

Using Portfolio as an Alternative Assessment Tool to Enhance Thai EFL Students' Writing skill

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Abstract

This present study investigates the effects of portfolios on the development of English as a foreign language (EFL) learners' writing skills. For the purpose of this study 56 senior Thai undergraduate students majoring in Business English at an International University in Thailand were selected and divided into experimental and control groups. Each group, consists of 26 students, both of them were given pretest to ensure the same proficiency level. Throughout the eight weeks in which the experiment was carried, the experimental group was taught through portfolio assessment technique and the control group was taught using the conventional method. Besides, an independent sample t-test was carried out to see the significant differences between the two groups. In order to see the differences within each group, a paired sample t-test was applied. The statistical results showed that there was a significant difference between the experimental and control groups which signifies that those receiving the treatment, in this case, the portfolio based assessment, outperformed their control group counterpart in the area of writing skill.

keyword: EFL writing, portfolio assessment, portfolios

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Introduction

Improving second language learners' writing skills is one of the most problematic areas in language learning field. With the shift of paradigm from traditional method to assess writing in a more modern or alternative ways, portfolio assessment has been appealing to many classroom practitioners and researchers alike. The ability to use portfolio in a classroom is a demanding job in an exam oriented culture like Thailand (Norris, Brown, Hudson, and Yoshika, 1998). When implementing portfolio in English language classroom, Tierney, Carter, and Desai (1991) mention that there is no particular way to do so (p.7). According to Barret (2002), a portfolio is a collection of students' tasks which contains their progress, achievement and efforts in one particular area or more (cited in Wang & Liao, 2008). By Hamp-Lyons & Condon (2000)'s definition, a portfolio must carry nine characteristics including: collection of more than one performance, consists of a wide range of performance, rich in context, delayed evaluation time in order to provide more revision time, selection of writer's work, students centered, self-reflection and self- assessment, measuring a learner's development over a period of time. Burner (2014) sums up these nine characteristics into three main categories that constitute collection, selection, and reflection.

Many scholars have conducted various studies on portfolio in terms of authentic assessment tools and demonstrated that portfolio assessment had a positive reinforcement on student's language skills in general (Yurdabakan & Erdogan, 2009; Fahed Al-Serhani, 2007; Burner, 2014; Nicolaidou, 2012). However, its impact on sub skills of purpose, content, organization, sentence structure and mechanics were limited. Besides, very few research focused on students' attitudes towards portfolio assessment, in particular in ESP classes (Hamp-Lam 2013 cited in Burner, 2014). Nevertheless, according to Sandford & Hsu (2013), portfolio can contextualize learning and facilitate students' involvement in the learning process.

According to Hart (1992), portfolio give students chance to showcase what they can do rather than focusing on their negative aspect which according to him would be useful when teaching students with limited English proficiency or with non-native learners. Furthermore, this view is also shared by Hamp-Lyons and Condon (2000) who report that portfolio is particularly useful for nonnative English learners because it provide a broader picture of the students' ability and skills. Therefore, this study focuses on the effect of portfolio on students' writing method in order to find an alternative way to improve EFL students' writing.

Literature Review

The starting point of using portfolio was adopted from the field of fine arts where its purpose was to showcase the depth and breadth of the work of an artist's abilities (Jongsma, 1989). Many educators perceive the standardized tests serve a purpose in education, however, they are neither infallible nor sufficient. Hence, a single measure of students' ability is incapable of estimating their diverse skills (Flood & Lapp, 1989). Researchers and classroom practitioners alike often use a combination of formal and informal assessment techniques for monitoring students' development. Of which in this case is their language development. Portfolio assessment conveniently responds to this need.

Many studies exploiting the impact of portfolio assessment on EFL writing found a positive effect on students' writing (Fahed-Al-Serhani, 2007; Elahinia, 2004; Ghoorchaei, Tavakoli & Ansari, 2010; Spencer, 1999; Lam, 2013; Valencia & Place, 1994; Yurdabakan & Erdogan, 2009),

Fahed Al-Serhani (2007)'s study shows that the group that uses portfolio assessment significantly surpasses their counterpart in terms of four writing processes of planning, drafting, revising, and editing. In Yurdabhakan and Erdogan (2009)'s experiment with the Turkish students on reading, listening, and writing skills, they found significant improvement only on writing skills but not on reading and listening skills. The findings of Ghoorchaei, Tavakoli and Ansari (2010)'s investigation of the effect of portfolio assessment on Iranian EFL students showed that portfolio assessment empowers students' learning more than the group without the use of portfolio. On the contrary, there exist some studies where statistical significance between experimental groups and control groups were not found (Chu, 2002; Subrick, 2003). It is also advised by Hashemian & Fadaei (2013) that portfolio can considerably improve autonomy of learners and inspire them to become active and engage in language learning.

