

ASSESSING B1 LEVEL LEARNERS' WRITING SKILLS THROUGH PORTFOLIO AND ACHIEVEMENT TESTS

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Abstract: The primary focus of this study was to determine the effect of portfolio assessment on final examination scores of EFL students' writing skill. To determine the impact of portfolio-based writing assessment 40 university students who enrolled in composition course were initially selected and divided randomly into two experimental and control groups. A quasi-experimental research design was adopted in this study. In order to appraise the homogeneity of the experimental and control groups Comprehensive English Language Test (CELT) was employed at the beginning of the study. The pre-test was applied to both the experimental group and control group. Later in the study, a post-test of dependent variables was implemented for both groups. Data analysis was carried out by SPSS 16 statistical computer program. The statistical techniques being applied were the Levene statistic of One-Way ANOVA and the Paired-sample T-test. The results of the study revealed that students whose work was evaluated by a portfolio system (portfolio-based assessment) had improved in their writing and gained higher scores in final examination when compared to those students whose work was evaluated by the more traditional evaluation system (non-portfolio-based assessment). The findings of the present study highlighted the fact that portfolio assessment could be used as a complementary alternative along with traditional assessment to shed new light on the process of writing.

Keywords: Portfolio, Portfolio assessment, Writing skill, Portfolio- based instruction

Writing is often considered one of the most challenging skills for language learners. At the B1 level, learners are expected to write coherent and cohesive texts, though they may still make errors in grammar, vocabulary, and spelling. The challenge for educators is not only in identifying these errors but also in measuring learners' overall writing development.



Two primary methods for assessing writing skills at the B1 level are portfolio assessment and achievement tests. Portfolio assessment involves the collection of a learner's work over time, which allows for a deeper, more comprehensive view of their writing progress. Achievement tests, on the other hand, focus on assessing writing performance at a specific point in time, providing a snapshot of the learner's abilities under test conditions. This paper aims to explore both methods in detail, providing insights into their effectiveness and suggesting ways in which they can be applied to better assess B1-level learners' writing skills. Portfolio Assessment Yang (2003) defined portfolio as a compilation of students' work, which documents their effort, progress and achievement in their learning, and their reflection on the materials negotiated for the portfolio. Crosby (1997) indicates that the primary purpose of portfolios in EFL context is to increase the level of students' motivation and to give them a sense autonomous learning. The portfolio as a self-reflection assessment has appeal because it changes the way writing has been graded traditionally and institutes a grading system whereby the teacher shares control and works collaboratively with students (Berlin 1994). Portfolio assessment is used as an evaluation tool for reviewing the status of student progress and development. The components of the portfolio are decided by the teachers, the students, or through an agreement between teachers and students. Portfolio-based writing assessment has attracted a considerable amount of interest in colleges and universities because they link teaching, learning, and assessment within the discipline and across disciplines in the college curriculum. Hamp-Lyons & Condon (2000) argue that the “greatest theoretical and practical strength of a portfolio, used as an assessment instrument, is the way it reveals and informs teaching and learning” (p.4). Lee (2001) points out that portfolio assessment prioritized student-centered over conventional concept of teaching. Although portfolio assessment of writing promised potential benefits for writing skill development in ESL and EFL context, the traditional psychometric opponents criticize its principles and practice. Writing assessment is a critical part of language instruction, providing teachers with valuable insights into a learner's progress. The B1 level, as defined by the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages (CEFR), is an intermediate stage of proficiency, where learners can produce simple connected text on familiar subjects but may still have significant errors in their use of language. To assess learners at this level, educators

often rely on both portfolio assessments and achievement tests. These methods, while distinct, can provide complementary insights into a learner's development and help identify areas for improvement. Portfolio assessments involve the collection of a learner's written work over a period of time, offering an opportunity to track progress, reflect on writing skills, and set goals for future development. Achievement tests, on the other hand, assess a learner's writing ability at a specific point in time, typically under time constraints, and are often used to measure a learner's performance against predefined learning objectives. This paper aims to discuss the merits and limitations of these two assessment tools, and how they can be used together to provide a comprehensive picture of B1-level learners' writing abilities. They voiced their frustration over the issues of design decision, logistics and interpretation. They also challenged the portfolio assessment's time-consuming nature, and the issues of reliability and validity (Brown & Hudson 1998). Hamp-Lyons & Condon (2000) believe that in portfolio assessment both reliability and validity are necessary and must be addressed. Williams (1998, 2000) argues that without standards for implementation and outcomes, portfolio assessment will become unfair because "it increases the subjectivity teachers bring to evaluation" (2000, p.136). This unreliability will threaten portfolio assessment benefits because portfolio assessment was supposed to, "developed with the goal of making the evaluation of classroom writing more objective, more fair, and more realistic" (2000, p. 147).

