

Using Portfolio Assessment to Enhance Reflective Writing in EFL Classrooms

Houda Boumediene¹, Fatiha Kaid Berrahal², MadhuBala Bava Hardji³

¹ *Sidi Bel Abbes University, Algeria*

² *Teachers Training School Oran, Algeria*

³ *Multimedia University, Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia*

Abstract

There has been an increasing interest on research which documents the significance of portfolios in foreign language instruction in general and teaching writing in particular. The primary focus of the current work is to explore the effectiveness of portfolio assessment in developing English as a Foreign Language (EFL) students' reflective writing. In order to fulfill this objective, an experimental research design was conducted. The sample was composed of one hundred second year students of English at the University of Laghouat-Algeria. The data were collected through the following experimental tools: Interview, Pre-Post Writing Tests, and Pre/Post Self-Reporting Questionnaires. Students were asked to write about ten reflective topics which are drawn from their own experiences. The main findings demonstrated that reflective writings of students were improved after the use of portfolio assessment method and which confirms that portfolio assessment stratagem has significant effects in developing students' reflective writing in terms of both process and product. And henceforth; this research suggests that portfolio assessment keeping deserves to be taken into consideration in the curriculum of EFL Teaching Departments in Algeria.

1. Introduction

In any educational system, assessment plays a significant role in improving learning. In teaching and learning EFL, writing is considered as the most difficult skill to be acquired. Consequently, assessing writing will be a complex process too especially when it comes to reflective writing which is more personal than the academic one. As language teaching has moved in the direction of learner – centered approach, tests and assessments have begun to incorporate the measure for learner-centered tasks [1].

As mentioned by the authors in [2], assessment performance is day-to-day activity. It can be authentic and engaging demonstrations of students' abilities. It is based on a collection of information about what students know and what they are able to do. In assessment, there are multiple ways and

methods of collecting information at different times and contexts. Authors in [3] claimed that assessment "is used to have better understanding of the current knowledge that a student processes". There are two tools of assessment: traditional and alternative assessments. First, traditional assessment tools that are widely used and commonly utilized by teachers, schools, and organizations and which involve multiple-choice tests, true/false tests, short answers, and essays writing. Second, alternative assessment tools as authors in [4] explained they involve three main tools: cognitive assessment, performance assessment, and portfolio assessment. This latter means more interaction and cooperation between the student and the teacher. More or less, portfolio can be a set of the activities taken on over time in the development of written products [5]. A portfolio is a collection of learner's works over a period of time. It is used for evaluating learners' abilities and progress in that period.

Portfolio assessment is an alternative method of assessment which was introduced to cope with the changes and developments that occurred in the educational system and to answer the drawbacks of the traditional methods of assessments. It considers the student a full partner in the process of assessment rather than a subject of assessment. More specifically, portfolio assessment is defined as an "ongoing process involving the student and teacher in selecting samples of student work, during a specific period of time and according to predetermined criteria" to show how much the writing has progressed and how much the students have put effort into it. It is also defined as "the procedure used to plan, collect, and analyze the multiple sources of data maintained in the portfolio" [7].

Portfolio assessment requires both: more input and responsibility from the students, and it demands a great deal of time and commitment from the teachers [5]. Through portfolios, teachers will get a broader and more in-depth look at what students know and can do. Students also in their turn will have a better chance to communicate. Portfolio assessment tool will let learners express their knowledge on the material discussed in their own

ways using various intelligences. In other words, portfolio assessment can help learners to produce fairer and more consistent evaluation on their own works. Portfolio assessment meets the demand of efficiency and effectiveness; it is a promising alternative procedure, as it provides opportunities for positive interactions between students and teachers and provides powerful learning process. It mainly bounds the teaching, learning and testing together as a whole thing.

2. Review of Literature

Authors in [8] argued that the skill of reflection involves the capacity to effectively utilize high-level cognitive skills for examples critical and creative thinking, problem-solving, and decision-making in addition to the ability to tap into affective areas and articulate thoughts and feelings. More specifically, authors in [9] defined reflection as:

A form of mental processing – a form of thinking – that we use to fulfill a purpose or to achieve some anticipated outcome. It is applied to relatively complicated or unstructured ideas for which there is no obvious solution. Thus, reflection offers students the opportunity to consider to what extent their personal experiences and observations affect their thinking and their acceptance of new ideas and to reinforce what they have learned. Reflection is the process that provides an opportunity for students to be able to evaluate their own work and think about what they are doing, for taking charge of their growth and development.

