

EFL Students' Perceptions of the Working Portfolio in Classroom Writing Assessment

تصورات طلاب اللغة الإنجليزية كلغة أجنبية لمحفظة العمل في تقييم الكتابة

Les perceptions des étudiants d'anglais comme une langue étrangère pour le portfolio de travail dans l'évaluation de l'écriture en classe

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Introduction

Writing in English especially for non-native students is a tiring task. Lately, many alternative writing assessment tools have been used not only for final grading purposes but as means to help students progress and motivate them to reach their study goals as effectively as possible. Portfolio assessment is one of the important procedures that gained increasing attention in writing pedagogy (Lam, 2018). In fact, this interest raised in the mid-1980s when portfolios were used as an assessment medium in the L1 writing classrooms (Belanoff & Dickson, 1991). However, it has lately become popular because it can serve different purposes among them aligning teaching and assessment to facilitate productive learning (Huot, 2002; Klenowski, 2002), and emphasizing the composing process, learner self-reliance and self-reflective capacity (Hamp-Lyons & Condon, 2000). More than being an alternative tool of assessment, sometimes portfolio assessment is a preferred tool to the traditional ones, like writing tests, as it does not only enhance the overall quality of the written drafts but also impacts positively the writing development (Lam, 2013). The process, per se, of creating a portfolio is believed to enhance students' writing as the steps it goes through, either the step itself or the inter-step, exercise that impact.

Particularly, implementing portfolio assessment in an EFL context is perceived to be beneficial and productive to students mainly in short term writing performance (Lam, 2013). In support of this idea, Condon and Hamp-Lyons (1994) argued that "the portfolio has simply been accepted on faith, on writing specialists' feeling that the portfolio is better" (p. 277). In this context, many studies exploring the impact of writing portfolio assessment revealed that both native and non-native students are likely to perform better in portfolio assess-

ment than in single-essay exams (Song & August, 2002). The flexibility and progress tracking-function make of the portfolio an important tool in writing classrooms.

In fact, studies into student perceptions and experiences of using portfolio assessment in the EFL context are scarce (Lam & Lee, 2009) especially when it comes to treating a specific type like the working, the showcase, or others. To contribute to this field of research, this study aims at exploring the EFL students' perceptions of using the working portfolio in relation to their writing. To this end, reflective texts, at the end of the process of treating working portfolios, were written by student participants. The main focus of this study is summarized in this research question: what are the perceptions of EFL students of using the writing working portfolio? This main question is composed of the two following sub-questions: (1) How do students perceive the writing working portfolio? (2) What benefits, if any, do they gain from using the working portfolio?

1. Literature Review

1.1. Writing Portfolio Assessment

Writing portfolio is seen a purposeful collection of student texts that shows students' effort, progress, and achievement in writing over a period of time (Arter & Spandel, 1992; Genesee & Upshur, 1996; Weigle, 2002). More than being a compilation of folders including students' works, portfolios are seen personalized and longitudinal representations of students' self-efforts and achievements (Collins, 1992) as they are perceived to be a prototype of sociocultural assessment (Mohamadi, 2018). Regardless of being just a folder or website (electronic) (Genesee & Upshur, 1996), there is no one definition of portfolios (Klenowski, 2002; Burner, 2014). The key to call a given collection of works a portfolio is to include a set of pieces and not just one piece because this alone does not make the portfolio (Weigle, 2002).

Despite having frameworks that guide EFL teachers regarding how to start up a portfolio program in terms of planning the content in relation to the objectives set at the outset, matching tasks to those objectives, monitoring progress and finally evaluating the progress of the portfolio (Delett, Barnhardt, & Kevorkian, 2001; Moya & O'Malley, 1994), Hamp-Lyons and Condon (2000) offered a theoretical framework of portfolio assessment, the most used until nowadays, including students as active participants. Three key steps are important in this framework: collection, selection, and reflection. These steps will be developed in the section below-Working portfolio.

