THE USE OF PORTFOLIOS AND DIFFERENT FEEDBACK TYPES IN EFL COMPOSITION

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Abstract: Portfolios are considered as an alternative assessment in EFL composition. The use of portfolios as an assessment tool is linked to the process-based approach to writing. Many researchers have examined the integration of portfolios and how beneficial they can be in assessing student writing. Rather than just an assessment tool, portfolios represent the process of creating drafts which ensure a continuous relationship between the teacher and the student. Drafting students' written assignments offers teachers the ability to follow student's progress by focusing on an alternative approach to teaching and assessing writing. Furthermore, the incorporation of drafts gives the opportunity to students to become aware of their weaknesses and problems in writing while at the same time taking action into improving these issues based on the teacher feedback. Responding to student writing is an important issue to discuss when considering teaching composition to EFL students. It should not be misunderstood and taken as the same notion as evaluation. Response is a process that includes peer review, peer editing and continuous feedback through the stages of writing. Teacher feedback, which is genuine, effective, and long-lasting has proven to be efficient for both teachers and students. By giving constructive feedback, the teacher understands students' problems and intentions by also making them responsible for finding and analyzing what needs to be improved. Moreover, constructive feedback given in the form of a comment and directed to each student individually influences the students' motivation and self-confidence when it comes to expressing themselves in writing. This study, following the process-based instruction, examines the effectiveness of drafts and the impact of constructive feedback on the overall students' performance in EFL composition. Portfolios are used as the qualitative method for evaluating students' outcomes after undergoing drafting and alternative feedback types as opposed to being given a grade on a written assignment that is not offered a follow up for improvements. The findings support the hypothesis that EFL composition can be influenced through the use of drafts and enhanced by the incorporation of constructive feedback which would continuously ensure an upgrade and result in a final improved written product.
Keywords: portfolios, EFL composition, constructive feedback, drafts

1. INTRODUCTION

Teaching composition as an integrative part of teaching English as a foreign language is a rather challenging process. It includes facing and dealing with different problems that students encounter while trying to engage in the writing process in a language other than their mother tongue. Therefore, finding the most appropriate approach to tackling students' difficulties in composition is even more challenging than the writing itself. Portfolios are considered as an alternative approach to teaching EFL composition. They represent a process-based approach to writing by integrating and categorizing students' work in order to ensure continuation and document every progress and achievement that each student makes. Many researchers have examined the usage of portfolios and how beneficial they can be in assessing student writing. Burnham (1986) defines portfolios as tools for following students' progress, in which case the teacher, instead of giving a grade to the written assignment submitted by the student, gives comments and suggestions on how to improve. Therefore, portfolios offer a collection of students' written work, the progress of which has been guided by the teacher. Reid (1993) explores the notion of a portfolio assessment by giving a list of advantages that portray their efficiency in the writing process which includes commitment to writing multiple drafts, engagement in developmental composition course, assuming responsibility for their own writing (Reid, 1993, p. 240). Portfolios are also defined as a means of "facilitating judgments about student performance". Thus, portfolios facilitate the student writing process as well as the teacher evaluation process by making it easier for the teacher to assess students' work. Portfolios represent a compilation of students' work that shows what a student "is capable of doing". (Salvia & Ysseldyke, 1998, p. 271). White (1998) discusses the effects of a portfolio by including both its advantages and disadvantages. He alludes to reliability and validity of portfolios that many researchers tend to question by saying that they can pose problems because of the "uncontrolled conditions under which they are produced". Nevertheless, White (1998) continues to argue that teachers can avoid student plagiarism by using portfolios. He claims it would be very easy for a teacher to track plagiarism "because the portfolio contains so much work that must be genuine, anything that is not genuine is usually obvious to both the student and teacher" (White, 1998, p.121). Furthermore, White emphasizes the fact that portfolios support the idea of writing being a process rather than a product by also reducing "time constraints and test anxiety". Song and

August (2002) in their research about portfolio assessment, report satisfactory results for ESL students who were evaluated through the process of using portfolios and considers them as a suitable alternative assessment tool (Song & August, 2002).

