

## Portfolio Assessment and Process Writing: Its Effect on EFL Students' L2 Writing

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### Abstract

The current study aimed at investigating the effect of portfolio assessment on Iranian EFL learners' L2 writing proficiency. This study followed a quasi-experimental design. First, a total number of 30 female EFL learners who were learning English at a language institute in Rasht, Iran served as sampling. Oxford Placement Test (2004) was used to ensure the homogeneity of the participants. Then they were randomly divided into two groups: one experimental group (N=15) and one control group (N=15). Portfolio assessment was used to check the students' writing in the experimental group while the control group followed a traditional assessment. After 22 sessions of treatment, two IELTS writing tasks adapted from samples of IELTS writing tests as pre- and post- tests were given to the both groups. The mean scores were compared by running both independent and paired samples *t*-tests to investigate the possible differences between the two groups in terms of their writing proficiency. The results indicated that while the two groups were homogeneous in terms of their writing proficiency before the treatment phase, the experimental group outperformed the control group in the post-writing test.

**Keywords:** portfolio assessment; writing proficiency; writing processes; EFL learner

### INTRODUCTION

A quick review of the history shows that there is a close interrelationship between language teaching and testing in a way that it is impossible to break this bond. Along with the growth of English second language (ESL) teaching and learning, traditional approaches of assessment were applied by most language instructors. However, nowadays there is great interest in focusing on students' hidden ability to be revealed under a stress-free environment.

Over the last decades, the conceptual framework of curriculum and instructional development has been modified into more student-centered communicative approaches

in the classroom. As language teaching has moved in the direction of learner-centered approaches, testing and assessment have begun to incorporate the measures for learner-centered tasks (Brown, 2000). In order to compensate for the limitations of using standardized tests, educational administrators have tried to use a mixture of formal and informal assessment techniques for monitoring students' progress. In effect, there is a growing need for alternative assessments. Although there is no single definition of alternative assessment, there are some labels that can distinguish it from traditional standardized testing (Huerta-Macias, 1995). These labels include performance assessment, authentic assessment, portfolio assessment, informal assessment, contextualized assessment, and assessment by exhibition (Garcia & Pearson, 1994; cited in Huerta-Macias, 1995).

Portfolio assessment, one of the alternative assessment techniques, reveals the integrated form of formal and informal assessment. Hamp-Lyons (1994) labeled portfolio an excellent pedagogical tool interweaving assessment with instruction. The use of portfolio assessment has been considered as a potential answer to the shortcomings of both the indirect writing test and the more direct timed-essay assessment. These regards can be seen as a great evidence for the necessity of applying a new well-organized approach like portfolio assessment in evaluating writing skills.

In traditional method of assessing papers, the teacher is the only reader who edits the paper for grammatical and mechanical mistakes while it contrasts with the sole theory of assessment which states that students need to realize that their paper is their own property.

In writing skill, by making students familiar with using the portfolio approach in the classroom, we can measure their learning progress and real performance, and provide feedback to their shortcomings in a well-organized way. They would also have evidence of their own works which would reflect their actual day-to-day learning activities.

An effective strategy to produce a piece of writing is experiencing writing processes. Monitoring and assessing these writing processes may be dependent on the students' mastery of the writing product skills, and ultimately on proficiency in writing in general. Considering the framework of language teaching and learning, writing skill has been considered the most challenging skill of EFL learners to master. We call writing a difficult task since the writer should be able not only to generate and organize ideas, but also to translate these ideas into a readable text. By writing skill, students would reveal their level of spelling, punctuation, dictation, word selection, grammar usage, mental knowledge etc.

The difficulty with writing skill would be severe if their language proficiency is low. Given the fact that the skills involved in writing are highly complex, EFL learners should consider the process of generating ideas, planning, drafting, redrafting as well as editing that are not assessed in traditional testing. In order to consider the effect of these processes of writing, portfolio assessment continues to become increasingly

widespread in both first and second language writing programs as a means of evaluating writing proficiency.

According to Cooper (1997), the use of portfolio-based assessment is now well-established as a valuable assessment tool. Cooper and Love (2000) state that portfolio based assessment can include evidence from several sources; it can help educators overcome many assessment difficulties, especially in the area of equity and moderation; it provides a richer picture of the student, so it is pedagogically efficient. Hamp-Lyons and Condon (2000) argue that "portfolios provide context, which has long been claimed to be particularly discriminatory against non-native writers" (p.61). Hedge (2000) maintained that portfolio assessment was seen as a more comprehensive collection of students' writing ability than one essay composed under limited conditions. In 2002, Sang and August pointed out that being pressed for the time of writing, students' focus would be directed just to the product issues of writing and they cannot focus on the skills needed for L2 process of writing at the same time. Dysthe (2008) claimed that it seems more logical to evaluate students' writing ability by portfolios instead of only one impromptu timed writing sample of students; portfolio will also provide teachers with a better situation to make informed judgments about students' writing ability. In addition, it enables teachers to provide ongoing feedback that informs both teachers and students.

Despite the potential benefits of portfolios, using writing portfolios is not common in the Iranian EFL context. Students are usually given numerical grades for their final writing assignment which may not be true indicators of their writing ability and the teachers are not in a position to make appropriate judgments about the development of their students as writers.

Considering the process of writing and using portfolio as a method of assessment of learners' writing proficiency, the purpose of this study was to investigate writing ability of students influenced by the portfolio-based assessment. Therefore, the study seeks answers to the following research question.