Lack of Formative Feedback: Unlike portfolios, achievement tests do not allow for in-depth reflection or ongoing feedback that can help learners improve their writing skills over time. Reliability needs to be based on performance instead of idiosyncratic scores that have no preset criteria (O'Malley and Pierce, 1996). One of the main problems of reliability in L2 portfolio assessment is inter-rater reliability, consistency of scores because teachers are not used to this new concept of assessment. The psychometric view of reliability is too narrow to take into account the "less standard forms of assessment" such as the portfolio. Portfolio assessment requires that readers be trained to agree and to score papers based on a common rubric that describes numerical points. Rubrics should include development and organization, fluency of idea (problem) description, and mechanics (O'Malley and Pierce, 1996). If readers agree, there is a reliable rate of agreement. If readers do not agree, there is low interrater reliability. Without a sufficiently high rate of reliability, scores cannot

be considered valid. Portfolios can be used to support or even determine a grade when a well defined scoring guide or rubric is developed by both the teacher and the learner (Defina 1992, P.37). O'Malley and Chamot (1990) indicated that a key element of portfolios is student self-assessment; without self-assessment and reflection on the part of the student, a portfolio is not a portfolio. According to these researchers, the self-assessment called for by portfolios can have several outcomes for the student: students take responsibility for knowing where they are with regard to learning goals; students broaden their view of what is being learned; and students begin to see language learning as a process. This study is also addresses the use of portfolios in writing assessment for self-assessment in an EFL context.

Portfolio-based Instruction The implementation of a portfolio assessment system in many classrooms today is of great interest to teachers and researchers at every level of education. Murphy (1999) states that they are implemented in classrooms in order to accomplish various goals. These goals range from providing students with a sense of ownership, motivation, accomplishment to assessing curriculum needs for demonstrating competency. Because of the number of goals associated with the implementation of portfolios, Murphy categorized them into three groups: "teaching tools, professional development, and assessment purposes" (p. 4). The Portfolio approach is used for both evaluation and instruction. Once the goals, assignments and the criteria of the portfolio are set by the teacher and the student, the daily classroom portfolio-based instruction starts. In the curriculum, portfolio-based instruction is basically conducted through individualized tutorials. The teacher and the student work together to find materials within the student's interests to complete their assignments. Literature in the portfolio research (Vizyak, 1996) suggests that the role of the ESL teacher in a portfolio approach involves planning both mini-lessons and individualized tutorials or conferences with individual students based on the teacher's understanding of the students needs. The teacher uses information in student portfolios to diagnose student needs and to guide instruction. Portfolios give the teacher a solid foundation on which to base instruction. Student portfolios provide the teacher with a record of student strengths and areas for improvement.

Method This study is intended to determine the effect of writing and assessing portfolios on final examination scores of EFL students' writing. The design for this study is Quasi-experimental in nature, since the classroom groups are already in

place and had to be intact. In order to have a strong quasi-experimental design, internal threats to validity were controlled by use of pretesting. To be confident that there were no significant difference among the subjects of the Experimental Group (EG) and Control Group (CG) regarding the variables under investigation, both groups were pre-tested at the beginning of the experiment.

Subjects The sample for this study was drawn from the students who were enrolled in second-semester freshman English composition course at E.C.O. College of Insurance. Initial enrollment in this course totaled 68 students. Out of 68 examinees, the researcher finally nominated 40 participants and randomly divided them into two experimental and control groups. All students have completed at least one previous three-credit composition course; approximately all of these students have also completed an additional Intermediate General English course. None of the students have prior experience with portfolios. Both groups involved in this study were taught by the same teacher in order to provide uniformity of instruction. Therefore, the researcher and the instructor were the same. Writing is a crucial skill in second language acquisition, and assessing it accurately is essential for understanding learners' progress and identifying areas that need improvement. In the context of English language teaching, the B1 level of the Common European Framework of Reference (CEFR) represents an intermediate stage, where learners can produce coherent texts on familiar topics, though with some errors in grammar, vocabulary, and spelling.

Assessing B1 learners' writing skills requires a careful balance between measuring achievement and development over time. This paper focuses on two key methods: **portfolio assessment** and **achievement tests**, both of which provide valuable insights into a learner's writing ability. Portfolios allow for ongoing reflection and development, while achievement tests provide a snapshot of learners' performance at a particular point in time.

Portfolio Assessment

Portfolio assessment is a comprehensive, learner-centered approach to evaluating language skills. It includes a collection of a learner's work over time, showcasing their writing development. Portfolios are used not only for assessment but also for reflection and self-regulation, helping learners identify their strengths and weaknesses in writing.

