

A CASE STUDY: EFL LEARNERS' AND WRITING TEACHERS' ATTITUDES TOWARDS PERFORMANCE BASED PORTFOLIO IN A UNIVERSITY CONTEXT

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Abstract

This study has been carried out to investigate the attitudes of students and writing teachers towards the performance-based portfolio. In the study, both qualitative and quantitative research methods have been used. Within the process of qualitative research, teacher reflection papers have been used and interviews with the teachers and students have been made. Within the quantitative research process, an attitude survey designed by Brooks (1999) has been used and the student attitudes have been investigated. The participants of the study are 89 university students and 5 writing teachers. In the light of the findings obtained from this study, it has been concluded that the majority of the writing teachers and the interviewed students have a positive attitude towards the performance based portfolio while the findings from the student attitude survey displays the opposite. According to the findings from the general attitude survey, the majority of the students show a negative attitude towards the performance-based portfolio.

Key words: Performance Based Portfolio in Writing Classes, Teacher and Student Attitudes.

1. Introduction

Assessment has a major role in teaching. Evaluating learners' performances in an effective way is as crucial as putting the methods and approaches to teaching into practice. How should learners be assessed? This is an age old but still an important question, because experience and research tell us that assessment impacts what is taught and learned in classrooms. Students spend a great deal of time reviewing information, and instructors spend a great deal of time teaching and assessing. The field of assessment has been given a special emphasis especially in recent years when the need for a more effective assessment system has been realized. In the past few years, there has been a shift of interest from classical assessments to alternative assessments. In parallel with this paradigm shift, teacher and students roles have also undergone certain changes. Today, teachers are not the sole authorities and learners are no longer passive recipients of the language. Instead, teachers are facilitators who guide the learners and facilitate the whole learning process and learners are active involvers that make discoveries and develop their own strategies for their learning. The active role of the learners in the learning process has led to an increasing popularity of the use of performance based assessments in classroom practices. As a result of the increasing need for performance based assessments, portfolio assessment, which is an alternative to traditional teaching, has gained popularity. Portfolio assessment is defined as 'a purposeful collection of student work that shows student's efforts, progress and achievements in more than one era' (Paulson, Paulson and Meyer 1991, p.61). In literature, portfolio assessment has proved to have a variety of benefits for learners. Paulson, Paulson and Meyer (1991) states that:

An application portfolio is a visual representation of who you are as an artist, your history as well as what you are currently doing. It is representing you when you are not present. Part of the evaluation of a portfolio is based on the personal choices you make when picking pieces for the portfolio. It tells the school something about your current values; that's why you will rarely get a school to be very specific about what they look for in a portfolio. You should not be afraid to make choices (p. 2).

In general, the literature highlights the autonomous, authentic and performance based nature of the portfolio assessment. Although the benefits of the portfolio assessment model have been proved in literature, some challenges along with those benefits have also been observed. The time consuming, difficult to monitor nature of the portfolio assessment and the issue of

reliability can be listed as the main challenges of the portfolio assessment. Cirneanu and Chirita (2009) point out the disadvantageous nature of the portfolios by stating that it is not easy and quick to assess since learners reflect their creativity and originality in their works

2. Assessment: A Shift from Teacher Centered to Student Centered Learning

In the past few decades, approaches to language assessment and learning have changed with an emphasis on a student centered and classroom based language assessment. Within this process, language teachers undertake several roles that are significant in the assessment process. Stoyloff (2012) highlights the need for language teachers to reflect their own assessment practices since there is not enough research conducted on the assessment of young learners. Andrade and Huff; et al. (2012) emphasize the key role of the student centered self-assessment by stating that student centered assessment can improve learning and motivation. They also indicate that student centered approaches to learning offer active engagement and self-management which are considered to be crucial to learning. Moskal (2010) puts forward that self-assessments are indicators of learners' motivation, satisfaction and self-efficacy. Hancock (1994) highlights the role of self-assessment and claims that there is a need for a new assessment initiative in education which highlights the importance of performance, competence and self-assessments.