According to the authors in [10] reflection or reflective writing in academic context is to involve a conscious and stated purpose for the reflection". Authors in [11] further stated that "Reflective writing is a term that includes a variety of classroom writing activities ranging from semester-long journaling projects to short in-class writing exercises that ask students to summarize a lecture or discussion". According to her, the aim of reflective writing is to improve both quantity and quality of students' written practice. Reflective writing is considered to be more personal than the other sort of academic writing since students are free to reflect on their personal experiences, thoughts, and feelings. However, this does not mean that it should not be well structured. Contrarily, teachers expect from student to produce good pieces of writing. According to [6], assignments that involve reflective writing such as journals or reflection papers are still considered to be academic writing. Therefore, instructors are not looking just for the feelings of student's about a particular subject. Instead, they emphasize on two main elements required in any reflective piece of writing and which are: "analysis and reflection that have significant depth and breadth". Authors in [11] clarified that "Reflective

writing is evidence of reflective thinking". According to authors in [7] reflective thinking involves:

1. Looking back at a phenomenon that happened. It can also be an event or object.
2. Analysis: thinking deeply and from various perspectives about an event or concept; and trying to explain often with reference to a theory from the theme.
3. Thinking accurately about what the event or idea means for you? And your gradual improvement.

Authors in [5] argued that reflective writing is a means of capture the thoughts and experiences in journals, dairies, and blogs. The purpose of reflective writing is to interrogate your own learning and demonstrate the ability to apply theory or conceptual processes to your practice or task in a meaningful way. The reflective framework was found useful in scaffolding reflective writing for a portfolio, and continuous to be used in other capacities for supporting learning and reflective practice. It provides evidence of reflective thinking and can also be a valuable tool for helping the students to formulate and clarify his/her evolving thinking as it develops. According to authors of [12] writing practice is a powerful tool in reflecting some one's ideas, thoughts, and feelings. The reflective writing practice deliberated pauses to allow for thinking processes and gaining new and deeper understanding that leads to actions of improving learning for students. Reflective writing enables learners to inquire in their own practice.

Moreover, reflective writing can improve students writing. It is a helpful tool for learners to develop their critical and creative thinking skills. Additionally, it is an umbrella which has potential improvement of students' writing through increasing their own quality and writing process. As the teachers may provide learners with more opportunities to practice writing by asking them to summarize each class session or once a week, it clearly enables students to regard their comprehension and thinking capacities to communicate their ideas [5].

Reflective writing is considered to have a significant role in the learning process as it encourages students to: use critical thinking and to reinforce their acquired knowledge through reflecting on their personal experiences. In this context, Authors in [13] stated confirmed that reflective writing "provides an opportunity for you to gain further insights from your work through deeper reflection on your experiences, and through further consideration of different other perspectives from people and theory. Therefore, through reflection we can deepen the learning from work. In this respect, authors in [13] said that reflective writing is

beneficial for students as it improves their productions. They are not required just to describe things and list events, but instead to analyze and interpret facts in order to make sense of the information they have learned in classroom. Thanks to this process; students will be able to connect detached pieces of information in order to make them easy for them to recall latter. According to authors in [3], the reflective thinking process removes the burden of undigested information from students and allows them to work towards a more meaningful understanding and comprehension of any given subject. In addition, by engaging students with information, they will be independent and self-directed. Furthermore, authors in [5] claimed that instructors can use reflective writing as a solution to the problem of infrequent writing by giving them a chance for more practicing, and at the same time improving their writing skills. Finally, by writing diaries or short lecture summaries as examples, during each session or once a week, teachers will have more opportunities to provide formal or informal feedback to students regarding their comprehension of the material and ability to clearly communicate their ideas.