In reality, a portfolio is not a conventional tool with fixed and rigid pre-established characteristics and guidelines, but it differs from one type to another. It is mainly based on the purpose(s) which is used for (Klenowski, 2002), the reasons generated for its implementation, and the portfolio intended audience (Danielson & Abrutyn, 1997). In agreement with this idea, Wolf and Dietz (1998) asserted that the purpose for which the portfolio is used determines its form. The various the criteria of classifications the various the kinds and conceptualizations made by different scholars. For this reason, it is found that various categorizations of portfolios are found in the literature (Rolheiser, Bower & Stevahn, 2000). For example, Seely (1996) identifies four types: showcase, documentation, evaluation, and process portfolios while Danielson and Abrutyn (1997) identified three main types: working, display, and assessment. On the other hand, Burke, Fogarty, and Belgrad (1994) discussed three major categories of portfolios: personal, academic, and professional while Campbell, Cignetti, Melenyzer, Nettles, and Wyman (1997) emphasized just two types: the working and the presentation portfolio. Rolheiser, Bower, and Stevahn (2000) had spotted the best work and growth portfolios. For Smith and Tillema (2003), portfolios are classified by purpose (selection vs. learning) and volition (voluntary vs. mandatory) into four types: dossier, reflective, training portfolio, and a personal portfolio. Another classification suggested by Johnson, Mims-Cox and Doyle Nichols (2006) and Hartnell-Young and Morris (2007) is that portfolios can be either formative (developmental), summative (cumulative), or marketing portfolio (focused on career advancement). In its turn, Fersten (2009) presented four types of portfolios: showcase, process portfolio, evaluation and online (e-portfolio). Last but not the least, Lam (2018) has identified three types of portfolios: the progress (growth), working (efforts), and showcase (achievement) portfolio.

As we have noticed, various categorizations exist, but the principle of those groupings can be mainly linked to the purpose. So, using a given type of portfolios is a matter of choice and that choice is supported by various arguments. However, the success of introducing a portfolio is linked to the purpose, the content, and the structure (Van Tartwijk, Driessen, Van Der Vleuten & Stokking, 2007).

1.2. Working Portfolio

The working portfolio, as a term, is an appellation that differs from one scholar to another as everyone categorizes the portfolios and defines the types according to his/her own conceptualization. To avoid being constrained by such appellations, the focus of this article is on using the portfolio that tracks

students' progress, either called working, growth, effort, or learning. As a matter of choice, we preferred using the term working portfolio. To discuss the various appellations, as displayed above in different types of portfolios, if we see the categorization by Lam (2018), for example, the author evoked growth portfolio and working portfolio as two distinct types while authors like Danielson and Abrutyn (1997), Campbell, Cignetti, Melenzyer, Nettles, and Wyman (1997), and Rolheiser, Bower, and Stevahn (2000) kept the word working to show the type that tracks students' learning and progress, and they didn't use other synonyms to the word or evoke a distinct category that has a similar meaning. In fact, the overlapping definitions of the different types "can make it hard to see the forest for the trees" (Beckers, Dolmans & van Merriënboer, 2016, p. 32), so it is better to avoid discussing those appellations and focusing instead on the purpose under study.

In this article, the working portfolio is understood to be an intentional collection of student works oriented by learning objectives (Danielson & Abrutyn, 1997) used to track students' efforts (Lam, 2018). The working portfolio is also known to be the learning portfolio (Burner, 2014) essentially used for formative purposes but also can be used for grading and summative purposes (Lam, 2018). Therefore, it can be used to diagnose students' needs (Danielson & Abrutyn, 1997), orientations, preferences and responsiveness. In the working portfolio, the collection consists of gathering all students' works that are related to a given objective (Danielson & Abrutyn, 1997). The works included in the portfolio can be finished or unfinished. In the reflection phase, mainly, the idea is to monitor and review the whole portfolio development to diagnose the strengths and weaknesses of student writings. So, using pre-set criteria to facilitate the task can be very helpful. This phase can be also scaffolded either by teacher and /or peer guidance.

