

## Opinions of ELT Students in Freshman Class on Using Portfolio as an Assessment Tool

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### Abstract

The purpose of this study is to identify the opinions of freshmen at an ELT department on using the portfolio process as an assessment tool in an advanced reading-writing course. The data were collected through the reflective essays reflecting students' opinions on the portfolio-keeping process, their progress and feedback. The data analysis was done through content analysis by coding the students' opinions under specific themes. Unstructured interviewing technique was also used in the study. The findings indicate that the students had positive thoughts about the assessment of their assignments over their portfolio despite the workload in the integrated reading and writing course. The students believe that the portfolio process eliminates the negative influence resulting from exam anxiety, and considering their effort and the time spent, they find it fair to be assessed over their portfolio. The students' opinions also indicate that the portfolio process leads to a positive change in students' attitude towards the writing skill with respect to the motivation it brings about, and that student's portfolio can be used as an effective assessment tool in a reading-writing course.

**Key words:** *Portfolio assessment, ELT, advanced reading-writing*

## Bir İngilizce Öğretmenliği Bölümünde Portfolyonun Bir Değerlendirme Aracı Olarak Kullanılmasına İlişkin Birinci Sınıf Öğrencilerinin Görüşleri

### Özet

Bu çalışmanın amacı, bir İngilizce öğretmenliği bölümünde birinci sınıf öğrencilerinin ileri okuma-yazma dersinde portfolyo sürecinin bir değerlendirme aracı olarak kullanılması hakkındaki görüşlerini belirlemektir. Çalışmanın verileri, öğrencilerin portfolyo süreci üzerine görüşlerini, gelişimlerini ve geri dönütlerini yansıttıkları kompozisyonlarından elde edilmiştir. Veri analizi, öğrenci görüşlerinin içerik analizi yoluyla belli konular altında kodlanmasıyla yapılmıştır. Çalışmada yapılandırılmamış görüşme tekniği de ayrıca kullanılmıştır. Çalışmada elde edilen bulgular, getirdiği iş yüküne rağmen, öğrencilerin ileri okuma ve yazma dersi bağlamında gerçekleştirdikleri ödev çalışmalarının portfolyo üzerinden değerlendirilmesi hakkında olumlu düşünceye sahip olduklarını göstermektedir. Öğrenciler, portfolyo sürecinin sınav heyecanından kaynaklanan olumsuz etkiyi ortadan kaldırdığına inanıyor, çabaları ve harcadıkları zaman düşünüldüğünde de, portfolyo üzerinden değerlendirilmeyi oldukça adilce buluyorlar. Öğrenci görüşleri, portfolyo sürecinin yarattığı motivasyon bakımından öğrencilerin yazma becerisine karşı olan tutumlarında olumlu bir değişime yol açtığını ve öğrenci portfolyosunun bir okuma-yazma dersi bağlamında etkin bir değerlendirme aracı olarak kullanılabilirliğini göstermektedir.

**Anahtar Sözcükler:** *Portfolyo değerlendirme, İngiliz Dili öğretimi, ileri okuma-yazma*

## Introduction

Richards & Rodgers (2001, p.161) point out three principles to promote second language learning: communication, task, and meaningfulness principle. The meaningfulness principle suggests that language that is meaningful to learner supports the learning process. Reading and writing skills, in this sense, can be integrated in order to motivate the learners, to get them to participate in the process, and produce the language intelligibly in a portfolio-keeping process.

Each writing assignment created within a reading-writing course can be collected systematically in a portfolio for such reasons as concentrating on more than one skill, helping students to transfer their gains from the reading activities into the writing performance, and making students' writing experience more connected and meaningful. In other words, they will be practicing the target language and the two language skills in an integrated, natural, and meaningful way within authentic contexts. In support of this, Nunan (1989, p.10) stresses the need for meaningful interaction between the learner and the language act, saying that "learners bring together the acts of comprehending, manipulating, producing, and interacting in the target language while their attention is principally focused on meaning rather than form." In a portfolio-keeping process, language learning can be turned into an interesting and motivating process from the standpoint of the students. From the standpoint of language teachers, they can ensure that the students will participate in the learning process by making a portfolio a part of assessment. Also, it will be easier to keep track of each student's individual "effort, progress, and achievements" in writing (Brown, 2004, p.256).

