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Developing an Assessed Reading Portfolio to Improve Reading Habits and Raise Test Results

Nick Moore, Gillian Knight and Claudia Kiburz

Abstract

For over 10 years, preparatory students at Khalifa University, UAE, have been encouraged to improve their reading and language learning skills through the use of an assessed reading portfolio. This paper briefly outlines the rationale behind this type of assessment and the design features of the portfolio, before detailing some of the many adaptations that it has experienced over the years, paying particular attention to recent developments involving the use of technology. Through an evaluation of the portfolio, using authentic scores for the portfolio and comparing them to IELTS reading test scores, it emerges that students who do well on the portfolio are more likely to make gains in their reading scores than those who do not perform well in their reading portfolio assessment.

> *But throughout this process, one thing has remained constant – we only learn to read by reading*. William Grabe (2009, p.xv)

1 Introduction

Typically a language-teaching textbook will focus on reading skills that extract meanings from a text, such as prediction and identifying specific information through detailed reading, skimming or scanning. Most language teaching textbooks avoid teaching such basic skills as fluent recognition of graphemes (Hudson, 2007), reversing text direction for readers of non-left-to-right alphabetic writing systems (Moore, 2010) or engaging with the social context of the reading act (Haneda, 2006; Street, 2005). Neither do most textbooks extend reading activities to evaluate, respond to or synthesise texts, or require students to read extensively (Renandya, 2007), assuming instead that adult students can transfer these literacy skills from the native language (L1) to the foreign language (L2) (Hudson, 2007). However, in contexts

where transfer of fluent reading skills cannot be taken for granted - for instance where literacy levels in L1 are low - this approach is insufficient. What is needed in such a context is a reading programme that aims to make up for lost time and instil in learners the habits associated with a fluent reader. This paper outlines a tool for assessment that, in conjunction with in-class activities to improve reading skills, aims to guide students with little practice in reading in either L1 or L2 towards good reading habits that enable a wide range of reading skills and strategies.

The reading programme and portfolio described in this project aims to teach and assess the skills outlined in Grabe (2009) as depicted in Fig.1. These skills range from those more focused on the text itself, and more often assessed in ELT textbooks and examinations, to those more directed by the reader in their attempt to channel meaningful information to be incorporated into the knowledge that they already have. In a typical progression through primary and secondary school into university, the sequence in Fig.1 roughly corresponds to linguistic and intellectual development as we learn how to mean in increasingly sophisticated ways (Halliday, 1993), and is often taken for granted by second language acquisition studies and ELT textbooks as having been achieved in L1 (Hudson, 2007). The challenge for the faculty at Khalifa University of Science Technology and Research in the U.A.E. (hereafter Khalifa University) is to ensure that students are competent in all of these skills.

A responsible language-learning syllabus must assess the abilities, environment, needs and learning styles of the students in order to provide the most suitable programme of instruction (Nation and Macalister, 2009). In the case of a reading programme, this involves evaluating the reading competencies and practices of the students in comparison with the standards required by the target situation, and taking action to bridge the gap between the two. In our experience, based on formal and informal assessment of the reading abilities and observation of the practices of students entering preparatory and undergraduate courses, most freshman year undergraduates do not read academic text efficiently in L1 or L2. This is partly caused by a lack of emphasis on reading skills in the school curricula: "the almost total absence of reading classes in schools, [is] apparently the result of 'not having enough time to teach the basic curricula'" (UNDP, 2003, p.78) and results in relatively poor reading skills: in the 2009 PISA reading test, Dubai ranked 42nd, Jordan 55th and Qatar 61st of 65

Reader-Centered skill

Text-Centered skill

| decode graphic forms for efficient word recognition | access the meanings of a large number of words automatically | draw meaning from phrase- and clause-level grammatical information | combine clause-level meanings to build a larger network of meaning relations | recognize discourse-level relationships and use this to infromation to build and support comprehension | use reading strategies with more difficult texts and for a range of (academic) reading tasks | set goals for reading and adjust them as needed | use inferences of various types and to monitor comprehension in line with reading goals | draw on prior knowledge as appropriate | evaluate, integrate and synthesize infromation form a text to form a situation model of comprehension | maintain these processes fluently for an extended period of time | [motivate oneself to] persist in reading and to use the text information appropriately in line with reader goals |

