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The Impact of Portfolios on Enhancing Writing Skills in ESP Classes

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Abstract

This study aimed to investigate the effect of portfolios on developing writing skills among 52 Turkish undergraduate learners in ESP classes. This study was carried out on two groups – experimental and control groups- each of which consists of 26 students. The learners were freshmen at the department of Sea and Marine Management at Vocational School of Higher Education, Sinop University. Before the treatment, a pre-test was administered to both groups in order to investigate the writing performance and sub skills of focus, elaboration, organization, conventions and vocabulary of learners of ESP. Throughout the study the experimental group was taught through portfolio assessment technique and the control group was taught through the conventional method. An Independent samples t-test was applied in order to see whether there was a statistically significant difference or not between the groups. Additionally, a Paired Samples t-test was used so as to compare differences within each group. The results obtained from the post-test demonstrated that there was a statistically significant difference between the experimental and control groups in terms of the type of treatment, which signifies that portfolios had a statistically significant effect on promoting writing performance and its sub skills in ESP classes. After the treatment, the students in the experimental group were also administered an attitude questionnaire to elicit their thoughts about the effectiveness of using portfolios on augmenting writing abilities in ESP classes. The data collected from the attitude questionnaire was analysed through descriptive statistics including the frequencies, percentages, means, and standard deviations etc. The results showed that students have positive attitudes towards using portfolios on improving their writing skills in ESP classes.

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1. Introduction

The innovations in English language teaching has led to the change in the method of teaching writing from the traditional way of the end product-oriented approach to the process of creating writing (Tabatabaei & Assefi, 2012). Therefore, there has also been progress in assessment procedures, which replace the summative assessment with the formative assessment (Yurdabakan & Erdogan, 2009). Along with the improvement in the assessment types, alternative assessment techniques (e.g. peer assessment, portfolio assessment, self-assessment etc.) have appeared to become evaluation methods, which necessitate learners to become “a part of the complete learning cycle” and “to create a product that shows what they can do” (Sajedi, 2014). Therefore, such alternative assessments have generated new techniques such as portfolio assessment technique.

In Barrett’s definition (as cited in Wang & Liao, 2008), a portfolio is an intentional collection of students’ performance, which contains students’ efforts, progress and achievement in one or more fields. Hamp-Lyons & Condon (2000) defined nine characteristics of writing-portfolio; collection of more than one performance, range of performances, context-richness, delayed evaluation promoting time for revision, selection of writer’s work, student-centered control, reflection and self-assessment, growth along specific parameters, and measuring a learner’s development over time. From these characteristics, there main categories that constitute portfolio are collection, selection and reflection (Burner, 2014).

Among the studies related to the effects of portfolios on improving EFL writing skills and students’ attitudes towards portfolio assessment, a study conducted by Yurdabakan & Erdogan (2009) investigated the impact of portfolio assessment on reading, listening and writing skills of students of secondary school language preparatory class in Turkey. The findings indicated that portfolio assessment had a significant effect on writing skills; however, same findings were not found on reading and listening skills. Another study conducted by Fahed Al-Serhani (2007) demonstrated that portfolio assessment had a significant positive impact on students’ writing performance in general and sub skills of purpose, content, organization, vocabulary, sentence structure and mechanics.

Nevertheless, there have been limited studies that shows the effect of portfolio assessment techniques on EFL writing skills, sub skills of writing and students’ attitudes toward portfolio assessment, in particular in ESP classes (Burner, 2014; Elahinia, 2004; Ghoorchaei, Tavakoli & Ansari, 2010; Lam, 2013; Nicolaidou, 2012; Tabatabaei & Assefi, 2012; Wang & Liao, 2008; Yurdabakan & Erdogan, 2009). Hamp-Lyons (as cited in Burner, 2014) indicated that there is a need for more research on the effect of portfolio assessment in writing skills in EFL classes. Therefore, this current research was intended to investigate the impact of portfolios on enhancing writing skills and sub skills of focus, elaboration, organization, conventions and vocabulary of learners of ESP and to investigate students’ attitudes towards portfolio assessment technique on improving their writing skills.

