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**Impact of strategy-based instruction via webfolio assessment on
IELTS general reading of EFL learners**

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Abstract

This study employed a webfolio assessment system to investigate how the use of blogs within a portfolio framework in Iranian EFL reading classes which implemented Strategy-Based Instruction affects reading comprehension. For the purpose of this study, 45 advance male learners were divided into three groups. Two IELTS general reading tasks adopted from Cambridge IELTS 10 were administered as pre-test and post-test phases of the study to the experimental groups in order to find the difference in the reading comprehension of the learners prior to the treatment and then at the outset of the study. The pre- and post-tests were administered along with a Skill-Based Strategy Inventory adopted from Oxford (2001) to find the differences in using strategies before and after the treatment. Analysing the performance of three groups showed that utilising the webfolio assessment system (M = 24.30) had a significant effect on the reading comprehension of Iranian EFL learners in comparison with the paper-based portfolio assessing system (M = 21.96).

Keywords: Computer-mediated communication, cooperative/collaborative learning, evaluation methodologies, evaluation of CALL systems, teaching/learning strategies.

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1. Introduction

Reading comprehension strategies were used as a means to minimise the gap between what students understand and what they are supposed to understand. (Carrell, 1988; Carrel & Eisterhol, 1983;). The importance of implementing reading strategies has been found to be vital and necessary for EFL and ESL learners who seek a high level of English language and wish to be successful in academic institutions (Schunk & Rice, 1992; Sheorey & Mokhtari, 2001).

Pedagogical reform reflects innovative and revolutionary ideas concerning the nature of assessment and its purpose. The main reason for language assessment is to help teachers get information about students' knowledge (Bailey, 2012). Therefore, assessment is an essential part of the instructional system which could be used to improve learning. Furthermore, a prominent revolution regarding the assessment process is a shift in assessment function from a judgmental role to a developmental one (Hancock, 1994). Traditional assessment deficiencies lie in not assessing students' capabilities in presenting consistent reasoning, organising the pertinent information and ignoring consideration to individual growth that teachers look for in students' assignments (Cole, Ryan, Kick & Mathies, 1999).

A measurement method is needed to be more compatible with the process approach to reading comprehension, taking into account the other aspects of student reading than the single, timed test, usually placed at the end of a reading course (Elbow & Belandoff, 1997 cited in Khanahmadi, Alavi & Behafarin, 2015). Alternative assessments claimed to measure students' performance and developments in the learning process. One of the alternative methods in education used in the assessment of the students' individual or group performance is the portfolio. In the late 1980s and early 1990s, portfolio pedagogy began to emerge as a personal, multiple-use tool for both teachers and students. Authentic, performance and portfolio assessments are the most applicable constructivist approaches to assessment in the literature (Reeves & Okey, 1996 cited in Khanahmadi, Alavi & Behafarin, 2015).

Wu (2005) claimed that the features of portfolio assessment emphasise long-term learning and hybrid assessment, and persuade self-assessment, reflection, teacher–student interaction, and reader evaluation and interaction (cited in Chang, 2008). A portfolio is a storage system for a student's work, an accumulated collection of a learner's work over time, and focuses on process as well as product (Reeves & Okey, 1996). Evaluating a web portfolio is called webfolio assessment. Setting up a web portfolio assessment system in an educational system can be the best instance of technology integration into the learning process (Bergman, 2000). E-portfolio allows teachers and students to better assess the students' work for evaluation purposes and for monitoring development and achievement levels (Dorn & Sabol, 2006).

The purpose of the present study is to investigate the effect strategy-based instruction and e-portfolio assessment via blogs on the IELTS general reading comprehension of Iranian EFL learners and to explore if it is feasible to apply it in the teaching of reading in an EFL educational setting in Iran.

The following research questions will be investigated in the study:

Is there any significant difference between strategy-based instruction of IELTS general reading comprehension and non-strategy-based instruction?