The main focus of writing instruction is on the process of creating writing rather than the end product. Yet, traditional assessments concentrate on the final product and neglect the process [5]. The role of portfolio assessment, in this context, is not just to evaluate learners' products but also to enable them to talk about their thoughts at every step of the writing process. The effectiveness of portfolio assessment in developing reflective writing among EFL learners should be examined for several reasons. First, most of EFL students, including students of the Department of English –University of Laghouat, show weaknesses in writing, especially in the reflective instruction. Second, when students write, they are not able to assess their works. Therefore, what is needed is an approach of assessment that can motivate them to thinking, reasoning, evaluating, and judging things and help them to be self-regulated. We suggest portfolio as a method to develop these skills of reflective writing.

Though there have been several studies on the advantages of using portfolio assessment in writing instruction, there seems to be little research related to its benefits along with reflection, which was employed in this paper. Perhaps due to the complexity of the study or time issues, this technique has been neglected in studies on portfolio usages. Yet, a few studies has been conducted on reflection; Two experimental studies conducted by the authors in [15] that have demonstrated that students who have opportunities to reflect on their works and well-assess themselves exhibit great improvements than those who do not.

Furthermore; in learning and teaching EFL content, writing has gained a lot of importance because language learners are often dependent on their ability to express knowledge and culture through written expressions. However, new authentic and alternative methods as portfolio assessment were needed to assess students' writing ability. Portfolio assessment has been used for educational purposes, because it enhances students' self-evaluation and expands their critical thinking. In the light of this issue, Authors in [15] made a study aimed at investigating the effectiveness of portfolio assessment on EFL learners' expository writing ability. The study was conducted with 44 under graduate EFL students at two universities, that is, Sheikh Bahae and Safahan Universities in Isfahan, Iran. The findings suggested that EFL learners could enhance their expository writing ability when employing portfolio assessment. Through portfolio assessment, EFL learners can better monitor their writing process. Also, in other studies concluded that students would reveal their level of spelling, punctuation, dictation, word selection, grammar usage and mental knowledge in writing skills by making students familiar with the using of portfolio assessment in classroom as an effective strategy to produce a piece of writing.

Despite of writing the potential of portfolio assessment benefits, using writing portfolio is not common in EFL context. So, authors in [16] based on the weaknesses of students in writing. Usually students are given grades for their final assignment. Considering the portfolio assessment and writing process, the study aimed at investigating the effects of portfolio assessment on developing EFL learners' writing ability. The study followed a quasi-experimental design includes 30 female EFL learners in the study divided into two groups (one experimental and one control group). The results support the hypothesis of the study that portfolio assessment has a positive effect on Iranian EFL learners' writing proficiency. Participants in experimental group after receiving portfolio assessment have improved their writing proficiency. The final results of the study showed that portfolio assessment as a process and assessment tool improved the students writing ability. However, the study might need more results to support the study. It is important to bear in mind that portfolio assessment has not only positive piles of students' work, but will be better if the researchers can provide multiple results include both negativity and positivity of portfolio assessment on writing.

However, also authors in [16] made a study attempted to investigate the view of students using portfolio assessment and its effects in reporting writing. The findings of the study showed that portfolio assessment has a clearly positive effect on student participants' writing. Also, it has been found

that portfolio was helpful in many aspects such as it improves writing, monitors students' writing and making writing fun. Therefore, it might be worthwhile to explore further benefits of portfolio in EFL writing skills.

As far as, authors in [17] conducted a study in which aimed at examining the effects of portfolio-based writing skills of EFL students. They quoted from [17] that "portfolio assessment requires reflective writing in which teachers invite their students to reflect on their writing". Also they mentioned White and Wright, defined portfolio as "folder containing the students' written works and the students' evaluation of the strengths and weaknesses of his or her written products. In addition to that, authors in the study stated that "the portfolio assessment with a high level of feedback opens the channel of communication between the teachers and the students. In so doing, students can improve their linguistic, cognitive, affective, and social areas." Moreover, authors summarized the benefits of evaluating writing proficiency via portfolio in EFL classes to several points.

First, as mentioned by [15] portfolio makes students responsible and involves them in the learning process. Second, as mentioned by [16] that portfolio encourages students to be self-assessment and self-understanding. While in [18] authors mentioned that portfolio decreases writing anxiety at a significant level. Lastly, portfolio assessment gives a chance to continue and develop their writing. In this study [17], authors allowed a mixed-methods approach, in which they combined both methodologies quantitative and qualitative. In one hand, quantitative method used to explore the difference between the students' writing task in time and the change in students' beliefs before and after the class via research questions.

