

INVESTIGATING THE USE OF PORTFOLIO AS A TOOL TO ENHANCE  
STUDENTS WRITING SKILL.

by

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## Abstract

### Investigating the use of Portfolio as a tool to enhance students' writing skill A Case Study in S.M Sains, Kuching

Hazali bin Madihi

The purpose of this study is to find out the potential of using portfolio as a tool to enhance students' writing skill and to identify the strength and constraints of using portfolio in their lesson. The sample used in this study are ten English language teachers and five form two students, in S.M. Sains, Kuching. To gather the data for the study, questionnaire and interviews are used as the research instruments.

The findings revealed that the majority of the teachers and students gave positive responses to the use of portfolio in the lesson. The teachers believed that by using portfolio, teaching and learning activities would be more effective and efficient. Based on the responses, they also agreed that portfolio has the potential to be used to enhance students writing skill. Their reluctance was due to the fact that they have limited time and the lack of commitment by the students.

It is hoped that that the findings of this study will give some insights to the teachers and authorities concerned, on the used of portfolio in the EL lesson, particularly in teaching writing.

## **Abstrak**

Menyelidik penggunaan Portfolio sebagai alat untuk meninggikan tahap kemahiran menulis para pelajar. Kajian Kes di S.M. Sains, Kuching

Hazali Bin Madihi

Tujuan kajian kes ini dijalankan adalah untuk menyelidik potensi portfolio sebagai alat untuk meninggikan tahap kemahiran menulis para pelajar. Ia juga bertujuan untuk mengenalpasti kekuatan dan kekurangan yang terdapat dalam penggunaan portfolio dalam pelajaran. Kajian ini melibatkan sepuluh orang guru bahasa inggeris and lima pelajar tingkatan dua. Instrumen yang digunakan untuk pengumpulan data ialah soal selidik dan temubual.

Hasil kajian menunjukkan bahawa kebanyakan responden yang terdiri daripada guru dan pelajar memberi respon yang positif mengenai penggunaan portfolio dalam pembelajaran. Kebanyakan guru percaya bahawa dengan penggunaan portfolio, aktiviti pengajaran dan pembelajaran akan lebih berkesan dan efisien. Berdasarkan kepada respon yang diberi, mereka juga setuju bahawa portfolio mempunyai potensi untuk membantu meninggikan tahap kemahiran menulis para pelajar. Bagaimanapun, kekurangan pada penggunaan portfolio ini adalah berkaitan dengan masalah tidak cukup masa masa dan kurang komitmen daripada para pelajar.

Harapan penyelidik agar hasil daripada kajian ini akan memberi serba sedikit gambaran dan manfaat kepada para guru dan pihak yang berkaitan, mengenai penggunaan portfolio dalam kelas bahasa inggeris, terutamanya dalam kelas penulisan.

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Special dedication goes to my late father, Allahyarham Madihi Bin Salleh, who wished for my success.

Thank You.

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## LIST OF ABBREVIATION

CHART	Collaborative for Humanities and Art Teaching
CLAS	California Learning System
EL	English Language
ELT	English Language Teaching
ESL	English as Second Language
ETS	Educational Testing Services
NAEP	National Assessment of Educational Progress
TESL	Teaching English as a Second Language

# CHAPTER 1

## INTRODUCTION

### 1.0 Background Of the Study

Writing is one of the most important skills in language learning. According to Raimes, A. (1938) writing helps the learners to reinforce the grammatical structures, idiom, and vocabulary that the teachers have been teaching to them. Apart from that, the learners also have the opportunity to be adventurous with the language and become very involved with the new language. Bello (199) agreed to this view and claimed that writing also enhances language acquisition as learners experiment with words, sentences, and larger chunks of writing to communicate their ideas effectively and to reinforce the grammar and vocabulary they are learning in class.

According to Chitavelu, N. (1995), writing has at least five roles in the ESL classroom.

- i. As a mean of consolidating language learned in other skill areas (listening, speaking and reading ).
- ii. To provide variety in the teaching of language so as to maintains motivation.
- iii. To serve as a record of what has been learned orally and also the retention of vocabulary and sentence structures.
- iv. To provide useful and convenient means for testing large number of students.

Despite all the importance and roles mentioned above, for most teachers writing is probably the most difficult skill to teach and monitor as it involves more than one area.

