

THE ROLE OF DIGITAL PORTFOLIOS IN EMPLOYABILITY-FOCUSED ESP COURSE

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Abstract: *Student employability has emerged as a paramount concern in higher education (HE) in recent years, placing an imperative on educators to rethink higher education teaching methods through the implementation of innovative and immersive initiatives and competency-based practices. Bridging the pedagogical and professional divide and developing practical and transferable skills is increasingly valued as these skills are fundamental to student success in different business roles and a constantly evolving job market. In the HE context, English for Specific Purposes courses (e.g. Business English) have always been designed around specific language needs. Their core focus is on task-based learning and delivering practical content that is both authentic to the professional landscape and relevant for student career success. Moreover, employability skills development should be a cornerstone of the Business English curriculum as it needs to be made responsive to real-world market demands in the global context. A highly tailorable and flexible solution capable of meeting the specialized requirements of business students is the digital portfolio, the added value of which is its potential relevance across diverse educational levels, disciplines and professions. This article presents digital portfolios as a strategic tool capable of maximizing professional learning to address the above-mentioned concerns. Specifically, the digital portfolio serves as a personalized repository for showcasing artefacts like students' CVs, cover letters, recorded spoken samples, video comments, written reflections and infographics on relevant topics, or any other content that can be tailored to the students' needs or disciplines. This pedagogical approach not only encourages students to actively immerse themselves in the learning process and reflect on achieved competences and/or challenges, but it also provides concrete evidence of both linguistic and transferable skill development. Observations from both the instructors' and students' self-reflections suggest that this method enhances learning outcomes and at the same time empowers students to take ownership of their professional development, and prepares them more realistically for the demands of the modern workplace.*

Keywords: *employability skills; higher education; ESP; Business English; digital portfolios*

1. Introduction

Global career readiness is a condition *sine qua non* in today's highly-competitive job market and higher education (HE) institutions need to demonstrate readiness to equip students with comprehensive knowledge, experiences and skills necessary for managing their transition into professional work and their future careers. Therefore, the responsibility of HE is to design curricula that comply with labour market requirements. This alignment effectively addresses human resource needs, as student employability ultimately validates the relevance of higher education. Redefining the curriculum and introducing contemporary, interactive and creative pedagogical approaches showcase higher education's agility in proactively responding to changing job market requirements as quickly as possible.

This study attempts to offer an innovative and flexible pedagogical approach that can be readily implemented within ESPs and bridge the gap between academic knowledge acquisition and the evolving demands of the job market. More specifically, it aims to analyse the shifting paradigms of teaching for the job market in the context of higher education. In addition, the study presents digital portfolios as a relevant solution and a strategic tool to address the employability imperative identified above as well as a platform for fostering core professional and transferable competencies, including self-presentation, intercultural, digital and technical competencies, critical thinking, project management competencies, etc. Finally, the aim of the paper is to position digital portfolios as an example of pedagogical good practice and an adaptable solution for practising employability skills in different HE settings and enhancing employability across various professional fields.

2. Skills for Better Employability

The rapid pace of changes in the job market and its constantly evolving nature has placed particular importance on student employability. Employability may be defined as “a set of achievements – skills, understandings and personal attributes – that makes graduates more likely to gain employment and be successful in their chosen occupations, which benefits themselves, the workforce, the community and the economy” (Yorke, 2006: 8). Be it technological development, new strategic considerations or some other concerns, students are expected to be able and ready to adapt to swift-changing needs of the job market.

The changes in the labour market inevitably require the shifting paradigms of teaching as well as developing new, innovative approaches in higher educational practices. In addition to the core academic and technical competences, a growing importance has been given to a set of skills also known as *employability skills*, *soft skills* or *transferable skills* (cf. Tomlinson, 2017). Their importance has been highlighted by a variety of policy makers and education providers: international organizations such as the European Union (e.g. CEDEFOP, 2017), national government organizations (e.g. National Careers Service, 2024; Government of Ontario, 2023), universities and online learning platforms (e.g. Oxford University, 2025; Libertas.hr, 2021; Futurelearn 2020) and so on.