- Does portfolio assessment have any significant effect on improving learners' writing progress?

## **LITERATURE REVIEW**

### **Portfolio assessment**

Grace (1992) defined "portfolio as a record of the child's process of learning: what the child has learned and how she has gone about learning; how she thinks, questions, analyzes, synthesizes, produces, creates; and how she interacts intellectually, emotionally and socially-with others" (p.1). On the other hand, Sommer (1989) defined assessment as the process of recognizing the students' abilities, needs and weaknesses which shows the teacher how to plan lessons for their needs.

In fact, portfolio assessment is defined as an “ongoing process involving the student and teacher in selecting samples of student work” (Hancock, 1994, p.4) “during a specific period of time [and] according to predetermined criteria” (Birgin, 2003, p.22) to show how much the writing has progressed (Applebee & Langer, 1992; Hancock, 1994) as well as how much the students have put effort into it (Paulson, Paulson & Mayer, 1991). It is also defined as "the procedure used to plan, collect, and analyze the multiple sources of data maintained in the portfolio" (Moya & O'Malley, 1994, p.14).

### **Writing process**

Kroll (1997) argues that the main focus in writing instruction is on the process of creating writing rather than the end product. Therefore, attention has shifted from the finished product to the whole process with its different stages of planning, drafting, revising, and editing. It enables students to talk about their writing at every step of the writing process.

Seow (2002) classified the various activities that occur during writing and identified six major writing processes:

- 1) Planning is a pre-writing activity that stimulates thought for getting started, it deals with the input in long-term memory which then produces a conceptual document as the output. Planning involves generating and organizing ideas in mind, and goal setting activities.
- 2) At the drafting stage, the writers are focused on the fluency of writing and ignore the grammatical accuracy or neatness of the draft. Translating takes the conceptual plan for the document and produces text expressing the planned content.
- 3) In responding, the text produced so far is read with modifications to improve it (revise) or correct errors (proofread). Responding intervenes between drafting and revising. It is the teacher's quick initial reaction to student's drafts. Response can be oral or written.
- 4) Revising includes meta-cognitive processes that link and coordinate planning, translating, and reviewing. Revising is not only checking for language errors, it is to improve global content and the organization of ideas in order to make the writer's intention clearer to the reader.
- 5) Editing involves students in tidying up their texts to prepare the final draft for evaluating by teacher. At this stage students have the chance to edit their grammatical, spelling, dictation, punctuation, accuracy and structural errors and add supportive textual material such as quotation marks, examples. It is a great expectation to ask the students to know where and how to correct every error, but editing to the best of their ability should be done as a course activity before delivering their final work for evaluation. Students need to feel that correction is

the part of the process of making clear and unambiguous communication to an audience.

- 6) Evaluation shows an analytical score to students based on specific aspects of their writing ability or holistic scores based on the global aspects of their texts. Students need to be aware of the criteria for evaluation that should include overall interpretation of the task, audience feeling, relevance and organization of ideas, format of text, structure and grammar, spelling and punctuation, range of vocabulary, and communicational needs. A numerical score or grade should be given based on the purpose of evaluation.

### Rating process

There are four different types of scoring methods for assessing writing: analytic, holistic, primary trait, and multiple traits. Huot (1990) argued that the most common scoring method that has high inter-rater reliability coefficient is holistic scoring which refers to a single grade based on the whole understanding and comprehension of a written text. However, according to Conrad (2001), Hamp-Lyons and Condon (2000) reached the conclusion that it is quite doubtful that a portfolio can be assessed holistically as a single entity. Instead it seems that readers will assess the components of texts *individually* and weigh each of them in the light of others or in comparison to each other's text in order to get to a final decision on the portfolio's quality. It is also clear that readers often do not consider all texts and components of the portfolio equally without having read all of its component, and readers may get to a judgment of a given portfolio's quality without having read all of its parts.

It is clear that designing a rubric for a single sample writing assessment on a given topic is much easier than designing a rubric for describing levels of writing ability on different genres of writing in a portfolio without the standard topics. Specific rubrics can be used only for a few genres of writing while for greater genres of writing the general rubrics should be used. The main problem with a general rubric is that the terms which are used in the descriptors are really hard to define and drawing a clear distinction between the standards of quality in the descriptors is so challenging (Callahan, 1995).

According to Hamp-Lyons and Condon (2000), one main characteristic of making a perfect portfolio assessment is mixing shared and standard criteria among raters and in order to determine the construct validity of the assessment, it is necessary to examine the criteria used by different raters. When raters are eager to use the same criteria for assessment, it can be said that they share the same construct of writing quality and if the raters do not agree in applying the same criteria, there would be a single construct of writing quality and the assessment has no meaning and validity. In other words, "if we do not know what raters are doing and why they are doing it, then we do not know what their ratings mean" (Connor-Linton, 1995, P. 763). It is obviously clear that the scoring procedures used like analytic or holistic scoring as well as the content and format of the scoring have a great role in the way raters assess texts for final outcomes.

## The origin of portfolio concepts

Portfolio is not a new concept in the assessment system. In the constructivist post-method era, assessing the learning process was preferred over testing the outcome as a great change for the incompatibility of product assessment (Moya and O'Mally, 1994). Hedge (2000) believed that assessment and instruction are totally related to each other since assessment is collaborative process for measuring students' ability and gathering enough information which helps teachers to modify and design a more appropriate instructional method.