As portfolio assessment has achieved importance in language learning, more and more attention on method of assessment in terms of writing skills and researchers have started to contemplate on the effectiveness of this method of writing assessment in the last few decades. Especially in EFL context, many studies have conducted research to investigate the effectiveness of portfolio. For example, the study of Aly (2002) conducted in Cairo context using pretest and posttest design revealed that a group with portfolio technique had higher writing performance compared to their peer counterpart. Yet in another research conducted by Apple and Shimo (2004) on Japanese learners investigated through the use of self-reported questionnaire found out that not only portfolio had the positive effect on their writing but also was highly preferred among the Japanese learners.

In the context of Thai EFL students, Abhakorn (2014) conducted a study to explore how high school students view the usefulness and practicality in using portfolios in EFL teaching and learning, and to what extent student portfolios could assess and develop students' metacognition in language learning. In her study, 53 Thai secondary students from the of English were divided into a control and experimental group. The students' attitudes were assessed through pre- and post-intervention questionnaires and the experimental group were asked to keep reflective portfolios in addition to their homework while the control group had to complete only their homework. Semi-structured interviews were also conducted with some students.

The study showed that the portfolios proved to be a good mediated tool in uncovering the students' metacognitive knowledge and their current level of metacognitive strategies. However, findings revealed that students cannot differentiate how to describe planning and process of learning hence, the students need supportive training on learning skills and metacognitive. In addition, it was found that the mean scores of the attitudes toward teacher roles from the control group did not change but from the experimental group, students' attitudes changed to the need to depend more on teacher's feedback.

According to Freeman and Freeman's (1998) portfolio project with teachers in one of a bilingual school in California revealed that teachers were able to monitor the language growth.

Teachers involved in the portfolio project found that they had more complete information on their students than they had in the past, using report cards and standardized test scores.

They felt confident about making recommendations and were amazed at how much they had learned about their own teaching (1998 , p.260).

Before creating portfolio, there are a number of factors that the researchers needed to take into consideration. Tangdhanakanonda & Wongwanichb (2015) state that there are five common steps in creating a good portfolio, i.e., planning for portfolio assessment, collecting created products, selecting products, and reflecting on selected products, revising and evaluating products, as well as utilizing results from portfolio assessment.

Moreover, in terms of students' perception, a number of studies have been conducted. Yang (2003) survey students' perception with a class of 42 students using open ended Likert type scale and the findings revealed that majority of the students found portfolio assessment as a useful instrument.

According to Fentsen & Fentsen (2005) students and teachers' communication could be establish in a healthy way through the use of portfolio. However, it is also believed by many researchers that portfolio assessment may be subjective and may have less reliability when compared to traditional assessment (Tigelaar et al., 2005). In Baume & Yorke (2002)'s study came up with seven criteria for different evaluator in order to achieve a better reliability. Besides, Pitts et al. (2001) studied that inter-rater reliability of this alternative way of assessment is rather weak. Hence, its result should only be used as formative rather than summative. Nevertheless, rubrics can be used in order to increase the reliability of portfolio assessment as explained by Moskal (2003). He prepared a set of rubrics which clearly state the expected aims and clear definition of aims which could be clearly observed by different evaluators. As preparing portfolio based classroom teaching and learning takes large amount of time Sulzen & Young (2007) state that the most challenging phrase is the evaluating process

Meanwhile, to ensure that appropriate level of inter-rater reliability was achieved, the Pearson correlation coefficient was put in use. The results indicated a correlation coefficient of 0.89. According to Pershkin (1998), " subjectivity is inevitable and that researchers need to seek out their own subjectivity (p.17).To increase the dependability of scoring, the pretest writing test tasks were scored again by each rater and analyzed for intra-rater reliability using the Pearson correlation coefficient. The obtained results suggested a 0.86 intra-rater correlation for each rater. For further analysis, each participant's score was considered to be the mean of those scores given by two raters based on the mentioned scale

Research Question

1. Are there significant differences in the effect of portfolio on overall writing skills of EFL students?

Methodology

The experiment was carried out for eight weeks (three hours per week). Prior to giving treatment, pretest was administered to both groups by the researchers. Participants of this study were 56 Thai undergraduate students in their senior year of an International University in Thailand. The design of this study was quasi-experimental consisting of a control and an experimental group.

