Theoretical Analysis, Classroom Practice, Opinion Essays

The Portfolio-Based Language Assessment (PBLA): Suitable for Adult Learners?

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Abstract

The Portfolio-Based Language Assessment (PBLA) literature explicitly states the suitability of using PBLA in English as an additional language (EAL) learning contexts. An underlying assumption is that it is also suitable for adult learners. This paper tests this assumption by comparing PBLA against the assumptions and principles of andragogy—a theory of adult learning. Andragogy was chosen as the yardstick because it created a portrait of adult learners and adult learning that is still considered a cornerstone of the best practices in adult education (Merriam, 2001). Akin to andragogy, which states how adults need to be involved in the planning and evaluation of their instruction, PBLA involves participants in the planning and evaluation of their learning via needs assessments, peer- and self-assessments, goal-setting, and student-teacher progress conferences. Furthermore, like andragogy, which highlights how adult learners want to learn things that have immediate application, PBLA assesses participants on content that is of immediate relevance to their personal lives. Finally, similar to andragogy, PBLA allows participants to draw from their life experiences during the learning process. After comparing PBLA and andragogy, the conclusion is that in its totality, PBLA is consistent with andragogy—and therefore suitable for adult learners.

Introduction

There is a dearth of literature on the Portfolio-Based Language Assessment (PBLA)—an assessment model used in the Language Instruction for Newcomers to Canada (LINC) program. The few available research articles include Singh and Blakely (2012), Ripley (2013), Pettis (2014), Drew (2015), and Holmes (2016). However, Singh and Blakely (2012) did not write about the PBLA per se. They provided an invaluable overview of the history and development of language training in Canada since the inception of the federally funded LINC program and the *Cours de langue pour les immigrants au Canada* (CLIC) in 1992. Focussing on the PBLA, Ripley (2013) examined the benefits and challenges of implementing PBLA in the LINC program. He interviewed six LINC instructors who were part of the group of instructors piloting the PBLA. His conclusion was that PBLA had more benefits than challenges. In contrast, Drew (2015), investigated students' perceptions of PBLA and the different aspects of the assessment model students found most helpful in their language learning. Her overall conclusion was that learners felt that the PBLA model was a good assessment approach that is helpful to their language learning. Moving away from research, Pettis (2014) provided a guide on the effective implementation of PBLA. The guide is an overview of the theoretical foundations, principles, essential features, and assessment strategies fundamental to PBLA. In a similar vein, Holmes (2016) proposed a model of sustainability for PBLA, and critically discussed implications for its application and suggested a way forward.

The predominant message in the current discourses on PBLA is that it is an appropriate model of assessment in English as an additional language (EAL) learning. The underlying assumption is that PBLA is also suitable for adult learners. In this context, this paper undertakes to examine the plausibility of this assumption, with a view to contributing to a body of knowledge that informs adult education, best practices in adult EAL learning, portfolios in general, and the PBLA in particular. This paper specifically addresses the following question: Is the PBLA suitable for adult EAL learners?

In this study, andragogy is used as the yardstick for assessing the plausibility of the assumption that PBLA is suitable for adult learners. To this end, individual components of PBLA are compared against the portrayal of adult learners as depicted in andragogy. Andragogy was chosen for three reasons: First, it created a portrait of adult learners and adult learning that is still considered the cornerstone of the best practices in adult education (Merriam, 2001). Second, all things considered, andragogy offered a well-received model for designing, implementing, and evaluating educational experiences with adults (Merriam, 2001; Sandlin, 2005). Finally, it is indisputable that andragogy has had "an enormous and far-reaching influence on the field of adult education practice" (Brookfield, 1989, p.201).

Background

The background section describes the LINC Program, and in turn, the portfolios in general, and PBLA.

The Language Instruction for Newcomers to Canada

In Canada, the federal government's department of Immigration, Refugees and Citizenship Canada (IRCC) funds English and French language classes for adult immigrants and refugees to help them settle in Canada (Saint Germain, 2012; Singh & Blakely, 2012). The English language classes are known as LINC and are free to eligible newcomers. LINC was established in 1992, and is free to eligible newcomers. Like in other provinces, in British Columbia, there are several immigrant serving agencies that provide LINC classes and other complementary settlement services to eligible immigrants.

