Exploring the Folio Thinking Mechanisms Used by EFL Learners in the Assessment Portfolio Implementation

استكشاف آليات التفكير الورقي المستخدمة من قبل متعلمي اللغة الإنجليزية كلغة أجنبية في تنفيذ حافظة التقييم الورقية

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Abstract

This study seeks to delineate the EFL learners' folio thinking mechanisms of action from the assessment portfolio perspective. The folio thinking process, a newly arrived concept in education, is better embodied with the portfolio use as an assessment tool, the matter which goes often unnoticed. In a language learning context, the extant literature dealing with portfolio, both as assessment or learning tool, is strongly associated with the writing skill due simply to the fact that portfolio fits perfectly into the sub-skills making up the overall skills of writing. Hereby, a content-based analysis of portfolios for 2nd year EFL students at Chlef University revealed interesting results. Via this analysis, it was ensured that the non-workability of folio thinking stemmed from the disconnection among skills that may impede workability of portfolio assessment.

Keywords: Portfolio Assessment; Folio Thinking; Language Learning; Writing Skill.

ملخص

تسعى هذه الدراسة إلى تحديد آليات عمل التفكير الورقي لمتعلمي اللغة الإنجليزية كلغة أجنبية من منظور محفظة التقييم. يتم تجسيد عملية التفكير الورقي ، وهو مفهوم جديد في التعليم ، بشكل أفضل مع تنفيذ الحافظة كأداة تقييم، الامر الذي هو غالبا غير ملاحظ. في سياق تعلم اللغة ، ترتبط الأدبيات الموجودة التي تتناول المحفظة ، سواء كأداة للتقييم أو التعلم ، ارتباطًا وثيقًا بمهارة الكتابة بسبب حقيقة أن المحفظة تتناسب تمامًا مع المهارات الفرعية التي تشكل المهارات العامة للكتابة. بموجب هذا ، كشف تحليل قائم على المحتوى لمحافظ لطلاب السنة الثانية من اللغة الإنجليزية كلغة أجنبية في جامعة الشلف عن نتائج جديرة بالاهتمام. من خلال تحليل هذه الملفات ، تم التأكد بشكل صحيح من أن عدم قابلية التفكير الورقي تنبع من الانفصال بين المهارات التي قد تعيق قابلية تطبيق محفظة التقييم الورقية .

الكلمات المفتاحية: محفظة التقييم الورقية ، التفكير الورقي، تعلم اللغة، مهارة الكتابة.

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1. Introduction

Language teachers use assessment in the classrooms as an investigative procedure that explores the extent to which the teaching-learning process is going effective. This may be done through using a variety of tools such as tests, observations, portfolios, interviews…etc, which sometimes can be practised implicitly or explicitly by the teachers. Bachman (2010, p.20) argues that within the language assessment framework, the focus of efforts is to interpret some aspects that concern the individuals' language ability. So, what cannot be assessedwould be hard to improve. In classrooms, teachers can use assessment either in formal and informal ways. The first way, where the assessment is systematically planned by the assessor, in observance to time and place and the second way, where the assessor gives unplanned remarks and evaluative statements about a certain aspect of learning (Brown, 2004).

In the EFL academic context, notably the university level, the used assessment tools are supposed to be more learner-centred than the other levels, that is to say, learners should not rely heavily on teachers in terms of evaluation. Scientifically proved, the traditional assessment procedures, more specific tests, may not give a realistic account of learners' performances and as such tools are summative. What is more, they tackle the reproduction of language models delivered by the teachers, handouts, and other resources. Practically, this does not give the EFL learners the opportunity to improve their reflection by drawing formative decisions by relating the past and the present experiences. Engaging in such a process is being known as folio thinking. It is a newly didactic concept that embodies theexperience-based learning.

