An Inquiry into Increasing Learners' Writing Ability Through Traditional Portfolios VS Modern Portfolios

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Abstract

The aim of this study is to investigate the impacts of the application of two portfolios including *paper-based* and *weblog-based* electronic portfolios on learners' writing ability. First, a sample OPT was piloted to 20 learners bearing almost the same characteristics of the participants of the main study. This research used EFL learners' test scores as the data. Next, the test was administered to 90 intermediate EFL learners so as to homogenize them with respect to their proficiency. Out of 90 EFL learner, 60 intermediate learners were selected from an English language institute as the members of the present research in two groups (one experimental and one control groups). In the first step, the course explanation, objectives, and evaluation were introduced to the learners by teacher. The learners of the control group and the experimental group took the pre-test. In both control group and experimental group, the application of portfolios was introduced to the learners. The learners of the experimental group were trained in how to build and construct their personal electronic portfolio by using a weblog, while the learners of the control group were trained in how to improve and gather their work in paper-based portfolios. Descriptive statistics and t-tests were employed for the data analysis. It was found that the effects of the application of weblog-based electronic portfolios as modern portfolios have strong effect on the writing ability. That is to say, weblog-based electronic has a significant effect on the enhancement of the writing ability by EFL learners.

Keywords: EFL learners, Paper-based Portfolios, weblog-based electronic portfolios, Writing, Portfolios

1. Introduction

Nowadays, English for specific purpose plays an important role in training EFL learners in the required English skills for their future job or occupation. For ESP writing courses, the kinds of written texts are various with respect to social contexts, audiences, and the aims of the various kinds of written texts. Therefore, the traditional assessment, relying on learners' scores on their writing products or exams paying less attention to the learners' learning improvement is obsolete and cannot endorse the learners' growth of the goals. In this respect, For preventing from a negative

washback, the effect of assessment on language pedagogy and learning, the conformation of the writing instructional method, course goals and aims, and learning assessment should be of important concern (Brown & Hudson, 1998). With less exam-centric assessment, portfolios are considered an alternative method of assessment and are widely used for writing assessment because of their ability to assess cognitive skills and affective attributes of the learners.

The existing studies have demonstrated that portfolio-based assessment offers a meaningful series of learners' work and accurately shows the improvement of the learners (Ekbatani & Pierson, 2000; Hamp-Lyons & Condon, 2000; Lipton, 1997). In the Internet age, the influence of computer technology has become an integral part of teaching and learning, therefore it also alters the form of traditional assessment to electronic forms including integrating computer-mediated communication.

Babaee and Tikoduadua (2013) maintained that electronic portfolios plan to develop the learners' reflective ability, collaboration, self-and peer-assessment, and self-regulation. Most importantly, social media and virtual learning for modern learners have achieved many various scholars' interest as match the learning styles of generation net students. As there is increasing attention in utilizing electronic portfolios in EFL worldwide, so its design, development, and evaluation should be thoroughly investigated to maximize its adv in the EFL context (Aliweh, 2012). A short study has been performed out on the application of portfolios in the writing ability.

Based on the benefits of the study discussed in this present study, it is worth the time and effort to investigate a comparative study on the impacts of the application of traditional portfolios and weblog-based electronic portfolios with on Iranian EFL learners' writing ability. Therefore, the aim of this study is to investigate the effects of Paper-Based Portfolios and Weblog-Based Electronic Portfolios on EFL Learners' Writing. The following research question was posed: *Are there any significant effects of the use of paper-based portfolios and weblog-based electronic portfolios on Iranian EFL learners' writing ability?*

2. Review of Related Literature
2.1 Assessment

According to Wang and Wang (2007), the word "*assessment*" originates from 'ad sedere' – means to sit down beside (as cited in Birjandi & Tamjid, 2010). They also discussed that the etymology of assessment is mainly based on the learner guidance and feedback. Many methodologists such as Erwin (1991) stated assessment as "the process of defining, analyzing, understanding, and using information to upsurge students' learning and development" (p.14).

Angelo (1995) defines: "assessment is an ongoing process aimed at understanding and improving student learning. It involves making our expectations explicit and public; setting appropriate criteria and high standards for learning quality; systematically gathering, analyzing and interpreting evidence to determine how well performance matches those expectations and standards" (p.7).

