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Investigating Using Portfolio Assessment and Learning English Language in Qom Secondary Schools

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Abstract - This research was an attempt to investigate the influence of using portfolio assessment on students' Learning English language in Qom Secondary Schools. The study participants were students of two intact English classes (N=68). The study used a pre-test post-test non-equivalent groups design with two groups. The methodological procedure adopted was to have the experimental group use the portfolio, with the control group using conventional assessment. The independent t-test computed between the means of the two groups signified that there was a statistically significant difference between the performances of the two groups on the achievement posttest. Moreover, a selfreporting questionnaire was employed after the treatment. The experimental results revealed that the use of the portfolio had significant positive influence on students' language. However, the effect of peer-assessment performance was not significant.

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Investigating Using Portfolio Assessment and Learning English Language in Qom Secondary Schools

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Abstract - This research was an attempt to investigate the influence of using portfolio assessment on students' Learning English language in Qom Secondary Schools. The study participants were students of two intact English classes (N=68). The study used a pre-test post-test non-equivalent groups design with two groups. The methodological procedure adopted was to have the experimental group use the portfolio, with the control group using conventional assessment. The independent t-test computed between the means of the two groups signified that there was a statistically significant difference between the performances of the two groups on the achievement posttest. Moreover, a self-reporting questionnaire was employed after the treatment. The experimental results revealed that the use of the portfolio had significant positive influence on students' language. However, the effect of peer-assessment performance was not significant.

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I. Introduction

Basically portfolio is defined as a purposeful collection of any aspect of the student's work which is kept in a file folder, box, or any durable and expandable container that tells the student's improvement, progress, and achievement. Portfolio can also show the student's abilities, contributions, and activities to him/herself or parents. In recent years, the use of portfolio has been developed as an important and useful tool in teaching and testing English as a foreign language.

In many disciplines, portfolios help learning by providing portraits of students, offering multidimensional perspectives, encouraging students to participate, and linking to teaching (O' Malley & Valdez Pierce, 1996; Genesee & Upshur, 1996). In terms of foreign language learning and teaching, they are an alternative assessment tool used to both offer opportunities for absorbing language authentically and actively, and for evaluating student progress.

Classrooms are social settings; teaching and learning occur through social interaction between teachers and students. As teaching and learning take place, they are complicated processes and are affected by peer-group relationships. The interactions and relationships between teachers and students, and among students, as they work side by side, constitute the group processes of the classroom.

The problem of conventional teaching and assessment in our schools is hurting students and decreasing their personal motivation to learn and also conventional assessment causes different kinds of problems like: to study just the night before and bubble in the answer in exam day, full of stress and pressure, memorization and rote learning, etc. These methods became old and out-dated, so we need some new and up-dated methods in both teaching and testing. Nowadays not only portfolio assessment catches its own way but also it steps more than that and E-portfolio is going to be replaced.

Portfolio is used as an alternative assessment in Iran. This is done differently in Iranian schools. Some students have portfolios, but they are not controlled and checked very carefully by the teachers while some teachers do it very carefully and beautifully. They use it as a bridge with the parents and it can increase the interaction between the students and the teacher and also teachers and parents. Portfolio assessment catches a way in Iranian educational system.

In Iranian schools most of the assessments are traditional. The students memorize something the night before and bubble in the answer in the exam day. There is no need to think, search, and find something new. Just memorization will work. There is a lot of stress and pressure on students when taking the exam. The atmosphere of the classroom is also rigid and the teacher and students cannot talk about students' problems that much. The conventional methods of assessment mostly cannot involve the students in the process of learning, teaching, and assessment because there is no direct or indirect connection between them. The students are taught and then left in isolation. Hence the best alternative can be portfolio assessment. Portfolio assessment gives the students more autonomy and makes them more assertive and independent thinkers. When students cannot do freely in the exam and are limited, teaching and testing can be under question. In portfolio assessment, grades are not as

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important as in conventional assessment. What is important is that both teachers and students get involved in teaching and learning for a long time. A portfolio can be a bridge between students and the teacher and between teacher and the parents.