It is the *alternative assessment* that provides a strong link between teaching and assessing through feedback that teachers provide by monitoring. Self-assessment, portfolio assessment, student designed tests, learner-centered assessment, and project and presentation are some common forms of alternative assessment. They have appeared in reaction to unsatisfactory results of traditional assessment and separation of assessment and teaching. Applying portfolio as an assessment method is considered as one of the most famous alternatives in assessment.

Regarding portfolio planning, it should be mentioned that a portfolio is not a collection of a student's work haphazardly over time. Barton and Collins (1997) pointed out that it is important to decide the purpose, evidence consisting of portfolio, and the assessment criteria in developing a portfolio.

## Conferencing in portfolio

In portfolio assessment strategy, conferencing is being considered as an effective way of sharing and developing assessment. It takes the form of collaborative discussion between the students and the teacher in classroom in order to clarify the real aim of writing process for the students and remove the obstacles of learning. Conferencing can be applied in several forms such as: individual or one by one student, several students in groups, or even the whole class.

According to Farr and Tone (1998), the portfolio conferences give the best chance to both students and teacher to sit down one-to-one and talk about the students' textual mistakes and show them how to write it in a better way.

Conferencing enables students to share their portfolio. It gives time to students and the teacher to exchange their thoughts when the teacher examines the text's content in order to assess the students' improvement. It also gives students a sense of involvement and ownership in learning and assessment processes which is a real step toward learner autonomy while in traditional assessment it was teacher's responsibility to be the owner of work. It can be done on a regular basis through a semester. Since the writing process is the main focus of conferencing, it is required to consider both what the students are going to say and how they are doing that. Conferencing enables the teacher to know their students better to predict the strategies and approaches that the students use in their writing text and language task in order to promote their writing ability. Recording comments of conferencing is an efficient way since it helps the

student recognize their strengths and weaknesses. Moreover, students can experience making real life decisions by conferencing and keeping a portfolio. Ownership of their work

Kroll (1991) stated that conferencing would help the teachers to remove the misunderstanding that the students might have about their written feedback on a text that have been mentioned in the class. In conferencing, the teacher meets with the students individually and should make an atmosphere to confer with students on a one-on-one basis after that the students' written text represented.

The basic pattern of conference is proposed by Graves (1985, p.148), in this way:

- a) The student comments on the draft.
- b) The teacher reads or reviews the draft.
- c) The teacher responds to the student's comments.
- d) The student responds to the teacher's response.

### **Self and peer assessment**

In recent years, interest in the use of nontraditional forms of assessment directs a change from old methods to new ones like focusing on meaning rather than form, emphasizing on process rather than product, and following learner-centered rather than teacher-centered approach. According to Farr and Tone (1994), among the alternative assessments, portfolio combines instruction with assessment that follows self-reflection and self-evaluation. It involves collecting samples to show the improvement through record keeping and conferencing with teachers and peers. It helps the students to assess their own success and change to be a better learner by reflecting on their language learning strategies, what they are learning and how they are learning it. It enables students to be independent learners who have great motivation for progress.

As students are challenging with self-assessment, they learn how to cooperate with other students, share ideas, and ask for help if it is necessary. They need to feel the ownership of their learning process and then go through it by making meaning, revising their understanding, and sharing meaning with others. Peer assessment enables learners to develop skills in learning environment and gives students the chance of being responsible for monitoring, analyzing and evaluating their text in both sides of product and process views. It also helps the students to think more cognitively, be more self-centered, active and flexible learners toward a deep approach, and be social students who can make relationship with group members easily.

### **Advantages of using portfolio assessment**

Portfolio is the most effective system of assessment since students are required to write, but within this requirement, they can select the topic, audience, responders in the

class, revision strategies etc. They are also free to select from their works the pieces they want to include in their portfolios (Gallehr, 1993; cited in Penafiora, 2002).

Hamp-Lyons and Kroll (1996) stated that the fluency of several set of skills would govern the portfolio tests and the main advantage of these kinds of test is that they could be objectively and reliably scored. All dissatisfactions and negative reactions to the traditional indirect writing tests led to the use of more direct assessments in the form of timed-essay exams. However, an initial problem with the essay exams is that they are not as reliable as indirect writing tests in scoring. Another issue is related to the validity of these tests. Other issues concern test design, such as sudden development and time limitations.

Portfolio assessment changed the traditional grading of writing and introduced a new grading system whereby the teacher shares control and works collaboratively with students (Collins, 1992). It increases students' motivation and to give them a sense of autonomous learning (Crosby, 1997). It also gives a more comprehensive portrait of students' writing ability than one essay composed under limited circumstances (Hedge, 2000). Moreover, it helps teachers to provide ongoing feedback that informs both teaching and learning (Dysthe, 2008).

Applebee and Langer (1992) believed that portfolios of students' work suggest one of the best tools for assessment of writing for two reasons: (1) they usually contain a variety of different samples of student work, and (2) they make it easy to separate evaluation from the process of instruction.

In an action research study conducted by Ozturk and Cecen (2007) at Foundation University, in Istanbul, Turkey it was shown that portfolio keeping was beneficial in overcoming writing anxiety, and that experiences with portfolios might affect the participants' future teaching practices positively.

