

## **Action Research Of Portfolio Assessment In Writing In English As A Foreign Language While Teaching Preparatory School Students In Georgia**

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### **Abstract**

The goal of the article is to gain an insight into students' view on portfolio assessment of English as a foreign language (EFL) writing. Eleven students from Preparatory School at International Black Sea University who had not been successful in language study either at school or during one year at preparatory school and, correspondingly, needed a radically new approach to teaching writing. During a two-month summer course in writing portfolio assessment of their writing skills was applied to them for formative assessment. This time the students passed the testing. Then they were interviewed to find out whether the students thought it was more efficient than the weekly testing they had had the previous year of studies. The respondents' answers revealed several reasons why students were more satisfied with portfolio assessment than with testing.

**Key words:** portfolio assessment, language, preparatory, intensive, observation, interview

### **Introduction**

Nowadays, there are various types of assessment methods in EFL. One of the important assessment methods is known as portfolio assessment. With the advent of innovations in education, the significance of different kinds of assessments has increased. Portfolios are becoming a popular alternative to traditional assessment methods because they offer administrators, teachers, students and parents the opportunity to review, communicate and assess portfolios in an asynchronous manner.

In this study portfolio assessment method was implemented in writing skill teaching and assessment. The advantages and challenges of applying portfolios in assessment of writing skills in this study were discussed and analyzed with qualitative methods.

The idea of using portfolios as a tool in performance-based assessment is not very new. Painters, artists, writers, models and photographers have exhibited their vocational and acquired skills through portfolios. Portfolio

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assessment in education has been used extensively since mid '80s, first for teacher assessment, then, since the 1990s – for student assessment (Zollman & Jones, 1994). In Georgia portfolio is seldom used for student assessment, although it is the Ministry of education and Science requirement, and its application has almost not been researched (Goctu, 2012). Not all teachers are aware of portfolio assessment, others are aware, but avoid using it, due to its time-consuming and largely subjective nature. To persuade teachers to use portfolio, is necessary to carry out not only theoretical research into the matter, but also action research, which is of practical character and can have a stronger impact on teachers' desire to use portfolio in their practice.

International Black Sea University delivers the majority of programs in English, this is why students need a level of English which would enable them to study in this language. International students, mostly from Turkey, who do not have adequate language skill level, attend a one-year preparatory program. However, writing in English as a foreign language constitutes one of the problematic areas in language teaching and learning among Turkish EFL learners due to some objective reasons. The major reason is that writing instruction is neglected during the language teaching process at primary and secondary schools in Turkey, except schools with intensive language programs, as it is not part of the language exam. Correspondingly, many preparatory program students from year to year fail in writing even after one year of additional instruction. It means that they need a radically new approach to teaching writing. The action research presented in this article is an effort to show that portfolio assessment of writing skills may be a good outcome.

## Literature review

Yang (2003) defines portfolio as a compilation of students' work, which documents their effort, progress and achievement in their learning, and their reflection on the materials negotiated for the portfolio. Crosby (1997) indicates that the primary purpose of portfolios in EFL context is to increase the level of students' motivation and to give them a sense autonomous learning.

Magnan (1985) claims that the purposes of writing for foreign language learners include practicing grammatical forms and structures, vocabulary, and spelling, using information in context, and expressing their ideas, feelings, opinions, thoughts, and attitudes. Writing in a foreign language also has some pedagogical purposes such as reinforcement, training, imitation, communication, fluency, and learning (Raimes, 1987). Portfolio-based writing assessment has attracted a considerable amount of interest in colleges and universities because they link teaching, learning, and assessment within the discipline and across disciplines in the college curriculum. Briefly, according to Scarcella and Oxford (1995), writing in a foreign language assists learners improve their grammatical, strategic, and sociolinguistic in the target language.

Portfolio assessment is an ongoing process. If a paper and pencil test just measures the level of student's writing skill, portfolio diagnoses the student's problems and permits him/her to move towards success step by step, approaching the desired result, in cooperation with peers and teacher.

An ongoing assessment is a learning process that examines and documents learner progress at certain intervals. The main goals of portfolio assessment are encouraging learners to become more autonomous, take the control of their learning, make decisions, participate in the evaluation of their own work and solve the problem they may face, individually. This makes portfolio suitable for ongoing (formative) assessment.

