

PORTFOLIO ASSESSMENT -A PEDAGOGIC TOOL TO ENHANCE WRITING SKILLS OF THE LEARNERS

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ABSTRACT

This paper discusses the procedures followed in the classroom in implementing the portfolios in teaching writing. It reports the details of the experiment conducted and the try-out of the strategy for experimental group of Jeppiaar Engineering College conducted in 2014. The paper presents the few methods adopted in implementing portfolios to enhance students' writing and the observations of the study done by the author. The sample of study was Students of Jeppiaar Engineering College,(N-60) who were first year Engineering in Chennai. The results showed that EG group using portfolio assessment showed remarkable improvement in learning writing skills than the CG (N-62)group.

KEYWORDS: *CT-Critical Thinking, CG- Control Group. EG-Experimental Group, N-Sample No of Students*

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INTRODUCTION

Language testing is central to language teaching. (Saraswathi.V.2004) Testing is usually done for two purposes. At first, to provide feedback during the process of teaching for formative purposes and secondly, to assign a grade or score that will indicate the level of the written product for summative purposes.

According to Negari.M.J. (2011), writing is a complicated process, which involves a number of cognitive and meta-cognitive skills, for instance; brainstorming, planning, outlining, organizing, drafting, and revising. Use of portfolios for teaching and testing proved to be advantageous. Researchers in the area feel that portfolios are characterized by mainly four traits- collection, selection, reflection and communication.

According to Yancey (1992), "Portfolios are a collection of student's work, they are the creation of archives based on personal selection and they allow for a reflection for a student on his/ her work there by will communicate something about the writer, about what he or she values, about the context in which the writer has worked, and so on". Yancey (1992) also mentions three essential characteristics of portfolios: Firstly, they are longitudinal in nature. That is, in a portfolio classroom, the teacher sets out quite explicitly to create the time necessary for writers to develop. The portfolios allow for submission of work over a period time. Secondly, portfolios are diverse in content. Thirdly, portfolios are collaborative in ownership as the student as author, works with the teacher and other students as partners to evaluate and rework and select pieces to be submitted. They give both teacher and students a chance to evaluate how much the students' writing has progressed.

Raimes (1983) opines that Portfolios allow for the implementation of the process approach, where the students are trained to generate ideas for writing, think of the purpose and audience, and write multiple drafts in order to present written

products that communicate their own ideas. Portfolio assessment and process writing are considered to be natural partners, and that both show effort and development very clearly.

While the Portfolio approach is used for both evaluation and instruction in L1 contexts, the study proposes to use portfolios for formative purposes and thereby to make suggestions in the feasibility of using them in future for academicians and policy makers. The paper discusses the portfolio techniques in the experimental study in brief.

ORIENTATION

The purpose of orientation was to train the participants to various aspects of process-based approach to writing, to expose them to the writing activities using portfolios, to make them understand the rubrics for peer review. Since the study was done by the teacher instructor, extra care was taken to focus on the needs of the experimental group for completion of the syllabus besides administering the treatment.

Extra coaching was conducted at the start of the course; the participants in the experimental group were given clear instructions on what they (students) have to do in their portfolio classrooms. The teacher instructor arranged for extra coaching after the college hours for the purpose, as reflective practices mentioned in the study needed extra time. Extra training was given to enable the participants to revise and resubmit, provide peer feedback and for self-reflection. The teacher instructor taught the students necessary language items prescribed in the syllabus. As part of orientation, students were explained the procedures involved in the process-based approach to writing by showing the following diagram.

