

# The effect of the portfolio and other types of alternative assessments on ESP learners' performance in essay writing

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## **Abstract**

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*This study aims at finding out the effect of the portfolio and other alternative assessments on Iraqi employees' performance in essay writing. The participants are represented with (38) employees (27 females, 11males) from different companies who joined the English language training course at Development and the Continuing Education Center\ University of Baghdad. They are divided into two equal groups, experimental group (that has been taught according to the portfolio and alternative assessment techniques) and control group (that has been taught according to the conventional method). The results show that the portfolio and other types of alternative assessments have significantly influenced the learners' performance in essay writing and developed their performance. In light of the results, conclusions, recommendations, and suggestions have been set forward.*

**Keywords:** Portfolio, Alternative assessments, Essay writing, EFL Teaching techniques.

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## **I. Introduction**

Iraqi employees need the English language to be qualified in the workplace. Essay writing represents a big dilemma for many Iraqi employees since it is very important for communication with world companies. Iraqi employees used to write without systematic steps. Even when they study essay writing systematically, Iraqi employees still hardly able to write an essay correctly. This leads to exploring the English language teaching strategies in the continuous training center to find out suitable and practical writing strategies. The importance of teaching writing skill is emphasized by Weigle (2002, p.6) and the same emphasis is implicit in Saalh (2014, p. 136-137) who says, in English, teaching writing is as important as teaching speaking, listening, and reading since learning to write is a developmental process that involves being able to communicate meaningfully, use appropriate cultural terms, and use the grammar forms correctly.

The Portfolio and alternative assessments are suggested as suitable strategies for teaching the Iraqi employees, as ESP learners, an essay writing since these strategies provide them with ongoing feedback that is important for improving their performance in essay writing. Chang, Chaoyun, and Yi-Hui (2013, p.325) define the portfolio as a judgment instrument and purposely learning processes for a long time term that reverses

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academic performance comprising proof of development, meditative thinking, and learning feedback. Chang (2008, p.1753) also defines portfolio assessment as "the examination of a systematic collection of student work that documents learners' endeavors, growth, and achievements." Hamayan (1995, p.213) also presents alternative assessments as techniques and principles used in everyday classroom activities. Huerta-Macias (1995, p.9) makes a comparison between alternative assessments and traditional testing; the former encourages strategies that allow learners to show what they can do with learning a second language, whereas, the latter encourages strategies that evaluated the learners on what they produce rather than on what they can reproduce. To sum, alternative assessments are used for collecting information about learners' progress in real-life tasks for specific material.

## **II. Literature Review**

### **2.1. ESP learners' need and writing skills**

ESP learners differ in their needs, accordingly, these needs are identified and classified to decide the course content. The course content has an important role in selecting the methods and strategies that suit the learners' needs of language depending on their specialists. This direct connection between the language and methods of teaching enhances the students' use of language in real-life situations (Naqvi and Mathew, 2010, P. 244-245).

The writing skills, planning, drafting, and revising, make the learners' product suitable to the writing purpose and clarity to the reader. Thus, writing is not an easy activity and requires time for drafting and revision, which demands a quiet environment that could not get by the classroom environment (Kavaliauskienė and Kaminskienė, 2009, 174).

### **2.2. The Portfolio**

The portfolio is a type of assessment and a strategy that is used to collect learner's work over a while. It reflects learner's development based on specific standards. McMullen et al. (2003, p. 283) define a portfolio as "a gathering of the clue, usually in written style, of both the output and procedure of education. It certifies to fulfillment and vocational growth by submitting a critical analysis of its details".

Arifani & Suryanti (2019, p.240) emphasize the importance of engaging learners in classroom teaching to be active learners. Learners' involvement provides them physical and psychological positive energy (Arifani & Suryanti, 2019, p.240).

Sajedi (2014, p.1643) mentions that portfolios promote students' involvement in assessment, in interaction with a teacher, students, and even parents and promote collaborative work in the classroom.

