
| RESEARCH ARTICLE

The Impact of Portfolio Assessment on the Moroccan Police Cadets' EFL Writing Skills

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| ABSTRACT

The purpose of this study is to examine whether or not the integration of portfolio as part of the assessment practices in English for Specific Purposes (ESP) context can significantly impact the improvement of the Moroccan police cadets' EFL writing skills. The study participants were 50 Moroccan Police Cadets who have been studying English for Policing at the Moroccan Defense Language Institute for one year. They were randomly selected and divided into experimental and control groups. Each group consists of 25 students. A pre-test was administered to both groups to check their writing proficiency level. The experimental group students were treated, throughout the semester, using portfolio-based assessment techniques like (self-and peer-assessment, teacher's feedback, student-teacher conferences...etc.) to evaluate their writing skill, whereas the control group ones were tested using the traditional summative writing achievement tests. Eventually, a paired sample t-test was conducted to determine the significant differences between the two groups after the treatment. The findings showed that the experimental group students, who were exposed to portfolio-based writing assessment, outperformed their control group counterparts. Finally, the researchers concluded that the use of portfolio assessment in an ESP classroom positively affects the Moroccan Police Cadets' writing skills.

| KEYWORDS

English for Specific Purposes (ESP), Portfolio Assessment, Achievement Test, EFL Writing.

| ARTICLE INFORMATION

ACCEPTED: 12 May 2023

PUBLISHED: 15 May 2023

DOI: 10.32996/jeltal.2023.5.2.13

1. Introduction

Generally speaking, assessment is an essential component of the teaching-learning process because it allows educators and practitioners to diagnose, track, and measure learners' progress throughout all learning stages. There are two kinds of assessments: summative and formative. The first is an assessment *of* learning to measure students' achievement at the end of the semester or academic year, whereas the second is an assessment *for* learning supporting good teaching and learning through teachers' feedback and reflections. Several studies have proven the effectiveness of portfolios in assessing and improving students' EFL writing skills. However, in Morocco, EFL teachers are still leaning toward the use of traditional summative ways to assess their students' writing skills, such as writing achievement tests. The portfolio is a new alternative to the traditional summative assessment ways. It is a formative assessment tool that scaffolds students in their learning journey. Furthermore, assessing EFL students' writing is arduous work for most teachers. It is both difficult and unfair to assess students' writing using summative tools like achievement writing tests at the end of the semester. Giving students a numerical grade once or twice during the learning program does not reflect their right achievement level. Portfolio assessment is "an alternative method of assessment which was introduced to cope with the changes and developments that occurred in the educational system and to answer the drawbacks of the traditional methods of assessments" Boumediene, H., Berrahal, F. K., & Hardji, M. B. (2018). The integration of portfolio-based assessment is not common in the Moroccan curriculum in spite of the fact that it is insisted on in the (Pedagogical Guidelines for TEFL, 2007; Ministerial Circular N° 142-07). Teaching English for Specific Purposes (ESP) to Moroccan Police Cadets at the Defense Language

Institute is not an exception. In this institute, the dominant students' writing evaluation method is characterized by its summative nature. This kind of assessment doesn't offer a clear picture of students' learning progress as well as their needs. It gives specialists in the field of education only a "snapshot" of students' learning progress Dikli, S. (2003). This traditional method proved to be inefficient. With the shift of paradigm from the conventional way to assess writing in more modern or alternative ways, portfolio assessment attracted many classroom practitioners and researchers. However, putting these alternative assessment tools like portfolios into practice to test their efficiency in improving students' writing skills is still not common in the Moroccan ESP context. Therefore, the purpose of the current study is to address such concerns and present empirical evidence about whether or not the portfolio-based writing assessment implementation can have a positive impact on the Moroccan Police Cadets' writing skills.

2. Literature Review

2.1: English for Specific Purposes

English for Specific Purposes can be defined as the teaching and learning of the English language for specific academic or professional objectives. Robinson's (1991) definition of ESP is based on two assumptions: that ESP is normally "goal-directed" and that ESP courses are developed from a need analysis. Its goal is to help students acquire the suitable linguistic tools to communicate effectively in particular domains like business, policing, engineering, or medicine. In this paper, study participants are learning English for Policing at the Moroccan Defense Languages Institute. Due to globalization, the English language is spreading quickly over the globe. Nowadays, English is the universal language of communication and interaction between different people from various linguistic backgrounds. So, Moroccan Police Cadets are called one day to interact with people from different nationalities. While dealing with emergencies and fighting lawbreakers, police officers probably come across some speakers of English. Thus, they need to ask, answer questions and listen to witnesses in English. Due to the urgent nature of most police investigating cases, there is no time to hire an interpreter. Therefore, the main goal of the Moroccan Defense Language Institute (DLI) is to graduate law enforcers who are not only able to communicate in English but also can write unified, coherent police reports while dealing with cases in which foreigners are implicated. Normally, police officers use description and narration in their written reports. It is worth mentioning here that fostering the Moroccan Police Cadets' EFL language proficiency skills is among the priorities of Moroccan DLI in the ESP syllabus.

