

Students' Perceptions about Writing Portfolios: A Case of Iranian EFL Students

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Abstract

Among alternative assessment options, portfolios have received considerable attention in the field of education, but there has been little research exploring students' perceptions of the portfolio approach or its impact on the learning of writing (Lam, 2013). Therefore, this study aimed at investigating students' perceptions about the effect of portfolio assessment as a process-oriented assessment mechanism on Iranian EFL students' English writing and its sub-skills of focus, elaboration, organization, conventions, and vocabulary. Moreover, the study dealt with students' perceptions about the use of portfolio assessment in EFL writing. Thirty university students were chosen as the participants. They received the treatment i.e. portfolio assessment in an essay writing course. Students' views and reflections about portfolio assessment were elicited via "Portfolio contribution questionnaire" and individual semi-structured interviews. The results showed that most of the students perceived improvement in overall writing and the sub-skills of focus, elaboration, and organization. Furthermore, students had a positive attitude to the implementation of portfolios. The results have some implications for teaching and assessment of writing in the EFL context.

Keywords: Portfolio assessment, Students' perceptions, writing sub-skills.

1. Introduction

In the constructivist post method era, there has been a paradigm shift from testing the outcome to assessing the learning process (Ghoorchaei, Tavakoli, & Nejad Ansari, 2010). Assessment is viewed as part of teaching and learning not as the end-result of teaching and learning. On the other hand, with the dissemination of process approaches to writing, there has been a shift of interest from traditional norm-referenced summative assessment of writing in favor of formative, learner-directed assessment, from bureaucratic testing to democratic assessment, from outcomes-based grading to process-based assessment in which assessment is aimed at improving learning and teaching. Traditional tests are incongruent with current practices in EFL writing classes. As Barootchi and Keshavarz (2002) argued, they do not provide rich descriptive information about the process and products of learning. Because of the incompatibility of process learning and product assessment and the difference between information needed and the information derived through traditional tests, alternative ways of assessment are essential and a paradigmatic shift in assessment is required (Gottlieb, 1995). In fact, teachers' concerns for types of assessment that are in harmony with teaching practices and curricula have been an impetus for the move toward alternative assessment options like portfolio assessment (Weigle, 2002).

Among alternative assessment options, portfolios have received considerable attention in the field of education. However, little research is done concerning the use of portfolios with college students in the EFL context (Yang, 2003). According to Hirvela & Sweetland (2005), there has been little research in L2 writing instruction which explores student responses on the use and value of portfolios. Also, Lam (2013) notes that not due attention is paid to students' perceptions of the portfolio approach or its impact on the learning of writing. Therefore, to see the suitability of writing portfolios for Iranian EFL students, the study took student views to this process by exploring students' perceptions about the use of portfolio-based writing assessment in the Iranian academic context. The main purpose of the study was to investigate students' perceptions about the effect of portfolio assessment on students' overall writing and its sub-skills. Also, the study tapped on students' viewpoints about the use of portfolio assessment in an essay writing class.

2. Review of the Literature

2.1. Portfolio Assessment

Portfolios could be regarded as a type of constructivist evaluation technique in line with the constructivist learning process (Buyukduman & Sirin, 2010). They have replaced traditional assessment methods based on the constructivist theories which suggest that learning should be constructed by learners themselves (Marefat, 2004).

As cited in Tiwari and Tang (2003), based on the constructivist theories according to which learning should be constructed by learners themselves rather than being imparted by teachers, portfolio assessment requires that students give selected evidence to show that learning relevant to course objectives has taken place. As the authors said, the constructivist foundation of portfolio assessment assumes that learners' activity is central in the process of education.

The concept of portfolio development was adopted from the field of fine arts where the portfolios are used to display illustrative samples of an artist's work (Moya & O'Malley, 1994). 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). In fact, it presents "multiple samples of a student's work in a variety of rhetorical styles that reflect course curriculum" (Graziano-king, 2007, p. 75).

Kohonen (1997, cited in Douglas, 2000) believes that alternative assessment, including portfolio assessment, "entails a movement towards a culture of evaluation in the service of learning" (p. 14) and regards the portfolio as an interface between learning and evaluation.

