

Improving Student's Writing through Portfolio Assessment

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Abstract: This study aims at improving student's writing in terms of content, organization, and language use through the implementation of portfolio assessment. This classroom action research is descriptive qualitative in nature and was conducted in only one cycle consisting of four stages of activities. Twenty-six students taking Writing II course were taken as the subject and the main data was the paragraphs the students wrote throughout the semester. The instruments of data collection include rubric, self-reflection sheet, field notes, and questionnaire. The results show that portfolio assessment has increased the quality of students' writing as indicated by the difference between the scores they achieved for the pre-test and post-test, and by the rise of scores they achieved for the three paragraphs the students selected to be included in the portfolio.

Keywords: assessment, portfolio, students' writing, rubric.

Writing II is one of the compulsory skill courses to be taken by students of the English Department of State University of Malang where this study was conducted. As far as the writer is concerned, there have appeared new approaches in language teaching including the teaching of writing and its method of evaluation; nevertheless, quite a lot of English teachers who teach writing still use traditional methods of evaluation or assessment. In the traditional assessment of writing, the teacher assigns the students to write paragraphs about the given topics and in a limited time, the

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students write and hand in the papers, and then the teacher check the papers and gives written comments and a score on the papers.

The traditional assessment gives the impression that the teacher only emphasizes the final product and ignores such important aspects as students' effort, skill development, and process. In addition, the teacher does not pay sufficient attention to and feel the hard process of writing the students have to go through. As a result of the implementation of the traditional assessment, students may feel that their writing is something they have only to make, but not to possess. Consequently, they lack of sense of belonging, are unaware of the mistakes, and are inclined to repeat making mistakes. In this regard, there should be a way of eliminating this problem.

Emphasizing this, Penaflorida (1998:72) asserts that traditional teaching, especially the evaluation procedure, is problematic since it has some weaknesses. Some of the practices that many language teachers find difficult to do away with are: (1) teacher gives exercises and model paragraphs and essays for students to imitate; (2) teacher lists a number of topics on the chalk board, then asks students to choose one and write about it; (3) teacher prescribes the exact number of words and the time limit with which to finish a piece of writing; (4) assessment, evaluation, and grading are imprecise and unsystematic; (5) teacher gives writing assignments which take time to mark and give back to students, or worse, teacher sometimes fails to return the papers; (6) teacher corrects all errors, 'bleeds' students' papers to death; (7) readership is limited.

According to her, those class malpractices confuse and disorient students. In the same light, Proett and Grill (1986) affirm that studies do not find correlation between traditional way of evaluation and students' performance. In order to minimize the negative effects, there should be a shift towards non-traditional approach of teaching, including the evaluation procedure, expected to improve the condition and quality of teaching writing.

There are some forms of non-traditional evaluation that can be used in accordance with the class condition; among them is portfolio assessment which can be defined as a collection of students' work (Applebee & Langer, 1992:30). According to Tierney (1991), portfolio concerns the following important points. Portfolio is a systematic collection made by students and teacher. Portfolio can be used as the basis of evaluating effort, development, process, and performance, and to meet the requirement of formal evaluation. Portfolio is not an object, but is an ongoing procedure of evaluation by students. The underlying norms in the use of portfolio

include reliance on student involvement in self-assessment and their awareness of their development as writers and readers; reliance on a view that assessment should take into account (1) process the reader and write undertake, (2) results they develop, (3) development they achieve, (4) efforts they make, and (5) how those aspects vary in reading and writing activities.

As suggested by Tierney (1991:70), portfolio assessment has some advantages such as: students feel they possess their work; students begin to be aware of their strength and needs, and assessment is a common procedure for them; students begin to understand what they want to read or write, what is expected from them, how they can develop, and they begin to know their own and others' strength.

In the same token, Baack (1997:38), states that it is advisable for teachers to consider the development of portfolio in teaching writing since it can measure students' ability as writers, improve their sense of belonging of their own writing; and with the use of rubric, provide a mechanism that can be used by students to evaluate their own strength and weaknesses as writers.

Emphasizing the benefit of implementing portfolio assessment, Friedlander in Tsang (1999:61) concluded in his study that there is a relationship between quantity and quality of writing. In other words, the more or longer students write, the better the quality of their writing is. Similarly, Pennington in Tsang (1999:69) argues that there are significant correlations between quantity and quality, and there is plausible effect of quantity coming before quality, at least quality in terms of content if not overall quality.

