THE USE OF PORTFOLIOS ON EFL YOUNG LEARNERS' SENTENCE WRITING: A CASE AT AN ENGLISH LANGUAGE CENTRE IN THE MEKONG DELTA

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Abstract: The aim of this experimental study is two-fold: (1) to find out the extent that the portfolio affects EFL young learners' sentence writing; (2) to explore learners' attitudes towards the use of portfolio. Participants are 60 young learners enrolling Mover courses at an English language center situated in the Mekong Delta. Data were collected and analyzed quantitatively by means of 30 pre-tests (E1 and C1) and 60 post-tests to identify the degree of the treatment's effectiveness. Additionally, semi-structured interviews were administrated to determine learners' thoughts and opinions after using portfolios in their writing. Results have indicated the use of portfolio brings significantly positive effects on EFL young learners' sentence writing ability and the participants have showed positive attitudes towards the use of portfolio.
Key words: Attitudes, portfolio, writing, young learners

1. Introduction

In foreign language learning, the ability to write effectively is becoming more and more important (Weigle, 2002). In addition, as Nezakatgoo (2011) mentioned, writing is the most difficult skill for EFL learners to master. It is more than production of these graphic symbols. The graphic symbols must be arranged in such away according to certain conversion, to form words to form phase. The shift in writing theory from writing products to that of writing processes has led to the popularity of portfolios among educators as an alternative approach both in English as a Foreign Language (EFL) and English as a Second Language (ESL) context as an instructional tool for the exam preparation (Nezakatgoo, 2011). There are many different ideas of the definition of portfolios, but the common consensus is that portflios are the purposeful collections of works showing the development of skills, knowledge or experiences over a period. Basically, the aims of all kinds of language portfolios are to keep records about learners' language learning process, to demonstrate how their skills developed in time and to promote language learning (Gonzales, 2009). In this sense, Council of Europe's Modern Languages Division devised European Language Portfolio (ELP) to motivate learners by acknowledging their efforts, diversifying their language skills at levels and providing a record of the linguistic and cultural skills they have acquired (Little, 2002 & Mirici, 2008).

Song and August (2002) pointed out EFL learners struggled to focus on the skills needed for second language writing and on culturally related issues in the process of writing at the same time when they had a set time during the writing test. Moreover, learners are usually given numerical grades for their writing assignment that may not be accurate indicators of their writing ability. Therefore, it is believed that combining portfolios with an impromptu timed writing sample may help teachers both enhance students' writing ability and make better informed judgments about students' writing ability (Dysthe, 2008). For young language learners, oral skills should be developed first. Theory in child language acquisition has

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shown that children of young age should be supported to develop language skills in the following order: listening, speaking, then reading and writing (O'Grady, 2005). As such, writing should be developed last of all for children at primary school age and younger. It does not mean that writing is totally ignored when it comes to teaching a foreign language to primary school students. But rather it should come later after a focus on other skills and extra carefully technique and method is required to help young language learners improve their writing. Little (2005) states that language portfolios give children a real sense of pride and achievement by providing an opportunity to perform their language competence to others.

2. Literature review

According to Brown (1998), the concept of portfolios was borrowed from the field of art when it aimed at displaying best samples of an artist's work. Then, it has been commonly used in education field in a wide range of places from the middle of 90s. In this field, there are many different ideas of the definition of portfolios, but the common consensus is that it is a purposeful collection of works showing the development of skills, knowledge or experiences over a period.

A number of studies related to the use of portfolios on young learners' writing have been conducted in different contexts.

In 2011, Taki and Heidari conducted a study on the effectiveness of portfolio-based writing assessment in EFL situations with 40 pre-intermediate young Iranian English learners. The learners were randomly divided into 2 groups: control and experimental group of 20 each. Results of the study indicate that portfolio-based writing assessment has a positive effect on language learning and writing abilitysuch as fluency, content, conventions, syntax, and vocabulary. It also shows that the use of portfolios helps students' self-assessment and almost all students are satisfied with this method of assessment.

Zorba and Tosun (2011) did research on 24 pupils who are all 6 years old in Turkeyto determine the advantages of using language portfolios in kindergartens. The findings revealed that the language portfolios increased their motivation, incorporate them in the courses, and prolonged their attention span. All of them clearly indicated that the development of autonomous learning can be achieved in kindergartens. Therefore, using portfolios is one of the applicable methods that promotes the development of learners' independence, responsibility and decision making.

