Using an e-Portfolio System to Improve the Academic Writing Performance of ESL Students

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Abstract. Many intensive English language programmes that English second language (ESL) students enrol in adopt a process approach to writing, interpreting writing as a cognitive process that is highly private or individualistic (Atkinson, 2003), where writers use specific cognitive phases, such as pre-writing, drafting, and revising, to generate their text. However, Lefkowitz (2009) claimed that the interpretation of the process approach is often superficial, focusing on improving grammatical accuracy, rather than on the generation, formation and revision of ideas. To tackle the problems of providing appropriate, regular feedback within a "socially and culturally situated" approach to writing, and to tackle the issues of motivation, attitude and confidence among ESL writers, which difficulties with writing are likely to engender, an e-portfolio system was used to support students on an ESL writing course as they worked through the key phases of the writing process. The system provided a framework within which they could write to and receive feedback from each other, as well as from the teacher. 46 ESL students from an English Centre were divided into a conventional group and an e-portfolio group. They submitted a series of essays over a number of weeks on which they received both peer and teacher feedback. Data were gathered using an online questionnaire, samples of writing, online tracking and interviews. The post-intervention test results indicated no significant improvement among the control group's motivational constructs and performance in writing, but significant differences were found in the experimental group's writing performance and in the students' perceived value with regard to writing, writing self-efficacy and writing process approach self-consistency. These findings suggest that e-portfolio software, by facilitating both writing, and the provision of regular peer and teacher feedback on writing, has the potential to encourage a significant improvement in ESL students' writing self-belief and writing performance.

Keywords: writing process approach, ESL writing self-beliefs, writing self-efficacy, process-writing self-consistency, e-portfolio, writing motivational constructs.

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1. Introduction

In producing a written text, skilled writers generally begin with a pre-writing activity and then cycle through stages of drafting and revising until they arrive at a final, acceptable, version of their text. This view of writing as a highly private or individualistic cognitive process (Atkinson, 2003) forms the core of a process approach to teaching writing, which many English as a Second Language programmes claim to use in their writing courses. In practice, however, these courses often focus on linguistic (grammatical) products rather than on the process of writing, i.e., the generation and elaboration of ideas (Leifkowitz, 2009).

In addition, it has increasingly been recognized that writing is a socially and culturally situated activity (Hyland & Hyland, 2006), with the focus on writing for an audience. A writing course therefore needs to provide support to learners while they work through the various stages of planning, drafting, and revising a text for a specified audience. Such support can most usefully be given in the form of appropriate, regular feedback, while also taking account of the need to encourage and maintain learners' confidence and motivation. This paper discusses an attempt to achieve those goals through the use of an electronic portfolio system (Taskstream e-portfolio).

This "21st century personal learning environment" (Barrett & Garrett, 2009; Hill, Song, & West, 2009) allows the learners' control of the learning process in more social and authentic contexts and served as a learning tool to support students on an ESL writing course as they worked through the key phases of the writing process. The system allowed learners to write for an audience (each other) and to give feedback to, and receive feedback from, both their intended audience, and their teacher, with the aim of helping them develop a consistent approach to their writing practice (self-consistency), encouraging a positive view of the value and importance of writing (self-belief), and fostering a realistic appraisal of their strengths and weaknesses as writers (self-judgement).

2. Method

2.1. Research questions

The aim of the study was to investigate the effect of using a web-based e-portfolio system in an ESL learners' writing course on the learners' self-motivational constructs (self-consistency, self-belief and self-judgement). The specific research questions were:

- Does utilizing a web-based learning platform encourage a change in ESL learners' writing self-beliefs?
- Does utilizing a web-based learning platform encourage a change in ESL students' writing self-efficacy?
- Does utilizing a web-based learning platform encourage ESL students to consistently apply a process approach to writing?