2. Methodology

To elicit EFL students' perceptions of using writing working portfolio, the study at hand employs students' reflection texts that were written after analyzing and feedbacking on the content of their portfolios. The method used to report the data is mixed, quantitative and qualitative, to best meet the purpose of this study (Downe-Wamboldt, 1992). To show the importance of the mixed method, Morse (1991) said "researchers who purport to subscribe to the philosophical underpinnings of only one research approach have lost sight of the fact that research methodologies are merely tools, instruments, to be used to facilitate understanding" (p.122). So, the major purpose for using the mixed

method is to avoid the pitfalls that might be generated from using either approach alone.

Mixed content analysis is used to analyze the texts written by the participants, who all wrote a text in which they reflected about their experience of using the working portfolio. Content analysis is commonly used “for making replicable and valid inferences from texts (or other meaningful matter) to the contexts of their use” (Krippendorff, 2004, p. 18). To write the text, the participants were asked the following question: Write a text in which you answer the following question: How did you find using the portfolio? (For example: Did you like the idea of the portfolio? What are the benefits, if any, you gained through this experience? etc.)

2.1. Context of the Study

Conducted at the department of English of Algiers 2 University, the study involved 38 participants of first year coming all from public schools. Their mean age was 18.7. The English writing syllabus was based on genres and taught based on the process approach. No constraints were put onto teachers’ practices but only final goals to achieve. For example, by the end of the semester the students should be able to write a well structured and coherent paragraph. The assessment practices were limited to final summative evaluation including both the mid-term tests and final exams grades. The pedagogical materials, approaches, strategies, tools and techniques were left to the teacher choice with some suggested materials to consult.

2.2. Portfolio Assessment Procedure

To examine students’ perceptions of using the writing working portfolio, a reflection text was written by the participants after the reflection and analysis steps. They were invited to write about this experience in relation to their writing. Each of the 38 portfolios contained 3 written pieces of descriptive genre and 3 written pieces of narrative genre, accompanied with self- and peer assessments sheets done according to an analytic rubric and peer feedback comments plus a self-reflection journal. To analyze the content of the portfolio, the informants were asked to strictly follow the guidelines indicated in the associated brochure; selecting which is the best writing and which is the poorest written piece and justifying their choice. Learner choice is very important in introducing the portfolio in the classroom (Yancey, 1992 ; Davies and LeMahieu, 2003; Lam, 2018). The informants were also provided a set of criteria detailed in a rubric of an analytic profile which covered five aspects: writing mechanics, vocabulary, language use, organization, and relevance. The rubric was used to guide students’ evaluation and progress. This goes in agreement with Young (2001) who found that when using rubrics in portfolios the students could be motivated to improve their writing driving them to give specific feedback.

It is worth noting that the participants graded and scored their written pieces following a scoring rubric and that happened after reflecting qualitatively on the content of their writings. This step was seen important to avoid misleading students' real evaluation, polluting their decision, and shifting the interest from helping to improving their writing to overestimating the importance of grades and numbers which may affect their reflections. In agreement with this, Davies and LeMahieu (2003) find that scoring and grading portfolios may diminish student choice, ownership, and responsibility and that disorient the portfolio from its learning goal. Here are the steps followed to create the portfolio compilation, pointing to that the participants were assisted whenever necessary:

Writing a descriptive and narrative Paragraph (Final version)



Peer assessment using an analytic writing rubric and providing peer feedback in a separate section



Self-assessment using the same analytic rubric spotting their strengths and weaknesses



Receiving the peer assessment including the evaluation and the feedback



Rewriting the draft when seen necessary by the student



Collecting all the pieces : first written draft, peer assessment and peer feedback, self-assessment and the rewritten version



Students classifying their works from the best to the poorest one and justifying why the best is best and the same for the poorest one



Writing a reflective text about using the working portfolio



Scoring and grading their writings using a scoring rubric



The participants were divided into four sub-groups for easy management. Their portfolios were organized and arranged in advance to ensure that they all include the same materials. In the process, six portfolios were excluded because they were not complete i.e. the total number was 44 portfolios. It took the participants 35 minutes to write the text about their experience in using the working portfolio.