Is there any significant difference between webfolio assessment system of IELTS general reading comprehension and paper-based portfolio assessment system?

Is there any significant difference between webfolio assessment with a strategy-based instruction and paper-based portfolio assessment with strategy-based instruction?

Although portfolio assessment might be seen as an alternative to traditional approaches to reading comprehension assessment, there are some concerns about portfolios, particularly when used for large-scale performance evaluation. Some limitations were noticed as the findings of the study were interpreted and analysed. The first one is that the participants in this study were randomly assigned to

the comparison and experimental groups. Therefore, members of the classes were not representative samples of the whole population. The second one is that this study concentrated on advanced Iranian EFL learners. The study is not performed on all levels of proficiency. And the last one is that some of the participants in the webfolio group were more computer literate and interested in working with computers than the others, so they could be more motivated.

2. Literature review

2.1. Reading comprehension and strategy-based instruction

Some studies define reading as an interactive cognitive process in which students try to interact with the text using their existing knowledge and cultural background (Carrell 1988; Carrel & Eisterhol, 1983).

According to McEwan (2007), reading strategies can be taught explicitly before working on a new text. There are seven strategies which seem practical and were implanted in the present study. The first strategy is activating. In this phase, the readers extract and build meaning from the text by recalling their related existing knowledge from their long-term memory. The second strategy is inferring, which means putting together what is written in the text, what is not written in the text and what is almost known in the reader's mind in order to extract meaning from the text. The third strategy is monitoring-clarifying, which includes thinking about how and what the reader reads while and after the act of reading. It aims to determine if the reader comprehends the text with the ability to clarify and fix up any ambiguities. The fourth strategy is called questioning which engages in learning conversations with text, partners and instructors through self-questioning, question generation and question answering. The fifth strategy is searching-selecting; that is, searching for different sources to choose suitable information to answer questions, define words, solve problems and gather information. The sixth strategy is summarising, which is paraphrasing the text with different words used in the original text. And the last strategy is visualising-organising. It means constructing a mental image for building meaning from the text.

2.2. Portfolio vs. webfolio

In the instruction of assessment of a reading comprehension skill, a portfolio is a collection of readings that can be chosen but not certainly polished pieces that a writer brings about over a fixed period of time (Park, 2004 cited in Khanahmadi, Alavi & Behafarin, 2015). Developing portfolios is one of the best ways of helping learners to engage actively in theirs and others' reading process. Critical thinking, writing as learning, and reflective practice are consequences of using portfolio (Jasper & Fulton, 2005), also it helps learners to boost their proficiency and self-consciousness (Spence & El-Ansari, 2004). The benefits of portfolio use are realised not just through the finished product, but through the actual process of constructing the portfolio (Coffey, 2005).

According to different scholars, portfolios have been typified in an assortment of ways. Smith and Tillema (2003) divided the portfolio into four types: dossier portfolio, training portfolio reflective portfolio and personal development portfolio. But Abrami and Barrett (2005) list three other types of portfolios: process portfolio, showcase portfolio and assessment portfolio (Khanahmadi, Alavi & Behafarin, 2015). While Cooper and Love (2001), as cited in Ali (2005), divided portfolios into two main types: formative and summative.

An electronic version of portfolio (also known as eportfolio, e-portfolio, efolio, digital portfolio, webfolio, etc.) is basically an electronic version of a paper-based portfolio which is shaped in a web-based setting, and including not just text, but graphic, audio and video material as well (Omidvar, Jaryani, Zafarghandi, Salehinasab & Jamshidi, 2011). Webfolio is 'a collection of authentic and diverse evidence, drawn from a larger archive representing what a person or organisation has learned over

time on which the person or organisation has reflected, and designed for presentation to one or more audiences for a particular rhetorical purpose’ (NLII, 2003; Barrett, 2003; cited in Wang, 2006).