The term *employability skills* refers to “a set of transferable skills and key personal attributes which are highly valued by employers and essential for effective performance in the workplace” (The University of Sydney, 2023). While hard skills refer to subject specific knowledge and job-related competences, employability or

soft skills are “generic in nature, rather than job-specific, and are common to all work roles and workplaces across all industry types” (The University of Sydney, 2023). The importance and ubiquity of the term *soft skills* has been reflected by its addition into general English dictionaries (e.g. dictionary.cambridge.org, 2025; www.collinsdictionary.com, 2025).

The list of employability skills is neither unique nor definite (cf. Yale University, 2019; Tertiary Education Commission, 2021; Coursera, 2025). For example, based on the report of the Confederation of British Industry, the Oxford University Careers Centre focuses on the following employability skills: business awareness, communication, creativity, initiative, leadership, planning, self-management, and teamwork (Oxford University, 2025). Having good communication skills, for instance, implies “building rapport and feeling confident engaging others through listening, observing, writing, and presenting” (Oxford University, 2025). In order to achieve this, it is suggested that students first start thinking about spoken and written communication with different audiences and for different purposes. Debating ideas with friends, networking, watching TED presentations, etc. are all effective strategies to enhance their communication skills. More specifically, the list of short-, medium- and long-term commitments (e.g. writing an article or review for a student publication, creating your own website, running a campaign about something important to you, etc.) are proposed.

Even a brief glance at the list of attributes that graduates are supposed to develop and demonstrate in just a single area is impressive and it is clear that neither building nor demonstrating the possession of these skills are simple and straightforward. Many employability skills (e. g. in communication, teamwork, etc.) are gained through prescribed curriculum courses and activities in degree programmes: through various forms of written assignments, oral presentations, common projects, etc. However, there are also a vast number of non-compulsory activities enhancing employability opportunities and contributing to the student success in the professional landscape: student conferences, workshops, hackathons, mobility programmes, internships, volunteering, etc. They all significantly add to the personal traits and skills of the graduates which are highly desirable by the employers.

It is highly likely that most HE courses attempt to integrate employability skills into their curricula to some degree. ESP, being a forward-thinking and fundamentally practical discipline in higher education, has been largely responsive to real-world market demands and it has made the development of employability skills an important part of its curriculum. For example, Chi and Vu (2023) investigate how Vietnamese graduates evaluate the contributions of ESP courses to their employability. Dlabolová and Čoupková (2022) discuss the design of their ESP courses for science students and the implementation of skills needed for peer-feedback, mediating meaning and providing evidence of one's achievements. Spirovská Tevdovská (2017) compares the views of students in ESP classes with the views of potential employers regarding the employability skills.

As for the employer's side, in addition to the list of skills emphasized in the report by the Confederation of British Industry above, the research conducted by Robles (2012) provides a valuable insight into the soft skills that the surveyed business executives in the USA recognize as crucial: integrity, communication, courtesy, responsibility, social skills, positive attitude, professionalism, flexibility, teamwork, and work ethic. They want their employees to “communicate effectively, get along

well with their coworkers, embrace teamwork, take initiative, have high work ethic, and portray professionalism” (Robles, 2012: 462). Nghia, Anh and Kien (2023) compare most valued soft skills in business and other occupational fields in various countries and provide evidence that English language education contributes to graduates’ employability.

ESP instructors have been determinedly attempting to align their curricula to the needs of the labour market identified above and to integrate some soft skills. Numerous advancements in technologically enhanced language learning provide a modern learning environment that fosters active involvement of students in the learning process, an augmented learning experience, and greater authenticity.

3. Digital Portfolios in ESP Teaching

One of the digital classroom solutions that leverages technology and has the potential to bridge academic learning and professional competence through ESP courses are digital or e-portfolios. Digital portfolios are an ideal fit for ESP due to their interdisciplinary and customizable nature. They cultivate proficiency that requires not only language skills but also an understanding of language’s role within specific professional environments, making them relevant across academic disciplines and professional fields.

