as responsible for their own L2 learning process. “After all, as long as motivation is externally regulated and controlled ... learners cannot be expected to develop skills regulating their own motivation which good language learning depends” (Ushioda, 2008, p.30).

In a study carried out in the motivational changes over long periods of time in Japanese students Miura (2011) stipulates that if learners can make a conscious decision to make a commitment to learning then they become more autonomous and persevering in their attitude towards learning L2. She also states that these learners will likely succeed in their studies. This study was conducted on six Japanese students who were highly proficient in English. Based on their experiences she found that negative experiences within the classroom and/or the exam system in Japan can influence overall commitment and drive to learn English. She also suggests that learner autonomy and ownership of language learning is important for fostering IM.

## 2.2. Portfolios

Research into the usefulness of portfolios in second language learning has also been a field rich in study and often emphasizes how portfolios can be used to enhance learner autonomy (Paulson, Paulson, & Meyer, 1991; Kohonen, 2000a; Yang, 2003; Apple & Shimo, 2004; Barrett, 2005; Lo, 2010). In their paper Paulson, et al (1991) describe portfolios as offering an alternative to more traditional methods of assessment and can guide students to make judgments regarding their own learning and performance. Nunes (2004) also explains how they can serve as a record for both teacher and students of the learners’ progress in the second language. Also, Barrett (2005) explains that much of the literature in the uses of portfolios tends to focus more on how they can be used “...to support reflection that can help students understand their own learning and to provide a richer picture of student work that documents growth over time” (Barrett, 2005, p.2).

Kohonen (2000a) writes that there are certain student properties or expectations in students’ own set of outcomes that can have an effect on learning. He explains that these properties include such aspects as a student’s commitment for and ownership of their own language learning and skills and strategies that may be necessary for learning. He states that portfolios can provide opportunities for L2 learning to become more visible (or apparent) to students. As the outcomes and progress become more visible to the learner, the portfolios can aide in developing a critical awareness of language learning with the assistance of the teacher. Kohonen further goes on to explain that in order to aide students in going through the process of creating a portfolio, questions can be used by the instructor throughout the course that will guide students in reflecting on their work and language learning. The list of questions will not be included here, however they will further be discussed later (please refer to Kohonen, 2000a, pp.3-4).

In research examining Japanese EFL students’ views on creating portfolios, Apple and Shimo (2004) show that they can promote student reflection on their own progress and by doing

so can promote more autonomy in learning. Apple and Shimo also explain that the results from the subjects in their study seem to indicate that students who participated in creating their portfolios show more active involvement and enhanced motivation in learning. Apple and Shimo also describe that the subjects show awareness of how portfolios can aide in their learning; “For tests, we study only one week, but for portfolios we make the same amount of effort all throughout the semester” (Apple and Shimo, et al, 2004, p.56).

In his book on using portfolios as a way to improve the learning process, Zibazarreta (2004) describes how portfolios contribute to student learning through self-reflection and can be tools for improving student learning. He also contends that most research into the use of portfolios to date has been at the primary and secondary levels of education and teacher training. However, portfolios have been employed in university English pedagogy for some time now;

“In English... college classes, portfolios, journal, and more recently digital storytelling strategies have been employed with some regularity, but remarkably, higher education has lagged behind the grade schools in innovating and refining such persuasive tools. Today...learning portfolios are attracting significant attention in college and university settings” (Zibazarreta, 2004, p.4).

Saker and Hu (2006) studied twenty two students in order to ascertain the usefulness of assessment portfolios as a tool to foster student learning. They found that a majority (95%) of the students involved in the study supported - and were in favor of - the idea of portfolios aided them in their own learning.

Although portfolios can and are used for a variety of purposes, there are exceptions, however, to the view that portfolios are valid in terms of assessment. Santos (1997) commented that although student reflection aids learners in understanding their own learning process and their assessment. However, she warns also that these should not be “givens in portfolio assessment” (Santos, 1997, p.6); but rather the instructor needs to also be part of the process and guide students in the use of the meta-cognitive effort. Clement (2009) conducted research regarding the use of writing portfolios as part of student assessment in an EFL class in a Japanese university. Although he does recommend further study in the field, he also notes that more explicit instruction to the students on how a portfolio should be kept and its purpose needs to be made clear to the students. Two possible solutions he gives to the problems his study encounters is that of regular reflection throughout the course, and explicit instruction being given to the learners from the beginning of the course.