While conventional assessment cannot actively involve the students in the process of assessment, an important dimension of portfolio assessment is that it should actively involve the students in the process of assessment. Portfolios are a great mode of assessment for the classroom. They can create autonomous learners and make the students independent. This study investigates how using portfolio assessment can improve English in Qom Secondary Schools, how it can change a passive class to an active one, and how it can create autonomous and independent learners.

Numerous studies have been carried out on the effects of portfolio assessment on students' English learning (Van Olphen, 2007; Song and August, 2002; Birjandi, et al., 2000; Moya and O'Malley, 1994; Mandell and Michelson, 1990).

Traditionally, portfolios have been employed as a way to develop and assess the professionalism of pre - service teachers (Van Olphen, 2007). They also take on the role as the assessment device in myriad educational settings. In the literature, many empirical studies have been undertaken to investigate the benefits of employing portfolios as the major or ancillary assessment tool in second/foreign language classrooms. Song and August (2002) found that a carefully structured portfolio assessment could serve as a better tool to identify ESL students that would succeed in subsequent courses than could standardize tests. They also reported that portfolios encouraged EFL students to take ownership over their own learning and to engage in active reflection on the learning process, thus creating an environment favorable for the development of learner autonomy. Furthermore, this alternative assessment tool was also greeted with overwhelmingly positive responses from both ESL and EFL students alike. Moya and O' Malley (1994) claim that portfolios can be used as a systematic assessment tool in instructional planning and student evaluation. Matching assessment to teaching and supplying a profile of students' learning and growth in multiple domains or skills, portfolios are thus recommended as an alternative to standardized testing.

These studies in general hypothesized that portfolio assessment would enable FL learners to learn better and more. In portfolio assessment, students actually learn something about writing and the grades are no longer an obstacle. The students learn how to evaluate themselves. Self-evaluation is an important factor in portfolio assessment. Birjandi, Bagheridoust, and Mossalanejad (2000) assert that portfolio assessment breaks most of the conventional rules for good testing practice.

II. Origins of the Portfolio Concept

Portfolio is not a new concept in the educational literature. It goes back to hundred years ago. Traditionally, portfolios have been employed as a way to develop and assess the professionalism of pre - service teachers (Van Olphen, 2007). Gradually, they also took on the role as the assessment device in myriad educational settings, Song and August (2002). In the literature, many empirical studies have been undertaken to investigate the benefits of employing portfolios as the major or ancillary assessment tool in second/foreign language classrooms. Song and August (2002) found that a carefully structured portfolio assessment could serve as a better tool to identify ESL students that would succeed in subsequent courses than could standardized tests. Barootchi and Keshavarz (2002) and Nunes (2004) reported that portfolios encouraged EFL students to take ownership over their own learning and to engage in active reflection on the learning process, thus creating an environment favorable for the development of learner autonomy. Furthermore, this alternative assessment tool was also greeted with overwhelmingly positive responses from both ESL and EFL students alike.

III. Different Types of Portfolios

There are different types of portfolios suggested by different teachers and experts based on their experience with using portfolio assessment. Portfolios are often divided into four types according to Mandell and Michelson (1990):

- Showcase: Student only puts his best work or his best product in for each objective
- Cumulative: Student places all work or all products relevant to each objective into the file
- Process—Student places pre/post-samples of work for each objective into the file
- Each type of portfolio should include all of the essential components of a portfolio listed above.

Crockette (1998) asserts that portfolio can be divided into five parts:

- Found samples, which refer to pieces done to fulfill class assignment
- Processed samples, or the students' analyses and self-assessment of a work previously graded by the teacher
- Revisions or samples of student work that have been graded and then revised, edited, and rewritten
- Reflections, which are related to the processed samples but are applied to the portfolio as a whole, providing a chance for students to think about who they are, what strengths and weaknesses are

- Portfolio projects, which cover work designed for the sole purpose of inclusion in student portfolios.