Several research studies on the use of portfolio on other levels of learners and on other aspects of language have been also conducted.

In 2009, Yurdabakan and Erdogan conducted a project to explore the effects of portfolio assessment on reading, listening and writing skills of students who enrolled in a secondary school language preparatory class and to analyze the opinions of those students on portfolio assessment. The learners were divided randomly into two groups of 22 each, treatment and control, from secondary school English preparatory. The findings showed that portfolio assessment had a significant influence on students' writing skills as the change in the mean score of the treatment group was much higher than that of the control group. However, the same results were not found for the reading and listening skills. Furthermore, the analysis of students' answers to the open-ended questions showed that portfolio assessment can increase responsibility of students and motivates them.

In order to determine the effect of portfolio assessment on final examination scores of EFL students' writing skill, Nezakatgoo (2011) conducted a study with 40 university students who enrolled in composition course were initially selected and divided randomly into two experimental and control groups. The results

revealed that students whose work was evaluated by a portfolio system had improved in their writing and gained higher scores in final examination when compared to those students whose work was evaluated by the more traditional evaluation system.

Shokraie and Tabrizi (2016) investigated the effect of portfolio on writing performance of EFL learners. The participants were 60 undergraduate EFL students in Frisby Language School in Babol, Iran. They were randomly divided into experimental and control groups of 30 each. The experimental group received the treatment (portfolio assessment) while the control group underwent the traditional approach of writing assessment. The participants were also required to complete a questionnaire to assess their reflection and self-assessment. Results of the study indicate that portfolio-based writing assessment has a positive effect on writing ability.

In Vietnam, little research on the use of portfolio has been carried out.

Tran (2007) investigated the effectiveness of portfolio-based assessment in EFL writing settings and found out the attitudes of learners toward the use of portfolio strategy. The data was gathered from the analysis of pretests and posttests and the questionnaires answered by 18 EFL teachers and 64 learners at the center for foreign languages at Can Tho University. The result showed that portfolios are an effective assessment. Besides, the result indicated that the attitudes of the learners were not convinced because the questionnaire was administered only for the experimental group. Therefore, it could not compare learner's attitudes before and after the intervention.

Ung (2010) conducted a study with the aim of revealing the extent of the portfolio's effect on learners' writing anxiety and the attitudes of the learners towards the use of portfolio. To obtain the data, the researcher used three research instruments: pre-questionnaires, post questionnaires and writing blogs. The finding showed that the level of anxiety in students' writing was reduced and they showed positive attitudes toward the use of portfolio .

Nguyen (2015) administrated an action research project with 60 sophomores majoring in English at a university in a Mekong Delta province. The purpose of the research was to find out the impacts of the use of the portfolios on learners' writing performance and the learners' attitudes towards the use of portfolios in their learning. The results revealed that the participants of the experimental group significantly improved their writing after the study while the participants of the control group slightly improved their writing. Moreover, the data of the interviews showed that interviewees had positive attitudes towards the use of portfolio in learning how to write.

It can be deduced that the use of portfolios has come popular as it brings many different benefits for teaching and learning process. It has also interested many scholars conducting research related to its use on the development of students' writing performance. Although they have been done for several times, most researchers focused on the participants from pre-intermediate to advanced English levels. There has been a few research implemented on its use on young language learners. Besides, researchers paid much attention on writing performance in general, thus, there is still space to do a study on a specific space of writing, such as writing sentence ability of EFL language learners.

Despite its potential benefits, portfolio has not been applied much in the Vietnamese teaching context, including the Mekong Delta. Thus, the study on the use of the portfolios on writing performance of EFL young learners conducted in the religion would be necessary as it may provide some insightful findings and information that may support educators in their further teaching process.

