

Portfolio as a Tool to Improve Writing Skills among First Semester EFL Learners at a
Public University in Colombia, a Case Study

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Abstract:

This case study was an attempt to understand the perceptions and experiences of four first semester students through the use of FL portfolio as a way to improve their writing skills. Data was gathered through participants' portfolios, interviews and one participant's observations. Data was analysed by using the interpretive analysis model suggested by Hatch (2002) and using MAXQDA10. The findings showed that Portfolios helped learners to improve their writing skills since they provide the learners and the teacher with different activities and strategies to improve their writing. There are some problems related to the correct use of portfolios.

Key words: Case Study, Portfolios, Writing Skills, English as a Foreign Language, EFL.

Resumen:

Este estudio de caso fue un intento por entender las percepciones y experiencias de cuatro estudiantes de primer semestre hacia el uso del portafolio como una forma de

promover las habilidades de escritura entre los aprendices de inglés como lengua extranjera. Los datos fueron recogidos a través del análisis de documentos, entrevistas y una observación participativa. Los resultados mostraron que el portafolio es una herramienta útil para promover las habilidades de escritura a través de diferentes actividades y estrategias utilizadas por los estudiantes y la docente pero existen algunos problemas con relación al correcto uso del portafolio.

Palabras claves: Caso de estudio, Portafolios, Habilidades de escritura, Inglés como Lengua Extranjera, EFL

Introduction

Writing in English constitutes one of the most problematic areas in language teaching and learning. One of the reasons to carry out this inquiry was my personal experience; I wondered how my writing skills would be if I had used a portfolio; because, as previous studies have shown, a portfolio is a helpful tool to promote this ability and achieve accuracy, complexity, fluency and coherence. "Portfolio is considered 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" (Yang 2003). In other words, students show their work from the beginning of the term to the end; portfolios therefore give both a teacher and students a chance to evaluate how much the student's writing skills have progressed.

This case study attempts to understand whether a portfolio is a useful tool to improve writing skills among students. They were chosen taking into account the following

criteria: Proficiency level ranging from A1 to A2 level, and the completeness of the portfolio. After having revised seven students' portfolios, only four decided to participate.

Literature review

This inquiry took into account the theoretical framework and previous studies related to portfolio and writing skills. First, I will provide the main definitions of portfolios and communicative competencies, categorized into receptive and productive skills. Second, I will present a review of important studies on portfolios and how these might have an impact on learning processes in EFL. More importantly, I will describe the relationship between these past case studies and my case study pertaining to the use of a portfolio to improve writing skills in EFL.

Receptive and Productive skills

According to the Common European Framework (CEF), receptive skills involve two aspects: understanding and reading, whereas productive skills involve writing and speaking. In both the receptive and productive modes, the written and/or oral activities of mediation make communication possible between persons who are unable, for whatever reason, to communicate with each other directly (CEF).

Speaking and writing as parts of productive skills are two critical components of the complex process of communication. Furthermore, a particular social value is attached to these judgments made up of what has been submitted in writing or of fluency in speaking and delivering oral presentations. Writing skills are specific abilities which help writers

express their thoughts, feelings and experiences in words in a meaningful form (CEF). In the same way, writing skills help the learner gain independence, comprehension, fluency and creativity in writing.

Raimes, (1987) stated that writing in a foreign language can have some pedagogical purposes such as reinforcement, training, imitation, communication, fluency, and learning (As cited in Aydin, 2010). Besides, Scarcella and Oxford (1995) stated that writing in a foreign language helps learners improve their grammatical, strategic, sociolinguistic, and discourse competencies in the target language. Writing in English as a foreign language constitutes one of the most problematic areas because it is seen as one of the most difficult skills. Students have to pay a lot of attention to the mechanics of writing (punctuation, capitalization, abbreviation, numbering, spelling) and grammar in order to be able to write effective compositions.

Similarly, Nunan (1991) pointed out that producing a coherent, fluent, extended writing piece is likely to be the most difficult thing in a language since the reader has to comprehend what has been written without asking for clarification or relying on the writer's tone of voice or expression. Moreover, he asserted that writing is clearly a complex process, and competent writing is accepted as being the last aspect of language to be acquired; few people write spontaneously and feel comfortable with a formal writing task intended for the eyes of someone else, even in their L1, and all the more so in a second or foreign language. When that "someone else" is the teacher, whose eyes may be critical, and who indeed may assign an individual assessment to the written product, most people feel uncomfortable.