Portfolio should include the contents mentioned above as well as other items considered relevant to its specific purpose.

Why is Portfolio Used?

There are various reasons why portfolios are used. One of the major reasons is that teachers want to be far from the old methods of testing. They are not eager to apply pencil-and-paper method because in this method students' true ability cannot be measured and also it is very stressful and limited to the night of exam. On the one hand, students have been using notebooks or related workbooks for many years, on the other hand they can't show their true abilities when they are tested in the form of pencil-and paper test. Hence, they need something new, tolerable, effective and useful, so portfolio can be the best choice. The main feature of portfolio is in the assessment of students' achievement. Portfolio assessment can engage students actively, foster student – teacher communication and student – student communication, enhance understanding of the educational process among parents and in the society, provide goals for students' efforts and offer an alternative to traditional test (pencil and paper) for students with special needs. Portfolio evaluation can encourage both teachers and students to concentrate on texts and not on grades. It can provide opportunities for students to view his/her progress, to control his/her own learning and to be agents of reflection and decision making.

The epistemology of portfolio assessment is student – centered communicative approaches in the classroom. The new methods of teaching and testing are not congruent with the traditional classroom situations where there are only pencil and papers to measure the learners' ability. When teaching methods are changing very fast, so testing methods should be changed faster. Students' true abilities cannot be measured by pencil and paper. Hence some other varieties are needed; one of them is portfolio assessment. When learners' abilities are measured longitudinally they have enough time to think, to select, to do different things and there is no pressure on them. When teaching and assessment are going to get a common set of goals, assessment can make sense and can be used for teaching. Truly good assessment is a focal point of good instruction. Both teaching and testing need to reflect goals for students; assessment measures important classroom objectives. It supports and illustrates instructional improvement. Portfolio assessment can enhance the learners' opportunities to do more and be responsible not only in the classroom but in the society.

In order to investigate the effect of using portfolio assessment on Iranian English Learning, the following research questions were proposed:

1. Is there an effective relationship between using Portfolio assessment and learning English Language in Qom Secondary Schools?
2. Can Portfolio Assessment improve the students' English Language?

IV. Method

a) Participants

The participants selected for this study were chosen from students of EFL who enrolled in the third year of secondary school in Qom (Niroogah region).Two available classes were chosen. Participants were 68 male students attending two separate classes in one school. To carry out the experiment, one class was randomly assigned to serve as a control group (34 students), while the other as an experimental group (34 students).

The socio economic background of the chosen school population ranges from upper middle class to lower class families. All participants are Persian speaking students learning English as a foreign language. They have been studying English language for two years. The students were between the ages of 13 and 15 years old.

b) Instrumentation

To know whether the experimental and control groups are identical and homogenous before conducting the study, a proficiency test was used which consisted of four sections: vocabulary, grammar, spelling, and reading comprehension. The test reliability was computed through Spearman-Brown prophecy formula ($r = 0.80$). The content validity of the test was approved by three English language teachers.

Another instrument used in the study was an English school test (65 items) which was administered to both groups (experimental and control) before and after the experiment to determine whether there was any progress in the scores of the participants after the experiment.

In addition, after the experiment, the participants in control group were asked to answer the questions of a questionnaire to know whether they had used their portfolios regularly and to know the effect of portfolio in their learning.

c) Procedure

Before the experiment started, the participants (both experimental and control groups) were given the English School Test as a pre-test. The Test was done in two different classes, but at the same time, the same situation, and condition.

The experiment lasted 15 weeks (two sessions per week). The same writing assignments of the

textbook were given to both experimental and control groups. The two groups were taught by the same teacher; the experimental group received the treatment (portfolio assessment strategy). The researcher provided each student of the experimental group with two folders with plastic bags inside. The students would keep the writing assignments different activities like: PowerPoint, recording voices in one folder (collection portfolio); the returned pieces of writing selected for the portfolio would be put in the other folder (showcase portfolio) according to the portfolio contents.

