



***EFFECTIVENESS OF AN E-PORTFOLIO-BASED WRITING METHOD
USING ANALYTIC TRAITS ON WRITING PERFORMANCE OF EFL
STUDENTS***

ALIASGHAR YOUSEFI AZARFAM

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By

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**Thesis Submitted to the School of Graduate Studies, Universiti Putra Malaysia, in
Fulfilment of the Requirements for the Degree of Doctor of Philosophy**

February 2016



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DEDICATIONS

Gratefully dedicated to

My dear parents, dear wife, and lovely son



Abstract of thesis presented to the Senate of Universiti Putra Malaysia in fulfillment of the requirement for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy

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February 2016

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This study focused on the writing skill development of EFL learners by examining the effect of an alternative method of writing instruction on the writing ability of Iranian university students in a public Malaysian university. The writing method introduced and implemented in this study was developed based on the four dimensions of process, genre, electronic portfolios, and analytic traits of writing. The integration of these elements into the writing instruction was the main purpose of this study in order to make improvement in the writing skill of the EFL learners.

In EFL writing instruction and in writing portfolios, learners are required to do writing assignments without being actually shown the writing process and the analytic qualities of writing. Even in 'Process' model of writing, or in writing e-portfolios, learners are asked to be involved in the writing process through peer- and self-assessment, but they are not given any specific criteria or scale to do so. At the same time, although instructors evaluate learners' writing drafts, they seldom do so in a way to guide instruction in the writing process or reflect all traits of the writing.

In this study, an 'explanatory design' was used to appraise the effectiveness of the writing e-portfolio method using analytic traits. Hence, the data were sequentially collected by first collecting the major and prior quantitative data through conducting an experimental study. The qualitative data, acquired through semi-structured interview, were then used to support the results from the quantitative data. The reason for choosing a quantitative study was to obtain empirical data and to see if a significant effect size was observed by applying the new method. The results from qualitative interview, on the other hand, helped to identify unobserved heterogeneity in quantitative data and shed light on them. It was used to grasp the attitudes of learners in order to get deeper into the effect of e-portfolio models on the writing ability of students, which may have been unnoticed in the quantitative part of the study. The selected sample for the study was randomly assigned to two Experimental Groups and one Control Group. The reason to include two treatment groups was the incorporation of online learning system and analytic traits of writing as two levels of independent

variable – i.e. ‘method’ in this study. Hence, the learners in Writing E-portfolio 1 (WE1) were required to make use of an online Learning Management System or LMS in addition to the analytic traits of writing, but the learners in Writing E-portfolio 2 (WE2) were just introduced to LMS without being presented with the analytic traits of writing. At the same time, the members of Writing Portfolio (WP) were asked to follow the procedure of the classic writing portfolio making no reference to LMS or writing analytic traits. The teaching and learning strategies in WE1 were based on the Process Scale of Akef and Maftoon (2010), and involved self-, peer-, and teacher-assessments. The instructor used the scale itself in the process of writing, but the learners used a simplified and adapted checklist as Peer Checklist for reviewing and commenting on the writing drafts of their peer-group members.

The results of the research showed that although the documented difference between the two treatment groups – WE1 and WE2 – was not significant in this study, the experiences and expressions of the learners showed a difference in the attitudes of them towards the analytic traits of writing. The learners in WE1 talked about a sort of awareness of the different qualities of writing. They claimed that knowing about the analytic traits of writing caused them to understand and be convinced that they need to pay attention to all aspects of writing and not just the usage and mechanical correctness of it. It was a new look at writing ability causing the learners to pay attention and be sensitive to these required features of writing. The learners in WE1 referred to the role of Peer Checklist in reminding them of the writing qualities to be considered in their self- and peer-assessment. Nevertheless, the learners in both treatment groups referred to the relative benefits, compatibility, observability, trialability, and complexity of the introduced methods in the LMS environment.

As it was the first experience of most of the learners in dealing with the electronic portfolios in LMS and the analytic qualities of writing, they were more motivated to be involved in the course activities. The learners in WE1 were, therefore, expected to have much better writing performance by the course instructor. However, because of encountering some complexities and being inexperienced in dealing with the new environment, the learners in WE1 could not show ideal writing performance; nevertheless, the respondents of WE1 were mainly satisfied with the learning strategies they learned and applied in the course. It was found very crucial to scaffold the writers and provide them with a framework and a pattern to know what to do and how to cover the different stages of writing following the method instructions.