Portfolio

Currently, the use of a portfolio is well known in the education field and over the years it has been implemented by students and teachers not only to document their achievements, but also to demonstrate how their skills have developed over the years as a consequence of their learning background, so it has become a feature of many university departments.

Since the purpose of this research was to understand whether a portfolio is a useful tool to improve writing skills, I have quoted some important authors that define portfolio. For instance, Barnard & Deyzel (2003) “defined portfolio as a portable, systematic, purposeful collection of work, selected to provide information about attitude, level of development and growth during a given period of time. It is a powerful visual tool that provides evidence of self-assessment, personal reflections, learning, growth and development and a comprehensive and complex overview of skills.”

On the other hand, 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”. The current study will be guided by this definition because it is important to take into account the role of a portfolio in the learning process in order to grow and advance in all skills.

Several researchers pointed out that portfolios are an effective means to integrate learning as well as to promote writing skills. For instance, Aydin (2010) conducted a case study implemented at Balikesir University, Turkey, with a group of 39 pre-service EFL

teachers. The results suggested that portfolio keeping helps learners to integrate the development of proficiency skills, content knowledge, and grammatical competence; it improves vocabulary and grammar learning and practice, although there were some potential problems as well such as the feeling among some students that portfolio keeping is boring and tiring because students need to study every week to complete their products and it also takes time to finish them.

Similarly, Lombardi (2008) carried out a qualitative research project in some colleges, universities and other institutions in the United States where she showed that written portfolios have been replaced by electronic portfolios. Digital portfolios or ePortfolios have evolved from the traditional paper variety and serve as a source for study regarding their effects on student motivation, achievement, and institutional outcomes. Moreover, the author stated that students can use digital cameras, camcorders, Web cams, scanners, and file transfers to demonstrate skills that cannot be conveyed via traditional paper portfolios. Students documented material without reflection and the portfolio became a mere exhibition rather than a real collection of work.

The following two papers explain how the use of portfolios helps EFL students improve their writing skills. Also, they showed portfolios are positive tools to become informed about assessment processes in language courses. Romova & Andrew (2011) examined the benefits for learners who work with portfolios as pedagogical tools for developing academic writing. This case study was carried out in a tertiary institution in New Zealand where a multicultural group of 41 learners enrolled in the degree-level course of ‘Academic Writing’ that made up part of this course. The authors found relevant benefits. For example, they found that a multi-draft portfolio is an effective assessment

tool, not only because it provides a feedback loop, but also because it enhances learners' understanding of writing as a recursive process and the student developed the stages of writing skills which are: pre-writing, outlining, drafting and doing several re-drafts. So, learners gain a sense of progress and hence increased confidence.

In addition, Qinghua (2010) studied two sophomore English major classes, consisting of 34 students aged between 18 and 21. The author in his comparative study investigated differences between the Portfolio-Based Writing Assessment (PBWA) experimental class and the non-PBWA class in terms of writing products involving accuracy, complexity, fluency and coherence. Qinghua (2010) indicated that (PBWA) facilitated growth of EFL writing ability at least in some dimensions, specifically accuracy and coherence. Therefore, the author considers PBWA, as a tool of learning to aid promoting writing ability.

Other studies have analysed teachers' portfolios. Craig (2003) conducted a multiple case study with teachers from five schools in the United States. The author found that school portfolio development proved to be a productive activity for the teachers. Even though this research showed that portfolios are useful to teachers as well as students, there are some dilemmas about the use of a portfolio such as the fact that there are limitations in enthusiasm and creativity when working on their portfolio. Similarly, Xu (2003) conducted a case study in which portfolios used by teachers evolved as a mechanism to promote school-centred professional development in a public elementary school located on the Upper East Side of Manhattan, in New York City. The author worked with a group of 12 teachers. Xu found important results which were essential for teacher development, for instance: a portfolio helped create a sense of affiliation and provided a vehicle for teachers

to work collaboratively and constructively. It also energized teachers at different stages of development to take risks and to examine their practices.