Chang (2001) explained the features of webfolio assessment into two parts. The first one is ‘Real-time information creation and maintenance, thereby overcoming space–time limitations of traditional portfolios’ and the second one is ‘Benefits in recording, organising, searching and analysing portfolio information, and serving as a platform for students and teachers to share or view other students’ files, which enhances interaction and learning’.

3. Materials and methods

3.1. Participants

To test the hypotheses of the study, 45 advanced English learners were selected as the participants of the study ($N = 45$). The participants were all male adults and were in the 20–30-year age range. Participants divided into three groups. Each group contained 15 English learners. The groups were intact and not randomly selected. Two of these classes were considered experimental groups (web-based and paper-based portfolio) and the other group was considered the comparison group (non-portfolio).

3.2. Instrumentation

In this research, the following instruments prepared in Table 1 were implemented.

Table 1. Implemented instruments and rationale behind using them

| Instruments | Rationale behind using instrument |
|----------------------------------|--|
| Interchange Placement Test | Using Interchange placement test C, adopted from Lesley, Hansen, and Zukowski (2005) in order to ensure that they were at the advanced level. |
| Reading Strategies Questionnaire | Skill-Based Strategy Inventory (SBSI) adopted from Oxford (2001), was administered to the experimental groups with pre-test and post-test due to two reasons. First, to see if the participants were familiar with the strategies which the researcher was going to teach them and second, to be assured if there was any progress. |
| IELTS General Reading Tests | Two IELTS general reading test adopted from Cambridge IELTS 10 were administered as a pre-test and a post-test. They were done as a pre-test to make sure there was no statistically significant difference in the general reading comprehension of the three groups and as a post-test to make a comparison with their performance on the pre-test and see how much progress each group has made. |
| Teaching materials | McCarter and Whitby (2007) and reading sections of McCarter (2010) were employed as the teaching materials of the class. These books were chosen since they fitted the theoretical philosophy of the research which was focusing on the IELTS reading process. |
| Weblogs | The participants in webfolio group designed and used their own weblogs as webfolio to keep their reading texts and send or receive their feedback. To investigate the effectiveness of webfolios, there was another experimental group, who used traditional (i.e., paper-based) portfolios. |

3.3. Procedure

The procedures put into practice for the present study include selecting the participants, administering the pre-test with a reading strategy questionnaire, applying the treatment and finally administering the post-test with a reading strategy questionnaire.

The Interchange placement Test adopted from Lesley et al. (2005) was employed to homogenise the participants according to their general proficiency level. From the learner population in the

institute, 60 learners who were qualified, with regard to their level, placement test of the institute and successful completion of the prior courses, took the Interchange Placement Test and Essay Writing Test C adopted from Lesley et al. (2005); and 45 with scores between 55 and 70, according to the scoring guideline were selected as the participants of the study. The participants were divided into three groups, including two experimental groups and one comparison group.

A week before the treatment, a pre-test was administered to all three groups. The participants were asked to take a test adopted from Cambridge IELTS 10 within 60 minutes. The classes were held 3 days a week and each session consisted of 120 minutes. The participants were similar regarding their age range, sex, teaching materials and tests.

In this study, all three groups were exposed to instructions on the reading skill. In experimental groups, the taught strategies were also limited to the reading skill. The reading course syllabus in all three classes was organised around skills and processes, such as activating, inferring, monitoring-clarifying, questioning, searching—selecting, summarising and visualising—and organising. In fact, the only difference between all three groups was the usage of different kind of methods to teach reading comprehension.

In one of the experimental groups, reading strategies were taught via portfolio assessment through blogs; and through traditional portfolio assessment in another one. Thirty to forty minutes of the class time was specified for teaching strategies and around 30 minutes was specified for covering them in reading comprehension. In addition to the two experimental groups, one group served as a comparison group, working on the reading comprehension skill without the use of portfolios or reading strategies and spent this time by doing some reading comprehension tasks in groups and giving oral feedback.

