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E-Portfolio Assessment on EFL Learners' Writing Performance at Tertiary Education

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Abstract

Most educational scholars nowadays are looking for methods to combine technology into classroom learning practices. Electronic portfolios (E-portfolios) can be considered as one of these methods that could be integrated into learning approaches, resulting in considerable developments in learning outcomes. In other words, e-portfolios are one of the potentially influential e-learning developments that could successfully find its way into language learning classes all around the world, especially in EFL writing assessment, which has gained attention in recent years. Thus, this paper aims at exploring the effect of implementing e-portfolios as an alternative method of assessment as opposed to the conventional method of teaching writing in writing classrooms to enhance EFL student writing quality.

Keywords: portfolio, e-portfolio assessment, writing skills, writing performance

1. Introduction

Writing is one of the most difficult language skills to master in EFL contexts and it is a complex and demanding cognitive process including iterative cycles of planning, drafting, and revising. Multiple cycles of high-quality revision are necessary for students to improve their writing. Feedback from their teachers as assessment has been shown to be helpful and promotes students' writing skills (Fong & Schallert, 2023; Graham, 2018, Graham *et al.*, 2015) ^[11, 14, 15]. The development of curriculum and instruction practices in teaching resulted in the increasing use of learner-centered communicative trends in the classroom. These trends, including process writing, process reading, communicative competence, and whole language are distinguished from previous practices due to their emphasis on language function and meaning and the process of learning. With the shift of thought on the nature of writing from product to process approaches, new approaches required to evaluate learners' writing ability. These techniques have been named as alternative or valid strategies for writing evaluation (Tabatabaei & Assefi, 2012) ^[26]. In addition to the two labels for these new assessment strategies, terms such as informal assessment, direct assessment, performance assessment, and descriptive assessment have been used (Javaherbakhsh, 2010) ^[17]. One type of authentic assessment is portfolio assessment.

A portfolio is a comprehensive metatext that compiles work from an archive and includes additional texts crafted specifically for it (Yancey, 1996a) ^[28]. Yancey describes portfolios as documenting diversity, showcasing varied content, and highlighting individual, cognitive, cultural, and institutional differences. They also serve an evaluative purpose, reflecting the significance of contributors (Yancey, 1996a) ^[28]. Importantly, portfolios offer a unique instructional perspective, emphasizing students' roles over teachers'. Research has shown that portfolios improve EFL learners' vocabulary, grammar, and organization (Aydin, 2014; Wang & Liao, 2008) ^[3, 27]. They also aid cognitive development, enhancing critical thinking, self-awareness, and self-evaluation (Meihami *et al.*, 2018) ^[24].

With the rise of technology, feedback supported by technology, commonly referred to as electronic feedback (e-feedback), has become prevalent (Ene & Upton, 2014) ^[10]. Similarly, due to technological advances, many writing teachers have changed the traditional portfolio assessment to an electronic portfolio (e-portfolio) assessment. E-portfolios have progressed into an authentic assessment method that acts as a repository for learner work and a way to track learners' progress (Kusuma & Waluyo, 2023) ^[18]. E-portfolios are used to collect students' digital work using digital means (Dougherty & Coelho, 2017). Modern technical platforms like Facebook, websites, blogs, wikis, and Google Docs increasingly offer e-portfolios (Babae, 2012), which include peer- and, or self-assessment.

Therefore, the overall objective of this study is to explore the effectiveness of e-portfolio assessment on the improvement of university students' writing ability.

2. Content

2.1. Origin of portfolio assessment

There has been a shift from traditional learning environments and focusing on final products to student-centered learning that evaluates the learning process and performance during the constructivist post-method era. This change from summative to formative assessment is known as "Authentic" or "Alternative" assessment, emphasizing integration with curriculum goals and a constructive relationship with teaching and learning (McNamara, 2000) ^[23]. It includes various procedures like learner-centered assessments, student-designed tests, portfolio assessments, and self-assessments, which teachers and students can collaboratively select and use in language classrooms. Among these, portfolio assessment is highly effective, interesting, and popular in EFL/ESL writing education. It is defined as "a purposeful collection of students' work that demonstrates their effort, progress, and achievement in a given area" (Genesee and Upshur, 1996) ^[13]. It is important to note that while a portfolio is a collection of student work samples, portfolio assessment involves creating, collecting, and evaluating the portfolio's contents (Moya & O'Malley, 1994) ^[25].