In the other hand, the qualitative method used to explore EFL students' perspectives on the effectiveness of portfolio writing practice via research questions. The authors of [17] in the study sample contained 14 and 18 female students from a writing class at Adana Science and Technology University in Turkey. In addition to that, collecting data tools were used with research questions are three tools. First, the Self- Efficacy Scale was employed to collect the students' beliefs on writing. Second, Portfolio Assessment Rubric used to assess the writing products. Third, semi-structured focus group interview used for ask students to articulate their views and perspectives on the effectiveness of the writing portfolio practice. The results of the study that found show these several points. First, portfolio gives students opportunities to observe their areas of weaknesses through teachers' comments on their papers pointed out their errors; it helped students to become autonomous for finding their mistakes and enables them opportunities to correct their mistakes

in a different way. Finally, portfolio assessment is a positive step towards increasing writing skills of EFL students. However, the study has some limited points such as the lack of student's mastery of grammar and vocabulary it was limited for students to think critically.

Further in EFL context, the authors of [19] aimed to investigate and examine the understanding of portfolio assessment techniques in selected courses at Ahmadu Bello University, Zaria, Nigeria. They study reviewed the use of portfolio as a model of assessment gained a lot of interest, its types, and identified several benefits of using portfolio assessment such as, it used as a procedure to plan, collect, and analyze the data that saved in portfolio. The students could improve themselves in selecting works process; and assessment portfolio is collaborated the students and teacher in assessing and evaluating the learning process. It could provide information on the learners' development from the beginning to the end. It contains the criteria for evaluating students' learning process, product, and reflection. However, the findings of the study agrees with that of [20] in whose study exposed that, teachers do not have enough knowledge and experience about portfolio assessment; it also concludes that the use of portfolio assessment is difficult because of time consumption and burdensome in large class.

Considering the fact that not enough researches have been done to check the effectiveness of portfolio assessment on developing reflection in writing, this study tries to examine the significance of portfolio assessment in fostering reflective writing of EFL learners in Laghouat University. We felt the need for carrying out the present research to shed a small light on issues like what are the advantages of portfolio assessment? What is the importance of reflective writing? Does portfolio assessment have any significant effect on the EFL learners' reflective writing?

3. Research Methodology and Results Interpretations

In an attempt to answer the research questions, we are going to test the effectiveness of portfolio assessment in reflective writing skills through experimental study taking the second-year undergraduate students of English at Amar Thelidji University in Laghouat-Algeria, as a sample. This practical part consists of three tools: pre-post writing test, interview and self-reporting questionnaire.

In this section, we are going to state down the main findings that found in pre-test, posttest, and the interview.

3.1. Results of the Writing Pre-Test:

The aim of the pre-test writing was to know the level of students' writing and to identify the common mistakes committed by them. The figure below shows the total mistakes that are made by the participants in all the topics.

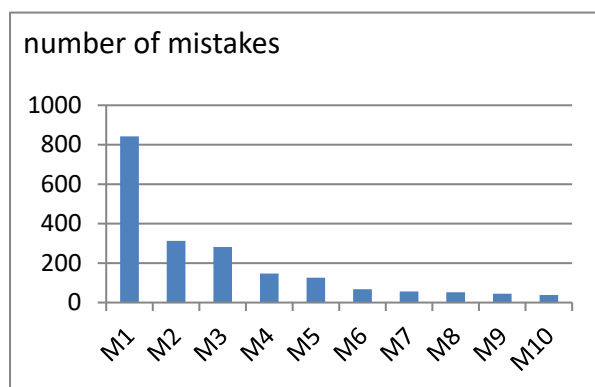


Figure 1. Mistakes of Participants In Pre-Test

From the Figure 1, we can notice the great number of mistakes among the participants is spelling mistake (M1) as we found 842 mistakes. For example, childhood instead of childhood, summery instead of summary and many others. And they do not know the rules of capitalization in that they do not capitalize the word after the period or in the beginning of paragraph. Sometimes the opposite as they capitalize letters in the middle of sentences. Besides that, they do not capitalize the name of places. For example, algeria, paris, america, bercelona ...etc. Another common mistake is punctuation as we scored 282 punctuation mistakes. In terms of tenses, we recorded 68 mistakes in the shift in tenses.

