

The Effect of Portfolio Assessment on EFL Learners' Expository Writing Ability

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Abstract

The traditional teaching of writing has been the predominant approach in many schools around the world. Second/foreign language (L2) students' writing attempts have been usually assessed by means of a single final exam as the main criterion representative of their writing ability. Recently, however, there has been a shift from the dominant past paradigm to using portfolios as a possible means of language learning and assessment. This study examined the effectiveness of portfolio assessment in L2 learners' expository writing ability. A quasi-experimental research design was employed; two writing classes, including 44 undergraduate EFL students in two universities, constituted the control and experimental groups and expository writing tasks were administered as the pretests and posttests. The control group was instructed through the traditional approach of learning and assessment whereas the experimental group was provided with a portfolio assessment practice. The results of covariance analysis and *t*-tests indicated that the participants in the experimental group outperformed the ones in the control group in terms of their expository writing ability, in general, and the subskills of focus, support, and organization in particular. But, the performance of the two groups in the subskills of vocabulary and convention in writing was not significantly different.

Keywords: *portfolio assessment, L2 learning, expository writing*

1. Introduction

When thinking about language learning and teaching, one might define proficiency as listening to foreign speech, speaking in a foreign language, or reading foreign texts. But, nowadays, writing plays an absolutely important role in foreign language education. A person who is proficient in speaking, listening to, and reading in a foreign language, is not known to be a good language learner unless he or she has a decent writing ability in that foreign language. It is one powerful form of communication; it develops critical thinking (Tierney, Soter, O'Flahavan, & McGinley, 1989) and facilitates learning (Deshler, Palincsar, Biancarosa, & Nair, 2007). Also, language learners' academic achievement across content areas is often dependent on their ability

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to express knowledge through written expressions (Mason, Benedek-Wood, & Valasa, 2009). This is the reason why writing has gained a lot of importance in learning and teaching second/foreign languages.

Due to the indispensable role that writing as a language skill plays in foreign/second language (L2) learning and teaching, the way it is taught or assessed is of utmost importance. Writing used to be conceived of as a product-oriented approach; L2 teachers taught their students the principles and techniques of writing in a foreign language and they would focus on only the end product which was a completed piece of writing (Nunan, 2003). And, what L2 students submitted as the final product was supposed to be free of any kind of flaws and teachers would base their final assessment on this final draft. Weigle (2002) considers this approach to writing assessment a limited approach in that, first, it is not wise to assess students' writing ability based on only one draft that is written under timed conditions and about an unfamiliar topic. Second, he argues that a single piece of writing cannot serve as a good indicator of students' overall writing ability. Therefore, writing gradually came to be thought of as a process rather than a final product in the mid-1970s, when teachers realized the importance of the process of writing in a foreign language (Weigle, 2002). In the process approach, according to Nunan (2003), the focus is on how texts are created and not on the end product.

Undoubtedly, with this shift of thought on the nature of writing, new methods were needed to assess students' writing ability. These methods have been named as *alternative* or *authentic* methods of writing assessment (Tabatabaei & Assefi, 2012). In addition to the two labels for these new methods of assessment, as Hamayan (1995) points out, other labels such as *informal* assessment, *direct* assessment, *performance* assessment, and *descriptive* assessment have been used. One type of authentic assessment is portfolio assessment. According to Brown (2005), "portfolios are any procedures that require students to collect samples of their second language use (e.g., compositions, audio recording, and video clips) into a box or folder for examination at some time in the future by peers, parents, outsiders, etc" (p. 62). He also states that portfolios were developed as showcases for works done by photographers, painters, and architects so that employers could see their products. However, recently portfolios have been used for educational purposes and, more specifically, for language education. As a result, "in terms of writing assessment, a portfolio is a collection of written texts written for different purposes over a period of time" (Weigle, 2002, p. 198).

Just like any other methods of assessment, portfolios assessment is also **surrounded by** controversy. On the positive side, as Venn (2000, cited in Scherba de Valenzuela, 2002) states, portfolio assessment enhances students' self-evaluation and expands their critical thinking. Also, portfolios assessment makes it possible to measure students' performance through genuine samples of their work and makes the process of measurement more flexible. In addition, it gives the teachers the opportunity to measure the students' progress by utilizing different sorts of data and materials. On the negative side, the reliability of portfolio assessment is low due to the fact that portfolios are scored and rated subjectively. Besides, managing a bulk of portfolios is not easy for teachers to handle. In fact, the time management for portfolio conferences is difficult and it might limit the time which could be spent on other instructional activities. In light of this issue, the current study aims at investigating the effectiveness of portfolio assessment on Iranian undergraduate L2 students' expository writing in order to find a balance between the advantages and the disadvantages of portfolio writing assessment.

