Incorporating Self-assessment and Reflection in Writing Portfolios of EFL Writers

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Abstract: Can incorporating self-assessment and reflection as a part of the writing process make EFL students improve their writing? This article presents the findings of a semester-long study conducted at four universities in Medan, North Sumatera where writing portfolio were implemented to help students document their progress. Using pre- and post- test design, it was found that the writing performance of students who used portfolio mainly focusing on incorporating self-assessment and reflection for their essay writing process over a semester more increased than students who did not. The increase of writing performance corresponded to students' perceptions of improvement in writing. EFL writers who were usually concerned with fixing surface-level errors (mechanics and vocabulary) rather than global errors (organization and content), in this study, were partly concerned with global errors.

1 INTRODUCTION

To help EFL students become better and successful writers, teachers need to help them have knowledge and skills in assessing their own writing. Incorporating self-assessment and reflection is part of the writing process of successful writers. According to O'Neill (1998), incorporating self-assessment and reflection into the writing process is not a new idea in the field of English composition: composition practitioners and theorists have been advocating it through the seventies, eighties, and nineties, especially as portfolios have become more popular. The literature on metacognitive activities agrees that such exercises help students become better writers. Encouraging students to become their own evaluators gives them more power and control over their writing, As Robert Probst explains, the transfer of power to the student writers is the most important part of teaching writing: "The responsibility for making judgements about the quality of their work must become the students'. They are the ones who must feel the rightness or wrongness of their statements, because, ultimately, they are responsible for what they write" (76). How about self-assessment conducted by EFL writers? It was hypothesized in this study that EFL students' writing performance increased over time with the significant progress happening between pre- and post- portfolio implementation primarily focusing on self-assessment and reflection. The finding was strengthened by the fact that the group not conducting self-assessment and writing reflection journals did not experience a significant progress with regard to writing performance when this was measured at the beginning and at the end of the semester. Students' incapability of self-assessing was the result of their perceptions of improvement in writing. EFL writers were usually concerned with fixing surface-level errors rather than global errors. However, in this study, students at four universities in Medan, North Sumatera were partly concerned with global errors. This study was part of a larger research program that examined the development of students' writing performance through portfolio integration in the curriculum and that was funded by the Research Institution at University of Sumatera Utara in the year of 2018.

2 INCORPORATING SELF-ASSESSMENT AND REFLECTION AND ITS CONNECTION WITH PORTFOLIOS

2.1 Self-assessment and Reflection

Self-assessment research has been going since the 1950s and originated within the field of Social and Clinical Psychology (Hilgers, Hussey, & Stitt-Bergh, 2000). The two key concepts embedded in the notion of self-assessment are self-observation and self-monitoring. Self-monitoring, the parent of self-assessment, provides individuals with internal feedback which allows them to compare the current level of behavior with some well-recognized social standard (Kanfer, 1975). This feedback comes partially from observation and evaluation, which have been shown to be key processes in affecting change with deep-seated human behaviors (Bellack, Rozensky & Schwartz, 1974; Cavior & Marabott, 1976).

In writing research, studies on self-assessment, which is sometimes referred to as revision within the writing process, began to receive attention in the late 1970s when the Flower and Hayes (1981a) model of the composing process permeated composition studies. This was also the exact period when cognitivism was in vogue. The view of self-monitoring, which belongs to the domain of behaviorism, was out of fashion. Hence, studies of self-monitoring were gradually replaced by studies focusing on writing coping strategies and their effects (Flower and Hayes, 1981b; Hayes, Flower, Schriver, Stratman, & Carey, 1987). According to the Flower and Hayes's (1981a) model, revision is one component of the cognitive writing process, and modifying writing strategies or texts is due to the constant evaluation and reevaluation of the text. Nevertheless, in the 1996, Hayes proposed that a new framework for understanding cognition and affect in writing was needed. In Hayes's new model, revision was reorganized and subsumed under a new category, reflection, which is a function that requires writers to problem-solve and make decisions (Hayes, 1996).

In the 1990s, social constructivist theory made it clear that all behaviors are influenced in one way or another by the social contexts in which they are situated (Bruffee, 1984; Grabe & Kaplan, 1996). However, from a behaviorist or cognitivist perspective, self-assessment is viewed as a set of isolated acts. This view does not take into account how individuals acquire self-assessment strategies and under what circumstances they make use of socially contextualized criteria to self-evaluate their own work (Hilgers, Hussey, & Stitt-Bergh, 2000). Consequently, studies of self-assessment that adopted a behaviorist or cognitivist perspective have been unable to identify ways that an individual's self-assessment practices could be made more effective, thus helping an individual become a better writer who can actively engage in the composing process. Therefore, more research is needed on how novice writers in an EFL context adopt self-assessment and its impact on their writing development.