Iran was also the context of some studies which confirmed the significant positive effect of portfolio assessments on overall writing performance (e.g., Elahinia, 2004; Nezakatgoo, 2011; Sharifi & Hassankhah, 2010; Taki & Heidari, 2010), on writing research papers (e.g. Niami's, 2010), on learners' self-assessment, and satisfaction with the method of assessment (e.g. Taki & Heidari, 2010), and on EFL students' Essay writing, overall writing ability, and also on sub-skills of focus, elaboration, organization and vocabulary, and learning of English writing (e.g. Ghoorchaei, Tavakoli, & Nejed Ansari, 2010)

Hamp-Lyosn and Condon (2000) claim that the "greatest theoretical and practical strength of a portfolio, used as an assessment instrument, is the way it reveals and informs teaching and learning" (p.4). Lee (2001) believed that the portfolio assessment is more student-centered than traditional teaching.

## Techniques for developing portfolio assessment strategy

Hamp-Lyons and Condon (2000) believed that, in portfolio assessment, there was a great need to consider both reliability and validity since without standards for application and results, portfolio assessment will become unfair and it enhances the subjectivity that teachers relate to evaluation. In reliability, raters should consider the real performance rather than scores without any preset criteria. The main problem of reliability in portfolio assessment is inter-rater reliability and consistency of scores since teachers are not used to this new approach of assessment. They also claimed that reliability depended on raters' agreement, and only when there was a high rate of reliability, scores could be considered valid. In fact, when a well-defined scoring guide or rubric was developed by raters, portfolio could be used to support a grade. In their opinion, a well-organized portfolio should have the following characteristics in summary:

- Collection: portfolio should be able to measure the students' progress over different areas and needs to include more than a single sample.
- Range: portfolio assessment asks the students to provide a wide range of topics in different genres to explore their writing ability.
- Context richness: considering the matter of assessment process, students' experiences are vital factor that need to be discovered.
- Delayed evaluation: students are being given another chance to revise their works before the final assessment.
- Selection: students have the right to select their own works for making a portfolio.
- Student-centered control: it is the students' responsibility to learn the points.
- Reflection: students are able to self-assess their texts and reflect on their own works little by little as they go on.
- Improvement: portfolio can reveal the students' growth in a specific area over a great time.
- Development: portfolio exhibits the progress of every piece of text after the treatment and assessment processes.

Farr and Lowe (1991) believe that a good portfolio should include a wide range of student's work and not only the best ones which are picked up by students or teachers. Comments and reflection of teachers should be kept in portfolio. Moreover; students' writing activities are collected in the portfolio, including unfinished projects.

According to O'Malley and Pierce (1996), in portfolio assessment, raters need to be trained to score papers based on a common rubric that includes numerical points for

organization and development, fluency of ideas, description, and mechanics. Moya & O'Malley (1994) introduced five main characteristics of portfolio assessment strategy:

- 1) Comprehensive: the contents of portfolio should reveal a wide range of students' knowledge in different areas and be rich in meaning for audience.
- 2) Systematic: in designing a portfolio, first of all the goal and purpose should be considered and then a careful planning need to be applied.
- 3) Informative: the gathered evidence in portfolio should be as meaningful as possible to teachers, students, parents and everyone else who is involved in this process.
- 4) Tailored: portfolios need to include items that are related to their focus.
- 5) Authentic: portfolios should design activities which are related to real-life situations and this enables the students to write better about tangible topics.

## **METHOD**

### **The Design of the study**

This study followed a quasi-experimental design since the classes were intact groups and it was almost impossible to arrange a true experimental design in language institutes' classroom for the researcher. In order to carry out the experiment of the present study, two classes were randomly selected. One class was assigned to serve as an experimental group (portfolio) and the other class as a control group (non-portfolio). The pretest-posttest results revealed the differences between these two groups. The mean of gained scores of the control and experimental groups were compared and tested for statistical significance. Moreover, the students' progress was revealed through the portfolio they have collected since it was a qualitative study, too.

### **Participants**

Participants, who participated in this study, included 30 female EFL learners. They were divided into two groups (one experimental and one control group). The participants were studying *Summit1* by Sallow and Asher (2006).

Both groups in this study were taught by the same teacher in order to provide the uniformity of instruction; actually. The subjects were learning English at a language institute in Rasht. Their age ranged between 16 and 30. All of them were attending the English class twice a week about 3 hours per week during a semester.

Ten students who had similar characteristics to the main sample in terms of their general foreign language ability also participated in the pilot study.