In implementing portfolio, it will be beneficial for the teacher to use process writing approach, which shifts from form and accuracy to content and fluency at initial writing stages. In process writing there are five stages of activities: pre writing, drafting, editing, revising, and publishing. The editing and revising stages are essential parts in portfolio. In those two stages, students have opportunity to edit and revise their papers before entering them in the portfolio. In editing, students can give self-response in order to get self-feedback and do peer conference or teacher-student conference in order to obtain peer response or teacher response.

Based on the background of the problem, this study on the implementation of portfolio assessment was conducted in an attempt to improve the quality of student's writing and grow student's awareness of their writing problems.

METHOD

This study is a classroom action research as developed by Kemmis and Taggart (1998) aiming at improving the quality of student's writing through the implementation of portfolio assessment. The subject of the study was 26 students of the English Department of State University of Malang taking Writing II. The main data source was the paragraphs the students wrote throughout the semester. The additional data source was students' answers and comments they provided in the questionnaire.

This one-cycle classroom action research consists of 4 stages of activities: planning, implementation, observation, and reflection. In the planning stage, the researcher who was also the writing class teacher made the course outline, planned the teaching-learning activities for the class, and prepared the research instruments. In the second stage, students were asked to write paragraphs in process writing stages. There were six methods of paragraph development to be practiced (paragraph by examples, facts and statistics, cause and effect, comparison and contrast, process paragraphs, and paragraph of classification). For each method of paragraph development students were expected to write at least 3 paragraphs. During these activities the research observed what the students were doing and how the process were going on. The results of the observations were recorded in the field notes and used as the basis of the reflection.

On the first day of the writing class students were asked to write one paragraph as a kind of pre-test about one of the following topics. (1) There are some special people in your life who have influenced you. Pick someone and tell how that person has influenced you and how that has changed you. (2) Explain why you decided to go to college and what difference you expect it to make in your life. (3) After some years of schooling, you are likely to have some good teachers. In your view what are the characteristics of a good teacher?

In the following meetings, after some introduction to paragraph writing, students began to write their paragraphs about one topic of their choice. In the first writing practice the students were fully assisted by the teacher, especially in the editing stage. In the following practices the teacher gradually withdrew herself from students' editing activities and let them do more self-editing using and peer editing using rubric adopted from EFL Composition Profile developed by Hughey. By the end of the cycle students had been able to demonstrate their skill in analyzing and evaluating their own and their peers' writing better.

For the overall data collection, students were suggested to write as many paragraph they could, but they were to include five (2 paragraphs for pre-test and post-test, 3 selected paragraphs) only in their portfolios to be analyzed. The three selected paragraphs were those the students thought the best. The data collected from students' writing in the form of scores for the content, organization, and language use were analyzed quantitatively in order to find the means. By comparing the means, the researcher could find whether the students had made any progress. The additional data collected through the observations using field notes and questionnaire were analyzed in a qualitative descriptive method.

RESULT

The five paragraphs included in students' portfolios were scored for the content, organization, and language use using the EFL Composition Profile. The highest scores achieved in the pre-test are 20 for the content, 17 for the organization, and 17 for the language use; while the lowest scores are 14 for the content, 13 for the organization, and 13 for the language use. The mean scores are 17.11 (fair) for the content, 15.03 (average) for the organization, and 15.38 (average) for the language use.

The highest scores achieved in the post-test are 22 for the content, 19 for the organization, and 18 for the language use; while the lowest scores are 18 for the content, 17 for the organization, and 17 for the language use. The mean scores are 20.38 (good) for the content, 17.69 (good/very good) for the organization, and 17.35 (good) for the language use. The comparison between the mean scores for the pre-test and the scores for the post-test represents the improvement of the quality of students' writing in terms of content, organization, and language use.

The data collected from observations and questionnaire show that students have positive attitude and perception towards the implementation of portfolio assessment and the conference. Responding to the number of paragraphs they had to write, all (100%) students state that frequent writing is good for them since they think it can grow their writing habit, they can write more fluently, they can learn from their mistakes, portfolio motivates them to read more, and they can learn more about vocabulary. Furthermore, they say the portfolio assessment outweighs the traditional assessment in the sense that through the portfolio they can compare their paragraphs, evaluate their progress and decide the marks they deserve.