In research carried out at two Spanish universities to study whether students believe portfolio use enhances learning efficacy compared to more traditional methods, Martinez-Lirola and Rubio (2009) also looked at the students' motivation and their opinions of portfolios. Student self-reflection, as in much of the literature above, was discussed in the results of the study as well. In surveys given to the participants of the study, many of the students replied that one of the advantages to using a portfolio was that they

were motivating.

### 2.3. Summary

The literature reviewed in the above sections is a small selection of critical studies in the vast research into motivation and portfolios in the second language classroom. Recent studies in motivation have been carried out to look into fluctuations of individual motivational levels, and also how to aid in developing and perpetuating students' motivation, be it extrinsic or intrinsic. As stated previously, there seems to be no one firm definition of motivation, especially when applied to learning situations; however, there appears to be a consensus that motivation is necessary for L2 acquisition.

Also, several researchers have linked the nurturing of intrinsic motivation to fostering student self-determination and independent awareness of learning. Connected to this idea is research that shows that students' motivation is not only apparent or driven by high scores and high achievement in classroom outcomes, but is shaped by personal experience and self-perception. This is to say that if students have continually received low scores then they will perceive themselves as incapable of learning a second language. This in turn may affect behavior and attitudes in lower level students in a negative manner in the classroom.

The research into portfolios within language classrooms has been mostly concerned with self-assessment and evaluation of students. There has also been much studied in terms of using portfolios as tools for enhancing and developing independent learning. Portfolios have been shown to aid students in becoming aware of their own learning styles and strategies and self-reflection. Many studies have shown that learners also seem to be motivated to use portfolios as a learning tool.

Motivation in using portfolios, as mentioned above, has been studied by researchers; however, one area that has not been touched upon much is that of using portfolios as tools for developing motivation in learning a second language.

## 3. Method

### 3.1. Research Questions

The purpose of this study is to ascertain if the use of student portfolios can be used, not only as a form of alternative assessment, but also as a tool to foster motivation in students who are considered, by themselves or by others, to have low motivation in studying English in a mandatory class. The following questions are addressed in this study:

1. Can the use of portfolios as a tool for self-reflection serve as a motivating factor for students with low-level interest in a required EFL college course?
2. Does self-reflection enhance intrinsic motivation in learners?

### 3.2. Design and setting

The study was conducted during one semester (approximately four months) of a mandatory university EFL oral communications class. A sophomore level class entitled *Communication English 3* was chosen because of the students' English level and their placement within the beginner level track. The class met twice a week for 90 minutes each session (one day a week the class met at 8:40am, the second day it met at 10:40 am).

All of the students in the study are majors in the Career English Course within the Humanities Department at Kyushu Lutheran College. However, in a questionnaire given to the participants at the beginning of the semester, 59% stated that the reason they entered the Career English department was because they did not want to enter either of the other two options available at the college. The students are all native speakers of Japanese and had been placed into this particular group according to their placement test scores, which had been administered at the beginning of their freshman year in the college. There were a total of 22 participants at the beginning of this study, one of whom dropped out of the class after the first week. All of the participants of the study were second year college students (ages 19-22). At the end of the semester there were three male (19-21) and 17 female (19-22) students.

### 3.3. Data Collection Procedure

The data, which is mostly qualitative in nature except for a questionnaire, was collected from the students' portfolios, three separate teacher-student interview sessions, two questionnaires, and teacher notes. The data collected for this study consists of materials gathered over a period of one school semester, and material from all 21 students and the teacher is included in the data. There are four main sources of data; the materials within the portfolios, one-on-one interviews between the teacher and students, two questionnaires, and a teaching diary. It should be noted here that the questionnaires will not be discussed in this paper due to the nature of the qualitative data.