Furthermore, from one reading and writing task to the other with lots of vocabulary input, students are expected to end up with more connected and organized essays with rich content. Therefore, as Nunan and Lamb (1996, p.12) state, a language course is to be used to enable the learners "to be aware of the pedagogical goals and content of the course, to help them go beyond the classroom, and to make links between the

content of the classroom and the world beyond the classroom, selecting and creating their own goals and objectives from a range of alternatives". In line with this, a portfolio assessment can be used as an alternative approach to make better inferences about the writing ability of students. As Belanoff and Elbow (1986, in Weigle, p.198) point out, "program-wide portfolio assessment offers benefits to students, teachers, and program administrators to assess students' progress and achievement in writing in academic contexts." In other words, students' progress in language can be better observed to see how far they have gone compared to their starting level.

Since a portfolio is a purposeful collection of students' products and aims at exhibiting their efforts, progress, and achievement in a specific field, the most important features seem to be the collection of products, selection, and reflection. Collecting writing samples is not enough to make a portfolio useful for assessment purposes, but selection and reflection are essential as well. Hamp-Lyons and Condon (2000, p.119) stress that "without reflection all we have is simply a pile, or a large folder." The contents of a portfolio can be selected and arranged by students and a reflective essay in which each student can discuss how specific writing activities reflect his/her strengths and progress should complete the job. By keeping a portfolio, students can go back to their products, make revisions, and finally select those representing their progress and achievement. It is clear that a portfolio-keeping process can help students become more autonomous and self-directed. Briefly, the process is learner-oriented, rather than teacher-oriented.

Delayed evaluation is an important feature of portfolio process and prevents it from becoming a meaningless exercise. Weigle (2002, p.200) points out that "the decision to use portfolios needs to be based on a consideration of the qualities of test usefulness", and recommends Bachman and Palmer's (1996) model of six qualities of test usefulness covering "construct validity, reliability, authenticity, interactiveness, impact, and practicality." Also, Herman et al.



The data for this study were collected through an analysis of the participant students' reflective essays (as written documents) and an unstructured interview. According to Patton (2002, p.4), qualitative findings grew out of three kinds of data collection: open-ended interviews, direct observations; and written documents (In Tailor, 2005, p.103).

### Procedures

The participants were informed at the beginning of the Fall Term that portfolio-keeping was a compulsory component of the assessment. A training session was held in the first week in order to inform the students of the portfolio process, assessment criteria, and requirements. The portfolio process covered both Fall and Spring terms and the students turned in their reflective essays with their portfolio.

Ten students were randomly selected towards the end of the Spring Term for an interview and they were reminded that participation in the interview session would be voluntary and would not affect their grades. Because the goal of unstructured interview is to understand a phenomenon, it becomes paramount for the researcher to "establish rapport" beyond any preconception (Fontana & Frey, 1994).

### Data Analysis

In this study, the reflective essays written by the participant students were used as written documents in order to identify their opinions on various aspects of the portfolio process. "The content analysis" technique, which can be defined as the isolation, counting, and interpretation of the concepts, problems, and subjects repeated in collected data (Straus&Corbin, 1990; Miles&Huberman, 1994; Denzin&Lincoln, 1998), was used to identify the themes and decide into which themes the students' opinions fall. Each specific opinion was underlined with a code written on the sides of each page. While naming the codes, a name that is closest to the concept it was describing was used (Miles Huberman, 1994), such as 'lang. use' to mean 'language use'; 'port. assess.' to mean 'portfolio assessment', and so on. Eight themes were identified initially. Then, another instructor was asked to read a second copy to increase the validity and

reliability of the findings. Miles & Huberman stress that:

Definitions become sharper when two researchers code the same data set and discuss their initial difficulties. A disagreement shows that a definition has to be expanded or otherwise amended. .... Check-coding not only aids definitional clarity, but also is a good reliability check. (p.64)

In relation to coding qualitative data, Trumbull (2005, in Tailor, p.121-2) draws attention to the effects of subjective scoring by the researcher, and recommends selecting another coder for the validation of the process, stressing that a percentage agreement between 80-90 % should be strived for in order to establish coder reliability and handle the data objectively.