2.2 Writing Portfolios

Since the 1990s, writing portfolios have been widely adopted as either a large-scale writing assessment or classroom-based assessment in various teaching contexts in the United States. Part of the appeal for using writing portfolios is the component of reflection, which helps students think about what they have achieved throughout the process of writing individual pieces as well as the overall portfolio construction (Hamp-Lyons & Condon, 2000; Weigle, 2002; Yancey, 1998; Yancey & Weiser, 1997). Within Hamp-Lyons and Condon's (2000) theoretical framework of portfolio assessment, the terms *reflection* and *self-assessment* are used interchangeably although Broadfoot (2007) argued that they do not mean the same thing. These two terms also suggest that students will revisit their early and interim drafts to reflect upon their effort and progress throughout the course of writing. For example, when teachers adopt a showcase portfolio approach, students are usually asked to review all papers and drafts and then select the best ones either for display (e.g. to a future employer) or for summative grading. Self-assessment, as defined by Hamp-Lyons and Condon, can help students better understand what they are expected to compose as well as explore their own strengths and weaknesses in writing in order to make further improvement.

Portfolio assessment, therefore, has the potential to create positive washback on students' writing (Biggs & Tang, 2003; Hughes, 2003). Traditionally, students have been asked to write in a "one-draft, one-reader" context (Arndt, 1993). Having received a grade and minimal feedback from the teacher, students may make corrections on their drafts. After that, the learning process is supposedly finished and

students are asked to write on another topic. The product approach to writing promotes students' reliance on a teacher's summative judgments rather than helping students to self-assess their own drafts before submission. The adoption of a portfolio approach in EFL writing classrooms may empower students' active participation in self-evaluating their own work within the writing process (Weigle, 2007; White, 1994; Yancey, 1998).

2.3 Purpose of the Study

This study was designed as a guide for portfolio implementation. It was hypothesized that students benefitted their writing by enhancing their linguistic awareness and helping them better monitor the writing strategies they selected for composing the portfolio entries. Process portfolios were used as a systematic way to help students place more emphasis on the learning process rather than the final outcome and engage in the processes of documenting their progress monitoring, goal setting, reflection and self-evaluation (mastery experiences). As part of an intervention to increase students' writing performance, this study implemented process portfolios to students at four different universities in Medan, North Sumatera, Indonesia. They are students of English department at University of Sumatera Utara, students of English department at State University of Medan, students of English study program at University of Harapan, and students of English study program at Islamic University of Sumatera Utara.The study attempted to answer the following research questions:
1. Can incorporating self-assessment and reflection as a part of the writing process make EFL students improve their writing?
2. What are students' perceptions of the impact of self-assessment and reflection on the improvement of their writing?

3 METHOD

3.1 Research Design

A non-equivalent pre-test and post-test design was used. The study was conducted at four different universities in Medan, North Sumatera, Indonesia. There are English department at University of Sumatera Utara, English department at State University of Medan, English study program at University of Harapan, and English study program of Islamic University of Sumatera Utara.

3.2 Participants

The participants of the treatment group were 120 fifth semester English department students of four universities in Medan (convenience sampling) over one academic semester (January 2018–June 2018). A total of 158 fifth semester students who were part of four intact classes in different universities where portfolios have not been used served as a control group for the study and they completed the self-assessment and reflection instrument twice, as a pre-test and as a post-test, at the beginning and at the end of the academic semester.

An effort was made to identify control classrooms who would match as closely as possible the experimental classrooms. All teachers needed to follow national curriculum requirements for the development of Composition course. Therefore control group students produced the same amount of writing pieces throughout the semester in the same genres (one of them is an argumentative genre) but without following the process approach. Experimental teachers used portfolios, while control teachers did not.

Consent forms were agreed by teachers and students. Confidentiality was assured and pseudonyms were used instead of the real names of all participants. In general, the treatment of participants was in accordance with the ethical standards.

3.3 Students' Training in using Portfolios

All experimental students received training on the use of portfolios and on how to set goals, conduct a self-evaluation, self-reflect and provide peer feedback. Specific support structures were used for training as students did not have any previous experiences with these portfolio affordances. Templates were used to train all experimental students: (a) on providing peer feedback, (b) on conducting a self-evaluation of their writing, (c) on self-reflection by revisiting their writing piece and providing an answer to prompts and (d) on goal setting by describing specific areas where improvement in their writing was needed.