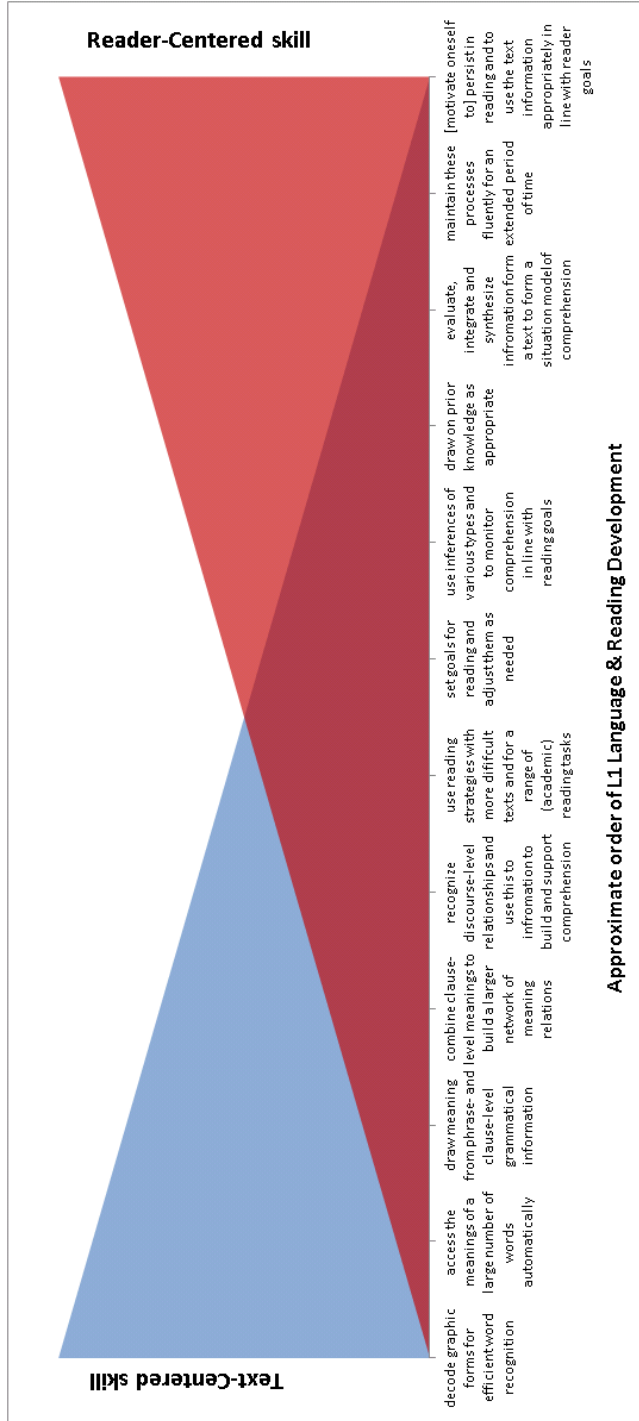**Approximate order of L1 Language & Reading Development**

Figure 1.   Implications of research into reading for instruction, based on Grabe (2009, p.330)

countries or territories (OECD, 2010); IELTS academic reading scores in UAE and Saudi Arabia in 2011 averaged 1 full band below the international mean for males and 1.3 bands below the mean for females (IELTS, 2013); and a comparative aversion to reading at university by Middle East students was identified by Mahrous and Ahmed (2010). One key component for the reading programme, therefore, was to dramatically increase the amount that students read. Without the ability to decode graphic forms for efficient word recognition (see Fig.1 and Grabe, 2009, p.330), there can be no automaticity and reading cannot become fluent - fluent native readers can typically recognise a word in less than 30 milliseconds (Pollatsek and Rayner, 2004) - and, as our opening quote suggests, this can only be achieved through practice.

At Khalifa University, the team responsible for the language-learning syllabus decided to tackle this problem by implementing a reading programme that, alongside the many other objectives in language-learning and study skills, would reward students for practising and improving their reading practices. This paper outlines the rationale behind the introduction of the teaching and assessment tool called the Reading Portfolio which was designed to address the deficits identified in reading skills, it describes how the tool has developed in response to various forces, and evaluates the effectiveness of the reading portfolio in relation to the target situation of a high-stakes international language reading test.

2   Background

Established as Etisalat College of Engineering in 1989, Khalifa University aims to supply the nation with highly educated and skilled graduates in the field of engineering. The student profile up to about five years ago was male Emirati science stream students who demonstrated the potential to succeed on an engineering programme. The programme was a fixed five year British style B.Sc. Honours degree course with the first two years at foundation level. Strength in mathematics and physics were the main criteria used for entry, but as English was the language of instruction, building English proficiency skills was the main focus in the foundation years. At this time the majority of students entering the programme came from government schools from across the Emirates where teaching methodology and

facilities tended to be highly traditional. Rote style learning was the norm and all assessment was based on set homework, tests and examinations. Students had minimal exposure or encouragement to study independently or use critical thinking or problem solving skills.

Over the last five years there have been a number of educational developments and initiatives introduced into the current UAE government school system such as the Madaras Al Ghad, where efforts have been made to better prepare students for higher education and to move away from rote style learning. Even so, these measures are still in their early stages and there are a significant number of students entering tertiary education who lack the study skills or learning habits needed to succeed on a rigorous programme of academic study.