2. Review of Literature

As portfolio assessment has gained importance in language education, more and more attention has been paid to this method of writing assessment and researchers have started to contemplate on the effectiveness of this method of writing assessment in the last few decades. In English as a foreign language (EFL) contexts, several studies have been carried out to investigate the effectiveness of portfolio assessment and the students' attitudes towards this method of assessment. For instance, Aly (2002) conducted a study at Shams University in Cairo on 40 male and female English student teachers. The researcher utilized a student questionnaire and a pre-post writing composition test. Teacher-student conferencing was used in the writing workshops for the students to receive feedback on their writings. The findings showed that using a writing workshop approach could improve the students' writing performance.

Also, Wang and Liao (2008) investigated whether portfolio assessment had any positive effects on the English writing of 88 students of vocational and technological education at Chung-Shan Medical University, Taiwan, and whether students under portfolio assessment had higher satisfaction. The students in the experimental group were assessed using the portfolio program whereas the students in the control group received the traditional way of teaching and assessment of their writing. The researchers also used a satisfaction questionnaire to figure out the degree of students' satisfaction of the writing courses. The overall results of the study showed that the students under portfolio assessment had higher satisfaction than those in the control group. It was also concluded that portfolio assessment had a significant positive effect on students' writing ability.

In another study, Apple and Shimo (2004) investigated Japanese students' responses to portfolio assessment through a self-report questionnaire. The primary means of conducting the study were the students' self-selected portfolios. Sixty-one students at two universities, all attending English writing classes, participated in the study. Results indicated that portfolio assessment had a positive effect on the students' writing performance and they favored portfolio assessment as a means of improving their expressive and compositional writing ability. In addition, Hirvela and Sweetland (2005) reported two case studies which investigated student experiences with portfolios in two ESL writing classes. The findings showed that the subjects liked the idea of portfolios, but they did not endorse their use as employed in those writing courses. Furthermore, Yurdabakan and Erdogan (2009) noted that portfolio assessment had an effect on reading, listening and writing of students. The study also aimed at analyzing the opinions of the students on portfolio assessment. The researchers randomly selected two groups of students studying in a secondary school language preparatory class. The students were assigned into two control and experimental groups. The findings showed that portfolio assessment had a significant effect on students' writing, but there was not any significant influence on their reading and listening. In addition, the researchers concluded that portfolio assessment increased the responsibility and motivation of the students, but the participant students did not favor portfolio assessment because it was time consuming and difficult.

In the EFL context of Iran, Nowruzi Khiabani and Nafisi (2010) looked into the effectiveness of portfolio assessment on reading comprehension and academic motivation of undergraduate students of English language. The participants in the control group received the

traditional teacher-directed instruction but the participants in the experimental group were asked to develop a portfolio consisting of 10 self-designed concept maps based on the content of the readings during the course of instruction. Also, an academic motivation questionnaire was administered to the students in both groups. The findings indicated a significant positive effect on the development of the concept maps and on the motivation level of the students. Also, Tabatabaie and Assefi (2012) researched the impact of portfolio assessment technique on the writing performance of 40 EFL learners. The results showed that the students in the experimental group, having the portfolio assessment technique, outperformed the students in the control group in their overall writing performance.

In sum, some empirical research on the portfolio assessment generally supports the role that portfolio plays in enhancing students' language skills such as L2 reading and writing in spite of some practical shortcomings. However, little research has concentrated on the effect of portfolio assessment on EFL students' expository writing performance. The present study aims at filling this existing gap in the EFL context of Iran.

