

THE DEVELOPMENT OF STUDENTS' WRITING AND ASSESSMENT SKILLS: A PORTFOLIO EXPERIMENT IN EFL

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The present study focused on students reflecting on their own learning during three courses of English between the years of 1995 and 1998. The students at the upper stage of the comprehensive school compiled writing portfolios, which were used to show evidence of processes and strategies employed to generate writing, of the writers' awareness of those processes and strategies, and of the writers' development over the period of three years. Reflecting on one's own work was one of the most crucial features in this portfolio approach. The students' self-assessments revealed that nearly all the students thought that they had developed in self-assessing their own pieces of writing. The criteria set for good English writing had helped the writers a lot in choosing their best and most representative work to be evaluated by the teacher. The good writers in particular were able to use the criteria flexibly for their own learning purposes. The portfolio experiment offered a useful channel for the developing writers to practise their EFL writing and assessment skills. It also provided the teacher with a versatile picture of all the students' writing ability.

Keywords: EFL writing, a writing portfolio, self-assessment, reflection

1 AIMS

The present study concentrated on the development of the students' writing and assessment skills in the comprehensive school. The principle aim was to increase the students' critical self-awareness of their own learning and its regulation. They were also encouraged to take an active and self-directed role in learning English. They were guided to analyze their own learning in a new way, as active and critical learners.

The use of a portfolio approach seemed to offer an interesting and challenging means to focus on how the students progressed in producing

text and reflecting on their own learning. A portfolio of writing was used to show evidence of processes and strategies employed to generate writing, of the writers' awareness of those processes and strategies, and of the writers' development over a period of time (Camp & Levine 1991: 196).

The definition of the portfolio approach used for the present research purposes emphasizes the characteristics that make it worthwhile (Camp & Levine 1991: 197):

1. Multiple samples of writing gathered over a number of occasions.
2. Variety in the kinds of writing or purposes for writing that are represented.
3. Evidence of process in the creation of one or more pieces of writing.
4. Reflection on individual pieces of writing and/or on changes observable over time.

Each of these features adds information to the overall picture of student writing ability. According to various portfolio projects, the last characteristic, reflection, appears to be the one that brings the greatest reward to student and teacher. Students' reflection on their own learning makes visible much in learning that is otherwise hidden, even from the student writers themselves. It also provides the teacher with information that can help him or her to guide instruction (Camp & Levine 1991: 197).

2 METHOD

The present study is an action research comprising three courses of English. In the study, each of these three courses formed one research cycle, and the purpose of each of them was to lead into a deeper understanding of the phenomenon at hand than the previous one.

As reflecting on one's own work was fairly new to the students, they needed guidance in learning how to use reflection when investigating their own learning. During each research cycle the students were gradually guided to look back at their own work. The purpose of the questions was to make them able to move from easier self-assessments of their own learning and its progress into a more detailed and complex analysis of their portfolio writing and assessment processes. The goal was to be able to choose the written products which would best describe and characterize them as **developing writers** (Camp & Levine 1991: 199).

In the course of the experiment the students had the opportunity of assuming the role of active, self-directed, critical and responsible learners

(Kohonen 1993: 69). The teacher had to assume the role of a facilitator, guide and supporter, who was in charge of the whole process.

At the beginning of each cycle we agreed upon the number of writing assignments to be given to the teacher at the end of the cycle, and also the number of those tasks which required peer feedback. Besides choosing a certain number of assignments, the students had to present a detailed account of the reasons why they had selected the particular ones to be evaluated by the teacher. The purpose of the earlier agreed-upon criteria was to help them in this task.

3 DATA

The students' self-assessments formed the main data of this qualitative research. It was the informants who were speaking in the study for themselves (Strauss & Corbin 1990: 21). In addition to them, observations, oral interviews and two questionnaires were used as sources of data.

4 SUBJECTS

One group of twenty students in the Teacher Training School of the University of Jyväskylä, eleven girls and nine boys, took part in this study. The students had been studying English as their A1-language, which they had started in the third grade of the lower stage of the comprehensive school, at the age of nine.

The research covered three courses (out of the seven courses of English to be studied) at the upper stage of the comprehensive school: one course in the seventh grade, one in the eighth grade, and one in the final, ninth grade. The experiment comprised the years of 1995–1998.

5 RESULTS

The good writers had adopted the main principles of process-based writing fairly well. They had a larger variety of tools than the weaker writers for getting started with writing, sustaining their writing processes and revising their writing. Especially during the second and third research cycles, the good writers were able to analyze their writing process in a versatile and detailed manner. They were also able to assume the role of active and

responsible learners. Those who had self-assessed themselves as good writers also regarded writing as an integrated part of learning, not as any separate domain of learning. They were also able to see writing as a means of communication.

Generally speaking, nearly all the students considered assessing one's own work difficult. However, almost all the writers thought that they had developed in self-assessing their writing during this three-year experiment; some of them more than others. The criteria set for good writing had helped the writers a great deal in choosing their best work to be evaluated by the teacher, but to the benefit of the good writers in particular, for they were able to use the criteria flexibly for their own learning purposes.

The students appreciated the possibility of being able to give priority to the criteria that would best suit them when assessing their writing and its progress at a certain stage. In addition to such commonly-agreed-upon criteria as clarity, fluency and originality, the good writers in particular also mentioned such criteria as effort, commitment and rate of interest (see also Linnakylä 1996: 77–78). The latter criteria were the ones that the good writers used in self-assessing their own work. They were also the criteria that they would have liked the teacher to employ, too, when looking at their work.

Comparing one's own written products with the other writers' pieces helped the majority of the writers both in the entire writing process and especially in the selection of their best pieces. Consequently, peer feedback – giving feedback to one's classmates' written pieces and also getting feedback on one's own writing from one's classmates – turned out to be a very valuable tool used at the various stages of writing in this experiment.

Both the pieces of writing and the self-assessments of the good writers were longer and richer in nuances than those of the weaker writers. The good writers were able to set realistic goals for their learning and to distinguish the possible gaps in it. Learning more words and structures and being able to write faultless English were often mentioned as new learning challenges, whereas the weaker writers did not quite know what they still had to learn.

The present portfolio experiment offered the developing writers a useful channel to practise their EFL writing and self-assess it. The portfolio approach also enabled them to display their writing ability in its full range. Consequently, the portfolio approach provided a versatile picture of all the students' writing ability.

6 CONCLUSIONS

The students considered the experiment useful. It had helped them as developing writers and learners of English. The group and the teacher formed a writing community in which the dialogic nature of writing was prevalent. The research also offered a welcome change into the lessons and thus affected the students' motivation to learn English.

The students were proud of having been able to participate in decision-making concerning their own learning. They had had several opportunities to use their decision-making power, for example, in selecting their best pieces of writing to be evaluated by the teacher and in choosing the most appropriate criteria for their own writing. All these procedures had increased the notion of **ownership** of their own written products.

Even the weaker writers felt that during the experiment they had gained at least something, which some of them could not explicate, though. The teacher's contribution in this respect would have had to be greater than it was.

As the practice of looking back at one's writing was relatively new to the group, the students needed considerable guidance and support from their teacher and the peers. Although various sets of reflective questions (written and oral answers) were used, some of the writers would clearly have required more guidance and aid than they received. They themselves should have been more active in asking for more help, because now the teacher thought that they would manage on their own, which, however, was not true.

For me as a teacher of English and as a researcher this experiment was very valuable. It did not only show the benefits of a new approach, but it also revealed how the portfolio approach could be further developed and tailored to suit the researcher's purposes. I am very grateful to the group for their enthusiasm and collaboration.

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