The Implementation of Portfolio Assessment to Enhance Writing Skills in EFL Adult Classrooms: An Exploration of the Benefits and Challenges

تطبيق استراتيجية التقويم المعتمد على الحقائب لتحسين مهارات الكتابة في فصول تعليم اللغة الإنجليزية: الفوائد والتحديات

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Abstract

The aim of my research is to explore the benefits of using portfolios (PA) for formative assessment to enhance EFL adult students' writing skills at the university level. Precisely, I will explore the use of this strategy to assess adult's English writing in a foreign language setting. I will investigate some of the challenges that EFL teachers face when assessing students' writing. They spend much time revising, commenting, and grading compositions. Nevertheless, students tend to make the same mistakes even though the mistakes have already been corrected by teachers. It seems that students do not learn much from teachers' feedback and assessment. Reviewing the literature related to the use of PA in EFL writing, I will explore how PA provides a portrait of what students know and what they can do, and offer a multidimensional perspective of students' progress over time. EFL teachers try their best with their students in order to increase their confidence in their ability to learn, and evaluate their own learning. However, students start to gain knowledge of the English language very slowly and on a limited basis. Indeed, the formative assessment is not used effectively in a real classroom setting because of several challenges such as teachers' lacking relevant knowledge and skills, and the test-oriented education system. PA provides students with personalized feedback on the effectiveness of their learning strategies, specific learning methods and learning materials. Hopefully, PA can generate creativity in both students' and teachers' minds and thus, they will start to hold the keys for constant progress and a way to improve their academic achievement in writing. Finally, I will shed the light on some challenges that both teachers and students might face when using PA. The investigation of the benefits and obstacles of this form of assessment can

hopefully improve the level of EFL learning in the future.

Key words: Portfolio Assessment, writing skills, EFL Adult Classrooms

الملخص

يهدف البحث للكشف عن فوائد استخدام الحقائب في التقويم التكويني لتعزيز مهارات الكتابة عند طلاب اللغة الإنجليزية في المرحلة الجامعية، كما يسعى لدراسة بعض التحديات التي يواجهها معلمو اللغة الإنجليزية كلغة أجنبية عند تقييم كتابة الطلاب الجامعيين. اعتمد منهج البحث على دراسة الأدبيات السابقة المتعلقة باستخدام الحقائب في التقويم التكويني لتقديم منظور متعدد الأبعاد لتقدم الطلاب في مهارة الكتابة مع الوقت، اختتمت الدراسة برؤية مستقبلية لتحقيق أفضل الطرق من أجل تحسين مستوى تعلم اللغة الإنجليزية كلغة أجنبية في المستقبل.

Introduction:

Writing is usually considered as an important skill by EFL educators that it has to be supported and developed in EFL teaching. Adult English language learners need to adjust to the social, cultural, linguistic, and emotional newness of a classroom environment. Writing can give students that sense of admitting they need to feel belonged with their classroom, teachers and school. Furthermore, good writing tasks not only help solve the problem of the students' cultural, social and emotional isolation but also are connected to real world tasks – a concept known as authenticity. When students can be skillful to accomplish these tasks they can be able to learn applies to their real lives inside and outside their classroom (Zeichner, Melnick, Gomez, 1996). Through writing, ELLs have the chance to reach their "voices" that may otherwise go ignored. Writing also helps to develop a personal bond with students and discontinues teachers from seeing their students as the other (Zeichner, Melnick, Gomez, 1996).

When applying at English university courses, writing skills in general are essential to better college grades and greater academic achievement. Students are not only graded on content, but also on their writing skills. Poor grammar, spelling and punctuation often lead to learners' markdowns.

Additionally, Learning effective writing skills is important for many adult English language learners to use English for job related skills and career development. Usually, employers seek for employees with strong written communication skills. They commonly assess employees' responses to application questions, resumes and letters to determine their written communication skills. Some employers may even ignore applications and letters that have grammatical, spelling or punctuation errors. Most job professionals, such as marketing, finance, and research and development managers, need perfect writing skills to reach ideas and concepts. Email interactions with customers or business partners can be evaluated. Therefore, strong written communication abilities reflect the employee's intelligence, professionalism and attention to details.