The portfolios involved in the study were physical and students were required to turn them in at the end of the semester. The data in an individual portfolio consists of the following; the student's learning journal, all drafts including the final product from any individual and group projects, work that the student considers his/her personal best, an explanation and description of their own English learning during the semester, summaries and impressions from each interview, and anything else they wished to include. All materials in the portfolios are in English.

The one-on-one student-teacher interviews were conducted at the beginning, the middle, and the end of the semester. Each interview was in private and recorded by both the teacher and the student. The teacher used a digital voice recorder for the interviews and the students were given a choice of how they could record. After the interview was over the students were instructed to listen to the recording and then write a summary as well as their impression of the interview in English. I and two other colleagues then transcribed

the interviews from my personal recordings.

After all the data was collected from the sources mentioned at the conclusion of the final interviews and the submission of the interview impressions and summaries from the students (all of which were turned in) the researcher attempted to identify any patterns that were noticeable in regards to motivation and attitude toward English learning. Therefore, the data and the interpretation of it are qualitative.

#### 4. Qualitative data: Student portfolios and Interviews discussion

In this section the three rounds of one-on-one interviews with the students, their written impressions on those, and their thoughts regarding the portfolios are discussed. The contents of the portfolios will not be discussed in detail; rather, how the students view their work within the portfolios is considered relevant to this research.

##### 4.1. First interviews

There were, as stated before, 3 rounds of interviews throughout the semester. It should be noted here that these interviews were not designed for the purpose of this study, but are part of the researcher's regular syllabi for all oral communication classes. The interviews included questions regarding the students' opinions about their own English levels and their preferred learning styles, and how they enjoyed studying the L2.

In the first round of interviews all students were asked what were their English strong points and weak points. The terms strong points and weak points are general and were purposefully phrased in this manner so that the students would better understand the questions. In the researcher's past experiences with students of about the same level, it has been noticed that students respond to these questions with a better understanding than if asked for specific levels of development in the four skills. Other questions regarding the students' L2 levels are also stated in general terms such as: "How is your grammar," or, "What about vocabulary?"

The teacher often had to further explain what was meant by the question of what the student considered to be one of their strong skills in English communication. Examples of this can be seen in two interviews:

<Teacher>        *All right? And first I want to ask you; what do you think is your strong point?*

<Student>        *My strong point is, umm, smile. [laughter]*

<Teacher>        *[laughter] Smile? OK, alright. Well, that's good, but what about your English? You can smile in Japanese, too. What about English skills?*

<Student>        *English?*

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- <Teacher> *So, I want you to start. I want you to tell me; what do you think is your strong point in English?*
- <Student> *My strong point?*
- <Teacher> *Yes*
- <Student> *Uh... My strong point is smiling. [laughter]*
- <Teacher> *Smiling? OK.*
- <Student> *And taller.*
- <Teacher> *Ah... About your English, your English strong point.*

(student interviews)

In many cases during the first round of the interviews the responses from the students, once they understood the intent of the question was always in very general terms. Students would usually respond that they were good at only one of the four core skills, and further explanation was usually not given until the teacher pushed them for more detailed information.

Also, most of the students responded that their knowledge and use of English grammar and vocabulary was not at a level that they considered acceptable.

- <Student> *Uh, grammar is my weak point.*
- <Teacher> *Grammar is your weak point?*
- \*\*\*\*
- <Teacher> *... How 'bout grammar? How is your grammar?*
- <Student> *Uh... [laughter]*
- <Teacher> *Is your grammar good, or not so good//*
- <Student> *//Not good.*
- <Teacher> *Do you study grammar?*
- <Student> *No. [laughter]*

(student interviews)

These generalized comments show that the students considered grammar something they needed to study, and that their grammar knowledge was not at a level which they wished it to be. Most of them stated that they did not enjoy studying grammar, and when they did study, the motivation came from an outside source. When asked how they studied grammar, most of the responses were that they used a textbook or dictionary.