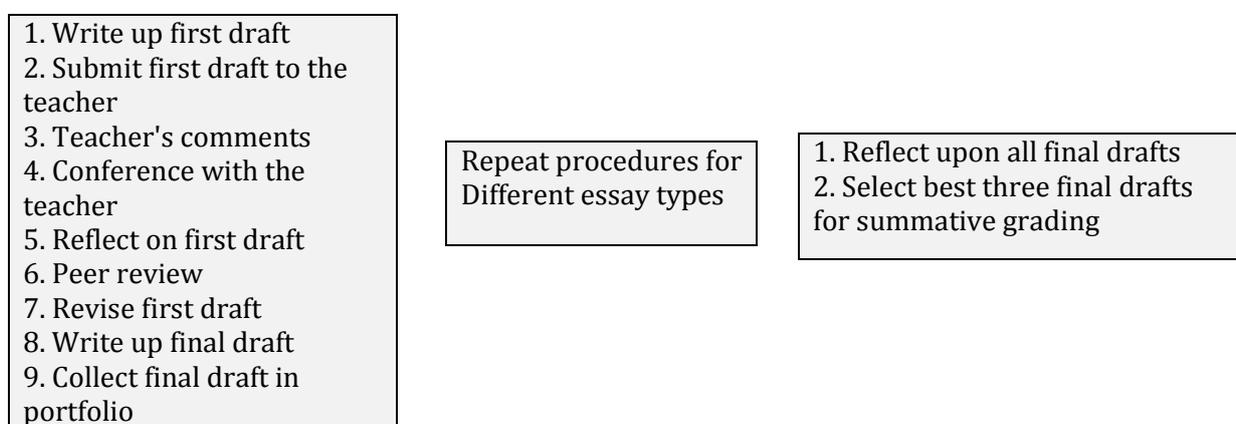
## Instruments and material

### *Measure of L2 proficiency (Oxford placement test)*

Oxford Placement Test (2004) was used to determine the proficiency level of participants. It consists of 100 multiple choice questions of grammar with scores' interpretation sheet in order to determine EFL learners' proficiency level. This test was administered at the first session of both classes before the treatment period in order to ensure the homogeneity of both the experimental and the control group.

### *Portfolio assessment model*

The portfolio assessment model used in this study was based on the "classroom portfolio model" and consisted of three procedures: collection, selection and reflection, as suggested by Hamp-Lyons and Condon (2000).



**Figure 1.** Portfolio assessment model

### *Analytic scoring rubric*

The modified version of Wang and Liao's (2008) as a writing scoring rubric was used in this study, which consisted of five subscales: focus, elaboration, organization, convention and vocabulary, each with five levels.

### *IELTS writing test*

In order to compare the effect of treatment on students' writing performance, two IELTS writing tasks were adapted from samples of IELTS writing tests as pre- and post-tests. Students were given a discussion topic to write about it during 45 minutes. The topics were selected based on the students' interests, age, and intended lessons to explore their ideas. Here, students were supposed to present their point of view with convincing evidence, challenge an alternate point of view, focus on topic and avoid irrelevancies, communicate in a style that is easy to follow and cohesive, and use English accurately and appropriately.

## Data collection and analysis procedure

The portfolio model which was applied in this study was based on the "classroom portfolio model" since its main focus was on learning rather than final assessment and the portfolio procedures composed of collection, selection and reflection, as recommended by Hamp-Lyson and Condon (2000).

The teacher introduced the purpose and design of portfolio assessment to the students of experimental group at the beginning of the semester. The students were supposed to write about different genres of writing such as; comparison and contrast, letter writing, description form and argumentative ones. The book's content provides students with writing structures, format, and some generated ideas related to topic, key words and a writing model which shows students how to write at home.

The students submitted their first draft for having the teacher's comments. The teacher read their texts carefully, and wrote her comments under each assignment. So, the students found out their weaknesses and had the chance to edit and rewrite their drafts for two more times. Their third draft was their final text for getting a mark. Moreover, the students were able to consult with their teacher to have her comments in one-to-one conferencing during the class. They were also asked to have peer assessment, self-assessment or reflect on their writing in the classroom and evaluate their strengths and weaknesses. Then, at home, the students revised, edited and rewrote their texts in response to peer and teacher feedback.

The control group followed traditional assessment. The teacher explained the writing structure of every lesson explicitly. Here, students were asked to write their first and only text for getting a mark. In contrast to experimental group, the students had no chance to edit or rewrite their texts into better ones.

There were two groups of participants: Experimental Group and Control Group. They were divided in two groups of 15 students who received treatment during 22 sessions (11 weeks). The instructional material and methods were the same in both groups by the same teacher.

At the beginning of the experiment, in order to make sure that the participants were at the same level in terms of foreign language writing ability, a standard writing proficiency test from *Oxford placement book* was given as a pre-test. After that, the students in the experimental group were controlled by portfolio based instructional procedures over 22 sessions. Instruction followed the writing as a process approach as far as possible while in the control group, with a traditional (non-portfolio) method of evaluation, the teacher gave comments on each essay or written text and then a score was given at once.

During the semester, the students in both groups wrote on five topics based on each unit of their course book. The students in experimental group submitted their written text to teacher but no score was given at that time. In real, the experimental group students had another chance to revise and resubmit their essay after self- or peer-

assessment according to the feedback they received. They had this chance for all of texts and then they should have submitted their papers after three careful drafts while the control group would write only once on each topic.

In experimental group, the students were encouraged to extensively revise and edit their papers and all drafts, pre-writing and evidences of revision were included in portfolio to help the students to reflect upon their writing processes. After the treatment period, the post-test was given to measure the students' progress. It was a standard essay-writing test, which was selected from *IELTS writing book*. Their writings were checked based on a rubric by two raters who were familiar with the scoring rubrics. Therefore, the inter-rater reliability was checked.

To assess the participants' writing ability, Wang and Liao's (2008) analytical scoring rubrics were used by two raters who were familiar with the scoring rubrics. The correlation between the two raters was examined through running a Pearson correlation to the scores of composition tests.

At the end of the term, a post-test was given to measure the students' progress. To compare the mean scores of control and experimental group, independent and paired samples *t*-tests were applied to the results of the post-test to examine the possible differences between the two groups. The post-test was a standard essay-writing test based on a topic in a specific time 30-45 minutes.

## RESULTS

To ensure the participants were roughly at the same level of general language proficiency, Oxford placement test (OPT) was administered to 30 EFL subjects.

An independent sample *t*-test was run to check whether there was any significant difference between the means of the two groups. As illustrated in Table 1 and Table 2. The two groups turned out to have homogeneous variances,  $F=0.098$ ,  $p= 0.75$ . Therefore, with equal variances assumed, the *t*-test results indicated that there was no significant difference between the mean scores of the two groups on the OPT test, ( $t= 0.14$ ,  $sig=0.88$ ) and thus, the two groups were proven to be homogeneous in terms of their general language proficiency at the beginning of the study.