Additionally, in this study, the electronic environment of e-portfolios proved to play a significant role in facilitating the writing task performance of the learners and consequently improving their writing skill in both WE1 and WE2 groups. The gained quantitative and qualitative findings of this study proved to be satisfactory in terms of the impact of online environment on the writing performance of the learners in comparison with the writing performance of WP or Control group. The significant difference was observed in comparing both the total gained scores of the learners and the obtained scores of the learners in certain traits of writing. It meant that the electronic environment of portfolios was an effective means to facilitate the writing activities and help the EFL learners to achieve their desired goals through making improvement in their own writing.

Abstrak tesis yang dikemukakan kepada Senat Universiti Putra Malaysia sebagai memenuhi keperluan untuk ijazah Doktor Falsafah

**KEBERKESANAN PENDEKATAN PENULISAN BERASASKAN E-
PORTFOLIO MENGGUNAKAN CIRI ANALISIS PENULISAN TERHADAP
PRESTASI PELAJAR EFL**

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Kajian ini memberi tumpuan kepada pembangunan kemahiran menulis pelajar EFL dengan memeriksa kesan kaedah alternatif pengajaran menulis kepada kemahiran penulisan pelajar universiti Iran di sebuah universiti awam di Malaysia. Kaedah bertulis diperkenalkan dan dilaksanakan dalam kajian ini telah dibangunkan berdasarkan empat dimensi, iaitu proses, genre, portfolio elektronik, dan ciri-ciri analisis penulisan. Integrasi elemen-elemen ini dalam pengajaran tulisan ialah tujuan utama kajian ini untuk membuat peningkatan dalam kemahiran penulisan pelajar EFL. Dalam pengajaran dan pembelajaran menulis dalam Bahasa Inggeris sebagai Bahasa Asing (EFL) dan dalam portfolio bertulis, pelajar dikehendaki melakukan tugas penulisan tanpa sebenarnya ditunjukkan proses penulisan dan analisis kualiti penulisan. Begitu juga dalam kaedah 'Process' dalam pengajaran penulisan, dan dalam menulis e-portfolio, pelajar diminta untuk terlibat dalam proses penulisan melalui penilaian sendiri dan penilaian rakan, tetapi tidak diberi kriteria atau skala tertentu untuk berbuat demikian. Pada masa yang sama, walaupun pengajar menilai draf penulisan pelajar, mereka jarang berbuat demikian dengan cara yang dapat membimbing pelajar memahami proses penulisan serta mencerminkan semua ciri-ciri penulisan.

Dalam kajian ini, rekabentuk eksploratori digunakan untuk menilai keberkesanan kaedah penulisan berasaskan e-portfolio yang menggunakan ciri analisis. Oleh itu, data dikumpul mulanya dengan data berbentuk kuantitatif melalui kajian eksperimental. Data kualitatif, dikumpul melalui temubual separa struktur, kemudiannya digunakan untuk menyokong dapatan dari data kuantitatif. Kajian kuantitatif dilakukan untuk memastikan saiz kesan (effect size) dipatuhi dalam menggunakan kaedah baharu ini. Dapatan dari data kualitatif pula membantu mengenalpasti kepelbagaian yang tidak dikesan dalam data kuantitatif dan untuk memahami dengan lebih mendalam lagi kesan kaedah menggunakan e-portfolio ini terhadap sikap serta keupayaan menulis. Sampel yang dipilih untuk kajian diagihkan secara rawak kepada dua Kumpulan Eksperimen dan satu kawalan Kumpulan. Tujuan diadakan dua kumpulan rawatan adalah disebabkan penggabungan sistem dalam talian pembelajaran dan ciri-ciri analisis penulisan sebagai dua tahap pembolehubah bebas - iaitu 'kaedah' dalam kajian ini. Oleh itu, pelajar dalam Penulisan E-portfolio 1 (WE1) dikehendaki menggunakan