2.2. Portfolio assessment in the EFL/ESL writing context

The results of most of the previous studies showed that portfolio assessment was positively received by EFL students who experienced the process in their writing classes. Marefat (2004) found that the majority of the participants in an email-based EFL writing class found the portfolio approach a positive and refreshing opportunity. Hirvela and Sweetland (2005) conducted two case studies in which they dealt with student experiences with portfolios. They found that the participants liked the idea of portfolios, but they did not endorse their use as employed in the writing courses. Likewise, in Paesani's (2006) study, Students' reactions to the portfolio writing project emphasized the perceived value

of the project in boosting the development of students' writing skills and grammatical competence. By investigating Malaysian ESL students' perceptions on the use of portfolio assessment tool, Saad and Noor (2007) reported that the participants felt improvement in their writing ability. Moreover, the students agreed that portfolio assessment is a valid assessment tool in an ESL writing classroom.

Wang and Liao (2008) investigated student satisfaction of portfolio assessment. They found that students in the portfolio assessment group experienced greater satisfaction than their counterparts in the control group. The students perceived that portfolio assessment has a positive impact on the students' English learning process. They also felt that the writing portfolio enabled them to understand their grammar and writing problems.

Using the survey method of research, Ocak and Ulu (2009) found that parents, teachers, and students agreed with using portfolios in learning and that portfolios played a major role in assessing students' progress. Their study showed that the portfolio helps students to improve their critical thinking skills, understand their strengths and weaknesses, and involve in assessing their own work. However, it is time-consuming and sometimes may become boring to the students.

In an investigation of Turkish EFL students' views towards using portfolio assessment in writing courses, Caner (2010) found that the participants generally had a positive attitude towards portfolio assessment and believed that portfolio assessment fostered the students' English learning process. Buyukduman and Sirin (2010) found in the Turkish EFL setting that most of the students believed that the Learning portfolio (LP) helped them improve their writing skills, reading, and vocabulary learning.

Aydin (2010) investigated EFL writers' perceptions of portfolio keeping. The results showed that portfolio keeping in EFL writing considerably improved students' vocabulary and grammar knowledge, reading, research and writing skills. In terms of writing skills, the students believed that they acquired information about organization of paragraphs and compositions using brainstorming, clustering and outlining techniques. They learned capitalization, punctuation and feedback strategies.

Lam and Lee (2010) found that three benefits of portfolio assessment (PA) were: more autonomy to choose their best work to be graded, improvement in writing through conferencing, and a supportive environment for enhancing writing.

Khodadady and Khodabakhshzade (2012) investigated the effect of portfolios on Iranian EFL students' writing and self-regulation abilities and found that students in the portfolio group had a significantly higher score in writing and self-regulation ability.

Obeiah & Bataineh, (2016) investigated the effect of portfolio assessment on EFL students' writing and its sub-skills. The results showed that the portfolio assessment had a positive effect on students' overall writing as well as the sub-skills of focus, development, organization, conventions and word choice.

Farahian and Avarzamani (2018) investigated in an experimental study the effect of portfolios on Iranian EFL students' metacognition, writing ability and their attitude. The results showed that the portfolios had a significant effect on both metacognition and writing ability. With regard to students' attitude, they found that students had in general a positive view of formative assessment and teacher/peer feedback.

Portfolio assessment does not always yield positive results. For example, Weigle (2002) cited Spalding and Cummins's (1998) study to show how a well-intentioned portfolio assessment writing program did not achieve positive results. The students perceived the portfolio as time-consuming, an imposition from an outside authority (the state), rather than something beneficial for them. Callahan's (1999) study also showed that some high school English teachers in Kentucky regard portfolios "primarily as a stressful administrative task" ... "imposed from outside, introduced as a high-stakes accountability task, and embedded in a massive top down reform effort." (pp. 34–35).

There is scarcity of research in the EFL context which explores students' perceptions of writing portfolios. Therefore, the present study is an attempt to investigate Iranian EFL students' views about the implementation of portfolios in an essay writing class. The research questions of the study are as follows:

1. What are students' perceptions about the effect of portfolio assessment on Iranian EFL students' overall writing ability and its sub-skills of focus, elaboration, organization, conventions and vocabulary?
2. What are students' viewpoints about the use of portfolio assessment in EFL writing classes?