2. Literature Review

Among studies related to the impact of portfolio assessment on EFL writing skills (Fahed al-Serhani, 2007; Ghoorchaei, Tavakoli & Ansari, 2010; Spencer, 1999; Lam, 2013; Valencia & Place, 1994; Yurdabakan & Erdogan, 2009), one study conducted by Elahinia (2004) investigated the impact of portfolio assessment on Iranian EFL learners’ writing skills. The results indicated that portfolio assessment had a statistically significant effect on writing performance of EFL Iranian learners. Furthermore, students had a positive attitude towards portfolio assessment. Enoki (1992) indicated that portfolios can be considered as an important way to measure student improvement more accurately. Shober (1996) examined how a portfolio can be helpful for presenting students’ improvement in narrative writing within a 12-week period. During the treatment, students had three writing samples which were made up of prewriting, revising and editing procedures. Each sample was assessed for understanding the writing procedure. After the treatment, results concluded that there was a statistically significant effect on students’ improvement in narrative writing. Another research carried out by Tabatabaei & Assefi (2012) investigated the effect of portfolio assessment technique as a teaching, learning and assessment tool on writing skills of EFL students. Sub skills of writing were also taken into account. Forty Iranian EFL learners were classified into two groups; experimental and control groups. The experimental group received the portfolio assessment as an instructional tool while the control group had a conventional approach of writing. The results revealed that portfolio

assessment technique had a statistically significant impact on improving writing skills, particularly sub-skills of writing such as focus, organization, vocabulary, elaboration and conventions.

Among studies related to students' attitudes towards portfolio assessments (Apple & Shimo, 2004; Hirvela & Sweetland, 2005; Marefat, 2004; Paesani, 2006; Wang & Liao, 2008), Wang & Liao (2008) investigated students' satisfaction of portfolio assessment for writing classes in the technological and vocational education system. After the instructional procedure, the results showed that the experimental group under portfolio assessment technique have greater satisfaction in writing class than the control group. Hirvela and Sweetland (2005) conducted two case studies of portfolios in ESL writing classes. The findings demonstrated that the participants liked the idea of portfolios, however, they did not approve their use integrated in writing course. Another study conducted by Koç (2013) investigated the attitudes of teachers and students towards the use of portfolio in EFL writing classes in Turkey. This study was conducted with 16 EFL teachers and 96 students in EFL writing classes. The findings showed that all the instructors and most of the EFL students have positive attitudes towards the use of portfolio assessment in EFL writing classes.

There have been some studies demonstrating that portfolio assessment did not have a statistical significant effect on students' writing skills and students' attitudes towards portfolio assessment. (Chu, 2002; Liu, 2003; Subrick, 2003). Chu (2002) investigated the effect of portfolio assessment on children's writing performance. This study was carried out on two groups; experimental and control groups. The experimental group was taught portfolio assessment and the control group was taught through product-based writing instruction. Findings gathered from the study indicated that experimental group did not significantly outperform the control group. Liu (2003) conducted a study investigating ESL students' experiences with writing portfolios in college composition courses and their attitudes towards portfolios. Data analysis revealed that students had different attitudes to their portfolio assignments. Most students stated that they did not see immediate effect from reviewing their portfolio work.

In light of these studies, although there have been several studies about the impact of portfolio assessment on improving writing skills and to explore their attitudes towards to portfolios, there needs to have more empirical studies investigating the effect of portfolios on enhancing writing skills, particularly, on sub-skills of writing like organization, vocabulary, focus, conventions and elaboration in ESP classes. Therefore, this current study was intended to investigate whether portfolio assessment technique has a significant effect on ESP students' writing skills and subskills of writing and to explore their attitudes towards portfolios. The study tries to answer the research questions below:

1. Does portfolio assessment technique have an impact on the ESP students' achievement in their overall writing ability?
2. Does portfolio assessment technique have an impact on ESP students' writing ability in terms of focus, elaboration, vocabulary, organization, and conventions?
3. What are the ESP students' attitudes towards portfolio assessment technique?