3. Results and Discussions

The students' overall perception of using the writing working portfolio has been found to be a significant experience for all of them. The perceptions are grouped into three main categories which are motivating, promoting self-reflection and choice, and promoting autonomy and ownership. The first category has two sub-categories ; recognizing their weaknesses and knowing their strengths. They perceived it to be a motivating tool to improve their writing through knowing their strengths to rely upon and their weaknesses to work on, developing self-reflection and their choice, and enhancing in them autonomy and ownership towards their writing. The main results are presented in the following figure :

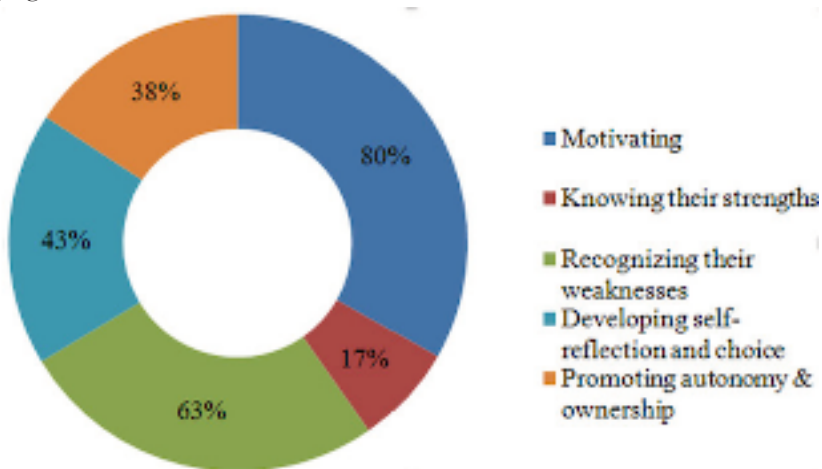


Figure 1. : Students' perceptions of using the working portfolio

The students appreciated their experience with the working portfolio and they noted that it was the first time they engaged in an experience of such kind. They expressed their opinions differently but all led towards one result : their satisfaction with the working portfolio. In this context, the students wrote :

1. 'I really liked this experience, and it really helped me a lot.'
2. 'It was a great experience in which I was able to witness the evolution of my writings'
3. 'It is a very important process to reflect on my past writings'
4. 'Seeing all the works I done at one time makes me see my progress through comparing my writings'

5. 'It is very important to see my profile in writing through seeing all my works'
6. 'I am happy after seeing all my writings at one time and I am proud to have a certain level'
7. 'This portfolio helped me to track my progress'

It is found that using the working portfolio plays an important role in motivating students. In agreement with this idea, in a study by Aydin (2010) and Hirvela and Sweetland (2005) where comparing the working portfolio to just keeping it, EFL students found the latter boring and lacking motivation to reflect upon their writing compared to the former one. Another positive result found by Slater (1996) when involving students in creating portfolios is that those students became active participants through acting and reacting. This is to say that working portfolio would allow students to timeline their writing progress, compare their works to spot their mistakes, and boost them towards further improvement through self-reflection. In the same context, the students wrote:

1. 'I am motivated by seeing all my works at once'
2. 'The portfolio is so motivating for me. It makes me so satisfied'
3. 'Seeing the difference between my writings gives me a message that I can progress and develop it. It is possible and I can do it.'
4. 'I feel happy when I see the best and the poorest writing because that gives me hope to improve it.'
5. 'I liked how the improvement from the first to the last work could be noticed'