**Table 1.** Group Statistics for the results of OPT test

	Group	N	Mean	Std. Deviation	Std. Error Mean
OPT score	Experimental	15	134.1333	8.60122	2.22082
	Control	15	133.6667	9.28645	2.39775

**Table 2.** Independent samples *t*-test for the results of OPT test

		Levene's Test for Equality of Variances		<i>t</i> -test for Equality of Means							
		F	Sig.	T	df	Sig. (2-tailed)	Mean Difference	Std. Error Difference	95% Confidence Interval of the Difference		
										Lower	Upper
OPT Score	Equal variances assumed	.098	.75	.14	28	.88	.466	3.26	-6.22	7.16	
	Equal variances not assumed			.14	27.8	.88	.466	3.26	-6.22	7.16	

Before running the statistical tests including independent samples *t*-test, Skewness analysis was done to check the normality assumption. The results of the Skewness analysis, as it is displayed in Table 3, obtained by dividing the statistic of Skewness by the standard error revealed that the assumption of normality was observed in the distribution of the scores (-.956 for the pretest scores of the experimental group, -.776 for the posttest scores of the experimental group, -.199 for the pretest scores of the control group, .533 for the posttest scores of the control group, -.224 for the OPT scores of the experimental group, and -.504 for the OPT scores of the control group ). The results indicate that the distribution is symmetric.

**Table 3.** The results of the Skewness analysis

		Pre-test scores (experimental group)	Post-test scores (experimental group)	Pretest scores (control group)	Posttest scores (control group)	OPT scores (experimental group)	OPT scores (control group)
N	Valid	15	15	15	15	15	15
	Missing	0	0	0	0	0	0
Mean		62.1333	88.3667	61.4000	66.3333	134.1333	133.6667
Std. Deviation		11.21298	6.05176	13.42067	12.96929	8.60122	9.28645
Skewness		-.956	-.776	-.199	.533	-.224	-.504
Std. Error of Skewness		.580	.580	.580	.580	.580	.580
Sum		932.00	1325.50	921.00	995.00	2012.00	2005.00

The measure of inter-rater reliability for the two raters is reported in table no 4, 5, 6, and 7. The Pearson correlation provides the overall agreement of the two primary raters. The inter rater reliability measured by the Pearson correlation for pre-test scores of the experimental and control groups were 0.984 and 0.990 respectively; those for post-test scores of the experimental and control groups were 0.950 and 0.951 respectively, which were all considered to be acceptable.

**Table 4.** Inter rater Correlation for the pre-test scores of the experimental group

		Rater 2 pre-test experimental
Rater 1 pre-test experimental group	Pearson Correlation	.984**
	Sig. (2-tailed)	.000
	N	15

\*\* . Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed).

**Table 5.** Inter rater Correlation for the pre-test scores of the control group

		Rater 2 pretest control
Rater 1 pre-test control group	Pearson Correlation	.990**
	Sig. (2-tailed)	.000
	N	15

\*\* . Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed).

**Table 6.** Inter rater Correlation for the post-test scores of the experimental group

		Rater 2 posttest experimental
Rater 1 post-test experimental group	Pearson Correlation	.950**
	Sig. (2-tailed)	.000
	N	15

\*\* . Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed).

**Table 7.** Inter rater Correlation for the post-test scores of the control group

		rater2posttestcontrol
Rater 1 posttest control	Pearson Correlation	.951**
	Sig. (2-tailed)	.000
	N	15

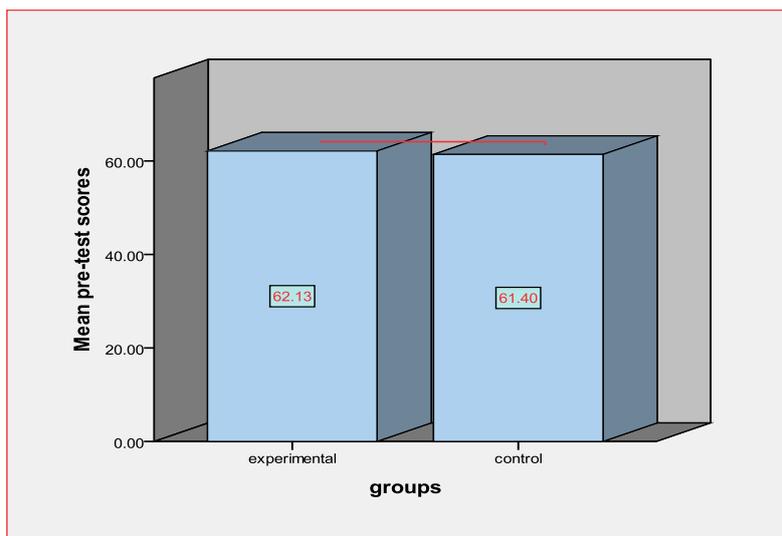
\*\* . Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed).

As the tables of inter rater correlation show, there was a strong correlation between the two raters' scores both for the pre and post-test of writing test of the two groups ( $p \leq .05$ ). Given the similarity of ratings by the two raters, the average of the two raters' scores was used as the respondent's final writing score.

