

The impact of writing portfolios on improving the process of writing research papers

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Abstract

process portfolios are ideal because they document stages that students go through as they learn and progress (Venn, 2000, p.33). Recent research on portfolio also indicates a link between feedback and quality of learning (Segers et al., 2008)

Having said that, the researchers aim to improve the process of writing students' research papers through assessment of their progress reports, answers elicited through designated weekly questions and the following individualized feedback provided by the teacher and students, creating an interactive atmosphere in the classroom, and in a purpose-built weblog. Two raters will assess the progress reports in oral and written modes. Extensive feedback from and to students and teacher on progress reports can raise awareness of students about how and what of search and find techniques, topic, relevant statistics, sources and reference selections. Weekly weblog queries are ordered from general to specific, urging students to think about how to improve their work.

Participants are senior undergrads majoring in English literature from both genders in an intact group aged between 21-23 all taught by one of the researchers, set by a TOEFL. This study clarified that there was no significant improvement in students' work regarding portfolios. The improvement was slight in some cases negligible. Yet, regarding their improvement in writing research papers, the students showed a considerable improvement

Keywords:

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Introduction

In recent years, many second language teachers and researchers have noticed the importance of helping students to become effective and autonomous learners. This importance is much more prominent in some courses such as research course in undergraduate programs since the students are required to write on a specific topic, develop it and discuss the findings. As a purposeful collection of student work, portfolios show effort, progress, achievement, and self-reflection in one or more areas (Paulson and Paulson 1991). Paulson, Paulson, and Meyer (1991) described portfolios as an intersection of instruction and assessment. A portfolio includes information regarding the process of development and a narration made on the part of the students about the learning that took place or is taking place. Materials in the portfolio can represent the whole learning content (Gottlieb 1995; Yueh 1999).

A number of differences exist between portfolios and traditional assessment, according to existing research (e.g. O'Malley and Pierce 1996; Paulson and Paulson 1991). First, portfolios measure student's ability over time, while in traditional assessment it is measured at one time. Second, portfolio assessment is done by teacher and student and the student is aware of criteria, while traditional assessment is done by teacher alone and the student is often unaware of criteria. Third, portfolio assessment is embedded in instruction but traditional assessment is conducted outside instruction. Fourth, portfolio assessment captures many facets of language learning performance, while traditional assessment does not capture the range of student's ability. Fifth, portfolio evaluation stresses improvement, effort, and achievement, while traditional assessment only focuses on results. In other words, portfolio evaluation is process-oriented, while traditional assessment is product-oriented. Finally, portfolios connect learning, assessment, and instruction whereas these aspects are separated in traditional assessment. In brief, portfolios are considered a better tool for student learning (Yang 2003).

The advantages of using portfolios include offering students a concrete way to value their work, reflect on their performance, enhance their learning and autonomy, alter their view of the teacher's role and their own role, encourage themselves to take responsibility for their learning, and involve themselves in the assessment process (Brown 1998; Paulson, Paulson, and Meyer 1991; Yueh 1999).

Interest in portfolios as assessment devices first emerged in the field of composition instruction, but it evolved almost concurrently in other disciplines in the language arts

such as reading, literacy, and oral language development (e.g., Fair and Tone 1994; Hewitt 1994). Portfolio assessment was then adopted in teacher training and various educational programs at different levels (e.g., Mokhtari et al. 1996; Reed 1997; Spence and Theriot 1999). English teachers have also used portfolios to evaluate and enhance student learning (e.g., Fradd and Hudelson 1995; Murphy 1997).

Of all non-traditional approaches to instruction and assessment, portfolio use is in accordance with theories of constructivism and multiple intelligences (Chang, 2001; Dai, 2003). Proponents deem its use as congruent with their teaching aims and beliefs about learning (e.g., Belanoff & Dickson, 1991; Cole & Struyk, 1997; Gardner, 1983, 1991; Lockledge, 1997; Newman & Smolen, 1993, Valencia, 1990; Yancey, 1992), a means of empowering students to become active learners and decision makers in their own learning. As Gottlieb (1995) puts it, portfolios "serve as a guide for students in making choices and in demonstrating how they reason, create, strategize, and reflect" (p. 12).

Research evidence also suggests portfolios as a potent device to gauge students' effort, achievement, improvement, and self-evaluation (e.g. Chen, 1999, 2000; Far & Tone, 1994; Hamp-Lyons & Condon, 2000; Hsieh et al., 2000; Newman & Smolen, 1993; Smolen et al., 1995). Hamp-Lyons (1994) labels portfolio an excellent pedagogical tool interweaving assessment with instruction: it provides chances to integrate more forms of evaluation into teaching, such that evaluation will become "a less threatening and more supportive activity" (p. 54) to learners. Moya and O'Malley (1994) claim portfolios can be used as a systematic assessment tool in instructional planning and student evaluation. Matching assessment to teaching and supplying a profile of students' learning and growth in multiple domains or skills, portfolios are thus recommended as an alternative to standardized testing and all problems found with such testing.

