

The Effect of Portfolio-Based Assessment on EFL Students Writings and Process Writing

Jamel Ben Youssef Mtawaa

Sharifi and Hassaskhah (2011) set out to investigate the impact of portfolio assessment techniques on the overall quality of students' writing. The population of the study included 20 university students in a time interval extending over one semester at the University of Guilan, Iran. In this review I'm going to summarize this study in terms of its research design and the results reached by the researchers. The two dimensions of this research will then be discussed in terms of their descriptive power, explanatory adequacy and external validity.

The writers seem to depart from the claim, central to process-oriented approaches to second/foreign language teaching, that portfolio assessment techniques coupled with reflective activities can lead to significant improvements in students' writing quality at the level of organization, content, accuracy and complexity. Drawing on the literature, the authors define portfolio assessment as a means of recording students' efforts and activities and measuring their progress over a certain span of time. Self-reflective activities are regarded as a "form of metacognition" (p.195) which could help learners think about their learning experience and equip them with strategies to monitor, edit, plan and control their learning process. The general research question was whether reflective activities can contribute to students' improvement in their writing at the levels of depth, breadth and growth. The other related question was whether portfolio assessment as gleaned through these self-reflective activities enhances students' assessment process.

Adopting a negative hypothesis which states that neither reflective activities nor the portfolio assessment technique will lead to significant progress in students' writing quality and ability, the authors adopted the following research procedure:

The control phase: during this period (half of the semester), the researchers asked the students to do the writing tasks at hand and to keep track of whatever they write in a folder (p. 204). In order to measure students' progress, the researchers administered five pretests and instructed students on essay writing. No mention was made of portfolio assessment.

The treatment phase: during this stage, students were explicitly asked to respond to issues about writing, describe some of its features and exchange views about their writing. The two groups (control and treatment) were then tested five times and their writing was scored by trained raters. A questionnaire was administered in order to tap students' attitudes about portfolio assessment and reflective learning (McMullan, 2006).

Briefly, the emerging results suggest no significant progress for the control group in the five test sets as shown by a t test. However, the treatment group showed significant improvement as recorded in their scores moving from 6.43 on the first posttest to 7.21 on the last one. By the

authors' own accounts, these results could be attributed to the treatment received by the learners (reflective activities and portfolio assessment).

While this study looks acceptable at the level of the overall design and the results obtained, some problematic areas remained. At the level of descriptive adequacy; first, the authors remained silent on the actual content, the proceedings as well as on the input received by the learners either for the control and treatment groups. Much more significantly, there was very little, if no description, of the profile of the students studied especially in terms of their overall language proficiency in general, and writing competence, in particular. Also, it would have been helpful if the writers had described the amount of exposure of these students to writing in English. Also, the writers stated that these students had informal lessons in paragraph writing. We would like to know about the differences as well as the similarities, if any, between formal and informal writing? It is very well known that writing within an academic context is, by definition, formal, planned and edited, features which make this type

of writing look very different from informal writing.

Moreover, the writers said that the students belonged to different cultural backgrounds; what are these cultural backgrounds? Are they related to language as part of culture or to educational backgrounds? Or even more importantly to varying norms of communication (e.g. writer-reader relationships, audience construction, politeness strategies and face work)? Studies in the field called contrastive rhetoric (e.g. Kaplan 1966) have shown that the cultural and the linguistic background of the students may significantly shape the form and character of writing. Finally, the writers claimed that there were some improvements in students' writing in the treatment group as opposed to the control group. It is unfortunate that the writers did not give any extract which showcased this progress from one stage to another. This is contrary to what the writers claimed that their study included a qualitative dimension.

At the level of explanatory power, the authors insisted on the importance of reflection activities and self-assessment as well as peer-evaluation as leading to better writing ability. While this can be true to a certain extent, the overall design of the study does not reflect either the positively redundant nature of process-oriented approaches to learning or the recursive and developmental nature of writing. For example, during the portfolio based assessment course, students were only asked to answer questions about their writing and reflect on it. In fact, reflection is superficially examined in this study. Students neither received training about how to reflect on a piece of writing nor participated in training about how to construct a reflective letter. Substantive steps inherent to the process-oriented approach to the teaching of writing are not respected (e.g., brainstorming, planning, drafting, redrafting, editing, etc.). The information provided during the overall process of interaction remained very meager in quality and scope, if not virtually absent. Nezakatgoo (2011), for example, contends that teachers' feedback on a piece of writing can have a positive impact on students' development.

Finally doubts may be raised not only with regard to the internal contradictions of the study, but also with regard to the validity of the testing procedure itself. It is well-known that portfolio assessment and process writing are laborious and time-consuming. Besides, the implementation of portfolio assessment in some educational settings may not be easily introduced. Indeed, as the authors themselves confessed, 64% of students felt that portfolios are time consuming and anxiety-raising. Furthermore, in contexts where a classic final test at the end of the course is still the dominant practice, teachers may find it difficult to engage their students in a portfolio project. Practices in education including testing techniques are by definition resistant to change.

Probably the limitations of the study detailed above may go beyond the study itself to encompass the deficiencies associated with process oriented approaches and their teaching/learning philosophy. Over the last three decades, genre based approaches have established that writing in all domains is highly generified and that writing is not only a cognitive process but also a response to authentic communication contexts (Swales 1990). A study made by Henry and Roseberry (in Mojibur Rahman, 2011, p. 5) proved that learners who employed genre based instruction were much better in producing well-organized writing than the non-genre learners.

In conclusion, the result obtained by this study highlighted the importance of portfolio assessment and reflective writing. This viable alternative in writing assessment not only gives learners a sense of control over their writing, but also provides opportunities to develop their writing skills. Indeed, this review has attempted to show that student-student interaction through peer correction corroborated by teacher-student collaboration and reflection may boost students' confidence as writers. These interactive dynamics have not, however, been highlighted in this study. Indeed, as a novice teacher of technical writing for over than six years, I have learnt a lesson rather too late. Teaching students writing in the form provided by the article reviewed here may not be transferrable to the writing of the key genres which students are required to write in their

domains. It may be useful to reframe process-oriented from a genre-based testing perspective.

References

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