Each group was given a pretest and posttest but the participants were not randomly selected nor were they randomly assigned to the groups due to practical constraints (Mackey & Gass, 2005). The independent variable was the implementation of portfolio assessment while the dependent variables were the writing ability and its subskills that were measured using Wang and Liao (2008)'s scoring rubric (see appendix).

According to Gottlieb (2000) the selection and implementation of portfolios carry a lot of freedom. For instance, a portfolio may be influenced by the variety of educational context, diversity of population, and variety in teaching approaches. In this study, the model utilized was based on classroom portfolio model whereby the purpose was for learning rather than for assessment.

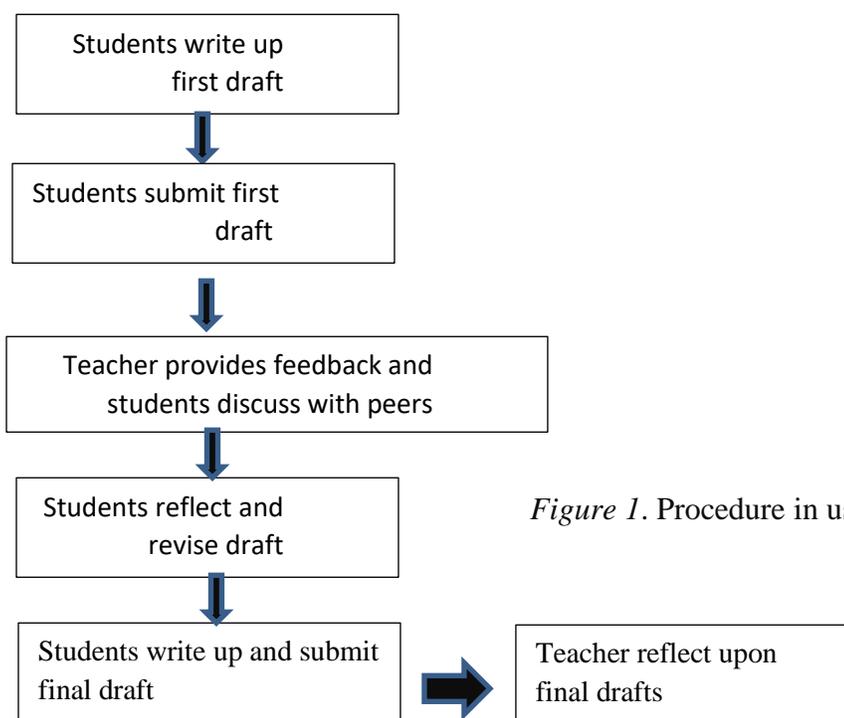


Figure 1. Procedure in using the Portfolio

Before starting experimental the course at the beginning of the experiment, the experimental group was provided with explanation about the portfolio. The students in both groups were asked to write different genres essay including classification, cause-effect, compare-contrast, and argumentative essays. While the control group received traditional assessment. The teacher taught the structure of the essay and they were not given opportunity to revise their writing.

Data Analysis

Table 1. Independent sample t-test for pre test

	N	SD	T	p
Experimental group	26	8.76	.111	.89
Control group	26	10.53		

It can be concluded from table 1 that participants in both groups were equal before applying the treatment with regards to their writing performance ($p = .89$).

Table 2. *Independent sample t-test for post test*

	N	SD	T	p
Experimental group	26	7.87	-3.723	.000
Control group	26	14.16		

It can be seen that there is a statistically significant difference between the post-test scores of control group and experiment group ($p=.000$). Thus, it can be concluded that those receiving treatment through portfolio outperformed their counterpart.

Table 3. *Paired sample T-test control group*

	N	SD	T	p
Pre test	26	10.53	.117	.73
Post test	26	14.16		

Table 3. Compared the mean scores of pretest and post test of the control group. It can be seen that ($p=.73$) there were no significant improvement on the overall writing skills of the students in this group.

Table 4. *Paired sample T-test experimental group*

	N	SD	T	p
Pre test	26	8.76	-4.78	.000
Post test	26	7.87		

Table 4. compared the mean score of pre test and post test of the experimental group. It can be seen that ($p=.000$) there is a significant improvement on the overall writing skills of the students receiving treatment.