Finally, all of the studies reviewed in this section were useful to supplement my proposal because they showed that a portfolio promotes writing skills and integrates learning, organization and self-assessment in which the students can improve their EFL writing ability and acquire confidence to continue writing and overcome their problems in this skill. In addition, they contributed to a better understanding of portfolio implementation and the impact it has on the learning process in EFL because they provide both negative and positive aspects that were essential when posing the questions that guided this study.

Methodology

I adopted the case study method because this type of design allowed me to understand a “bounded system” in time and space through a detailed data collection process (Creswell, 1998.) This was a bounded system in space because this research was conducted in a specific classroom setting in the foreign languages program belonging to a Colombian public university. This research took 16 weeks, and was developed according to my schedule of activities (See annex 1.)

Participants were: Butterfly, Consentida, Vago, and Poderosa (pseudonyms), 4 beginner-level students (3 female and 1 male), their ages ranged from 16 to 18. The selection of participants was done through purposeful sampling. According to Patton (2002) purposeful sampling is a non-random method of sampling where the researcher

selects “information-rich cases for study in depth.” In other words, I selected participants who can best help me understand my phenomenon and also participants who are between A1 and A2 level (Common European Framework.)

Student’s portfolios were the main source of data in this study. I evaluated them based on 4 aspects: organization, content, quality of reflection and self-assessment. I designed my own protocol in order to carefully examine these portfolios. It allowed me to have an easy and understandable way to gather all the information required in this study (see annex 2.) Moreover, I conducted two semi-structured interviews. The first one, conducted at the beginning of the study, aimed to identify the general and basic knowledge that students had about portfolios and how they used them. The second interview conducted at the end of the data collection process, helped me to learn about participants’ experiences when using portfolios (See annex 3.) The information gathered through the participant voices corroborated previous analysis of the portfolios.

In order to complement the data gathered, I conducted one participant classroom observation. This had not been planned initially. However, the professor in charge of this course invited me to observe a students’ oral report. I accepted and I observed this activity for approximately two hours. During this activity, I participated actively: The teacher let me ask students general questions about their presentation or their process using a portfolio; in this presentation participants showed their classmates their portfolios including the organization and content, which refers to their writing products such as tests, exams and free writing products that they collected. Participating in this activity was a unique opportunity to have a first-hand experience in the real setting. In other words, while observing participants in their classroom environment, I learned how they expressed their

experiences and feelings at the time of writing the texts or tasks required in the portfolio and what they learned and improved using it.

Data analysis

Data was analysed through the interpretive analysis suggested by Hatch (2002.) Once data was transcribed, I started the coding process in order to identify all of the cases related to the salient memos. I also used MAXQDA to organize all of the data. Finally, I wrote narratives about what I found during the coding and analysing process. The idea behind writing narratives was to force myself to put the interpretations in my memos into a “story” that others could understand (Hatch 2002.)

Findings

The findings obtained from this study can be divided into two broad categories: advantages and disadvantages. Portfolios make some significant contributions to the writing skills of foreign language students. However, some potential problems exist when using portfolios in EFL writing.

In terms of the advantages, there are three aspects that seemed to have been improved by the use of a portfolio such as: the organization of their portfolios, vocabulary and grammar used. First, participants agreed that the portfolio helped them to become more organized because they kept track of their assignments in a variety of ways. For example, participants were allowed to organize their portfolios by sections, such as free writing products, tests, exams and songs. This simple strategy was useful when managing and assessing their progress. For example, Consentida stated that: “sugiero llevar sus trabajos organizados es decir dividirlos por secciones porque se le facilita a uno mejorar el uso del portafolio y así ver el progreso en cada escrito y lo tiene uno bonito”.

Although, most of the students’ agreed that it was necessary to have a well-organized portfolio, when analysing them, I realized that they did not have section markers, and some documents were not labelled with titles; in other words, the products students showed in their portfolios did not reflect enough time spent by the students organizing their work or enough preparation. Participants’ samples were only a seemingly random collection of writing tasks that lacked creativity and originality.