None of the students gave any response to questions about how they liked to study grammar or vocabulary other than reading from a book or using a class text. In fact, no mention of motivation for learning was directly expressed apart from some stating that they *needed* to study, and none of the students could tell the interviewer how they might like to study. If asked directly how they like to study, several said they enjoyed listening to music or watching movies in English (with Japanese subtitles). One student had this to say about self-learning:

- <Teacher> *All right. So, do you like to study by yourself, or from the teacher?*
- <Student> *Uh... Teacher. [laughter]*

<Teacher>        *From the teacher? [laughter] So you want me to tell you; "Please, study this or this..."*

<Student>        *Yeah.*

(student interview)

Again, the learner relies on the teacher to direct him in his SAL. This indicates a lack of ownership in their L2 development, and also shows that most of the subjects were not accustomed to reflecting on their own English level or preferred learning styles.

There were some students who did show some intrinsic motivation levels. In a few of the interviews students replied that they liked English, or they liked speaking English. Also, in the interviews several examples of intrinsic motivation are expressed. Some students stated that they wished to become English teachers or airline cabin attendants (for which English comprehension and communication are desirable skills).

<Teacher>        *OK. Do you want to use English for your job?*

<Student>        *Yeah.*

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<Teacher>        *... In your future do you want to use English?*

<Student>        *Yeah. I want to become a elementary school teacher.*

<Teacher>        *Oh... Great. So maybe you need English?*

<Student>        *Yes.*

(student interviews)

After the interviews were completed the students were asked to listen to their recording of the interview and then write an impression of the conversation, in particular their English and where they can improve, and then keep it in their portfolio. This required the students to reflect on what they heard and how they felt about their L2 level.

"I thought my English skill is not good... And my score of TOEIC is not good one, either, and I can't talk smoothly... I thought I wasn't fluent, but I could enjoy with you.... I want to check if there are words which it doesn't know in class."

(interview impression from portfolio)

This student, after listening to her interview, was surprised by her level, but stated that she enjoyed the conversation even though she considered her level low. She also seemed be encouraged to find new vocabulary outside of class. Another student wrote this: "It was when I finished interview that I know my English conversation skills again. I really realized the limits to my ability this time." Here, she reflects on her abilities. She goes on to state, "I must increase my active vocabulary... I try to practice speaking English on native speakers" (interview impression from portfolio). She is encouraged to go outside the class to seek conversation in English with native speakers. Finally, here is one more example of a student showing increased self-reflection after reviewing her interview:

"I don't study English outside school now ... I need to study more. I thought I do not have enough return words. I was frequently at a loss for words. I need to try practice a English vocabulary everyday. I must not forget to read English

sentence everyday.” (Interview impression from portfolio)

#### 4.2. Second interview

Throughout the semester, the students were asked to review their portfolios, which included their learning journals. These journals included their notes from class, some homework assignments and periodic reflections on their English learning during the class. One student wrote in her journal:

“About two months have passed since the first interview test. Maybe I’m getting better to try to speak English and use English... Second, sometimes, I’m trying to speak English with my friends... These are hard for me, but I have to keep this motivation. Did I improve my English? I thought I have no confidence, but my English is getting better.” (student journal entry)

She reflects that her confidence was not high, but upon looking through her work in class, and attempting to use English outside of class, she is encouraged to keep her motivation level.

As Ryan and Deci (2000) explain, intrinsic motivation needs to be maintained in order for it to flourish, and finding situations and ways to support motivation is an important step in fostering it. What is important about the above journal entry is that the student recognizes her effort and understands the necessity of maintaining it without prompting from the teacher.

Another journal entry that was written between the first and second rounds of interviews states: “I want to talk and study more. But I can’t use perfect English, so I’ll try more!!” (student journal entry) This learner sees areas within his learning that are still not acceptable in his opinion; however, instead of being discouraged, he decides to put more effort into studying, giving evidence of increased motivation.

The second round of interviews provided more data regarding the students’ self-reflection and use of their portfolio. The teacher asked the subjects what they thought of their work inside the portfolio, where they had improved and what they still considered to be weak points in their English skills. A majority of the students responded that they thought their English levels were gradually increasing, and/or spoke of problems they needed to work on. One student explains her progress in the following manner:

<Teacher> *That’s alright. Well, umm, well then, since April, from April how has your English been?*

<Student> *Um... I think my English skill is a little good.*

<Teacher> *A little better?*

<Student> *Yeah.*

<Teacher> *OK. For example, what?*

<Student> *Vocabulary. I can listen and grammar.*

<Teacher> *Oh, you think your grammar is better?*

<Student> *But, I am not good speaking.*

(student interview)

She feels that her level is increasing but recognizes that she is still not a skilled speaker.