3. Purpose of the study

One of the essential prerequisites of achieving proficiency in any language is the ability to write well in that language. In order to be a proficient writer in English, or any other languages, a learner should demonstrate a good command of the lexicon and many grammatical rules. Besides, as L2 students progress academically, expository writing, as a fundamental social interaction skill, becomes increasingly important. Therefore, it is important to find ways to increase their ability to perform effectively in expository writing. Recently, portfolio assessment techniques, among other alternative ways of writing assessment, have received a great deal of attention as a useful framework for both assessing and improving L2 learner's writing ability. Some researchers (e.g., Gussie & Wright, 1999; Hirvela & Sweetland, 2005; Tabatabaie & Assefi, 2012) have underscored the progressive, widespread adoption of portfolio instruments for assessing the students' writing abilities. However, most of what is found in the literature on portfolio assessment pertain to first language writing (Hamp-Lyons, 2006) and those remaining studies that deal with this concept within the realm of second language learning are mainly anecdotal (Gottlieb, 2000). Therefore, a need for further quantitative research providing some experiential evidence on the effect of portfolio assessment on L2 learners' writing ability is strongly felt, particularly in EFL contexts. In an EFL context such as that of Iran, many students experience difficulties with the writing, developing content, arranging their thoughts in a coherent way, setting up goals for writing, and managing the mechanics of writing. This study thus aims at investigating the effect of portfolio assessment on Iranian undergraduate EFL students' expository writing ability. In light of the above issues the following questions are addressed in the present study:

1. Does portfolio assessment contribute to the EFL learners' achievement of expository writing ability?
2. Does portfolio assessment affect the EFL learners' expository writing ability in terms of subskills of focus, support, organization, convention, and vocabulary?

4. Methodology

4.1. Participants

The study was conducted with 44 undergraduate Iranian EFL students at two universities, that is, Sheikh Bahae and Safahan universities, in Isfahan. They were all junior students who had passed a course on paragraph writing and were having a course on advanced writing. Their age range was from 20 to 25. Two classes, each with 22 male and female EFL students constituted the control and experimental groups of this study. All the participants, who were taught by the same instructor, were at the third year of study at the university and were homogenous in terms of the scores on the Oxford Placement Test (OPT). Meanwhile, since complete randomization was not possible, the present study, which had a quasi-experimental design, used analysis of covariance as a statistical technique to factor out the effects of possible pre-existing differences in writing ability.

4.2. Instruments

This study made use of two instruments for data collection: Oxford Placement Test (OPT, 2004), and two timed-writing essays. OPT includes 200 items, measuring listening as well as grammar, vocabulary and reading skills. The test provides a reliable and efficient means of placing students at different levels of language ability. Allen (2004), the developer of the test, claims that the OPT is capable of being utilized with any number of students of English to ensure efficient, reliable and accurate grading and placing of students into classes at all levels from elementary to advanced. According to Allen, the OPT has been calibrated against the proficiency levels based on the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages (CEFR), the Cambridge ESOL Examinations, and other major international examinations. Having utilized the OPT to determine proficiency level of participants, Birjandi and Sayyari (2010) also established the concurrent validity of the OPT with TOEFL scores. The results revealed a high correlation between the OPT and TOEFL scores. The 90-minute essays included two topics, not requiring any special knowledge. For one of them, the participants were asked to write an essay on *the reasons they study English*, and for the other, they were asked to write an essay on *the reasons of immigration to foreign countries*. Care was taken to make the titles of the essays as similar as possible in terms of difficulty.

4.3. Procedure

Due to some practical problems, random selection was not possible; thus, two intact classes from the above mentioned universities were selected. They enrolled in an advanced English writing course in their third year of study in the above-mentioned universities. First, the OPT was administered to them ($n = 54$); ten students (i.e., outliers) who received extreme scores, based on the stem-and-leaf plot of the OPT scores, were excluded from further data analysis. Those who enrolled at Sheikh Bahae University were randomly assigned as the control group ($n = 22$) and those at Safahan University were assigned as the experimental one ($n = 22$). To ensure the comparability of the participants in the two groups, the Levene's test of equality of variance was also run on the OPT scores of the participants in both groups ($F = .120, p > .05$). Moreover, to make sure that there was no significant difference between the students on the variables investigated in the study, the participants in both groups were pretested with an expository writing essay test at the beginning of the experiment; *t-test* results indicated no statistically significant difference between the two groups ($t(42) = -.130, p = .897$).