Richards and Schmidt (2002) believes that assessment is a methodical method to assemble material and make implications and conclusions about pupils' performance. In addition, Airasian (1994) defined assessment as gathering, separating and explaining information to make to make decisions on student performance. He also states that "in classroom, assessment can be done conducted to diagnose student problems, to judge their academic performance, to provide feedback to student and to plan instruction" (p.16).

2.2. Portfolio as an Alternative Assessment of Writing

With respect to writing ability, negative results of the traditional testing method have been found, such as the incapability to assess cognitive ability and affective contributes, the limits to offering true and rich information about an individual's growth, the cause of learners' anxiety and stress, and the shortage of learners' motivation to assess their own learning. Consequently, a new form of learning assessment underpinned by alternative assessment has been improved, as it is generally believed that instruction should correspond with the assessment so as to produce meaningful and remarkable learning in a constructivist learning environment in real world conditions (Mitchel, 1992). There are many various kinds of alternative assessments, including oral presentation, peer assessment, and self-assessment, but portfolios sound to be extensively used in writing.

2.3 Traditional Portfolios and Electronic Portfolios

A portfolio is regarded as a series of work which a learner has collected, selected, organized, reflected upon, and presented to show his/her development and growth over time (Barrett, 2006). In addition, it includes a learner's reflection on the individual pieces of work (artifacts), and an overall reflection on the story which the portfolio tells. The existing studies have developed that portfolios are better predictors of learners' performance in an authentic situation, enhance learners' higher order thinking skills (DeFabio, 1993; Jamentz, 1994; Tillema, 1998), force learners to be more actively get involved in the learning process and take control of their own learning (Blake et al. 1995; Paulson et al., 1991;Valeri-Gold, Olson & Deming, 1991), increase their learning achievement (Winograd, 1995), and provide a continuous and ongoing record of students' progress.
  Because of the improvement in technologies of communication, the application of electronic portfolios has achieved remarkable attention. In addition, it has widely widespread (Barrett, 2000). Generally speaking, electronic portfolios include the same kinds of information as paper portfolios, but the majore difference is that electronic portfolios utilize technologies such in different media form including CDs, DVDs, the Web, audio, video, graphics, and texts (Abrenica, 2009).

3. Methodology
3.1. Participants

For carrying out this study, a number of learners were selected as the participants. The present research was conducted at Arvand Language Institute which was located in Shiraz with the range of 20 to 25 years old. The Oxford Placement Test (OPT) was applied to homogenize the EFL learners. For the homogeneity of the subjects, prior to the administration of the research, Oxford Placement Test (OPT) was administered to 90 EFL learners. Out of 90 EFL learner, 60 intermediate

learners were selected as the members of the current research in two groups (one experimental and one control groups).

3.2. Instrumentation

In this study, some instruments were used.

3.2.1. Oxford Placement Test (OPT)

To tap participants' level of English language proficiency level, an Oxford Placement Test (OPT) (2004, Allen) was utilized to homogenize the participants in the study. The test included reading, vocabulary, and grammar sections. The test consisted of 60 questions in two parts. The first part consisted of 40 multiple choice items in 4 subparts. Questions 1 to 5, the learners were asked to answer grammatical questions about prepositions. Questions 6 to 10, the learners were asked to read a cloze passage and choose one option out of three ones. Questions 11 to 20, they were also asked to read two cloze passages and select one option from four ones. Questions 21 to 40 checked the learners' grammatical knowledge. In the second part of this examination, there was two sub-sections. For questions 41 to 50, the learners were required read two cloze passages and select the correct option. Questions 51 to 60 tapped learners' vocabulary format. The participants were allotted 30 minutes to answer the questions. The results were classified based on OPT ranking rubric.

3.2.2. Writing achievement test

The aim of writing test is to assess the learners' writing ability before and after taking the course. It included four important parts: *error identification*, *error correction*, *completion*, and *writing* and responding to a complaint letter. The learners had to complete all of the test tasks within 3 hours. For letter writing part, the assessment principle for letter writing is categorized into 4 majors writing components: *organization*, *content*, *appearance*, and *language use*, with each one having four rating level: exemplary, accomplished, improving, and beginning.