2.2. Portfolio assessment in EFL writing context

Currently, teachers often use a process-oriented approach in writing instruction. In this method, students spend time selecting topics, gathering information, and drafting, revising, and editing their work before submitting a final piece. The focus in EFL classrooms is on writing processes to produce a final product, making it important to use an assessment method that supports this trend, as assessment and teaching are closely linked. A portfolio, considered a practical alternative to standardized testing, is a modern technique that provides accurate insights into a student's abilities across different learning areas. Portfolio assessment, an authentic and innovative technique, evaluates both the writing process and the final product. It fosters a student-centered learning environment that requires active participation from students. It helps improve students' writing performance by allowing them to select their best work for assessment. Students can also include samples showing their progress, such as planning, drafting, revising, and editing. Portfolio assessment fosters autonomy, critical thinking, and linguistic competence and supports the idea that writing is both a process of growth and development and a final product.

Portfolio assessment is important for EFL learners, because the outcomes of language proficiency can be assessed effectively, and the observable behaviors gathered through it provide evidence of students' acquisition of skills. In 2019, Taheri *et al.* explored the impact of portfolio assessment on EFL students' writing ability, particularly focusing on the interaction between portfolio assessment and self-regulation strategy. The study aimed to determine if portfolio assessment could significantly improve BA EFL students' paragraph writing ability, especially among high/low self-regulated learners. The results of this study could have implications for teaching, curriculum development, and testing. In the same year, Sinar *et al.* conducted a semester-

long study at universities in Medan, North Sumatera, implementing writing portfolios with self-assessment and reflection practices to support students' progress in writing. The findings indicated that students who used portfolios with self-assessment and reflection showed greater improvement in their writing performance compared to those who did not. In the same vein, Taufik *et al.* Both focused on promoting students' autonomous learning through portfolio assessment in EFL writing classes. Tyas presented the implementation of portfolio assessment in a university in Indonesia, using observation checklists to assess the completeness of students' portfolios while Taufik *et al.* emphasized the importance of students practicing writing frequently and reviewing their work to develop writing skills. In their reasearch, Fathi *et. al.*, examined the impact of portfolio-based writing instruction on EFL students' writing performance and anxiety. The study recruited 41 EFL learners to investigate the effects of portfolio-based instruction on writing outcomes.

In an experimental study, Aly (2002) ^[1] suggested a writing process approach to improve students' writing skills. The experiment was conducted at the English Department, Faculty of Education, in Shams University. Forty, second year male and female students were randomly assigned to the experimental group. The instruments of the study included a student questionnaire and a pre-post writing composition text. Conferencing was an integral component in the workshop to teaching writing as an attempt to create interaction between the teacher and the student. Findings showed that using writing workshop approach improved the students' writing. It is clear that such approach helped students to have some more sense of responsibility towards group and individual work. Apple and Shimo (2004) ^[2] tested students' perceptions of portfolio creation in an EFL context in Japan. The participants were sixty one students in two different universities attending English writing class. A student-selected portfolio work was used as the elementary means of assessment. Tests were not used for assessment. A self-report questionnaire was used to measure the responses of the learners which showed that they firmly believed that portfolio technique helped them improve expressive and compositional writing ability. Marefat (2004) ^[21] investigated views of the students on portfolio use in an email-based EFL writing class. The majority of the subjects found that the portfolio technique was a positive opportunity for their writing. In addition, some students improved a personal understanding of their learning process.

2.3. E-portfolios: assessing to learn

The advancement of technology and the evolution of teaching and learning theories have mutually reinforced each other, which results in increased use of technology in education and the creation of pedagogical tools that enhance the teaching and learning process. One such tool that has gained prominence is the digital portfolio (Bryant & Chithum, 2013) ^[16]. Also known as an electronic portfolio (e-portfolio) or webfolio, it began being used to assess student performance in the late 1980s, particularly in North American universities. Studies have reported that digital portfolios promote increased student engagement in extending and integrating knowledge, motivation, self-reflection and, consequently, in improving learning outcomes. On the other hand, it is a tool that encourages teachers to direct their activity toward guiding students in the construction of their own knowledge. In higher education, particularly in blended learning courses,

e-portfolios enable students to engage in committed learning and self-training through dialogue and mentoring (Leite & Fernandes, 2011) ^[20]. Highlights that learning is more effectively consolidated when portfolios incorporate reflection, documentation, and collaboration. A learning-focused portfolio should include reflective processes, selective evidence, and the teacher as a mentor, supporting its development collaboratively. The teacher's role is crucial, not just for the knowledge they provide, but for fostering understanding through collaborative processes between students and peers, enhancing shared learning experiences in an online environment (Cova, 2010) ^[8]. This creates a fertile environment for potential synergies between authenticity and assessment, and no better way exists to exercise authenticity in assessment than by portfolio. Authentic assessment aims to engage students in carrying out tasks that include problematic situations that are close to real-world problems. With the exploration of these tasks, it aims to enhance the development of knowledge and skills, in particular, favor the development of students' higher order thinking skills, such as communication, initiative, autonomy, problem-solving, and critical thinking.

