

IMPLEMENTING WRITING PORTFOLIOS IN ESL CONTEXTS-ADVANTAGES, CHALLENGES AND FINDINGS

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Abstract: Writing has been taught for many years as a product rather than process. Teachers emphasize more on grammar and mechanics of writing than on the content and the organization of ideas. The paper discusses writing portfolios in relation to two aspects. First, portfolio based writing is discussed and secondly the findings of the research using various components of portfolio are presented.

Key words: Portfolio assessment, Process of writing, Product

INTRODUCTION

English is the link language and people need English for different purposes. With globalization and multinational companies entering every sphere of life like business, education, entertainment, more and more people feel the need for proficiency in language. Though English medium of instruction has been in existence for more than a century, there is an evidence of anxiety among the learners of language in real life contexts. Though speaking and writing are productive skills, which are essential for successful discourse, many teachers complain of students' inability to communicate effectively in English. In this regard, writing is an important ability that human beings are endowed with. Writing is a significant part of language which is complex and supportive skill as it involves cognitive abilities. Writing has received great attention these days among the educated because it plays a crucial role in writers' academic, professional and social lives.

Portfolio Assessment

Portfolio provides evidence of students work over a period of time with different audience feedback such as teacher, peer and the group members. Also, portfolio encourages the learners to share ideas on the writing performance during conferencing and peer feedback. According to Moya O'Malley (1994), "the information in the

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portfolio must be meaningful to teachers, students, staff, and parents. It also must be usable for instruction and curriculum adaptation to student needs. Borthwick (1995) adds that portfolio offers teachers vital information for diagnosing learners' strengths and weakness to help them improve their performance. Also, portfolio offers personal learning experience as teacher plays the role of an advisor and commentator on students' writing.

Advantages of Portfolio

Portfolio provides the learners with assessment, feedback, motivation and a basis for all their discussion. It also includes learners in the assessment process. Portfolio gives teachers an opportunity to assess learners' work throughout the semester and understand the learners' abilities. Using portfolio in writing classes has proven effective that the process of collecting a variety of writing samples with repeated rewriting and frequent editing improves writing performance.

Generally, portfolio includes sample students' work over a period of time. According to Colorado (2007), in Lotfi.A. H. (2012), portfolio includes information, sample work and evaluators for student performance.

The important factor in prevailing portfolio is to determine the purpose of the portfolio. further, the teacher need to have a plan and how he/she is going to implement. the teacher also should consult with colleagues, students and the administration and seek their support.

Mittan (1989) notes peer review's impact on students' confidence on their writing, by working together. Students realize the similar problems and difficulties that their peer share and feel less isolated.

The Need

In the growing modern and computerized generation, young engineers need written skills in second language to excel in academic, social and in personal level. Questionnaire to teachers of English reveal that the importance of teaching writing skills including the various stages of writing. Equally, it is a known fact that teaching and assessing writing should go together in order to make them successful writers.

The Strategy

The study is an attempt to improve the writing skills of the students. The sample was the first year learners of Engineering college students, Chennai. Tasks, materials and tests were developed and standardized. After the pilot study and observations and discussions, main and major study were done on two groups- the experimental group and the control group for comparison of the strategy in 2013 However, this paper concentrates only on the findings based on the questionnaires to subjects and observations of teacher investigator.

Implications

Several recommendations are

- Assessment should be a formative, ongoing process which should provide feedback to progress towards the goals in writing.
- It is recommended to train other ESL teachers in planning and implementing the portfolios.
- Portfolio assessment needs to be used as a complementary to traditional classroom tests. This point is in line with Lucas. R.I (2006) findings. Also, he concluded that students were trained to think for themselves and thrust their capabilities as writers.
- Portfolio helps us to evaluate learners' abilities and to develop instructional goals and objectives based on documentation provided by the portfolio. Feedback and learner reflection provides the teachers rich information on learners' needs, interests and potentials. In line with the argument, portfolios create a dynamic learning environment and eliminate writing anxiety. Since portfolios are not primarily used as a means of correcting errors in grammar, vocabulary, more emphasis is given to the expression of ideas both by the teachers and students. With the help of portfolios, students can see the quality of their own work and this creates a strong sense of accomplishment.
- The results could be summarized thus: it was found that portfolio helped the learner to develop higher order thinking skills, critical thinking skills and communication skills. Further, it develops like sub skills as focus, elaboration, organization, conventions and vocabulary.

Students observations on Feedback

A student observes, "when the teacher points out the grammatical errors, I corrected it. Also, constructive feedback from peer helped me realize my problem in writing".

Finally, portfolio reveals new understanding of editing as examining the whole text structure rather than only grammar and vocabulary and better understanding of stages of writing in portfolio. Though teacher feedback played a significant role, peer feedback plays a supporting role by proper training and this idea is in line with a survey based study made by Maarof, Yamat & Li Li (2011).

In portfolio, learners can follow their work improvement over time, create assessment criteria for a written product, and discuss the strategies/methods they use, work with peers to redraft the work, estimate peers work, and identify difficulties they encounter during the performing of a required task. And when learners are collaborators in the assessment process, they develop reflective skill and thus improve their performance.

E-portfolio can also be developed with the use of computer and internet which facilitate learning. By using computer and internet, the students benefit from traditional classroom and also the advantages of technology.

During the pre-writing session, passive listeners witness new ideas, suggestions coming from their peer and classmates. It motivates passive listeners to take an initiative or to answer in the class. Writing skill has to be mastered with regular learning and effecting teaching.

Portfolio shows learners' performance from the beginning to the end of the semester. Language learning takes place when they are engrossed in the classroom activities, they discuss, clarify, observe, edit based on error codes which help them to improve their cognition. Portfolio allows the teacher to monitor the learners' performance from the beginning to the end of the course. Further, they appreciate learners' company in discussing on their writing issues. Delayed evaluation by teacher helps them to come out of their inhibition and overcome writing anxieties. The study found students favored portfolio to be effective tools to examine their learning process and improve their writing skills.

Teacher's observations

The study further suggests that teaching need time to prepare for evaluation, presentation, peer evaluation and completing the final evaluation by the instructor (Teachers' assessment). In order to integrate portfolios into English courses, instructors and/or institutions should give common training to the teachers on portfolio implementation. Further, curriculum can also implement portfolio based learning in tertiary level. The study also found that the learners were much improved at the end of the semester.

Limitations to the study

Portfolio implementation takes lot of pressure to the teachers. It needs administrative support to implement it properly. It is time consuming as it needs to practice brainstorming, teacher feedback, peer feedback, conferencing and redrafting. Further, there were no guidelines or teacher support to implement portfolio assessment.

CONCLUSION

The positive effects of portfolios student learning emerge from the opportunities they afford students to become actively involved in assessment and learning. The portfolio assessment model is initiated to be an effective instructional strategy as well as an evaluation tool. Using portfolio is quite acceptable to Indian students and the portfolio in curriculum is boon for student writers.

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