Methodology

The participants were a group of 40 undergraduate students in a research course. 10 students were missing due to different reasons such as absenteeism. The students were required to answer 3 blog questions every two weeks. The questions were in accordance with the development of their research papers. They also were asked to write a progress report every two weeks on the development of their term project. Every two or three weeks, they had an interview session with one of the researchers,

who was the instructor as well. At the end of the semester, they were supposed to hand in their term projects.

In a research course, the participants were asked to write on a free topic related to their field of study, i.e. English literature and language learning. The instructor drew the students' attention to follow the format of an academic research paper, and to notice the accuracy of their writing. The researcher classified the written work into four categories to investigate the possible improvement of the students' writings:

1. Portfolio I: the answer to question one+ the first report
2. Portfolio II: the answer to question two+ the second report
3. Portfolio III: the answer to question three+ the third report
4. The research paper

To study and detect the possible improvement of the students' writings, the following research questions were addressed:

- Does the students' second portfolio show any development in comparison to the first one regarding accuracy and fluency?
- Does the students' third portfolio show any development in comparison to the second one regarding accuracy and fluency?
- Does the students' third portfolio show any development in comparison to the first one regarding accuracy and fluency?
- Does the students' research paper show any development in comparison to the first one regarding accuracy and fluency?
- Does the students' research paper show any development in comparison to the first portfolio regarding accuracy and fluency?

In this study, two raters rate all the papers against the following criteria:

comments	Q3				Q2				Q1				
	accuracy		fluency		accuracy		fluency		Accuracy		fluency		
	Spelling	Grammar	Word choice	Academic expression	Sp	Gr	w.ch	ac	Sp	Gr	w.ch	ac	
													S1
													..
													S30

Table 1: The assessment of blog questions.

comments	Report 3				Report 2				Report 1				
	accuracy		fluency		accuracy		fluency		Accuracy		fluency		
	Sp	Gr	w.ch	ac	Sp	Gr	w.ch	ac	Sp	Gr	w.ch	ac	
													S1
													..
													S30

Table 2: The assessment of reports.

Abstract				introduction				review				discussion				
Ac		Fl		Ac		Fl		Ac		Fl		Ac		fl		
Sp	gr	w. ch	ac	sp	Gr	w. ch	A c	Sp	Gr	w. ch	A c	Sp	Gr	w. ch	a c	
																S1
																...
																S30

Table3: The assessment of research papers.

Findings

After the data were gathered, interreliability between the two raters was calculated. Regarding the blog questions and reports, it was 75% and for research papers, it was 70%.

Comparing the means of portfolio 1, 2, 3 and the research paper, the following result was obtained:

	Mean	Standard deviation
Portfolio 1	3.3	1.20
Portfolio 2	3.23	1.50
Portfolio 3	3.13	1.54
Research paper	4.41	.6

Table 4: comparison among the means.

Regarding the result, it is observed that the mean of the class is not improving from the first to the second portfolio and from the second to the third. This fact is contrary to what has been expected. The researcher tried to define a criteria to rate the papers against. For accuracy, she defined spelling and grammatical mistakes as accuracy problems. Regarding the fluency, word choice and academic expression were defined as the criteria for fluency since the students were supposed to use research terms expressing the results and findings.

The mean of research paper is higher from all the portfolios. The reason might be the interest of the students to their topics. Sometimes the researcher also traced some signs of plagiarism in their work, but since the definition of plagiarism is something controversial, she could not be sure about it.

The problem regarding research courses which was obvious to the researcher in this study is defining a more objective criteria. The students participating in this study were all majored in English literature, but they had a lot of problems regarding their self-expression, i.e. when they were asked to write about finding their topics, the problems they encountered during their project, they could not express themselves clearly. This fact shows that they were not sufficiently trained to have metacognitive speculations.

Limitations

This study, like all other studies on portfolio, had the limitation of an objective criteria for assessment. The other problem was related to the difficulty related to the recognition of the students' their own writing. As mentioned before, plagiarism is not a clear-cut concept to be dealt with.

Conclusion

In my university, the students have a lot of problems in writing and when they reach the stage of writing a research paper, they are really confused at first and needs the instructor's help. This study tried to investigate guiding the students through writing reports and proving an opportunity for them to express their ideas in a research course in a virtual environment, i.e. a weblog. It seems that the more opportunity the instructor provides for her students, the better they will improve.

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