At their most basic, digital portfolios can be described as a digital dossier of materials that documents individual competencies and achievements in the form of tasks, reflections, photographs, audios, videos, links, infographics, presentations, scanned documents, and self-reflections. Salem (2025: 1), for example, defines e-portfolios as a comprehensive e-collection of multimodal learning artefacts that have various purposes, including teaching, assessment, and providing insight into a student’s learning process. Lam (2023, cited in Mogas, Cea Álvarez and Pazos-Justo, 2023: 829) further adds that these artefacts are crucial for helping students reflect on their learning journeys and as such they contribute to learning in numerous ways (Mapundu and Musara, 2019: 191). While working on a digital portfolio, students continuously monitor their progress, developing the key skill of reflection almost subconsciously. The skill enables them to think critically about their learning experience and professional development, which can be evidenced by the role of digital portfolios in fostering critical thinking, problem-solving, and the skills needed for lifelong learning, as highlighted by Bolliger and Shepherd (cited in Ciesielkiewicz, 2019: 649). This is further supported by Alexiou and Paraskeva (2010: 3049), who claim that digital portfolios enhance self-regulated learning and encourage students to be active and autonomous learners. And precisely higher education aims to promote the competence of autonomous learning because in this way the learning process is increasingly shifted to the student, which additionally supports the suitability of digital portfolios for the context. Taking ownership of their learning through portfolios while studying will eventually be substituted by proactivity when they enter the labour market where they will have to demonstrate these skills to employers. Ultimately, this demonstrates how digital learning contexts, aligned with new pedagogical paradigms, are highly supportive of both student learning and career readiness. This versatility, comprehensiveness and authenticity is what gives digital portfolios their enduring value, a value that, as a result of numerous contributions, is clearly multifaceted. Furthermore, Mogaz, Álvarez, and Pazos-Justo (2023: 829) argue that digital resources must be

integrated into syllabi to effectively guide students' learning. This is the reason why digital portfolios can be said to represent a highly important approach to fostering self-management skills as they enable experiential and personalized learning in both academic and professional settings. Due to their ability to foster students' growth, constructivist learning, and critical reflection on their learning, Mapundu and Musara (2019: 192) claim that portfolios have become a key factor in e-learning. This perspective aligns with Malita's (2009: 2312) assertion that it is vital not only to introduce this method, but to implement it as an overall concept within the curriculum. As such, they are no longer just an educational resource but, as Alonso-Díaz et al. (2018: 143) note, a fundamental component of the new learning culture and, in our view, a modern career must-have.

Preparing students for future work can be done through various comprehensive approaches, combining in-class guided learning with independent study whereby the students engage in different assignments and projects that develop intercultural communication skills and core business skills such as self-management, digital literacy, problem-solving, time-management, critical thinking, collaboration, etc. In comparison with other tools, digital portfolios are particularly effective as they can be turned from a learning repository into a powerful tool for professional development. In other words, they can bridge the gap from theory to practice, which is exactly what today's students prioritize – the practical application of their education.

4. Digital Portfolio in a Business English Course

4.1. Context and Participants

This paper provides an overview of the five-year experience gained from implementing a digital portfolio concept within the Business English (BE) curriculum. More specifically, it focuses on the integration of the concept during the 2024/25 academic year in the Business English course for third-year undergraduate students at the Faculty of Economics in Osijek, Croatia. Comprising both full-time and part-time students, the above-mentioned course (Business English 6) is mandatory and it includes three weekly English classes with a lecture and two practical study sessions. It generally enrolls a cohort of approximately 160 students in the summer semester, all majoring in Business Economics. Students typically possess a B2 level of English proficiency according to the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages. The curriculum of the Business English course is based on the idea to strike a balance between the in-class lessons as a directed learning pathway accompanied by an independent student learning experience through digital portfolios, maximising the affordances of technology.