They were asked to write a 90-minute five-paragraph essay on a topic, i.e. *The Reasons I Study English*). All the compositions, then, were scored by two raters following the writing scoring rubric from Wang and Liao (2008, see Appendix). The five criteria of focus, support, organization, convention, and vocabulary were the main factors in the scoring process. The first criterion, that is, focus, deals with paying attention to or addressing the writing task. The second concept, support, pertains to the extent to which one can support or elaborate on the writing topic. While the organization involves the logical and smooth flow of ideas in a piece of writing, the convention criterion is related to such issues as spelling, grammar and punctuation. The last concept within the scale embraces one's knowledge of English vocabulary, idioms and verb forms which is identified as vocabulary. It is worth mentioning that each of these subscales had five levels with equal weight. Therefore, the lowest and highest scores in each subscale were 1 and 5 respectively. Added up totally, the scores of all these five subscale yielded the total score of 5 as the minimum score and 25 as the maximum score for each essay. Meanwhile, to ensure that appropriate level of inter-rater reliability was achieved, the Pearson correlation coefficient was put in use. The results indicated a correlation coefficient of 0.83. To increase the dependability of scoring, 12 pretest writing test tasks were scored again by each rater and analyzed for intra-rater reliability using the Pearson correlation coefficient. The obtained results suggested a 0.97 intra-rater correlation for each rater. For further analysis, each participant's score was considered to be the mean of those scores given by two raters based on the mentioned scale.

At the beginning of the treatment, the students in experimental group were provided with some information about the nature and goal of portfolio assessment. The instruction in portfolio class mainly consisted of three stages of collection, selection, and reflection. The students were asked to write some expository essays developing different topics using methods such as comparison-and-contrasts, description, and classification during the course. After writing the first draft of an essay, each EFL student was asked to type and email the essay to the instructor individually for perusal during a specified time span. The instructor, first of all, assessed each student's first draft based on the Wang and Liao's (2008) writing scoring rubric. Taking into account the five criteria of focus, support, organization, convention, and vocabulary, the instructor then wrote some comments on different parts of the written task and emailed to the students within a week to be reviewed by the participants again. The purpose was to gain a clear insight of their strengths and shortcomings on the written tasks. The students were also recommended to reflect upon each of their strong and weak points, to get some suggestions from their classmates, and to revise and redraft their first writing attempts alone at home. Next session, they were to make a print of their revised drafts and bring them to the class. The instructor examined each revised draft and gave some more feedback, when necessary. The goal was to minimize the possibility of making the same previous mistakes in their next writing tasks.

The instructor kept a separate folder for each student containing all their first and revised drafts of their writing attempts. To observe the students' progress in their writing ability, these folders were progressively checked by the instructor during the course. The above steps were taken to improve gains in L2 writing since the primary main purpose of portfolios, according to Hirvela and Sweetland (2005), should be for the sake of learning rather than assessment objectives.

In contrast, the students in the control group received traditional assessment. The teacher provided them with some explicit instructions on the outline and general format of an essay. They were taught to specify and develop the thesis statement, body paragraphs, conclusion, or different parts of expository essays. Every student was to write an essay for each session making use of the instructed materials and some methods as comparison-and-contrast, and classification for developing the paragraphs within the essay, description of scenes and cause-and-effect relationship. The teacher, next, examined each student's written attempt, gave the student some feedback on the spot, and finally assigned a score to each composition. In contrast to the experimental group, the students in control group were not asked to reflect upon their drafts, have their peer revise drafts, or redraft their writing tasks.

At the end of the course, to examine the effectiveness of portfolio assessment in promoting the students' writing ability in experimental group, the participants in both groups were posttested with an expository essay on a topic (i.e. *Reasons of Immigration to Foreign Countries*) different from that of the pretest. The same version of scoring rubric from Wang and Liao (2008) was used by the two raters to score the posttest essays. The Pearson correlation coefficient was implemented to ascertain the level of inter-rater reliability. The results yielded the correlation index of 0.92, which was high. Meanwhile, the average of two scores assigned by two raters was reported for each participant's final score on the posttest.

Meanwhile, given pretest-posttest design of study, analysis of covariance (ANCOVA) was used as a statistical tool for data analysis. According to Larsen-Hall (2010, p. 357), "such a technique may be useful when you assume that there is some external factor, such as pre-test ... which will affect how your students will perform on the response variable". ANCOVA is like repeated-measures or mixed-effect procedures and can "reduce the amount of variability in the model that is unexplained" (p. 357).

