**USING PORTFOLIO AS A FORMATIVE ASSESSMENT TECHNIQUE IN FRESHMAN WRITING COURSES AT HUE UNIVERSITY   
OF FOREIGN LANGUAGES - A CASE STUDY WITH NORTHSTAR 2**

**(3th Edition) WRITING MODULE**

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**Abstract**

Writing is one of the most important skills to build mature language communication. It is, therefore, essential for writing teachers not only to improve their own instruction but help students improve their writing skill as well. One of the methods that work towards building such competent capacity and are likely able to combine both missions in writing classrooms is the use of formative assessment. Formative assessment refers to a wide variety of techniques that teachers use to conduct in-process evaluations of student comprehension, learning needs, and academic progress during a lesson or course to make adjustments accordingly to the lessons or instructional techniques. This article discusses the use of portfolios as a formative assessment technique in teaching English writing skill to freshman students. The preliminary results of a ten-week research project in writing classes offered to novice academic students at Hue University of Foreign Languages reveal that using portfolios as a formative assessment technique brings teachers and students a great deal of benefits. It did help foster students’ writing sub-skills while support educators’ instruction parallelly. Following an in-depth multi-dimensional analysis of preliminary research results, some recommendations for the use of formative assessment in teaching writing skill to first-year students will be presented.

**Keywords**: formative assessment, writing, portfolio

1. **Introduction**

Assessment is one of crucial components of language education. In order to promote, assist and improve students’ learning as well as to inform teachers of teaching and learning results, assessment is used at different stages of the learning process. It can help to provide data about the progress and achievement of individual students or groups of students. Assessment may include various methods, approaches and techniques which function according to specific learning situations, particular program purposes and individual groups of learners with distinct backgrounds.

Within the setting of a freshman writing course at Hue University of Foreign Languages (HUFL), we conduct a research project over ten weeks; the partial aim of which is to promote the use of portfolio as a formative assessment technique in language education at tertiary level. Formative assessments are in-process evaluations of student learning that are typically administered multiple times during a unit, course, or academic program. It is undeniable that formative assessment plays an essential role in language education in general and in teaching and learning English writing skill in particular. For Black and William (1998), and for many other experts in the field, formative assessment is not an instrument or an event, but a collection of practices with a common feature: They all lead to some action that improves learning. Therefore, formative assessment is an ideal tool of both teachers and students in the language skill classes.

Accordingly, the use of portfolio as an assessment tool has become more and more popular in many disciplines in general and in language teaching and learning in particular. While adhering to the regard of writing as a process-based rather than a product-based approach, the use of portfolio is highlighted and is getting more concern and application from language practitioners. This trend reflects one important innovation in curriculum reform, which is the development of outcome-based educational framework where the learning outcomes of training are defined broadly to allow students to recognize their progress along the scope and depth of their professional competences (Harden et al., 1999).

1. **A Review of Literature**

**2.1. Formative Assessment**

Assessment can be directed towards assessment of learning or assessment for learning. Following this division, assessment can be termed either *formative* or *summative,* the former of which refers to the process of *monitoring student learning* to provide ongoing feedback that can be used by instructors to improve their teaching and by students to improve their learning. More specifically, formative assessments are designed to help students identify their strengths and weaknesses and target areas that need work and also help teachers recognize where students are struggling and address problems immediately. Formative assessments are commonly contrasted with summative assessments, which are used to evaluate student learning progress and achievement at the conclusion of a specific instructional period - usually at the end of a project, unit, course, semester, program, or school year. (Black, 1998; Hanna et al., 2004; Stiggins, 2005; Ainsworth et al., 2006)

When analyzing the purposes or characteristics of these two trends of assessment, Weeden, Winter and Broadfoot (2002) asserted that assessment of learning equates to summative assessment. It is the process of summing up or checking what has been learned at the end of a particular stage of learning; while assessment for learning equates to formative assessment. It is this type of assessment that helps students learn.

Moreover, formative assessments are also considered part of the learning; they need not be graded as summative assessments (end-of-unit exams or quarterlies, for example) are. Rather, they serve as practice for students, just like a meaningful homework assignment. They check for understanding along the way and guide teacher decision making about future instruction; they also provide feedback to students so they can improve their performance.

