Portfolio Use in Foreign Language Learning

Yabancı Dil Öğreniminde Portfolyo Kullanımı

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ABSTRACT

This review aims to explore the use of portfolio in developing foreign language skills of English language learners with a focus on literature on writing skills development and assessment. Depending on the results of this study, what is suggested is that 1) Portfolio can be integrated to foreign language classrooms at all levels. 2) Foreign language writing skills, in particular, can be formatively assessed by using portfolios. 3) The outcomes of portfolio practice needs to be disseminated to a wider audience so that practitioners might utilize portfolio and administrators might contextualize its use. The reviewed literature may give insight to teachers, school administrators, parents and students about the portfolio as an effective alternative assessment method.

Keywords: Foreign language teaching, assessment, portfolio.

ÖZET

Bu çalışmanın amacı İngilizce öğrenen öğrencilerin yabancı dil becerilerini geliştirmede özellikle de yazma becerilerini geliştirmede ve değerlendirmede portfolyo

kullanımını incelemektir. Çalışma bulgularına dayalı elde edilen değerlendirmeler1) Portfolyonun yabancı dil sınıflarına her seviyede dahil edilebileceği, 2) Özellikle yabancı dilde yazma becerilerinin süreç boyunca portfolyo kullanarak değerlendirilebileceği, ve 3) Portfolyo ile ilgili çalışmaların sonuçlarının geniş kitlelere iletilerek uygulayıcıların kullanmasnıı sağlayabileceği ve yöneticilerin de süreci anlamlandırabileceğini öne sürmektedir. Bu çalışmanın sonuçlarının öğretmenlere, okul yöneticilerine, ailelere ve öğrencilere etkili bir alternatif değerlendirme yöntemi olarak bakış açısı kazandıracağı düşünülmektedir.

Anahtar kelimeler: Yabancı dil eğitimi, değerlendirme, portfolyo

SUMMARY

The need and necessity to compile the literature forming this paper emerged from several reasons such as lack of attention and lack of comprehensive research on portfolio use in foreign language classrooms in Turkey. Portfolios first started to be used in arts classes are now widely used in language classrooms. The observations of patient and careful working habits of artists led Wolf (1987-1988) to link portfolio use of artists to that of language arts learners. The similarity is the underlying motive of both fields to find answers to others' questions and secondly, to utilize it throughout the process and finally, thereby to improve critical thinking and judgment skills of users. Hence, portfolios started to be used in other disciplinary areas such as language learning (cited in Underwood, 1998).

As for the purposes of portfolio use, Bryant and Timmins (2002: 39) listed this performance assessment system to be used to influence the instruction and curriculum in the direction of teaching problem-solving, critical thinking, and good writing skills,, to monitor student progress, to improve balance across curriculum, instruction, and assessment and lastly, to hold schools responsible agents for the assessment systems.

Recent shift to process-oriented approach in assessment offer teachers the opportunity to reflect on how learners are processing the information as a missing feature in standardized testing such as multiple-choice tests. Alternative assessment can be referred to as a non-traditional assessment type with forms of performance observation and portfolios that outline a detailed picture of student performance in line with curricular goals. In this type of assessment, higher thinking skills, meta-cognition and reflection are also promoted (Barootchi & Keshavarz, 2002).

Writing, as will be the narrowed down skill to focus in this paper, is the most commonly used way of assessing student performance mainly by administering written exams that is the most solid means to record the performance with ease and to be analyzed both by internal and external participants at once such as teachers, peers and parents. The written form can serve as a concrete proof of success and failure requiring skills of critical thinking, reflection, discipline and commitment (White, 1987).

The conceptual framework of portfolios is *constructivism* where learners are actively involved in constructing meaning with a focus on production in the evolving process (Williams & Burden, 1997: 23). In language learning, learners construct language output making sense of the language themselves as Swain (1985) stated in the *Output Hypothesis*. For the input to be transformed into output learning tasks need to be properly selected and while the tasks to be performed in the target language are developed; cognitive maturity of the learners should be considered. The ultimate aim of this review, in addition to introducing the use and benefits of integrating an alternative assessment method is to make portfolio users aware how self-confidence is developed through self reflection skills, competence is gained, while innovations are followed and practiced through improving foreign language skills.