2.2. Research design

The study adopts a combined inductive-deductive research approach to answer the research questions. This combination enables the researcher both to test the suitability of the existing theories for the participants of the study and to validate, modify or even reject the existing theories, or put forward new theories based on the collected data. Therefore, a multimodal methodology which values both empirical (quantitative) and hermeneutic (qualitative) inquiries is used. This integration of methods adds breadth, richness, and depth to our understanding (Denzin & Lincoln, 2005) of both explanations of phenomenon and social change (axiology). These methods include a survey questionnaire, log files of accessed data, writing samples, and in-depth interviewing.

2.3. Participants and data collection

46 ESL students were recruited from an English language centre and divided into a conventional group and an experimental (e-portfolio) group, with a pre-test showing no significant differences between the participants in the two groups. They submitted a series of essays over a number of weeks on which they received both peer and teacher feedback. Data were gathered using an online questionnaire, samples of writing, online tracking and interviews.

3. Results

The first research question investigated changes in the students' beliefs about the perceived value of writing, their writing self-concepts and anxiety about writing. The analysis of the data collected from self-report questionnaires and interview sessions in the second and final weeks of the study, as well as the online tracking, revealed improvements in the perceived value of writing and writing self-concept beliefs among the experimental group of ESL students. No significant differences were found between the two groups in levels of writing anxiety.

The second research question examined the impact of using the TaskStream e-portfolio on the ESL students' beliefs about the self-efficacy of their writing in terms of the skills of content, organization, word choice and conventions. The analysis of the mixed source data indicated significant differences between the groups in their beliefs about their writing skills. Students in the e-portfolio group were more confident than those in the conventional group in their ability to judge their global and local skills as reflected in their writing products at the end of the study. This difference in levels of confidence in favor of the TaskStream group was of both statistical and practical significance, taking into account effect size (Vaske, Gliner, & Morgan, 2002).

The third question explored changes in the ESL students' self-consistency in using the writing process approach following the use of the TaskStream e-portfolio. The findings showed significant changes in the beliefs of the e-portfolio students concerning the consistent use of strategies appropriate to the writing process approach.

4. Discussion and conclusions

Based on these results, the implications of this research concern three issues: learners, instructors and institutions.

4.1. Learners
- E-portfolios provide a means for students to control their learning by setting their own learning goals and the time line within which these goals are to be achieved;
- E-portfolios provide a means for students to present and develop their identity in a social context and to engage with a wider environment through interaction with their teachers, peers, and external reviewers and evaluators, who provide feedback on their learning;
- E-portfolios record learners' academic development and their strengths and weaknesses with regards to academic knowledge and skills development. This promotes their metacognitive skills, including monitoring and evaluation of their progress;
- E-portfolios allow learners to share, interrelate, collaborate and scaffold each other while learning. This helps them construct meaning from information, develop their understanding of it, and then subsequently transform this understanding into knowledge.

4.2. Instructors
- E-portfolios enable instructors to view, track, and evaluate learners' progress from a single web-based portfolio;
- E-portfolios give instructors detailed insight into each learner's learning experience, beliefs, personal goals, and learning strategies, so as to gain a holistic picture of their development;
- This information permits instructors to gain better understanding of the students' motivational constructs. This can help in identifying appropriate instruction and in selecting e-portfolio assignments, so as to enhance deeper learning and increase the effectiveness of their teaching.

4.3. Institutions
- In the development of practice with e-portfolios, faculties and administrators must have agreed upon goals, intentions, and implementation strategies to enrich learning opportunities;
- E-portfolios should focus on a limited set of aims and skills that are appropriate for each level of the language programme since the use of e-portfolios will probably increase the length of time required to cover the curriculum;

- The use of e-portfolios involves long-term processes that necessitate their gradual implementation into English programmes from the first level, allowing learners to gain experience and confidence in using this technology;
- E-portfolios should be easy to use so as to enable faculties to adapt features to their curricula, train their students to use those features, and help them develop methods of reflection that can enhance their learning experiences;
- E-portfolios enable English language programme administrators to monitor their students' learning processes and evaluate their progress in order to design remedial courses to suit students' needs.

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