Portfolio assessment strategies held the responsibility of assignments for a long time from the instructor to learners to collect evidence and evaluated by teaching staff, besides, learners should organize, synthesize and describe their productions and effectively describe what they have reached (Friesen & Cheryl, 2007, p.205). The portfolio is a technique that covers writing assessment concerning cognitive and social views and it is used as a technique for teaching writing (Graziano-king, 2007, p.80). This supports the saying of Marzano, Pickering, and McTighe, (1993, p.8) in that: portfolio assessment integrates both assessment and teaching process as a pedagogical method. This indicates that assessment and learning are two in one in the classroom-based assessment exercise.

The portfolio offers good criteria for learners' performance in learning the foreign language depending on language learning assessment (Milanovic & Saville, 1996, p. 23). Therefore, Black, Daiker, Sommers, & Stygall, (1994, p. 2) confirm that portfolios provide reasonable answers to questions of content validity and partial answers to questions of constructability.

### **2.3. Portfolio, Assessment or Testing**

In language teaching tasks, the emphasis is moved on learner-centered which needs to corroborate between the testing and assessment to measure learner's progress. The difference between assessment and testing is determined in that assessment is used for learning, while testing is separated from teaching activities. One of the evaluation techniques which represent the joined form of assessment and testing is the portfolio (Sharifi & Jaleh, 2011, p.195).

Proponents of testing tend to think that the only trusted and objective form of evaluation is the standardized exam, since standardized tests can easy to manage, score, and interpret, and they do not supply instructors with information to make decisions about learners' progress and needs.

Lucas (2003, p.2) differentiates between traditional testing techniques and portfolio in that traditional testing techniques are often inconsistent with English as a Second Language (ESL) class writing exercises, as the standardized written test is given at the end of the semester. In contrast with the portfolio which is increasingly being known as a better substitution to the traditional standardized testing. The portfolio assessment serves as an effective evaluating device to identify learner accomplishment and efficiency in writing as well as other language skills.

### **2.4. Alternative Assessments and their Types**

Alternative assessments are widely used types of assessments as they fall into the following three types:

#### **2.4.1. The rubrics**

Rubrics are strong instruments for both education and evaluation. Goodrich (1996, p.16) lists many advantages of using rubrics:

1. The instructors' expectations will be clear by using rubrics.
2. The learners turn out to be a thoughtful assessor of their work and others' work.
3. Time is saved for instructors who are assessed the learners' work.
4. Rubrics enable instructors to shape mixed groups.

One of the disadvantages of using the rubric as an alternative assessment tool is the difficulty of converting rubric scores into grades. However, Worley (2003, p.3) assigns the scores and then places them on the criterion that is related to a letter grade. Thus, if a problem or project is worth 20 points the scale for converting to a letter grade might be  $17 - 20 = A$ ,  $13 - 16 = B$ , etc. Accordingly, converting rubric scores into grades becomes an easy task.

Montgomery (2000, p.326) offers advice to instructors who prepare to design their rubrics.

1. The instructors must be fixed when they choose the assessment standard.
2. Particular feedback on the learners' assignment should be contained.
3. The instructors should motivate learners to participate in the assessment.

#### **2.4.2. Peer assessment.**

Peer assessment is a type of assessment that learners assess each other's assignments using standards set (Opp-Beckman & Sarah, 2006, p.104). O'Farrell (2008, p.6-7) defines peer assessment as the evaluation of each other's work. The advantages of peer assessment are represented in its using to assess other learners' assignments and to give and obtain feedback with suitable training and close straightness. According to Al-taie (2014, p. 888) peer assessment is characterized as follows:

- 1.It provides feedback to learners.
- 2.It is useful for both those who give feedback and receive it. To cover this area, the learners should learn how to mark and use assessment criteria.
- 3.It enriches the learners' experience to become autonomous learners and encourages skills of lifelong learning.

However, peer assessment needs careful designing, suitable scales, and suitable tools for analyzing scores. Besides, learners have been encouraged to carry this practice seriously and improving the required skills that need time and assistance (Ibid).

#### **2.4.3. Self-assessment**

Self-assessment is a type of assessment that learners assess their work using standards set (Opp-Beckman & Sarah, 2006, p.104). Self-assessment can be defined as the learners' involvement in recognizing criteria to apply to their assignment and assess them according to standards and criteria.