Introduction

The literature on foreign language learning and teaching assessment issues to pinpoint alternative assessment forms needs to be revised to see the whole picture; the lack of compilation of the available research is the leading motive of this paper that will be on a specific alternative assessment form for English language learning, serving a general theoretical framework with reference to recent practices along with pedagogical implications

This paper unifies the areas of writing skills in a foreign language and related assessment techniques reviewing the related literature. Firstly, as for the specific skill-writing and its overall importance was pointed out as for communicating, getting higher grades in courses, applying for universities requiring performance of written tasks and jobs as well that at least seek skills of writing technical reports or formal electronic mails. Writing instruction does not take place effectively in classes and it still remains as one of the most poorly taught or neglected skills in the schools. Writing is mainly practiced by assigning as homework that is not always later checked; therefore, a critical number of students are below their grade level proficiency at the basic compulsory education period (Graham & Perin, 2007: 445).

Secondly, with the underlying idea that not all skills and competencies can be assessed through a set of similar standardized tests without reference to individual differences, learning styles and strategies, in 1990s *alternative assessment* emerged in the form of portfolios, journals, self and peer assessments that are formative and process evaluation based. This type of assessment require learners to construct and reflect using real-world contexts as much as possible while promoting the higher level thinking and problem solving skills. Most importantly, they allow learners to see their own strengths and weaknesses as well as others' as they constantly peer review and assess each other's performance and products (Brown, 2004: 13).

The word "portfolio" itself has Italian origin of 'portafoglio', 'portare' where it means 'to carry' (fr. L.) and 'foglio' refers to 'sheet' (Tierney et al., 1991). Shores and Grace (1998: 39) defines portfolio as "a collection of items that reveal different aspects of an individual child's growth and development over time." In addition, the definition cited by Al Kahtani (1999:262) is that portfolio is "A systematic and selective collection of student work that has been assembled to demonstrate the student's motivation, academic growth and level of achievement." (Norton & Wiburg, 1998:237). Finally, Freeman and Freeman's description (1994) "a box or a folder which contains various kinds of information that has been gathered over time about one student" fits well to a variety of educational contexts.

Portfolios focus on process rather than the product, development rather than achievement, and self-assessment rather than other than self-initiated assessment. Students feel a sense of ownership of their own product during the process and are empowered. Portfolios help students to collect work samples, reflect on their abilities, capacities and needs; meanwhile, portfolio users determine personal and educational goals. The stages of selection, collection and reflection by the student display its student centered nature (Tierney, Carter, & Desai, 1991). Nunes (2004) practiced portfolio use with 10th grade students where learners' assessment reflections enabled *autonomy*, more participation and provided a deeper analysis and understanding of learner goals, needs, and strategies for the teacher. Furthermore, portfolio assessment allows seeing the weaknesses and strengths through self-assessment and learners are given the chance to improve problematic areas of their learning. Pollari (2000) pointed out the emergence of learner-empowerment during the study with 80 students at the upper secondary school. The preconditions for empowerment are listed as decision making power, resources availability and effective use and most importantly one's being active and responsible of his own actions.

Assessing Writing Skills in Language Learning

The focus of emphasis on composition that has been practiced solely for decades under the cover of teaching writing has shifted to the process of writing competence and performance itself (Cowie, 1995; Matsuda, 2002; Muncie, 2000) with the realization of necessity for understanding the process rather than the concrete outcome orientation. Process writing is not just into forming a written product but also composing and how to write with metacognitive involvement of the writer over the whole progression (Muncie, 2000: 47). Goldstein and Carr (1996: 2) defines the process stages as *thinking*, writing and rewriting, also referred to as prewriting, writing and post-writing. These stages have been also identified by Jenks (2003: 3) as prewriting, drafting, revising, editing and publishing adding more emphasis on making constant changes after revising with the final step of sharing the piece of work with audience.

The studies (Bereiter, Scardamalia and Steinbach, 1984; Brown, 2001; Emig, 1971; Grant & Ginther, 2000; Shaw and Liu, 1998) show that writing skill instructed from the process oriented approach contributed to learners' proficiency in many ways. Emig (1971) reported that writing is more like conscious learning than teaching. Writing requires seeing the whole; its relation and dependence on features like style, pace and its social function cannot act in isolation all of which cannot be taught through instruction. Furthermore, writing processes have many variations and have been progressing in the recursive form not linear that provides abundant amount of opportunities to practice and recycle the target language. In the study Bereiter, Scardamalia and Steinbach (1984) compared two groups of children; process writing group and a group continuing their routine classroom activities. The experiment group worked with cue cards aiming better planned and goal-oriented communicative output who demonstrated their shift towards a reflective style of composition, with more proof of reflective and complex thought than the ones in the control group.