In another interview, a student demonstrates a shift in her attitude when she shows pride in what she considers to be her best work thus far. She also explains that even though the work was difficult, she enjoyed doing it.

- <Teacher> *Your travel project, how was that?*  
 <Student> *Little difficult.*  
 <Teacher> *A little difficult? But did you work hard?*  
 <Student> *Yes.*  
 <Teacher> *But did you enjoy doing it?*  
 <Student> *Yes.*  
 <Teacher> *Good. What do you think of your presentation?*  
 <Student> *But it is difficult for me to research it. But, ST helped me.*  
 <Teacher> *Oh, good.*  
 <Student> *We could, I could [Japanese]//*  
 <Teacher> *//Present.*  
 <Student> *Presentation.*

(student interview)

One student stated in her interview that she was trying to speak English with her friend outside of the class. This is evidence of a shift from her earlier interview in which she reported that she didn't try to speak English outside of the classroom. One student reported in the interview that one of the projects for class allowed her to research the topic from an English website, and it had been the first time she had attempted that. The students were not required to use English websites, however she chose to do this. This shows a change in attitude and motivation.

- <Teacher> *Good. Do you think you did a good job?*  
 <Student> *Yeah.*  
 <Teacher> *Yeah? What should your grade be?*  
 <Student> *Umm... I have never do research English website. This time first time English site, so I very surprised because many English. But I think, I thought not difficult.*  
 <Teacher> *Do you think since April until now, how, how is your English?*  
 <Student> *Ah... I had good Ms. B's class, pronunciation class, so I had... uh, my pronunciation a little up. And this communication class, this class is many use English and conversation, so I had my English is more good, I think. Conversation is, not grammar [laughter].*

(student interview)

This is evidence again of self-reflection and increased confidence in learning. Here it can be considered that motivation is being fostered. Gardner (1991) also suggests that attitude and motivation are linked together and that positive results can encourage

continued learning. One more example of this comes from a student's journal entry regarding his work in class: "Because, I could know my English skill level through this work. I feel a sense of fulfillment" (student journal entry).

In an interview impression of her second interview a student wrote about a preferred style of learning. "But I think [*Speed Learning*] study system is not good... I think English communication connect with own English level up. So it is important to speak in English... And I have to study harder" (interview impression). In this quote the student is exhibiting learner autonomy in how she prefers to learn and what she will do to improve her level.

Finally, one student wrote in her interview impression about her weak points and how she wants to work on those so her English will improve: "Then I thought that 'What can I do?'... But I could find my weak points so I study more words, Grammar, listening and talking" (student interview impression). This evidence shows that some of the subjects are able to identify strong and weak points about their L2 development and are beginning to make decisions on how to improve their level outside of class.

### 4.3. Third Interviews

For the final interview, the students were asked to bring their portfolios with them in order to show the teacher what they considered to be their best work throughout the semester. During the conversations, students were asked what they enjoyed and did not enjoy about class, about their English level, and about their work in class.

<Teacher>        *What about your portfolio? What do you think was your best work? Best work.*

<Student>        *I, [inaudible]*

<Teacher>        *Hmm?*

<Student>        *Preview [inaudible]*

<Teacher>        *Oh, really? That was your best? Why?*

<Student>        *I think I try... I think I got better with this. Maked my English strong, maybe. I like and I study, I can see study hard.*

(student Interview)

In this excerpt the student was asked what she considered her best work and why. She chose work that showed her effort and progress in one or more English skills. This indicates that her attitude regarding learning is connected to her motivation to learn.