Sistem dalam talian Pengurusan Pembelajaran atau LMS sebagai tambahan kepada ciri-ciri analisis penulisan manakala pelajar dalam Penulisan E-portfolio 2 (WE2) hanya diperkenalkan kepada LMS tanpa menggunakan ciri-ciri analisis penulisan. Pada masa yang sama, pelajar dalam kumpulan Penulisan Portfolio (WP) telah diminta untuk mengikuti prosedur portfolio penulisan klasik tanpa membuat sebarang rujukan kepada LMS atau sifat-sifat penulisan analisis. Strategi pengajaran dan pembelajaran dalam WE1 adalah berdasarkan Skala Proses Akef dan Maftoon (2010), dan melibatkan penilaian sendiri, sebaya, dan oleh . Pengajar menggunakan skala itu sendiri dalam proses penulisan, tetapi pelajar menggunakan senarai semak yang dipermudahkan dan disesuaikan sebagai Senarai Semak Rakan Sebaya untuk menyemak dan mengulas mengenai draf penulisan ahli-ahli kumpulan sebaya mereka.

Keputusan kajian menunjukkan bahawa walaupun perbezaan didokumenkan antara kedua-dua kumpulan rawatan - WE1 dan WE2 – ianya tidak ketara dalam kajian ini, pengalaman dan luahan pelajar menunjukkan perbezaan dalam sikap mereka ke arah ciri-ciri analisis penulisan. Pelajar dalam WE1 bercakap tentang satu bentuk kesedaran mengenai kualiti yang berbeza dalam penulisan. Mereka mendakwa bahawa mengetahui tentang sifat-sifat analisis penulisan menyebabkan mereka memahami dan menjadi yakin bahawa mereka perlu memberi perhatian kepada semua aspek penulisan dan bukan hanya penggunaan dan ketepatan mekanikal sahaja. Ia adalah penampilan baru pada keupayaan menulis menyebabkan pelajar memberi perhatian dan menjadi peka terhadap ciri-ciri yang diperlukan dalam penulisan. Pelajar dalam WE1 merujuk kepada peranan Senarai Semak Peer dalam mengingatkan mereka tentang kualiti penulisan yang perlu dipertimbangkan dalam penaksiran secara sendiri dan oleh rakan. Walau bagaimanapun, pelajar dalam kedua-dua kumpulan rawatan merujuk kepada faedah relatif, keserasian, keteramatan, trialability, dan kerumitan kaedah yang diperkenalkan dalam persekitaran LMS.

Oleh kerana ia adalah pengalaman pertama sebahagian besar pelajar dalam menangani portfolio elektronik dalam LMS dan kualiti analisis penulisan, mereka lebih bermotivasi untuk terlibat dalam aktiviti-aktiviti kursus. Pelajar dalam WE1 dijangka mempunyai penulisan yang lebih baik oleh pengajar mereka. Walau bagaimanapun, oleh kerana kerumitan dan kurang berpengalaman dalam menangani persekitaran baru, pelajar dalam kumpulan rawatan utama tidak dapat menunjukkan kualiti penulisan yang diharapkan; walau bagaimanapun, responden WE1 terutamanya berpuas hati dengan strategi pembelajaran yang telah dipelajari dan digunakan dalam kursus ini. Ia didapati sangat penting untuk memberi sokongan kepada penulis dan menyediakan mereka dengan rangka kerja dan corak untuk mengetahui apa yang perlu dilakukan dan bagaimana untuk menampung pelbagai peringkat penulisan mengikut kaedah yang dikemukakan ini.

Selain itu, dalam kajian ini, persekitaran elektronik e-portfolio terbukti memainkan peranan penting dalam memudahkan pelaksanaan tugas penulisan pelajar dan seterusnya meningkatkan kemahiran penulisan mereka dalam kedua-dua kumpulan WE1 dan WE2. Hasil kuantitatif dan kualitatif yang diperolehi dalam kajian ini terbukti memuaskan dari segi kesan persekitaran dalam talian ke atas prestasi penulisan pelajar berbanding dengan prestasi penulisan kumpulan WP atau Kawalan. Perbezaan ketara diperhatikan dalam membandingkan kedua-dua jumlah markah pelajar dan skor yang

diperoleh daripada pelajar dalam ciri-ciri tertentu penulisan. Ini bermakna bahawa persekitaran elektronik portfolio adalah satu cara yang berkesan untuk memudahkan aktiviti penulisan dan membantu pelajar EFL untuk mencapai matlamat yang dikehendaki mereka melalui membuat penambahbaikan dalam penulisan mereka sendiri.