On the other hand, knowing students' strengths and weaknesses would help them in many ways. For example, they can monitor their progress in writing (Lam, 2013) and prepare their brains to take risk when necessary for learning (Jensen, 1998). As a result, the students face the reality of their writing and recognize that the works done are vivid evidence of their writing performance level. In the same context, the students wrote:

1. 'I can now understand why my paragraph is poor and why it is good'
2. 'I learned that it is possible to improve my writing when I know the characteristics of good writing. I have to work on'
3. 'I spotted all my mistakes. The only thing to do now is to correct them all.'
4. 'Knowing that I have acquired some criteria of good writing gives me self-confidence'

Participants' answers suggested that knowing their strengths and weaknesses did not only motivate and make them aware but also helped them to fix all their

mistakes and work harder. They concluded too that there are criteria to respect when writing which does not make it a random task but possible to master.

Second, the students are trying to develop their self-reflection and choice through knowing what is missing in their written pieces like spotting their linguistic inaccuracies. When developing their self-reflection, the students would be able to promote their choice. The results seem in agreement with Chang and Tseng's (2011), and Li's (2010) conclusions where students received portfolio assessment to be of significant importance and useful for improving language problems, like fluency and accuracy, and metacognitive aspects of writing, like self-reflection. In the same context, the students wrote the following :

1. 'It is good to see all my writing at once because I can compare them to know the good criteria of writing.'
2. 'I learned a bunch of aspects to respects while writing any piece'.
3. 'This experience definitely changed my view of how to write a paragraph'
4. 'I feel that I can improve my language and the spelling in my writing. I have now self-confidence to write a good paragraph'

In their empirical work, Gearhardt and Wolf (1995) found that students' choice of their works in the portfolio helped in understanding the content with a clear focus on and the quality of that product. In addition, they developed ownership towards that work giving it more care and effort. Moreover, they found that the relation between the teacher and students became less judgmental, focused, and productive.

Third, enhancing students' autonomy and ownership is one of the important outcomes of the working portfolio. Many studies demonstrate the importance of portfolios in promoting autonomy and language awareness in writing (Hirvela & Sweetland, 2005; Aydin, 2010; Lam, 2018) to make informed decisions (Lam, 2018). Howard and LeMahieu (1995) reported that students' responsibility towards their writing increased when they created their portfolio to share it with their environment. In this context, the students wrote:

1. 'The portfolio teaches me to depend on myself in my writing'
2. 'I can understand that to improve my writing depends on myself'
3. 'My poor and good writing teaches me to work harder not only in the classroom'
4. 'I liked the portfolio because I feel that now I am able to write a nice and academic paragraph'
5. 'The portfolio helps me to catch up my mistakes and to be responsible of them'

We noticed that students' responsibility and accountability is more enhanced when their portfolio is supposed to be seen by the audience whose opinion is worth for them. As a result, one could say that the working portfolio would show the student dynamism in writing to decide upon their progress.

Conclusion

The study conducted to explore students' perceptions of using the working portfolio show positive results including students' satisfaction with the tool, motivation towards further progress and self-reliance. The importance of the tool was mainly for learning purpose i.e. helping to progress. A number of limitations and implications are worth mentioning. As for the limitations, this study is not representative of the whole population. Additionally, only one tool was used because the participants could not carry out an interview as they felt shy, not fluent to converse, and needed much time to think and speak. The findings of this research shed light on a number of areas for future research. Here are just two examples : (1) conducting studies where to compare the effects of the types like the showcase with the growth (2) being careful when implementing a portfolio is a must, so more contributions about introducing and implementing portfolios can be another field of research. This would bring wider options for novice researchers i.e. the procedure of implementation differs from one researcher to another, so the various contributions would offer a wide range of choices from which novice researchers could select from.