3. Methodology

3.1. Design

The study followed a mixed-methods approach in that it combined both quantitative and qualitative methods for data collection and data analysis. Frequencies and percentages

were used for descriptive analysis of data. As for the qualitative data, inductive thematic analysis was used and the themes emerged from the data were discussed. To collect data, a bio-data questionnaire, the portfolio contribution questionnaire and semi-structured oral interviews were used which will be detailed in the next section.

3.2. Participants

The participants were chosen by means of convenience sampling procedure. The preliminary participants of the study were ninety undergraduate EFL students at the University of Isfahan who were majoring in English literature and translation. They were juniors who had passed a course on paragraph writing. They were given a writing test and sixty one of them were found homogeneous in terms of writing ability. Out of this number, 30 (7 males and 23 females) students volunteered to attend the portfolio program. A bio-data questionnaire given at the beginning of the semester showed that the participants in the portfolio group were aged between 20 and 24 at the time of the study and none of them had experienced portfolio assessment in their classes i.e. they were all assessed by traditional assessment in their previous classes.

3.3. Instruments

Multiple data collection methods were used to obtain comprehensive and useful data and to increase the validity of the findings. The data were collected from bio-data questionnaires, portfolio contribution questionnaires and oral interviews which are explained as follows:

3.3.1. Bio-data Questionnaire

The students were given a simple researcher-made questionnaire at the beginning of the study to obtain information about their age, gender, and previous experience in English learning in general, and writing learning in particular (see Appendix A).

3.3.2. Portfolio Contribution Questionnaire

Students' perceptions about the effect of portfolio assessment on essay writing and its sub-skills were elicited via the portfolio contribution questionnaire - in English - developed by the instructor (see Appendix B). The questionnaire consists of six items on a

Likert-type scale with five levels of *strongly agree*, *agree*, *not sure*, *disagree*, and *strongly disagree*. After each item, some space was provided for any students' comments. As for the validity of the instrument, the earlier draft of the questionnaire was sent to two PhD holders in TEFL for expert scrutiny. By utilizing the expert judgment, some amendments and revisions were made to the previous draft. Also, the questionnaire was administered first to a group of five students - when the treatment was over - to correct any vague points and misconceptions.

3.3.3. Oral Interview

Individual semi-structured interviews were conducted with 8 students to elicit students' opinions and reflections on portfolio assessment. All the interviews were conducted in English, tape-recorded with each student's consent, and transcribed. The interviews were used to match the quantitative findings with qualitative descriptions and also, to investigate students' perceptions about using portfolios.

3.4. Data Collection and Analysis Procedures

The essay writing class met once a week for ninety minutes. The instructor taught the structure of the essay, how to develop the thesis statement, body paragraphs and conclusion, outlining, coherence, unity, etc. The students were required to write five essays of different genres during the term on general topics which did not require expert knowledge. The students were asked to reflect on, redraft and revise their essays. The evaluation of their writing ability was based on their portfolios.

The Students were given a special training concerning portfolios. It should be mentioned that there is not a *right* way to implement portfolios and teachers have used portfolios in many ways (Tierney, Carter & Desai, 1991). The portfolio model used in this study was based on the "classroom portfolio model", whereby portfolios are assigned primarily for learning rather than assessment purposes (see Hirvela & Sweetland, 2005). In fact, the focus of the study was student awareness of their learning and improving their writing and not teacher assessment of student learning; The portfolio procedure consisted of collection, selection, and reflection (See Hamp-Lyons & Condon 2000). Figure 1 below depicts these procedures:

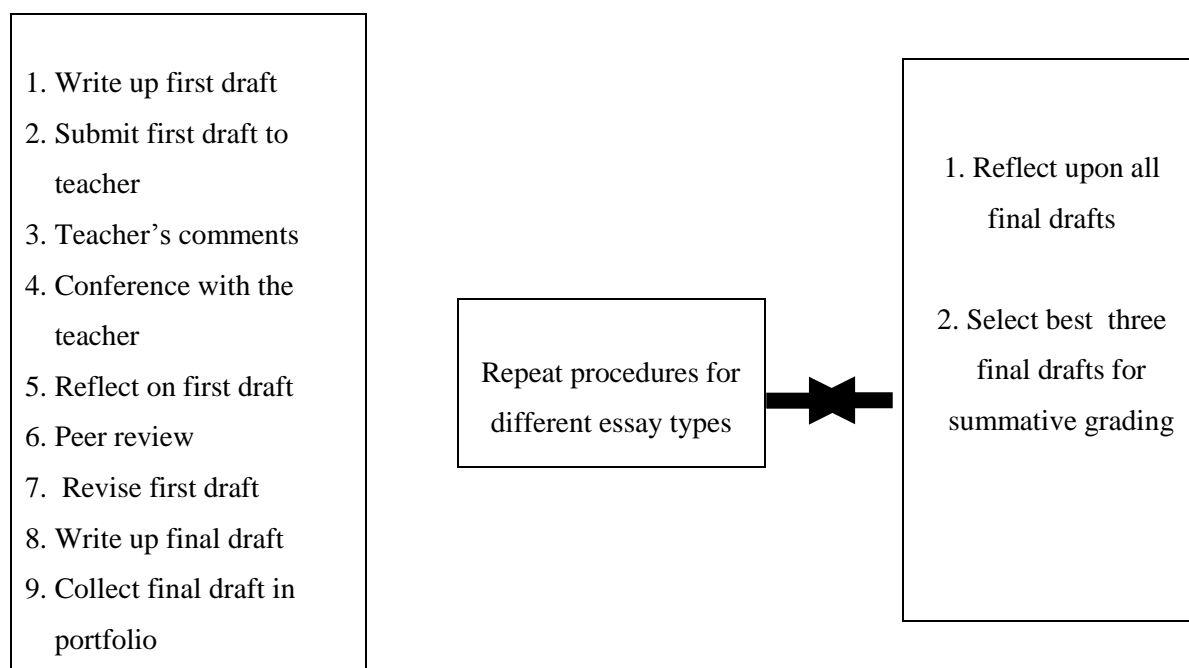


Figure 1. Procedures of the portfolio process (Ghoorchaei, et al., 2010)

As depicted in the above figure, the portfolio process involved the teacher, the students, and their peers. Having received the first draft of students' essays, the teacher read them carefully. Then, under each assignment, he wrote his comments as to different sub-skills of students' writings. The students were asked to make reflections on their writing in the classroom and evaluate their strengths and weaknesses. Then, they self-assessed the first draft of every writing type using the modified version of Wang and Liao's (2008) writing scoring rubric (see Ghoorchaei, et al., 2010) and receiving some guidance and assistance from their teacher. The teacher did not grade the drafts so that students could develop their writing ability in an anxiety-free environment.

They were also asked to review their peer's written tasks using the peer review guide (modified from Winterword & Murray, 1985; see Appendix C) in groups of two. Moreover, the students sporadically received comments in a one-to-one conference with the teacher. Then, at home, the students revised and redrafted their essays based on their own reflections and the teacher's comments.

As for final grading, the students were asked to select three out of five of their best final drafts. In line with studies done by Lam and Lee (2010) and Elahinia (2004), the average of scores on the pieces of writing was considered as the portfolio score of the

students. To rate their writing students used the analytic rating scale which was based on a modified version of Wang and Liao's (2008) writing scoring rubric.

To gauge students' perceptions about the effect of portfolio assessment on their overall writing and its sub-skills the portfolio contribution questionnaire was distributed when the course was over among students. Furthermore, to elicit their opinion about the portfolio program, oral interviews were given to students at the end of the portfolio program.

To answer the research questions both quantitative and qualitative techniques were used. To answer the first research question descriptive statistics such as frequencies and percentages were used. To answer the second research question, transcripts of the individual interviews were analyzed inductively and the themes that emerged from the data were identified.

4. Results

The research question dealt with Students' perceptions about the effect of portfolio assessment on their essay writing ability and its sub-skills. Students' perceptions were elicited via the portfolio contribution questionnaire. When the portfolio program was over, they were given the questionnaire and asked to select the choices based on their own perceptions. They were reminded that there are no wrong answers. After each item, some spaces were provided for any students' comments. They were not asked to write their names on the questionnaire so that they will be assured of the confidentiality of the information they provide. Table 1 below shows students' responses to research question 1.