2.2. Assessing EFL writing

Writing enjoys an important place in the process of learning any language. It is considered the most important productive skill that students need to master. Moroccan future police officers need to enhance their writing skills so that they can write detailed, consistent police reports in English when dealing with foreigners. The main characteristic of police writing is detailed narration and description. Therefore, the Moroccan police cadets' writings in the ESP curriculum are normally descriptive narrative essays or paragraphs. In general, students find writing difficult because it is a productive skill. It is more challenging than other receptive skills like reading and listening. Therefore, body language is not included in writing production like in speaking, which makes it more complex for students to convey the written message accurately. "We fully understand the difficulty of learning to write "well" in any language, even in our own native language", Brown, H. D., & Abeywickrama, P. (2004). Assessing writing can be challenging for both teachers and students because it includes the evaluation of several linguistic aspects, such as grammar, lexis, organization, and content. Furthermore, teachers' feedback is crucially important to enhance students' learning. "Teachers initiate learners to the whole learning process, and their feedback constitutes the significant step forward that triggers learners towards enunciating a language" (S. SAKALE 2019). There are two ways of assessing students writing. Summative achievement test, which is administered at the end of the semester or the year, and informative continuous assessment throughout the learning period. This latter is more flexible and is an anxiety-free tool to both assess and support students' learning. Formative assessment goes hand in hand with the objectives pre-set in the recent Moroccan educational system reform. Besides, "the strategic vision (2015-2030) of reform for education in Morocco is based on equality of education to develop an inclusive and cohesive society" (R. BENDRAOU & S. SAKALE, 2023). Summative assessment is no longer supporting equality in education; thus, policymakers and educators have to look for new testing tools which assure both students' accountability and responsibility. One way to do that is to use the portfolio to assess and track students' writing skill progress. It is a practical way to teach students how to write coherent essays through assessment. In other words, teachers don't need to wait till the end of the semester to measure their students' writing improvement because "formative assessment is carried out by them on a daily basis during the teaching and learning process" (Widiastuti, I. A. M. S., & Saukah, A. 2017).

2.3 Portfolio Assessment

The beginning of using portfolio was adopted from the domain of fine arts, where its purpose was to showcase the depth and breadth of the work of an artist's abilities (Jongsma, 1989). Before exploring the benefits of using a portfolio as an assessment tool which supports students' learning, let's find out its meaning. Several definitions have been given by experts for a portfolio. To begin with (Winch et al.2001, p. 272) define a portfolio as "a systematic collection of student's work that is analyzed to show progress over the period of time with regard to specific instructional goals". With portfolios, the collection of each student's work can be in many forms, such as reports, essays and other products, which can provide accurate evidence for the learning

achievements of that student. Students may also be allowed to decide for themselves the type of work and the topics they are going to work on, which will further involve the student in a meaningful learning process. Furthermore, Cooper (1999, p. 3) states that a portfolio is “the collection of evidence that demonstrate skills, achievements, learning, and competencies”. According to Brown (2004), a well-designed portfolio assessment project should include the following materials:

- Essays and compositions in draft and final forms;
- Reports and project outline;
- Poetry and creative prose;
- Artwork, photos, newspaper or magazine clippings;
- Audio and/ or video recordings of presentations, demonstrations, etc.;
- Journals, diaries, and other personal reflections;
- Test, test scores, and other written homework exercises;
- Notes on lectures; Self and peer-assessments; comments, evaluations, and checklists.

Brown (2004) used the acronym **CRADLE** to design six potential features of the portfolio. According to him, in a portfolio assessment project, students collect, Reflect, Assess, Documenting, Linking, and Evaluate their work and performance on a daily basis.