In order to test the inter-coder reliability, the formula  $Reliability = \frac{\text{number of agreements}}{\text{total number of agreements} + \text{disagreements}}$  was used (Miles & Huberman, 1994). This procedure resulted in an inter-coder reliability rate of .83, which was in a high and satisfying range (51 agreements vs. 10 disagreements). As a result of the double-checking, the categories for four opinions were changed, one opinion was used under two different themes and five opinions were categorized under a new theme relating to 'the effect of portfolio-keeping in building confidence in writing.' Finally, the opinions from students' reflective essays were categorized under nine themes:

(1) comparison of the portfolio process with students' previous experiences, (2) progress in language use, (3) progress in vocabulary use, (4) contribution of the portfolio keeping process to the development of other language skills, (5) assessment of the portfolio as part of the mid-term and final exams, (6) organization in written assignments, (7) expectations from the course, (8) topics selected for the writing assignments, and (9) effect of portfolio keeping in building students' confidence in writing. The findings given in this paper present the reflections of the students on the use of portfolio as an assessment tool as part of mid-term and final exams.

Patton (2002:4) stresses that "interviews yield direct quotations from people about

their experiences, opinions, feelings, and knowledge". In this study, 10 randomly-selected students were invited for an interview. They were asked to give their opinions on the portfolio process in general as well as their experiences. Their views were recorded on the spot. An unstructured interview aims to discover certain aspects of a research question without imposing any previous expectation or categorization that may limit an inquiry, so it should be free-wheeling (Yıldırım&Şimşek, 2008; Fontana and Frey, 1994; Wallace, 1998).

## Findings

The opinions given here present the reflections of freshmen on using the portfolio process as an assessment tool in an integrated reading-writing skills course.

### *Opinions of ELT Students on Using the Portfolio as a Tool of Assessment*

The following opinions were identified regarding the use of portfolio for assessment in mid-term and final exams and were grouped under the sub-titles, such as a) satisfaction with the portfolio assessment, b) elimination of exam anxiety, c) wholeness of portfolio and improvement, d) effort and time spent by the students on the portfolio, e) motivation of students by portfolio procedure.

#### *Satisfaction with the Portfolio Assessment*

The first and second opinions are a reflection of satisfaction with the assessment of portfolio as part of exams:

[1] *"I like the idea that our portfolio is evaluated towards the midterm and final exams each term. It was different from what I know an exam is."*

This opinion is a direct indication of a satisfaction in relation to the portfolio assessment and shows that this participant was happy with the idea of evaluation of the portfolio as an essential component of the course, and says that it was quite different from his/her understanding of an exam.

Similarly, the second opinion supports the first opinion and presents a comparison of assessment through portfolio and being tested over performance on a single topic in the exam.

[2] *"Being evaluated over our portfolio is much better than writing about only one topic in the midterm or final."*

This opinion indicates that this sort of assessment is better than being assessed based on performance in a timed-essay in a mid-term or final exam.

#### *Elimination of Exam Anxiety*

The third and fourth opinions are drawing our attention to the fact that exam anxiety may be an important factor when students are evaluated over a single written product under exam conditions.

[3] *"If we were evaluated over only one essay in exams, I would personally panic and it would be much harder to write in a limited time."*

[4] *"If we were asked to write about one topic in the exams, it wouldn't contribute much to our performance because of exam anxiety."*

These opinions indicate that the portfolio process and its evaluation covering a whole term eliminate the possibility of panic in an exam which might lead to failure. These participants are conveying the message that a timed-essay written as a part of exam would not contribute much or reflect into their performance; and thus, such a performance should not be used as a reflection of their writing ability.

The fifth opinion also supports the same view and helps us realize the fact that students may fail to write well under exam conditions; however, this cannot be a proof or a reflection of their real performance.

[5] *"We might fail to write well in an exam, but this doesn't prove that we are not good at writing, so it's a good idea to spread our written products over time and assess them as part of our exams."*

This opinion supports the idea of spreading the writing assignments over time during a term and assessing them as part of an exam within a portfolio.