3. Methodology

This study was intended to investigate the impact of portfolio assessment technique on ESP students' writing skills and sub skills of writing (focus, conventions, vocabulary etc.) and to explore their attitudes towards portfolios. In this current article, participants, data collection instruments, procedure and data analysis were discussed in detail.

3.1. Participants

The research was conducted with 52 Turkish undergraduate ESP learners at the University of Sinop. The learners were freshmen at the department of Sea and Marine Management at Vocational School of Higher Education, Sinop University. As this study was carried out in the second term, after taking a proficiency exam about their language level at the beginning of the second term, it was determined that students were on the level of intermediate level. The study was supervised by the researcher herself on randomly selected class A (experimental group) and class B (control group). The experimental group was made up of 26 students and the control group was also 26 students. The ages of the participants ranged from 18 and 22.

3.2. Data collection instruments

The first collection instrument was students' two in-class argumentative writings on the same topic in the same lengths, which were administered prior to and after the formal instruction (measured as pre-test, post-test). The overall writing performance and writing sub skills were measured by a modified version of the writing-scoring rubric developed by Wang & Liao (2008) was used as the second instrument in the study. The scoring rubric is based upon five aspects of writing such as focus, elaboration, organization, convention and vocabulary. Focus indicates specifically addressing the writing task; content indicates using specific appropriate details; organization indicates being generally well-organized; conventions indicate spelling and grammar; vocabulary indicates using suitable words. The participants' two argumentative essays (pre-test, post-test) were scored by two trained raters and the results were compared and averaged. The inter-rater reliability was determined for obtaining confidential results. The last instrument was the student satisfaction questionnaire developed by Wang & Liao (2008), which was used in order to measure students' attitudes towards portfolio assessment. Nevertheless, researchers eliminated three sections (C, D, E). The questionnaire was a 5-point Likert Scale including 16 items. The instrument was checked by three proficient EFL instructors and piloted to a group of 15 students for validity and reliability. Cronbach's alpha was calculated as .817.

3.3. Procedure

The experiment was carried out for four weeks (two hours a week). Before the treatment, the pre-test (writing an argumentative essay on the topic of "Meteorology at Sea") was applied to both of the groups by the researcher. At the beginning of the procedure, the experimental group was provided with the explanation of the design of the lesson, the goals and the content of the portfolio. The students were asked to write about some topics related to their fields (Sea and Marine Management) and chosen by the instructor. After getting first draft of students' argumentative essays, the instructor read them attentively and gave feedback to each participant about each subskills of writing such as focus, elaboration, organization, conventions and vocabulary. Thus, these comments were helpful for students to learn their weaknesses and strengths about each aspect of their writing. Students were asked to evaluate their strengths and weaknesses and review their peer's work. Furthermore, the students had also extra time for evaluating their work via one-to-one appointments with the instructor. Then, students revised and write up their final draft in accordance with their self-evaluation, their instructor's and peer's feedback. Finally, they were asked to collect final drafts in their portfolio. On the other hand, in the control group, the instructor explicitly taught the structure of the essay including topic sentence, supporting details, concluding sentence etc. the students were also asked to write about the same topics as the experimental group. However, unlike the experimental group, the control group were not asked to reflect, revise and redraft their essays. After the procedure, the post-test (Meteorology at Sea) was administered to both groups. Both groups were evaluated under 5 headings for 20 points each.

4. Data Analysis

This current research was intended to investigate whether portfolio assessment technique has a statistically significant effect on ESP students' writing skills and sub skills of writing and to explore their attitudes towards portfolios.