In the study by Shaw and Liu (1998) it is observed that after "English as a Foreign Language" course students started writing more formal texts with few adjustments in the syntactic complexity, text organization, lexical variety and lessened number of errors. Grant and Ginther (2000) with the focus of changes in the learners' writing in the process concluded that students wrote longer and more cohesive essays with greater lexical variety, frequent use of connectors and reference words, and varied use of tense and mood, more modal verbs, subordination and passive voice due to practice. As stated by Brown (2001) without doubt process writing seems to be the most reasonable current approach to writing throughout which specific stages are to be followed and reflection in the form of giving and receiving feedback is experienced as opposed to traditional writing skills instruction of demonstration and practice cycle.

There is a vast majority of techniques and ways of assessing different types of texts; this redundancy in assessment of writing could be explained by the high number of applications in the classroom related to various sub-skills and depending on the personal style differentiation shifting from formal to informal. For instance, technique for assessing note taking or letter writing is not the same as the one for assessing a persuasive essay. Additionally, long list of criteria to be assessed like mechanics, organization, and content with their own sub-criteria is another challenge (Madsen, 1983). Brown (2004: 242) identifies three methods for scoring are *holistic*, *primary trait* and *analytical*. A single score for a whole document is given in the holistic scoring. In the second one, only one aspect of the writing is focused to be assessed within a discourse; whereas in the last one, main elements of writing are scored under categories like organization, logical development of ideas, grammar, punctuation, spelling, mechanics, and style and quality. It should be stated that these methods vary depending on the proficiency level of the students and genre of writing as well as the goals of instruction.

An Alternative Assessment Tool: Portfolio

Traditional assessment types such as multiple choice tests, True/ False statements, and fill in the blank type questions are rigid, focus on product and simple behaviors; there is a sense of completeness lacking the process, procedure and personal traits. These are isolated events at the end of the unit or assignment where students act as passive recipients compared to a broader engagement as targeted (O'Malley &Valdez-Pierce, 1996). Portfolios, on the other hand, provide authentic verification of student progress: First and final drafts, revisions, writing notes, anecdotal records to be graded holistically shows the dynamic feature of portfolios.

Types of Portfolio

Portfolios have been grouped and classified according to their function and use of purpose; learning, assessment and working (Gülbahar & Köse, 2006) benchmark, showcase and collaborative (Jenkins, 1996); process and product (Cole, Ryan, Kick, & Mathies, 2000); working, developmental, showcase (Gathercoal, Love, Bryde & McKean, 2002); showcase, collection and assessment (O'Malley & Valdez-Pierce, 1996); private, learning and pass-along (Shores & Grace, 1998).

Gülbahar and Köse (2006) classified portfolios with the following functions as *learning* portfolio; for professional development, *assessment* portfolio; for performance assessment, *working* portfolio; for career building. Whereas Jenkins (1996) listed as *benchmark*, *showcase* and *collaborative* consecutively from most teacher-centered to the least where cooperation is situated at the end of the continuum. The *benchmark* portfolio is assessed using checklists and benchmarks set by the teacher as the sole provider of information and standards. In a way, it is advantageous when it is the teacher to instruct and to assess according to in-class practices. Furthermore, designing benchmarks necessitate too much time and effort as well as expertise. While guiding the assessor showing what to look for, checklists limit the scope of evaluation, that is,

without a list, the assessor might have a wider perspective and even compose his/ her flexible criteria based on experience and perspective. Lastly, in the benchmark portfolio, learners are in no way involved in the process: They are neither asked to choose their best samples nor to reflect on them.