Secondly, the use of a portfolio was also advantageous when improving participants’ vocabulary. Based on the portfolio samples, I realized that they rewrote their

products (e.g. my daily routine, who is my best friend, my favorite day and others) as a strategy to learn by heart those new words and the mechanics of the language.

For instance Butterfly pointed out: “uno aprende mucho vocabulario de tanto repetir o escribir varias veces, uno escribe mucho más, aprende uno a mejorar la gramática a inspirarse o a soltarse más para escribir”.

I inferred that the teacher followed this strategy as a way to assess and at the same time to help them to develop their writing proficiency. For instance, when they had grammar, vocabulary and spelling mistakes in the texts in their portfolios, the learners wrote these texts again. The teacher corrected their mistakes; students then rewrote the correct version.

Thirdly, portfolios helped participants to improve their grammar knowledge and use what resulted in improved, coherent, and cohesive writing production. As stated by Butterfly: “... Uno escribe mucho más, aprende uno a mejorar la gramática a inspirarse o a soltarse más para escribir bien”.

It seems that rewriting texts helped them to improve their grammar knowledge, and use fluent and correct sentences in each task. Moreover, it was advantageous because they realized and understood the mistakes they had made and after teacher corrections they were able to produce more complex and complete writing products.

As for disadvantages when using EFL portfolios, I found that students have faced a variety of problems that could interfere with the process of improving their writing ability; and acquiring confidence to continue writing and overcoming their problems in this skill.

The first problem is that students had difficulties when writing because the way the students

used their portfolios was a boring and tiring process since they had to write each text more than twice as Butterfly stated:

“No le prestaría mucha atención porque es tedioso y algo cansón y además cuando terminamos los quizzes la profesora no lo corregía en el tablero y nos tocaba después pasarlos y no solo los quizzes todos nuestros escritos una dos o más de tres veces nos tocaba pasarlo hasta que quedaran bien”.

I deduce that using a portfolio is not a tedious and boring process in itself. Perhaps the strategy used by the teacher was not successful, and did not reach her students' expectations.

The second problem students faced while keeping their portfolios was the insecurity they felt when writing. Sometimes they did not know how to produce a complete and creative piece of writing that would satisfy their teacher's expectations. For example one student stated:

“Una desventaja puede ser que a la hora de hacerlo nosotros mismos no estábamos seguro al hacerlo entonces una escribe como uno entiende que es, pero después uno se da cuenta que no es así por que la profe no los corregía”.

The last limitation found through the analysis of each portfolio was that students were not required to reflect on their own progress or self-assess. All in all, the content of the portfolios was based on writing products. The use of reflections on the students' part would indicate the ability to analyse and critique their own work. Reflections also demonstrate student understanding of relevant outcomes. Moreover, through self-

assessment the student would identify strengths and areas for improvement related to portfolio product.

Conclusions and discussions

Two main results were drawn from this study. Firstly, data demonstrated that portfolios were beneficial to improve vocabulary, grammar, and writing in a FL. Participants became more organized when writing a text. Secondly, EFL students perceived some problems during the use of a portfolio; they believed that a portfolio implies a tedious and tiring process, and they also had difficulties in writing each text because they felt insecure when writing for fear of later being corrected. Finally, the analysis of portfolios was appropriate for confirming students' opinions and for finding advantages and drawbacks related to the use of a portfolio, for instance: student's portfolios did not feature reflections and self-assessment and they also featured problems in terms of organization because some students did not use them correctly.

After summarizing the study results, I concluded that there were some similarities and significant contributions found in my study and previous studies. For instance: Aydin (2010) pointed out that portfolio keeping helps students to improve vocabulary and grammar learning and practice. But she also found some problems as portfolio keeping is a boring and tiring tool. In my study I found similar results: the improvement in the proficiency skills (writing) and problems as some students considered portfolio as a tedious and laborious process.

Moreover, Romova & Andrew (2011) found significant benefits using a multi-draft as an effective assessment tool, because it enhances learners' understanding of writing as a recursive process and the student gains a sense of progress and hence increased confidence. In my study, the teacher used a similar strategy as a way to assess her students through the portfolio used; it was re-writing and correcting their mistakes. Even though in both studies, the use of this strategy was useful to improve the writing skills of EFL students, the difference found between Romova & Andrew (2011) and this study was that students did not assess and critique their own work through reflection and self-assessment or through correcting their mistakes because they were made by the teacher and for this reason students felt insecurity when writing their texts because they were subject to the grades given by the teacher.