Czerniewska (1992) shared this view and in her book, she claimed that "writing development involves more than the acquisition of handwriting, spelling rules and knowledge of various forms of writing". There are at least twelve micro skills that Brown H. Douglas (2001) claimed are very essential in the writing skill and among them are:

- i. Producing graphemes and orthographic patterns of English.
- ii. Producing acceptable core of words and use appropriate word order patterns.
- iii. Expressing a particular meaning in different grammatical forms.
- iv. Using cohesive devices in written discourse.
- v. Appropriately accomplishing the communicative functions of written texts according to form and purpose.
- vi. Conveying links and connections between events and communicate such relations as main idea, supporting idea, new information, given information, generalization, and exemplification.

It is impossible for teachers to spend more time teaching all the micro skills involved, in the ESL classroom. This is due to the fact that at the same time there are also many other areas and other skills (listening, speaking and reading) in the English syllabus that needs to be covered.

Although teaching and learning writing is rather complicated in nature, it is important for students to master the skill for a variety of purposes. Bryne (1988) has listed out the following purposes on why the writing skill is much needed by learners.

- i. It enables the learners to provide for their different learning styles and needs.

- ii. It serves to provide the learners with some tangible evidence that they are making progress in the language.
- iii. Exposure to the foreign language through more than one medium especially if skills are properly integrated, appears to be more effective than relying on a single medium alone.
- iv. Writing provides variety in classroom activities, serving as a break from oral work. At the same time, it increases the amount of language contact through work that can be set outside the classroom.
- v. Writing is often needed for formal and informal testing.

There are also certain aspects that Broughton, Brumfit, et al (1989) want English teachers to consider when it comes to teaching writing. These are:

- i. Mechanical problems with the script of English;
- ii. Problems of accuracy of English grammar and lexis;
- iii. Problems of relating the style of writing to the demands of a particular situation;
- iv. Problems of developing ease and comfort in expressing what needs to be said.

The aspects mentioned above are some of the common problems faced by teachers in teaching writing skill. These are among the reasons why most teachers find teaching the writing skill difficult. How do teachers overcome these problems? How do they actually go about teaching writing?

There is actually no definite answer to this question. It all depends on the teachers. They need to be sensitive toward learners' need. There are in fact many strategies and methods to teach writing skill to the students. However, in applying different types of strategies or methods in their teaching, they need to consider students' learning styles and also important areas that students' need to be proficient in. As what Raimes, A. (1938) claimed in her book, *Techniques in Teaching Writing*, teaching writing will depend on the teaching styles and also students' learning styles.

As writing involves more than one area, a variety of approaches have been developed to meet learners' needs and their learning styles. Different teachers will stress on different features of the writing skill creating many approaches in the teaching of writing. They have come out with seven approaches. Among the approaches that are commonly used by teachers in their teaching are the process approach and the genre based approach. Through these approaches, students are taught through the writing stages more effectively and efficiently. However, according to Hammond et al (1992), there are five stages that are very essential in writing.

i. Field building

It is the first stage of the lesson where knowledge of the general context of the topic.

Discussion between the teachers and students will also occur here to have further understanding of the topic.

ii. **Model the text**

At this stage, students will be introduced to a model of genre that they will be reading or writing. Here the students, with the help from the teacher, will analyse the genre and other features of the text.

iii. **Joint construction**

This stage allows the students to work with the teacher to construct a similar text . However before this could be done, the students need to gather relevant information and do extra research on subject matter.

iv. **Independent writing**

The teacher would only let the students to construct the required text if the students are ready. The students are to construct the required text without the help of the teacher.

v. **Publishing the finish text.**

This purpose of having this stage is to compliment the students on the text that they have produced. The text will be publish on a notice board to be shared with the rest of the class.

As writing assumes a wide scope, teaching it to the fullest within the time constraint is almost near impossible. So the most teachers could do is just help them through group

discussions. Without the guidance of the teachers and regular consultation, learners' writing skill will only improve at a slow pace.

Teaching writing is something, which is not easy and straightforward. All the areas involved in writing (such as language features, generic structures, text organization, mechanics, etc in different text genre) have to be taught through a process whereby the learners will be able to plan, draft, revise, edit and finally produce a final text. Through the stages, teachers should know at which stage the learners need to be guided and at which stage they should be let independent. Hedge (1988:21) suggests the following as a representation of the stages of writing.