5. Results

The first concern of this study was to explore the possible effect of portfolio assessment on the EFL undergraduate students' expository writing ability, compared with the traditional practice. Various statistical analyses including descriptive and inferential statistics were carried out to fulfill such purposes. Table 1 shows the descriptive statistics of expository writing scores in both control and experimental groups of the study.

Table 1. *Descriptive Statistics of Control and Experimental Groups*

	Pretest				Posttest			
	Min	Max	Mean	Std. dev.	Min	Max	Mean	Std. dev.
Cont.	10.00	18.00	13.36	1.79	11.00	21.50	15.77	2.41
Exp.	11.50	17.00	14.75	1.24	15.50	23.50	19.25	1.96

Cont. = Control; Exp. = Experimental

As demonstrated in Table 1, the experimental group received a higher mean score than the control one on both pretest and posttest, but there was not a considerable difference between the mean scores of experimental and control group in the pretest as compared with those of the posttest.

To evaluate the significance of this difference between two groups, one-way ANCOVA was carried out. The independent variable was the type of intervention (traditional vs. portfolio assessment), and the dependent variable was EFL students' essay scores in the posttest. Moreover, the students' pretest scores were included as the covariate in the analysis to control for preexisting writing ability differences between the experimental and control groups. Preliminary checks were conducted to ascertain no violation of the assumptions such as normality, linearity, and homogeneity of regression slopes. After adjusting for pre-intervention writing scores, a significant difference was found between the two groups on the posttest essay scores $F(1, 41) = 19.45$, $*p < .05$, partial eta squared = .32. That is to say, the portfolio assessment in the experimental group improved the EFL undergraduate students' expository writing scores and there was a large effect size for the group difference on the posttest.

The second research question of the study concerned the possible effect of portfolio assessment on the EFL students' writing abilities in terms of focus, support, organization, convention, and vocabulary. Table 2 shows the descriptive statistics (mean and standard deviations) of the writing scores on the subskills in the two groups of the study.

Table 2. *Descriptive Statistics of Writing Scores on the Subskills*

Subskill	Groups	Pretest				Posttest			
		Min	Max	Mean	Std. dev.	Min	Max	Mean	Std. dev.
Focus	Con.	1.50	4.00	2.61	.671	2.00	5.00	3.20	.67
	Exp.	2.00	3.50	3.00	.267	3.00	5.00	4.06	.54
Support	Con.	2.00	4.00	2.68	.546	2.00	5.00	3.27	.61
	Exp.	2.50	3.50	3.04	.305	3.00	5.00	4.15	.50
Organization	Con.	2.00	4.00	2.70	.549	2.50	4.00	3.38	.53
	Exp.	2.50	4.00	3.25	.370	4.00	5.00	4.65	.36
Convention	Con.	2.00	3.50	2.77	.505	2.00	4.00	3.02	.54
	Exp.	2.00	3.50	2.63	.516	2.00	4.00	3.13	.62
Vocabulary	Con.	2.00	3.50	2.59	.503	2.00	3.50	2.90	.50
	Exp.	2.00	3.50	2.84	.358	2.50	5.00	3.25	.61

According to Table 2, the highest mean score on the writing subskill was related to 'organization' in both pretest (3.25) and posttest (4.65) in the experimental group. Both were above the possible median score (2.5) on a 5-point scale. And, the lowest mean score on the writing subskill was related to 'vocabulary' in both pretest (2.59) and posttest (2.90) in the control group. Also, the difference between the subskill mean scores of control and experimental groups in the pretest was not large. However, comparing these means of the pretest and posttest,

it becomes evident that mean scores in the posttest were higher than the ones in the pretest in the aforementioned subskills. This result supports the above results in the ANCOVA. That is to say, the instructions of the study improved the EFL participants' writing scores.

In order to see whether there was any significant difference in the mean scores, i.e. improvement, between the control and experimental groups in the posttest, independent samples *t*-tests were conducted on the mean scores of subskills. The results are summarized in Table 3.