Thus, it is clearly stated that a portfolio has several advantages which make learners engaged in their learning process. Additionally, if created following the previously mentioned main portfolio construction guidelines, portfolios will achieve their objectives in tracking and diagnosing students’ learning. The portfolio-assessment projects are not created for the purpose of scoring but also for monitoring the achievements of learners through evidence: products, feedback and commentaries, etc. However, some researchers believe that this kind of assessment may be subjective and less reliable compared to traditional assessment (Tigelaar et al., 2005). Despite the different points of view on portfolio assessment use and the difficulty of its implementation (time, workload, & money), results reveal that portfolio assessment is well worth the investment.

2.4 Previous studies on the impact of the portfolio on the EFL writing skill

Alternative assessment has triggered the attention of researchers all over the world. As a result, various new assessment theories have emerged to scaffold students in their learning journey. However, there is a big gap between theory and practice; therefore, through the study experiment, the paper seeks to shorten the distance between researchers’ recommendations and classroom practices by investigating the effect that portfolio-based assessment project has on Moroccan police cadets’ EFL writing skill. Several studies on the impact of portfolio assessment on EFL writing found a positive effect on students’ compositions. To start with, Fahed Al-Serhani (2007)’s has proven a significant difference in scoring between the group of participants who used portfolio assessment and their counterparts in the other group who were assessed traditionally. Students in the experimental group excelled over the ones in the control group in terms of four writing processes; planning, drafting, revising, and editing. The findings of Aly’s (2002)’s study revealed that the writing performance of students who received the treatment (portfolio-assessment of the writing skill) was much better than the control group. Yet, there are some studies which found no statistical significance between the pre- and the post treatment results like the ones of (Chu, 2002 & Subrick, 2003). In addition to that, in terms of students’ perception of portfolio assessment implementation as an assessment for/as learning, several studies have been conducted. The study (Yang, 2003) surveyed 42 students’ perceptions of portfolio-based assessment implementation in schools using open ended Linkert type scale. The findings were interesting; the majority of participants showed their interest in this new flexible, useful assessment method. Along the same lines, Moradan and Hedayati (2012) conducted a similar study in which they investigated the impact of student-teacher conferences on Iranian students’ writing performance. Two groups were randomly divided into two experimental groups and one control group. The result of the study showed that there was a significant difference between the performance of the two experimental groups and that of the control group on the post test. No significant difference was found between the performance of the two experimental groups after implementing portfolios and conferencing techniques.

2.5 Research question

To reach the aforementioned objectives of the study, one major research question was formulated:

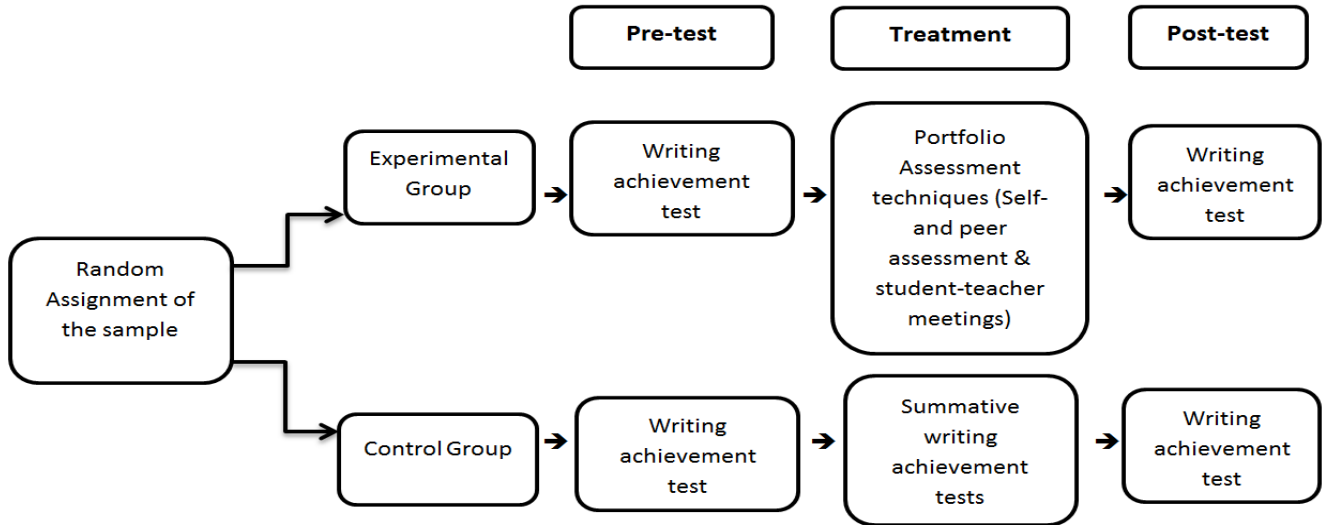
- 1) Does portfolio assessment have any significant impact on the Moroccan Police Cadets’ writing skills?