Many subjects replied that they most enjoyed games or speaking to the question regarding what they enjoyed in class. However, some responded that their projects and group work were the most helpful to them. One student, however, replied that he did not like group work because, "I did all the work" (student interview). This same student, when asked what his best work was had this to say:

<Teacher>        *Yeah. What do you think is your best work?*

<Student>        *Umm... Best work?*

<Teacher>        *Yeah. Like, was it your quick writes, or your homework, summaries,*

- or//*
- <Student> *//Quick write.*
- <Teacher> *Really? I noticed you wrote many words. Do you like writing in English?*
- <Student> *No.*
- <Teacher> *No? But you like the quick writes. Why?*
- <Student> *Because I feel I can write English smoothly and I hate writing English. Maybe I study writing next time a little hard.*

(student interview)

He is encouraged by his accomplishment in being able to write English smoothly even though he disliked the activity. This seems to indicate that his accomplishment in improving his writing skills changed his perception about his English ability, possibly fostering his motivation.

Students' opinions on their portfolios, more specifically their work throughout the semester often shows similar satisfaction or pride. In one journal entry a student explains how her attitude towards using English in conversation changed over the duration of the class: "I replayed that I liked the English class. Because due to this class I became positive and not nervace [nervous]" (student journal entry).

There are also comments specifically mentioning the portfolios. "Portfolio was very useful to review my summary" (student journal entry). This student, although not explaining if review of the portfolio aided in her progress in the L2, does state that the portfolio helped in the reflection process itself.

Through her reflection, one subject writes this about her portfolio: "... But in review I can speak English magnificent than before... I learned to like English much more" (student journal entry). Another journal entry expresses the same type of self-reflection; "I think my English skills improve a little. Because, before I don't like speaking in English but, now, I enjoy speaking English with my friends" (student journal entry). This student's entry gives evidence of a change in attitude. Over the duration of the class he changes his view about speaking English to a more positive one. His final interview summary repeats his sentiments: "I will stick [studying English] out for my goals" (Interview impression from portfolio).

Kohonen (2000) gives a list a certain properties that are necessary to language learning; among these are a commitment to language learning, ownership of that learning, and self-reflection. These properties can be seen in excerpts from the interviews as well as in journal entries and interview summaries.

In one interview a student's comments give evidence to a fostered sense of personal learning style.

- <Student> *I think my vocabulary is a little low.*
- <Teacher> *How do you like to study vocabulary? Do you study?*
- <Student> *Uh, Ms. T. class, so always tests, so English words tests. So I try*

*to study hard, but finish test, I always forget.*

(student interview)

Here, the student perceives her vocabulary skills as being at a low level. However, she also explains that memorizing words merely for the sake of a test does not aid in building her vocabulary knowledge. The purpose of studying in preparation of a test in the Japanese educational system (especially at the secondary level) is a common practice and is a learning strategy that is familiar to most Japanese college students. In her comment, the student has identified a strategy that she is used to and, through reflection, now sees it as not being helpful to her L2 learning. She goes on during the interview to ask for advice in how to study vocabulary, which also demonstrates a fostered sense of motivation in learning the language.

One student wrote this in regards to her work in the portfolio:

“I became very annoyed because I was not able to speak English well. My aim of April was to be able to talk slightly fluently, but I think that the aim was not able to be accomplished... I could not understanding English words even if I want to talk and did not participate in this class positively.” (student journal entry)

In this journal entry, the subject’s disappointment is clear. She did not achieve her goal of speaking more fluently. However, part of her understanding comes from reflecting on her work throughout the semester in her portfolio, and through this reflection she also writes how she might have been able to improve more if she would have participated in class. This is evidence of a student beginning to take responsibility for her learning by reflecting on, and then analyzing why she did not achieve her goal.

There also seems to be a little confusion about the portfolios themselves by some of the subjects. In a different subject’s journal the same type of response can be found: “I don’t know well how to use my portfolio” (Student journal entry). One student wrote in his journal that he did not know what to put inside. Another student misunderstood the purpose of the portfolio. She wrote: “I thought I tried to do my best in Communication III, because I could submit a lot of my homework [in my portfolio]” (student journal entry). Here, instead of using her work to reflect on her language learning progress, she assumed that because there are several homework assignments in the portfolio she did a good job in class. Other students complained that the portfolio and interview summaries were too time-consuming. In a study carried out by Nunes (2004), in terms of the introducing the use of portfolios to students, it is necessary to make sure the purposes of them are clear to the learners.