According to Petty (2004, p. 463), the principal purpose of formative assessment is developmental to help students monitor their own understanding and progress. Its nature is diagnosing, identifying weaknesses and allowing students to spend time and effort on improvement. Also, formative assessment with its feedback function can strongly influence motivation, encouraging interest, commitment, intellectual challenge, independence and responsibility (Ramsden, 1992, pp. 184-185, 193). Generally, both students and teachers take advantages of using formative assessment in the language classroom. Besides, Chappius & Chappius (2007) advocate that although all formative assessment practices have the potential to increase student learning, there are some of the distinct benefits of formative assessment: (1) Timeliness of results enables teachers to adjust instruction quickly, while learning is in progress; (2) Students who are assessed are the ones who benefit from the adjustments; (3) Students can use the results to adjust and improve their own learning

# **2.2. Portfolio-based language assessment**

In recent decades, language practitioners have made themselves more familiarized with the use of portfolios as a powerful interactive tool of assessment. Portfolios have been increasingly used worldwide in language learning for assessment purposes. A portfolio is a collection of work that a learner has collected, selected, organized, reflected upon, and presented to show understanding and growth over a given time (Barret, 2006; Mahoney, 2002; Young, 2002; Johnson et al., 2010). Barret (2006, p. 4) in her REFLECT Initiative Research Project describes that “a critical component of a portfolio is the combination of a learner’s reflection on the individual pieces of work (often called artifacts), as well as an overall reflection on the story that the portfolio tells.” For the beneficial outcomes that using portfolios may bring to the language learning, the use of portfolio-based language assessment (PBLA) has been promoted extensively in almost adult classrooms. Many other researchers (Feez, 1998; Harlen, 2004; Holmes, 2005; Daugherty, 2011; Gardner, 2012) in Pettis (2014) have since then developed theoretical background and sound practice on PBLA. They saw PBLA as a comprehensive, systematic, authentic, and collaborative approach to language assessment that engages teachers and students in dialogue to tell the story of the student’s journey in learning English and meeting personal goals. The assessment approach is classroom-based and teacher-based that is integrated throughout the teaching or learning cycle. Pettis discussed that “teachers and students together collaborate to set language-learning goals, compile numerous examples of language proficiency and learning in a variety of contexts over time, analyze the data, and reflect on progress. In this way, students are encouraged to become more autonomous, active, and self-aware language learners, engaged in and responsible for their learning.”

It is clear that portfolios, when being used properly, have the great potential to support a deeper level of engagement and self-awareness. Students are assisted to understand their own learning and teachers are provided with a more informative picture of what students know and are able to do.

**3. The study**

The project has been put up in a time frame of 10 weeks in the second semester of first-year writing class at Hue University of Foreign Languages where Northstar 2 - Reading and Writing module - is used as the main textbook. Thirty students who participated into the project kept a portfolio the requirements of which are set in the syllabus (unit description) at the beginning of the semester. Each week, a writing lesson based on a content topic (from Northstar 2 textbook) was given in class. Students were also given reading materials, exercises, discussion and various writing tasks,... to practice their writing skills. Then, they were assigned one or two tasks as home assignment. This weekly home assignment might be a piece of writing (e.g. writing a paragraph on a given topic) that reinforced the skills and sub-skills learned in each lesson; it might also be the response to the class group discussion or personal reflection on students’ self-perception of writing tasks. They were also encouraged to collect model paragraphs of different genres written by advanced language learners or native speakers. There were two whole-class discussion and reflection sections in-between the ten-week program when students brought up what they have really learned and progressed through those learning activities.

As described, the portfolio in this context is a collection of all students’ class and home writing assignments, model paragraphs of different genres, discussion minutes, or project work,… in the classroom. The teacher made it clear as the entry to the class that portfolios would be evaluated in terms of rather a “supervised and assisted self-process” than a “finished perfect product”. In addition, it only accounts for 10% of the total assessment. So it serves more as an ideal formative assessment tool to assist both students’ learning and teacher’s teaching than a summative assessment one.

To support the measurement of students’ satisfaction with the use of portfolios as a formative assessment technique, we also conducted a mini-interview at the end of the program, which includes questions regarding what kinds of benefits students can get from such a portfolio-based language assessment project. More importantly, we recorded students’ progress over 10 weeks through the assessment of the writing work in terms of coherence/ cohesion, range of vocabulary, grammar, discourse organization,…

The research questions (hypotheses) for this study can be described as: (1) Can portfolio be a type of formative assessment in writing classes?; (2) How can teacher maximize the students’ language production through the use of portfolios in the writing classrooms? What kinds of benefits do teachers and students get from the use of portfolio-based assessment tool in the writing classroom?