The results of recent studies related to the application of portfolio assessment in teaching EFL/ESL writing were stated to indicate students' positive reactions to portfolio keeping. For instance, according to Aziz and Yosuff's (2015) research in a Malaysian school, portfolio assessment in writing skills is beneficial and effective in the English language classroom. D'Angelo (2012) held a similar study in the context of higher learning. D'Angelo found that portfolio assessment helped in guiding and motivating students in their writing. In various countries (Canada, Indonesia, Thailand, USA ) studies (Eridafithri, 2015; Garcia, Meyer & Walsh, 2002; Harborn, 2015; Wanchid & Charoensuk, 2015; Wuetherick & Dickinson, 2015) have been implemented on how portfolio assessment improves students' English language writing skills, but few of them deal with teaching at preparatory school level. Thus, this article will try to indicate how much portfolio assessment is effective and beneficial in improving students' English language proficiency and in particular, their writing skill.

## Research

This study focused on getting to understand how portfolio helps in improving students' writing skills. It was carried out at International Black Sea University, in preparatory school. The research was an action research, applying qualitative approach to data collection. The data were gathered via interviews which followed an action research – teaching writing for two months, accompanied by portfolio assesment.

## Participants

There were 11 participants in this research, 4 female and 7 male students. Participants` English level was close to interemediate. To maintain the ethics of research, the real names of the participants are not revealed.

After they had taken one year of intensive English courses (5 days a week, six hours per day), they were still not able to pass to the next level. That is why they had to take summer courses. The duration of the course was almost 2 months. Besides taking a writing course, they also took reading, listening and grammar courses.

## Procedure

In this research, a purposeful sampling was used to select the participants of the study. Both the administration and students' consent to participate in the research was obtained. A writing process checklist was used in observing the students' gradual improvement in the writing tasks, namely pair writing, picture description and journal entries. Besides, students wrote dairies related to their daily activities, classes that they had that day and some free topics, such as descriptive, opinion or narrative essays. The students' works were checked by the teacher regularly. The tacher did not indicate the errors directly, however, he put some remarks to imply the wrong parts of the texts. After they corrected themselves, the teacher rechecked the writing task. This process helped students to see their mistakes and also urged them to assess themselves. Students had their own portfolio files which entailed diaries, aforementioned writing tasks, free writing essays, and summaries of given tasks. They did not have any traditional examinations, such as writing an essay about a precise topic or some other traditional methods. The assessment method in writing skill was based on portfolio. This is why students were willing to do the tasks given by the teacher. They were not coerced to keep and study on their portfolios, however, they were preparing their files enthusiastically without any anxiety in terms of grades.

## Observations

During the portfolio assessment process, students showed a significant improvement in their writing skills. Based on the teacher's observations, they constantly improved various aspects of their writing skills because all their draft work helped them to make every piece of their writing a better one every time. All their work was straight and neat in the portfolio and they made sure that they kept all the tasks given in the classroom as well as home tasks. Besides that, some of them also helped their friends to correct their work during the classes. They would always volunteer for their work to be read in front of the classroom even though there were times when each of their work had major grammatical errors. The majority of the participants admitted that portfolio assessment is indeed a great learning tool in helping them to improve their writing skills.

## Interview Questions and Students' Answers

A set of interview questions related to portfolio assessment was prepared in order to find out students' opinions and to understand whether the implementation of portfolio assessment was benefical for them. The interview questions the entailed process of writing as well as how the students felt about portfolio, what they liked most about portfolio, what put them down, how much the teacher helped them in their writing, what should be done to improve the assessment and how they felt about the 'new' assessment that was taking place in their classroom.

### **1. *What do you think about keeping portfolios? Do you like it or not?***

'I like it. I will get good marks in English. I wasn't able to do well in exam. But keeping portfolio is not like having an exam, I really feel free while writing my diaries and doing other home tasks. Portfolio is easier. I can discuss my writing with my friends and can share answers. We learn from each other and help each other learn. I like portfolio, as I can work with my friends.' (Participant 2)

'I like portfolio because with portfolio I will get higher marks. Before having portfolios, I was getting low marks, but now I am getting high marks with portfolio and I am happy.' (Participant 8)

## **2. Did the portfolio application help you to write better and get better organized?**

The responses were overwhelming, because all of them agreed that it helped them in many ways.