The job of learners in self-assessment is to ensure their assignment, relook drafts and texts, and reflect upon their past exercises. Teaching the learners how to judge is very important in developing skills of self-awareness and critical reflection. Furthermore, the advantages of peer assessment can be shown in self-assessment (O'Farrell 2008:7-8).

#### **2.5. Hypotheses**

The present study focuses on using the portfolio as a strategy for learning, teaching, and assessing essay writing; in addition to using other types of alternative assessments, rubrics, peer, and self-assessments. To find out the effect of portfolio and other alternative assessments, the following two hypotheses have been set:

1. There are no statistically significant differences between the rank means of the experimental group that has been taught according to the portfolio and alternative assessment techniques and the rank means of the control group that has been taught according to the conventional method in their performance in the posttest.
2. There are no statistically significant differences between the rank means of the experimental group in their pretest and posttest of the essay writing.

### III. Method

#### 3.1. The Participant

The participants are 38 adult learners (27 female, 11 male) who usually joined to a training course at the Center of the Continuing Education /University of Baghdad, to prepare for the TOFEL test. The participants are divided equally into two groups, 19 learners for each. One of them (14 female, five male) and the other is (13 female, six male). The experimental and control groups are selected randomly as (14 female, five male) for the experimental group and (13 female, six male) for control one.

#### 3.2. Experimental Design

The design of two groups of pre-posttest experimental is used in this study to compare the control and experimental groups in their performance in essay writing. The experimental group is taught by using portfolios and other alternative assessment techniques (rubric, peer, and self- assessments) as strategies for teaching essay writing. On the other hand, the control group is taught by the conventional method of direct instruction. The experimental design is consists of the following steps:

- 1.Pre-test, for equalizing the two groups in their writing performance and finding out the differences between the learners' performance before and after the course.
- 2.Equalizing the two groups in several variables that may influence the results.
- 3.Constructing post-test.
- 4.Ensuring the post-test's validity and reliability.
- 5.Select suitable rubric for scoring the pre and posttests' papers.
- 6.Put two types of lesson plans one for experimental and the other for the control group to teach the learners during the experiment period.
- 7.At the end of the course, submit the two groups into the post-test to find out the effect of teaching by using the portfolio and other alternative assessment techniques as teaching strategies on the learners' performance in essay writing.

##### 3.2.1. Pre-Test and Equalization

The two groups are equalized in the following variables which may influence the study results.

- 1.Age
- 2.The pretest (writing one essay of 250 words with four paragraphs about a specific topic).

Table 1. shows that the two groups are equal in both variables since the U- computed values (140.000, 143.000) respectively are higher than the tabulated value (99) for sample number (19) at (0.05) level of significance.

**Table 1**

The samples' age and pretest equalization.

Variables and Groups	N	MR	SR	CU	TU	L(S)= 0.05	Variables and Groups
Age in years	E	19	15.78	U1 :300	140.000	99	not significant

	C	19	13.15	U2:250			
Pretest level	E	19	20.15	U1:383	143.000	99	not significant
	C	19	18.84	U2:358			

*Note.* E= experimental group; C= control group; N= group number; MR = mean rank; SR = sum rank; U-test= Mann Whitney test; CU= computed Mann Whitney value; TU= Tabulated Mann Whitney value; L(s) = level of significance.

### 3.2.2. Post-Test

The test is constructed according to the aims of the present study which focuses on assessing the learners' ability in essay writing after the training course depending on portfolio and alternative assessment techniques. The test is composed of one question which asks the learners to write one essay of 250 words with four paragraphs at least to cover the steps of writing an essay beginning with the introduction, the body, and the conclusion with examples, reasons, and personal stories to support writing skill.

### 3.2.3. Validity and Reliability

Face validity is adopted to ensure that the test and its score scheme are valid. Face validity relates to what a degree test is perceived to be doing what it is supposed to do. In testing, it describes the look of the test as opposed to whether the test is proved to work or not (Nadasdy, 2014, p.7).