The research aimed to answer the following questions:

1. What extent does the portfolios affect EFL young learners' sentence writing?

2. What are the attitudes of the learners toward the use of portfolios in writing sentence?

3. Methodology

3.1. Research design

This research is designed as an experimental study implementing both quantitative and qualitative research methods. The Solomon four-group design was adopted because it provides rigorous control over extraneous variables and also provides the opportunity for multiple comparisons to determine the use of the experimental treatment (Campbell & Stanley, 1963). In this design, participants are divided into four groups included one experimental group (E) and three control groups (C1, C2 and C3). The experimental and the first control group (E and C1) are pre-tested groups, and the second and third control groups (C2 and C3) are not pre-tested groups. After the treatment period, both groups are post-tested. The design of the current study will be summarized by the below table:

Group	Pre-test	Treatment	Post-test
Experimental group (E1)	X	X	X
Control group 1 (C1)	X	-	X
Control group 2 (C2)	-	X	X
Control group 3 (C3)	-	-	X

In Campbell and Stanley (1963), this design is considered as a strong design as it actually involves conducting the experiment twice, once with pre-test and once without pre-test. Therefore, if the results of these two experiments are in agreement, the researcher can be ensured to come up with the findings.

3.2. Data collection

In order to find out the answers for research questions, the quantitative method is first employed. This method included the writing tests, including pre-test and post-test with applying portfolio-based teaching, aims to measure the degree that experimental treatment may change young learners' writing sentence ability. The tests contained 17 questions that required students to write one word answer and a sentence answer about some given pictures during 30 minutes. Their writings were checked based on a rubric by two raters who were familiar with the scoring rubrics. Therefore, the inter-rater reliability was checked.

Then, the qualitative method with semi-structured interviews was adapted to elicit students' opinions and reflections on the use of portfolio on their writing. The combination of various research instruments provides the researcher with more opportunities to find answers for research questions.

3.3. Participants

The participants recruited in the study were 60 young learners trying to achieve Mover certificates, which is claimed to bear equivalent to A1 level following *Common European Framework of Reference for Languages: Learning, Teaching, and Assessment* in a language center situated in the Mekong Delta. To ensure that the learners can reach this level, the language center requires them to take part in 4 courses named CK1, CK2, CK3 and CK4.

In the current research, the researcher chose CK3 learners to involve because of some potential reasons. First, learners at this level occupied most of the population of this language center, thus it helps the researcher collect a bigger sample size than others. Moreover, the researcher who is also a teacher at the language center has mainly taught CK3 and CK4 classes at this language center so that it would be easier and more convenient for the researcher to conduct the current research with her own classes.

3.4. Data analysis methods

To compare the mean scores among groups, Independent and Paired samples T-Tests were applied to compare the results of the post-tests to examine the possible differences between the two groups. Meanwhile, given design of study, analysis of covariance (ANCOVA) was used as a statistical tool for data analysis.

The data collected from the interviews of participants were analyzed based on the protocol designed by the researcher to provide more data for answering the research questions.

4. Findings and discussions

4.1. The extent to which the use of portfolio influences EFL young learners' writing sentence

The Reliability Analysis was first run to check the reliability of the writing tests. The reliability coefficient of the writing tests were acceptable (α = .718 for pretest and α = .778 for posttest). In other words, the result showed the tests used in the current study were reliable.

Then, the pretests of the experimental and the first control group were first analyzed by the Descriptive Statistics. After that, the Paired Samples T-Test was administrated to compare the mean scores of the participants' writing sentence performance before and after the treatment of the two groups: the experimental group and the first control group.

Finally, the Independent Samples T-test was run to analyze and compare the mean scores in the participants' writing sentence of 2 pairs: (1) the experimental and the first control group and (2) the second control group and the third control group. In order to triangulate the result of the Independent Samples T-Test, One-way ANOVA was also carried out to come up with the final result.

4.1.1. Participants' writing sentence performance within the two groups before the intervention: the experimental (E1) and the first control group (C1)

Before administrating the treatment, 30 students of the experimental and the first control group were pretested. After the data were collected, the Descriptive Statistics Test was first carried out to examine the overall mean scores, the maximum, the minimum and the standard deviation (SD) of writing sentence performance and to compare the mean scores of the pretest between the two groups. The results have indicated that the mean score of the experimental group (M=7.42) after being computed is statistically higher than that of the first control group (M=6.58). (Please see the Appendix for the outcome of the Descriptive Statistics).