**4. The effects of using portfolio as a formative assessment tool in writing classes**

We have all agreed that portfolios are ideal to provide teachers with formative assessment. Through a number of formative assessment techniques that we carried out in the writing classes under the practice of portfolios including *asking students to find their peers’ mistakes in the writing assignments and suggest improvement; eliciting students’ responses on controversial topics or their answers on questions made by other students about a lesson; reviewing main ideas of model paragraphs and tell others about their chosen models;*…, the research results imply various benefits, which can be summarized in terms of the followings:

* ***The benefits the portfolios bring to students in the writing classes***

The writing portfolio really encourages students’ self-reflection, which is important in self-directed or self-study learning. Students have become more reflective and own more critical thinking skills. Some students who answered the post-program interview questions revealed that they tend to be more reflective and critical when writing on everyday topics, thanks to the activities that they have experienced through the portfolio assignments. They said they viewed the assignments more meaningful, exciting and worth doing than ever. Moreover, by reading and giving comments on friends’ written work, students have had a chance to mirror their competence through peers’. This task did help students do more self-reflection as they could see others’ mistakes and shortcomings while it might be difficult to recognize theirs. Those who did this job seriously have become more alert and improved in language use in the next assignments. They tended to avoid similar mistakes and problematic use of grammar structures or vocabulary in their later works. In the later drafts of students’ writing, spelling, grammar or vocabulary mistakes (and even errors) were avoided more frequently. Student T1 revealed that she improved herself significantly over the last 5 assignments. Mistakes regarding her use of wrong tenses or vocabulary choice have been diminished through time and several of her writing drafts.

Besides, students have been really motivated and become actively involved in writing thanks to the creativity of the teacher in terms of designing portfolio activities. Based on the unique features of each of the topics and the relevant writing sub-skills assigned in each unit of the textbook, the writing portfolio assignments were accordingly designed to help students revise the language of the content domain while practicing the skills needed. Apart from the class activities which focused mainly on genre-based writing practice, the portfolio assignments directed students towards something more creative, exciting and critical-thinking. For example, for the topic *jobs*, students created a job advert which includes ideal requirements as skills and experiences, job settings and rewards,… For the topic *organic produces*, students designed an eye-catching brochure about the type of produce which they think is good and convinced people to buy the produce. One more interesting assignment is the collection of various web pages on culture-specific *etiquettes* which really motivated students and taught them how to write a web page. Student L2 said that: *“I have become totally involved in the interesting writing activities given by the teacher. I roughly compared them with previous writing assignments and realized the great differences between teacher’s* ***asking*** *and* ***encouraging*** *students to write. Here in my class I have never been pushed to write something out of my interest. I was really inspired in each of the writing assignments as I felt I was writing about myself, my world and my preferences.”*

Next, students have been trained to change from passive learning to active learning by being able to set their own realistic goals, develop their learning plans and monitor their own progress through the management of the portfolio assignment. Over the ten-week program, students could have been left behind if they had not designed a proper plan to deal with really abundant sources of information and tasks. Moreover, if they had not seen the true benefits of these activities which are developing their learning capacity and sharpening their skills, they could have given up because the institutional assessment quota for this assignment made up only 10% of the whole course, which is not much encouraging at all. More importantly, students can “see” their progress when looking again at each phase of the program through their assignments. To some extent, the active use of portfolio has helped them self-assess their language competence by comparing it against the competence displayed on entry to the program. When being asked about the self benefits she might earn from this writing class, student P3 answered: *“I have worked really hard in your class. At first, I felt a bit overwhelmed with lots of work and enquiries. Later, when I could find for myself some kind of strategic plan, things had become more easily handled. I felt kind of ease to prepare first draft and be ready for later editing work. The later assignments seemed more easily handled than previous ones since I got used to working with my own plan and strategies”*.

In addition, as research on portfolio-based language assessment has pointed out, students have been made to focus on the learning process rather than just the learning outcomes which many other traditional types of assessment may encourage. Low-performance students may gain more confidence over the whole course and may seek some opportunities to improve their language skills as the course goes on, not just worry much about the final results which generally give out a sense of “destiny” on a specific exam date. From our project experience, we can see that there were some students who missed one or two assignments but then quickly made up with the whole stream and get well-prepared for the course final exam without much effort. And more importantly, they said in the interview that they did not feel being left behind, or worrying a lot about the final exams as they used to.