3.4. Data analysis

After collecting the data, the results of the three groups were compared. A one-way analysis of variance (ANOVA) was run on the scores of the three groups, gained through pre-test, post-test and (pre-post) strategy questionnaire to see the result of treatment during the study for the first and second research questions. According to Hatch and Farhady (1981), ANOVA is used to compare the means of several groups at the same time. One-way ANOVA can be used if there is one dependent and one independent variable. In order to compare the scores between three groups, a repeated measure was run.

The first research question of this study investigated the effect of strategy-based instruction (the independent variable) on the reading comprehension (dependent variable) and the second research question studied the effect of electronic portfolio assessment with strategy-based instruction (independent variable with two levels) on reading comprehension (dependent variable).

4. Results

4.1. Homogenising the participants

A placement test adopted from Lesley et al. (2005) was administered in order to select three homogeneous groups of English language learners in terms of their language proficiency. These participants were assigned to two experimental groups and one comparison group. The participants who gained between 75 and 100 were accepted for this research. Descriptive Statistics of the test are as follows: Mean, std. error of mean, std. deviation and variance of the 45 participants are 88.32, 1.142, 6.788 and 61.012, respectively.

Also, SBSI adopted from Oxford (2001) was administered to the experimental groups along with pre-test and post-test. Descriptive Statistics of the pre-test and post-test questionnaires are as following. Mean, median, mode, std. deviation, variance and skewness of pre-test questionnaire for

experimental groups are 50.04, 51, 53, 5.128, 31.782, and 0.375, respectively. In addition, mean, median, mode, std. deviation, variance and skewness of post-test questionnaire for experimental groups are 59.15, 59, 59, 7.325, 46.512, and 0.212, respectively.

4.2. Pre-Test IELTS general reading

After choosing three homogeneous groups as comparison and experimental, a general reading test set adopted from Cambridge IELTS 10 was administered as pre-test on the first session of the classes. Table 2 shows the descriptive statistics of the pre-test for the three groups separately. Based on the results, students' scores on pre-test for the three groups enjoy normal distributions.

Table 2. Descriptive statistics of the experimental and control groups

| | Comparison | Paper-based portfolio | Webfolio |
|--------------------|------------|-----------------------|----------|
| N | 15 | 15 | 15 |
| Mean | 18.20 | 18.43 | 18.26 |
| Std. error of mean | .357 | .386 | .304 |
| Std. deviation | 1.386 | 1.49 | 1.17 |
| Variance | 1.92 | 2.24 | 1.38 |
| Skewness | -.550 | .424 | .122 |

A one-way ANOVA was run to compare the webfolio, paper-based portfolio and the comparison groups on the pre-test in order to probe their general reading comprehension prior to the administration of the treatments. Based on the ANOVA results showed in Table 3, it could be concluded that there is no significant difference between the comparison and experimental groups' mean scores ($F_{(2, 42)} = 0.117, p = 0.89$).

Table 3. Comparison of the pre-test of general reading comprehension across three groups

| | Sum of Squares | df | Mean square | F | Sig. |
|----------------|----------------|----|-------------|-------|------|
| Between groups | 0.443 | 2 | 0.217 | 0.117 | 0.89 |
| Within groups | 77.76 | 42 | 1.85 | | |
| Total | 78.20 | 44 | | | |

4.3. Post-test IELTS general reading

To see the effects of the treatment and procedures during the study, IELTS general reading comprehension test adopted from Cambridge IELTS 10 was administered as post-test on the last session of the classes. Table 4 shows the descriptive statistics of the post-test for the three groups separately. Based on the results, students' scores on pre-test for the three groups enjoy normal distributions.