To explain the use of supporting templates, some examples for peer feedback, self-evaluation and reflection support are provided next. The symbols are the following:
S = spelling mistake
G = grammatical mistake

+ = have to add a word/sentence/paragraph
 - = have to delete a word/sentence/paragraph
P = start a new paragraph here
C = capital letter
R = repetition
PU = punctuation
CR = consider revision.

The criteria used for conducting a self-evaluation of students' writing are the following:

- Did I organize my essay in paragraphs?
- Is there an introduction, main body and conclusion in my essay?
- Did I put adequate content in my essay?
- Did I put adequate knowledge of written genres in my essay?

- Did I put adequate content in my essay?
- Did I have effective paraphrasing in my essay?
- Did my essay have enough vocabulary?
- Did I have problematic sentence structure in my essay?

The prompts that were used to guide students' reflection after completing the drafts of their writing piece are the following:

- What did you like best about your essay?
- What can you improve on the next draft?

Finally, the general rubric used to grade students' writing performance is the following:

Rubric 1 Grading students' writing performance.

	5 Exemplary	4 Understanding	3 Competent	2 Developing	1 Beginning
Focus:	The student's writings fit the prompt and went beyond with additional readings and experiences that brought new light to the paper.	The student wrote a paper that followed all the guidelines given but did little to add more to the work.	The student covered most of the requirements and did so in a way that suggested they understood the prompt.	The student wrote a paper that had the subject, but did not follow the prompt or did not meet the requirements in another way.	The student did not turn in a paper or did not attempt to meet the requirements.
Development:	The student came in to talk with the instructor about the paper and took suggestions to heart through the rest of his paper.	The student came in and talked about his paper, but only worked on some of the problems that were noticed in the paper.	The student may have come in once, but there was at least one rewrite created to improve the piece.	The student could recognize mistakes during the time with the instructor, but was unwilling to correct them or work beyond the first draft.	The student did not turn in a paper or did not attempt to meet the requirements.
Audience:	The paper was written in a way that was easy to read and was clearly written to benefit the correct audience, both in word choice and in experiences shared.	The work was written in a way that covered the prompt and allowed the audience to understand what was being communicated.	The audience had difficulty relating to the work because of word choice or the way experiences were shown to them.	The audience felt alienated by the piece because of word choice and experiences shared. The author clearly did not take the audience into consideration.	The student did not turn in a paper or did not attempt to meet the requirements.

The data was consisting of students' self-assessment forms and reflective journals, which were part of the required portfolio entries. Students were asked to fill in a self-assessment form and complete a writing journal during the semester. In other words, self-assessment was done retrospectively of the semester. The self-assessment process involved students referring back to their drafts, figuring out which entry was the best, and justifying why they believed it was well-written. Self-assessment forms and reflective journal entries were collected from the students. The reflective journal entries that were selected for use in this study mentioned the benefits of self-assessment and discussed them at length.

4 RESULTS

4.1 Students' Writing Improvement by Incorporating Self-assessment and Reflection in the Writing Process

To better understand the progress in students' writing performance over time, scoring was conducted by using the rubric. Ten students from the experimental and control groups were selected based on the results of administration, so as to include three students with low, three students with average and four students with high writing performance for each group. Students were ranked according to their pre-portfolio implementation score on writing performance. The three students with the lowest writing performance scores (A, B, C), the four students with the highest writing performance scores (G, H, I, J) and three students from the middle of the distribution of scores (D, E, F) were selected. Pseudonyms were used in place of students' real names to facilitate the reporting of findings.

Table 1 presents students' writing performance (WP) scores pre- and post- portfolio implementation. With regard to methodology, students' writing performance that ranged between the minimum possible score of 3-7 was coded as ''low''. Students' writing performance that was the score of 8-11 was coded as ''average''. Students' writing performance that was higher than 11 and lower than or equal to 15 was coded as ''high''.

Table 1. Selected experimental and control group students' writing performance scores over time

Name	Experimental Group		Control Group	
	Pre-portfolio Implementation	Post-portfolio Implementation	Pre-test	Post-test
A	4 (low)	7 (low)	4 (low)	4 (low)
B	6 (low)	7 (low)	5 (low)	5 (low)
C	6 (low)	8 (avg)	7 (low)	6 (low)
D	8 (avg)	9 (avg)	9 (avg)	8 Iavg)
E	10 (avg)	13 (high)	10 (avg)	10 (avg)
F	11 (avg)	12 (high)	11 (avg)	11 (avg)
G	12 (high)	13 (high)	12 (high)	12 (high)
H	12 (high)	13 (high)	12 (high)	11 (avg)
I	13 (high)	13 (high)	12 (high)	13 (high)
J	13 (high)	14 (high)	13 (high)	12 (high)