Finally, thanks to dealing with many types of portfolio tasks which require the integration and incorporation of different skills, students have been developed many fundamental skills and concepts that can transfer to other life, social and professional contexts. This is a completely crucial strategy in whole-person education policy employed by many advanced educational systems in the world. Almost all of students participated in the program agreed that they have become more “mature” after the course, in terms of language competence (i.e. reading and writing skills) and other life skills such as negotiating, vision-sharing, risk-taking, information-seeking, net-surfing, presenting, teamwork engagement, time-managing and library skills,… Some students even told us that they have become more responsible with their practice as a routine. They did not want to leave assignments piled up after weeks, and they enjoyed doing creative new things weekly. Student M4 said she has developed for herself the joy of free-writing just in-between and after the course, which is a rewarding remark for the teacher.

* ***The benefits the portfolios bring to writing teachers***

The first benefit we could see as teachers is the tangible evidence of student performance and progress in writing skills. When looking at students’ assignments every week, we recorded the progress students made in understanding about the genres they are writing, using appropriate lexical and grammar range, developing coherent flow of discourse, writing good spelling of English,… The progress was noted down in each category but also provided us with a general picture of student performance over different stages of the program. That’s why we teachers had the grasp of the student competence in writing even before the final exam took place. We believe that the formative assessment results can help teachers evaluate and select pieces to contribute to the institutional assessment that fully determines the grade for the final results which is often called summative assessment.

The next and very important benefit for teachers is that the portfolios have indeed been proved ideal tools for formative assessment because they facilitate ongoing reflection on the teacher’s teaching and students’ learning process. Basing on the shown performance, the teacher can adjust their teaching strategies and plans appropriately. In the case of the textbook Northstar 2 (with focus on writing paragraphs), some units have appeared unrealistic in terms of topic development and sub-skills practice. We have based on the students’ performance and also their comments to adjust the content domain as well as the writing tasks to fit in well with the flow of genre-based writing development. This effort also supported the theory of training in response to learning needs. The adjustment of teacher is a good sign of meeting learning needs of students who are seen as “the clients” of the teaching process.

Last but not least, we realized that the assessment of students’ writing portfolio though taking so much time and effort obviously benefits us as writing teachers in terms of professional development. When designing portfolio tasks, guiding students along or reporting their progress, our expertise is enhanced accordingly. Our teaching resources are doubled and the assessment skills are sharpened too. The most joyful reward is that we can avoid the backwash of “teaching versus testing” that most traditional approach of teaching writing might have experienced. Thanks to the use of portfolios as a formative assessment tool, we did help students develop their written language competence meaningfully, instead of teaching them to get good results in the final writing exams only. In addition, portfolio use has promoted the real communication between teachers and students. This has truly assisted us as teachers in the language classrooms.

The all-above-mentioned benefits agree with what Yancey (1992) stated that all portfolios, regardless of the particular context, share three essential characteristics. Firstly, they are longitudinal in nature. Secondly, portfolios are diverse in content and thirdly, portfolios are almost always collaborative in ownership. The practice of writing class to the first year students at HUFL has shown visible outcomes with the use of portfolios as a means of formative assessment and it was set over ample time to facilitate students to develop their writing. Next, it provided various and abundant content domains and skill practice tasks to motivate students and allow them to do more of drafting, editing, revising work. Finally, the portfolios of students were the product of the collaboration among the students as writers, working with teacher and other students as partners for advice and evaluation. In broader meaning, these all benefits reinforce what Murphy (1994), Herman (1996), Weeden et al. (2002) and Pettis (2014) have stated in their research on portfolio-based language assessment.

**5. Conclusion**

In short, the research done at a writing classroom to first-year students at HUFL has proved that all the hypotheses set before about the beneficial use of portfolio-based formative assessment in the language classrooms are distinctively true. While maintaining that assessment is a crucial factor of language education, we also realize that any assessment process may result in some “wash-back”: That is, it affects teaching and learning. Portfolio assessment research substantiates the idea that students greatly benefit from assessments that go beyond simple grades and more than that, they involve participants in the evaluation process. Therefore, it is suggested that language teachers choose portfolio-based language assessment as a tool to contribute to positive wash-back because it fosters reflective teaching practice and also enhances the development of language teaching curricula, which bases on students’ own needs and goals. As for students, portfolios encourage them to take part in the development of their portfolios, and then work along with the criteria for what constitute good work, and learn to evaluate their own writing work. These all help them develop themselves into reflective learners, increase their knowledge and understanding, sharpen their language skills through cooperative and integrative learning experiences. Moreover, in order to maximize the benefits of portfolio-based language assessment, teachers should design frequently varied assignment types which combine both content knowledge and skills development tasks. Hopefully, this formative assessment tool will bring language teachers with more rewarding experiences as they go through the mission of helping students learn languages for the communication purposes.

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