**Table 8.** Group Statistics for the pre- test scores of the control and experimental groups

		Group	N	Mean	Std. Deviation	Std. Error Mean
Pre-test scores	Experimental		15	62.1333	11.21298	2.89518
	Control		15	61.4000	13.42067	3.46520

Table 8 shows that there is no significant difference between the mean scores of the two groups in pretest of writing proficiency ( $62.1333 - 61.4000 = 0.7333$ ), that is: the control and experimental groups were almost at the same level of proficiency *in terms of writing ability* in the administered writing test at the beginning of the study.



**Figure 2.** The comparison between the two groups on writing pre-test at the beginning of the study

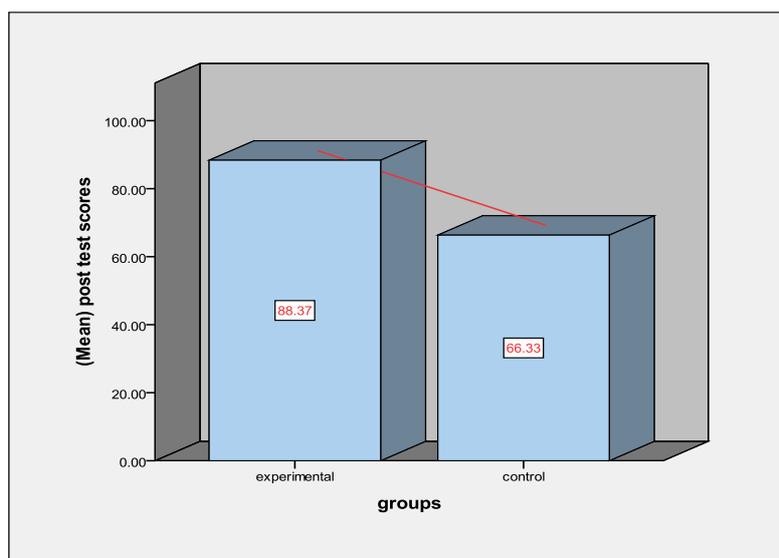
As far as the research question is concerned an independent *t*-test was run to the results of the writing post-test to compare the experimental and control groups. The results revealed that portfolio assessment affects the writing proficiency of the two groups differently ( $t=5.96, 0.00 < .05$ ). In fact, the learners' performance in the experimental group (Mean =88.36) far outweighed that of the control group (Mean =66.33) in posttest (Table 9).

**Table 9.** Group Statistics for the post-test scores of the control and experimental groups

	Group	N	Mean	Std. Deviation	Std. Error Mean
Post-test scores	Experimental	15	88.36	6.05	1.56
	Control	15	66.33	12.96	3.34

**Table 10.** Independent Samples Test for the post- test scores of the control and experimental groups

		Levene's Test for Equality of Variances		t-test for Equality of Means						
		F	Sig.	T	Df	Sig. (2-tailed)	Mean Difference	Std. Error Difference	95% Confidence Interval of the Difference	
									Lower	Upper
Post test scores	Equal variances assumed	7.28	.01	5.96	28	.00	22.03	3.69	14.46	29.60
	Equal variances not assumed			5.96	19.8	.00	22.03	3.69	14.32	29.74



**Figure 3.** The comparison between the two groups on writing post-tests

The results of independent samples *t*-test for the post-test in Table 10 indicated that there was a significant difference between the two groups in their post- test ( $p < .05$ ). The experimental group considerably outperformed the control group in the post-test. The results indicate that portfolio assessment had been effective in improving students' writing proficiency score in the experimental group. In other words, portfolio assessment affects Iranian EFL learners' writing proficiency.

Moreover, in order to investigate the students' progress within groups, two paired *t*-tests were also run, which showed the participants' progress in pre-test and post-test (tables 11 & 12).

**Table 11.** Paired Samples Statistics for the two groups in pre and post tests

		Mean	N	Std. Deviation	Std. Error Mean
Pair 1	pre-test scores (experimental group)	62.13	15	11.21	2.89
	post-test scores (experimental group)	88.36	15	6.05	1.56
Pair 2	Pre-test scores (control group)	61.40	15	13.42	3.46
	Post-test scores (control group)	66.33	15	12.96	3.34

The mean score of the experimental group has been improved from 62.13 in pre- test to 88.36 in post-test; that of the control group has changed from 61.40 in pre- test to 66.33 in post- test.

As depicted in tables 11 and 12, both control and experimental groups had progressed in the post-test. Based on the result of paired *t*-test, this progress is statistically significant only for the experimental group but not for the control group ( $P$  experimental group  $< 0.05$ ,  $P$  control group  $\geq 0.05$ ). In other words, the experimental group made a considerably higher progress as compared to the control group in the post-writing test.

These results support the hypothesis that portfolio assessment has a positive effect on Iranian EFL learners' writing proficiency.

**Table 12.** Paired *t*-test for the two groups in pre and post tests

		Paired Differences					T	df	Sig. (2-tailed)
		Mean	Std. Deviation	Std. Error Mean	95% Confidence Interval of the Difference				
					Lower	Upper			
Pair 1	Pre-test scores (experimental group) & post-test scores (experimental group)	-26.23	15.04	3.88	-34.56	-17.90	-6.75	14	.00
Pair 2	Pre-test scores (control group) & post-test scores (control group)	-4.93	19.14	4.94	-15.53	5.66	-.99	14	.33

## DISCUSSION

In this study, the results of data analysis results indicated that there was a significant difference between the control and experimental groups in terms of their writing proficiency. In other words, participants in the experimental group seemed to have improved their writing proficiency after receiving portfolio assessment. The results are in line with earlier findings in the literature. It is consistent with the findings of most of the studies conducted in Iran, Yurdabakan and Erdogan (2009), and Fahed Al-Serhani's (2007)

The positive effects of portfolios on students' writing might be due to the "opportunities they afford students to become actively involved in assessment and learning" (Genesee & Upshur, 1996, p.99). In line with Murphy (2006), learning processes can be improved if formative assessment procedures are applied appropriately.