3.4. Results concerning the overall writing performance, experimental and control groups

The purpose of first question was to find out whether the application of portfolio assessment technique has a significant impact on overall writing performance of ESP learners. Before the treatment, Independent samples t-test was conducted in order to investigate the difference between two groups in terms of students' writing performance.

Table 1. Independent samples t-test analysis for pre-test scores of groups

| | N | M | SD | t | df | p |
|--------------------|----|-------|--------|------|----|------|
| Experimental group | 26 | 26.62 | 9.859 | .111 | 50 | .912 |
| Control group | 26 | 26.92 | 10.091 | | | |

Table 1 demonstrated that the findings produced non-significant results. To be more specific, there is not a statistically significant difference between two groups in terms of pre-test scores of ESP students' overall writing performance ($t(50) = .111, p=.912$). Thus, it is concluded that participants in each group were equal with regard to their writing performance.

Table 2. Comparison of pre-test, post-test scores, experimental group

| | N | M | SD | t | df | p |
|------------------------------|----|-------|--------|---------|----|------|
| The pre-test overall scores | 26 | 26.62 | 9.859 | -10.336 | 25 | .000 |
| The post-test overall scores | 26 | 48.00 | 17.121 | | | |

A paired-samples t-test was also conducted to compare the mean scores of pre-test and post-test was also conducted to compare the mean scores of pre-test and post-test of the experimental group. Table 2 shows that there is a statistically significant difference between pre-test ($M=26.62, SD= 9.859$) and post-test ($M=48.00, SD=17.121$) scores of experimental group with regard to their writing performance ($t(25) = -10.336, p< .005$). Therefore, it can be concluded that the instruction through portfolio assessment technique was found to be significantly affecting ESP students' overall writing performance.

Table 3. Comparison of pre-test, post-test scores, control group

| | N | M | SD | t | df | p |
|------------------------------|----|-------|--------|--------|----|------|
| The pre-test overall scores | 26 | 26.92 | 10.091 | -4.804 | 25 | .000 |
| The post-test overall scores | 26 | 34.15 | 8.018 | | | |

Table 3. demonstrated the results of paired samples t-test analysis for the pre-test and post-test scores of control group. As Table 3 indicates, there is a significant difference between pre-test ($M=26.92, SD=10.091$) and post-test ($M=34.15, SD=8.018$) scores of control group in terms of overall writing performance ($t(25) = -4.804, p<.005$). It can be concluded that the instruction in the control group also has a significant effect on ESP students' writing performance.

Table 4. Comparison of post-test scores, experimental and control groups

| | N | M | SD | t | df | p |
|--------------------|----|-------|--------|--------|----|------|
| Control group | 26 | 34.15 | 8.018 | -3.734 | 50 | .000 |
| Experimental group | 26 | 48.00 | 17.121 | | | |

Table 4 indicated that there is a statistically significant difference between the post-test scores of control group ($M=34.15, SD=8.018$) and experimental group ($M=48.00, SD=17.121$) with respect to the type of treatment ($t(50) = -3.734, p<.005$). Therefore, it can be said that those who received instruction through portfolio assessment technique showed significantly higher performance in their writing performance to those who received the instruction in the control group.

3.5. Results concerning the performance of the groups in sub skills of writing

In response to the second research question, an Independent samples t-test was conducted in order to Investigate the differences on ESP students' writing sub skills between two groups.

Table 5. Results of Independents Samples t-test for writing sub-skills in the post-test