'There is improvement in my writing. My writing is becoming more arranged and my paragraphing is better. Now, I think my writing is better because I keep all my exercises from class work in the portfolio and I refer to it before I start with my new exercise. I learn from my mistakes and do not repeat them.' (Participant 1)

'Portfolio really helps me in writing. If I didn't have a portfolio, I might have lost all the photocopied exercises and I would have never known how to write sentences correctly. Now, with portfolio, I can write better and I can arrange files orderly'. (Participant 6)

## **3. What do you like most about portfolio?**

'I like to work with my friends because, when I forget something, my friends remind me and when my friends forget, I remind them. It was fun to do the labelling of the parts of a bicycle, where we worked together to get the highest marks for our group.' (Participant 11)

'I like portfolio because most of the time I don't have to work alone. While working in a group or a pair, we discuss answers. That is what I like the most in portfolio.' (Participant 9)

## **4. How is portfolio assessment different from other traditional assessments (e.g. tests and exams)?**

'In traditional assessment, it is difficult to see whole term's progress and I cannot see my mistakes, but in portfolio you can see your mistakes and the improvement in process'. (participant 3)

'You have very limited time in traditional assessment, and it makes you nervous, but in portfolio you are free, you can study whenever and as long as you need'. (Participant 1)

## **5. What challenged you during the portfolio study?**

'It is difficult to keep and gather the necessary files every time. I can say that portfolio preparation required an intensive study. I had to put all the files in the portfolio. I had to spend much more time on home assignments than in the traditional assessment.' (Participant11)

'Keeping portfolio is important, but if you think in Turkish language and write in English, like me and some of my friends, it is hard. When you translate, it does not make any sense. Learning to think in English while you are writing is really hard.' (Participant 2)

**6. Did portfolio help you to take more responsibility for your study?**

'Yes, a lot. Although the teacher and your friends are helping you, finally you have to be organized, to be prepared for testing in the end of the semester.' (Participant 7)

'As the teacher just helped, and did not control, I had to be responsible for my learning.' (Participant 5).

**7. Are you ready to present your portfolio to people other than teacher? Why (not)?**

'It's OK, when my work is good, I am even proud, not like ordinary home work. As for my friends, they can help me improve my writing, so I'm glad if they see it.' (Participant 10)

"In the beginning, I was a little afraid my friends would laugh at my mistakes, but they almost didn't, as they didn't want others to laugh at their mistakes. Now I will take my writings home and show them to my parents. I want them to know that they didn't waste money on my education." (Participant 4)

## Results

The participants were clear about the purpose of portfolio use in the classroom. They came to the conclusion of that with portfolio they could write better without having to think of low grades that they used to get previously. Their work was systematic and organized with all the task sheets and exercises documented with days and dates written on every sheet. Portfolio helps in their writing. An eventually significant and in the process gradual improvement in writing skills of research participants was observed by the teacher and confirmed by students' answers to the interview questions. What is important is that students were keeping their portfolios without any pressure and anxiety.

Findings from this study indicated that writing and assessing portfolios are beneficial to students. Even if they encountered some problems in the process, they learned a lot from solving their problems and taking responsibility of learning. The students of portfolio-based class benefited from the reflective nature of the task.

The results of the questionnaire were summed up in the figure below.



**Figure 1. Results of Interview Questions**

### **Limitations of the study**

One of the limitations of the research is its small sample size with 11 participants, which may not be representative for all the preparatory school students in Georgia. Future study with a larger group of students may be needed to approve the compatibility of the study. The interview was just implemented in one university, for the further study, it is desirable to involve some other universities from different parts of the country, as well as from other countries.

### **Conclusions**

The following implications can be drawn from the present research:

- Portfolio assessment can promote the students' sense of personal involvement and serious responsibility and can provide opportunities for students to use language within day-by-day work by writing diaries.
- With this assessment method, students can set clear targets for language learning. The findings of the study displayed that this assessment type had a significant impact on the level of students' writing skills.
- Psychologically, portfolio used as formative assessment does not cause anxiety, provoke nervousness and entail mistakes. There is no fear of making mistakes as mistakes are perceived as part and stimulus of learning.

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