Table 4. Descriptive statistics of the experimental and control groups

| | Comparison | Paper-based portfolio | Webfolio |
|--------------------|------------|-----------------------|----------|
| N | 15 | 15 | 15 |
| Mean | 20.53 | 21.96 | 24.30 |
| Std. error of mean | 0.321 | 0.382 | 0.419 |
| Std. deviation | 1.245 | 1.48 | 1.62 |
| Variance | 1.55 | 2.19 | 2.63 |
| Skewness | -0.375 | -0.134 | -0.597 |

A one-way ANOVA was run in order to compare the webfolio, paper-based portfolio and comparison groups on the post-test to probe their general reading comprehension prior to the administration of the treatments.

As displayed in Table 5, Levene’s F of 0.20 is not significant ($p = 0.81 > 0.05$). Since the probability associated with the Levene's test was higher than the significance level of 0.05, it could be concluded that the three groups enjoyed the homogeneity of variances.

Table 5. Levene’s tests of homogeneity of variances on the post-Test

| Levene statistic | df1 | df2 | Sig. |
|------------------|-----|-----|------|
| 0.204 | 2 | 42 | .816 |

The results of the one-way ANOVA test between and within groups on the post-test general reading comprehension test are presented in Table 6. These results indicate that there are significant differences ($F_{(2, 42)} = 25.48, p > 0.000$) between the mean scores of the webfolio, paper-based portfolio and the comparison groups on the post-test of general reading comprehension.

Table 6. Comparison the post-test of general reading comprehension by groups

| | Sum of squares | df | Mean square | F | Sig. |
|----------------|----------------|----|-------------|-------|------|
| Between groups | 108.43 | 2 | 54.21 | 25.48 | .000 |
| Within groups | 89.36 | 42 | 2.12 | | |
| Total | 197.80 | 44 | | | |

Although there is a significant difference between the mean scores of the three groups on the post-test of general reading comprehension, the *a priori* (planned) contrast could be run to probe the two null-hypotheses of the study. A planned or *a priori* contrast test was run in this study since the post hoc test compares all groups, thus increasing the rate of multiple comparisons error. A-priori limits the comparisons to $K-1$ comparisons or the number of means minus one and thus decreases the rate of multiple comparisons error. Moreover, a-priori allows us to compare one mean or combination of other means with one or a combination of other means, while the post hoc compares the means individually (Field, 2007).

Table 7 shows the t-observed value for comparing the mean score of the comparison group as compared with the grand mean scores of the web-based and paper-based portfolios. The results show that there was a significant difference between the mean score of the one comparison group with the combined mean scores of the two experimental groups (Webfolio and Paper-Based Portfolio).

Table 7. A priori contrast post-test of general reading comprehension by equal variances be ‘assumed’ and ‘not assumed’

| | Contrast | Value of contrast | Std. error | t | df | Sig. (2-tailed) | |
|-----------|-----------------|-------------------|------------|--------|------|-----------------|-------|
| Post Test | Assume equal | 1 | 2.600 | 0.4613 | 5.63 | 42 | 0.000 |
| | variances | 2 | 2.333 | 0.5326 | 4.38 | 42 | 0.000 |
| | Does not assume | 1 | 2.600 | 0.4290 | 6.06 | 33.91 | 0.000 |
| | equal variances | 2 | 2.333 | 0.5675 | 4.11 | 27.76 | 0.000 |

1: Comparison group versus Web + Paper-based

2: Web-Based versus Paper-based

Based on these results, it can be concluded that the first research question is approved. The strategy-based instruction applied with the two experimental groups (paper-based and web-based portfolio) with a grand mean of 23.13 shows a significantly higher mean than the comparison group whose mean is 20.53 and it could be claimed that strategy-based instruction improved the IELTS general reading comprehension of the male Iranian EFL learners in comparison with a non-strategy-based one. The Assume Equal Variances for contrast tables regarding the post-test of general reading comprehension are also reported in Table 7.