I- Definition of Portfolio:

A portfolio is "a collection of a student's works that demonstrate to students and others their efforts, progress and achievements in given areas" (Genesee & Upshur, 1996, p. 99). Portfolio is used to collect samples of student work over time to track student development. It is "essentially formative in nature as it can include work in progress, even imperfect work, yet of some pride to the learner" (Jones, 2012, p.402). Buckley et.al (2009) define portfolio as "learning and assessment tool" and a collection of evidence that learning process has taken place (p. 283).

II- Why Portfolio Assessment (PA)?

Good teachers need to spend as much as one-half of their professional time to practice assessment-related activities. They are usually making decisions about how to deal with their learners, and "those decisions are based in part on information they have gathered about their students through classroom assessment" (Stiggins, 1992, p.35). EFL researches give the priority to the development of EFL students' interest, motivation, confidence and learning strategies, advocates more humanistic assessment models and requires teachers to use alternative assessments in classrooms as a form of formative assessment to change the widely-accepted practices

where teachers are used to teaching according to what is tested and give an evaluation to students only by testing them. Indeed, it has become essential that teacher is required to help his/ her students in order to develop their skills and to increase their confidence in their ability to write, and evaluate their own learning. In EFL classrooms, in order to bear learners' responsibilities in their writing skills, they should be trained the practices of making informed decisions, time management, the effective use of resources, and then evaluate their achievement by applying the effective self- and/or peer assessment.

However, in adult EFL classrooms, many English language learners do not like writing activities and do not enjoy the writing process may be because they find some difficulties to understand grammar. Students often do not feel comfortable expressing themselves in writing and especially in a second language; this often complicates the teaching process. The question yet becomes, how teachers can provide more meaningful and engaging writing opportunities for English language learning students so they can feel confident in their writing abilities?

The writing abilities of ELLs are more difficult to assess than those of native speakers (Song and August, 2002). As EFL teacher, we have met some problems regarding assessing student writing. We spend much time revising, commenting, and grading compositions, but students repeat making the same mistakes even though the mistakes have already been corrected by teachers. It seems that students do not learn much from teachers' feedback and assessment. Additionally, EFL teachers usually are sensitive to the student's diverse backgrounds that define their students.

Therefore, the focus of research is to review and synthesize the current empirical literature on using PA to assess writing abilities in adult ELLs classrooms as it provides "a portrait of what students know and what they can do, offer a multidimensional perspective of student progress over time, encourage student self-reflection and participation, and link instruction and assessment" (Delett, Barnhardt, & Kevorkian, 2001, p. 559). To provide focus for this review I posed the following key question:

- What are the benefits and challenges of using portfolio assessment to assess adult EFL learners' writing skills?

This paper discusses the background of using PA to understand how to use it for writing growth in our teaching context—EFL teaching. Advantages arising from the use of PA thorough investigating the students' perspectives will be discussed, in addition to the challenges and limitations of using PA to enhance EFL students' writing skills.

Background Information:

- **Two reasons for PA popularity:** The conception of using PA began to attract educators' attention around the mid-1980s as a result of the increasing worry about declining standards of education. Since that time, PA has gained growing popularity mainly for two reasons: increasing dissatisfaction with timed impromptu essay tests and the development of process-oriented writing pedagogies (Li, 2010).

- **Four features** of PA: collection, selection, reflection, and delayed evaluation (Hamp-Lyons & Condon, 2000).

-**Three characteristics of a writing portfolio**: most of educators and assessors see writing portfolio assessment as longitudinal in nature, diverse in content, and collaborative in ownership (Yancey, 1992).

- **Seven steps** in the framework for PA in the foreign language classroom: set assessment purpose, identify instructional objectives, match task to objectives, set criteria, determine organization, monitor progress, and evaluate the portfolio process (Delett, Barnhardt, & Kevorkian, 2001).