The system of education and the profile of the students within Khalifa University have changed significantly over the last five years. A credit-hour system of study has been introduced that allows students greater autonomy and decision making in their programme of study. The University has also become co-educational and at the same time has opened its doors to a small number of top ranking expatriates from the region. With these changes, the admissions criteria to the undergraduate programme were reviewed, and entrance to the undergraduate programme became dependent not only on academic excellence in science subjects but also on proficiency in English language. An IELTS band score of 5.5 (or equivalent) became a pre-requisite for entry level. This has since been raised to a band 6.

As a result, the English department at Khalifa University needed to revise its syllabus to include preparation for the IELTS examination. A major objective of the Khalifa University preparatory programme is to help all students achieve the equivalent of a score of 6.0 on the internationally-standardised IELTS examination in order for them to start undergraduate studies in engineering and science disciplines. Some of these students start the academic year with an overall score of 4.5 and so there is great pressure on the programme to accelerate attainment levels. Achieving the required band scores provides access to undergraduate study in Khalifa University, making the IELTS a very high stakes test. The challenge was to resist the pressure for the syllabus to be entirely examination driven, but to incorporate the language and study skills necessary for success on the undergraduate programme. There was also a clear necessity to review the assessment system within the programme which up to that point had also been

predominantly quizzes and examinations, and to introduce new ways to promote learner independence and the application of knowledge. The outcome was a reduction in summative assessments and the consolidation of continuous assessment tools. At the same time, courses were also restructured to encourage students to be more analytical and reflective on their studies and the introduction of a Study Skills and Information Literacy course became mandatory.

3   The Reading Portfolio at Khalifa University

The majority of students who join the university programme have yet to establish good reading habits and are not active readers. Although Arab culture is rich in language and literature, students have a negative attitude to reading, viewing it as a requirement, a challenge and certainly not a pleasurable pastime (Mustafa, 2012). Consequently, all students experience difficulty with their reading in English and in particular when faced with the challenges of completing IELTS reading tasks and of dealing with academic texts in their undergraduate studies. Most students may understand the importance of reading to their studies, to language acquisition and to their lives, but engaging them to read outside the classroom is rarely successful.

The Reading Portfolio at KU was designed to address this issue; it was set up as an assessment tool that would motivate students to read and help them become active readers. The purpose was to train students in how to handle extended texts, and to understand, react to and reflect on the content of readings in order to process the information meaningfully. It would also allow students to monitor and take responsibility for their progress as a reader throughout the semester.

While the Reading Portfolio focuses on the skill that consistently produces the lowest band scores in IELTS, it aims to improve students' reading abilities independently of any washback effect from the IELTS examination question-types. The Khalifa University Reading Portfolio extends work on a previous reading portfolio (Moore, 2005). Moore (2005) describes many of the crises in testing that inspired teachers to devise more valid measures of student achievement than those provided in formal tests (McNamara, 1997; Messick, 1998). Many of the same concerns inspired the language teaching team to implement portfolio schemes for reading, writing, and vocabulary development at Khalifa University, particularly those related to: learner training; the

need to balance the development of students' language skills with preparation for formal high-stakes international examinations; and the interaction between grades, assessment, student culture and washback.

3.1 Learner Training

Our experience of UAE students arriving at higher education institutes is that they typically exhibit a poor awareness of their own strategies and strengths as learners; they have very little metacognitive awareness (Carrell, 1989; Mokhtari and Reichard, 2002). Alongside the stated programme objectives for language learning, there are objectives designed for personal and academic development. That is, the institution demands that the preparatory programme bridges the cultural and learning gap between school and university. One such demand is to develop greater autonomy towards learning in students, needed to counteract the traditional pedagogical approach of rote learning which remains pervasive despite repeated attempts to lessen its influence (Al Nowais, 2004; Rugh, 2002).

The Reading Portfolio, combined now with vocabulary development, writing, and listening assessments in the Independent Learning Log, contributes to the aims of increasing learner autonomy, developing language-learning strategies and improving metacognitive awareness. By choosing their own texts, by deciding on the best techniques to exploit the text and by becoming increasingly more responsible for their own development, students become more autonomous in their language learning. During the accompanying reading course, students experience typical explicit reading strategy training (Taylor, Stevens and Asher, 2006) to improve their reading skills. These include word attack strategies, speed-reading techniques, note-taking techniques, different reading sub-skills, and identifying useful vocabulary to learn (*e.g.* Folse, 2004). These strategies are then practiced by students in the portfolio. As with all portfolio assessment tools, students are provided with the grading criteria so that they can evaluate their own performance, which encourages a metacognitive awareness of their own level of language development and the behaviours expected of a good learner (Moore, 2005).