However, most of the entries in the journals and comments made during the interviews suggest that most of the students liked keeping a portfolio and reviewing their work:

<Teacher>        *Umm... So quick writes, no dictionary. Alright, so that’s good to know.  
Do you think your English has gotten better, or the same.*

<Student>        *Little bit. Little bit.*

<Teacher>        *OK. Listening, grammar, speaking?*

<Student>        *Umm... Speaking.*

<Teacher>        *Oh, OK. Why do you think?*  
 <Student>        *Because see and hearing my portfolios summaries, and I think.*  
 (student interview)

This student liked keeping her portfolio because it was evidence to her that she made slight improvement. Other comments include: “I think I held out” and, “It was good self evaluation” (Student journal entries).

#### 4.4. Summary

The data collected over the duration of the semester gives a variety of information regarding the students’ perception of their own English level, what they thought about the class, and provides evidence of a shift in attitude and ownership of their own L2 learning. The information taken from the journal entries and interviews show a change in many of the students’ ideas regarding their study habits and motivation to study English. The three rounds of interviews and the periods between them indicate this positive change in many of the learners involved in the study.

Evidence of a positive shift in some learner attitude toward the study of English is demonstrated by many of the students in their remarks shown above. Entries in the subjects’ journal throughout the semester make mention of wanting to study more, and expressing pride in having worked hard on certain assignments.

There is also evidence of this in the students’ interview and portfolio summaries. A few of the students express that they have more confidence in speaking English: “My communication skill improve compare with April. I can take positive attitude now, and I enjoy now communication with my classmate” (student journal entry).

Student ownership of learning is also shown to shift in a more positive direction. Several students explain that they were able to find their strong points and weak points in the L2, and express a wish on what and how they would like to continue studying next semester. “To improve my listening level, I listen to western music and English conversation with(on?) radio or Walkman every day. I like this class because owing to this class, I found my good and bad point as for my English level” (student portfolio summary).

Other students express what they would like to continue studying in the next semester. These remarks are often very general in nature such as the following two excerpts; “I should study more vocabulary” and, “ I want to play a game using English” (student portfolio summaries). After reviewing their work, these two students found areas in which they had weakness, or found tasks which they enjoyed but could not give further information on how they could continue in their language learning.

Some students comment in their portfolio summaries that they had too many absences and should have been in class more often. One subject wrote; “I could be better because I was often late” (Student journal entry). Here, the student is accepting responsibility for his tardiness and understands that may have affected his L2 development. Nunes (2004) explains that developing self-reflection enhances ownership in learners and that portfolios



can foster this. “The portfolio, considered as an instrument that can foster students’ reflection, can also help them self-monitor their learning, thus helping them become more autonomous learners” (Nunes, 2004, p. 334). Herbert (2001) also suggests this as well; “...it is essential to give [learners] means by which they can express and expand their understanding of their own learning process” Herbert, 2001, p.55)

Motivation seems also to have increased in most of the students. Several comments in the second and third rounds of the interviews show that the students’ motivation level is shifting. One student, a learner who is in the Career English major but had no plans to pursue English in the future, states in his final interview that he would like to study English more, especially conversation with friends. In this student’s first interview he stated that his weak point was grammar and vocabulary. However, when asked how or if he studied, he replied no. In his last interview he explains that he likes English and he wants to continue studying; in fact he would like to continue conversation practice in the coming semester’s class.

Other comments already shown in the above section give evidence that some students have been motivated, even though they are challenged. Many of the students seem to have reflected on their work over the semester and have noticed that they have made progress in their L2 learning. Some of the subjects comment that they have made only a small amount of progress, but want to continue studying.

“I listened to the interviews with my voice recorder, I thought that my English conversation skills are not good...But, I thought that I have good points, too. For example, I could communicate that I want to speak things and I enjoyed speaking. And I noticed I have to study... I am hoping to speak English more!” (student portfolio summary).

In a study on the use of portfolios in a Chinese classroom setting, Rao (2006) showed that portfolios can aid in creating learner autonomy in students. “With the use of portfolios, students can document the planning, learning, monitoring, and evaluation processes. This can help raise students’ awareness of learning strategies, facilitate their learning process, and enhance their self-directed learning” (p. 121). Masgoret and Gardner (2003) also conducted a study which indicated that motivation and achievement are strongly linked; in other words, if students feel they have achieved a goal, or made progress towards it they will be further motivated to study.