- **No one-size-fits-all** PA framework: Instructors need to set up portfolio projects according to their context (Lam, 2013).

- **Mixed attitudes** towards the effectiveness of PA in ESL/EFL writing development (Li, 2010):

Some studies report that portfolios could promote students' learning autonomy, motivation, reflection, language awareness, and sense of achievement in writing (Aydin, 2010; Slovin, 2001). Some other studies state that some student writers are not particularly motivated, lacked interest, and do not take advantage of the peer and self-assessment (Hamp-Lyons, 1995; Liu, 2003).

Table 1

Summary Description of Research Studies on the benefits and challenges of Using PA to enhance their Writing Skills

Study	Context	Methodology	Purpose/Focus	Findings
Aydin, S. (2010)	EFL writers' perceptions of portfolio keeping	- 204 university level students - Interviews, a survey, and essays	Analyze the contribution of portfolio and to examine its problems	- Portfolio is beneficial in improving the overall performance in EFL writing -Some students' negative perceptions of portfolio as students faced some problems during the process of portfolio keeping
Caner, M. (2010)	Students views on using portfolio assessment in EFL writing courses	-An attitude survey and semi-structured interviews with the students and their instructors. -140 Turkish EFL students enrolled at a school of foreign languages.	Find out the students' preference in writing exams.	-50% of students are aware of advantages of PA in their writing courses. -Some have negative attitudes towards PA and prefer to be evaluated by the traditional paper and pencil tests. Some benefits of applying portfolio assessment in ESL classrooms.
Hirvela, A. & Sweetland, Y. (2005).	The use of learning-directed portfolio contexts through two writers' experiences.	The voices of EFL writers using portfolio in two EFL different writing courses through interviews and textual analysis of their writings.	Show how beneficial is implementing learning-directed portfolio contexts in developing the ESL students' writing.	PA has clear advantages in

				being able to give evidence of a wider range of personal and critical abilities and skills rather than some other forms of assessment.
Jones (2012).	PA as a tool of language learning assessment.	Views of a learning group of primary language teachers planning to develop portfolio work that includes an assessment function.	Show PA as an active tool for teachers to better understand how students develop and learn the language, and to show evidence of their achievement and progression	Students prefer the instructor and peer feedback as more significant sources of input for revision to self-feedback.
Lam, R. (2013)	English foreign language students' perceptions of the portfolio assessment	Students' and teachers' interviews, student reflective journals, classroom observations, and analysis of writing revisions.	Explore the responses of two groups of EFL pre-university students to two portfolio systems (working portfolio and showcase portfolio) in one academic writing course	The portfolio management system improved the self-directed learning for students.
	Implementation of portfolios in an ESL classroom	This case study was done in a multicultural ESL middle school classroom.	The development and implementation of portfolio and how students could manage it.	Holistically scored proficiency is hard for ESL learners and therefore, portfolio assessment is more valid to evaluate their writing abilities.
Newman, C. (1995)	Evaluating ESL students' performance on proficiency exams	Writing processes was scored for 284 students in the paper.	Compare the success of ESL students to native English speaking (NES) students in a proficiency exam.	Students benefited from the portfolio system in terms of the development of English use and confidence and learning ownership.
Ruetten, M. K. (1994)	The role of portfolio assessment and reflection on process writing	Both a questionnaire and an experimental design were administered in a class of 20 EFL students during one semester.	Investigate the effect of using portfolio assessment technique and reflection activities on students' writings and process writing. -Investigate the performance in a	Students were more likely to pass when they were evaluated by portfolio than when they were required to pass by (WAT).

Sharifi, A. & Hassaskhah, J. (2011).	PA to assess the writing of EFL students.	Chi-square test or AZ test were administered to contrast the two groups on a dichotomous dependent variable.	second semester composition course - Compare the performance of students according to the writing assessment test (WAT) and PA.	
Song, B., & August, B. (2002).				