Findings showed that three experimental group students with low scores (A, B, C) in pre-portfolio implementation received higher scores in post-portfolio implementation. Two out of the three students earned the same code, the low code, while one out of the three students did get the better code, from the low to average code. Three experimental group students with average scores (D, E, F) in pre-portfolio implementation received higher scores in post-portfolio implementation. One out of the three students earned the same code, the average code, while two out of the three students received the better code, from the average to high code. Three experimental group students with high scores (G, H, J) in pre-portfolio implementation received higher scores in post-portfolio implementation and one student (I) earned the same score. All students in this

group were in the same score code (the high code) before and after the portfolio implementation.

The other group students, control group students, showed different findings. The students with low scores (A, B, C) in pre-portfolio implementation received the same code (low) in post-portfolio implementation. Two out of the three students earned the same scores, and even one out of the three students earned lower score. Three experimental group students with average scores (D, E, F) in pre-portfolio implementation received the same code level (average) in post-portfolio implementation. One out of the three students earned lower score, and two out of the three students received the same scores. Three experimental group students with high scores (G, I, J) in pre-portfolio implementation received the same code (high) in post-portfolio implementation and one student (H) earned lower code (from high to average).

The result of this study showed that students' writing performance increased over time with the significant progress happening between pre- and post- portfolio implementation. The finding was strengthened by the fact that a control group that did not use portfolios did not experience a significant progress with regard to writing performance when this was measured at the beginning and at the end of the semester. With regard to the interpretation of these findings, it is important to identify some possible explanations. Experimental teachers may have been more open to innovative teaching practices than control teachers. In addition, support was provided to experimental students in the form of training on how to use portfolios and how to engage in portfolio processes. These are possible explanations to the impact of involving self-assessment and reflection in writing portfolio of EFL writers.

4.2 Perceived Impact of Self Assessment

Three major answers by the students in term of the aspects of writing they could improve further which can be seen in Table 2 below are grammatical mistakes, inadequate content, and lack of vocabulary. The first aspect was to avoid grammatical errors. The second aspect, unpredictable, was to enrich and diversify ideas in writing. It was surprising as this kind of mistake was one of the global errors that EFL writers were often not concerned about. The third aspect was to use a wide range of vocabulary to express ideas. It is interesting to pay attention that students usually focused on surface-level errors such as mechanics and vocabulary, but in this finding some students thought revising global errors, such as content and organization, as an area of potential improvement.

Table 2. Students' Perception of Areas in Demand of Improvement

	Categories	Frequency	Description
1.	Grammatical mistakes	32	Students conduct grammatical mistakes in their written work
2.	Inadequate content	25	Students are not able to enrich and diversify their ideas in their writing
3.	Lack of vocabulary	21	Students lack sufficient vocabulary items to express ideas in their writing
4.	Problematic sentence structures	12	Students use too simplistic and inappropriate sentence structure
5.	Poor organization	10	Students put their ideas not logically and coherently connected in their written work

Students were taught how to respond to both local and global errors when reviewing their own drafts and their peer drafts. It could be said that their perceptions of improvement in writing were mainly concerned with fixing surface level errors rather than global errors. However, the result showed that some students were concerned with global errors. It was related to the previous finding regarding to the writing improvement as the result of students having knowledge and skills in conducting self-assessment and getting help of reflection journals. Students successfully applied the methods in their writing portfolio so that they made significant progress between pre-portfolio implementation and post-portfolio implementation.

As a matter of fact, some students were also still concerned with surface-level errors. There may be reasons for this phenomenon. One of the reasons is that students have difficulty differentiating between the processes of revising, which concern both content and organization, and editing, in which only grammatical errors are paid attention. This concept was also reinforced by any students' teachers who only marked grammatical errors in their essays.

Another reason students were focused more on correcting local rather than global errors was that students were probably incapable of revising higher-level errors such as organization and content. It is obvious that students needed more training guidance in order to self-assess global errors in their writing.

5 CONCLUDING REMARKS

The study supported that students' writing performance increased over time with the significant progress happening between pre- and post- portfolio implementation primarily focusing on self-assessment and reflection. The finding was strengthened by the fact that the group not conducting self-assessment and writing reflection journals did not experience a significant progress with regard to writing performance when this was measured at the beginning and at the end of the semester. Students' incapability of self-assessing was the result of their perceptions of improvement in writing. EFL writers were usually concerned with fixing surface-level errors rather than global errors. However, in this study, students at four universities in Medan, North Sumatera were partly concerned with global errors.

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