3.2 The Impact of a High-stakes Examination

In the Khalifa University preparation programme, a student's academic future, self-image and their position in the community are all determined by their ability to become an undergraduate in one of the science and engineering degree programmes. This ambition is determined by the student passing the IELTS examination with an average of 6.0 (or the equivalent). There is then, not only great pressure on the programme to deliver as many students as possible to undergraduate courses, there is also a professional imperative to prepare those students for the task types demanded by the IELTS examination - not to do so would be a dereliction of duty.

However, the programme constantly strives to find the right balance between preparing students for the examination, bridging the gap from school to university learning, and developing the skills that the IELTS examination attempts to represent and which will be of most value when they become undergraduates – academic listening, speaking, writing and reading skills in English. One advantage of the reading portfolio is that it allows students to develop their language skills independently of examination training but, as this paper aims to demonstrate, it also contributes to improving examination scores, without being a drain on class time. That is, students are encouraged, and rewarded through grades, to practice and improve their reading skills, from word recognition (Pollatsek and Rayner, 2004) to evaluation of a text, without taking away class time.

3.3 Grades, Assessment and Washback

Khalifa University students may typically require training in how to become autonomous learners, but they are also generally highly motivated and are, by definition, amongst the most successful students in the country. These students have been awarded very high grades throughout their school career, and grades represent a significant motivating factor in their success, as well as a source of status in the family, peer groups and the community. The Khalifa University preparatory programme aims to harness the motivational impact of grades in a positive way by rewarding students for adopting the behaviours of good language learners (Baker and Boonkit, 2004; McMullen, 2009; Naiman et al., 1995; Norton and Toohey, 2001; O'Malley and Chamot, 1990; Pickard, 1996; Porte, 1988; Wenden and

Rubin, 1987).

While the effect of a test on a course of study - often referred to as washback (Alderson and Hamp-Lyons, 1996; Bachman and Palmer, 1996; Hughes, 1989) - may be considered negative, especially when the assessment tool does not offer a valid measurement of the target language situation (McNamara, 1997; Messick, 1998), its effects are integrated positively in Khalifa University portfolio assessments. Students are rewarded with high grades in the portfolio for demonstrating the behaviours, strategies and practices that will enable them to succeed as good language learners and as good readers. This is achieved by aligning the grading criteria for the portfolio with descriptions of good language-learning behaviour (Moore, 2005). The following sections outline the guiding design considerations of the reading portfolio, before discussing how different pressures on the language-learning programme may influence the demands and outcomes of the portfolio while retaining the focus on encouraging good language-learning behaviour. This is followed by an evaluation of the success of the reading portfolio in relation to IELTS examination scores.

4   Portfolio Design

As a record of a student's reading, the design of the portfolio needs to take into consideration a number of factors:

1.   Course aims and outcomes

2.   Content

3.   Quantity

4.   Activities

5.   Consistency

6.   Assessment

7.   Organization & Presentation

These factors are discussed, in turn, below.

4.1 Course aims and outcomes

The reading portfolio specifically, and the independent learning log in general, evaluates a wide range of course aims and objectives, especially those rarely assessed in formal tests. It enables assessment of the journey from school to university in terms of responsibility, maturity and autonomy. It rewards students for experimenting with different learning styles and techniques in order to identify which work best for them. Students need to include academic texts in their portfolio, ensuring that students are exposed to relevant genres and helping them learn to cope with academic study in English. Later, as students feel the pressure of the high-stakes examination, typical IELTS texts and tasks are also included to provide further practice.

4.2 Content

Student entering the preparatory programme at Khalifa University are streamed into two levels, allowing a student to progress to the undergraduate programme within one or two semesters. As an assessment tool, the content of the reading portfolio needs to consider the profile of the student and satisfy the aims and outcomes of each level. For students that study English for two semesters, in the first semester the reading portfolio focuses more on reading for pleasure and introducing students, usually for the first time, to reading extended texts through graded readers. While reading for pleasure remains a key component for the fast track students (those completing the preparatory programme in one semester), the portfolio content also needs to include more academic texts that are more in line with the demands of the IELTS reading test and their undergraduate studies so more focus is put on current news articles, textbook and research articles and IELTS practice texts.

To read efficiently, reading needs to be purposeful; by reading a variety of genres, students learn to recognize purpose and also learn to adapt and adopt different strategies as they read to get the most out of the text. For this reason the content of the portfolio was designed to encourage reading from a variety of genres, i.e. graded readers, short stories, current news articles, academic text, topic related articles from magazines and the internet as well as recommended supplementary reading materials such as the National Geographic Footprint series.

Although students have the freedom to select their own texts, students are given clear guidelines and recommendations on the range of texts and sources available, how to determine level and what would be an appropriate length. Emphasis is placed on the selection of texts that are of interest, relevant and manageable at that point of the learning programme.