4.2 Aims

Firstly, the digital portfolio was introduced in the Business English course in pursuit of a quality solution that would innovate the teaching practice, and, in doing so, encourage students to embrace education-enhancing opportunities and elevate their learning experience by taking on assignments that go beyond the standard curriculum. Secondly, the idea was to add value to traditional language learning by raising both students' perception of learning as a lifelong process as well as their

awareness of more meaningful, deeper, and applied methods of learning. Thirdly, as experienced language instructors, the authors recognize that true language and skill mastery, particularly at higher proficiency levels, is dependent on immersive and autonomous learning. Given the limited contact time in the BE course at hand, it was aimed to implement a solid solution that would enable students to move beyond the classroom. Ultimately, strong language proficiency constitutes a significant advantage for successful global market integration.

With this context in mind, the introduction of digital portfolios into Business English classes represents a welcome transformative shift in the instructor's pedagogy. It reflects a collective responsibility to prepare new generations of competitive professionals by connecting language skills with practical professional tasks, fostering student autonomy, and providing them with a tangible, transferable document for future employment.

4.3. The Portfolio Development Process

There are numerous website-making platforms nowadays but, for the purpose of Business English classes, Google Sites have been chosen as the platform for creation of their digital portfolios. Some of the compelling advantages of using Google Sites include the possibility of their seamless integration with Google Workspace, simplicity and user-friendliness. Also, for students who did not have a Google account it was easy, fast and completely free to create one.

After creating a Google Account and accessing Google Sites, students begin the process of building their portfolios which turns them from passive recipients of knowledge in traditional teaching into active participants of the course, students who learn by creating their own content in line with the course instructor's guidelines. The guidelines were explained during the introductory course session and were available throughout the semester in a presentation on the learning management system (LMS). They encompass a detailed explanation of the concept, duration, obligations, and assessment, as well as step-by-step instructions for each specific portfolio assignment. All assignment topics included in the portfolio are covered as educational units within the course curriculum but can be modified from academic year to academic year, in accordance with the curriculum and outcomes. In the 2024/2025 academic year, the assignments included:

- A clear title page with the student's name, a favourite quote and its author. In addition, on this page, there should be a dropdown menu that shows all 7 submitted assignments, with each one on a separate page.
- Assignment 1 is a biography focused on the student's professional aspects, education, and experience, accompanied by an inserted tabular curriculum vitae in Europass or another chosen format.
- Assignment 2 is a cover letter for a real job of the student's choosing, based on a current job advertisement from suggested websites like Eurojobs, Guardian Jobs, or LinkedIn Jobs. The instructions for writing it are provided to the students during lectures and through documents on the LMS. Students must also include a link to the selected advertisement.
- Assignment 3 is an approximately one-minute audio recording in which the student shares their view on the importance of teamwork skills and personal experiences. They are guided by a question template to cover specific aspects of the topic.

- Assignment 4 is to present the content of a chosen TED talk on the topic of leadership, followed by a critical opinion on its quality and/or usefulness.
- Assignment 5 is to create a personal infographic using a digital tool like Canva. Using images, symbols, and topic-specific keywords or phrases, students will present their view of one or more business risks in the global environment over the upcoming five-year period, as well as potential solutions.
- Assignment 6 is to provide answers to a series of questions and statements about what job satisfaction means to them. Each answer must be elaborated on with a minimum of three sentences. Students begin this portfolio page with a favourite quote about job satisfaction and must interpret the quote in their own words.
- Assignment 7 is a self-reflection task. Students debrief the portfolio project and reflect on their learning process. They reflect on their efforts, achievements, and challenges encountered during the summer semester. By evaluating their strengths and weaknesses, the students set personal English learning goals for the future.

From what has been stated above, it is clear that students are no longer creating a single, static document, but rather a dynamic and collaborative one. The document enables instructors to view, edit, and assess student work, while serving as tangible evidence of learning and growth for students and potentially employers. Furthermore, students demonstrate their foreign language communication abilities through a series of relevant, employability-focused assignments that directly align with the course material. In this way, classroom learning is shifted toward the practical development of employability skills. It is through this process that students not only acquire new knowledge and skills but also learn to reflect on their experiences, a crucial skill for adapting to the demands of the modern workforce.