- i. Getting ideas together
- ii. Planning and outlining
- iii. Making notes
- iv. Making first draft
- v. Revising and re drafting
- vi. Editing
- vii. Final version

Derewianka (1946) in his book, *Exploring How Texts Work*, also agree that learners should go through what is called a "curriculum cycle". In this cycle, the learners will go

through phases where they need to make preparation, model the text, jointly construct the text with the teacher and ultimately independently construct the final text.

One option that teachers could consider to help the learners and at the same time assess their writing is by using portfolio. This is due to the nature of a portfolio that allows the teachers and learners to go through the writing process systematically and more efficient. It also helps the teachers to guide the learners throughout the stages and allows them to monitor the learners' progress in writing. As Forster and Masters (1996:2) indicate, all portfolios are 'sources of evidence for judgement of.....achievement in a range of contexts, from classroom monitoring of students performance to high-stakes summative assessment'. They further claimed that, all materials in the portfolio contain "pieces of evidence", that could show learners' performances.

As using portfolio is more toward the learner centred approach, learners will have the opportunity to revise their texts and to identify the strengths and weaknesses in the texts, thus enhance their writing skill. In this way, teachers will become facilitators who could conveniently monitor their progress and assess them easily. By using portfolio, the learners will assume a more active role in their learning (Terry Underwood, 1998). In an article, *Teaching Writing With Reflective Questions and Reflective Events*, Terry claimed that helping students become aware of their writing processes is an integral part of the teaching of writing as they will gradually move from the position of spectator to participant.

## 1.1 Statement of Problems

Teachers teaching English as a second language (ESL) constantly face the persistent problem of attempting to sustain students' interest and motivation in the classroom, particularly during the writing lesson. In addition to that, teachers also face difficulties in teaching the writing skill as it involved many micro skills. The introduction of using portfolio in the field of education has been claimed as a wise move as it could motivate the learners to engage explicitly in the learning content and also to develop independent learning among students. However, the use of portfolio in classroom has yet to show a positive outcome. Perhaps, this is due to the fact that not many schools are using portfolio in the teaching and learning activities. Although some schools have started using it, their full potential has not been discovered.

Hebert, E (2001) through his book *The power of portfolio*, argued the way some educators use the portfolio. He stated that in some cases some portfolios would end up a failure because it was made into something they should not be. In order to understand the situation, this study attempts to look at the potential of using the portfolio as a tool to enhance students writing skill, in one Kuching Secondary School.

## 1.2 Research Objectives

The purpose of conducting this case study is to identify the type of portfolio used in the selected school and to investigate the possibility of using such portfolio and its potential as a tool to enhance students' writing skill. The study will also serve to identify the strengths and

constraints faced by teachers in using portfolio and provide few proposals to overcome the constraint.

### **1.3 Research Questions**

The case study attempts to answer the following research questions:

- i. Does the portfolio have the potential to be used as a tool to enhance students' writing skill?
- ii. What are the strength and constraints in using the portfolio as a tool to enhance students' writing skill in the classroom?

### **1.4 Significance of the study**

It is hoped that the findings from this study will benefit the curriculum developer and also other teachers who are interested in using portfolios in their respective schools. The findings would provide them with some insights as what are really required when they intend to use portfolio as a tool to enhance students' writing skill. By knowing the actual picture faced by the teachers in this study, hopefully the authorities concerned will take appropriate measures or actions to assist them.

### **1.6 Limitation of the study**

This case study is restricted by the following scope and factors.

- i. The study was conducted on a small scale on a school (S.M. Sains) in the Kuching suburban area. A small group of ten ESL teachers and five students of this school were selected as samples.

- ii. The study was carried out towards the end of the 2002 academic year. The teachers were busy with school activities. As a result only five out of ten teachers were available for the interview sessions.
- iii. The case study covers specifically only on the writing skill component.

Due to all these limitations, the result of this research cannot really be used to make generalisations about the use of portfolios in the EL classrooms in the whole country.

## **1.7 Conclusion**

The following chapter provides some description of literature review related to the field of this case study. The third chapter describes the research methodology employed in this case study. This chapter provides the description of the samples, instruments used, procedures on data collection and the analysis. Chapter four provides the analysis to the case study and also discussions based on the findings. The last chapter, chapter five provides the summary and conclusions to the case study. It also gives recommendations to the authorities concerned for further research.