3.3. Design

The design of this study was experimental and was consisted of one control group and one experimental group. The application of different kinds of portfolios was the independent variable, while writing ability was the dependent variable of this study. The learners in the control group used paper-based portfolios with all of their writing assignments, and writing reflections were handwritten, whereas the learners in the experimental group utilized a weblog for increasing their electronic portfolios for their learning and assessment. Both experimental and control groups were taught with the same instructor utilizing the same teaching methodology, strategies, activities, and materials.

3.4. Procedure

The present study was to comparative study on the impacts of the application of paper-based and weblog-based electronic portfolios on EFL learners' writing ability. First, a sample OPT was piloted to 20 learners bearing almost the same characteristics of the participants of the main study.

This research used EFL learners' test scores as the data. The reliability of the test was calculated using Cronbach's alpha formula. Then, the test was administered to 90 intermediate EFL learners in order to homogenize them with respect to their proficiency. Out of 90 EFL learner, 60 intermediate learners were selected as the members of the current research in two groups (one experimental and one control groups). In the first step, the course explanation, objectives and evaluation were introduced to the students. The students in the control group and the experimental group took the pre-test. In both control group and experimental group, the use of portfolios was introduced to the students. The learners of the experimental group were trained in how to build and construct their personal electronic portfolio by utilizing a weblog, whereas the learners of the control group were trained in how to improve and gather their work in paper-based portfolios. The learners improved their own portfolios by gathering the assignments, writing reflections, and other work like peer feedback and teacher feedback, first draft, and subsequent drafts of their writing. The learners took the post-test and answered the questionnaire.

3.5 Data Analysis

In order to answer the research questions, the researcher used one independent sample t-test procedure.

4 Results and Discussion

This study aimed at exploring the impacts of the application of paper-based and weblog-based electronic portfolios on EFL learners' writing ability. The data collection procedure was carefully run, and the raw data was entered into SPSS (version 21) to compute the required statistical analyses and deal with the research question and hypothesis of the present study.

4.1. Analysis of the Research Question

This study aimed at exploring the impacts of the application of paper-based and weblog-based electronic portfolios on EFL learners' writing ability. In order to answer this null-hypothesis, two independent sample *t*-tests were conducted on both pre-test and post-test. Before presenting the results of the first *t*-test, the related descriptive statistics are given in Table 1.

Table 1. Descriptive Statistics in Experimental group (pretest and posttest)

	N	Mean	Std. Deviation	Skewness		Kurtosis	
	Statistic	Statistic	Statistic	Statistic	Std. Error	Statistic	Std. Error
Pretest. Exp	30	15.87	3.003	-.010	.427	-1.151	.833
Posttest. Exp	30	17.23	2.112	-.659	.427	-.563	.833
Valid N (listwise)	30						

The mean score of the group in pretest is 15.87 and the posttest mean score is 17.23, respectively. The mean scores of the experimental group in pretest and posttest indicate that learners' performance actually improved from 15.87 in pretest to 17.23 in posttest; but it is essential to specify whether this growth and improvement was significant enough to reject the null hypothesis. Therefore, paired samples t-test was performed to compare the mean scores of pretest and posttest of the experimental group.

Table 2. Paired Samples Correlations

		N	Correlation	Sig.
Pair 1	Pretest. Exp & Posttest. Exp	30	.745	.000

One of the assumptions of paired samples t-test is also the requirement for significant correlation between the pretest and posttest indicating the data on the two tests are related. According to Table 2, there is a significant correlation between the pretest and posttest (p < .05).

Table 3. One sample t test (pretest and posttest)

| | | Paired Differences | | | | | | | |
| | | | | | 95% Confidence Interval of the Difference | | | | |
		Mean	Std. Deviation	Std. Error Mean	Lower	Upper	t	df	Sig. (2-tailed)
Pair 1	Pretest. Exp Posttest.Exp	-1.367	2.008	.367	-2.117	-.617	-3.727	29	.001

Table 3 shows that the significance value is below the *p* value of .05; so, the researcher can assume that the mean difference is significant, and the learners have developed in their performance from pretest to posttest. In other words, the null hypothesis to this research question is rejected. That is to say, weblog-based electronic has a significant effect on the enhancement of the writing ability by EFL learners.

