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## Using the portfolio model to assess the writing competence

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### Abstract

The article revisits portfolio assessment and explores the positive impact of its digital format on students' development of writing competence in the Algerian context. It highlights the differences between traditional standardized tests and authentic assessment models, namely portfolio assessment. It also examines the reasons that preclude the introduction of such an alternative assessment model in Algerian EFL classes and offers solutions and recommendations, based on the portfolio's and its digital format's advantages, to encourage Algerian teachers to use them in their classes. Finally, the article addresses some of the challenges associated with portfolio validity and reliability, and suggests solutions to reinforce them.

**Keywords:** assessment; authentic assessment; evaluation; e-portfolio; portfolio.

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## **1. INTRODUCTION**

Using portfolio assessment is not a common practice in the Department of English at Boumerdes University, despite its numerous advantages highlighted by various studies (Smith & Tillema, 2003; Cheng & Fox, 2017; Abrami & Barrett, 2005). Algerian practitioners remain reluctant to adopt it. This reluctance is likely due to objective factors, such as the large class sizes typical of Algerian universities, the lack of teacher training, and the complexity of implementing portfolio assessment processes.

The objective of this work is to introduce this authentic assessment method to both practitioners and decision makers, with the hope that they will consider launching a pilot project to evaluate its benefits in the Algerian context. To begin, we will define key concepts related to assessment and evaluation, as these terms are often used interchangeably even though they serve different functions.

## **2. ASSESSMENT**

The primary goals of assessment are to provide practitioners with valuable insights into students' performance and to evaluate the effectiveness of their learning process. Teachers routinely gather student feedback to assess whether their teaching methods are effective and whether the syllabus's objectives have been met. In other words, assessment involves collecting information about students' performance. In this regard, Brown (1990) claimed that "assessment refers to a related series of measures used to determine a complex attribute of an individual or group of individuals. This involves gathering and interpreting information about the student's level of attainment of learning goals." (Brown 1990 )

The main goal of the assessment process, then, is to identify learners' strengths and weaknesses and provide remedial work to help them overcome learning challenges. Assessment serves several key objectives: first, it evaluates the learners' progress and development throughout the learning process. Second, it assesses the effectiveness of the classroom teaching methods, enabling necessary adjustments or remedial actions. It ranks and classifies students' performance relative to the group as a whole. Lastly, it motivates students to study and provides better performance.

## **3. EVALUATION**

Unlike assessment, evaluation is the process by which practitioners use methods to assess learning performance. It aims to grade and rank students. It is, then, feedback from the teacher to the learners, concerned with the teacher's appreciation of how well the students have performed on a particular task or in relation to the syllabus objectives, and with the use of clearly set standards (Weir & Roberts, 1994). Evaluation focuses on grading students' performances. It is rather a final step used to assess the quality of the process, primarily based on grades.

## **4. TRADITIONAL ASSESSMENT AND WRITING COMPETENCE**

For decades, teaching writing in the Algerian context has been tackled from a product-centered perspective. Teachers generally provide students with a model of the writing genre, and students are asked to reproduce it. Correspondingly, like their peers worldwide, Algerian teachers updated their teaching practices to align with modern writing approaches, namely the writing process. The main focus of the writing process approach is to inculcate the process writing stages, namely brainstorming, drafting, revising, and editing. However, when it comes to assessment, teachers in the Department of English at Boumerdes University still rely on summative tests, such as final-term timed tests, to

evaluate their students' work. This discrepancy between a modern teaching approach and the adoption of obsolete assessment procedures rooted in the psychometric tradition is generally justified by the nature of the tests used by Algerian universities. The latter imposes midterm exams in which students are allotted 1.5 hours to produce a written production. Furthermore, the overcrowded class, with more than 40 students, makes it strenuous to adopt alternative assessment procedures. Their practicality and ease of implementation, traditional tests are not a reliable tool for adequately assessing students' writing competence, especially in realistic situations. For instance, they fail to meet the requirements of modern writing approaches that promote lifelong skills and competencies needed in real-life contexts. Thus, it is not sufficient to teach the different writing genres and processes to inculcate writing competence in learners; there is also a need to equip learners with the capacity to produce these written products in real-life situations, such as their future workplace.