The evidence from the qualitative data seems to show a sense of positive motivation development in many of the students. Whether the shift that is fostered from the use of portfolios is intrinsic or extrinsic is not clearly understood, however there are indications that the use of portfolios does foster motivation in lower level students.

## 5. Conclusion

“The growing awareness of motivational issues has heightened the need to translate research results into practical terms: Language instructors are less interested in what motivation is than in how they can motivate their students” (Dornyei, 2003, p.23). It was the purpose of this study to do that; explore a practical solution, the use of portfolios, which can positively affect motivation and attitude in lower-level students.

Motivated is a term that is most often used to describe students who do well and participate in class. In other words, a motivated individual is a successful student, while an individual who is not successful is often considered unmotivated. How to handle unmotivated students is a common problem in classrooms and can be a time-consuming issue for teachers. There were two questions posed in this study, both of which deal with the issue of motivating students with lower levels of interests and English skills so as to increase their participation in class and their own feelings of accomplishment. Ushioda (2008) explains one reason why learner ownership, or autonomy, is important in motivation; “For motivation to be sustained... it seems clear that learners need to develop certain skills and strategies to keep themselves on track” (Ushioda, 2008, p.26).

The first question was whether the use of portfolios as a tool for self-reflection can serve as a motivating factor for students with low level interest in a required EFL college course? The data collected over a period of one semester from such students appears to give evidence that suggests that this is indeed possible. The interviews and student journals contain evidence of increased motivation to apply more effort in their study of English. Students indicated personal pride in their reflections of their work and accomplishments, and make mention of enjoying certain challenges posed by work in class. Through reflection, which was a requirement of the portfolios, students identify personal weakness in their L2 development and mention learning strategies that may be applied in order to make progress in their learning.

In student written impressions regarding their work and thoughts on their interviews, mention is also made by some that personal progress is not completely satisfactory; however their change in attitude is often not one of failure, but of wanting to challenge themselves to make acceptable progress.

The second question is whether self-reflection enhances intrinsic motivation in learners. There is evidence, as stated above, that suggests the motivation level in many of the subjects has increased. Learners respond more positively in terms of enjoying studying, and that they would like to pursue learning English outside of class. There are also a few students who remark in interviews and journal entries that express the same motivation, as with the student who writes that she will study over summer vacation.

Remarks such as this indicate intrinsic motivation. The student will not receive any grade or credit for studying during vacation; she chooses to do this in order to increase her skills in English communication. However, there are very few entries that clearly

indicate that the increase in motivation is intrinsic or extrinsic. While the distinction of whether the motivation is intrinsic or extrinsic is not clearly ascertained, the use of portfolios in terms of student self-reflection is shown to increase motivation levels in students with low interest or low level skills in English.

### 5.1. For further study

The data regarding the second question of the study suggests that a follow-up study may be relevant in order to ensure that the statements in the questionnaires clearly indicate whether the subjects' motivation is intrinsic or extrinsic. During interviews, more questions regarding this issue also need to be asked to the subjects.

Along these same lines, further study is warranted to ensure the role of the portfolio is clear in the increase of motivation. While student self-reflection is evident in the data, how much the subjects used their portfolios for that purpose is not definitive. One student, in fact, commented in one of her journal entries that she did not know what to put in the portfolio. Therefore, follow-up on the role of portfolios in self-reflection is suggested. Follow-up with the subjects from the end of one semester to the next may also provide stronger data for the development of motivation and its continued upkeep.

Another aspect of the study that class for further research is that of the duration of the data collection. A more long-term research period, perhaps a year a two-year study, may produce more reliable data. If student progress and personal sense of accomplishment and motivation can be followed for a longer period of time, then perhaps ascertaining the affects of portfolios on motivation could be ensured. Also, the participation of other teachers throughout the duration of a long-term study is suggested to ensure that student motivation is fostered by the portfolios and not reliant upon any certain personality or teaching style of any particular instructor.

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