3. Methodology

To address the above research question, the study follows a quasi-experimental design with two groups of ESP students. They were randomly assigned to experimental and control groups. Both groups were given a pre-test before being exposed to the treatment and post tested after that to see whether or not there were any significant differences between the two groups. The experiment was carried out for one semester at the Moroccan Defense Languages Institute in the capital city of Rabat. Participants

in the experimental group took advantage of ongoing portfolio-based assessment activities like (peer/self-assessment, getting teachers' feedback through conferences...etc.); Whereas the control group was tested using the traditional summative writing achievement tests. In addition to that, the researchers examined the differences between the pre-test and post-test results for each group to determine whether there were any remarkable improvements or not between the two experiment phases. Figure 1 below illustrates the methodological research design of the study.

Figure 1: Research design



3.1. Study participants

The participants engaged in this study were Moroccan police cadets. They are all males aged between 18 and 24 years old. They have been studying English for policing at the Defense Language Institute in the capital city of Rabat for one year. Their native language is either Moroccan Arabic or Tamazight. In order to determine the impact of portfolio-based writing assessment on their writing skill, 50 Moroccan police cadets' students were randomly selected and divided into two independent pairs (experimental and control groups). There were 25 students in each group. The paper adopted a quasi-experimental research design. That's to say; the study samples were pre and post tested. To ensure the homogeneity of the two groups, an achievement test was employed before conducting the study. The results revealed that both groups had the same proficiency level in the writing skill.

3.2. Research instrument

In the current study, a pre-post writing achievement test was exclusively developed for the sake of the research experiment and administered to students in both the control and the experimental groups. The test was designed in line with the ESP curriculum objectives of the Moroccan Defense Languages Institute. It consisted of two semi-guided writing activities, mainly writing formal emails, letters and police reports in which students narrate and describe different incidents. The students' writing tests were scored following the Analytic Rating Scale, which considers certain criteria desired in the target writing production. The maximum test grade was ten over ten (10/10) distributed as follows: 3 points for unity and cohesion, 2 points for content relevance, 2 points for ESP vocabulary use, 2 points for grammatical accuracy and 1 point for layout and structure of the target writing genre. To ensure the reliability and validity of the test, a pilot test was conducted before the experiment.

3.3 Procedure & data analysis

The experiment was conducted throughout one semester as part of the normal classroom practices. Before starting the treatment, ESP students (experimental group) were provided with a portfolio template to get familiarized with. It includes all the essential parts of a well-designed portfolio following Brown (2004)'s model. In every writing section, experimental group students were asked to write their first drafts on a specific theme, then self-assess them, after that, exchange the writings with other students for peer-assessment using a checklist, and finally sit for a short interview with the teacher. At the end of the semester, students have to reflect on the whole accumulated work and choose the best writing to be graded in a traditional summative way. As for the control group participants, they were introduced to the same content and writing skills following the same order and classroom writing activities. But students in the control group were not given the freedom to collect their writing production throughout the semester, reflect upon that and finally decide which work should be considered in the final grading.

The quantitative data of the study were collected through the pre-post-writing achievement test. They were analyzed via the Statistical Package for the Social Sciences (SPSS) using the paired samples t-test with inferential statistics.

4. Findings and discussion

4.1 Pre-post writing achievement test results

To answer the main investigated research question of whether or not the portfolio assessment has any impact on the Moroccan police cadets' writing skills, the mean and the standard deviation of both groups were calculated. Additionally, a paired samples t-test was deployed to measure the differences between the experimental and control groups. (See Table 1 below):

Table 1. Paired Samples Statistics

	Mean	N	Std. Deviation	Std. Error Mean
Pair 1 Pre-test control group	10,28	25	4,226	,865
Post-test control group	10,32	25	4,220	,844
Pair 2 Pre-test experimental group	10,32	25	4,250	,850
Post-test experimental group	13,92	25	4,142	,828

Table 1 describes the mean scores and the standard deviations of both groups (control and experimental) in the pre – and post-writing achievement tests. A quick look at the table shows that the total mean scores and standard deviations of the experimental and control group in the pre-test were almost the same and close to each other to the extent that there was no statistical significance between them. The mean score and the standard deviation of the control in the pre-test were (M = 10, 98, SD =4 .226), and the ones of the experimental group were (M = 10, 32, SD =4 .250). This means that the scores of both groups in the pre-test were not statistically significant. The results after the treatment, on the other hand (using portfolio assessment techniques), revealed a significant difference between the control and the experimental groups in their overall writing achievement post-test in favor of the latter one. The mean scores of the experimental group during the pre-test were (M = 10, 32, SD =4,250), and the mean scores in the post-test were (M = 13, 92, SD =4,142), which demonstrates a noticeable mean scores' difference within the same group (experimental group).