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CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

This study focused on the writing skill development of English as a Foreign Language (EFL) learners by examining the effect of an alternative method of writing instruction on the writing ability of Iranian university students. The main purpose of the study was to examine the feasibility of the application of a method of writing e-portfolio using analytic traits to improve the writing skills of English language learners.

The e-portfolio is defined as a web-published collection of a learner's works demonstrating his or her learning effort, progress, and achievement (Chang, Wu, & Ku, 2005; Paulson, Paulson & Meyer, 2003) that can be used as a tool for instruction and assessment to develop the language skills of the learners. Since electronic portfolios facilitate the teaching and learning process, they have the potential to be used in language skill development. They have the advantage of easy replication, manageable size, and easy modification (Galloway, 2001) all of which are of high importance in writing instruction.

E-portfolios are used in different disciplines such as education, art, and employment. The main aim of portfolio used in education is "to document the learning process and growth for learners of all ages" (Barrett, 2007, p.438). The most frequently used e-portfolios in educational contexts are working (formative) portfolios and showcase (summative) portfolios (Barrett, 2005). Working portfolios are defined as "a collection of work over time showing growth and improvement reflecting students' learning of identified outcomes, and can include everything from brainstorming activities to drafts to finished products" (Schools, 2004, p.1).

This study aimed to examine the potential of e-portfolios in developing writing skills among EFL learners. As research shows, the focus on ESL/EFL writing skill has often been less than the other skill areas both in research and instruction (Edelsky & Smith, 1989; Amiran & Mann, 1982; Graves, 1984). This lack of attention has resulted in less interest among ESL/EFL learners to improve their writings, and has contributed it to the kind of classroom practice introduced by their teachers (Lipstein & Renninger, 2007). Writing e-portfolio is considered to be an alternative approach to compensate for the weakness of previous product and process methods (Barrett, 2005; Lorenzo & Ittelson, 2005) in writing, because it emphasizes the important role of learners in doing self and peer assessment to raise their own awareness in the process of writing.

1.1 Background

The use of portfolio assessment for educational purposes began in the late 1980s; mainly in university writing classes (Belanoff & Elbow, 1991) and for assessment purposes (Barrett, 2005). According to Hamp-Lyons (2003), paper-based portfolio is defined as "a collection of the writer's own works over a period of time, usually a semester or school year" (p.29). It emphasizes the collaborative feature of the task of writing, self-awareness, and active involvement of the learners in the process of writing their drafts.

With the advancement in computers and new technologies, e-portfolios have developed from paper-based portfolios (Lorenzo & Ittelson, 2005) and they are gradually replacing the paper-based portfolios. In comparison with paper-based portfolios, e-portfolios are better able to organize learning materials to illustrate the process of learner development. According to Abrami and Barrett (2005), they are easily shared with peers and tutors and feedback is usually provided electronically. In EFL context, language learners considered some advantages for internet application in their education, such as better accessibility of internet and updated information, inclusiveness of the information, variety of online materials, and possibility of doing more jobs in less time (Atai & Dashtestani, 2013).

E-portfolios might be used for instructional objectives; can represent variation and progress over a period of time; cause learner and tutor reflection; and link one educational semester to the next. They are also used to motivate autonomous learning, increase critical thinking skills, create a link between teaching and evaluation, provide a way for learners to value themselves as students, and offer opportunities for peer-supported development through constant interaction and exchange of ideas both synchronously and asynchronously in educational settings (Shin, 2013).

1.1.1 Characteristics of Successful Writing E-Portfolios

E-portfolios have proved to be helpful in writing instruction and assessment, but as research shows, there is not a clear procedure for constructing and assessing tasks in e-portfolios. Instructors and peers need to know what they are looking for in students' stored works. Hence, a systematic comparison of the learners' performance is required in e-portfolios, which is not achieved unless we provide a framework for this purpose (Shin, 2013, p.11). This framework is needed to give the teachers and the peers a schema for thinking about the students' performance. This is mostly important "when e-portfolios are intended to be used as a formative assessment instrument" (Shin, 2013, p.11).

In writing e-portfolios, learners are required to assess their own and their friends' writing drafts in the writing process; however, they are not introduced to any specific criteria to do so. Self-, peer-, and teacher-assessment as the important components of writing e-portfolios are also addressed in ESL/EFL writing instruction. Additionally, the summative assessment of the writing drafts by the teachers causes the learners not to experience recursive learning. Hence, the learners mainly deal with the conventional aspects of writing ignoring the other qualities of it, such as content, organization and vocabulary, which finally results in their inability to improve their own writing skills. To resolve this issue, analytic traits of writing, could intervene in the writing e-portfolios in conjunction with the other components of e-portfolios in improving the writing skills of the EFL learners.