Review and Synthesis of the Empirical Literature:

I- Students' Perceptions of the benefits and challenges of Using PA to Enhance their Writing Skills

Lam (2013) shows how the two portfolio systems (working portfolio and showcase portfolio), according to students' perception, have a significant impact on their writing ability and the kind of feedback they consider constructive in enhancing the quality of their drafts. Lam (2013) investigates the perception of two EFL groups (A and B) to two portfolio systems working portfolio and showcase portfolio. The data was collected qualitatively by semi-structured interviews, student's reflective journals, and classroom observation. The author starts the paper by looking at the research conducted on portfolio assessment, in particular, portfolio assessment in academic writing and students' preferences in this regard. Lam (2013) looks

at two portfolio systems to answer two research questions about student's perception on writing abilities after experiencing portfolio assessment. Lam states that some of his students using the working portfolio claimed that they felt enthusiastic about the effectiveness of portfolio assessment and they were more receptive to the experience more than the other group who applied the showcase portfolio. The study concludes that students from the show case group (B) were less excited about PA and did not know whether it could enhance their writing. However, group (B) showed more responses to the experience and agreed that rich feedback could facilitate writing the author ends with a recommendation about PA and how it can be best used to raise self-awareness in the process of writing.

In ESL/EFL classrooms, the portfolio assessment of students learning is being developed to demonstrate what students are learning and what they can do with their knowledge (Caner, 2010). Caner (2010) claims in his case study *Students Views on Using Portfolio Assessment In EFL Writing Courses* that almost half of the students are aware of advantages of the implementation of portfolio in their writing courses and they believe in its effectiveness in the evaluation process. However, some participants have negative attitudes towards portfolio assessment and prefer to be evaluated by the traditional paper and pencil tests because they do not understand why they need to compile a portfolio (Caner, 2010). The author concludes his article arguing that students must be involved deeply and thoughtfully in learning and assessment practices. They have to become aware of the differences between the traditional test and the portfolio assessment. Teachers and educators need to develop their student's awareness to become as an autonomous language learner and as a language user by compiling a portfolio (Caner, 2010).

Aydin (2010) states that portfolio is beneficial in improving the overall performance in EFL writing. In addition to, a very noticeable improvement in use of grammar, reading, learning vocabulary, and writing skills. However, some participants have negative attitudes towards portfolio assessment and prefer to be evaluated by the traditional paper and pencil tests because they do not understand why they need to compile a portfolio. Some students perceive some problems during the portfolio keeping process; they believe that it is boring, tiring, and takes too much time, and that they have difficulties in pre-writing activities, feedback, and rewriting processes.

For example, they said that it was hard to understand the feedback process, and prewriting and rewriting process. Also, they described it as a boring and tiring process that takes a lot of time (Aydin, 2010).

However, findings also explore some factors that might have hindered its progress such as challenges resulting from continuous intake and teacher training. The conclusion of the article states that this study has brought a different and needed type of reality to discussions of portfolio use in ESL writing courses. The authors hope that this study will encourage educators to find opportunities to investigate what actually happens when portfolios meet students in a second language-writing course (Hirvela & Sweetland, 2005).

II- *Benefits of Using PA to Enhance EFL Students' Writing Skills (taken from the published literature)*:

Jones (2012) explains in this article the idea of portfolio as a tool of language learning assessment. Jones (2012) claims that portfolio assessment is considered to be the best-known and most popular form of alternative language assessment across the curriculum in primary schools. According to Jones, the term portfolio has become a popular alternative for assessing students' outcomes after great deals of problems of tests and examinations. She lists criteria and benefits that portfolio assessment meets: to encourage learners to draw on their language learning experiences, a mean to provide evidence of learning, and for showcasing work pupils are proud of. She, Jones, elicits some views of a learning group of primary language teachers planning to develop portfolio work that includes an assessment function. Jones findings show that the use of portfolio assessments from an early age has clear advantages in being able to give evidence of a wider range of personal and critical abilities and skills rather than some other forms of assessment. Finally, the author concludes her article stating that portfolio in language learning in general is flexible because it creates an integration of learning and achieves a close integration of learning and assessment. In this article, the author provides the reader with information on how portfolios have helped students achieve the goals of language learning curriculum and evaluation standards.