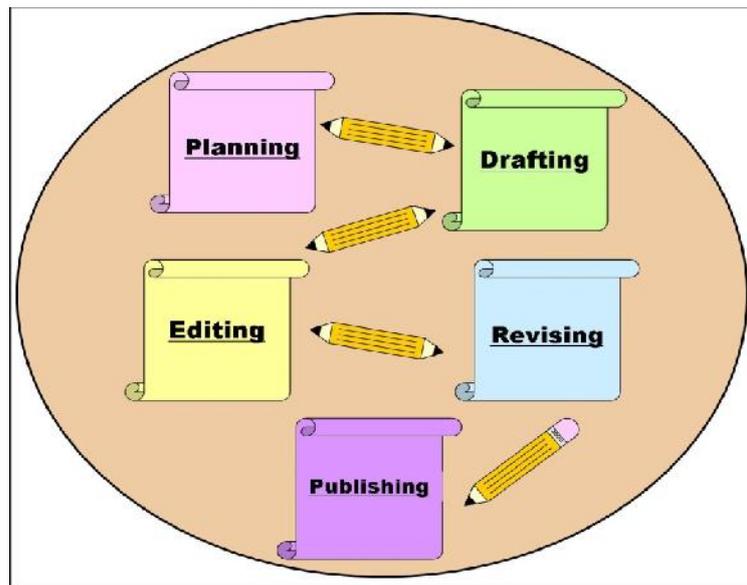


Figure 1

Source: http://academic.luzerne.edu/microcomp/ENG101_MicroComp_WritingProcess.htm

PROCEDURES INVOLVED IN PORTFOLIO STRATEGY

On the first day before starting the course, clear guidelines were given on portfolio strategy. They were asked to write a paragraph on “My first day in college.” All the students started writing the paragraph. Then, the scholar asked the students to think what they can write, and elicited their responses. Then, they were told the importance of generating ideas by brainstorming than writing the paragraph without planning. The importance of brainstorming is taught in class

Brainstorming

- Brainstorming helps one to have as many ideas as possible
- You can take the most relevant ideas and organize them into a paragraph or an article
- After brainstorming, you cannot say, “What should I write?”

Activities Used for Teaching Writing

Think-Pair-Share

The purpose of the activity is for practicing /sharing of ideas and knowledge between participants. First, the participant works individually to think about a given topic, then pairs with a partner to discuss views and finally shares ideas with a group or whole class. Hence, the activity is called Think- Pair-Share.

PROCEDURES IN THE ACTIVITY

- Assign questions or topics to participants
- Participants individually think about the answers or their views on the topic for a stipulated time
- Then participants share ideas with a partner
- Finally, participants share the answers/ideas with the whole class

Peer Dictation Activity was used to create more awareness about critical writing among the students.

This is an activity that very effectively contributes to improvement in all skill areas—reading, writing, speaking and listening. It is particularly useful for practice with paragraph structure; grammatical accuracy and pronunciation. In addition, it can be successfully employed in any class setting with any type of student.

Paired Reading Activity

Paired Reading (also called Partner Reading) encourages students to work together and supports peer-assisted learning and cooperation through reading, listening, and responding to other readers.

Pairing Students & the Roles of Students

The students need to be divided into groups of four, then, they were assigned as pair A and Pair B. The instructor took care of six students of high proficiency in English language with those of less proficiency in the language

- The participants were allowed some time to chat with their new partners; considering presenting them with some "getting to know you" questions to ask and answer with each other
- Materials about procedures portfolio usage in class were presented
- While reading, the partners were encouraged to can help each other with words or understanding,
- Students were asked to answer questions on the materials they read

WRITING PROCESS TEMPLATE

Task: Writing a Paragraph on “Consumption of Alcohol: A Social Evil”