To ensure face validity, the test and its scoring scheme have exposed to jury members who are specialized in English language teaching as shown in Table 2. The jury members are agreed with the suitability of the test and its scoring scheme for achieving the study aims.

**Table 2**

The jury members.

Name	College \University
Prof. Fatin Kharee, Ph.D	College of Education \Ibn –Rushd \ University of Baghdad
Prof. Shatha Alsa'adi	College of Education for Women\ University of Baghdad
Asst. Prof. Maysaa Rasheed Abdul-Majeed	College of Education for Women\ University of Baghdad
Inst. Fatima Kudhair	College of Education for Women\ University of Baghdad

Reliability is mostly accepted to be the scope to which a measure is harmonious and obtains identical results when managed frequently. Kadhim (2014, p.252-253) shows that a test is reliable if its results remain the same under the same conditions on different occasions.

To ensure the reliability of the present study Alpha Cronbach is used. The reliability factor, which is (0.87) looked accepted depending on Kubiszyn and Gary (2003, p.311) who consider it must be between (0.70-0.90).

#### **3.2.4. Scoring Scheme**

A rubric of an essay writing is used for rating the students' performance see the appendix. It consists of five components with four marks for each component as shown in the appendix. Accordingly, the higher score is 20 and the lower one is four.

#### **3.3. The experiment**

The experiment period is held from 16th April to 2nd May 2019. During this period, one of the researchers has taught the two groups the following topics, "Test of written English" and "how to write an essay ", which are parts of the "Preparation Course for TOEFL Test. paper test " by Debora Philips, in addition to supporting resources from other books such as " How to Prepare for the TOEFL ESSAY " by Loughheed (2000, p.30-35), and "Practice Exercise for the TOEFL" by Sharpe (2007, p.239-270), and " English Skills with Readings" 6th Edition by Langan (2006, p.311-331). Both groups are taught for three hours per week by using portfolios and other alternative assessment techniques (rubric, peer- assessment, and self –assessment) for the experimental group and conventional techniques for the control one.

At the beginning of the course, both groups are exposed to pretest under the same condition and classroom atmosphere. Then, the experimental group is provided with the quality, target, and the planning of portfolio and alternative assessments in teaching essay writing. The blue folder is provided for the portfolio that learners are already using for working in progress.

The instructor (one of the researchers) explains steps (before, while, and after writing an essay), strategies, how to divide the time of writing an essay, and gives details about the form of an essay with rules of grammar, run-on sentences, fragments, punctuation marks, etc. that help them in editing essay after writing.

After that, the learners are asked to write an essay on social subjects (i.e. parents, education, weddings, new technology, and different cultures) over the course. The learners select topics that concern to them and do not need knowledge proficient. Also, they are provided with regulation to help learners acquire the aims of the portfolio, as long as its construction. Having obtained the initial draft of learners' essays, the instructor reads them accurately. Then, the portfolio is graded by the instructor and returned to the learners to make certain that they have understood the procedure. In addition to, that in each assignment the instructor writes her comments. Therefore, the learners get information about their strengths and weaknesses in these aspects of their essays. Scoring guides and the rubric are introduced to the learners to help them evaluate their writing, and they practice using regulation and the rubric on samples of their work.

The learners are requested to self-assess and evaluate their writing strengths and weaknesses in the classroom. They are also claimed to peer's written tasks review in groups of two. Furthermore, the learners consult their instructor to get notes after the class. Afterward, at home, the learners revised and redrafted their essays depending on their instructor's reflections and peer's notes. All in all, the portfolio assessment requires the learners to write essays about various topics. The learners need to reflect on and revise the essays in reply many times over the course training.

At the same time, the control group has got a classic evaluation. The instructor has taught the learners, how to evolve the topics, introductions, body paragraphs, and conclusion. The learners are required to write essays about various topics throughout the training which does not require knowledge proficient. In contrast to the experimental group, the learners are not required to reflect on, redraft, and revise their essays. Writing ability assessment is depended on the final test.

## IV. Results

In this section, the results of the posttest for both groups are displayed to verify the study hypotheses.