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Abstract

Writing Portfolio assessment is a tool that lately gained considerable interest in the literature, but not much in the EFL context especially when focusing on a specific type. Research into portfolios has mostly emphasized the way of implementing them; however, less attention was paid to students' perceptions of a given type of portfolios and their impact on writing improvement and progress. Towards this aim, 38 texts were written by participants who reflected on and analyzed the content of their writing working portfolios. To analyze and interpret the data collected, content analysis mixed method was used. The results show that students perceived this experience as an important initiative which highly motivated them to reconsider their weaknesses in writing and use their strengths. This tool was also seen as a catalyst of their awareness towards fixing their mistakes as urgently as possible. In addition to that, the students found the working portfolio as a medium which helped in promoting their self-reflection and choice, and enhanced in them autonomy and ownership towards their writing

Keywords

Writing working portfolio, EFL students, motivation, self-reflection, autonomy, ownership.

المخلص

اكتسب تقييم حافظة الكتابة مؤخرًا اهتمامًا كبيرًا في مجال تعليمية اللغات، ولكن أقل في مجال تدريس اللغة الإنجليزية كلغة أجنبية ونادرًا لما يخص ذلك نوع معين من الحافظات. ركزت الأبحاث حول حافظات الكتابة بشكل أساسي على كيفية تنفيذها، ومع ذلك قد تم إيلاء اهتمام أقل لها ولكيفية تقديرها من طرف الطلاب وتأثيرها على تحسين كتابتهم. تحقيقًا لهذه الغاية، كتب 38 نصًا من قبل المشاركين الذين حللوا محتوى قوائم عملهم أثناء الكتابة. لتحليل وتفسير البيانات التي تم جمعها، تم استخدام طريقة مختلطة لتحليل المحتوى. تظهر النتائج أن الطلاب أدركوا هذه التجربة على أنها مبادرة مهمة أعطتهم دافعًا قويًا لإعادة النظر في نقاط ضعفهم في الكتابة واستخدام نقاط قوتهم. كما تم اعتبار هذه الأداة بمثابة حافز لتوعيتهم لتصحيح أخطائهم في أسرع وقت ممكن. بالإضافة إلى ذلك، وجد الطلاب حقبة العمل كدعم ساعدهم على تعزيز التفكير الذاتي والاختيار، وتحسين استقلاليتهم فيما يتعلق بكتاباتهم

حقيبة العمل، طلاب الإنجليزية كلغة اجنبية، الدافع، التأمل الانعكاسي، الاستقلالية، التملك

Résumé

Les perceptions des étudiants d'anglais comme une langue étrangère pour le portfolio de travail dans l'évaluation de l'écriture en classe. L'évaluation de portefeuille d'écriture est un outil qui a récemment reçu un intérêt considérable dans la littérature, mais pas beaucoup dans le contexte d'enseignement de la langue anglaise comme une langue étrangère et rarement lorsqu'il s'agit un type spécifique. La recherche sur les portefeuilles, en particulier le type qui montre le travail des étudiants, s'est principalement concentrée sur la manière de les mettre en œuvre; cependant, moins d'attention a été accordée aux perceptions des étudiants sur les portfolios et à leur impact sur leurs progrès en écriture. Dans ce but, 38 textes ont été rédigés par des participants qui ont analysé le contenu de leurs portfolios de travail. Pour analyser et interpréter les données collectées, une méthode mixte d'analyse de contenu a été utilisée. Les résultats montrent que les étudiants ont perçu cette expérience comme une initiative importante qui les a fortement motivés à reconsidérer leurs faiblesses en écriture et à utiliser leurs forces. Cet outil a également été considéré comme un catalyseur de leur prise de conscience pour corriger leurs erreurs le plus rapidement possible. De plus, les étudiants ont trouvé le portfolio de travail comme un support qui les a aidés à promouvoir leur auto-réflexion et leur choix, et a amélioré leur autonomie et l'appropriation de leur écriture.

Mots-clés

Portfolio de travail, étudiants de langue anglaise comme une langue étrangère, motivation, auto-réflexion, autonomie, appropriation.