It should be noted that no student chose 'Strongly disagree' as a response. Therefore, it was omitted from Table above. The items in the research question and students' responses to them are explained below in order.

Most of the responses to this item were positive as displayed in Table 1 above. Seventy percent of the participants (n=21) strongly agreed or agreed that the portfolio experience helped them improve their overall writing ability. About twenty-three percent of the participants (n=7) had no idea about their improvement and about six percent of them (n=2) disagreed with the statement.

Table 1.

Students' Perceptions About the Effect of Portfolio Assessment On Overall Writing

Item No.	Item description	Number & (Percentage) of Strongly agree	Number & (Percentage) of Agree	Number & (Percentage) of Not sure	Number & (Percentage) of Disagree
1	The portfolio experience helped me improve my overall writing ability.	4 (13.33%)	17 (56.66%)	7 (23.33 %)	2 (6.66%)
2	The portfolio experience helped me address the writing task well and not stray from the topic (i.e. focus).	1 (3.33)	21 (70%)	6 (20%)	2 (6.66%)
3	The portfolio experience helped me support the topics and explain my ideas better than before (i.e. elaboration).	6 (20%)	18 (60%)	5 (16.66%)	1 (3.33%)
4	The portfolio experience helped me organize my writing better so that my ideas flow more smoothly than before (i.e. organization).	6 (20%)	21 (70%)	2 (6.66%)	1 (3.33%)
5	The portfolio experience helped me improve the conventions (grammar, spelling, and punctuation) of my writing.	6 (20%)	11 (36.66)	11 (36.66)	2 (6.66%)
6	The portfolio experience helped me improve word/idiom form, choice, and usage (i.e. vocabulary).	3 (10%)	12 (40%)	9 (30%)	6 (20%)

Two students commented that at first, the program seemed to be tiresome but at the end they really enjoyed writing essays and could see the result of their efforts which is the improvement in writing. As one of them commented, *"the portfolio shows this improvement; one can easily see this improvement by comparing the first and the last essay"*. This improvement, as the participant said, is because of much time devoted to writing in the portfolio program. Also, two other students said that they owed their progress in writing to the instructor's feeling responsible towards his students' learning and thanked the instructor in their written comments.

A student also commented that what they learned in this class was *"no pain, no gain"*. The student claimed that they spent more time drafting the essays, sharing ideas with classmates and the teacher as a result of which they could get good results. Another student commented that she/he could not make good progress because during the semester she/he had a demanding part time job which prevented her/him from meeting the course requirements. Also, a student blamed the instructor that the class was to some extent boring and teacher-dominated. The student suggested that the teacher bring more sample essays to class so that the students will discuss their weaknesses and strengths.

Item 2: The portfolio experience helped me address the writing task well and not stray from the topic (i.e. focus).

The second item is related to the sub-skill of focus. As with the previous item, most of the students (73.3%; n=22) said that the portfolio experience helped them to address the writing task well and not stray from the topic. In other words, the sub-skill of focus improved as a result of the writing portfolio program. As displayed in Table 1, only six participants (20%) were not sure about their improvement in this area and only two of the them (6.7%) disagreed with the positive effect of portfolios on the sub-skill of focus.

There was only one student comment with regard to this question. The student said that *"I remember that in the first essay I had many irrelevant sentences in my writing but after all the comments and revisions I learned to write to the point sentences which are related to the topic."*

Item 3: The portfolio experience helped me support the topics and explain my ideas better than before (i.e. elaboration).

The third item is related to the sub-skill of elaboration. As illustrated in Table 1, the majority of the respondents (n=24; 80%) perceived that they had improved this skill as a

result of involvement in the portfolio program. Five participants (16.7%) were not sure about the item in question and only one of the responses (3.3%) was negative.

There were four comments on this question. One student commented that the teacher's comments on the first draft had persuaded them to develop an idea further or cut the others. The second student commented that they had never learned how to linger on an idea to make the essay longer. The student believed this as a weakness of their writing. The third student commented in support of teacher's comments and said that the teacher's questions about the paragraphs had helped them to learn how to expand and elaborate on their ideas in the paragraphs. The last one commented that *"at first I thought that using examples is something useless but bit by bit I understood that it's a must. There must be examples to convince or to express the ideas better and I learned how to choose or put examples which are really clear and related to the main idea of the paragraphs."*

Item 4: The portfolio experience helped me organize my writing better so that my ideas flow more smoothly than before (i.e. organization).