Digital portfolios have evolved from a tool focused solely on showcasing final products and knowledge mastery to one that supports ongoing assessment and promotes learning. They serve as an alternative to traditional testing, encouraging students to engage in critical reflection, self-assessment, and autonomy in knowledge creation (Lam, 2018) ^[19]. This approach supports an integrated assessment method. Digital portfolios help teachers and students view assessment as a central part of learning and as a way to mediate relationships and knowledge among students, content, and teachers.

In learning and assessment, portfolios empower students as both authors and readers of their continuous and systematic assessment process. Teachers, acting as mentors, guide students with feedback to enhance learning. Digital portfolios offer more flexibility and interactivity than traditional paper versions, promoting reflection and knowledge-building through "networked systems" (Marinho & Delgado, 2019) ^[22]. They foster teacher-student dialogue, connecting teaching, learning, and assessment. Yancey (2009) ^[29] emphasized that digital portfolios encourage contextualized reflection to boost student performance. Buzzetto-More (2010) ^[7] found that digital portfolios help students understand learning goals, reflect on knowledge, and play an active role in organizing and demonstrating their learning, as well as exchanging ideas and learning from feedback.

In an online course English course, use of an electronic portfolio is practical and useful. According to Barret (2000) ^[4], an electronic portfolio includes the use of electronic technologies that allow the teachers and the students to collect and organize artifacts in many different formats. Furthermore, since electronic portfolios are not constrained by time, they provide a stimulating environment for teacher and peer feedback. Therefore, electronic portfolios provide more advantages than the regular portfolios (Hung, 2008) ^[16].

2.4. Design of the e-portfolio and its assessment

Based on the extensive use of e-portfolios to improve EFL writing skills, they are expected to be designed and implemented following Moya and O'Malley's (1994) ^[25] *Portfolio Assessment Model*. Originally for face-to-face teaching, this model has been adapted for electronic portfolios in online courses and includes six interconnected

activity levels:

1. **Defining the purpose and focus of the e-portfolio.** The main goal is to enhance students' writing skills. The instructor reviews the online English course materials, identifies e-portfolio components, and informs students at the start. Students are explained what to include, how individual work would be assessed, the rubric for evaluating writing drafts, and where to store their e-portfolios. A committee, including the instructor and another faculty member, is responsible for assessing the writing drafts in the e-portfolios.
2. **Planning the components of the e-portfolio.** This involves required and optional entries. Required entries included three writing drafts, pre- and post-English proficiency tests, and achievement test results. Optional entries were a checklist, survey, and form. Students choose from suggested topics, design to be engaging and not reliant on specific content knowledge, such as describing their home, a famous person, or friends, writing various types of letters, and retelling a story or memory. Controversial topics like violence at football matches and dating are also included. Students are informed about the draft due dates, a 50-word limit, and resources such as dictionaries and online materials.
3. **Designing e-portfolio analysis.** The writing tasks aligned with course goals, requiring students to write three drafts. Writing skills are assessed based on individual progress and group comparison.
4. **Preparing for instruction.** Students are encouraged to organize and submit their e-portfolios by the deadline, promoting self-regulation. This involves managing their cognitive activities and motivation for learning (Garcia & Pintrich, 1994). Feedback is provided to inform students of their progress.
5. **Planning verification of procedures.** To ensure consistent interpretation and scoring, a portfolio committee used a specific criterion and rubric to evaluate student progress (Moya & O'Malley, 1994) ^[25]. Optional entries are validated for reliability before use.
6. **Implementing the model.** In the first chat session, the instructor explains the e-portfolio's components, purpose, and assessment rubric.

3. Conclusion

As to the role of portfolios in writing in the literature, this study concludes that portfolios can facilitate EFL learners' performance on writing. The study also shows that an e-portfolio can be a practical alternative to standardized tests. Similar to regular portfolios, it allows students to apply language skills in real-life situations, solve problems, and develop creativity. Additionally, e-portfolios let students self-assess their language progress and consider improvements for future work. The instructor's ongoing feedback enhances its benefits, making it a strong alternative to standardized testing. The assessment portfolio is particularly effective for promoting self-assessment, encouraging students to review their work and critically analyze their language development. In other words, keeping an e-portfolio helps students develop self-regulation skills, which are highly expected in higher education.

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