Researchers highlight two important objectives that traditional assessment procedures do not meet, namely authentic assessment and performance assessment. Traditional assessment procedures are not authentic assessment methods because they do not prepare learners for real-world job-market requirements. They would rather focus on assessing recall knowledge (Biggs, 1996)

The second, traditional assessment rarely puts the student in a concrete situation to perform tasks and demonstrate their mastery of the targeted objective. They do not ask the examinee to develop an idea or find solutions to problems under some predefined conditions or criteria. Biggs (1996). The shortcomings of traditional assessment motivated researchers to propose alternative assessment models that better reflect real learning processes and students' performance under test conditions.

Implementing alternative assessment fosters knowledge construction, authenticity, and creativity; thereby promoting initiation, compassion, self-discipline, and spontaneity in learners (Janisch & Liu, & Akrofi, 2007). Unlike traditional tests that focus on what students can do by evaluating their final products, alternative assessments reveal how students approach, process, and solve the problems and tasks. (Huerta-Macias, 1995). Alternative assessment also allows assessors to customize feedback for students and provides them with a clear picture of their performance and areas of difficulty. The superiority of alternative assessment modes over the traditional one is evident (Tisani, 2008), and assessors have a wide range of options, including teachers' observation records, students' reflective journals, and portfolios. (Garcia & Pearson 1991, Graves & Sunstein 1992, Rhodes & Shanklin 1993, Tierney & Clark 1998, Valencia 1998, Serafini 2001, Flippo 2003). (Babae 2013:50)

The alternative to traditional assessment procedures is to adopt authentic, performance-based assessment methods, such as the portfolio model, which offers numerous advantages. Portfolio assessment develops students' responsibility, autonomy, and self-reliance. It also increases students' awareness of assessment standards and criteria, as well as their motivation. As Yaghoubi (2015) claimed

Portfolio assessment has many empirically supported merits, including raising students' awareness, broadening the range of assessment, improving learning, promoting goal orientation, producing beneficial post-course effects, and fostering mutual responsibility for assessment. The other merits of these alternative assessments are learner involvement in the learning and assessment. (Yaghoubi 2015)

The subsequent section attempts to define the contours of an authentic assessment model, namely portfolio assessment, and tries to answer the following questions: What does portfolio assessment mean? And how do we implement it?

## 5. PORTFOLIO

Portfolio is an assessment technique borrowed from the field of fine art, in which artists compile sets of works that showcase their achievements. In the domain of education, portfolios are collections of works, such as written productions, produced by learners over a semester or a year. A portfolio is, then, an assortment of various forms of evidence of achievement of learning outcomes. However, a portfolio is not a simple collection of students' works or logbooks; it is accompanied by a set of annotations written by the students that reflect their thoughts, evaluations, and learning experiences at various levels, such as cognition, analysis, and evaluation. (Margery et al., 2005) In practical terms, a portfolio assessment is a compendium of reports, papers, and other materials, along with students' reflections on their learning experiences, that showcase their strengths and weaknesses.

Furthermore, portfolio assessment offers several advantages, such as assessing learners' written productions on a set of levels: Knows, Knowhow, and Does. The first level assesses factual and knowledge recall. The second level is the assessment of the learners' capacity to put into practice what they have learned. The third level tackles the does, or, in other words, it assesses learners' performance in a real-life setting (Miller date). Portfolio assessment is, then, a complex process that is applied through a set of stages. The following section describes how assessors can put portfolio assessment into practice.

### 5.1. Stages of Portfolio's Implementation

Practitioners who wish to implement the portfolio assessment model in their classes must go through the following stages.