The analytic traits of writing are the common characteristics or qualities of good writing, functioning as the shared understanding between teachers and students, and enabling both to assess drafts of writing analytically. Content as the details and focus of writing, Organization as the internal structure, and Vocabulary as the precise language and phrasing are among the analytic writing traits (NWREL, 2010). By introducing these writing traits, the teacher enables the students to use the appropriate learning strategies in their peer and self-assessments. They can also provide the teacher with

analytic scales to play both formative and summative roles in the writing process. Through sharing the stipulated criteria of analytic traits with students, tutors let them receive the power to differentiate a good writing from bad ones and gain power to apply criteria to improve and judge their own writing performance (Arter & Spandel, 1992).

1.2 Statement of the Problem

Considering the general agreement about the significance of learning to write in EFL, it is worrying to see that, as most scholars and instructors agree, learners are unable to write well (Amiran & Mann, 1982). Gray (2004) believes that EFL learners usually find it difficult to express their intended meaning through writing in English as a result of ineffective instruction and direct grammar correction of teachers. The conditions become worse for EFL students as they move to continue their studies in English speaking or ESL contexts. This sudden change of context along with the lack of appropriate means of English learning in their home countries (Hasani, 2003 as cited in Alifatemi, 2008) is typically putting these learners in an anxiety-provoking situation, where they are unable to communicate effectively in the new setting resulting in their inability to improve their performance in different skill areas, especially in writing (Matsuda & Gobel, 2004).

Research has shown that using an e-portfolio in the classroom overcomes the difficulty of learning writing under the ESL/EFL language environment and brings positive effects on students' learning of writing skills while increasing interests in the learning activities (Wick, 2004; Sutherland & Powell, 2007; Kennedy, 2010; Erice & Ertaş, 2011; Joyes & Smallwood, 2012). However, as Shin (2013, p.2) claims thus far, "there has been little or no guidance on how best to utilize specific online resources such as e-portfolios as research, instruction, and assessment tools". Although the development and organization of tasks in an e-portfolio follows certain procedures, so far no definite 'framework' for evaluating the performance of the students systematically has been provided, especially in using electronic portfolios as a tool for formative evaluation (Shin, 2013) which could be done by both teachers and students.

In EFL writing instruction and in writing portfolios, a lack of teacher modeling is observed. Instructors require students to do writing assignments without actually demonstrating the writing process to them (Kowalewski et al., 2002) and providing them with an applicable model of instruction. In writing e-portfolios, students are asked to be involved in the writing process through peer- and self-assessment, but they are not given any specific criteria or scale to do so. At the same time, although instructors evaluate learners' writing drafts, they seldom do so in a way that guides instruction in the writing process or reflects all traits of the writing.

The lack of formative evaluation and feedback is one other aspect of the problem in writing classes. As the learners seldom have any feedback on their writing other than the summative assessment of the instructor, it causes the learners not to experience recursive practice and learning, and focus mainly on the conventional aspects of writing ignoring the other qualities of it, which finally ends in their inability to write well through rethinking and making the necessary changes in their writing.

Teachers and learners in a writing e-portfolio model need to find out ‘what’ to revise, and in the process of writing ‘how’ to revise. Initially, they do not have a concept of all qualities of writing that need to be assessed. The only typical trait of writing noticed by teachers and students in writing classes is ‘conventions’ including grammar and mechanics, the practice of which does not always result in comprehensive learning or mastery of the writing skill. In addition, both teachers and students have no idea about how to do the assessment even if they know about all traits of writing.

Tutors and students in an e-portfolio model call for guidelines, planning tools, and scoring rubrics (Abrami & Barrett, 2005). It is very important to give directions to students in an e-portfolio model on how to deal with their own writings and that of their peers, and this job could be done by introducing the writing traits to them and providing them with the appropriate learning strategies to review and comment on the writings. Analytic writing traits provide both the teacher and the students with some teaching and learning strategies emphasizing not only the mechanical aspects of writing but also the other equally important qualities of it as content, organization, and vocabulary. It is especially true in EFL classes of writing, where according to Ghanbari et al. (2012), there is no reference made to any of the analytic traits or rubrics of writing. However, “the incorporation of e-portfolio systems in colleges is still at an early stage” (Tzeng & Chen, 2012, p.163), and there has not been conducted enough studies on the suitable teaching and learning strategies for writing e-portfolios.