| | Levene's Test For Equality of Variances | | t-test for Equality of Means | | | |
|--------------|---|--------|------------------------------|---------|-----------------|------|
| | F | Sig. | t | df | Sig. (2-tailed) | |
| Focus | Equal variances assumed | 13,717 | ,001 | -4,424 | 50 | ,000 |
| | Equal variances not assumed | | | -4,424 | 36,884 | ,000 |
| Elaboration | Equal variances assumed | 3,326, | ,074 | -2,680 | 50 | ,010 |
| | Equal variances not assumed | | | -2,680, | 45,745 | ,010 |
| Organization | Equal variances assumed, | ,540 | ,466 | - 2,793 | 50 | ,007 |
| | Equal variances not assumed | | | -2,793 | 47,884 | ,007 |
| Convention | Equal variances assumed | 2,126 | ,151 | -,886 | 50 | ,380 |
| | Equal variances not assumed | | | -,886 | 45,314 | ,381 |
| Vocabulary | Equal variances assumed | 5,878 | ,019 | -4,095 | 50 | ,000 |
| | Equal variances not assumed | | | -4,095 | 42,723 | ,000 |

Table 5 shows significant differences in the mean scores of the sub skills of writing performance of ESP learners. The results demonstrated that there were statistically significant differences between the experimental group and the control group in terms of sub-skills of focus ($t(50) = -4.424, p < .05$); elaboration ($t(50) = -2.680, p < .05$); organization ($t(50) = -2.793, p < .05$) and vocabulary ($t(50) = -4.095, p < .05$). However, the results revealed that there was not a significant difference between two groups with regard to conventions ($t(50) = -.886, p > .05$).

3.6. Results concerning the ESP students' attitudes towards portfolio assessment

In response to third question, Table 7 demonstrates ESP students' satisfaction questionnaire of the portfolio assessment technique with sixteen items using a Likert scale with five options ranging from "strongly agree (1) to "strongly disagree" (5).

Table 6. ESP students' attitude towards portfolio assessment technique

| N=26 | SA (1) | A (2) | N (3) | D (4) | SD (5) | M |
|---|--------|-------|-------|-------|--------|------|
| Instructional objective | % | % | % | % | % | % |
| I think the course content is based on past knowledge and experience | 12.0 | 4.0 | 24.0 | 20.0 | 40.0 | 3.72 |
| I think the course can enhance my critical ability | 16.0 | 8.0 | 20.0 | 32.0 | 24.0 | 3.40 |
| I think the course's objectives correspond with my personal learning objectives | 32.0 | 28.0 | 24.0 | 12.0 | 4.0 | 2.28 |
| Instructional material/ method | | | | | | |
| The students know exactly what has to be done in the class | 56.0 | 40.0 | 4.0 | 0.0 | 0.0 | 1.48 |
| Course requirements are clear, reasonable | 40.0 | 28.0 | 20.0 | 8.0 | 4.0 | 2.08 |

| | | | | | | |
|--|------|------|------|------|------|------|
| New and different ways of teaching are used in the class | 32.0 | 20.0 | 28.0 | 16.0 | 4.0 | 2.40 |
| I think the instructional material is pre-outlined | 52.0 | 24.0 | 12.0 | 12.0 | 0.0 | 1.84 |
| I think the course material corresponds with the subjects' and the units' objectives | 44.0 | 28.0 | 24.0 | 4.0 | 0.0 | 1.86 |
| Adequate and additional academic aid is available for students | 28.0 | 4.0 | 20.0 | 32.0 | 16.0 | 3.04 |
| The teacher is usually available after class | 40.0 | 16.0 | 20.0 | 12.0 | 12.0 | 2.40 |
| The quality of instruction I receive is excellent | 32.0 | 28.0 | 24.0 | 12.0 | 4.0 | 2.28 |
| There are opportunities for students to express opinions in this class | 32.0 | 32.0 | 12.0 | 12.0 | 12.0 | 2.40 |
| The instructor presents clear and relevant examples | 32.0 | 20.0 | 28.0 | 16.0 | 4.0 | 2.40 |
| The instructor thinks up innovative activities for students to do | 32.0 | 20.0 | 28.0 | 16.0 | 4.0 | 2.40 |
| The instructor uses a teaching style which varies method instruction | 24.0 | 24.0 | 36.0 | 12.0 | 4.0 | 2.48 |
| The teacher provides timely feedback about students' progress in the class. | 64.0 | 24.0 | 8.0 | 4.0 | 0.0 | 1.56 |