Similarly, the same statistical analysis was done for the control group so as to find out whether any improvements have occurred in that group or not. The following two tables show the results of the related analysis.

Table 4. Descriptive Statistics in Control group **(pretest and posttest)**

	N	Mean	Std. Deviation	Skewness		Kurtosis	
	Statistic	Statistic	Statistic	Statistic	Std. Error	Statistic	Std. Error
Pretest. Con	30	15.60	2.811	.081	.427	-.928	.833
Posttest. Con	30	16.07	2.900	-.080	.427	-1.466	.833
Valid N (listwise)	30						

The mean scores of the control group in pretest and posttest demonstrate that learners' performance actually improved; however, it is necessary to determine whether this improvement was significant enough to reject the null hypothesis. In order to answer this question, the data were checked for normality by computing the skewness and kurtosis ratios from the descriptive table (Table 4).

Table 5. Paired Samples Correlations

		N	Correlation	Sig.
Pair 1	Pretest. Con & Posttest. Con	30	.409	.025

One of the assumptions of paired samples t test is the requirement for significant correlation between the pretest and posttest indicating the data on the two tests are related. According to Table 5, there is a significant correlation between the pretest and posttest (p < .05).

Table 6. One sample t test (pretest and posttest)

		Paired Differences							
					95% Confidence Interval of the Difference				Sig. (2-tailed)
		Mean	Std. Deviation	Std. Error Mean	Lower	Upper	t	df	
Pair 1	Pretest.Con - Posttest.Con	-.467	3.104	.567	-1.626	.693	-.823	29	.417

The findings of the independent sample test indicated non-significant discrepancy between the mean scores of the control group from pretest to posttest. It can be acknowledged that although the students in this group developed in writing ability, observed discrepancy is nonsignificant.

5. Conclusion

In summary, from theoretical and practical perspectives, the results of this study shed new light on the scope of writing assessment and writing. the researcher can assume that the mean difference is significant, and the learners have developed in their performance from pretest to posttest. In other words, the null hypothesis to this research question is rejected. That is to say, weblog-based electronic has a significant effect on the enhancement of the writing ability by EFL learners. It could be concluded that the application of portfolios, both traditional paper-based and electronic based kinds, can be useful and helpful support for learners' learning, especially as regards their positive opinion towards this alternative assessment and their own learning. However, the results of this study should be interpreted with caution, as various findings would be yielded if the pedagogy and learning settings were various.

5.1. Pedagogical Implications

Many courses in English language teaching have integrated computer technology as an important element of the instruction. It cannot be ignored that skills of technology and "soft" skills include critical thinking and creative thinking are essential during the 21st century. Portfolios for learning and assessment may be the right "medicine" to be prescribed to show what their learning goals or aims are, what the learners learn, how well they learn, how far they have to reach their aim, what they should schedule and do to obtain their learning aims, and to show their learning and assess their own learning. In this present study, regardless of the kinds of portfolios the learners faced, introducing portfolio assessment in a writing course for EFL learners showed promising results in different dimensions, including developing writing ability, assessing their own learning, get involving in their learning both inside and outside the classroom, and achieving creative and critical thinking skills.

These advantages are less likely to be found in a traditional teacher-centered class with examination-based assessment. The application of weblog-based electronic portfolios did not have a significantly various impact on the learners' writing ability scores, but some remarkable advantages of incorporating technology in language learning were provided, like computer literacy skills, the frequency of learner-learner communication, and the convenience of offering peer and teacher responses. Technological issues like Internet accessibility and shortage of technology skills on the element of the learners were unavoidable. Therefore, teachers have to consider the pros and cons of the kind of the portfolio which is proper to their teaching and learning context, and it is the teachers' responsibility to produce how this learning tool is to be used and how to increase its potentiality. It could be concluded that the success or failure of the application of portfolio assessment in a writing class may not rely on the kind of portfolios a teacher uses, but it relies on many other factors which should be taken into consideration, especially the pedagogy and learning settings, the level of English proficiency of the learners, their computer literacy skills, and Internet accessibility.

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An Inquiry into Increasing Learners' Writing Ability Through Traditional Portfolios VS Modern Portfolios   95

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