It should be mentioned that a planned or a-priori comparison test was run to compare the mean scores of the two experimental groups (paper-based portfolio and webfolio) with the comparison group's mean score. Also, as displayed in Table 5, the *t*-observed value for comparing the mean score of the two experimental groups is 4.38 ($p < .05$). Since the probability associated with the *t*-value was lower than the significance level of .05, it can be concluded that there is a significant difference between the mean score of the two experimental groups on the post-test of general reading comprehension test.

Based on these results, it can be concluded that the second and third research questions are approved. The Webfolio group ($M = 24.30$) performed better than the Paper-based Portfolio group ($M = 21.96$).

5. Discussion and Implications

The researcher's aim was to determine the explicit impact of strategy-based instruction via webfolio assessment on the IELTS general reading comprehension of Iranian EFL learners. The findings of this study confirmed Grenfell and Macaro (2007) claims regarding strategy use in a language learning class. Learners who purposefully select and consolidate systems applicable to a given assignment show enhanced capability in the target dialect (Grenfell & Macaro, 2007). In this study, the two experimental groups of paper-based portfolio and webfolio, which achieved higher reading comprehension, confirmed the effective use of the reading strategies being taught in the course.

Another goal of this study was trying to show the effectiveness of webfolio assessment as a tool to improve IELTS general reading comprehension among Iranian EFL learners. The possible reason that webfolio group gained higher reading comprehension based on statistical analysis and collected data can be attributed to the employment of strategy-based instruction via webfolio assessment. Factors other than the reading strategies taught by the instructor may have influenced the participants' reading strategies used and their reading comprehension in the webfolio group. Webfolios, like traditional portfolios, can facilitate students' reflection on their own learning, leading to more awareness of learning strategies and needs. However, the current study confirmed the results of a comparative research done by Wesel and Prop (2008) between paper-based portfolios and webfolios in the same setting, which suggested the use of a webfolio, leading to better learning outcomes.

This study also revealed that the webfolio offers many advantages to its paper-based counterpart and use of strategies via this framework enhanced students' reading comprehension. The positive effect on the learning outcomes suggests a deeper level of reflection among the students using a webfolio. This might have led to better metacognitive regulation which in sequence led to improvements in the learners' performance (Wesel & Prop, 2008). Metacognitive regulation includes a set of activities that help to control the learning (Schraw, 2001).

This study confirmed McLoughlin and Luca (2006) clarification on the concept of the webfolio. They explained that the way to webfolios is not how to make it, yet to gather confirmation of expert advancement or learning conclusions and performing nonstop reflection and change. The study also revealed that traditional methods of teaching and assessing reading comprehension could be revised or replaced with new and efficient methods that put more demands on learners. Students will be self-appointed and self-assertive by choosing their own strategies. Using their own weblog and organising portfolios by their own reflective academics grow out their attention to reading, thus leading to autonomous learning. As it was shown in the statistical analysis and also in the collected data, the webfolio assessment system could improve the participants' reading comprehension in advance level, which means it is the time to change the method of teaching and assessing reading to improve the English learners reading comprehension skill.

The findings of this study showed that reading comprehension strategies should be explicitly instructed. Strategy-based instruction should replace the traditional way of teaching reading comprehension skill.

Strategies should be taught through direct explanation, explicit teacher modelling and extensive feedback. In addition, students should never be in doubt as to what the strategies are, where and why they can be used, and how they are used. More importantly, they should be informed of the value and usefulness of strategies in L2 reading comprehension.

Collecting all the activities including homework assignments and class activities, while reading comprehension strategies are being taught via portfolios (paper and electronic forms), enables the English learners to evaluate their progress during the course.

Utilising technological devices, such as personal computers, Internet and weblog, can be very good practice for those English learners who aim to participate in internet-based exams such as iBT test. These devices enable the learner to practice individually and focus on one's weak points while using technological devices. Based on the findings of this study (priority of webfolio group), the current study can suggest the use of technology in pedagogical settings not only for its benefits but also for meeting learners' needs in the today's modern society.

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