What is a Portfolio?

There are numerous definitions of portfolios and pulling together different aspects from these captures the essence of what a portfolio is. A portfolio can be defined as a classroom-based, purposeful, and collaborative collection of materials assembled over a period by the teacher and the learner to provide evidence of skills, abilities, and competencies of the learner (O'Malley and Pierce, 1992; Hamp-Lyons and Condon, 1993; Moya and O'Malley, 1994; Pettis, 2014). There is consensus that portfolios nurture students to assume ownership of their learning among other benefits (Hamp-Lyons & Condon, 2000; Paulson, Paulson & Meyer, 1991; Pettis, 2014).

Portfolios in EAL: Merits and Weaknesses

Portfolios were introduced largely as a response to standardized tests that were deemed unfair and unsuitable for assessing language learning. Moya and O'Malley (1994) reported that standardized tests were routinely criticized for their summative nature and a clear link between the standardized tests and consistently low scores for minority students. By the same token, Flood and Lapp (1989) argued that summative assessments, including standardized tests, are not the best tools to evaluate language proficiency because they assess at a single point in time. Such assessments are neither comprehensive nor accurate because of the longitudinal nature of language learning and the multidimensional nature of language (Cummins, 1983). Brown and Hudson (1988) mentioned that portfolios enhance students' learning by increasing their involvement in the learning processes through collaboration between the students and the teacher and amongst students. Furthermore, learners are observed using language in authentic settings.

Despite their strengths, portfolios have inherent weaknesses. First, lack of objectivity is a recalcitrant problem that has dogged portfolios since their inception (Hamp-Lyons & Condon, 2000; Weigle, 2002). For example, Weigle (2002) noted that portfolios may be less reliable than traditional tests, particularly "when portfolios are being read by people other than the classroom teacher, who may not be familiar with the students or the curriculum especially when the stakes for the individual student are high" (p. 208). Second, by their very nature, portfolios inherently lack standardization: Individual teachers create, administer and score their own assessments in collaboration with their students. Clearly, in such contexts, standardization is a potential problem (Gillespie, Ford, Gillespie, & Leavell, 1996; Sweygers et.al, 2009). Commenting specifically on scoring, Damiani (2006) asserted that, "…it can be quite difficult to establish scoring systems that are reliable over raters or time. Reliability across raters is especially important if major decisions are to be based on the assessment outcome" (p.123). Finally, for both the teacher and the learner, portfolios are time consuming when putting them together and maintaining them (Johns, & Leirsburg, 1992; Wolf, 1993). As observed by McMullan (2006), "… students, [and] mentors find portfolios very time-consuming and stressful, mainly due to the large amount of paperwork" (p. 341). Similarly, Short (1993) commented that *"...developing and evaluating portfolios is time-consuming; they do not provide a quick picture of student knowledge"* (p. 640). Despite their limitations, however, portfolios can still be considered more reliable and fair assessment tools in language learning contexts than standardized tests.

The Portfolio-Based Language Assessment

To bring standardization in language learning, then Citizenship and Immigration Canada (CIC), now IRCC, authorized the PBLA as the sole official assessment method in the LINC and CLIC programs across Canada. The PBLA is a longitudinal classroom-based assessment approach implemented by the teacher, which involves instructors and learners working together to set language-learning goals and gather samples of assessment tasks to demonstrate a learners' language proficiency in a range of contexts. Together they analyze the data and reflect on progress (Pettis, 2014, p. 7). Drew (2015) and Pettis (2014) stated that PBLA comprises the following major features: (1) Baseline Personal Information, (2) Needs Assessment, (3) Language Learning-Goals, (4) Assessments (teacher-assessments, self-assessments and peer-

assessments), (5) Self-reflection, and (6) Student-teacher progress conferences. Together, the different components of PBLA make a learning cycle (Drew, 2015).