## **CHAPTER 2**

### **LITERATURE REVIEW**

#### **2.0 Introduction**

This chapter discusses the definition and views of linguists and educators on the significance of using portfolio in education. It also explains how portfolio could be used in education. The next part will describe characteristics and types of portfolios followed by accounts on related studies and finally the conclusion.

#### **2.1 Background and Definition of Portfolio**

Portfolio has been admired by many educators for its ability to provide a structure and processes for documenting and reflecting on teaching and related learning practices. Initially, portfolios were used by artists for the purpose of presenting their work. However, it was later adapted to other professions such as writers, photographers, architects and many others, including who think that using portfolios could assist them in their presentations.

In the field of education, portfolios have been used for the development and assessment of subject knowledge, acquisition of teaching and learning skill, vocational preparation and also employment. They offer the opportunity of assisting the learners in their acquisition for knowledge, enhancement of their learning and improvement in their studies.

Portfolio is actually not a new term for most educators around the globe. It has been widely used as part of the teaching and learning environment especially as one of an alternative ways of assessing students' progress in their learning. Portfolios are systematic collections of learning materials by students to portray their learning development and achievement in learning. The collections in the portfolio could include materials used in the classroom (such as note, drafts and worksheets), follow-up activities (such as research works and assignments), and other related materials such as journals or articles. Apart from that, it could also include self-assessment or self-reflection by students and comments from the teachers or maybe by the students' parents.

Research findings conclude that the use of portfolios promote the development of important skills, especially in writing, such as reflection, self-evaluation and critical analysis (Klenowski, Val. 2002). Students require these skills for their learning and also need to be active in the development of portfolio.

Burke and Rainbow (1998) agreed that the development of portfolio requires important cognitive and metacognitive skills such as monitoring, planning, reflecting and self-evaluation. They stated that in higher education in England, portfolios help students to improve their self-assessment skills. They further claimed that a portfolio, with collections of evidence of progress and achievement collected, can help to raise students' overall achievement.

Educators and language experts have provided different definitions for portfolio. However, most of them share the view that it is a form of evidence that shows the students' learning progress and achievement. According to Paulson, Paulson, & Meyer (1991), *"portfolio is a purposeful collection of student work that exhibits the student's efforts, progress and achievements in one or more areas. The collection must include student participation in selecting contents, the criteria for selection, the criteria for judging merit and evidence of student self-reflection"*.

Genesee and Upshur (1996:99) also agree with Paulson, Paulson,& Meyer (1991). They stated that portfolio *"is a purposeful collection of students' work that demonstrates to students and others their efforts, progress and achievements in the given areas"*

The National Education Association (1993, p.41) of United States of America defined portfolio as *"..... a record of learning that focuses on the students work and his/her reflection on that work. Material is collected through a collaborative effort between the student and staff members.."*

According to Vavrus (1990), "a portfolio is more than just a container full of stuff. It's a systematic and organized collection of evidence used by teacher and student to monitor growth of the student's knowledge, skills, and attitudes in specific subject area.."

Portfolio could also be used to track the students' progress and achievement in certain areas. Johns (1992, p.10) stated that, *" a portfolio could serve as a basis to examine effort,*

*improvement, processes, and achievement as well as to meet the accountability demands usually achieved by more formal testing procedures".*

Arter and Spandel (1992) also share the view that portfolio could help to demonstrate students' progress and achievement in their learning. They stated that "*portfolios could tell the story of the student's efforts, progress, or achievement in (a) given area(s). However, the collection must include students' participation in the selection of portfolio content; the criteria for selection; the criteria for judging merit; and evidence of students' self-reflection*".

## **2.2 Rationales for using portfolio**

The rationale for using portfolios in the field of education is to create a learning environment, which is much more interesting and more challenging. Besides, it also develops students' skills of independent learning, self-access and self-pace learning. It may also serve to:

- i. Engage students in the learning content
- ii. Help students learn the skills of reflection and self-evaluation.
- iii. Document students' learning in areas that do not lend themselves to traditional assessment, and
- iv. To facilitate communication with parents.