As with the previous item, the respondents (90%; n=27) overwhelmingly agreed with the statement that the portfolio experience helped them with organization of their writing. As displayed in Table 1, only two of the participants were not sure about this idea and one of them disagreed with the statement.

One of the students commented that the major problem they had at the beginning was organization of writing, but during the course they learned how to organize the paragraphs, how to use transitions in writing, and how to mention the thesis statement at the beginning of the first paragraph.

Another student said that at the beginning they did not care to organization. Their main concern was grammar and the conventions of writing. During the course, however, they had *"plenty of time to revise their writing and think about more important things like coherence"* so that the writing is not confusing to the readers.

Item 5: The portfolio experience helped me improve the conventions (grammar, spelling, and punctuation) of my writing.

As illustrated in Table 1, the response to this item is different from the response given to the previous items. Although the response was evidently favorable (in that 56.7% of the participants agreed that they improved their conventions of writing as a result of the portfolio experience), more than 40 percent of the participants either were not sure about or

disagreed with the idea of improvement of writing conventions as a result of the experiment.

To this item, six students put their written comments. Five of them said that they need to develop and pay more attention to the conventions of writing. As they noted, the main source of punctuation and spelling mistakes is lack of attention by writers and not just lack of knowledge. One student also commented that her/his conventions of writing, especially spelling and punctuation improved because she/he is more careful about them than ever before.

Item 6: The portfolio experience helped me improve word/idiom form, choice, and usage (i.e. vocabulary).

As shown in Table 1, the response to this item is drastically different from the response given to the previous items, inasmuch as exactly half of the participants perceived that the portfolio experience helped them improve the vocabulary component of their essay writing while the other half did not have such perceptions. Nine of the participants (30%) were not sure about this idea and six of them disagreed (20%) with the statement. In other words, exactly half of the participants perceived the positive effect of the portfolio program on vocabulary component of their writing.

Some students noted that the problem with word usage is seen to the last essay which could be improved by reading and writing a lot. By reading more sample essays of different genres, one could probably have a clear idea of which words and conjunctions to use in a specific kind of essay. This is the problem they have not only in writing but also in speaking. As the student said, they have the problem of choosing appropriate words for the writing or speaking contexts.

4.1. Results concerning research question 2.

The second research question dealt with students' perceptions about the use of portfolio assessment in EFL writing. To answer this question, students' perceptions were elicited by semi-structured interviews with 8 participants with different writing ability. The themes emerged from data were "Merits" and "Demerits" which are explained below.

Merits

In the interviews, the students mentioned their ideas about their improvement in writing. The students unanimously perceived improvement in their overall writing ability.

One of them also commented that her attitude towards writing had changed drastically as a result of the portfolio-based writing program. She said that *"In the past I was always confused when I wanted to write, but now thanks to all the practice in brainstorming, outlining, and drafting. I feel at ease when I want to write because I know that writing can be improved by drafting and by passing the time I can improve my essay"*(Est).

It should be noted that although every student perceived that the portfolio experience helped them improve their writing, they believed that they are still at the beginning of the way and there is still room for development.

One of the students said that having a portfolio of her writings helped her to understand her weak and strong points in writing. All the students could identify their weaknesses in writing and seemed to be determined to solve their writing problems. As one of them said, *"I should work more on punctuation and spelling since most of my problems are of this category. In fact, I should be more careful to prevent such mistakes"* or another one commented that *"I didn't spend much time revising it but I think there is always room for revision."*

Having experienced portfolio assessment, the students were aware of the advantages and disadvantages of the portfolio program. As for the advantages of the program, one of the students commented that the "selection" component of portfolio assessment gave them the opportunity to compare and evaluate their written essays and be more aware of strong and weak points of their writing. Another student noted that the collection of pieces into the portfolio improved her responsibility toward her own writing (*sedig*).