#### *Wholeness of Portfolio and Improvement*

The sixth opinion is to do with the 'wholeness' of a portfolio and the 'degree of improvement' in the writing skill.

[6] *"If what we write weren't evaluated as a whole, we wouldn't be able to improve our writing skill so much."*

This participant clearly gives the impression that he/she is aware of the fact the portfolio is evaluated as a whole. The other message given in this opinion is that the portfolio process helped him/her to develop individually in the writing skill, and that there is an awareness about the degree of improvement.

#### *Effort and Time Spent by Students on the Portfolio*

Opinions 7# and 8# draw our attention to the value that the students attribute to the effort and time they spend when they write something worth putting into their portfolio.

[7] *"When I complete my portfolio, I see that I have spent a lot of effort and time to create it. It's much better than being evaluated on only one topic for a mid-term or final exam."*

[8] *"It's nice to see that something in which I put effort is evaluated as part of our exams. It makes my effort more valuable."*

These two opinions stress the fact that students spend time and effort to create a portfolio, and they consider that the evaluation of it towards a mid-term or final exam is fair. In this way, their effort becomes much more valuable. In other words, completion and creation of portfolio pays for itself in their eyes.

#### *Motivation of the Students by the Portfolio Procedure*

The next two opinions (#9 & #10) can be considered as the reflection of the importance of motivation in the development of the writing skill and to what extent assessment over the portfolio can influence students' performance.

[9] *"Knowing that what we write is evaluated created a desire in me to write and I really took it serious. This has always motivated me to write better."*

[10] *"To know that our portfolio will be evaluated as part of our exams makes me focus better on the course and the assignments even though I sometimes feel bored due to the workload. In this way, I can think in comfort and express*

*myself in writing better. I really got used to this sort of study and I believe that it contributed to my English in many ways."*

Based on these two opinions, it can be said that putting the portfolio right at the centre of the assessment procedure motivates the student to write with a desire and helps them focus on their assignments as they can take time to think and express themselves better. As a result, the students seem to become accustomed to the process and take the whole process seriously and can observe the contribution of the process into their English.

The following four opinions are also related to the motivation and level of progress that the portfolio process brought about:

(a) *"...To tell the truth, I found it too hard to write at first. Sometimes I couldn't find any ideas to write. There have been even times that I didn't feel like writing at all. As I saw that I could do it, it turned into a more enjoyable and meaningful activity. I never get bored now. Also, I see that I'm writing more fluently than I used to before I started at this department."*

(b) *"...I believe that I learned how to write better. As I didn't have much experience in writing before I started this department, what and how I write now seems to be a long way from the first things I wrote."*

(c) *"...When I consider the level I have reached compared to my level last year, I still believe that there must be more to do to write better."*

(d) *"...This year I got great pleasure out of writing in English, and I see that it helps me develop my level of English."*

These opinions all indicate that the portfolio process itself and the assessment procedure had an impact on motivating the students to focus on the course and develop themselves in the writing skill. Furthermore, it is important that they observe their improvement.

#### *Opinions Derived from the Interviews*

Only two out of ten interviewees (Participants 7 and 9) expressed opinions in relation to the assessment of their portfolio as part of mid-term and final exams as well as their personal development in the writing skill whereas the others specifically focused on other benefits

and aspects of the portfolio use. The opinions are as follows:

[P7] *"I think that I have taken a long way and I can say I trust myself more whenever I attempt to write in English now, I mean, more than I felt at the beginning. I had never written so much in English before. In this course I was able to improve myself in the writing skill, and now I know that I can do much better. As the portfolio was a part of mid-term and final exam score, it influenced my performance positively, to be honest. I see that I'm writing more fluently than I used to before I started at the department. I believe that I learned a lot."*

[P9] *"I had a sort of prejudice about the writing course at the very beginning, but now I'm more optimistic. You changed our attitude towards writing by having us keep a portfolio. I think including the portfolio into the assessment was the most important factor to force us to write. To get a better score in mid-term and final exams, I felt that I had to give more importance to the assignments. If you asked us to write on a topic in the exam only, I wouldn't be so successful. I feel stressed under exam conditions and I cannot organize my thoughts so well."*

The opinion by Participant-2 reflects the level of motivation despite the fact that the assignments were too many, and sometimes boring. On the other hand, this student can observe her improvement as a whole, and this means that she developed a sense of ownership of her own progress.