Finding the appropriate approach of teaching writing means also finding the best way to respond to students' writing. When planning to respond to student writing, teachers need to keep in mind that the purpose of the response or feedback should be helping students and guiding them toward improvement in their writing process. The teacher should be careful in not imposing his/her own opinion or belief to students when giving them feedback. It is reported that teachers' expectations are narrow and subjective, and they should "negotiate with their students about the intentions of their texts" and not always expect their writing to be what teachers think of as the perfect error-free text in their imagination (Silva & Matsuda, 2001, p.210). There has been a controversy between the usage of descriptive feedback against evaluative feedback. Many researchers have also argued about the effectiveness of corrective feedback and have often argued over its positive and also potential negative effects upon student writing. Furthermore, the modern approaches to writing lean towards contemporary ways of responding or giving feedback, including peer feedback and conferencing as current trends in this field of study. Descriptive feedback offers detailed information, which can be found in the form of oral or written comment, and which gives students insights into what needs to be improved in their writing. Rodgers (2006) explores the purposes of descriptive feedback by providing examples and by emphasizing its positive effects and the importance of using it when responding to writing. She claims that descriptive feedback is not judgmental, meaning that it does not judge teaching and learning as good or bad, but it provides process-based feedback where decisions are made with students, rather than for them. Therefore, according to this outline, this paper aims to explore and investigate the effects of portfolios as part of an intensive composition course which includes multiple drafts and the use of a more constructive feedback by the teacher on students' results in writing. Thus, the hypothesis of this paper is as follows: The use of drafts in written assignments as part of portfolios, in combination with descriptive feedback can improve students writing through the process of teaching and learning EFL composition.

2. MATERIALS AND METHODS

The study was conducted according to a detailed plan with the intention of ensuring reliability of results. There were 25 students who participated in this composition course who were attending intermediate to upper-intermediate level of English language instruction. Their proficiency level was based on their final grades from the previous year and their proficiency in writing or their ability to write was not previously accounted for. Therefore, students signed their names on a list that was handed to them and agreed to attend a composition course where they would have to commit to writing on different topics presented by the teacher. Through this process, students were allowed to be creative and write freely in the beginning by getting descriptive feedback for everything they wrote so that they were ready to follow strategies on how to write in a more organized way that would be evaluated by the teacher based on the five criteria that were presented to the students before writing the final three drafts. The composition course lasted for two months and ensured the creation of portfolios where each student had their written assignments gathered in one place for the teacher to compare the results. Therefore, the method for gathering data for this research was qualitative and relied on the compilation of students' continuous progress. The last assignment that students produced in three drafts was taken as the sample for analyzing students' progress. Even though students' work had been evaluated by giving them descriptive feedback throughout the whole course, apart from the descriptive comment, a grading scale was used for grading the last assignment in order to ensure validity or the results obtained. The "Sample Analytic Scale" presented by Reid (1993) (see Appendix 1) was used in my previous research on the comparison of controlled and free writing. The use of the scale will be presented in the form of a table given in the appendix, reporting all of the students' scores individually for all three drafts and given categories.

3. RESULTS

All three drafts submitted by the students for the portfolio were analyzed according to the analytic scale in order to follow students' progress through the actual instruction. Detailed results from drafts are shown in Table 1 (see Appendix 2). The following figures will show how students have progressed throughout the drafts in five categories as separate units and throughout drafts as whole essays.'
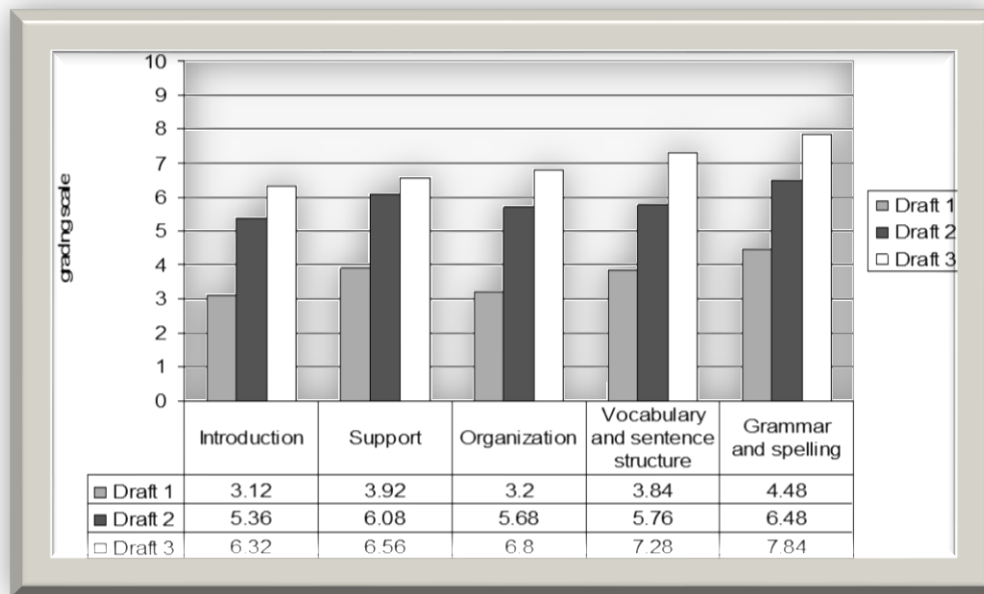
	Introduction	Support	Organization	Vocabulary and sentence structure	Grammar and spelling
Draft 1	3.12	3.92	3.2	3.84	4.48
Draft 2	5.36	6.08	5.68	5.76	6.48
Draft 3	6.32	6.56	6.8	7.28	7.84