4.3 Quantity

The quantity of reading required to achieve the aim of the reading portfolio is a hotly-contested issue among teachers, but is also determined by other demands placed on the students. A minimum requirement regarding quantity is specified that takes into consideration the course loading, course length and the weighting given to the reading portfolio. Based on a 15 week semester, the portfolio should include a minimum of 20 (regular track) to 30 (fast track) readings for the semester, averaging 2 or 3 texts per week of about 500 to 900 words from a variety of genres.

4.4 Activities

To read actively and to develop the reading skills typical of a good learner, students need to demonstrate interaction with the texts they select. Students are required to demonstrate this through a range of pre-reading, while-reading and after-reading activities. These activities are introduced in class throughout the semester and range from making predictions through questions and answers, marginalia, highlighting key vocabulary and main ideas to writing summaries and reflections. Students are encouraged to try different activities and demonstrate increasing competency in a wide range of reading strategies.

Vocabulary acquisition, in particular from the Academic Word List, is critical for effective reading and key to success in all skills areas. Originally a separate portfolio assessment, a vocabulary log is now integrated into the reading portfolio. Emphasis is given to building vocabulary through the reading texts selected and establishing strategies for identifying and learning new words. Vocabulary cards, for instance, have proved a popular and successful means of recording, understanding and learning word usage.

4.5 Consistency

Language learning is a long-term process that, we believe, cannot be crammed into the last few weeks before an examination or before submission of a portfolio. Therefore, to ensure that students read the minimum required texts on a regular basis, a mandatory Summary Reading Record was implemented. The record of work is signed and dated by the instructor each week to show that the work was done at that time. Although the instructor is not expected to grade the work on a weekly basis, the system provides the opportunity to provide general feedback if necessary. It is the responsibility of the student to demonstrate evidence of consistent work and a variety of activities on the texts when their portfolio is submitted for grading at mid-semester and end-semester. Students are awarded 40% of the final mark for the reading portfolio at the mid-semester point and a further 60% at the end of the semester to provide formative feedback and again to encourage consistent effort.

4.6 Assessment

Clear marking criteria are established and communicated to the students from the start of the semester to ensure reliable grading and transparency. Each criterion is designed to exemplify good language learning behaviour and therefore encourage students to adopt those behaviours (Moore, 2005). Criteria include quantity, variety and interaction. Additional notes, exercises that demonstrate effort to improve vocabulary and reading skills can also be included and can be rewarded with grades.

4.7 Organisation and Presentation

While neatness is not essential for good language learning, being organised and methodical can make a big difference, and so this is given consideration in the design of the portfolio. The portfolio needs to be organized and presented in a way that makes it easy to review and assess. A contents page outlining the texts read and activities completed can contribute greatly to this process.

5   Adaptations & Developments

The Khalifa University Preparatory Student Portfolio has undergone a number of transformations over the last ten years. These changes have been a response to many factors, including but not limited to, changes in the entrance criteria to the programme, feedback from degree programme professors and contributions from several preparatory programme lecturers. This evolution of the Portfolio has been manifested in many ways. Its very name, the skills categories, the format, the assessment instruments and feedback types have all changed; and yet these can all be seen as enhancements. There is still an understanding that the purpose underlying the Portfolio is that it is to be a vehicle for students to be rewarded for exploring and developing their own learning style.

5.1 Changes in Syllabus and Progression

The reading portfolio has seen dramatic changes in the organisation and delivery of the preparatory programme at Khalifa University. When it was originally introduced, students were not required to pass an internationally-standardised examination to enter undergraduate studies. The university has moved from a degree programme accredited by UK's main accreditation body for engineering degrees, the Institution of Engineering and Technology, to a credit-hour programme, based on the degree programmes offered by the best U.S. engineering universities. The profile of undergraduate students has also seen significant changes, from UAE male nationals, often with very poor English skills, to male and female students from different countries in the region, many of whom have a very high standard of English. The reading portfolio has adapted to all of these changes, while retaining its focus on encouraging good language-leaning behaviour.

A recent change is to divide the preparatory English programme into three courses: English E001 (18 hours per week for 1 semester followed by 002 & 003); English E002 (10 hours per week for one semester for students exempt or passed from 001); and English E003 (6 hours per week of IELTS preparation for students exempt or passed from 001). Previously English E002 & E003 was one course and assessment consisted of examinations, quizzes and portfolio work, but progression

to undergraduate study was based solely on successful achievement of a Band 6 in IELTS. This meant that students could fail the preparatory course if they performed badly in their portfolio, but could progress if they passed IELTS. As a result of this anomaly it was decided to split the course and make E002 a separate course where assessment is entirely coursework and E003 is assessed by examination only. This change requires a student who does not pass the E002 coursework to repeat that course, even when they progress to undergraduate studies. The aim of this change is to ensure that students focus on good study habits and building up the skills necessary for success on the undergraduate programme, rather than gaining credit for only passing the final external examination, and is testament to the strength of belief and support among the faculty and administration for the portfolio and independent learning log.