To verify the first one, Table 3. Shows that U- computed value (87.000), is lower than the tabulated value (99)  $p < 0.05$  and  $N = 19$ , therefore the null hypothesis is rejected. Accordingly, there are statistically significant differences between the experimental group and the control group in their essay writing performance in favor of the experimental group.

**Table 3**

The posttest results.

Variables	Groups	N	MR	SR	CU	TU	LS 0.05
Posttest	E	19	22.44	41.00	87.000	99	significant
	C	19	15.53	26.00			

To verify the second hypothesis, Table 4 shows that the computed U-value is (83.000) while the tabulated U- value is (99) at  $p < 0.05$  and  $N: 19$ ; this means that the second null hypothesis is rejected.

This indicates that there are statistically significant differences between the ranks mean scores of the experimental group in the essay writing pretest and those in the posttest in favor of the posttest.

**Table 4**

The pre- post-test results.

Variables and Groups		N	MR	S U-test		LS 0.05	
				R			
				C U		TU	
Pre-posttest for E group	Pretest	19	20.00	39.00	83.000	99	significant
	Posttest	19	22.44	41.00			

## V. Discussion

The results of the study show that using a portfolio and the other alternative assessment techniques, rubric, peer, and self-assessment as teaching strategies influence positively the learners' performance in the experimental group. Furthermore, these innovative ways of teaching are useful not only for younger students, but they are also



useful in adult learning as well. The performance of the experimental group excels in the control group performance. Moreover, the experimental group members excel in that their performance in the posttest is better than theirs in the pretest.

These results share with the results of Fahim and Jalili (2013) who use the portfolio as an assessment tool and follow the experimental design to achieve the study aims. The results emphasize the role of the portfolio in developing the Iranian EFL students' performance in editing ability and providing feedback for both students and teachers. Chelli (2013) investigates the development of writing abilities by using self-assessment through the portfolio, the tools here are pre-questionnaire and pre-test to analyze the situation before treatment and then uses the semi-structured interview to collect data. The results revealed not only the development in the students' writing abilities but also their attitude towards writing and their meta-cognitive skills. The development of writing abilities, attitude, and meta-cognitive skills appeared newly at the study of Farahian and Avarzamani (2018) who conducts experimental study to verify the study hypotheses. Both the experimental design studies of Nezakatgoo (2010) and Boumediene, Berrahal and Harji (2016) represent extra support to the results of the present study in that the portfolio is an effective assessment tool for developing the students' writing abilities in EFL classes, in spite of the differences between the two samples, university students and secondary schools' respectively. The study of Elango, Jutti, and Lee (2005) goes into another facet that is conducting a questionnaire survey to explore the clinical students' perspective of using the portfolio as a learning tool. The students felt that the portfolio is a good learning tool but consuming time and need guidance from the teacher. The present study shares the last one in using the portfolio as a teaching technique. The present study differs from the other studies in its participants. The participants of the previous studies are secondary and university students, whereas, the participants of the present one are represented with employees from different offices.

## **VI. Limitation and further studies**

The limitation of this study is in its sample which represent a small number of employee which restricted the generalization of the results. furthermore, the study did not find out the differences between males and females again because of the small number of the experimental group (14 females and 5 males). It could be used a nonparametric statistics to find out the difference, yet still, the results would not be generalized. Thus, there is a need for further studies with a larger number of samples and with other kinds of English for specific language learners and students such as vocational schools' students, nondepartmental college students, and even postgraduate students of different humanities and scientific studies.

## **VII. Conclusions**

Portfolio and other alternative assessment types approved their usefulness as teaching strategies as well as assessment strategies, since they provide the students with feedback about their progress, increase the teacher-student interaction, and activate the reflective teaching.

According to these results, it is recommended to use the portfolio and other alternative assessment types throughout the EFL training courses. Another recommendation is that using them as a formative assessment to provide the students with feedback. Finally, the portfolio and other alternative assessment types as an innovative

way of instruction and assessment are very important to be included within different EFL curriculum for writing skill as well as other language skills.

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