Figure 1. Draft results for all five categories

As shown in Figure 1, introduction has been evaluated with an average of 3.12 in the first draft. The average has increased in the second draft, which implies that students have performed better with an average of 5.36. The third draft has also shown progress, increasing the average to 6.32. These results show a significant progress from the first draft to the second one where students have improved by about 2.24, whereas there is a slighter difference from the second draft to the third one of about 0.96. The overall difference from the first draft to the last one is 3.2. In the category of support, students' performance was evaluated with an average of 3.92 out of 10. There has been a significant increase in students' ability to provide support in their essays in the second draft where they scored an average of 6.08. On the other hand, less progress was shown from the second draft to the third one, with an average of 6.56. According to these results students have shown a progress of 2.16 points from the first draft to the second one, while the progress from the second draft to the third one has resulted in lower points of about 0.48. Nevertheless, it must be noted that the difference between the first draft and the last draft of about 2.64 shows considerable success. In the category of organization, students' success is represented by an average of 3.2 in the first draft. The second draft showed a considerable difference with an average of 6.68. A slighter difference was detected from the second draft to the third, with an average of 6.8. However, students' progress in organizing their essays from the first draft onto the second one is very significant with a difference of 2.48 while the second draft differs from the third one by 1.12. Students' progress in the category of organization as well as in the first two categories has shown higher progress between the first and the second draft whereas the difference results in 3.6, which is higher from the two categories mentioned above, especially support. Vocabulary and sentence structure is the fourth category that has been analyzed throughout the three student drafts. In the first draft, students' performance as regards the vocabulary they have used and the way they have structured their sentences has resulted in an average of 3.84. The second draft has shown an increase with an average of 5.76 and following this, the third draft with an average of 7.28. In this category, students' progress is similar among drafts. There is a difference for 1.92 between the first and the second draft, while the progress between the second and the third draft shows a difference of 1.52. The overall progress from the first draft to the last one in this category is slightly higher than the previous category of organization, the figure being 3.68. The fifth and last category is grammar and spelling which has resulted in the following outcomes. Students' average in the first draft for this category is 4.48, which is the highest average of all other categories for the first draft. The averages of the second and the third draft are 6.48 and 7.84, respectively. The difference between the first draft and the second drafts shows the highest progress of 2 points, whereas the difference between the second and the third one is 1.36. Overall, students have progressed from the first draft to the last one by 3.36 which is approximately similar to the progress in the category of introduction.

4. DISCUSSIONS

The detailed analysis of the findings of this study supports the hypothesis of this research. Results from one draft to the other show that students have benefited from the use of drafts by showing significant increase in results in most categories they have been evaluated in. The use of portfolios enabled the compilation of all students' work throughout their composition course by providing a detailed and continuous follow-up to all of the students' assignments. Portfolios also gave the students a sense of achievement as they were also able to trace their own improvements and become more aware of their progress, which increased their own self – confidence. Moreover, the use of drafts gave students the chance to 'redeem' themselves, in the way they could go back to their own writing and improve based on the teacher feedback. Therefore, the second part of the hypothesis included the teacher feedback, which also played an important role in the students' overall progress. Giving descriptive feedback with an explanation of what needs to be improved to each of the students' written assignments proved to be very influential to students' overall results. In a similar study, Kasper (1995) reported enhanced progress among students attending a "non-judgmental approach" in opposition to students who followed an "error-oriented approach". Moreover, after expanding the notion of this nonjudgmental approach, Kasper and Petrello (1996) emphasize the decreased level of anxiety and increased level of students' performance that this approach offers. After getting a long descriptive feedback, students were expressing their ideas and thoughts in a contextualized setting, and even though they paid attention to accuracy to a certain level, they were more concentrated on getting their ideas across and were looking forward to the comments they would get from the teacher. Students' attitude towards writing was in a way determined by the feedback they would get. Praising the student about the positive things in their writing and explaining what should be improved, encourages them to look critically at things that needed to be developed further.