[P2] *"To be honest with you, I sometimes find the writing assignments you give too many, and sometimes boring, but when I finish and see what I have written, it makes me proud. Keeping a portfolio is tiring, but it gives me pleasure. I mean, it kept me very busy in my free-time and I did all the assignments. When I look through my portfolio, I see that I wouldn't have thought that I'd be able to make so much progress. Personally, I can say I benefited a lot."*

These opinions also support the opinions derived from the participants' reflective essays with respect to the impact of the portfolio assessment on their performance, the force that the inclusion of portfolio into the assessment created on the students to write better, the importance given to the

writing assignments, feeling stressed while writing on a topic and inability to organize their thoughts under exam conditions, and the sense of ownership of their individual progress.

## Discussion

All the opinions related to the use of portfolio for assessment within the scope of our study reveal that making student's portfolio an essential component of the assessment procedure forces them to focus on the course and the assignments.

In spite of the fact that they feel bored at times due to the workload, the portfolio process gives them the opportunity to think in comfort and express themselves better in their assignments over a period of time, rather than expecting them to think and write about a single topic in limited time under exam conditions; however, this might naturally result in anxiety and failure. The opinions indicate that they enjoyed the idea of being evaluated through a portfolio rather than on their performance on a single topic in the midterm and final exam. It seems that they did not suffer from any exam anxiety as a result of the assessment of their performance through portfolio.

The students reported that, as a result of the assessment process spreading over a term and a whole academic year, they better focused on the reading-writing course by revising their assignments again and again in order to produce better products. They also reported that they valued the time and energy in creating their written assignments. The fact that their portfolio constituted an essential part of the assessment procedure seemed to create a desire and motivation in the students to write, and consequently, they took the process seriously.

The students also reported that they developed a positive attitude towards the writing skill, the portfolio process, and its assessment. The comments made by the participant students also prove that they have all understood the idea behind the assessment procedure in the portfolio process.

A number of studies in various Turkish contexts and abroad reveal findings and

results in support of our study.

For instance, a study by Kılıç (2009) on portfolio implementation at Turkish university preparatory schools indicates that teachers perceive portfolios as an appropriate tool for assessment; however, certain key features of portfolios, such as student participation in the selection of portfolio content, self-assessment and student reflection, are not generally included in portfolios at preparatory programs, so they should be included in order to achieve the intended aims. Kılıç reveals that the problems related to the portfolio process caused by students' study habits, previous backgrounds, and institutional practices create some challenges in portfolio implementation. Our study also revealed that the students enjoyed being evaluated over their portfolio as part of mid-term and final exams, saying that they better focused on the course and tried to produce better products each time.

In a study covering 386 English instructors from the preparatory programs of 14 Turkish state universities, Oğuz (2003) reported that both the assessment instruments the instructors are currently using and portfolios have benefits as well as insufficiencies and stressed the significance of using multiple assessment methods to achieve effective results. The results also showed that instructors do not have adequate knowledge of assessment in some areas such as interpreting the assessment results, or the relationship between assessment and instruction, which suggests the need for professional training for the instructors in these areas. Moreover, the findings highlighted a challenge of portfolio implementation such as time demands on instructors, which suggests the need for making some adjustments in the preparatory class curricula to achieve effective use of portfolios.

Another study on the implementation of portfolio assessment in the Turkish context by Şahinkarakaş (1998), it was found that using portfolio assessment system in writing classes helps students improve their writing ability as well as their meta-cognitive skills, and that the criteria used were both reliable and valid to use in evaluating portfolio tasks.

Erdoğan (2006) reported in a study on the effect of portfolio-based assessment on student achievement and attitudes toward English that, although portfolio had no effect on student achievement and attitudes toward English, the answers given by students showed that the students liked the portfolio study, they tried to produce more quality work, they gained more responsibility towards their own learning and they had positive attitudes towards learning in general.

