

THE EFFECTS OF PORTFOLIOS ON DEVELOPING WRITING SKILLS OF ENGLISH MAJOR STUDENTS AT HANOI LAW UNIVERSITY

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Abstract: The primary focus of this study was to examine the effects of portfolios on enhancing writing skills of English major students at Hanoi Law University. To achieve the aim, 50 second-year students participating in the study were randomly divided into experimental and control groups. The experimental group was taught English writing skills using portfolios while traditional teaching method was applied to the control group. A pre-test and a post-test were administered to both groups to measure the differences in students' writing performances. The results revealed that portfolios had positive impacts on students' writing skills. The data gained from the questionnaires administered to the students in the experimental group to identify their perceptions of portfolios on their writing abilities showed that the majority of them considered portfolios to be effective. Based on the main findings, a number of recommendations relating to applying writing portfolios were made to improve the English teaching and learning process.

Key words: English major students, portfolios, writing skill

1. Introduction

It is undeniable that writing skill is the most challenging one for English learners to master in either EFL or ESP context. The teaching methodology of English writing skill, therefore, has gained a great concern among researchers and educators. Bailey (1986) indicated that it is important that “students develop a good level of writing, so that they can prepare written pieces of work with no difficulty, focusing on vocabulary definitions and grammar structures that are consistent with the language level.” Specifically, the key teaching strategy to develop students' writing skill is to use efficient teaching methods to obtain a continuous improvement of learning. In teaching practice, there has been a change in the methodology of teaching English writing skill, from the traditional way of the product-based approach to the process-product approach (Tabatabaei & Assefi, 2012), in which writing portfolios are implemented.

Yang (2003) defined 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”. Nowadays, in English classes, portfolios have become increasingly popular not only to assess students' achievement but also to demonstrate how their language skills have developed over a period of time. In the literature, a number of studies have been carried out to evaluate the effects of portfolios on improving English writing skill and students' attitudes towards portfolio assessment in the EFL/ ESL context. Several researchers pointed out that portfolios are an effective means to promote writing skill. For example, Aydin (2010) conducted a case study at Balikesir University, Turkey, the results of which suggested that

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portfolios help learners improve vocabulary, grammar learning as well as develop proficiency skills. Similarly, the findings of Yurdabakan and Erdogan (2009) indicated that portfolio assessment had a significant effect on learners' writing skill. It can be said that using portfolios in teaching and assessment was found to be of great benefit, providing complete pictures of students' needs in foreign language teaching and learning.

However, there have been limited studies on the effect of portfolios on EFL writing skill and students' attitudes toward portfolio technique, in particular in English classes at University level in Vietnam. This situation is similar to that at Hanoi Law University where writing skill is a compulsory subject to legal English major students during three semesters. At this institution, using portfolios in the teaching and assessment of students' development in English writing skill is encouraged. However, there has not been any research to identify the impact of using portfolios in developing students' writing performance. This fact suggests a need for carrying out the research on the impact of portfolios as well as English major students' attitudes towards the use of portfolios on improving their writing skills. The study, therefore, seeks to answer the two following research questions:

1. Do writing portfolios have an effect on the students' achievement in their overall writing skill?
2. What are the students' attitudes towards portfolio technique?

2. Theoretical framework

2.1. Portfolio and portfolio assessment

There has been a number of ways to define portfolio in the literature. Barnard and Deyzel (2003) defined: "portfolio as a portable, systematic, purposeful collection of work, selected to provide information about attitude, level of development and growth during a given period of time. It is a powerful visual tool that provides evidence of self-assessment, personal reflections, learning, growth and development and a comprehensive and complex overview of skills". To be more specific, a portfolio is defined as "a purposeful collection of students' work that demonstrates their effort, progress and achievement in given area" (Genesee & Upshur, 1996). A writing portfolio, therefore, is a collection of student writing that is intended to demonstrate the writer's development over the course of one or more academic terms.

Currently, in EFL classes, teachers tend to prefer using the process approach in teaching writing skill to the product approach. In the process approach, students spend time brainstorming, gathering the information, writing about the topics, revising and editing before submitting a final piece of writing. In other words, the process to create a final draft is even more important than the final draft itself. This denotes the fact that it is essential to apply an assessment technique instead of an only standardized test to measure the students' writing development during an academic programme. It is important to note that portfolio assessment is a kind of portfolios, which acts as a self-reflection assessment - an evaluation tool for reviewing the student progress in writing as well as the end product of writing. Portfolio assessment can develop students' autonomy, critical thinking, and linguistic competence, and supports the notion that writing process involves growth, development, and learning as well as a product (Weiser, 1992).

2.2. Previous studies on the impact of portfolio on promoting students' writing skills

In the literature of teaching and learning English writing skill, there are a number of studies on the effects of using portfolios and the students' attitudes toward using portfolios.