#### 5.1.1. *Collecting Learning Achievement Evidence*

At the beginning, the assessors strive to collect students' productions, which represent the evidence of their performance. The evidence of outcomes is so varied that one cannot limit it to a given type of student's performance. As stated by Friedman Ben-David et al., the evidence "is limited only by the degree of the designer's creativity." (as cited in Davis and Ponnampuruma 280: 2005) The evidence can range from grammar exercises, paragraphs, essays, to research projects. The flexibility of the portfolio assessment, in terms of evidence collection, will give the assessor an exhaustive picture of learners' performance, achievements, and weaknesses.

#### 5.1.2 *Reflection on learning*

The second phase consists of reflecting on the learning process. This process involves analyzing students' learning experiences and drawing conclusions that will help learners respond to future experiences. Indeed, students' learning experiences will help them acquire new abilities and skills that will be used in subsequent learning events (Schön, as cited in Challis, 1999).

#### 5.1.3. *The Evaluation Stage*

Evidence of students' outcomes is a valuable source of information and feedback for both assessors and students. The analysis of the evidence from the different exercises and tasks the assessors use may help them determine whether the portfolio teaching process is successful. It may also allow them to identify students' strengths and weaknesses, prepare remedial work, and scaffold feedback to address these weaknesses and reinforce learning objectives.

To optimize assessment feedback, students need to understand the terminology assessors use. Indeed, the evaluation criteria should be shared with students to help them understand the learning

process's objective, develop their autonomy, and reduce the assessment load on teachers' shoulders. sadler(1989),Andrade (2005)Black & Wiliam (1998)

#### 5.1.4. *Defense of the Evidence*

At this stage of the portfolio assessment, the assessor interviews the assessee to check whether the grading or evaluation has been done fairly and to confirm or reject the decisions taken during the previous stage of the evidence evaluation. Usually, this opportunity is given to the students to defend their work, and it is generally reserved for students with poor marks or grades to improve their scores. It also shows the potential that assessors have not captured with the assessment techniques used to evaluate their evidence. (reference).

#### 5.1.5. *Assessment Decision*

The assessment decision is a phase in which both assessors and the assessee adopt an agreed rating scale or descriptor to evaluate the writing performance, and when they disagree about any aspect of the assessment process, they may appeal to discussions or debates about the assessee's performance. Assessment decisions are, then, consensual among the different decision-makers. Despite its evident advantages, portfolio assessment is time-consuming and difficult to grade. Aydin (2010).

However, the advantages of this alternative assessment model outweigh its disadvantages, and it represents an interesting learning experience and opportunity. Despite its complexity, portfolio assessment remains one of the most effective methods for assessing writing performance when using the process writing approach. The following section outlines the advantages of developing a portfolio assessment model to enhance writers' competency.

## 6. PORTFOLIO ASSESSMENT AND THE WRITING PROCESS

It is widely accepted that the writing process is one of the approaches many instructors use in their classes. The teachers highlight the importance of going through a set of stages: brainstorming, prewriting, drafting, revising, and editing. At different stages, both teachers and students play different roles, interact intensively, or cooperate to build the targeted written productions. These exchanges of questions and feedback are the backbone of the writing process as teachers assist students at different stages of building the piece. Matsuda (2003) and Tribble (1996)

Both teachers and writers start the process of writing by brainstorming, that is, proposing, generating, and selecting ideas, and they move to the drafting stage, where the writers produce a set of drafts in which they put their ideas into a coherent and cohesive text. Drafting is followed by the revising phase, where writers, with the help of a mentor such as a teacher, question the appropriateness of ideas, including their coherence and relevance. Next, the revision stage should not be confused with the proofreading stage. The latter is the last step in the writing process, where writers polish their work by correcting mistakes in punctuation, spelling, and grammar. (reference writing process stages)

The writing process is very complex and requires frequent teacher intervention to adjust or support writers' decisions. Thus, do traditional standardized tests allow teachers to assess this multi-stage, intricate process? The answer is undoubtedly no. The standardized tests, such as quizzes, MCQs, and semester-based timed examinations, may not respond to the writing process requirement. The limitations of these tests stem from their assigned function; indeed, such tests are designed to

evaluate particular aspects of writing skills, such as grammatical items, lexis, connectors, etc., and their ultimate goal is to focus on the final outcomes of the writing process. These tests, however, cannot account for the way or the processes that lead to the final product. The process approach, then, requires an alternative assessment process that can depict how learners produce their final written products and accompany them through their different stages as they develop.