5.2 Changes in Assessment

Continuous assessment in reading, vocabulary, writing and listening and speaking are all viewed by faculty, administration and students as central to student progression. Although the reading section is still referred to as the portfolio, the term "Independent Learning Log" is now used to refer to all of the continuous assessment components to emphasise that they all contribute to the same aim of learner training.

Across both the Sharjah and Abu Dhabi campuses, the required number of Readings, Writings and Vocabulary items to be completed by a student has generated much discussion. As the number of texts required for the reading portfolio decreases, the variety seems to increase, but runs the danger of not achieving the aim of improving reading fluency. Such differences of opinion between faculty in Sharjah and in Abu Dhabi seem to arise because of the greater diversity in the larger teaching team in the Abu Dhabi campus. Various approaches have been tried to improve the inter-rater reliability of portfolio grading on the two campuses, and this is still a process that needs improving. For example, what is considered an excellent example of a reading treatment might be considered average by another teacher on the same campus or on the other campus.

Feedback and assessment criteria have been revised to suit the needs of the students and to ensure that the portfolio has validity and reliability. While the motivated student is quick to grasp the importance of the

portfolio and comply with its requirements, experience has shown that other students need a lot more guidance in order to become independent learners. Throwing them in at the deep end and telling them to get on with it does not work – many students have never read a newspaper article, let alone a whole book, in English so expecting them to read two or more texts a week with meaningful interaction can be de-motivating and set the reluctant reader up for failure. Students not only need a lot of guidance on their choice of text but also need scaffolding and instruction on how to interact with text. Guidance is thus a major component of reading classes. Copying and pasting is a default choice for many students, so they need to understand what is acceptable practice whether they are recording new vocabulary or writing a summary. Instruction and guidelines are given on the meaning of plagiarism and what strategies to use to avoid it.

As part of the process to train learners to take the portfolio seriously, it has become necessary to review and give quick feedback on the work being done for the portfolio, for at least the first 4 weeks of the semester. Feedback on progress of the portfolio was revised to respond to the demands of students of all ability or motivation to be given feedback in the form of a grade. A not satisfactory, satisfactory or very good didn't appear to have the same impact. Students desired feedback that was more transparent. A numerical grade is now awarded for each submission using a defined rubric with weighted marks for the different criteria.

All criteria are designed to encourage students to exceed expectations, e.g. to read more texts than the minimum. Completing the minimum requirement results in a C (pass) grade but to achieve an A grade, the expectation is much higher and thus acts as a motivation for students to read and challenge themselves more. A further motivation is that weekly grades are now indicative, not final; a student may revisit a text up to the submission date of the portfolio and additional activities are then given credit. The grading of the Student Learning Portfolio overall has also been revised to be fairer and to award those students who work continuously throughout the semester. 50% of the final mark is now awarded at the mid-semester point with the balance awarded at the end. Furthermore, the reading portfolio is now given more weighting than other elements of the independent learning log in the final course grade to emphasize the importance of vocabulary acquisition and reading for proficiency in all English skills. The assessment instruments and feedback have also changed. The

Portfolio's overarching rubric was too bulky with the numerous, continuous assessments. The assessment criterion for the series of smaller tasks was the same as the rubrics, but the range was shortened to a five point scale, rather than a 100 point scale.

Originally the Vocabulary Log was a separate assessment item which was designed to encourage students to gather vocabulary together from all their courses and learning into one place. However, it became increasing difficult to engage students in experimenting with different "Vocabulary Treatments." Vocabulary treatment seemed to be a mechanical act for many of the students; they would copy and paste a definition, grab a sentence online or do a Google image search. While some students used imaginative sentences, cartoons or drawings to demonstrate their involvement with new words, most of our future engineers were more practical in their approach. They seemed indifferent to studying vocabulary for its own sake and needed the motivation of a quiz to inspire them. Therefore, the Vocabulary section of the Portfolio was streamlined. We no longer required a log of paper-based treatments of words. Instead, students were tested on an academic word list. Methods of studying vocabulary were discussed, but in the end the "proof of the pudding" was how well the student could perform on a vocabulary quiz. It was felt that dropping the vocabulary log was a loss of a unique feature of the portfolio, particularly as students were not practising the important skill of distinguishing words that should be learned from those that would not help them in the future. Consequently, the vocabulary feature of the portfolio was re-incorporated into the reading portfolio. The students are now asked to identify words in their reading treatments which are new to them and those which are from the academic wordlist. (Vocabkitchen (see appendix A) has proved a valuable tool for this).