5. Reflections and Implications

The digital portfolio was implemented as a core component of the curriculum for its primary educational purpose: to document student learning and growth over time. To achieve this, students were required to synthesize their knowledge of professional English, digital skills, and business-related topics into a professional, tangible document with effectively presented content. Instructor experience and student feedback both confirm the program's authenticity and real-world relevance, showing that this dynamic and multi-faceted tool was clearly beneficial for the learning process and made the entire teaching process a success. Students were empowered and took ownership of their learning, transitioning from traditional passive methods to autonomous, individualized, and self-regulated learning. In the context of professional English, the portfolios provided concrete evidence of a student's ability to apply language skills in a holistic, real-world business setting, thereby fostering interdisciplinary learning.

However, it must be admitted that the students' initial reactions varied when a digital portfolio was introduced as a new learning methodology at the beginning of the semester. This was largely due to a combination of mixed feelings and a lack of knowledge, leaving many participants feeling reserved and uncertain about the new approach. While most students were intrigued and interested, others were

quite reluctant and discouraged. This was primarily due to the immediate realization that creating a portfolio would require more effort than traditional coursework. This initial reaction is best captured by a student's candid reflection below. To ensure authenticity, students' comments in the article have not been edited.

When I found out, during the introductory session of the Business English 6 course, that we wouldn't be taking a written exam as usual but instead had to create our own digital portfolio consisting of various tasks, such as voice recordings, writing a CV in English, expressing our opinions on certain topics, writing a cover letter, and other creative assignments, I thought to myself: "It would be easier to just take an exam."

After attending the classes and beginning the portfolio creation process, however, students reported an increase in their confidence and ability to create professional portfolios.

The portfolio's flexibility—which has allowed its content to be easily modified over the years in response to changing curricula, learning outcomes, and course materials—confirms that this pedagogical approach offers a unique opportunity to integrate tailored and versatile activities that foster essential professional English, employability, critical thinking and self-presentation skills. As a powerful medium for promoting lifelong learning and preparing students for a successful career, the digital portfolio's growing popularity is evident: students find them invaluable as dynamic records of their competencies that can be continuously updated and presented to future employers throughout their careers. To illustrate, here is what some students had to say:

Here I had a chance to express my opinion on interesting questions which is a rare occurrence nowadays when you can solve pretty much any task using AI tools.

Creating the portfolio helped me organize my experiences and present my skills more confidently in English.

I put a lot of effort into understanding the tasks and organizing my ideas, which helped me progress throughout the semester.

The relationship between the course content and the language is illustrated by the views of two students:

Working on this portfolio project has been a valuable learning experience that helped me improve my business English skills, especially in writing and expressing opinions clearly.

One of my favorite parts of the portfolio was writing about the TED Talk. It allowed me to connect language learning with real-life topics and listen to native speakers, which improved my listening skills.

The most interesting task for me was writing the cover letter, because we had the freedom to write it for any job in the world and in any location. I let my imagination run wild and really enjoyed looking through job ads and imagining myself working in those roles.

Digital portfolios did not remain only a static artefact but became also a process itself or a multidimensional reflection of their learning journey. Being actively involved in building and maintaining their digital portfolios, students took personal responsibility for their learning which made them most effective as a learning tool. Furthermore, as a key component of modern educational strategy, the portfolio creation process had a significant impact on student engagement by raising their

awareness of the learning journey and encouraging them to evaluate their own work and progress. Hence, the final assignment in the portfolio, designed as a comprehensive process of self-reflection and self-evaluation, served as the foundation for a deeper and more authentic review of students' work. This open-ended task prompted them to reflect on their work, allowing them to assess their strengths and weaknesses and set learning goals for the future. This approach allowed them to effectively demonstrate skills and competencies that conventional coursework often fails to capture. It is particularly beneficial for students who are constrained by traditional testing, or are otherwise reluctant or unable to present, as it provides a platform to fully showcase their learning and be recognized for the skills they have truly acquired. Despite potential concerns about objectivity and reliability compared to traditional methods, our experience indicates that a focus on authentic assessment through portfolios substantially increased student engagement and facilitated a deeper gain in knowledge. Here are some examples of students' self-reflection on their skills:

What I did best was writing the CV, as I had already written one for a student job, so I had a rough idea of how it should look.