Table 1: Writing Process Template for Task

Objective (for both experimental and Control Groups):	
After reading an article on the opinion of people on using alcohol, the students will be able to write a paragraph on the social evils of consuming alcohol, by making use of cohesive devices with 80 % accuracy. Critical Thinking Objective (for Experimental Group only) : Affective:	
S-1 Thinking Independently	
Cognitive	
S-18 Analyzing or Evaluating Arguments, Interpretations, Beliefs, or Theories Having completed writing a paragraph on given topic, students making use of the rubric given by the teacher, do self-reflection on the written paragraph and also evaluate the work of peers so as to revise and rewrite a new draft of the paragraph by taking appropriate decisions.	
Introduction	Problem Scenario In Tamil Nadu
How will you establish the relevance of the topic and task?	By showing video on Alcohol and You (@ https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=I_OoW_w-uM8) The above link shows how the functioning of liver is affected by too much consumption of alcohol and side effects on the body. Time (10 min)
Pre-Writing	
How will you draw on learners’ prior knowledge about the topic? How will you help learners generate and organize their ideas?	Brainstorming & Class discussion? (byThink/ pair share activity)using T Chart T-chart on Evil Effects of Alcohol For individuals & for the society Time limit (10 min)
Drafting	
How will learners write their first draft? When will learners write their first draft?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • by hand in the class • (How much time for drafting?) • Time: 20 minutes • In the class
Getting Feedback and Revising	
What opportunities will you provide for learners to get feedback and revise their work?	groups read volunteer’s drafts (Control Group- CG) peer review & self-reflection(Experimental group- EG) time: 10 min
Editing and Finalizing	
How will you help the learner edit his/her work to create a final draft?	Peer Editing based on appendices...for EG Revising: Home work
Publishing	
What suggestions will you give that allow learners to publish their work?	Reading written work by the teacher by CG Reading written work by the teacher & placing in portfolios by EG Time allotted: two days after submission and receiving feedback from the instructor

OBSERVATIONS ON CLASSROOM PROCEDURES

The schema of the students was activated through visual input i.e. video. The activity ‘think/pair/share’ activity enabled total participation of the students. It was observed that the learners also shared ideas, and exchanged views by complete involvement, and even by sticking to time limits. The group work and pair work ensured total participation and a lot of language input was ensured though reading, speaking, listening, reading and writing as notes of the peers.

For CG (Control Group), some paragraphs were read out by the students in the classroom. The control group were not involved in peer feedback, conferencing and redrafting in the process of writing paragraph writing. As they were writing the paragraphs, the instructor went around the class, correction any errors whenever needed. But for the EG, peer

feedback was done after writing the first draft in the classroom itself. For the control group, normal teaching was done without the peer feedback and maintaining portfolios. It was observed that many opportunities existed for the experimental group to share their writing with peers and there by allow for constructive feedback. While doing peer-editing, they participants also were made to reflect on their writing too as they become more conscious of the errors that were made.

DISCUSSIONS

Observations on Critical Thinking (CT) Strategies

The students were informed that focus was on improving their CT. At every stage, the experimental group was reminded about Critical Thinking strategies and their written pieces would not be used for formative assessment purposes.

S-1 Thinking Independently

Principle: “Critical thinking is independent thinking, thinking for oneself. Many of our beliefs are acquired at an early age, when we have a strong tendency to form beliefs for irrational reasons In forming new beliefs, critical thinkers do not passively accept the beliefs of others; rather, they thoughtfully form principles of thought and action; they do not mindlessly accept those presented to them. Nor are they unduly influenced by the language of another”.

The above-mentioned strategy was implemented through self-reflection and peer feedback. The EG were trained to listen to the ‘point of view’ (p.o.v) of their peers, but were able to decide what p.o.v to be accepted what needs to be rejected. Some participants realized that their peers are only complimenting them and not seriously correcting to avoid conflict.

S 1 strategy also includes the trait that “.. They evaluate both goals and how to achieve them. They do not accept as true, or reject as false, beliefs they do not understand...Independent thinkers strive to incorporate all known relevant knowledge and insight into their thought and behaviour. They strive to determine for themselves when information is relevant, when to apply a concept, or when to make use of a skill. They are self-monitoring: they catch their own mistakes; they don't need to be told what to do every step of the way.”