Like Jones, Sharifi & Hassaskhah (2011) investigate the effect of using portfolio assessment technique and reflection activities on

students "writings and process writing"(Sharifi & Hassaskhah, 2011, P. 194). They argue, in their article, that testing at the end of any EFL course is insufficient in estimating or assessing the different gaining skills, knowledge, processes, and strategies of writing. They claim that portfolio assessment is one of the important techniques that EFL teachers have begun to adopt as a useful alternative source of information about students' achievement and classroom instruction. Sharifi & Hassaskhah (2011) applied the portfolio-based teaching in the second half of the semester and the questionnaire was given to students in order to show their perspectives to portfolio-based learning. The study found that students favored the portfolio system, considering the learning tasks conducive to their learning, and portfolios to be good tools to examine their learning process and improve their learning skills in writing. Furthermore, findings of the student's questionnaire indicate that students benefited from the portfolio system in terms of the development of English use and confidence and learning ownership. Sharifi & Hassaskhah (2011) conclude their article stating that portfolio assessment is an effective mean to integrate pedagogy, learning, and evaluation as well as to promote critical thinking. They also suggest that language syllabuses should be flexible and consider the learner's participation in decision-making.

Hirvela & Sweetland (2005) describe, in their article, the use of learning-directed portfolio contexts through two writers' experiences. The findings of the survey revealed some benefits of applying portfolio assessment in ESL classrooms whereas it is away of increasing knowledge, better evidence of students' strengths and weaknesses and it gives teachers a more detailed representation of a student's language abilities than traditional assessment methods. Hirvela & Sweetland (2005) claim that one of the participants explained to him that the portfolio was "a summary of all my writing" and was designed so that students could view their starting and ending points and see how they had improved (p.200).

In *"Using portfolios to assess the writing of ESL students: A powerful alternative?"* Song & August (2002) find that students were more likely to pass when they were evaluated by portfolio than when they were required to pass by writing assessment test. They claim that due to the fact that ESL students learning abilities are hard to evaluate, teachers find portfolio assessment suitable because it provides a better way to measure what students can write. This study has demonstrated

that exams are not always the best way to assess students, especially ESL students, as they do not necessarily measure the students' real level of achievement. In some cases, students panic when it comes to exams or they may be ill and unable to sit the exam. The study also shows that students' performance appears much better and reflects their true level when assessed by portfolio, and moving appropriately from level to level is much easier (Song & August (2002).

Buckley et.al (2009) describe portfolios as tools to increase students' self-awareness, enhance their ability to learn independently and to encourage them in order to reflect on their own performance. Ruetten (1994) compares the success of ESL students to native English speaking (NES) students in a proficiency exam. Besides that, the author compares the sources of success and the number of attempts ESL students and native English speaking students need to pass the exam. The findings of this study showed that ESL students are twice likely as NES students to fail the exam. However, ESL students make this up by passing the appeal. Also, in terms of attempts' numbers, no significant differences were showed. Overall, this study argues that holistically scored proficiency is hard for ESL learners and therefore, portfolio assessment is more valid to evaluate their writing abilities. Like Ruetten, Newman (1995) claims that implementation of portfolio in the ESL classroom enhanced the students' learning. Compared to the traditional way of assessment, portfolios succeeded in evaluating not only the students' writing but also their self-monitoring.