Table 2. Paired Samples Test

	Paired Differences					t	df	Sig. (2-tailed)
	Mean	Std. Deviation	Std. Error Mean	95% Confidence Interval of the Difference				
				Lower	Upper			
Pair 1 Pre-test /Post-test Control Group	-,040	,841	,168	-,387	,307	-,238	24	,814
Pair 2 Pre-test /Post-test Experimental Group	-3,600	3,189	,638	-4,916	-2,284	-5,645	24	,000

In **Table 2**, the *t* value is obviously far away from 0 (-5,645), and the significance value is small (sig <0.05), which means that ESP students whose writings were assessed by the use of portfolio techniques such as (self and peer assessment and student-teacher conferences) have shown remarkable progress in their writing achievement post-test. These findings show that the classroom portfolio-based assessment has a positive impact on the improvement of students' writing skills (experimental group). Comparing the pre- and the post writing achievement test results of the experimental and control groups illustrates that there is a significant difference between the two groups in favor of the experimental one. Participants of this latter outperformed the students who were assessed through the regular traditional summative writing achievement test.

The current study was an attempt to test whether or not the portfolio-based assessment project has any significant impact on the Moroccan police cadets' EFL writing skills at the Defense Languages Institute. Comparing the pre- and post writing achievement test scores of the experimental group and control groups clearly shows the significant difference between the two groups in favor of the experimental group. Both groups started the experiment at almost the same writing level. Besides, the portfolio assessment classroom practice positively impacts the scores of students' writing within the same group (i.e. experimental group). As previously mentioned in the findings section, the implementation of the portfolio assessment tool in the experimental group class has proven its efficiency in enhancing the students' writing skills. However, there were no remarkable differences between the pre and post test scores for the control group participants who were assessed traditionally.

5. Limitation of the study

Despite its relevance, this study used a limited number of participants; therefore, the study findings can't be generalized. Further, the researchers focused only on the writing skill. In future similar studies, it will be more beneficial to consider other linguistic skills, such as speaking, reading and listening and how they are affected by the implementation of the portfolio-based assessment project in ESP classrooms. In addition, the paper didn't include qualitative data like interviewing students to get their reflections on their experience of portfolio assessment. Finally, the study would have a broader perspective if it was conducted outside the Moroccan context or compared to other international research sitting.

6. Conclusion

The current study aimed to investigate whether or not the use of portfolio-based assessment has any positive impact on the Moroccan police cadets' EFL writing skills. The study was conducted at the Moroccan Defense Languages Institute in the capital city of Rabat. The participants in the study were 50 Moroccan police cadets randomly selected and divided into two separate groups. The experimental and the control groups, each one consisted of 25 students. The findings revealed that students whose work was evaluated by a portfolio system (portfolio-based assessment) had improved in their writing and gained higher scores in the final examination when compared to those students whose work was evaluated by the more traditional evaluation system (non-portfolio-based assessment). The results of the present study highlighted the fact that portfolio assessment could be used as a complementary alternative to traditional assessment to shed new light on the process of writing. Overall, portfolio assessment is a valuable tool for educators to assess and support students writing abilities. However, the paper, as previously mentioned, has some limitations, such as the limited number of participants, the study being in the Moroccan context, the use of one research tool and one type of data (quantitative), and the focus on one linguistic skill (writing). Future researchers should consider these limitations so that their results can be generalized to benefit both students and educators regarding the field of alternative assessment to support learning.

Funding: This research received no external funding.

Conflicts of Interest: The authors declare no conflict of interest.

Acknowledgements: First, I would like to express my deepest appreciation to **Dr. SAKALE SANA**, who is my supervisor, for her continuous and unconditional support. I am deeply indebted to my colleagues at the Defense Languages Institute, Prof. Rachid BOUDRA & Prof. Said EL HAMZAOU, for their help and support throughout the study process.

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