## **2.3 Types of portfolios**

There are different types of portfolios that could be used in the classroom. However, according to the United States of America's National Assessment of Educational Progress

(NAEP), there are only three types of portfolio assessments that are commonly used to show students' writing development. They classify these three types as the *classroom portfolio*, the *combination portfolio* and the *assessment portfolio*.

The *classroom portfolios* are collections of written work that have been reviewed during a process of reflection, selection, and description.

The second type of portfolio uses a combination of approaches to collect writing from the students. Apart from collecting the materials used in the lesson, the students are asked to collect their best pieces and also to include in their explanations of what makes these pieces their best.

The third type, which is *assessment portfolio*, involves committees of teachers designing and administering a series of multi-day writing activities that reflect their writing curriculum. The students' works are collected and reviewed so that the students could explain which activity yielded the best writing and what they learn the most.

However, types of portfolios vary from one person to another person. According to Danielson,C. and Abrutyn,L. (1997) in their article *An introduction to using portfolios in the classroom*, there are three major types of portfolio; Working Portfolios, Display, Showcase, or Best Works Portfolios and Assessment Portfolios.

Working portfolio is a portfolio that contains a work in progress (example draft) and finished samples of work. It serves as a holding tank for work that may be selected later for a more permanent assessment. It is also a collection of work guided by learning objectives.

The second type, the Display portfolio, is the one that has a purpose to demonstrate the highest level of achievement attained by the student. It is also intended for displaying students' best work.

The third type, which is the assessment portfolio, is to document what a student has learned. The primary purpose of this type of portfolio is to document student learning on specific curriculum outcomes. This type of portfolio may be used to demonstrate mastery in any specific area.

#### **2.4 Characteristic of a portfolio**

According to Sharon S. Moya and Michael L'Malley (1994) in an article *A portfolio Assessment Model For ESL*, a portfolio should have five typical features in it.

i. **Comprehensiveness.**

Sharon and Malley (1994) believed that the potential for determining the depth and breadth of a student's capabilities can be realized through comprehensiveness data collection by the students.

ii. **Predetermined and systematic**

Students should have planned, as what are to be included in the portfolio, with the help from the teacher before they start using the portfolio in the lesson. Teachers

should give guidance and if possible standard guidelines in using portfolio in the classroom.

iii. Informative

The information in the portfolio must be meaningful and useful for the students and the teachers. It should also contain information from various sources such as teachers and parents, and it must be reliable. The information must also be able to show the progress that the student have made in the learning environment.

iv. Tailored

A portfolio should be tailored before implementing it. This is to make sure that there would be no problems when it comes to implementing it in the classroom.

v. Authentic

A good portfolio should provide the students with authentic learning materials. This is the very important feature that a portfolio should have.

## **2.5 Guidelines for using portfolio**

There are several guidelines for using portfolios in a classroom. According to Brown, D.(2001), teachers must consider the following factors when using portfolio in a classroom.

- i. Specify to students what the purpose of the portfolio is/are.
- ii. Give clear directions to students on how to get started with the portfolio.
- iii. Give guidelines on acceptable material to include.
- iv. Collect portfolios on pre-announced dates and return the promptly.
- v. Be clear yourself on the principal purpose of the portfolio and make sure your feedback speaks to that purpose.

- vi. Help students to process your feedback and show them how to respond to your responses. This might take place in a conference or through written feedback.

## **2.6 Related studies**

Many studies have been conducted to investigate the effectiveness of using portfolio in teaching writing. Among others are the portfolio project done by the PROPEL project in Pittsburgh and NAEP ( National Assessment of Educational Progress), both based in the United States of America.

PROPEL is a continuation of ARTS PROPEL, a cooperative research project involving the Pittsburgh Public School, Harvard Project Zero, Educational Testing Service (ETS) and the Collaborative for Humanities and Art teaching (CHART) funded by the Rockefeller Foundation. They have been conducting studies relating to the use of portfolio since 1980s. Throughout the stages of the project conducted portfolios have been used along with classroom observation and external assessment. However no result was available from the research.

In spring, 1990, NAEP conducted a Portfolio study on a big scale where they expected around 4000 students participating. The study was actually a follow-up to the 1984 and 1988 studies. The students were on grade 4 and grade 8 students. The purpose of this study was to look at the alternative methods of assessing students' writing achievement. The