As a matter of fact, analyzing the results of pre-test enables us to know the actual level of our participants in writing, as well as to identify the common mistakes and the areas of weaknesses.

The findings of pre-test demonstrate various weaknesses in writing skills. These can be resulted from students' lack of practice; they do not write compositions only if their teacher asks them to do or he/she informs them that the work will be marked. Second, even if students write, they lack the ability to assess their works. Thus, what is needed is a method of assessment that can motivate them to thinking, reasoning, evaluating, and judging things and help them to be self-regulated. We suggest portfolio as a method to develop these skills of reflective writing.

The use of portfolio assessment in developing students' reflective writing will help learners to determine their weaknesses and strengths. In addition

to that, it will encourage them to participate in assessment process and become active learners.

3.2. Results Concerning the Interview:

The interview was primarily based on their way of practicing writing. It is meant to know the themes they used to write about and whether they are comfortable with or not and to discover more about their preferences in writing. It was composed of the following questions:

- *Do you have time to write paragraphs in the classroom? If not why?*
- *Do you have weaknesses in writing skill? If you have in which area you are weak?*
- *Do you read your written compositions when you finish? Why?*
- *What do you feel after writing about this kind of topics (pre-test)*
- *Which topics do you use to write about? Do you like them? Why??*
- *Do you have experiences with writing such topics? What do you think about them?*

The results of the interview that took place after pre-test revealed that: all the students do not write paragraphs in the classroom because their teacher does not assign time to them for practicing writing. In addition to that all of them have weaknesses in writing skill. 80% of students responded that they have weaknesses in spelling, 70% in grammar, and 90% in punctuation. 95% of students do not read their works because they do not know the significance behind and they cannot determine their mistakes and correct them in the final draft as well. Moreover, 70% of students do not have experiences with writing such topics that requires reflection. All of the students appreciate writing about this kind of topics since it enables them to express their thoughts, feelings, and judgments comfortably.

3.3. Results concerning the Post Writing Test:

The first concern of the study is to explore the effectiveness of portfolio assessment on developing students' reflective writing. So the aim of this test is to check whether the participants get improved in their writing through recognizing and correcting their mistakes. In this phase, we asked the participants to write about five topics. Then, we revised their papers with more focus on the mistakes committed by them in pre-test. The results are better explained in Figure 2.

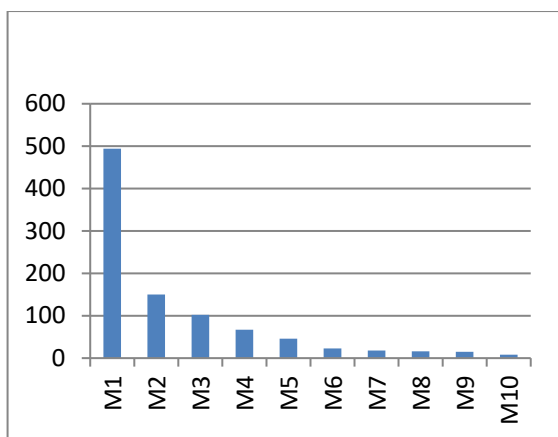


Figure 2. The Total Mistakes In The Post- Test

We compare the results of the pretest and posttest's results in a Figure as shown below:

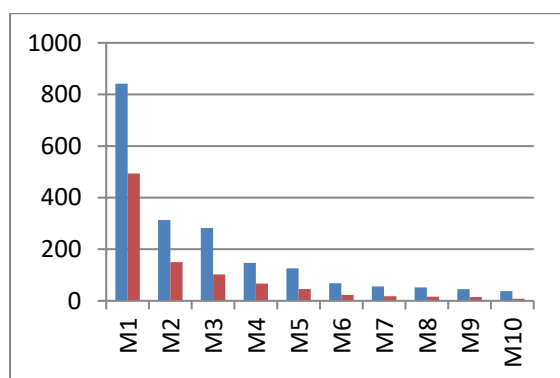


Figure 3. Comparison of Participants' Mistakes In Pre- Test (Blue) And Posttest (Red)

From the comparison between the total mistakes of participants in the pre- test and posttest, we notice that the total mistakes had been reduced from the pretest to post test. As an illustration: (M1) was reduced from 842 in the pretest to be 494 in posttest. While (M2) was found 313 times in the pre-test, it was found 150 times in the post test. The figure 3 shows also that the number of mistakes in (M3) was diminished from 282 in pre-test to 102 in posttest. When comparing (M4) in pre-test with posttest, we found that it was reduced from 147 to 67. Also, it is observed that the least committed mistake (M10) occurred only 08 times in the post test after occurring 38 times in the pre-test.