Portfolio assessment could be used in writing classes not only to resolve the teaching-testing incoherence (Walker & Perez Riu, 2008) prevalent in most EFL writing classes and but also to improve students' achievement in writing ability.

This method is consistent with what Moya and O'Malley (1994) have suggested that a single measure is incapable of estimating the variety of skills, processes, knowledge and strategies that combine to determine student progress.

In sum, this study demonstrated the formative and collaborative potential of portfolio assessment to help students improve their English writing ability. The method confirmed the impact of writing portfolios on Iranian EFL learners' writing ability. The results showed that portfolio assessment as a process-oriented teaching and assessment tool improved the students' overall writing ability.

## CONCLUSION

Several findings can be summarized from the present study. The students in the portfolio group were actively involved in assessment and learning in the process-

oriented portfolio program. They revisited, reflected on and revised their writing during the term and put their selected pieces of writing in their portfolios.

In line with the constructivist approach in which formative assessment procedures are incorporated into teaching and learning (Hagstorm, 2006), assessment was viewed as a process designed for learning rather than a product separated from learning.

Writing portfolios can be used in EFL classes as a mechanism whereby learning, teaching and assessment are linked. They can be used to improve the development of EFL students' writing ability. Students' writing performances during the term should be the target of evaluation. In fact, assessment should be seen as a process which helps students as they move toward their writing goals.

Based on the findings of the current study, portfolio assessment technique has a significant positive effect on EFL learners' overall writing ability. It is an effective instructional technique as well as assessment tool and can provide evidence of knowledge, and skills. In addition, portfolio assessment can offer authentic information about the progress of students and can be used as a means of helping students to overcome their writing anxiety in foreign or second language learning.

Using portfolio assessment technique allowed students to create a bridge between their teacher and themselves. The teacher can use portfolio assessment technique to analyze student growth and use the information for decision making regarding future instruction. It was also concluded that portfolio can be used as a teaching technique in writing classes to improve students' writing ability. It can be used to encourage and motivate weak writers.

This study suggested the formative potential of portfolio assessment to help students to improve their English writing ability. Students who participated in this investigation significantly favored the portfolio system. They considered the portfolios to be good tools for examining learning processes and learning a foreign language.

Content of student portfolios was mostly chosen and designed in accordance with personal preference, suggesting student ownership and active participation.

Challenges mainly resulted from the tendency toward the traditional testing, difficulties with heterogeneous classes, students' complain, and anxiety over learning deficiencies.

Overall, this study reinforced findings of previous studies (Chen, 1999, 2000; Hsieh, 2000) that portfolios are a dynamic device to facilitate learning and ownership development. Nevertheless, some confusion and doubt emerged during its implementation process, and the development of portfolio pedagogy was constantly inhibited by the traditional procedures.

As with the implementation of most new methods about which students' experience is unknown, the initial level of disappointment was predictable. However, it is commonly agreed by testing experts that portfolio assessment is one of the effective assessment tools that reflects students' performance over a period of time. Additionally, the

relevant literature showed that portfolio was a good tool that helped raise the students' awareness of learning strategies which facilitated their learning process and enhanced their self-directed learning.

This study suggests that nowadays, when the traditional notion of assessment is not so successful, widespread use of portfolio assessment, especially on the high school level, is out of the question for Iranian EFL students.

## IMPLICATIONS

Emerging concerns and issues suggest that when integrating a new assessment system into curriculum, practitioners should take into account that: Portfolio assessment involves much more than the collection and organisation of materials. In fact, it can be an example of promising innovation in learning and teaching.

Teachers should create a professional support so as to sustain innovative pedagogical attempts. Experiments in any innovation contain moments of success and failure, especially at the beginning. Sustaining collaborative support is indispensable. Over the course of this study, the collaborative support system made possible the investigation of portfolio use in the context where traditional testing culture was dominated. Explicit criteria and procedures for peer assessment are needed. Students may be concerned about peer assessment affected by friendship marking or their incapability for the task.

Portfolio assessment technique is a promising authentic assessment technique for EFL writing classes. Through proper application, portfolio assessment technique has the potential to increase instructor professionalism through active and meaningful involvement in student assessment. It can be a perfect assessment tool as well as instructional instrument in EFL educational setting.

Students need specific guidelines and support to engage in critical reflection and evaluation. Although students were required to reflect on their learning constantly in the study, some reflections appeared narrow or shallow. They might need a longer time to perceive their change in learning and acquire critical self-evaluation skills. Small groups can be arranged to ask students to examine one another's portfolio on a regular basis, explain difficult or interesting parts of learning, and discuss and exchange ideas of how to select, reflect on, and collect portfolio entries. Peers are often a more helpful and meaningful source of advice to students. In sum the following implications can be drawn from the present study:

- Portfolio assessment can promote the students' sense of personal involvement and serious responsibility
- Portfolio assessment can provide opportunities for students to use language within day-by-day work
- Portfolio assessment can set clear targets for language learning for the EFL students
- Portfolio assessment can value the student's global learning experience

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