One of my weaknesses is spontaneous speaking and using more advanced grammar when talking.

The most challenging part was recording my voice and speaking in English. I often feel nervous about pronunciation and grammar when speaking, but this task helped me build more confidence. I now understand how important it is to practice speaking regularly, not just writing or reading.

Based on the comments from a significant number of students, we can conclude that students described the portfolio project as a valuable and solid learning experience. They felt the assignments were not only interesting and practical but also an effective way to apply what they learned. While they found the project itself was not overly difficult, they recognized that it required a structured and challenging approach at all stages. Their realization that they successfully met these challenges ultimately made the entire process a deeply motivational and interesting experience. Below are some student reflections that highlight the portfolio's contribution to their professional development and the development of their employability skills.

Creating this digital portfolio, in addition to solving tasks, has given me the opportunity to get to know myself, my strengths, but also the challenges I need to overcome in order to be prepared for future business challenges.

It helped me set new goals for my career and personal growth.

Through the assignments and reflections, I became more aware of how important communication, organization, and presentation are in the business world

Each assignment pushed me in different ways - some tasks were tougher and some were easier, but none of them were boring.

This was a great opportunity to reflect on yourself as a person and the result of your actions. It helped me value myself more and brought me joy...

While portfolios offer unique benefits, their implementation comes with practical challenges. With large numbers of students, as is our case, the detailed feedback and individual attention required for effective assessment can be a significant burden for the educator. This is a crucial factor, as the process requires a substantial amount of time and effort from the assessor. Still, in smaller group

settings, ESP educators can use digital portfolios to gain a deeper understanding of each student's language proficiency, identifying individual strengths and areas for growth. This in turn enables them to customize instruction and improve learning outcomes. In other words, the inherent flexibility and adaptability of this pedagogical approach allow for the widespread implementation of digital portfolios across a variety of teaching models and ESP contexts.

6. Conclusion

This paper documents the implementation of digital portfolios in the BE curriculum, highlighting how these tools – powerful professional assets – enhance the course's value while effectively supporting the development and strengthening of students' employability within formal education. The purpose of introducing them into the course was to develop a strong sense of student competence in their abilities and to boost their confidence in the pre-employment process. It also aimed to raise awareness of this professional tool with which students can showcase a full range of skills and abilities transferable from academic to professional life. Moreover, the process of creating the portfolio as tangible evidence, made students aware of their acquired linguistic, professional and technical competencies, as well as the importance of these skills for their professional identity and future employability. It is the holistic nature of digital portfolios – spanning diverse needs and disciplines – that enables students to 'learn by doing' an authentic product that simulates real professional practice.

The findings of the study could be useful for ESP practitioners but also experts in different disciplines, policy makers, and current and future students since graduate employability is often not considered enough or is even neglected. Accordingly, employability skills should be cultivated across all academic disciplines, not solely business-related ones, and educators should explicitly link students' in-class activities with the proficiencies in the professional world. Therefore, preparing students for the global market via digital portfolios should be considered as an integral part of the ESP and Business English curriculum.

The study concentrated predominantly on the portfolio's value as a learning tool and a mechanism for personal growth. The findings are possibly constrained by their contextual specificity, stemming from experiential insights unique to a particular institution and pedagogical approach. The study's five-year focus, encompassing the pandemic years, introduces an additional limitation concerning potential temporal shifts in curriculum or student demographics.

The results of this study suggest a need for further research into the broader application of digital portfolios, as this approach is undoubtedly transferable across various disciplines and in diverse educational contexts. In addition, their inherent digital and collaborative features make them perfect for documenting learning in structured initiatives like virtual exchanges, distance or hybrid learning environments. Future research should therefore investigate these benefits in greater detail.

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