Three simple principles guided the implementation of the Portfolio Assessment Model: collection, selection, and reflection. From the very beginning of the experiment and at specific classes during the term, the students (experimental group) collected and submitted twenty finished drafts of writing assignments together with early drafts that were drawn from the students' textbook and developed in class work throughout the term and put them in a folder (collection portfolio).

After completing the predetermined writing assignments, the students were led to select and choose their best and favorite (a variety of writing styles) at least five pieces of writing to compile a portfolio (showcase portfolio) for final assessment. Selection of items had been made depending upon the purpose of the portfolio. Finally, reflection occurred. The students were encouraged to fill in their reflection sheets about the pieces of writing they had chosen and what they would still like to learn about their writing. It was optional to fill in the reflection sheets in the native language as Apple and Shimo (2004) claimed that "writing a reflective essay in one's mother tongue rather than the target language does not detract them from the value of the reflection, and in fact can even add to it"(p.3). Students were divided in teams as readers or editors of each other's work. Besides, two separate conferences of fifteen minutes each were held in which the student presented his work and justified his reasons behind each choice, sharing their thoughts, strengths, and weaknesses with the teacher.

At the end of the experiment, the English School Test for the second time to both experimental and control groups and the Self-Reporting Questionnaire for the first time were administered to the experimental group. After two weeks, the Self-Reporting Questionnaire was used for the second time to experimental group.

d) Treatment of the Data

The quantitative analysis of data was directed to assess the effect of the Portfolio Assessment Model on the English Learning of a sample of EFL third year of Qom Secondary School students.

Collected data were statistically treated through the computer package SPSS (version 18.0). Descriptive statistics such as means, standard deviations, frequencies, and percentages were computed. Independent samples t-test (2-tailed test) was used to determine if there were any significant differences in the mean scores between the experimental and control groups on the pre and post administrations of the English School Test (before and after the treatment). For statistical analysis, the alpha level of significance 0.05 of confidence was set. Pearson product - moment correlation was also used to assess the correlation between the participants' (experimental group) means of scores in the portfolio and their means of scores in the English School Test.

V. Results

The process of data analysis began with analyzing the data obtained from the proficiency test implemented for examining the homogeneity of the participants of both groups. Table 1 below shows the group statistics for the experimental and control groups. To know whether the experimental and control groups are identical and homogenous in the proficiency test before conducting the study, an F-test was used. As it is shown in table 2, $F(1, 66) = 1.21$, $p=0.25 > 0.05$ indicated that both groups are homogeneous due to their variances. In order to compare the mean scores of both groups an independent t-test was used. The computed t-value $t=2.001$, $df= 66$, $p= .05$ revealed that no statistically significant differences were found in the mean scores between the experimental (41) and control groups (43.05) regarding the proficiency test. Hence, the results showed that two groups were homogenous in their language proficiency.

Table 1 : Group statistics for the Proficiency Test.

Groups	N	Mean	SD Mean	Std. Error	Min	Max
Experimental	34	41	6.10	1.20	3.25	20
Control	34	43.05	5.41	1.12	4	20

Table 2 : T-test for the Proficiency Test.

	Levene's Test for Equality of Variances		t-test for Equality of Means				
Equal Variances	F	Sig.	t	df	Sig. (2-tailed	Mean Difference	Std. Error Difference
Assumed	1.21	0.25	2.001	66	.05	2.05	1.50

The next step was to start the experiment. A Standard School Achievement Test was administered to the participants before and after the treatment. The descriptive statistics is shown in table 3:

Table 3 : Group Statistics on the School Achievement Pretest.

Groups	N	Mean	SD	Std. Error Mean
Experimental	34	13.5	5.47	0.561
Control	34	15.05	4.41	0. 542

The comparison of the means on the pre administration (t= 1.209, df= 66, p=0.05) revealed that no statistically significant differences were found in the mean scores between the experimental and control groups regarding school test. This finding indicated that the two groups were almost equal to each other before the treatment.

Table 4 : T-test for the School Achievement Pretest.