Second model, according to Jenkins (1996) the showcase portfolio is the most studentcentered one, centering around self-assessment by students who are expected to be engaged in setting goals, selecting and reflecting on their own work. The rationale behind the student reflection is the trust to be felt in the student's self awareness, strengths and weaknesses. Although the ability to mentor progress and self assess develop slowly, within the boundaries of Vygotsky's zone of proximal development (ZPD) (1962) the child can survive and accomplish what is to be achieved. Last of all the collaborative portfolio finds a way in-between where the learner and the teacher meet to reach the eventual goal. The learner is in charge of the content of the portfolio; on the other hand, free to consult a knowledgeable someone beyond the learner's ZPD (cited in Lightbrown & Spada, 1999). This model helps learners to develop affectively, cognitively and metacognitively. The more learners like writing and beinvolved in evaluation, the more positive attitude they develop as in other learning experiences. Besides, the writer goes through mental processes while deciding on the topic and setting the goals, picking up the words, activating the knowledge, and editing the text. Realizing and correcting the errors, like giving feedback, editing the text reading many times develops metalinguistic awareness and metacognition (Jenkins, 1996). Another classification by Cole et al. (2000) simply shows a distinction between process and product oriented portfolio types naming the first as process portfolio that is active and displays growth. At the beginning students answer several questions such as "Why did you perform at that level?", "Where do you hope to move?", "How do you plan to get there?", and "When?". The second type; product portfolio is the shortened and reduced one that shows student proficiency as a final product.

Working portfolio generates artifacts; developmental portfolio is shared with the faculty; and the showcase portfolio is shared with the world (Gathercoal et al., 2002). Showcase portfolios include best samples of students to show where the emphasis is on the products rather than the process. Collection portfolios embrace all works of the students from the initial drafts to the final work displaying the products as well as process. Assessment portfolios consist of student works followed by student reflection and teacher assessment based on mainly the checklist criteria (O'Malley & Valdez-Pierce, 1996). Wade, Abrami and Scalter (2005) reported grouping portfolios as working portfolio that contains works in progress, showcase that exhibits best work and assessment that shows level of accomplishment attained.

Finally, three types are defined by Shores and Grace (1998:40) as; the *private, learning* and *pass-along* portfolio. One can keep the *private* portfolio to keep records of various occasions or the learner; the *learning* portfolio to display and reflect a comprehensive collection of works and the *pass-along* to show the main problem areas and well-developed skills. Regardless of its type, it is necessary to set policies for the use of each portfolio for greater achievement.

Content of Portfolio

What can be included in the portfolio has been stated in almost all articles on portfolio implementation with minor variance (Bryant & Timmins, 2002; Cole et al., 2000; Gathercoal et al., 2002; Gülbahar & Köse, 2006; O'Malley & Valdez-Pierce, 1996; Shores & Grace, 1998; Tierney et al., 1991) which can be listed as work samples, journal entries, articles, visuals, certificates, checklists, assignments, and any document that can be a confirmation of learning progress. Additional content in an e-portfolio different from those in the paper format are the digital forms of the documents, visuals, and videos referred to as multimedia, hypermedia programs, databases, spreadsheets, word processing software, CDROMs, and Web components (Al Kahtani, 1999); or the

e-portfolio content can be summarized as a website with hyperlinks to activities, artifacts, and reflections (Richards, 2002).

A wide variety of items can be found in portfolios like presentations, articles, animations, videos, sound files, graphs, charts, hyperlinks, concept maps, posters and any work by the student (Gülbahar & Köse, 2006). What is included changes according to its purpose; projects, independent work, journals, and formal test results are some content examples. Unfinished tasks with reflections can also be included to show the problem area(s) that helps to easily identify areas that need attention and further development.

For knowledge and skill mastery there can be series of student work samples, for attitudes; interest inventories, records, outside activities; list of books read, audio or videotapes, group activities, student conducted interviews, written reports, graphs, and charts. Work samples, letters, sketches, drawings and paintings, snapshots, projects, videos, tapes, checklists, logs, test scores, computer work, unit work, collaborative projects and assessment from peers can form the content of the portfolio. Main parts of portfolio subsequently are table of contents, identification of user, date of work, description of the task and last of all, student reflection on the entry (Cole et al., 2000).