Evidently, teachers who adopt the writing process need to use an authentic assessment tool that allows them to evaluate the different stages of building a piece of writing. An alternative to the shortcomings of standardized tests is portfolio assessment, which is inherently compatible with the requirements of the writing process and allows teachers to accompany students on their writing journey (Aydın, 2010).

The process approach allows instructors to closely and continuously monitor students' productions, and intensive feedback can be easily put into practice through alternative assessments, such as portfolio assessments. The latter is an ideal assessment procedure that gives both students and teachers the space to collaborate and work effectively and efficiently toward achieving the writing course syllabus.

According to Blair and Takayoshi (1997), portfolios have gradually become widely accepted in writing instruction, as they assess students' written proficiency over time. Students can interact with assessors, such as teachers, through portfolios in an easy way. The students may also receive instantaneous feedback on their written productions and make the necessary modifications in a quick and efficient way. Teachers, in turn, can closely monitor students' writing corrections and evolution and track their work's improvement in an efficient way.

## **7. PORTFOLIO ASSESSMENT AND AUTHENTIC ASSESSMENT**

Portfolio is considered an authentic assessment procedure. Thus, what do we mean by authentic assessment? Adopting authentic assessment is one of the objectives of modern assessment programs, owing to its benefits over traditional assessment models. Authentic assessments offer several advantages. On the one hand, they provide students with a clear image of their obligations, and on the other hand, teachers obtain results that reflect the true picture of the students' performance, on which they can organize remedial work to respond to the students' weaknesses and readjust the teaching process (Wiggins, 1993).

According to Wiggins (1993), authentic assessment is characterized by the following features: While the traditional assessment model assesses students' final products and knowledge recall out of context, authentic assessment develops students' capacity to perform writing tasks effectively.

Unlike traditional tests, which are limited to paper-and-pencil, MCQs, and gap-filling quizzes, authentic tests encourage students to generate ideas, draft, reflect on issues related to their writing tasks, and revise and edit their work.

The advantage of authentic assessment use is that it increases test validity and reliability by clearly defining the assessment criteria for scoring students' performances. The validity of authentic tests is evaluated by their ability to assess real-world activities. In other words, they have to simulate the real challenges that students will face in real-life situations, such as workplace requirements.

This idea is confirmed by Peng (2010), who claimed that "while these assessments help to create a closer relationship among teachers and students, they also foster critical thinking, communication,

feedback, responsibility, autonomy, and help students develop useful skills in academic and professional areas” (Peng, 2010: 2054)

With the advent and widespread of computers, digitalization, the internet, and mass media, portfolio assessment witnessed a real evolution as traditional paper based portfolio model is gradually replaced by a digital portfolio, or e-portfolio. E-portfolio is an additional evolution of the traditional paper based portfolio and an attempt to adapt the assessment tools to the requirements of modern teaching practices based on the use of electronic and digital instruments in the modern e-learning environment.

## **8. E-portfolio**

The introduction of e-portfolios in the Algerian educational setting will certainly pose a set of challenges for all educational partners and decision-makers. It is also naïve to pretend that our classes can integrate the E-portfolio assessment easily. This difficulty is attributed to certain characteristics of Algerian classes, in particular, and of the educational system in general.

It is true that Algerian universities are characterized by large classes exceeding 40 students; gaining access to technological assets such as computers and the internet, and finding well-trained teachers in the domain of technology and alternative assessment are real challenges that both teachers and decision-makers have to address. However, these challenges cannot justify our reluctance to embark on promising assessment techniques that may provide better learning opportunities, help teachers overcome the problems they face in their daily work, and avoid such wasted learning opportunities.