Tabatabaei and Assefi (2012) carried out a research on the effect of portfolio assessment technique on writing skills of EFL students, in which forty Iranian EFL learners were classified into experimental and control groups. The experimental group was taught writing skills using portfolios while the control group received the traditional method. The results indicated that portfolio technique had a significant impact on improving writing skills, particularly sub-skills of writing such as focus, organization, vocabulary, elaboration and conventions.

Wang and Liao (2008) also investigated students' attitudes to portfolios for writing classes in the technological and vocational education system. The results of the research showed that the experimental group provided with portfolio technique was more satisfactory than the control group. Also, Shober (1996) carried out a study to examine the usefulness of portfolios on students' narrative writing skills in a 12-week period. During the treatment, students were asked to write three pieces of writing following the procedures of prewriting, revising and editing. After the treatment, the statistic revealed that using portfolios had a clearly significant effect on students' improvement in narrative writing.

Nevertheless, there are several studies in the literature, the results of which showed that portfolio technique did not have a great effect on students' writing skill at all and students' attitudes towards portfolio were not completely positive.

Hirvela and Sweetland (2005) conducted two case studies of portfolios in ESL writing classes. The findings indicated that although the participants liked the idea of portfolios, however, they did not approve their use in writing course. Liu's study (2003) investigated ESL students' experiences with writing portfolios in college composition courses and their attitudes towards portfolios. The participants were divided into experimental and control groups. The experimental group was taught through applying portfolios whereas the control group was taught through product-based writing instruction - the traditional method. Findings gathered from the study indicated that experimental group did not gain significantly better results than the control group. In terms of students' attitudes, the data revealed that the majority of students stated that they could not see an immediate effect from reviewing their portfolio work.

In light of these previous studies, this current research was carried out to investigate whether portfolio technique had a significant effect on students' writing skill as well as to find out their attitudes towards portfolios at Hanoi Law University context.

3. Methods

3.1. Participants

Fifty legal English major sophomores – the population of this study, whose age ranged from 18 to 22, at Hanoi Law University, were divided equally into experimental group and control group. As this study was carried out in the second semester of the second year, after

taking the final exam of the first semester, it was determined that students were between the intermediate level and upper-intermediate level of English proficiency.

3.2. Data collection instruments

Participants' essays

Two groups were required to write two in-class discussion essays of 300-350 words on the same topic in a pre-test administered prior to and in a post-test following the formal instruction.

- *Survey questionnaire*

The student satisfaction questionnaire developed by Wang & Liao (2008) was used in order to identify students' attitudes towards using portfolios. The questionnaire had 10 items on a 5-point Likert Scale.

3.3. Procedures

The experiment was carried out in writing skill classes for 12 weeks, each of which lasts for 135 minutes. Before the treatment, students in both groups were required to write a discussion essay on the topic of "the explosion of the Internet", which served as the pre-test. At the beginning of the treatment, the instructor (researcher) explained the design of the lesson, the goals and the content of the portfolios to the experimental group. During the treatment the students in the experimental group were asked to write 3 discussion essays on topics such as living in a city; living in dormitory and environmental problems, all of which were designed and chosen by the teacher. The teacher then carefully read the students' first drafts and gave feedback on their writing of their essays on different criteria namely task fulfilment, organization, grammar, vocabulary, and punctuation. Those comments helped students realize the weaknesses and strengths of their pieces of writing during the treatment. In addition, students had to evaluate their writings as well as review their peer's writing. Then, they revised to rewrite their essays drawing on their self-evaluation, their teacher's and peer's feedback. Finally, they were asked to collect their final drafts in the portfolios. The control group, on the other hand, were traditionally taught the structure of the essay including how to write the introduction, the body and the conclusion, etc., in an explicit way. Those students were also required to write 3 discussion essays on the same topics as the experimental group. However, unlike the experimental group, the students in the control group were not asked to reflect, revise and rewrite their essays. After that, the post-test on the topic of "the explosion of the Internet" was administered to both groups. It should be noted that both students' pre-tests and post-tests were marked under 5 evaluation criteria mentioned above using a 10-point scale to assess the students' writing performance.

4. Findings

Research question 1: Do writing portfolios have an effect on the students' achievement in their overall writing ability?

Before the treatment, paired samples t-test was conducted in order to investigate whether or not there was any difference between the control and experimental groups in terms of

students' writing performance. The result was shown in table 1.

Table 1. Paired samples t-test analysis for pre-test scores of groups

	N	Mean	Std. Deviation	df	Sig.(2-tailed)
Experimental group	25	7.120	.6171	24	.621
Control group	25	7.200	.5951		

Table 1 indicated that in terms of students' overall writing performance there was no statistically significant difference in the pre-test scores of the experimental group and the control group with a mean of 7.120 and 7.200 respectively. In other words, it was concluded that the writing performance of the participants in each group was equal.