Discussion

This present study was conducted to investigate the differences between the experimental group taught through the use of portfolio technique and the control group which were taught in the traditional way. This study was aimed at comparing the effect of the portfolio vs. traditional writing assessment on undergraduate Thai EFL students majoring in Business English. The analysis of the data of portfolio assessment on the overall writing skills revealed that the portfolio approach in the present study had a significant impact on improving the EFL learners' abilities in term of writing skills. The findings is in line with Kathpalia and Heah, (2008), who have found that portfolios are effective for writing courses in improving the students' writing ability. This also

echoes the earlier findings of Butler and Lee (2010), where the students in the experimental group increased their writing accuracy as compared with those taught in the conventional method. Furthermore, in line with Murphy (2006), learning processes can be improved if formative assessments, in this case is the use of portfolio, are applied in EFL classroom appropriately. However, this issue needs further investigation in a more wider context before making generalization.

As Harmer (2007) states that portfolio requires more time on the part of the teacher as compared to traditional assessment method. Besides, the drawback of using portfolio as Mokhataria (2015) asserts, parents or community may disapprove unfamiliar system. Therefore, having a good explanation and comprehension on how portfolio may be beneficial is a crucial matter. Despite having many benefits, there also exist challenges in implementing portfolio in teaching and learning particularly with the issue of practicality. Researchers and practitioners have to take into account the time, cost, effort and administration. It is often reported by many researchers that implementation of portfolio is time-consuming. As Lo (2010) points out in her action research:

The reading and grading load was enormous, as was that of answering students' questions. For questions I could not answer, I had to spend time locating answers as well. Despite the greatly reduced number of questions, the reading and grading load was still very heavy. To meet the administration's deadline for submitting final grades, I was forced to write short comments and had no time to correct grammatical errors. The six entries I had insisted on to establish the habit of reading newspapers had become a massive burden for me. (p. 87)

Moreover, the students' belief about the use of portfolio should also be surveyed. The first and foremost limitation of using portfolio assessment is time-consuming. Weigle (2002) asserts that within the global community, as writing continues to become a significant skill, so does the need for effective instruction in teaching writing in both second- and foreign language contexts, which, in turn, calls for, —valid and reliable ways to test writing ability, both for classroom use and as a predictor of future professional or academic success (p. 1). Thus, to reap maximum benefits of the portfolio, the dynamic and interactive use of the portfolio can better help students. Using the portfolio to conference with the students at least once during the session can help students see the whole picture of their progress. This can also help build students' motivation and confidence, factors significant for success in language learning. Aside from the controversies surrounding these negative viewpoints of using portfolio as an alternative assessment tool, the main issue, pragmatically, lies in the interpretations. To clarify, what really matters is the final product or the end goal. . As Brown and Hudson (1998, p. 672) testified, "Tests are neither good nor evil in and of themselves. They are simple tools". This view is corroborated by Fox who claimed that it is (2008, p. 99), "how portfolios are used that determines whether they are truly alternative assessment tools.

Conclusion

All in all, the research obviously reveals a great impact of the portfolio assessment on undergraduate Thai EFL students, particularly in terms of their writing skill. The research results

which showed the comparison between the mean scores of the pretest and posttest of the experimental group clearly indicated that there was a significant improvement on the overall writing skills of the students after applying portfolio assessment. It can be concluded that the portfolio assessment is deemed an appropriate and effective tool for English teachers in improving EFL students' writing skill.

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Appendix

The writing Score Rubric Adapted from Wang and Liao (2008)

Scoring rubric description	Score
Supporting detail	
Using few or no details to support the topic	1
Using insufficient details to support the topic	2
Using some details to support the topic or illustrate the idea	3
Using appropriate detail to support the topic or illustrate idea	4
Using adequate supporting detail or illustrate ideas	5
Scoring rubric description	Score
Logical flow of organization	
Logical flow is not clear	1
Logical flow is less clear or connected	2
Most of the logical flow is clear	3
Logical flow is generally clear and connected	4
Logical flow is specifically clear and connected throughout the writing	5
Scoring rubric description	Score
Spelling and Grammar	

Poor spelling and grammar with frequent errors	1
Inappropriate grammar with obvious errors	2
Fair usage of language with some minor errors	3
Language is almost accurate with few errors	4
Language usage is near perfect or are perfect with no errors	5