5. CONCLUSIONS

The findings of this research offer a qualitative approach to teaching writing to EFL students by presenting real improvements in students writing, even in cases where students were exposed to EFL composition for the first time. Using drafts as part of portfolios has proven to be engaging for both the teacher and students by creating an environment where students believe they can improve. Instead of going from one written assignment to the other and getting a fixed grade for them, drafts offer students the possibility of going back to their own work and fix problems which can be prevented in the upcoming written assignment. Moreover, ways of responding to student writing could also be helpful for teachers seeking to vary their approach to giving corrective feedback in a school environment. Applying a non-judgmental approach by offering students descriptive feedback for the work that they have done has resulted in positive outcomes. The use of descriptive feedback was precisely one of the factors that increased students' motivation to continue their instruction in writing in this case study. Moreover, students' work was being valued by providing constructive feedback rather than just correcting mistakes and evaluating it with a grade. Finally, it depends on the teacher and his/her ability to analyze students' needs and decide which approach would be most suitable for his/her students in a certain school environment. One of the limitations of incorporating portfolios and descriptive feedback into EFL composition is that they are time consuming and involve a load of work that needs to be done by the teacher. Thus, finding ways of increasing teacher's motivation in using this approach would serve as a basis for new research.

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Appendix 1

SAMPLE ANALYTIC SCALE

Rate each feature for its overall merit by circling the appropriate number. Total the points in each category and write the total at the bottom.

Introduction	2	4	6	8	10
Support	2	4	6	8	10
Organization	2	4	6	8	10
Vocabulary and sentence structure	2	4	6	8	10
Grammar and spelling	2	4	6	8	10

Adapted and modified from: Reid, J. M. (1993). Teaching ESL writing. United States of America: Prentice Hall Regents

	Introduction			Support			Organization			Vocabulary & sentence structure			Grammar and spelling		
	D1	D2	D3	D1	D2	D3	D1	D2	D3	D1	D2	D3	D1	D2	D3
S1	2	4	6	4	4	6	4	4	6	4	6	6	6	8	8
S2	4	6	8	4	6	6	4	6	8	4	6	8	2	4	6
S3	2	4	4	6	8	8	4	6	8	6	6	8	8	8	8
S4	4	6	6	4	6	6	2	6	6	2	4	6	4	6	8
S5	4	8	8	4	8	8	6	8	8	6	8	10	6	8	10
S6	2	6	6	4	8	8	4	6	8	2	6	8	4	8	10
S7	4	6	8	4	6	6	4	6	6	4	6	8	4	6	8
S8	2	6	6	2	6	8	2	6	8	2	4	8	2	4	8
S9	6	8	8	4	6	6	2	6	8	4	6	8	6	8	8
S10	6	8	10	4	8	10	4	4	8	6	8	10	8	8	10
S11	4	6	6	2	4	4	2	6	6	2	4	4	4	6	6
S12	4	4	6	4	6	6	2	4	8	4	6	8	4	6	8
S13	2	4	4	2	4	4	4	6	6	2	4	4	2	4	6
S14	2	4	6	6	8	8	6	8	8	4	6	8	4	8	10
S15	2	4	4	4	4	4	2	4	4	2	4	6	2	4	6
S16	2	6	6	2	6	6	2	6	6	4	6	6	4	6	8
S17	2	6	8	4	8	8	2	6	8	2	4	8	4	6	10
S18	4	6	8	6	8	8	4	8	10	4	6	8	6	8	10
S19	2	4	6	4	6	8	2	6	8	4	8	8	6	8	10
S20	4	6	6	6	8	8	2	4	4	4	6	6	4	6	6
S21	6	8	8	8	8	8	6	8	8	6	8	8	4	8	8
S22	2	6	8	4	6	6	4	8	8	6	8	10	6	8	8
S23	2	4	4	2	4	4	2	4	4	4	6	6	4	4	4
S24	2	2	4	2	4	6	2	2	4	4	4	6	4	6	6
S25	2	2	4	2	2	4	2	4	4	4	4	6	4	6	6
	3.12	5.36	6.32	3.92	6.08	6.56	3.2	5.68	6.8	3.84	5.76	7.28	4.48	6.48	7.84

Appendix 2
Table 1. Results for each student and category in three drafts