The Baseline Personal Information section comprises the learner's autobiography, their Canadian Language Benchmarks (CLB) scores, needs assessment, and learning goals. A needs assessment is conducted during the first few days of class to identify and rank the topics learners are interested in. Likewise, at the inception of each new topic, a needs assessment is conducted. Related to their needs, learners complete language-learning goals, stating what they hope to accomplish using English. Goal setting in PBLA is an ongoing practice throughout the instructional cycle. Learners revisit their goals assessing how they are doing towards achieving them (Drew, 2015).

Continuous and consistent assessment is the mainstay of the PBLA model, and three types of assessment are conducted: (a) teacher-assessments, (b) peer-assessments, and (c) self-assessments. The teacher-assessments are administered and graded by the teacher. In contrast, peer-assessments involve students providing feedback on each other's work based on set criteria. With self-assessments, learners assess themselves, also based on set criteria.

Self-reflections involve learners reviewing what they learned, how they learned, and how this learning relates to the real world. Reflection also affords learners the opportunity to review their own portfolios, see their own progress, and adopt strategies on how they could improve (Hamp-Lyons and Condon, 2000; Pettis, 2014). Furthermore, self-reflection gives a learners a chance to reflect on how akin to self-assessments, regular self-reflections increase the learners' self-awareness, including their learning styles. Finally, the student-teacher progress conferences are an opportunity for the teacher and the learner to "review the student's progress in learning English in relationship to the student's specified needs and goals" (Pettis, 2014, p.52). It is also an opportunity for learners to set a new direction, including new language learning goals.

Andragogy and the Portrait of the Adult Learner

Although there is consensus that there is no single theory that explains how adults learn, there is broad consensus that andragogy is one of the pillars of adult learning (Merriam 2001; Pratt, 1993). For instance, Merriam (2001), noted that adult education is informed by "…a mosaic of theories, models, sets of principles, and explanations that, combined, compose the knowledge base of adult learning. Two important pieces of that mosaic are andragogy and self-directed learning" (p.3).

In 1968, Malcolm Knowles proposed andragogy to differentiate adult from child learning. As defined by Knowles, andragogy is "the art and science of helping adults learn," and this was contrasted with pedagogy which is "the art and science of helping children learn" (Knowles, 1980, p. 43). Andragogy comprises five assumptions and four Principles, which provide a depiction of the adult learner and is the bedrock of traditional pedagogy for adults. Table 1 below presents the five Assumptions and four Principles proposed by Knowles.

Table 1.
Assumptions and Principles of Andragogy

Assumptions
Assumption 1 Self-concept: As people mature their self-concept moves from one of being a dependent personality towards one of being a self-directed human being.
Assumption 2 Adult learner experience: As people mature they accumulate a growing reservoir of experience that becomes an increasing resource for learning.
Assumption 3 Readiness to learn: As people mature their readiness to learn becomes oriented increasingly to the developmental tasks of their social roles.
Assumption 4 Orientation to learning: As people mature their time perspective changes from one of postponed application of knowledge to immediacy of application, and accordingly their orientation towards learning shifts from one of subject centeredness to one of problem centeredness.
Assumption 5 Motivation to learn: As people mature the motivation to learn is internal.
Principles
Principle 1: Adults need to be involved in the planning and evaluation of their instruction.
Principle 2: Experience (including mistakes) provides the basis for the learning activities.
Principle 3: Adults are most interested in learning subjects that have immediate relevance and impact on their jobs or personal lives.
Principle 4: Adult learning is problem-centered rather than content-oriented

Adapted from Knowles (1980)

Besides the Principles and Assumptions, Knowles also proposed a classroom learning atmosphere which allows adults to "feel accepted, respected, and supported" and there must exist "a spirit of mutuality between teachers and students as joint inquirers" (Knowles, 1980, p. 47).

Critiques of Andragogy

Despite its foundational status and far-reaching influence, andragogy has its critics. The earliest criticism against andragogy was whether it is a theory or not (Davenport & Davenport, 1985; Elias 1979; Hartree, 1984; Houle, 1972; Griffin, 1991). Sandlin (2005), for example, observed that a growing number of scholars agree that andragogy is not a theory but a set of assumptions or a framework. Furthermore, andragogy has been criticized for its portrayal of adult learners as homogeneous. It has been argued that such a depiction overlooks the fact that adult learners are unique individuals with diverse circumstances (Cercone, 2008). In fact, studies have shown differences among adult learners, such as motivation, capability, and readiness to learn (Davenport & Davenport, 1985; Long, 1988; Pratt, 1988). The criticisms of andragogy

notwithstanding, scholars still seem to agree that, to this day, andragogy remains the single most influential "theory" in the field of adult education, and that the assumptions proposed by Knowles are still considered best practices in adult education (Merriam, 2001; Sandlin, 2005).