Then, the Independent Samples T-Test was also carried out to analyze and compare the mean scores of the experimental group and of the first control group. The result has demonstrated that there is no difference observed between the mean score of the two groups (t=1.830, df=28, sig. =.078 > p=.05). Because the significant level in this test is higher than the value of p (p=.05), it can be concluded that the level of writing sentence performance of participants of the experimental group and the first control group was the same before the intervention. (Please see the Appendix for the outcome of the Independent Samples T-Test).

4.1.2. Participants' writing sentence performance after the intervention

The posttests of 4 groups were also first analyzed by Descriptive Statistics Test. The results revealed that the experimental participants showed the highest mean score among 4 groups' participants, which means the participants of the experimental group performed better in the posttest than others. Meanwhile, among control groups, the second control group which was also received the treatment got the highest mean score.

After that, the Paired Samples T-Test was next operated to check whether there is a significant difference between the participants' level of writing sentence performance before and after the treatment of the two groups: the experimental group and the first control group.

First, the Paired Samples T-Test was conducted to compare the mean scores of the participants' writing sentence performance before and after the study within the experimental group. The Paired Samples T-Test has shown that the mean score of the posttest of the experimental group (M=8.45) was higher than the mean score of the pretest (M=7.42). However, no statistically significant difference was found between the participants' level of writing sentence ability of the experimental group before and after the treatment (t=-2.001, df=15, sig=.065). Therefore, it can be summed up that the participants' sentence writing performance of the experimental group after the treatment was improved, but the improvement is not significant. In other words, the portfolio did not bring significant influence on young language learners' writing performance for the experimental control group. (Please see the Appendix for the outcome of the Paired-Samples T-Test)

Second, the Paired Samples T-Test was next run to compare the mean scores of the participants of the first control group before and after the intervention. The result of the Paired Samples T-Test has indicated that the mean score on the posttest of the participants of the first control group (M=6.88) is slightly higher than the mean score they did on the pretest (M=6.58). Moreover, the result has suggested that no difference between the two mean scores is observed (t=-.52, df=14, sig=.612), which means the level of writing sentence performance of the first control participants on the pretest and posttest is not statistically different. (Please see the Appendix for the outcome of the Paired-Samples T-Test)

The next step, two Independent Samples T-Tests were administrated to compare the progress of the improvement in writing sentence ability between 2 pairs: (1) the experimental group and the first control group; (2) the second control group and the third control group after the treatment. As mentioned in the Methodology chapter, with the Solomon four-group design, the researcher can have much greater confidence in the findings if the results of these two pairs are in agreement.

The Independent Samples T-Test was first run on the mean scores of the experimental group and the first control group to check whether there is a significant difference. The result of the Independent Samples T-Test has been demonstrated in Table 3.1.

Table 1. The result of the Independent Samples Test on the mean scores of the experimental group (E1) and the first control group (C1)

	Levene's Test for Equality of Variances		T-test for Equality of Means							
	F	Sig.	t	df	Sig. (2-tailed)	Mean Difference	Std. Error Difference	95% Confidence Interval of the Difference		
								Lower	Upper	
Equal variances assumed	1.247	.274	2.721	28	.011	1.56667	.57584	.38712	2.74621	
Equal variances not assumed			2.721	26.185	.011	1.56667	.57584	.38343	2.74991	

As can be seen in Table 1, the observed Sig = .011 is lower than the p value (p=.05) indicating that there is a statistically significant difference between the experimental group and the first control group. In other words, the use of portfolio has been effective or it has a significant positive effect on young EFL learners' writing sentence ability. Moreover, the mean score of the experimental participants (M=8.45) is also statistically higher the mean score of the first control group (M=6.88). Besides, One-way ANOVA was carried out to double check the reliability of this result. The result of One-way ANOVA has also pointed out that there is a significant influence of the portfolio on YLLs' writing because the significance level was the same as the result of the Independent Samples T-Test (sig=.011). Consequently, it can be concluded that the use of portfolio brings positive changes in students' writing sentences after the study. (Please see the Appendix for the outcome of One-way ANOVA).

Then, the next Independent Samples T-test was also run to check whether any difference between mean scores of the second control group (C2) and the third control group (C3) was observed after the treatment. The result has revealed that the mean scores between the two groups are significantly different (t=2.16, df=28, sig=.04 < p=.05). Furthermore, it is obvious that the mean score of the second control group (M=7.42) is higher the mean score of the third control group (M=5.95). Therefore, it can be concluded that the treatment brings a significant effect on the participants, which implies that the use of portfolio affects significantly students' writing sentences. The result has been illustrated in Table 2.