When students wrote short self-reflective passages, they justified their reasons for accepting and rejecting peer's feedback. This way, EG were trained in decision making, application of elements of thought in the classrooms.

The affective domain of Blooms Taxonomy (Leslie Owen Wilson online) involves ‘**receiving**’ which refers to the learner's sensitivity to the existence of stimuli – awareness, willingness to receive, or selected attention; and ‘**organization**’, which refers to the learner's internalization of values and beliefs involving (1) the conceptualization of values; and (2) the organization of a value system. As values or beliefs become internalized, the learner organizes them according to priority”. The task not only focussed on cognitive domain of ‘Creating’ a paragraph of the participants in both groups, but for EG cognitive domain was also focussed upon. Besides, these two domains of Blooms Taxonomy, focus on ‘Dimensions of Critical Thought’ was ensured by use of portfolio procedures like peer feedback, self-correction, instructor's feedback and reflective feedback.

Other Observations

Studies showed that it was an important stage for the student writers' to make a transition from (Flower. L &Jays.R,1981) ‘writer-based writing’ of the earlier idea of generating and them- ‘Identifying phase to reader-based’ writing which will constitute the final product. Writers had to think of how to draw the attention of the reader, how to hold their interest and how to maintain interest through the text by a good beginning for keeping the reader interested and a good ending to leave the

reader satisfied. Based on the responses from the EG, it was found that the following points kept the reader interested - free flow of ideas, humor use of idioms, high proficiency words and use of storytelling techniques and quotations while writing.

Observations Based on Feedback from the Instructor

Most language teachers would agree that the learners get demoralized once they see their work corrected with red ink, with a list of suggestions made by the teacher where as a L2 learner can be highly motivated by a single positive remark (Harmer.J. 1998). The feedback for paragraph writing by the teacher focused mostly on coherence and use of cohesive devices.

Based on observation of the involvement of the EG, it was understood that the importance of peer feedback and peer correction in incorporating the affective domain of the students was clear to the students. Both the reader critic and the learner writer discussed the errors and arrived at solutions.

Over all Observations

Implementing Critical thinking strategies and involving the learners in using affective domain was possible for EG. For CG only cognitive domain was focussed upon as the syllabus does not give scope for on the areas mentioned for EG. Student collaboration, interaction leads to improvement of affective domain as internalisation of values was possible as the students were repeatedly exposed to concepts, point of view, reasoning, interpretations based on observation etc., which are important for a critical thinker. After working with portfolio-based writing, EG were more conscious of grammar, spelling and sentence structures.

Since the written scripts of both CG and EG were read by the teacher instructor, there was remarkable improvement shown in the written scripts of the EG in incorporating more ideas, syntax and use of vocabulary. While error codes were followed for CG, the teacher gave overall comments for the EG as research in the area of feedback suggests that constructive feedback is more useful than too much correction. Hence, suggestions like 'focus on subject verb agreement, focus on use of prepositions, focus on right use of conjunctions' were given. The presentation also improved with less scribbling and neat hand writing.

CONCLUSIONS

The students in EG (Experimental Group) showed more enthusiasm in writing and interest in learning to become 'Critical Thinkers'. Some of them wondered why they were not informed about CT (Critical Thinking) strategies at the school level itself. They asked information about links on "Critical Thinking" that can be gone through during their free time. All these observations suggest more involvement of EG by being motivated learners as portfolios enabled them to observe 'how they were progressing'.

Port folios works as a problem-solving strategy to overcome writing problems. It allows recollections of the previous knowledge open for suggestions and evaluate both for self and others. Firstly, during brainstorming, EG was able to collect many ideas. Then EG got detailed teacher feedback and constructive comment. Further, in the peer feedback session, EG exchanged their drafts with peer and they were open to give and receive feedback. Even the weaker learners were looking forward to peer feedback. EG showed remarkable improvement in cohesion, diction, syntax and grammar. Overall, portfolio assessment proves to improve writing skills of EG.

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