A Comparison of Andragogy and PBLA

This section compares components of the PBLA model and those of andragogy, with the goal of demonstrating the suitability of PBLA in assessing adult learners.

Needs Assessment

In PBLA, a needs assessment establishes themes and topics learners are interested in and also the contexts in which they want to use language. This is consistent with Principle 3 of andragogy, which articulates how adults are most interested in learning content that is of immediate relevance and impact on their personal lives. Some of the literature on adult education underscores the importance of doing a needs assessment. Cervero and Wilson (1999), for example, stated that "… the highest professional and moral principle for adult educators … is to involve learners in identifying their needs" (p.29). Similarly, in independent studies, Roberts (2007) and McGrath (2009) made a similar observation and stated that adults generally tend to resist situations in which they feel that others are imposing their will on them.

Conducting a needs assessment in PBLA is also consistent with andragogy's Principle 1, which highlights the need to involve adult learners in the planning of their own instruction. This allows LINC participants to decide what they would like to learn. Furthermore, it is an acknowledgement that the participants are mature, responsible, and self-directed adults. Additionally, this closely matches andragogy's Assumption 1, which highlights the autonomy, independence, and self-directedness of adult learners. In general, in PBLA, choosing relevant topics that adults would like to learn about should intrinsically motivate them to learn since the topics and themes they select would be of direct relevance to their immediate needs. Intrinsic motivation among LINC participants is consistent with andragogy's Assumption 5, which states how adults thrive on intrinsic motivation in the context of learning what is relevant to their lives.

Goal-Setting

In PBLA, LINC participants, together with the teacher, set language-learning goals as part of directing, or at least participating in, the planning of their own learning. Goal-setting is in keeping with andragogy's Principle 1, which requires adult learners to be involved in the planning and evaluation of their learning. Goal-setting in PBLA allows participants to tap into their metacognitive skills and knowledge of goal-creation. Kuhn and Dean (2004), for example, observed that metacognition enables a student taught a strategy in one context to retrieve and deploy that strategy in a similar but new context. Likewise, LINC participants retrieve, adapt, and deploy prior goal-making strategies when developing language-learning goals. These opportunities which allow participants to draw from their acquired metacognitive skills in their language-learning classes are comparable to andragogy's Assumption 2, which states how an adults' ever-growing reservoir of experiences is an invaluable resource for learning.

Typically, LINC participants are energized, motivated, and committed to learning English as they strive to achieve the language-learning goals they set for themselves. Goal-setting matches andragogy's Assumption 5, which articulates how adult learners thrive on intrinsic motivation. In the literature on second language acquisition , Oxford and Shearin (1994), for instance, commenting specifically on goal-setting, stated that, "goal setting can have exceptional importance in stimulating L2 [second language] learning motivation…," (p. 129). Lastly, goal setting in PBLA is akin to andragogy's Principle 3 which states that relevant content that adults learn has immediate impact on adult learners' personal lives. In PBLA, needs assessment and goal-setting contribute to the relevance of content.

Assessments

In PBLA, regular peer-assessments, self-assessments, and teacher-assessments are embedded in the teaching and learning. All PBLA assessments have a language task—a communicative "real world" instance of language use to accomplish a specific purpose in a particular context (Canadian Language Benchmarks, 2012). PBLA's task-based approach is akin to andragogy's Assumption 4, which highlight the problem-centeredness of adult learners and their interest in the immediate application of acquired knowledge to solve problems. For LINC participants, their immediate problem is to overcome their immediate communication barriers.