Table 2. Comparison of pre-test, post-test scores - control group

	Mean	N	Std. Deviation	Std. Error Mean
Pre-test Control group	7.200	25	.5951	.1190
Post-test Control group	7.360	25	.5686	.1137

Table 2 showed the results of paired samples t-test analysis for the pre-test and post-test scores of control group. According to the Table 3, there was a minor difference between pre-test (M=7.200, SD=0.5951) and post-test (M=7.360, SD=0.5686) scores of control group in terms of overall writing performance. From the statistics, although the adoption of the traditional method in the control group also had an effect on ESP students' writing performance, it was not considered as significant.

Table 3. Paired samples pre-test and post - test statistics - experimental group

	Mean	N	Std. Deviation	Std. Error Mean
Pre-test Experimental group	7.120	25	.6171	.1234
Post-test Experimental group	8.120	25	.5260	.1052

Table 4. Comparison of pre-test, post-test scores - experimental group

	Paired Differences					t	df	Sig. (2-tailed)
	Mean	Std. Deviation	Std. Error Mean	95% Confidence Interval of the Difference				
				Lower	Upper			
Experimental group - Experimental group	-1.0000	.4330	.0866	-1.1787	-.8213	-11.547	24	.000

A paired-samples t-test was also conducted to compare the mean scores of pre-test and post-test of the experimental group. Table 3 and 4 showed that there was a statistically significant difference between pre-test (M=7.120, SD= 0.6171) and post-test (M=8.120, SD=0.5260) scores of experimental group with regard to their writing performance ($t(24) = -11.547$). The results indicated that the instruction through portfolio assessment technique was found to significantly affect the students' overall writing performance.

Table 5. Comparison of post-test scores - Experimental and Control groups

	Mean	N	Std. Deviation	Std. Error Mean
Post -test Experimental group	8.120	25	.5260	.1052
Post -test Control group	7.360	25	.5686	.1137

The statistics of Table 5 showed that there was a statistically significant difference between the post-test scores of the control group ($M=7.360$, $SD=0.5686$) and the experimental group ($M=8.120$, $SD=0.5250$). This indicated that students who received instruction through portfolio technique were significantly better at writing than those who received the traditional instruction in the control group.

Research question 2: What are the students' attitudes towards portfolio technique?

Table 6 demonstrates students' attitudes towards the portfolio technique with 10 items developed by Wang & Liao (2008) using a Likert scale with five options ranging from "strongly agree – SA (5) to "strongly disagree" - SD (1).

Table 6. Students' attitude towards portfolio technique

N=25	SA	A	N	D	SD	Mean
The course content is based on past knowledge and experience	8.0	28.0	36.0	20.0	8.0	3.08
The course can enhance my critical ability	20.0	52.0	20.0	4.0	4.0	3.80
The course's objectives correspond with my personal learning objective	32.0	44.0	16.0	8.0	0.0	4.00
The students know exactly what to do in the class	28.0	60.0	12.0	0.0	0.0	4.16
Course requirements are clear	28.0	44.0	16.0	8.0	4.0	3.84
The students can learn a lot from teacher and peer feedback	36.0	48.0	8.0	4.0	4.0	4.08
The course material corresponds with the subjects and the units' objectives	36.0	48.0	12.0	4.0	0.0	4.16
There are opportunities for students to express opinions in this class	32.0	40.0	20.0	4.0	4.0	3.92
The teacher presents clear and relevant examples	24.0	56.0	16.0	4.0	0.0	4.00
The teacher provides timely feedback about students' progress in the class	52.0	40.0	8.0	0.0	0.0	4.44

As seen from Table 6, 76% of participants in the experimental group agreed that the course's objectives correspond with their personal learning objectives. At the same time most of the participants agreed that they know exactly what has to be done in the class (88%) and the course requirements are clear (72%). Moreover, the same rate of students thought that students can learn a lot from teacher, peer feedback and the course material corresponds with the units' objectives, which accounted for 84%. 90% and 92% of participants agreed that the teacher presents clear, relevant examples and provides timely feedback about students' progress respectively. In general, the students expressed a positive attitude towards portfolio technique in English writing class with the high mean ranging from 3.08 to 4.44 (strongly agree (5) to "strongly disagree" (1)).

5. Discussion and implications

This study aimed to investigate the differences between the students' overall writing performance of the experimental group taught by the portfolio technique and the control group taught by the traditional method as well as and to identify students' views in the experimental group towards the portfolio technique. The data from the pre-test, post-test and survey questionnaires were then gathered and analyzed through the SPSS program. The statistics indicated important main findings.