The next advantage is related to the student-centeredness of the class. The students themselves chose the topics. They said that this is important because *"we choose some thing that we are interested in, so we could write better..."*(*saeid*). They found portfolio experience useful not only for the students but also for the teacher. As they said, students could engage in the writing tasks without the fear of the final exam and in a relaxed way. The teacher can also evaluate students' progress more logically during the semester. The portfolio experience gave them a chance to observe their strengths and weaknesses during the term which made them more responsible for their own writing. The point that portfolio assessment makes learners more responsible for learning is frequently mentioned in the literature (e.g. Ballard, 1992; Buyukduman & Sirin, 2010; Genesee & Upshur, 1996; Ou, 2004, cited in Chang, 2008; Weigle, 2002).

Finally, students overwhelmingly preferred portfolio assessment to traditional paper and pencil tests and timed-essays. They said that in the portfolio program they do not need to worry about the final exam: *"You do everything during the term and there is no time limitation as in timed-essay tests. When you are taking a final exam you can't think properly because of the stress and anxiety that you have for the exam. Even if you are a good writer, you can't prove [i.e. display] your ability"* (emsak). The students mentioned lack of enough time, stress, and possible environmental factors as disadvantages of traditional writing tests.

Demerits

The students also noted some disadvantages of the program. Almost the majority of the interviewees said that revision was tedious and boring. However, they agreed that it helped them a lot to improve their writing in the long run. As an example, one student said *"although it is boring, it makes us understand our mistakes better and then try to improve our essays. It takes time but it is useful for us"* (sedig). It should be mentioned that one student regarded reflection and revision as useless activities. As the transcript reads: *"reflecting on the essays and then revising them every week was really boring, and a time-consuming job. I think they are useless."* Another disadvantage they mentioned was the shortage of time. Almost all the students said that the duration of the portfolio program was short and that they wished the course was longer, as learning writing requires more and more practice.

5. Discussion

To investigate students' perceptions about the effects of portfolio assessment on their essay writing ability and its sub-skills of focus, elaboration, organization, conventions, and vocabulary, the participants were given a questionnaire. The majority of them perceived the positive effects of the portfolios on their overall essay writing and the sub-skills of organization, focus and elaboration. As for the sub-skills of conventions and vocabulary, there were more diverse comments. Although the response to the statement that the portfolio experience improved their writing conventions was favorable, more than 40 percent of the respondents either were not sure about or disagreed with the statement that the portfolio experience improved their writing conventions. Also, vocabulary was the sub-

skill the participants perceived to be improved least. Exactly half of the participants either were not sure about their improvement or disagreed with the idea of vocabulary improvement as a result of the portfolio experience. This might suggest the need for the integration of vocabulary teaching in portfolio-based writing classes.

To enrich the findings, students' perceptions about the portfolio experience were also investigated using semi-structured interviews. The results showed that the students had a positive attitude toward portfolio assessment and believed that portfolio assessment improved their overall writing by exerting positive influence on the product as well as process of English writing. In line with some qualitative studies in the literature (e.g. Aydin (2010); Lam & Lee (2010); Saad & Noor, (2007), students had a positive perception about the value of the portfolios in improving their writing skills. The results of this study also contradict earlier findings in the literature. For example, contrary to Hirvela and Sweetland's (2005) findings, the participants of this study endorsed the use of portfolios in their classes.

Portfolio keeping creates more instances of writing practice. As a result, it improves writing skills. Students' self-perceived improvement in writing might also be due to their awareness of the rating criteria in the portfolio program. Students reflected on and self-assessed their writing based on the established criteria. As mentioned by Hashemian and Fadaei (2013) by provision of metacognitive knowledge, portfolio assessment helps students "to become self-directed and autonomous" (p. 144).

Quantitative studies in the literature have also shown that portfolio assessment significantly improves students' writing (e.g. Farahian & Avarzamani (2018); Ghoorchaei, et al., (2010); Khodadady & Khodabakhshzade (2012); Obeiah & Bataineh, (2016). Therefore, it should be given their due attention in teaching and assessment of language skills specifically writing. EFL teachers are recommended to implement portfolio assessment in essay writing classes. This will influence student learning in a positive way. They will be more responsible for and autonomous in their writing learning and improving their writing ability.