5.3 The Reading Portfolio and Changes in Technology

Probably the biggest development in the portfolio has been how a student chooses to present the portfolio and the activities that demonstrate interaction and engagement with the texts. Greater emphasis is now put on students not only choosing their texts but also choosing the style of learning that suits them best. Many students today are more comfortable using mobile technology as a tool for learning. Some students have already used technology in their schools, and so are familiar with various platforms for presenting their work.

Furthermore, all students possess smart phones and many also have iPads or notebooks giving them a new opportunity to read and practice skills using a wide range of applications. The main aim remains – to motivate students to become active readers and to encourage independent learning - allowing students the freedom to select their texts from traditional or more contemporary resources and to choose activities that will enhance their learning experience and motivation is paramount.

As a result of Khalifa University introducing Moodle as the learning management system, course notes, activities, assessments and grading are now available online, and Moodle has been exploited in different ways for the reading portfolio and independent learning log (see appendix A for information all electronic tools). Although Moodle contains a Portfolio option which was quite easy for the students to create, there was limited access for faculty. The students still had to bring their laptop and display their Portfolio on their screen to the assessor, making it in an unsatisfactory tool for assessment. As multiple teachers (typically teaching Reading, Listening & Speaking, Writing, and Research Skills) now work off of the same page for a shared group of students in Moodle, this produces an electronic portfolio of sorts. Each teacher can see what topics the other teachers are working on with that particular class, and automatically shares the gradebook for that Moodle class. The gradebook can therefore be a record of the numerous continuous assessment points across the components of the independent learning log, along with the Research Skills class. As a result, additional online EFL reading resources and applications have been added to the recommended guidelines, many of which are accompanied by online activities that can either be printed out or generate reports that can be reviewed in soft copy format for assessment. This allows a broader perspective on the student than would otherwise be possible.

Moodle has numerous activity and resource options for faculty and for students. Hot Potato quizzes can be uploaded (see appendix A). Links to Quizlets and Spelling City resources can be added. Online reading sites, such as Scribd and Epubbud (see appendix A) can be shared. With independent Vocabulary learning subsumed by the Reading portfolio, we were presented with the possibility that the Listening & Speaking teachers could assess aspects of Independent Listening and Speaking using Audacity (see appendix A) for Speaking, and the Moodle Survey feature with online Listening activities. Audacity has

since been used by students to submit audio book reports. Students follow the guidelines for a written book report, but record it rather than write up the book report.

Attempting to implement an e-portfolio through Moodle provided a new perspective on the entire independent learning log, and allowed consideration of whether all or parts of the paper-based reading portfolio should be replaced with an electronic version. The Abu Dhabi campus piloted a Weebly-based Portfolio (see appendix A). Each student created a free Weebly website, displaying their reading, writing and vocabulary treatments on different tabs. These worked well for students who were extremely tech-savvy, but some students still preferred to use paper and pencil. All that the more artistically-inclined students needed to make this option work was better access to good quality scanners. Reading treatments required highlighting and comments on the page. This could either be done electronically in MS Word, or students could annotate a hard copy and scan this and upload the image to their Weebly portfolio. Students also use the free Audacity software (see appendix A) to save voice files for any of their portfolio tasks in an MP3 format and upload them to their Weebly.

Khalifa University provides licenses for Turnitin (see appendix A). This plagiarism checker makes the bane of all Reading teachers, the shared book report, a thing of the past, or at least it makes it more difficult for students to lift summaries and to pass along their book reports from years past to others. The appeal of Turnitin is the variety of feedback choices from which one can select. There is a simple grade which feeds directly into the gradebook, there are comments which can be adapted to a class, and there is an audio feedback option which also contains an adaptable rubric.

A typical portfolio today therefore will be a combination of both traditional and more contemporary media. For example, students may choose to highlight and interact on a hard copy of a text but then record and practice new vocabulary on an application such as MyWordbook (see appendix A), while the summary/reflective passages could be recorded on Moodle or a visual presentation be made through an application such as Movie Maker (see appendix A). The challenge is for the instructor to stay abreast with developments and to review, evaluate and revise guidelines on resources and acceptable activities for the portfolio as they appear on the market.

All of these modifications demonstrate one certainty: that change itself

will never cease. It is almost inevitable that there will be many more variations in the format and evaluation of student involvement with their own learning. When it comes to education, it is probably better to be the windshield wipers helping a student to view the road ahead, than to be a rear-view mirror.