3. Writing Assessment

Writing is a constructivist process in which writers try to make meaning of the world by their own experiences. This makes writing assessment complicated since more than a set of single sentences is needed to construct meaning. Graves (1999) states, "Every study of young writers I've done for the last 20 years has underestimated what they can do. In fact, we know very little about the human potential for writing" (p.99).

The nature of writing skill is not only tough for the writers but also many teachers. Many writing teachers feel concerned about teaching writing due to the inadequate preparation programs, which give limited knowledge for teachers on how to teach writing. Huot (1996) asserts that teachers have doubts about assessment practices in writing as they think the real values of writing are not reflected. As what Hillocks (2002) suggests, writing has complicated mental functions and they are not easy to be assessed by objective tests. He also claims that

the formulaic nature of the objective tests apparently ignores the importance of planning, drafting, revising and editing parts of the writing process.

4. Methods

4.1 Participants

In the study, the targeted participants were 89 students from six EFL writing classes. As modular system is used at Toros University, those students involved in the study were at elementary level. Both qualitative and quantitative research methods were used in this study. A qualitative research with five writing teachers was also conducted to give support to the findings of the study. Data from the teachers were added with the belief that it would enrich the conclusions drawn from the study. The ages of the students ranged between 19 and 21. There are six EFL writing classes at Toros University. The teacher participants were the teachers of these six EFL writing classes

4.2 Data Collection Tools

Both qualitative and quantitative research designs were used in the study to investigate the attitudes of students towards the use of portfolio in EFL writing classes. In the process of quantitative research, a portfolio attitude survey that was designed by Brooks (1999) was applied to six EFL writing classes with 89 students. The original attitude survey was not used in the study. Instead, the researcher adopted the original attitude survey. The adopted version of the attitude survey was applied as a post study at the end of the module. Ten questions were asked in the survey and a five point Likert attitude scale was used. In the process of qualitative research, two different interviews were conducted to investigate the attitudes of students and teachers towards the use of portfolio. One was conducted with the students and the other was with the teachers. The interviews were also conducted as a post study at the end of the module (8 weeks). The interviews were semi- structured and open-ended questions were asked. In the interview for students, 5 questions were asked whereas in the interview for teachers, 8 questions were asked. Apart from the interviews, as a part of the qualitative research, reflection papers were collected from five writing teachers. Before the implementation of the study, 5 writing teachers had been asked to record their observations over a span of eight weeks (a module) on those reflection papers. Accordingly, the data from the reflection papers were also gathered.

4.3 Data Analysis

The data obtained from the performance based portfolio attitude survey was analyzed by using SPSS. The data from the survey was interpreted using a five point rating scale from “strongly agree”, “agree”, “don’t know”, “disagree” and to “strongly disagree”. The percentages, frequencies and related statistical data were obtained through SPSS. For the analysis of the reflection papers and the interviews, categorization was made to conduct content analysis.

5. Findings and Discussion

5.1 Evaluation of the Findings from Teacher Reflection Papers and the Teacher Interview

In the light of the data received from the teacher reflection papers, it can be concluded that all the writing teachers teaching in six EFL writing classes believe that students have a positive attitude towards the use of portfolio assessment. From the comments they made on the reflection papers, it is easy to observe that their personal comments as teachers of writing skill are positive, too. Similarly, in the teacher interviews, their comments were positive and they all reported in the interviews that the students benefit from the use of portfolio throughout the portfolio keeping process.

We may also conclude that portfolio keeping process helps the students learn about their mistakes. Students’ learning out of their mistakes by regular feedback is also reinforced by the teacher interviews and reflection papers. They also reinforced that portfolio keeping process helps the students monitor and keep track of their own progress. Moreover, it became clear that the students feel motivated towards learning when they see their own progress. This conclusion is based on the data gathered from the reflection papers and the interviews. The teachers put forward that the students feel motivated, as the whole process is encouraging.