At the same time, although the research emphasizes the role of students in expressing their attitudes towards the changes and new approaches in education (Lam & Lee, 2010; Fullan, 2007; Wetzel & Strudler, 2006), according to Tzeng and Chen (2012), “the literature on e-portfolios has rarely addressed students’ needs and opinions” (p.163), and studies into learner ideas and practices of applying portfolio and e-portfolio models in EFL/ESL situation has been insufficient (Lam & Lee, 2010). Fullan (2007) highlights the role of students in educational change by saying, “Unless they have some meaningful (to them) role in the enterprise, most educational change, indeed most education will fail” (p.170). Based on these studies and in order to appraise the efficiency of e-portfolio models, investigating the learners’ viewpoints on e-portfolio models with their “rich educational potential” is now of high importance (Thanaraj, 2012, p.28).

1.3 Objectives

This study, by taking into account the use of writing portfolios in writing instruction, aimed to explore the implementation of a method of electronic portfolios or e-portfolios. The main objective of the research was to examine the effectiveness of a method of writing e-portfolios using analytic traits to improve the writing skills of Iranian university students in Malaysia. The specific objectives were:

1. to examine the effectiveness of the implementation of a method of writing e-portfolios using analytic traits among Iranian graduate students in a Malaysian public university
2. to examine the effectiveness of the implementation of a method of writing e-portfolios using analytic traits on each of the different traits of writing among Iranian graduate students in a Malaysian public university

3. to explore the attitudes of Iranian graduate students in a Malaysian public university towards the implementation of a method of writing e-portfolios using analytic traits

1.4 Research Questions

The research questions for the study were:

1. Does the implementation of an e-portfolio-based writing method using analytic traits help improve the English writing skills of EFL students in a Malaysian public university?
2. Does the implementation of an e-portfolio-based writing method using analytic traits help improve each quality or trait of writing in EFL students in a Malaysian public university?
3. Does the e-portfolio group using the analytic traits have better writing performance in comparison to the e-portfolio group not using the analytic traits?
4. What are the attitudes EFL students express in the use of e-portfolios and analytic traits in their writing performance?

1.5 Significance of the Study

Writing classes in ESL/EFL contexts, where spontaneous writings of learners are mainly assessed by instructors impressionistically, underestimate the significance of authentic scoring which is achieved in portfolio assessment. This action by either program developers or educators discourages the learners from improving their writing. At the same time, while “most of the literature on portfolio assessment comes from first language contexts” (Weigle, 2002, p.198), not enough attention has been paid to ESL/EFL contexts. Portfolio has a long history in the western societies; as now for instance, nearly 90% of schools and colleges across the United States use portfolios to make decisions especially in teacher preparation programs (Salzman et al., 2002). Portfolios are also extensively used in the European countries as seen in the case of the European Language Portfolio (ELP) to let people document their achievements in language learning and their practice of acquiring and using languages (Little, 2006).

E-portfolios in writing courses provide an opportunity for students to collect samples of their work, to select from their collection those products that, in their judgment, best demonstrate learning over time, to reflect on those products and have the reflections of their peers and teachers in a user-friendly online environment. The portfolio thus begins to “dismantle the traditional division of labor between teacher and student, between assessor and assessee” (Yancey, 1996, p. 261). If a learner as a writer is unable to distinguish a good piece of writing from a bad one, he will also be unable to truly revise and evaluate his own and the other writers’ writings.

E-portfolios, with their specific manipulation of analytic traits of writing, are able to cause the students to think critically on their own and their peers’ writings, which could finally result in the writing skill development of the students. This job is done by providing the students with a set of trait-specific strategies to do self and peer-assessment. However, in EFL writing classes, there is usually no reference made to any of the analytic traits or rubrics of writing (Ghanbari et al., 2012). The prospect of

electronic portfolio application in language instruction is therefore quite promising and shows that “electronic portfolios are on the rise and will eventually become the norm rather than the exception” (Galloway, 2007, p.27).