Table 2. The result of the Independent Samples T-Test on the mean scores of the second control group (C2) and the third control group (C3)

	Levene's Test for Equality of Variances		T-test for Equality of Means							
	F	Sig.	t	df	Sig. (2-tailed)	Mean Difference	Std. Error Difference	95% Confidence Interval of the Difference		
								Lower	Upper	
Equal variances assumed	.047	.83	2.16	28	.040	1.46667	.67914	.07551	2.85782	
Equal variances not assumed			2.16	27.813	.040	1.46667	.67914	.07509	2.85824	

In order to triangulate the results of the Independent Samples T-Test, One-way ANNOVA was next run. The result of One-way ANNOVA completely matched the results shown in the Independent Samples T-Test, which strongly confirms that the use of portfolio brings significant effects on YLLs' writing. (Please see the Appendix for the outcome of One-way ANOVA).

4.2. Discussions on the extent to which the use of portfolio influences EFL young language learners' sentence writing

Although it was found that the students' abilities in writing were not significantly different in the pretest, there is a statistically significant difference among the four groups' participants. Specifically, while the two groups who worked with the portfolio performed with remarkable improvement in their writing in the posttest, the other two groups showed not much improvement in the posttest. The data showed the mean scores between the experimental group and the first control group are significantly different (t=2.16, df=28, sig=.04 < p=.05) and it was found similarly in the mean scores of the second and the third control group (t=2.16, df=28, sig=.04 < p=.05). Thus, it can be concluded from the findings that the portfolio can bring positive benefits on YLLs' writing sentence after the study.

Many researchers including Tran (2007), Taki and Heidari (2011), Yurdabakan & Erdogan (2009), Nezakatgoo (2011), Nguyen (2015) and Shokraie& Tabrizi (2016) revealed that the use of portfolio brings significant effects on students' writing performance, the results obtained in this study are matched the findings found by these researchers. In this study, learners who used the portfolio had more opportunities to do the writing tasks in class, to revise their own writing and to discuss with their friends and their teacher frequently, which leads to their improvement at the end of the course.

4.3. The leaners' attitudes towards the use of portfolio

4.3.1. Participants' general impressions of the portfolio

First, four over six participants agreed that the portfolio had a good design with many pictures where they could color and draw. They emphasized,

"I think it is beautiful with some tasks for drawing. I love drawing and coloring so much." (Participant 1)

"I like drawing the best. After drawing, I can color and write something, which makes me happy." (Participant 1)

"I think it is beautiful and it has fewer exercises than the workbook." (Participant 3)

"I think it is beautiful. I love many pictures." (Participant 4)

"It seems beautiful and it has more pictures than the workbook." (Participant 5)

On the other hand, two of the participants thought that the design of the portfolio should have some improvements. First, participant 2 mentioned the color of the portfolio. He suggested it should be printed out with colors instead of white and black colors like the current portfolio. Second, participant 6 mentioned that the size of some pictures should be bigger. He said:

"I think pictures are OK. However, some pictures are a bit small." (Participant 6)

Moreover, some of the participants also added that doing different types of tasks included in the portfolio supports them a lot in their learning at school as well as test preparation. Participant 1 mentioned one of the benefits he got from the portfolio,

"One day I was at school, my teacher asked me to write about my close friend, I could do that task because I used to do it in the portfolio before." (Participant 1)

Similarly, participant 6 added,

"Some of the exercises are the same as the exercises my teachers give at school, so I can do them following the portfolio." (Participant 6)

Moreover, participant 5 stressed

"Thanks to that portfolio, I knew how to do the tasks in the test. Some kinds in the test were the same as what I did in the portfolio." (Participant 5)

However, two of the participants found the tasks so easy to them. With these ideas, the teacher who designs the portfolio should take a consideration on the tasks included in the portfolio.

Among 6 participants, participant 1 confirmed that the language is easy to follow.