Finally, I suggest that the use of portfolios is a valuable tool for promoting reflection and self- assessment in which students can assess and improve their writing skills with the collaboration of their teacher as a guide or supervisor during the process. It is important to note that in the university in which I conducted this case study, the teacher did not promote self-assessment or self-reflection through portfolio keeping. This tool should be used more frequently by teachers from this public university because a portfolio used in the right way (with plenty of opportunities for student self-assessment and reflection on learning built in) would help to overcome writing skills problems.

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ANNEX 1


SCHEDULE TIME

JUNE 2012				JULY 2012			
Mon.	Wed	Thur.	Fri.	Mon.	Wed.	Thur.	Fri.
					11	12	13
11	13	14	15	16	18	20	21
				21	23	24	25
	27	28	29	26	27	28	29

Artifact analysis 

Interviews 

Document analysis 

Interview analysis 

ANNEX 2

ARTIFACT ANALYSIS PROTOCOL

Artifact: Portfolio

Participant: _____

CATEGORIES	DESCRIPTION	REFLECTION
ORGANIZATION		
CONTENT		
QUALITY OF REFLECTION		
SELF ASSESSMENT		

ANNEX 3

Interviews' Protocol

INTERVIEW PROTOCOLS

Interview N°: 1

Interviewer: _____

Interviewee: student name (pseudonym)Subject: Ingles Date: _____ Hour: _____

Site: _____ Number of interviewee: _____

Focus: _____

Objective: To identify the basic knowledge that students have about portfolios' use.

Brief Description: Las siguientes preguntas tienen como fin recolectar información acerca del uso de portafolios en relación a las producciones escritas con el fin de entender si el este es una herramienta útil para mejorar las habilidades de escrituras desarrolladas por los estudiantes de 1 semestre.

La información que usted proporcione en esta entrevista será utilizada únicamente para la colección de datos del estudio previamente citado. Mi interés es aprender de sus experiencias. Todos los comentarios y sugerencias de todos los participantes serán manejados con profesionalidad y confidencialidad.

Ahora siéntase libre y cómodo de responder al siguiente cuestionario. Le agradecería su completa sinceridad.

QUESTIONS	PARTICIPANT (pseudonym)
1 Cuénteme, ¿Qué es para usted escritura?	
2 ¿Cómo es su proceso de escritura o que pasos sigue a la hora de hacer un escrito?	

3 ¿Con base en su experiencia con el portafolio; cuénteme ¿Que es para usted esta herramienta?	
4 ¿Qué tipo de escritos ha realizado en el portafolio?	
5 ¿Piensa usted que el portafolio es buena herramienta para mejorar su escritura? Por que	

Interview N°: 2

Interviewer: _____

Interviewee: student name (pseudonym)

Subject: Ingles Date: _____ Hour: _____

Site: _____ Number of interviewee: _____

Focus: _____

Objective: To know students' experience obtained in portfolios' use.

Brief Description: Las siguientes preguntas tienen como fin recolectar información acerca del uso de portafolios en relación a las producciones escritas con el fin de entender si el este es una herramienta útil para mejorar las habilidades de escrituras desarrolladas por los estudiantes de 1 semestre.

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Ahora siéntase libre y cómodo de responder al siguiente cuestionario. Le agradecería su completa sinceridad.

QUESTIONS	PARTICIPANT (pseudonym)
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<p>1 ¿Como ha sido su experiencia trabajando con el portafolio?</p>	
<p>2 ¿cuáles fueron las ventajas al trabajar con el portafolio?</p>	
<p>3 ¿cuáles fueron las desventajas al trabajar con el portafolio? 4¿Como considera usted que mejoro su escritura con el uso del portafolio? En qué aspectos?</p>	
<p>5 ¿Que sugerencias tiene usted que pueden ser útil al usar el portafolio con el fin de obtener buenos resultados?</p>	