The results of this study could be of interest to EFL learners to improve their writing ability through being involved in an interactive learning environment. The learners could be suggested to apply certain learning strategies in the process of learning to write. The results also provide the writing instructors with certain teaching strategies to apply in their writing e-portfolio courses with the purpose of making fair and constructive decisions on the writing ability of the students. In addition, the teachers in the method used in this study provided the students with the language for thinking and talking about their own and their peers’ writing drafts.

The findings of this study could be appealing to material or textbook developers who want to provide a helpful guide for the instructors to use in their writing classes, as well. The e-portfolios encourage certain teaching and learning strategies which were introduced, implemented, and examined in this research for making improvement in the writing abilities of EFL learners.

Finally, the research outcomes could be of significance to the educational managers and administrators, since nowadays the quality control of educational management is becoming increasingly important for administrators and stakeholders. The effectiveness of writing courses and the amount of efficiency could be determined through the evidence provided by the analytic scales of writing (Nimehchisalem, 2010).

1.6 Limitations

While it was difficult to detect all limitations and weaknesses of the research before carrying it out, the distinct limitations of this study are outlined here.

The first limitation was about not having random selection of the sample in the study due to the inaccessibility to a large number of Iranian students studying at Universiti Putra Malaysia as the target population. In this case, as Brown (2006) emphasized, the findings of the research are ‘transferable’ to the other members in the population rather than ‘generalizable’. It means that the results are not applicable to all Iranian students’ population, rather to the applicants of this study, because the samples were not the representative of all population but conveniently chosen from among the applicants. So, the participants of this research were fully described so as to allow the scholars who read it to make decisions whether the outcomes are ‘transferable’ to the situations that they are dealing with (Brown, 2006).

Also, because of the time and space limitations, this study was planned and conducted in two semesters, and for three groups of students. It could have produced much better results if it could be continued for several semesters and with the participation of more students in different experimental groups. One other pedagogic limitation was the problem of being the only instructor developing e-portfolios in the teaching context (Barrett, 2007). Talking about new ideas and initiating them in educational settings has usually been challenging for practitioners at first. According to Barrett (2007), in such situations, the single teacher faces many unique problems, including no community of support for him.

1.7 Definition of Key Terms

Before reviewing the related literature in the next chapter, the key words related to the study are defined both conceptually and operationally.

1.7.1 E-Portfolio-Based Method

The e-portfolio or electronic portfolio is a web-published collection of a student's works demonstrating his or her learning effort, progress, and achievement (Chang et al., 2005; Paulson et al., 2003) that can be used as a tool for instruction to develop the language skills of the learners. In this research, the e-portfolio refers to writing e-portfolio in the environment of Learning Management System of Claroline, and includes the accomplished writing tasks and the collection of different drafts of a student's writing.

1.7.2 Analytic Traits of Writing

The analytic traits of writing are the common characteristics or qualities of good writing which function as the shared vocabulary for teachers and students (Culham, 2003) enabling both to assess analytically the different aspects of writing as content, organization, vocabulary, and conventions. In this study, they function as a rating scale for the formative assessment of the instructor and as an analytic checklist for the self- and peer-assessment of the learners in the process of writing.

1.7.3 Analytic Assessment

Analytic assessment makes use of analytic traits and rubrics to express "levels of performance for each criterion so the teacher can assess student performance on each criterion" (Mueller, 2012, p.5). In this study, they function as a rating scale for the formative assessment of the instructor and as an analytic checklist for the self- and peer-assessment of the learners in the process of writing.

1.7.4 EFL Students

EFL is the abbreviated form of "English as a Foreign Language". This is mainly used to talk about learners (whose first language is not English) learning English while living in their own country.

1.7.5 Process Scale of Akef & Maftoon (2010)

Process Scale as an analytic rating scale takes into account the different stages of writing and the students' performances in each operationally defined stage of writing process: generating ideas (brainstorming), outlining, drafting, and editing (Akef & Maftoon, 2010). In this research, the Process Scale was used as a formative instruction and assessment tool of student's performance during the writing course, and it assesses the effectiveness of instruction on a continuous basis.

1.7.6 ESL Composition Profile

It is an established analytic writing assessment scale created by Jacobs et al. (1981) which assesses a range of performance across five traits of writing namely, “Content, Organization, Vocabulary, Language use, and Mechanics” (p.91). The 66 pre-tests and 66 post-tests of the learners in this study were all evaluated using this valid scale.



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