After comparing the two tests' results, we may say that portfolio assessment has positive effects on developing reflective writing among EFL learners at Amar Thelidji University in Laghouat. As the participants are able to correct their mistakes and improve their writing skills in general, and reflective writing in particular.

3.4. Results concerning self-reporting questionnaire

The aim of self- reporting questionnaire is to know the process of writing employed by 50 participants and to check whether they follow the steps of: planning, drafting, revising, and editing in pre-test and then in posttest. The results of both pre-test and posttest self-reporting questionnaire are better presented in the figures below.

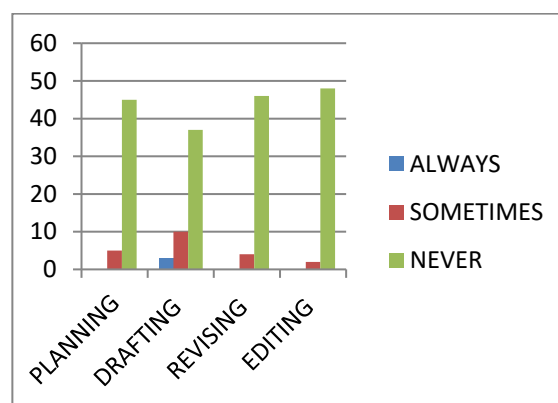


Figure 4. Participants' Use Of Processes In Pretest

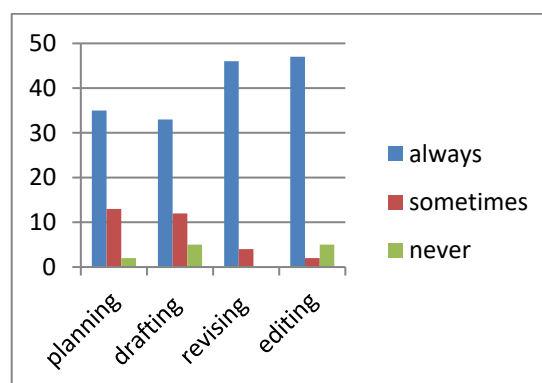


Figure 5. Participants 'Use of Processes In Posttest

By comparing the results of the figure 4 and the figure 5, we notice that the participants employ the writing processes in the post test after neglecting them in the pre-test. It is clear that the implementation of portfolio assessment changed the negative attitudes of students who used to ignore the four writing processes. It is also observed that portfolio method make our participants able to assess their writing by themselves and correct their language mistakes.

4. Conclusion

Based on the results of the data gathered from tools of the study, we can say that the students' reflective writing was improved after applying

portfolio assessment method. The findings of the analysis of the data provide us with the following results:

- The use of portfolio assessment helps to determine students' weaknesses and strengths in writing.
- Portfolio assessment encourages students to participate in the assessment process.
- Writing about topics that require reflection enables students to express their feelings, thoughts, and judgments comfortably; besides, it gives them more opportunities to practice writing as the practice is limited in the classroom.
- Portfolio assessment makes the students able to correct their mistakes and improve their writing.

At the end of this study, the main findings yielded that Portfolio assessment could change the negative attitudes of students who used to neglect the writing processes of planning, drafting, revising, editing study indicate that after the implementation of portfolio assessment, students become able to reflect on their writing through employing the processes of: planning, drafting, revising, and editing which they are neglected before experiencing portfolio assessment. We can also feel the students' satisfaction of having more opportunities to practice writing and to express themselves freely out of any limitation so as to improve their writing skills. As reflection is an important part in portfolio assessment, reflection sheets help the teacher to know students' awareness of their level of writing. Therefore, we recommend the use of reflection sheets in all EFL writing classes for the benefit of both teachers and learners.

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