Although the teachers find the process as a whole useful for the students and have a positive attitude regarding this, in both the reflection papers and the interviews, they reported the same problems. They articulated that writing the papers over and over is an extra burden for the students in the modular system, which is also difficult to adapt. They think that the students feel lost and overwhelmed in the process. Among the other problems that the teachers identifies throughout the process are boring and long lasting nature of the process, overload of work, the students’ tendency to lose their drafts and their unwillingness to write each time. Additionally, when asked about the problems related to the process both in the interview and

reflection papers, the teachers claimed that there were some students who seemed really demotivated and lost in the process. They suggested that these students were especially the ones who weren't able to keep the track of their own progress.

5.2 Evaluation of the Findings from the Student Interview and the Student Attitude Survey

In the light of the data obtained from the student interviews, it might be concluded that the students have a positive attitude towards the use of portfolio as an assessment as in the findings of Yang (2003). All the students reported that the portfolio keeping helped them learn about their weaknesses and strengths. Additionally, the majority of the students articulated that they felt motivated in the process. They claimed that once they realized they could succeed, they felt more motivated and tried to write better with fewer mistakes each time. They added that they felt more responsible when they were actively involved in the process. It can also be revealed from the data that all of the students find the process objective. They suggested that there is a standard, equal and just system for each student and the teachers do grading objectively through standard evaluation criteria. However, the results from the student survey showed that the students in general do not believe in the objectivity of the portfolio assessment. Similarly, although both the teacher and student interviewees claimed that the portfolio assessment helped the students learn about their mistakes and strengths and that the students felt motivated throughout the process, the survey displayed the opposite. Table 1 mirrors the percentages of student responses to student survey:

Table 1. Student Responses to Attitude Survey

ITEM	SD F%	DA F%	DK F%	A F%	SA F%
Q1.	48.3	12.4	3.4	32.6	3.4
Q2.	41.6	23.6	6.7	21.3	6.7
Q3.	39.3	11.2	14.6	15.7	19.1
Q4.	40.4	15.7	18.0	16.9	9.0
Q5.	38.2	13.5	13.5	24.7	10.1

Q6.	44.8	20.7	10.3	13.8	10.3
Q7.	37.9	17.2	12.6	18.4	13.8
Q8.	28.7	17.2	21.8	16.1	16.1
Q9.	44.8	14.9	11.5	18.4	10.3
Q10.	46.0	16.1	8.0	25.3	4.6

As represented in Table 1, we received variety of answers for each question. The item "strongly disagree" has the biggest percentage in each question which reveals a disfavor by the majority of students for being marked on portfolio. (Q1 48.3, Q2 41.6, Q3 39.3, Q4 40.4, Q5 38.2, Q6 44.8, Q7 37.9, Q8 28.7, Q9 44.8, Q 10 46.0)

6. Conclusion

In the light of all the data gathered for this study, it is easy to conclude that the student attitude survey contradicts with the other findings such as teacher reflection papers, student and teacher interviews. Although the writing teachers had a positive observation about the student attitudes, the student survey revealed the opposite. Instead, it revealed a disfavor by the majority of the students. The reason for the attitudes of the students in the interviews to be positive might be the limited participants that involved in the interviews since the study revealed the opposite findings when more participants were included. Interestingly, the majority of the writing teachers claimed about a positive overall student attitude in both the reflection papers and the teacher interviews. On the other hand, they reported some problems related to the portfolio keeping process. However, they put forward that these problems were related to only some students and some situations. The problems the teachers reported in the reflection papers and the findings from the attitude survey showed similarity only in the way that the students found the process time consuming. More interestingly, the students as well as the teachers reported in the interviews that they found the process objective. However, the results from the survey showed that the students in general do not believe in the objectivity of the portfolio assessment. Similarly, although both the teacher and student interviewees claimed that the portfolio assessment helped the students learn about their mistakes and strengths and that the students felt motivated throughout the process, the survey displayed the opposite. Furthermore, although the students reported some changes in their attitudes related

to the portfolio keeping, the results from the survey revealed that the majority of the students did not have any attitude changes. Lastly, the student attitude survey results contracted with the student interviews in that the student interviewees reported they made more effort when they learnt about their mistakes and received regular feedback from their teachers.

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