In response to conference in editing stage, they state that conferences, both teacher-student conference and peer conference, are useful for them although the results of the observations indicate that in the first conference activities students seemed reluctant to comment on their peers' work. In the following activities, they became more enthusiastic in spite of one or two inactive students. They like the conference because it gives them the opportunity to learn from each other, give and gain feedback, to identify their mistakes, and to grow their awareness of their problems and mistakes so that they will not repeat the same mistakes.

Concerning the quality of their writing, most (88.5%) students think the quality of their writing improves in that the grammar and vocabulary grow better, the content is more relevant to the topic, they provide more supporting details in their paragraphs, the organization of main and supporting ideas is more systematic, the topic is more focused, and they are able to use more complex sentences. Despite this fact, they also feel that they still have problems with diction and grammatical structures. In addition, they feel they have problem with paragraph development due to their limited knowledge about the topic. Answering the question about their plan to improve in the future, they say they will continue to write and read more, and learn more about the grammar.

Students also responded that portfolio assists them in growing their awareness of what they write and what they have to do with their writing for the reasons that it is easier for them to keep in their mind what they have to do in self-editing, the rubric help them to be more cautious in writing, and their peers' comments help them identify and not to repeat their mistakes.

DISCUSSION

The scores achieved in the pre-test and post-test, and the scores for their choice paragraphs indicate the improvement of students' writing. In terms of content, the mean score for the paragraphs the students wrote in the pre-test is categorized 'fair'. This indicates that students have only limited knowledge of the topic. Some sentences are irrelevant to the topic and the main idea is not adequately developed. The rise in quality is confirmed by the mean score for the same aspect the students achieved in the post-test. The score is categorized 'good' meaning that they have better knowledge of the topic and most of their sentences are relevant to

the topic although the paragraph still shows limited development of main idea and lacks details.

The mean score for the aspect of organization achieved in the pre-test is categorized 'average'. This means that their writing is somewhat choppy and shows that the main idea stands out, and the development of main and supporting ideas is unclear and limited. The mean score for the same aspect achieved in the post test which is categorized 'good/very good' proves an increase of quality. This indicates that students' writing has included the three structural parts of a paragraph, the main idea is clearly supported and well organized, and the supporting details are thoroughly developed.

The mean score for the last aspect to be evaluated, the language use, is categorized 'average' indicating that students still have problems with verb forms, the use of articles, and minor problems in simple, compound, and complex sentence structures. The mean score achieved in the post-test is categorized 'good' indicating that students are able to use more effective simple, compound and complex sentences. This fact indicates an increase of the quality in the aspect of language use although it is not a sharp increase.

The responses given by the students in the questionnaire and the observations reveal that students have positive attitude towards portfolio assessment and conference activities. They feel the portfolio assessment and conferences have improved their writing and analytical skills, grown their awareness of their problems and of the importance of self-reflection, made students realize that the more they write, they more fluent they become in writing. Their positive attitude might grow due to the unthreatening, favorable, and cooperative atmosphere in their writing class where students can learn from help each other. This may also be due to the class activities that provide them with more autonomy in developing their capacity to be competent writers.

CONCLUSION AND SUGGESTION

Based on the findings of this study it can be concluded that the implementation of portfolio assessment can improve the quality of students' writing in terms of content, organization, and language use. In addition, the results of this study indicate that this model of assessment can grow students' positive attitude and awareness that frequent practices can develop

their writing skill and that checking their own writing is necessary in order to find their strength and weaknesses. The researcher observed that students got used to having conferences, both in class or out of class, in order to get feedback for improvement. Students feel happy when their peers comment on their work, but they hold that teacher's comments are important as well because the teacher is more competent than the students.

Another positive effect is indicated by students' ability to identify their mistakes and their problems. Moreover, they are able to evaluate their progress they achieve by the end of the program. They can say that their paragraphs are more organized and unified; they can write paragraphs in different methods of development about various topics; they can comment on their peer's work; and they can write paragraphs using more complex sentences and a wide range of vocabulary. In order to gain better writing skills, students plan to do things in the future, such as writing more paragraphs, reading more books, and studying more about grammar.

In regard to the positive results of this study, it is recommended that portfolio assessment be implemented in other writing classes, especially writing III and Writing IV classes; that portfolio assessment be applied in other language skill classes; and that other forms of self-assessment be applied.

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