	Levene's Test for Equality of Variances		t-test for Equality of Means				
Equal Variances	F	Sig.	t	df	Sig. (2-tailed)	Mean Difference	Std. Error Difference
Assumed	0.20	0.84	1.209	66	0.368	1.55	1.45

However, the comparison of the mean values of the two groups on the post test showed that the difference between the means of the two groups was statistically significant (t= 2.250, df = 66, p= 0.05) and the experimental group was able to outperform the control group on the School Achievement post test. Table 5 below shows the group statistics for the school achievement post test and table 6 indicates the significant t-value on the post test.

Table 5 : Group statistics for the School Achievement post test.

Groups	N	Mean	SD	Std. Error Mean
Experimental	34	17.25	3.65	0.765
Control	34	16.14	3.78	0. 841

Table 6 : T-test for the School Achievement posttest.

	Levene's Test for Equality of Variances		t-test for Equality of Means				
Equal Variances	F	Sig.	t	df	Sig. (2-tailed)	Mean Difference	Std. Error Difference
Assumed	2.546	0.125	2.250	66	0.258	1.11	1.145

Final step was to ask the participants in the experimental group to answer the questionnaire. All 34 learners in the experimental group reported that they liked to use the portfolio in their English class and also portfolio motivated them in English. Only 4 out of the 34 learners reported that they were not able to improve their English due to using portfolio system. All the learners in the experimental group mentioned that using portfolio assessment caused to have a good relationship with the instructor. Moreover, they believed that they were successful in using portfolio and were motivated to learn more about English.

VI. Discussion

The positive answer to the first research question indicates that there is an effective relationship between using portfolio assessment and learning English language in Qom secondary schools. The performance of the learners on the achievement post test signifies that the Experimental (portfolio) group did much better than the Control (non-portfolio) group on the process of using portfolio. Pearson product - moment correlation revealed that there was a statistically significant correlation at $p < .05$ between the participants' (experimental group) means scores in the portfolios and their means scores in the English School Test. Thus, there is a relationship between the participants' test scores and their portfolio grading. This means that using portfolio along with the English School Test increased the participants' chance of success as they were motivated and encouraged to perform well in the English School Test.

It is important to mention that tests are not sufficient enough methods to achieve instruction and assessment purposes. They are administered only once or twice as a separate procedure during the term and thus assess specific skills or knowledge at a specific period of time neglecting students' performance throughout the term. Depending on that, test scores cannot be relied on as a basis of making decisions concerning students' true abilities, needs, and interests as well as decisions concerning instructional reforms. Such product-oriented traditional assessments had limited possibility to influence teaching and learning positively and are no longer fit with current EFL classroom practices. It was something separate and different from usual classroom life activities and it tested students' abilities to recall and reproduce specific knowledge, lower-level skills, and concepts, rather than their ability to produce and apply knowledge, significant high-level skills, and concepts to authentic situations.

It is worth to mention that the result of the present study is in harmony with what portfolio proponents (Camp, 1992; Weiser, 1992; Kowalewski, et al., 2002) suggested that such strategy of assessment motivates EFL students to learn and improve their performance. Weiser (1992) noted that students were comfortable with the portfolio assessment procedures because they received constant feedback and could consider the comments carefully as they would provide them with suggestions for improvement.

To answer the second research question, a self-reporting questionnaire was given to participants in portfolio group (experimental). The answers show that after the experiment and using portfolio assessment the students are motivated, improved, involved in the process of learning and testing more than the past. As the students answered, they improved their English language after using portfolio. Moreover; the capabilities of the learners in changing the dialog of the book to a new form, making new sentences, reading very fast prove the effectiveness of the technique.

VII. Conclusion

The result of this study may help teachers and instructors in teaching English to English language learners in different schools and universities. Using portfolio assessment is a strategy which can be used as a formative ongoing process providing feedback to students as they progress toward a goal. This, also, provides the students opportunities to assess themselves regularly and learn continuously. Using portfolio assessment strategy provides a relationship between the teacher and the parents. The teacher uses portfolios to analyze student growth and use the information for decision making regarding future instruction.

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