In a study by Sağlam (2005) on the effect of portfolio assessment on proficiency development and classroom practices of EFL students, it was revealed that portfolio assessment had a positive impact on students' classroom practices, improvement in the course, and feelings of monitoring their own progress. The students in the study benefited from the use of portfolio assessment through several aspects. They had higher grades, better tracked their development, and had higher amount of interaction than those students who received traditional assessment.

In a study in the Japanese context, Santos (1997) emphasized the importance of learner reflection in the portfolio process saying that learner reflection allows students to contribute their own insights about their learning to the assessment process, enhancing feelings of learner ownership of their work, and increases opportunities for dialogue between teachers and students about curriculum goals and learner progress. These benefits come as a result of seriously approaching the reflective task and helping students develop the meta-cognitive and communicative skills to document their reflections. Our study also proved that the portfolio process and its assessment lead to learners' ownership of their own improvement.

In another study in Taiwan on implementing reflective portfolios for promoting autonomous learning among EFL college students, Lo (2010) says that peer evaluation should be incorporated into pedagogy to allow students to practise the skills needed for self-evaluation. Also, the criteria for assessing portfolios need to be specific and made known to the students. In our study, it was also observed that explaining the evaluation

criteria to the students clearly at the very start was very beneficial to reach the intended outcomes.

The student opinions reflected through our study are also consistent with the limitations to which Weigle (2002, p.197) drew attention in the approach to writing assessment: "the fact that writing done under timed conditions on an unfamiliar topic does not accurately reflect the conditions under which most writing is done in non-testing situations, and the fact that it is difficult to generalize from a single writing sample to a much broader universe of writing in different genres and for different purposes and audiences." Similarly, Leki (In Kroll, 1990, p.65) draws attention to the discomfort when forced to evaluate students' writing assignments and recommends using the portfolio approach as a solution, saying "not grading writing based on quality, but rather on the completion of a minimum number of assignments, [...], not grading papers, but rather grading overall performance in a class; grading on the basis of a few limited required improvements."

### **Conclusion**

Portfolio assessment is a type of assessment that teachers can benefit from and enable their students to observe and assess their personal growth and achievement in writing. As a process, the use of portfolio can be applied at various levels, from elementary level to high school, from preparatory programs at universities to other academic contexts in specific fields. In our case, it was applied in an ELT context in an integrated reading-writing course with freshmen. It is true that portfolio assessment depends on either an institutional decision or the instructor's own choice. In this study, it was the instructor's decision to use a portfolio process.

The opinions derived from students' reflective essays and interviews on using their portfolio as an assessment component of mid-term and final exams indicate a positive attitude towards this sort of assessment. They report that portfolio assessment is better than selecting and writing about only one topic in an exam and being evaluated based on their performance in limited time. It creates a different understanding of assessment in their

mind.

The students draw our attention to the anxiety factor from which they might suffer negatively in an exam if they were asked to write a timed-essay. In other words, evaluation of their written products in a portfolio spreading over a term eliminates the exam anxiety and results in better performances. Such a performance in writing seems to be a better and more reliable indicator of students' progress and achievement in their eyes.

A portfolio process in an integrated reading-writing course can be used as an opportunity to enable students to see their improvement within the wholeness of their portfolio. In this way, they will value the effort and time they spend while creating each written product. As a result, from a pedagogical perspective, despite the workload students might complain about, they can be motivated to write better each time they attempt, focusing on the course itself and their assignments. As revealed by this study, the students complained about too many writing assignments; however, they got accustomed to this sort of study in the course of time and focused on the course. They could see that they could think in comfort to express themselves better. Most importantly, the students can evaluate their own improvement within their portfolio. As a result, while trying to improve their writing skill, they can compare their written products at various stages and undergo an enjoyable and meaningful learning process. In short, a portfolio process and assessment procedure can motivate the students in giving more importance to their assignments; and as a result of this, and they can perform better in an integrated reading-writing course by eliminating the negative impact of exam anxiety, giving them enough time to organize their thoughts in their attempts to write on various topics.

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