Table 3. Independent Samples *t* Tests for the Writing Subskills Between the Two Groups

Subskill	<i>t</i>	<i>df</i>	<i>Sig.</i> ^a	Mean Difference	Std. Error Difference	95% Confidence Interval	
						Lower	Upper
Focus	4.71	42	.000	.863	.183	.494	1.23
Support	5.27	42	.000	.886	.168	.547	1.22
Organization	9.29	36.7	.000	1.272	.136	.995	1.55
Convention	.645	42	.522	.113	.176	-.241	.469
Vocabulary	2.01	42	.051	.340	.168	-.000	.681

^a two-tailed at .05

As displayed in Table 3, the differences between the mean scores of the experimental and control groups in the subskills of 'focus' ($t(42) = 4.71, *p < .05$), 'support' ($t(42) = 5.27, *p < .05$), and 'organization' ($t(36.7) = 9.29, *p < .05$) were statistically significant. The magnitude of mean differences for the subskills of focus, support, and organization was large with eta squared values of 0.34, 0.39, and .067, respectively. But, the mean differences between the experimental and control groups were not significant for the subskills of 'convention' ($t(42) = .645, p = .522$), and 'vocabulary' ($t(42) = 2.01, p = .051$). In sum, the experimental group outperformed the control group in terms of subskills of focus, support, and organization.

6. Discussion

The results of the current study indicate that both traditional (nonportfolio assessment) and portfolio assessment practice improved the expository writing ability of the EFL undergraduate participants. This implies that the instructions, whether they are based on product-oriented or the process-oriented approaches are, by themselves, beneficial for promoting EFL learners' ability in

expository writing. Writing instructions can meaningfully improve the global features of writing such as organization, structure and content. The L2 participants' improvements, of course, were not perfect, yet significant, as indicated by the increased essay scores on the posttests. As for the effectiveness of product-oriented approach and nonportfolio assessment in the control group, it can be argued that the given input and continual requests by the instructor on writing essays and modeling different types of essays enhanced the learners' ability in writing. Besides, practice through doing some exercises and writing assignment at home helped them to have better writing gains. However, on the basis of the posttests and through the covariance analysis, when the students' performances in the two groups were compared, a significant difference in favor of the effect of portfolio assessment on the students' expository writing ability was found. This is probably due to the more complicated and effective techniques employed under the portfolio program. These techniques included continuous drafting, redrafting, revising, conferencing, seeking other students' ideas on one's writing assignments, and getting continuous constructive feedbacks from the instructor on the writing attempts, leading to their better ability and autonomy. Coordinating the processes such as planning, drafting and revising in a way that results in an effective text needs attention, control and self-regulation, which are better addressed in a portfolio practice than a traditional one. As Graham and Harris (1997) argue, writing requires students' cognitive engagement as well as the engagement of their motivation in the task, in terms of interest, and feelings towards writing. Since the portfolio treatment engaged the participants in an active process of learning and assessment, it is assumed that it led to the better strategic behavior and maintenance during the writing process and managing the tasks associated with the writing, hence the development of their expository writing ability.

Furthermore, the literature on the portfolio assessment supports the findings of the present study. Among the current studies carried out in the field, one can refer to a study done by Li (2010) in which a portfolio-based writing assessment (PBWA) class was compared with a non-PBWA one to see the difference between the writing products of the two classes. The results revealed that the portfolio program enhanced the EFL students' writing ability in some dimensions including accuracy and coherence. Yurdabakan and Erdogan (2009) also reported portfolio assessment remarkably improved the secondary school students' overall writing ability in an English preparatory class. Elsewhere, Nezakatgoo (2011) demonstrated that evaluating the writing tasks through the portfolio system improved the EFL students' writing scores in final examination.

In addition, the results of the present study showed that the portfolio practice, compared with non-portfolio program, improved the EFL participants' expository writing ability in terms of the subskills of focus, support, and organization, but the difference in instructions in both groups of the study regarding convention and vocabulary subskills was not significant. The reason might be that in both groups, the main concern was not improving the students' knowledge vocabulary or what is referred to as 'convention'. The point is that some writing courses do not mainly aim at improving EFL students' knowledge of vocabulary and grammar; rather, improving vocabulary and grammatical gains is mainly addressed in specific courses, like grammar courses. Perhaps, it is less addressed because it is assumed that EFL students themselves can improve it through self-study. In the experimental group of this study, the main focus was on teaching the EFL students how to communicate their ideas most effectively and comprehensively, how to specifically address the writing task, how to use specific appropriate

details to support topics or illustrate main ideas, and finally how to make the logical flow of ideas clear and connected, which all correspond to the subskills of 'focus', 'support' and 'organization' respectively; it is assumed that the issues such as having an outline, developing paragraph blueprints, and paying attention to cohesion and coherence, which are often addressed less in courses such as Grammar, were better touched upon during the portfolio practice in the current study. Of course, it can be argued that the subskill of 'vocabulary' and 'convention' may be enhanced significantly if addressed appropriately in a portfolio program by EFL teachers when needs for improvement in this area is felt during the assessment.