SD= Strongly Disagree, D= Disagree, N= Neutral, A= Agree, and SA= Strongly Agree

As seen from the Table 6, 60% percent of participants agreed that the course's objectives correspond with their personal learning objectives. Also, most of the participants agreed that they know exactly what has to be done in the class (96%) and course requirements are clear and reasonable (68%). Nevertheless, 20 % of participants declared that they have no idea about the course requirements. Moreover, 76% of participants think that the instructional material is pre-outlined and 72% of participants think that the course material corresponds with the units' objectives. 56 % of participants state that the teacher is always available after class while 24% of participants disagree with this item. More than half of the participants (60%) declared that the instruction was excellent and giving opportunities for students to express their opinions (64%). Over fifty percent of the participants (52 %) declared that the instructor presented clear examples and innovative activities while 28 % of participants neither agree nor disagree with this idea. Moreover, 88 % of participants agreed that the teacher provides timely feedback about students' progress. On the other hand, most of the participants (48%) disagreed with the idea that adequate and additional academic aid is available for students.

5. Discussion and Conclusion

This present study was intended to investigate differences between the experimental group taught through the portfolio assessment technique and the control group taught through the conventional method in terms of ESP students' overall writing performance, sub skills of writing (focus, elaboration, vocabulary, conventions and organization) and to explore students' views in the experimental group towards portfolio assessment. The quantitative data were gathered from students' pre-tests and post-tests, which were administered subsequently. After the instruction, in response to the first research question, the results obtained from the post-test showed that those who received instruction through portfolio assessment technique showed significantly higher performance in their overall writing performance to those who received the instruction in the control group. The second aim of the study was to examine the differences in sub skills of writing performance of ESP students. The results demonstrated that there were statistically significant differences between two groups in terms of sub-skills of focus, elaboration, vocabulary and organization. However, the results revealed that there was not a significant difference between two groups with regard to conventions. In response to the last research question, a student satisfaction questionnaire was administered in order to examine students' views on portfolio assessment. According to results participants know what has to be done in the class (96%); new teaching ways are used (52%); the instructional material is pre-outlined (76%); there are opportunities for students to express their opinions (64%) and teacher provides timely feedback (88%). However, the negative opinions are: the course content was not based on past knowledge (60%); the course did not students' critical ability (56%); adequate and additional aid is not available for students (48%). The results obtained from this current study are consistent with the previous researches that have found the impact of portfolio assessment on overall writing performance and subskills of writing over the traditional method. (Fahed al-Serhani, 2007; Ghoorchaei, Tavakoli & Ansari, 2010; Spencer, 1999; Lam, 2013; Valencia & Place, 1994; Yurdabakan &

Erdogan, 2009). A study conducted by Yurdabakan & Erdogan (2009) investigated the impact of portfolio assessment on reading, listening and writing skills of students of secondary school language preparatory class in Turkey. The findings indicated that portfolio assessment had a significant effect on writing skills. Another study conducted by Fahed Al-Serhani (2007) demonstrated that portfolio assessment had a significant positive impact on students' writing performance in general and subskills of purpose, content, organization, vocabulary, sentence structure and mechanics. As for students' views towards portfolio, the current study is also consistent with the previous studies that found that students had positive attitudes towards portfolios. (Apple & Shimo, 2004; Hirvela & Sweetland, 2005; Marefat, 2004; Paesani, 2006; Wang & Liao, 2008). This study underlines pedagogical important implications. First, instructors in ESP classes can use writing portfolios in order to promote overall writing performance and sub skills of writing. Second, through portfolio assessment technique, instructors can gain professionalism via active and meaningful involvement in students' evaluation. There are several limitations to the current study. First, age, gender and affective factors, which are not considered in this study, can be used in further research to understand whether they affect the impact of the portfolio assessment technique. The second limitation is the small size of the participants. More participants might have been generalizable to the population.

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