Concerning the first research question, the results of the post-test revealed that students taught by the portfolio technique in the experimental group were significantly better at their overall writing performance than those who received the traditional method instruction in the control group. From the statistics, it can be seen that the current study shares similar findings with the previous ones such as the studies carried out by Yurdabakan and Erdogan (2009), and Tabatabaei and Assefi (2012) on the impact of portfolio assessment on overall writing performance in comparison with the traditional teaching method. Specifically, two above studies also indicated that portfolio assessment had a significant influence on students' writing skills. The results of this study prove that the portfolio technique, to some extent, has had a beneficial effect on students' writing performance.

In response to the second research question, survey questionnaires were administered in order to examine students' views on the portfolio technique. The results showed that the majority of the participants expressed their positive attitudes towards the portfolio technique application in English writing instruction. Most of the statements received a high rate of agreement among the participants, which accounted for more than 70%. However, the negative opinion was on the statement "*the course is based on past knowledge and experience*", which was at 28% of disagreement and 36% of neutral opinion. In terms of students' views towards portfolio technique, this study is also consistent with the previous studies by Hirvela and Sweetland (2005) and Wang and Liao (2008), in which it was found that students had positive attitudes towards the portfolio technique.

Three important pedagogical implications have been drawn from this study. Firstly, portfolio is such an effective instructional technique that teachers in English writing classes should make use of it instead of traditional teaching method to motivate, thus, enhancing students' overall writing ability. Secondly, writing portfolios are a valuable tool of assessment as teachers can evaluate their students' development in writing through each piece of writing. Thirdly, the portfolio technique creates opportunity for students to develop their critical ability including critical thinking, critical reading when giving feedback to peer writing. This fact proves to be of great benefit as students become more actively involved into the learning process.

6. Conclusion

The study demonstrated the positive effects of the portfolio technique on developing students' writing performance, which was shown by much higher scores of the post-test than the pre-test. In addition, the students in the experimental group expressed their satisfaction on the

application of portfolios in terms of different criteria. However, there are several limitations to the current study. Firstly, the factors including the age, gender of the participants, which were not taken into consideration in this study, can be used in further studies to investigate whether they neutralise the effects of the portfolio technique on students' writing ability or not. Secondly, the size of the participants in this study is rather small. The results, to some extent, cannot reflect the behaviour of a larger population. Therefore, a greater number of participants should be involved in future studies to increase the generalization of findings. Lastly, the study only investigated the effect of portfolios on students' overall writing performance during a 12-week course, not specifically the sub-skills of writing in terms of focus, elaboration, organization, convention and vocabulary (Wang & Liao, 2008). In order to have a detailed insight into the usefulness of the portfolio application, further research should be carried out to measure the degree of the impact of portfolios on those writing sub-skills over a longer period of time.

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ẢNH HƯỞNG CỦA VIỆC ÁP DỤNG PORTFOLIO TỚI KĨ NĂNG VIẾT TIẾNG ANH CỦA SINH VIÊN NGÀNH NGÔN NGỮ ANH TẠI TRƯỜNG ĐẠI HỌC LUẬT HÀ NỘI

Tóm tắt: Bài nghiên cứu này nhằm tìm ra ảnh hưởng của việc áp dụng portfolio trong việc tăng cường kĩ năng viết của sinh viên ngành ngôn ngữ Anh tại trường Đại học Luật Hà Nội. Để đạt được mục tiêu nghiên cứu, 50 sinh viên ngành ngôn ngữ Anh tham gia vào nghiên cứu được chia ngẫu nhiên thành nhóm thực nghiệm và nhóm kiểm chứng. Nhóm thực nghiệm được dạy kĩ năng viết tiếng Anh sử dụng portfolio trong khi nhóm kiểm chứng được giảng dạy bằng phương pháp truyền thống. Sinh viên của hai nhóm làm bài kiểm tra viết trước và sau khi áp dụng portfolio đối với nhóm thực nghiệm để xác định mức độ khác nhau trong khả năng viết của sinh viên. Kết quả cho thấy sử dụng portfolio ảnh hưởng tích cực đối với kĩ năng viết tiếng Anh. Bên cạnh đó, bảng hỏi cũng được thực hiện để khảo sát quan điểm của sinh viên thuộc nhóm thực nghiệm về phương pháp áp dụng portfolio trong giảng dạy kĩ năng viết. Số liệu chỉ ra rằng phần lớn sinh viên đều đánh giá việc sử dụng portfolio là hiệu quả. Dựa vào những kết quả đó, tác giả đề xuất một số kiến nghị liên quan đến việc áp dụng portfolio để tăng hiệu quả quá trình dạy và học tiếng Anh.

Từ khóa: Sinh viên ngành ngôn ngữ Anh, portfolios, kĩ năng Viết