7. Conclusion

Writing ability, an indispensable L2 language skill, has always been considered as a challenge for many L2 students to overcome. Upon the paradigm shift from traditional approach of assessing writing tasks to alternative ways of writing assessment, portfolio assessment has been appealing to many language instructors and teachers as a tool for assessing and improving L2 students' writing attempts. This study was aimed at comparing the effect of the portfolio vs. traditional assessment on undergraduate EFL students' expository writing ability. The results of the present study revealed that the EFL learners who received instructions on expository writing, in general, improved their writing skill. The findings suggested that EFL students need instruction in gaining control over the expository type of writing and could benefit from explicit teacher-directed instructions. But we can have a more significant positive effect on enhancing EFL learners' expository writing ability when portfolio assessment is employed. EFL learners, in a portfolio assessment, can better monitor the writing process and are treated as more active collaborators in the process of learning writing skill. Further analysis of the data about the effect of portfolio assessment on the writing subskills revealed that the portfolio approach in the current study had a significant impact on improving the EFL learners' abilities in terms of focus, support, and organization aspects of writing skill. It is likely that the portfolio practice is be more effective for some aspects of writing skill. However, this issue needs further investigation before a generalization is made.

As Moya and O'Malley (1994) point out it, a single measure falls short of evaluating the processes, skills, and knowledge that account for a learner's progress and ability in writing. The findings of this study suggest that the one-shot traditional assessment can be complemented by a portfolio program through the collaboration of L2 teachers and learners. Portfolios can provide authentic information for teachers to trace the students' progress in several areas of expository writing ability, which in turn pave the way for better assessment of their improvements and ability. Therefore, there is a need to inform L2 writing instructors and learners' about using portfolios as a feasible way for success in L2 writing.

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Appendix: The Writing Scoring Rubric modified from Wang and Liao (2008)

Criteria	Descriptors	Scores
Focus	1. Having problems with focus or failing to address the writing task.	1
	2. Inadequately addressing the writing task.	2
	3. Addressing the writing task adequately but sometimes straying from the task.	3
	4. Addressing most of the writing task.	4
	5. Specifically addressing the writing task.	5
Elaboration/ Support	1. Using few or no details or irrelevant details to support topics or illustrate ideas.	1
	2. Using inappropriate or insufficient details to support topics or illustrate ideas.	2
	3. Using some details to support topics or illustrate ideas.	3
	4. Using appropriate details to support topics or illustrate ideas.	4
	5. Using specific appropriate details to support topics or illustrate ideas.	5
Organization	1. The logical flow of ideas is not clear and connected.	1
	2. The logical flow of ideas is less clear and connected.	2
	3. The logical flow of ideas is mostly clear and connected.	3
	4. The logical flow of ideas is generally clear and connected	4
	5. The logical flow of ideas is specifically clear and connected.	5
Conventions	1. Standard English conventions (spelling, grammar and punctuation) are poor with frequent errors.	1
	2. Standard English conventions (spelling, grammar and punctuation) are inappropriate with obvious errors.	2
	3. Standard English conventions (spelling, grammar and punctuation) are fair with some minor errors.	3
	4. Standard English conventions (spelling, grammar and punctuation) are almost accurate.	4
	5. Standard English conventions (spelling, grammar and punctuation) are perfect or near perfect.	5
Vocabulary	1. Little knowledge of English vocabulary, idioms and verb forms.	1
	2. Frequent errors of word/idiom form, choice, usage. Meaning confused or obscured.	2
	3. Occasional errors of word/idiom form, choice, usage but meaning not obscured.	3
	4. Almost effective word/idiom form, choice, usage. Almost appropriate register.	4
	5. Effective word/idiom form, choice, usage. Appropriate register.	5