They also expressed that they preferred the tasks in the portfolio to the workbook because it consists of fewer exercises and more pictures. Specifically, participant 3 expressed,

"I think it is beautiful and it has fewer exercises than the workbook. I do not like many exercises given like the workbook." (Participant 3)

In addition, they also offered interesting data that they loved to work with the portfolio just because they could compete the tasks with their classmates and get some encouragement from the teacher. That is they could receive some extra stars to exchange the gifts if they finish the exercises well, as shared by one of the participants:

"I have a chance to get an extra star whenever I complete the exercises well, then I exchange the stars I have collected for a gift. I am so excited to receive gifts." (Participant 1)

After the treatment, two participants showed their happiness because they were always rewarded whenever they performed well. Obviously, teachers' encouragement could bring some positive effects in students' learning process. Therefore, when teachers implement the portfolio in their class, they should plan carefully what they may reward for their students if they show good responsibility and improvement during their learning.

"I am so excited to receive gifts." (Participant 1)

"I can compete with John, I want to win." (Participant 1)

"My group was usually better than others, so you usually gave us the stars, so I felt very happy." (Participant 4)

For the learning process, they said that by doing the tasks in the portfolio, they could write the words they have learnt and they were also able to write some sentences about their friends, their family members and their teachers.

4.3.2. Participants' willingness of continuing using the portfolio in future courses

When being asked about whether the participants would like to use the portfolio in the next courses or not, all the participants showed completely their agreement by expressing "Yes, I am" (participant 1), "Sure" (participant 2), "Yes, I agree" (participant 3 and participant 6), "I mean yes" (participant 4) and "It is ok" (participant 5). Some of them also supported the reasons why they agreed such as it can help them get more stars, avoid hearing mom's complain about losing paper and get more chances practice at home.

4.4. Discussions on the young learners' attitudes towards the use of portfolio in learning writing

The individual interviews on the participants' attitudes towards the use of portfolio have shown that the majority of the participants could recognize the value of the use of portfolio in learning writing. Moreover, they all shared the agreement for further portfolio-based implementation for the next courses.

Regarding the participants' impressions about the portfolio, most of participants agreed that the design, the word choice and tasks used in the portfolio were good. The design was attractive and beautiful with many pictures. Moreover, the word choice was easy to understand. Besides, the tasks were said to be helpful and supportable for the learners both for the Mover course they were attending and for their learning at school. Additionally, they were with clear instructions. Therefore, the participants expressed their first nice impression to the portfolio. All of the evaluation mentioned could be explained easily based on the basic characteristics of the participants. All of them are still at the early stage of learning the foreign language, so they love to learn with pictures, easy-followed instructions and various types of tasks. In addition, the majority of the learners (4 out of 6 participants) strongly believed that the portfolio helps them not only increase the learning motivation but also improve the writing performance. Sharing the same viewpoint, Zorba and Tosun (2011) used to mention that portfolio could increase students' motivation and autonomy in learning in their study which was done on 24 six-year-old students in Turkey.

Regarding the willingness of using the portfolio for the further classes, they all showed their agreement. Basing on the agreement, it is safe to conclude that the participants expressed positive attitudes towards the use of portfolio.

The results of the qualitative data on the participants' attitudes towards the use of portfolio has a strong match to the results found by Taki & Heidari (2010), Ung (2010) and Nguyen (2015) who affirmed that most of the participants in their study showed the satisfaction on the use of portfolio in their learning.

5. Conclusion and implications

The result on the extent of the use of portfolio on young learners' sentence writing has indicated that generally the participants of the groups received the treatment in the current study improved significantly their sentence writing ability. In other words, the use of portfolio brings a positive effect on students' writing results. Therefore, teachers are recommended to implement this helpful means in their teaching English to younger learners. Moreover, teachers should equip themselves thoroughly with the fundamentals of writing as well as the methods and techniques applied in young language classrooms so that they may handle teaching writing for young language learners more successfully and effectively.

Qualitative results from the analysis of interview data provided information about the students' attitudes towards the use of portfolios. The majority of participants showed their happiness when using portfolios and their willingness of using portfolios in next courses. Thus, the teachers should consider combining this tool with other teaching techniques which help students develop their skills through the time. However, it might be suggested that there was still great variation among the learners about their opinions, and so teachers should take more considerations for applying portfolio in their classes\

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