PBLA assessments mirror the LINC participants' ever changing social, community, and work situations. These contexts are comparable to andragogy's Assumption 3, Principle 3, and Assumption 4, as explained below. LINC participants are assessed on their ability to use English in contexts where they would: Maintain or change interpersonal relationships; understand or give instructions; obtain services (e.g. banking); inform decisions; persuade; and learn what others have done, *inter alia* (Canadian Language Benchmarks, 2012). These diverse contexts mirror the ever-changing roles of LINC participants, akin to what is stated in andragogy's Assumption 3 on Readiness to learn. Assumption 3 articulates that as people mature, their readiness to learn becomes oriented increasingly to the developmental tasks of their social roles.

In the same context, PBLA tasks have immediate impact on the participants' lives since the learned language could be immediately applied to overcome direct communication challenges. The ability of LINC participants to apply the learned language to overcome immediate communication challenges is comparable to andragogy's Assumption 4. Assumption 4 partly states that as people mature, their time perspective changes from one of postponed application of knowledge to immediacy of application. Immediate application of knowledge also closely matches andragogy's Principle 3 which articulates how adults are most interested in learning subjects that have immediate relevance and impact on their jobs or personal lives.

Peer-Assessment

Peer-assessments involve learners assessing each other's work and giving feedback based on set criteria. Peer-assessments create a sense of mutual respect amongst LINC participants, and build a community of learners as well as a safe learning environment. This is consistent with Knowles observation that adults should "feel accepted, respected, and supported" (Knowles, 1980, p. 47). When giving feedback, LINC participants inevitably draw from their metacognitive knowledge

and skills accumulated over the years when providing feedback in other spheres of their lives. This closely matches andragogy's Assumption 3, which depicts an adult as someone who has amassed a rich reservoir of life long resources of learning experiences.

Self-Assessments

Akin to andragogy's Principle 1, which states that adults need to be involved in the planning and evaluation of their instruction, self-assessments in PBLA actively involve participants in the evaluation of their own learning. LINC participants assess their own tasks and assignments as well as determine what and how they could have done better. Besides involving learners in the evaluation of their own learning, self-assessments demonstrate respect for LINC participants as capable individuals who can judge their own performance, albeit on set criteria. There is explicit acknowledgement that LINC participants have experience evaluating their own activities in other aspects of their lives, and that they can utilize their metacognitive knowledge and skills to do self-assessments. This is comparable to andragogy's Assumption 2 which states how adults' lifelong experiences are a resource for learning. Also, self-assessments inspire LINC participants to meet the set standards, and this activity becomes a source of intrinsic motivation to learn.

Self-Reflections

The PBLA model requires participants to do regular self-reflection, which helps learners understand more about how they learn, and how what they learned applies to their everyday lives. As Fernsten and Fernsten (2005) emphasized, involving students in figuring out how they know and what they know about learning that has taken place can be an invaluable learning tool that helps learners take responsibility for their own learning. The PBLA self-reflections are akin to andragogy's Assumption 4 and Principle 3, which both share the notion that adult learners are interested in learning content that has immediate application, and that this content should also have immediate relevance and impact on their jobs or personal lives.

Teacher-Student Progress Conferences

In the application of PBLA, student-teacher progress conferences tie-in together the different aspects of the PBLA and "resets" the learning cycle (Drew, 2015). Consequently, the application of PBLA is comparable to several principles and assumptions of andragogy. During the teacher-student progress conferences, LINC participants are involved in the planning and directing of their own learning when they review their portfolios, assessing if previously set goals were met, and identifying their achievements, including areas for improvement. These activities are consistent with andragogy's Assumption 1. Assumption 1 articulates how adult learners are self-directed. Furthermore, the involvement of students in the planning and overall evaluation of their progress during the teacher-student progress conferences is in harmony with andragogy's Principle 1, which states that adults need to be involved in the planning and evaluation of their instruction.

Conclusion

This paper examined the underlying assumption that PBLA is a suitable model of assessment for adult learners. To test the veracity of this assumption, andragogy was used as the barometer: Features of the PBLA were compared with one or more of the assumptions and/or principles of andragogy. As established in this paper, in its totality, the PBLA is consistent with andragogy's stated principles and assumptions. It is therefore justifiable to conclude that PBLA is not only an appropriate method for assessing language proficiency in an EAL setting, such as LINC programs in British Columbia and across Canada, but is also a suitable method for assessing adult learners in general.

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