6   Evaluation of the Reading Portfolio

This section evaluates the effectiveness of the Reading Portfolio by examining its effect on reading gains for students at Khalifa University as measured in IELTS reading tests. As all students must be fairly assessed and evaluated, and the reading portfolio, as part of the Independent Learning Log, contributes significantly to students' grades, and academic, social and financial standing, it is not possible or practical to divide students into experimental and control groups. It is also not ethical to exclude a group of students from a practice that the majority of faculty believe to be of great value to all students. Consequently this evaluation will compare students' scores in their reading portfolio against the gains made in externally-validated examinations, namely IELTS reading tests. As all students follow the same general, academic and IELTS English language training and learning, it is assumed that all other factors are equal across the populations. The hypothesis that will be tested is

- all other factors being assumed equal, students with higher reading portfolio scores will make greater gains in formal tests of reading.

 Portfolio scores and reading scores in the Independent Learning Log are used for comparison with initial reading scores from official IELTS practice tests (e.g. Cambridge ESOL, 2009) at the start of the preparatory programme and with official IELTS reading test scores at the end of their preparatory programme. Specifically, portfolio scores are compared with the gains made in IELTS reading tests. Scores are selected from random students in random years before the IELTS mark required for undergraduate entry was raised to 6.0.

Examining the results for all students in this sample reveals a very low correlation between portfolio scores and gains in test results (0.256). The correlation scores show great variation from one cohort to another (between 0.00467 to 0.4152). This suggests that there is almost no relationship between good performance in the portfolio assessment

and improvement in the IELTS reading test. However, a closer examination reveals a weak correlation between the two scores which was statistically significant ($r_s(82) = .256$, $p= 0.05$).

Putting these scores into context, it is the main aim of students in the preparatory programme to pass the IELTS test, including the reading test, with a score of 5.0. For some students, this is not a challenge because they already score 5.0 on the initial test, and so may not be motivated to improve their reading results regardless of their portfolio scores. When we remove these students from the dataset, we find that there is a strong positive correlation which was statistically significant between reading portfolio scores and the gains made in IELTS reading scores for students that achieved a 5.0 or less on the initial test ($r_s(55) = .32$, $p=0.01$). We can therefore have some confidence in the hypothesis that all other factors being assumed equal, students that enter the Khalifa University preparatory programme below the required standard in reading and who gain higher reading portfolio scores will make greater gains in formal tests of reading.

7   Conclusion

This paper described some of the main principles behind the Khalifa University reading portfolio assessment scheme and outlined some of the many changes it has seen over ten years of implementation. Many of the changes were the result of external factors, while other changes resulted from an informal evaluation of the assessment tool. For instance, one change described above – that of separating the IELTS preparation course, which is assessed only through practice tests, from the language development course which is assessed through the independent learning log, including the reading portfolio – came about as faculty noted the reduction in motivation and progress when students achieved the required minimum standard in the formal tests. The preparatory programme faculty and administration recognise the significant improvements that the reading portfolio provides students at a lower level, as demonstrated above, and aim to implement assessment policies that will offer similar gains to students at all levels and across a far wider range of reading skills, both text-centred and reader-centred, than are typically tested in high-stakes international tests such as IELTS. It is this kind of development that will continue to instigate changes and improvements in the reading portfolio.

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Appendix A Some Useful Software & Websites for Independent Learning

What is it called?	Where can I find it?*	What does it do?
Audacity	*http://audacity.sourceforge.net*	*Freeware that allows you to record and edit sound files*
epub bud	*http://www.epubbud.com*	*Everything for e-books: download, write and share e-books all in one place*
free rice	*http://freerice.com*	*This site is not just free – while you learn and test your vocabulary, the site sends rice to starving families*
Hot Potatoes	*http://hotpot.uvic.ca*	*A collection of tools that help you to create a range of quizzes and tests*
Longman Dictionary of Contemporary English online	*http://www.ldoceonline.com*	*The classic Longman learner's dictionary available online, anytime, for free*
Moodle	*https://moodle.org*	*Open source learning management system software*
Movie Maker	*http://windows.microsoft.com/en-GB/windows7/products/features/movie-maker*	*Free software from microsoft that allows students to combine images and sounds*
Mywordbook	*http://learnenglish.britishcouncil.org/en/apps/mywordbook-2*	*Available as a web page or Android or iPhone app, allows you to build and practice vocabulary*
Quizlets	*http://quizlet.com*	*An online tool to quickly and easily create and send many types of quizzes and games. Also has a searchable bank of prepared quizzes*

continued...

What is it called?	Where can I find it?*	What does it do?
Scribd	*http://www.scribd.com*	*"A digital documents library that allows users to publish, discover and discuss original writings and documents in various languages"*
Spelling City	*http://www.spellingcity.com*	*Everything related to spelling in English, online for free*
turnitin	*http://submit.ac.uk* *http://www.turnitin.com*	*Online service to assist marking, feedback and originality scoring*
Weebly	*http://www.weebly.com*	*Free, easy to set up websites. Also has Android and iPhone apps for on-the-move additions*
Vocabkitchen	*http://vocabkitchen.com*	*Helps identify useful vocabulary from texts and keep personal records*