Tierney et al. (1991) list the elements for reading-writing portfolio as: projects, surveys, reports, favorite poems, songs, letters, comments, interesting thoughts to remember, examples of writing across the curriculum (reports, journals, literature logs), literature extensions (scripts for drama, visual arts, written forms, webs, charts, timelines). In addition, there can be a record of books read, writing responses to literary works, notes, items that are evidence of development of style (organization, voice, sense of audience, choice of words, clarity), writing that shows growth in usage of traits (growing ability in self-correction, punctuation, spelling, grammar). Unedited first draft, revised first draft, evidence of effort (improvement noted on pieces, completed assignments, personal

involvement noted), self evaluations, writing illustrating evidence of topic generation are the other potential contents.

Portfolios might have videos, dialogues, links to references, chat logs, simulations, graphics, sound, digital video, text and other presentation media. Main components affirmed by Gathercoal et al. (2002) are the statement title, student assignment, links (detail, help, and internet resources), assessment description, and metadata. Another content description by O'Malley and Valdez-Pierce (1996) covers student work samples: writing samples, audio or videotapes, mathematics problems, social studies reports, or science experiments within the same discipline or interdisciplinary. Shores and Grace (1998:42) classify the items as primary and secondary in that the former covers original and authentic materials like drawings or letters that have not been edited. The latter are edited forms of the works based on someone else's comments or the traditional test scores that are not authentic and reflective of the real progress. Bryant and Timmins (2002:40) puts the components in order starting with the module outline given by the teacher, criteria, rubrics and marking scheme, checklist of items, self-evaluation, reflective statements and finally the evidence as the piece of work.

Portfolio Use in Foreign Language Classes

Portfolios are used for a variety of educational purposes, basically to assess skills in reading and writing in language classes (Bryant & Timmins, 2002; Cole et al., 2000; Gülbahar & Köse, 2006; O'Malley & Valdez-Pierce, 1996; Tierney et al., 1991), professional development and teacher education. Portfolio assessment gets the foremost attention to its implementation process requiring commitment and willingness from its users. Its implementation necessitates time and energy; administrative, parental and social involvement; shift in the teacher and student role, documentation and self-evaluation. The members of 'Portfolio culture team' as referred by Bryant and Timmins (2002:21) are students, teachers, principals, and parents, which is all actors involved

that contribute bringing a new perspective to learning and teaching process on a multidimensional level.

In portfolio development, the learner has the whole authority and decision making initiative in a constructivist manner where the learner discovers by examining and taking charge of his own tasks and duties. Portfolio forms a direct link between the instruction and assessment integrating the isolated processes; students are assessed considering the goals of the course, what goes on in the classroom verifying the content validity of the assessment. It is validated that portfolios reinforce both writing skills development qualitatively and quantitatively and the cognitive development. The competencies of students are better reflected in portfolios than tests. (Born, 2003; O'Malley & Valdez Pierce, 1996). The study by Barootchi and Keshavarz (2002) conducted in English as a foreign language (EFL) setting compared the outcomes of portfolio assessment and teacher-made test while checking the likely contribution of portfolios to student responsibility development as they keep monitoring themselves throughout the process. The experiment group having assessed by portfolios are found more successful and satisfied, namely, portfolio assessment helped achievement, feelings of responsibility and change in attitude all in a positive direction. In her reflections, Collins (1998) stated that if she was not involved in the portfolio project, she would not have realized the individual differences and learning styles of the learners. Portfolio enabled the teacher to see the progress, skills of the learners and to follow the learning path (cited in Martin-Knief et al., 1998).

Portfolios can be implemented across a wide range of grades; even in the first grade as done in the study by Martin-Knief, Cunnigham and Feige (1998), it does not obligate high skills, once well- instructed and guided students even enjoy and appreciate the process. Teachers need to help students to build trust and confidence through moving from "I cannot" to "I can" descriptors; to model by sharing personal writings; and lastly, to set criteria with the student while using rubrics and exemplars. The first step is asking the learner write about portfolio; what it is and how it works. When learners have a

meta-understanding of the layout of the practice; they also learn how to be critical, how to approach a text and work on it. If the conferences are administered effectively and regularly which are short face to face conversations on learning process, between student-teacher and sometimes between teacher-parent; all parties involved would understand how the process is moving when frequently checked by a supervisor.