III- Challenges and limitations of Using PA to Enhance ESL/EFL Students' Writing Skills:
Instruction on the Formative Function of PA:

Without explicit instruction on the formative nature of PA, students tend to be more concerned about the summative role of assessment – grades while ignoring the learning process. So it is necessary to teach about PA and make students clear about the formative role of PA (Hirvela & Sweetland, 2005; Lam & Lee, 2009; Lam, 2013; Li, 2010). (Hirvela & Sweetland, 2005) Show some of the obstacles, which could face the implementation of portfolio. If students are required to perform self-assessment, reflection or peer assessment, the teacher has first to teach them how to do it. It is not reasonable to expect students to compile portfolios for the first time and receive a quick response to them unless the right approach has been thought about and implemented (Hirvela & Sweetland, 2005). Equally, students may not understand how to employ portfolios in their course. However, if

students like portfolios, this is a good sign, but the strategy still has to be to properly adapted to circumstances. Also, different types and uses of portfolios could lead to different results. It is essential for the teacher to choose the approach that best suits the students and helps them to reach their goals.

A Supportive Learning Environment:

A supportive environment in PA (or ongoing portfolio culture) includes: ongoing feedback from peer, self and tutor assessment, process writing with revision and multiple drafts, and a low-stakes setting with delayed evaluation (Hirvela & Sweetland's, 2005; Lam & Lee, 2009; Lam, 2013). Despite the advantages of portfolio assessment, Song & August (2002) shed the light on some of the challenges like the assessment's time consuming nature.

Improving Students' Peer Assessment Skills:

Many students have difficulty with providing appropriate and detailed feedback to peers' articles. Instructors should teach about peer assessment, provide specific guidelines and encourage peer discussion (Lam, 2013; Lo, 2010; Paesani, 2006).

Self-assessment and Critical Reflection:

Many ESL/EFL students find it difficult to self-assess and reflect on their portfolio process so it is necessary to teach about self-assessment and critical reflection, promote students' learning autonomy, self-regulatory capacity, and meta-cognitive ability (Hirvela & Sweetland's, 2005; Lam, 2013; Li, 2010; Lo, 2010). Students in EFL classrooms need to learn how to observe everything around them and were more keenly aware of the learning process. They have to be better able to understand their own and others' mistakes and evaluate and correct them.

Teachers' Lacking PA Skills:

Since PA is a new strategy in the field of ESL/EFL teaching, teachers need training in this regard (Lam & Lee, 2009; Li, 2010). In addition, their workload might become heavier due to the ongoing feedback with students. To deal with the heavy workload, Lo (2010) suggests reducing portfolio entries, adopting peer portfolios and encouraging peer and self-assessment. Lam (2013) explains that teacher's awareness of choosing the most suitable method of portfolio assessment gives the student a better chance of achieving his or her goals. Feedback is another superb assessment tool. It enriches the portfolio experience, which is one of the principles of formative assessment. It helps learners to have better look at portfolio as a tool of

formative assessment and the use of feedback in it.

Discussion:

Beyond a review and synthesis of the empirical literature on the effectiveness of applying PA as an assessment mean to enhance writing skills in adult EFL Classrooms, the purpose of this paper is to explore both the benefits and limitations of using portfolios (PA) for formative assessment to enhance EFL students' writing skills at the university level. This review provides that learners positively react to portfolio assessment in foreign language writing, and portfolios make considerable contributions to the language learning process. Indeed, portfolios help students become actively involved in their own learning. However, Very few findings indicate that EFL learners have some difficulties providing feedback and peer assessment. EFL students also find that it is difficult to reflect on their portfolio process.

Conclusion:

All the gathered literature, in one-way or another, is of the same opinion that the use of portfolios in the ESL classroom is an important addition to the assessment procedures of the class. PA in EFL writing is beneficial to the improvement of vocabulary, grammar and overall writing skills. I realize that portfolios are an effective way to assess the students' strengths and weaknesses. Portfolios give students many opportunities to present their best work, and, in so doing, are encouraged to do their best. This is especially important in the development of ESL students' confidence, and attitudes towards their growth in learning English as a second language. However, EFL students find some problems while using the portfolio process. Educators must take these problems into consideration.

As an EFL teacher, I feel a strong responsibility for discovering both the problems and solutions about the possibilities of using portfolio assessment in my classroom. I feel it is necessary for teachers to understand the requirements in order to use the successful portfolio assessment with young learners especially in writing.

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