6. Conclusion

The present study investigated on the one hand, students' perceptions about the effect of portfolio assessment on writing and its sub-skills, and on the other hand, students'

viewpoints about the use of portfolio assessment in writing classes. The results showed that most of the students believed that writing portfolios had a positive effect on students' writing ability in general and most of the sub-skills in particular. Also, students had generally a positive attitude toward portfolio assessment and believed that it improved their writing ability.

In sum, this study demonstrated students' perceptions about the formative potential of portfolio assessment in helping students foster the product as well as process of English writing. It can be used in classroom settings as a mechanism, whereby learning, teaching, and assessment are linked (Ghoorchaei, et al. 2010). In EFL writing classes special attention should be given to portfolio assessment. This will not only give the teachers a full portrait of students' learning but also will be a motivating factor for students to pursue their learning more meaningfully. It could be suggested that portfolios be embedded in the writing curriculum of EFL college students. The implementation of portfolio assessment in EFL classes needs careful planning and adequate training of teachers so that it becomes an effective teaching, learning, and assessment tool.

The study had some limitations. The participants of the study were only a sample of EFL students studying at the University of Isfahan who cannot be claimed to be representative of the EFL students in the whole population. The next limitation is related to the one-semester-long duration of the program. The period might not be long enough for significant changes to take place.

Further studies are recommended to enrich our understanding of the implementation of writing portfolios in EFL contexts. Studies with students of various levels of writing ability, at different universities and using different instruments can be done to consolidate the findings. Considering individual differences in cognitive and affective domains, it would be informative if perceptions of different groups of students are compared to provide valuable insight and complete understanding of the use of portfolio assessment in EFL classes.

Note

Students' names are pseudonyms, and in renderings of their utterances, all errors in conventions and vocabulary are retained.

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Appendix A
Bio-data Questionnaire

Your teacher would be grateful if you kindly and attentively give the following personal information. The information will be kept confidential.

Name:

Gender:

Age:

1. Do you have any learning experiences in language institutes? If yes, how long?
2. Have you ever had any opportunity to visit or stay in an English speaking country? If yes, how long?
3. Have you ever passed any course on English writing? If yes, what are the courses? Explain how the instructor taught writing? How did they assess your writing ability?
4. Have you ever had any experience with writing portfolios? If yes, please explain what you did in the class? How did you like it?

Appendix B
Portfolio Contribution Questionnaire

Directions: Please answer the following statements in terms of the extent to which you agree or disagree with them. Remember that there are no wrong answers. Your giving us additional comments will be appreciated.

1. The portfolio experience helped me improve my overall writing ability.

Strongly agree Agree Not sure disagree Strongly disagree

Comments:

2. The portfolio experience helped me address the writing task well and not stray from the writing task throughout the essay.

Strongly agree Agree Not sure disagree Strongly disagree

Comments:

3. The portfolio experience helped me support the topics and explain my ideas better than before.

Strongly agree Agree Not sure disagree Strongly disagree

Comments:

4. The portfolio experience helped me organize my writing better so that my ideas flow more smoothly than before.

Strongly agree Agree Not sure disagree Strongly disagree

Comments:

5. The portfolio experience helped me improve the conventions of my writing (i.e. grammar, spelling, and punctuation).

Strongly agree Agree Not sure disagree Strongly disagree

Comments:

6. The portfolio experience helped me improve word/idiom form, choice, and usage.

Strongly agree Agree Not sure disagree Strongly disagree

Comments:

Appendix C

Peer Review Guide (modified from Winterword & Murray, 1985, p. 20)

1. Are ideas expressed in a clear and interesting way?
2. Are new details, examples, illustrations, or information needed to fill in information gaps?
3. Are there any unnecessary details to be omitted or left out?
4. Is the content organized clearly?
5. Does each paragraph include a main idea with supporting sentences to develop this idea?
6. Are a variety of sentence patterns and lengths used?
7. Are transitional words and phrases used to link sentences and ideas?
8. Are there any better word/idiom choices?
9. Does the essay reflect the intended ideas?
10. Does the writing form a circle by showing a relationship between the introduction, the body, and the conclusion of the writing?
11. Are standard English conventions (spelling, grammar and punctuation) accurate?
12. Is the writing satisfying?