## **9. ADVANTAGES OF E-PORTFOLIO**

How does an E-portfolio increase learning collaboration? First, traditional learning environments, such as large classes, provide few opportunities for teacher-learner collaboration, making it a real challenge for teachers to provide customized feedback to their learners. However, with the widespread use of technological innovations, teachers can seize the opportunity to use chat groups, blogs, or mass media applications to reach every student and allow students to share their learning experiences in the virtual world and receive scaffolding support from both their teachers and classmates. (Vygotsky 1978; Moll 1990; Shepard 2000 )

The second advantage of using an E-portfolio is its flexibility. Bergman (1999) indeed argues that the e-portfolio is superior to its traditional paper-based counterpart, as it allows teachers to store students' work without difficulty and does not require a physical space to compile students' drafts and works. It also provides easy access to these works, enabling the teacher to monitor students' progress over time. The students can also go back to their teachers' feedback to learn from their previous experiences. Tezci & Dikici (2011). Students can also receive feedback from peers and develop self-reflection and collaboration skills, as the work is accessible to the whole class (Baturay & Daloglu, 2010).

Furthermore, e-portfolios allow teachers to provide feedback to their students at any stage of the writing process. It is also presented in different formats, such as a blog folio and a Facebook-based e-portfolio. This diversity may facilitate access to such applications for both teachers and students.

As we can clearly see, both the paper-based portfolio and its digital format may serve as viable assessment tools that promote the objectives of the LMD system, such as learners' awareness of the learning process, learners' autonomy, reflection, and collaboration. It is also an appropriate tool that

adapts to the requirements of the digital learning that the Algerian government is urging universities to embark on. However, as with any innovative pedagogical tool, portfolio assessment and its digital counterpart may raise challenges and concerns. However, portfolio assessment raises a set of issues and challenges, including validity, reliability, time management, and technological challenges.

## **10. VALIDITY**

One of the most important criteria for evaluating the effectiveness of an assessment tool is its validity. Indeed, validity means the extent to which a test measures what it is intended to measure. In other words, it has to assess the targeted objectives. To ensure high validity, teachers are required to introduce assessment rubrics.

The advantages of paper-based portfolio assessment and e-portfolios, such as students' self-assessment and evaluation, can become real problems if students are not appropriately trained to evaluate and score their own and peers' writing. An alternative to this issue is to adopt an assessment rubric and explain the goals of portfolio use to students. Sharing the assessment criteria for a good piece of work can help students understand the assessment profile and the standards teachers expect the work to meet. This awareness of what is good and what is bad may increase students' objectivity when assessing their own and their peers' work.

There are some models of portfolio rubrics presented by some researchers, such as Reckase (2002) who presented a rubric that contained the following layouts (a) subject matter degree of understanding; (b) content of the portfolio; (c) students reflection on the works; (d) portfolio content richness and difficulty; (e) portfolio organization and presentation. In addition to validity, portfolio assessment reliability is also a challenge for writing assessors.

## **11. RELIABILITY**

Reliability concerns the consistency of inter-rater scoring of students; indeed, to ensure consistent scoring among teachers and even students, a good understanding of the portfolio assessment goals and criteria, and raters' training are highly recommended.

## **12. CONCLUSION**

The expected positive effects of introducing portfolio assessment and its digital format in Algerian classes outweigh its disadvantages; the use of such an alternative assessment tool may increase students' ownership of the writing process, developing their reflective capacity, critical thinking, autonomy, and collaborative skills. These objectives are at the heart of the government reforms and may give Algerian students a real opportunity to develop lifelong skills that the job market is seeking. There is no doubt that introducing such alternative assessment tools may not be easy, as they require teachers' and students' involvement, expertise in the assessment domain, and teacher training. Moreover, technological issues, such as insufficient technology assets (e.g., computers, the internet), may also limit the use of innovative assessment tools. However, these difficulties cannot justify our reluctance to introduce them in our classes.

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