Shores and Grace (1998:18) focus on portfolio use and its advantages for children supporting child-centered learning as portfolios allow to better know the users, development of children in this context, their socio-emotional, physical and academic development as well. Teachers benefit in a variety of ways such as getting information about the child, developing their interview and observation skills, child-centered curriculum development, and building skills for parental involvement. The study (Shores and Grace, 1998) outlines portfolio process that starts with establishing a portfolio policy and collecting work samples. Next, photographs are taken and learning logs are used to form the content followed by interview sessions held during and after the implementation. While taking systematic and anecdotal records, preparing narrative reports three-way portfolio conferences need to take place and finally, the process ends with preparing pass-along portfolios.

In addition to research conducted by researchers, educators and practitioners, at a wider and multinational level, European Community has been using European Language Portfolio (ELP) in a standardized way and recently the digital form has been gaining popularity (http://eelp.gap.it/about.asp). ELP has three components: The first one, Language Passport is the part with guidance to evaluate the language proficiency skills according to the reference levels of the Common European Framework; secondly, Language Biography allows the learner to reflect on his/her language skills, competencies, what s/he can do or cannot through self-assessing; and the last one, Dossier is where learners can keep any kind of document, material as an evidence of the learning process like a certificate, best piece of work selected by the learner (http://www.coe.int/).

Documentation, reporting and pedagogic are the functions of the ELP; the pedagogic function is of our main concern as it is mostly integrated into the Language Biography whose content are biographies, checklists for assessment and reflection, objectives sheet, working lists and any related document on language proficiency. In addition, the Dossier section can be used for portfolio assessment in language classrooms independent of the other sections. Lenz (2004) summarizes the underlying features of ELP as it enhances learner autonomy having learners experience learning to learn as a part of lifelong learning that is another educational priorities of Council of Europe. Using portfolio permits learners to learn related how to skills like how to select works, how to reflect and so forth and in the next stage to work independently.

Final point to raise concerning portfolio implementation is the criteria to be formed and used. As an example, the rubric by Sostak (1998:60) is composed of four parts: focus/organization, development, language and mechanics is decided through the collaboration of the teacher and students. Once students got familiar with rubric formation and use, they were imposed to act more responsively and to take control of their writing. Sostak (1998) defined portfolio process as an "awakening" (cited in Martin-Knief et al., 1998) A sample portfolio checklist is as follows (Wyatt & Looper, 1999):

- 1. What is the purpose of my portfolio?
- 2. What required items do I have to include?
- 3. What optional items do I want to include?
- 4. Do I need to collect additional samples or participate in other activities to complete the goals/competencies of the portfolio?
- 5. Have I developed a plan for collecting artifacts?
- 6. How will I organize my portfolio?
- 9. How will I select representative artifacts?
- 10. What are length stipulations for the portfolio?
- 11. What type of materials should I collect?

As seen above, starting with goal setting and item selection, the list involves planning and organization processes. Such checklists guide students for self-assessment and teachers for an organized and standardized portfolio in their own teaching contexts considering individual and institutional matters. Finally, Bryant and Timmins (2002: 30) summed up the portfolio process as: "Portfolio is a tool that represents student growth in areas over time (e.g. presentation skills, cognitive development) and in scope (e.g. own identify and beliefs)."

Conclusion and Pedagogical Implications

Changing existing beliefs, attitudes and ideas is very difficult to achieve. In the educational context, new practices and innovations carry the risk of being underestimated or rejected easily. Portfolio use, as a recent practice in language learning classrooms needs further attention and requires professional training. As assessment takes place in the classroom, portfolios should be integrated in classes at all levels with student and teacher involvement contributing to their interaction as well (Barootchi & Keshavarz, 2002).

As a final remark, using teaching portfolios for professional development where teachers reflect on their teaching and students' learning is an example that shows wide range of portfolio applications (Bryant and Timmins, 2002). On the other hand, if students feel a sense of ownership about their portfolios, their effort will be more meaningful and motivating (Tierney, Carter & Desai, 1991).

For a successful portfolio implementation Butler (2006) listed the criteria starting with being aware and familiar with the portfolio culture focusing on the process rather than the product. Secondly, the teacher should set clear guidelines and announce them to the students before the implementation; if possible, students can be involved in decision making, which is creating the guidelines. Furthermore, feedback should be provided

during the process not afterwards. Last of all, reflection should be valued as an indispensible part of self-assessment

In conclusion, if portfolios become an integral part of the classroom assessment in language classes with clear guidelines and student involvement at all stages such as decision-making and reflecting, assessment would fulfill its mission meeting the long-term curricular goals.

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