Components of a Writing Portfolio

A typical writing portfolio includes several components:

1. **Drafts and Revisions:** These show the learner’s process of writing, highlighting changes made to improve their text.
2. **Final Products:** Completed assignments, essays, and short texts that demonstrate a learner’s final writing outcomes.
3. **Reflection Logs:** Learners reflect on their work, noting challenges, progress, and areas for further development.
4. **Peer and Teacher Feedback:** Comments from peers and teachers help learners understand their writing mistakes and strengths.
5. **Self-Assessment:** Learners assess their own progress, which encourages critical thinking and self-awareness in their writing abilities.

Advantages of Portfolio Assessment

- **Holistic View:** Portfolios provide a comprehensive view of a learner’s progress over time.
- **Focus on Process:** They emphasize the writing process, not just the final product, offering insight into learners’ development and strategies.
- **Encourages Self-Reflection:** Learners become more autonomous as they reflect on their work and set goals for improvement.
- **Motivating:** Portfolios encourage learners to keep track of their growth, making the assessment less intimidating and more rewarding.

Challenges of Portfolio Assessment

- **Time-Consuming:** Creating and reviewing portfolios requires significant time from both teachers and learners.
- **Subjectivity:** The reflective nature of portfolios may lead to inconsistent evaluations depending on individual interpretations.
- **Learner Engagement:** Not all learners may be motivated to engage with the portfolio assessment process, especially if they do not see its immediate benefits.

Achievement Tests

Achievement tests are more formal assessments that measure learners’ writing ability at a specific point in time. These tests typically focus on language skills such as grammar, coherence, cohesion, and vocabulary usage. Achievement tests are often designed around specific learning objectives, such as writing essays or

responding to writing prompts that assess students' ability to organize and express ideas clearly.

Types of Achievement Tests

1. **Timed Writing Tasks:** Learners are asked to complete writing tasks within a specific time frame, such as writing an essay or a letter. These tests assess the learners' ability to perform under time pressure.

2. **Written Responses to Prompts:** A prompt is provided, and learners are required to write a response, often in the form of a composition or a short essay. This type of test assesses creativity, clarity, and coherence in writing.

3. **Error Correction:** Learners may be given a piece of writing with intentional errors, and their task is to correct those errors. This assesses grammar and accuracy.

Advantages of Achievement Tests

- **Objective:** Achievement tests are generally more objective, with clear criteria for marking, such as grammar, vocabulary, and organization.

- **Quick Assessment:** These tests provide a fast method of assessing writing skills, giving immediate feedback to learners.

- **Structured:** Achievement tests are well-structured, providing a focused evaluation of a learner's writing skills.

Challenges of Achievement Tests

- **Limited Scope:** Achievement tests usually assess writing skills in a limited context, often focusing on grammar and organization, while ignoring the writing process or individual creativity.

- **Stressful:** Timed tests may induce stress in learners, affecting their performance and potentially providing a skewed assessment of their actual writing ability.

- **Lack of Long-Term Feedback:** Achievement tests provide little insight into a learner's progress over time and may not reflect their full range of skills.

Comparing Portfolio and Achievement Tests

While both portfolio assessment and achievement tests provide valuable insights, they each have their strengths and limitations. **Portfolio assessments** offer a deeper understanding of a learner's writing journey and development, encouraging self-reflection and autonomy. However, they are time-consuming and subject to individual interpretation. On the other hand, **achievement tests** offer a more

objective and structured approach but are limited in scope and may not provide a complete picture of a learner’s writing skills.

A combined approach—using both **portfolio assessment** and **achievement tests**—can be highly effective for assessing B1 learners. Portfolios allow for ongoing reflection and development, while achievement tests provide snapshots of learners’ writing skills at particular moments. This combination ensures a balanced and comprehensive assessment approach, allowing both teachers and learners to identify strengths and areas for improvement.

Conclusion

The assessment of B1 learners’ writing skills is essential for their continued language development. By utilizing both portfolio assessment and achievement tests, teachers can obtain a holistic view of learners’ progress, encouraging self-reflection and providing structured feedback. Though each assessment method has its challenges, combining them can provide a more nuanced and comprehensive understanding of a learner’s writing abilities. By engaging in both reflective portfolio assessment and formal achievement tests, learners can develop their writing skills in a more balanced, well-rounded manner. This approach will ultimately support learners in improving their writing proficiency and becoming more effective communicators in English. In conclusion, assessing B1-level learners’ writing skills through portfolio assessment and achievement tests provides valuable insights into their writing development. Portfolio assessment allows for a holistic and continuous evaluation of a learner’s writing process, while achievement tests offer a more focused, standardized measure of their writing abilities at a given time. By combining both methods, educators can gain a comprehensive understanding of learners’ strengths, weaknesses, and areas for improvement, ultimately guiding their development as proficient writers. The use of both portfolio assessment and achievement tests ensures that learners receive both formative and summative feedback, allowing them to track their progress and make meaningful improvements to their writing skills.

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