The objective for fostering the folio thinking pedagogical approach is to involve language learners in self-assessment for being more responsible for their progress. In this situation, EFL teachers are expected to be agents of folio thinking by providing the learners with the necessary theoretical, affective and methodological support. Via reviewing some portfolios, it has been noticed that the folio thinking process goes unnoticed and those who implement portfolios tackle them as a project through which they merely impart knowledge, what makes the portfolio implementation prone to ineffectiveness.On this available evidence, persistent efforts are made to figure out where the causal factors settle down. On this basis, the following research questions are put forward as the initial methodological onset:

1-   Are students' portfolios associated with the folio thinking process?
2-   What kind of difficulties do 2nd year EFL students encounter inpractising folio thinking?

To speculate upon the expected results, the following hypotheses are formulated:
1-   Students' portfolios are disassociated with the folio thinking process.
2-   The 2nd year EFL students facemeta-cognitive difficultiesinfolio thinking practice.

2. Literature Review

Language teaching and learning, which occupy a privileged place within applied linguistics, are qualitative in the sense that they always depend on periodic innovation and change. In the light of learning and teaching, it would be better to deal with language education. The field of language education has recently been issued as an important interdisciplinary of applied linguistics. It is mainly concerned with foreign and second language education. From a developmental standpoint, language education underwent several changes where various theoretical trends, either linguistic or psychological, influenced language learning and acquisition. Because foreign language learning and teaching practices are qualitatively specialized than other learning fields, foreign language education, as an integral part of applied linguistics, has experienced many challenges because of its purpose of learning and the pedagogical considerations in which it is taught. In this sense, talking about language education is mainly concerned with language learning and language teaching as one process. Language teaching has been the subject of many elaborations where different theories, principles and methodologies are introduced over time. In terms of the teaching methodologies, what should be emphasized in any language education program is the teaching methodology which links theories to practice, more specifically that of second language acquisition. As for language learning, it can be considered a complicated process regarding the interrelation of cognitive, meta-cognitive and affective functions that should be taken into consideration by teachers.

Judging the effectiveness of teaching and learning in language classrooms is determined by using different investigative procedures. These procedures used by both teachers and learners are referred to as assessment and testing, coming under the banner of evaluation. The existing literature addressing assessment and testing in language emphasized assessment over-testing because testing and tests are only components of the covering concept of assessment. Richards and Schmidt (2002, p.35) define assessment as "the systematic approach to collecting information and making inferences about the ability of a student or the quality or success of a teaching course based on various sources of evidence. Assessment may be done by test, interview, questionnaire, observation, etc". It follows from this definition that assessment draws a lot on collecting information and making inferences, but collecting information can be done via hearsays, casual observations or rumours and this may not be considered assessment. According to Bachman and Palmer (2010, p. 20), systematicity and substantive grounding are key qualities that differentiate assessment from other ways of collecting information. The first means that assessment is designed through defined mechanisms that are methodical and debatable by the developers, and the second quality means that assessment is grounded to a verifiable area of the taught content.

2.1   Assessment of Writing

Foreign Language theories are growing over time, however, and as fresh studies and practices come into reality, they should be put into action to ensure effectiveteaching and learning.Writing, as an importantskillin foreign language education, has seen further elaborations in parallel with different theories and approaches. In terms of

assessment, assessing writing is sensitive because it covers many sub-skills (macro and micro-skills), techniques and purposes featuring at different levels. The writing performances which go often along with purposes falls into four categories: imitative, intensive, responsive and extensive performances. Brown (2004) argues that each type of performance has its specifications and a special way of assessment. For instance, assessment tasks for responsive performance require the writers to perform a limited discourse-level via connecting sentences with paragraphs ad creating a logical synergy among paragraphs.

Within the alternative assessment framework, the theory of writing that supports portfolio assessment pertains to cognitive approach, collaborative learning and socio-constructivist approach. The cognitive approach adopts recursive writing processes typically exhibited in the process-oriented portfolio classrooms although some portfolio assessment systems can accommodate the product approach to teaching writing. Collaborative learning encourages students, teachers, parents and other stakeholders to form a learning community to facilitate uptake of writing knowledge and skills. Phrased in another way, the use of self-, peer and teacher assessment is indispensable as they are core learning-enhancing activities in the classroom-based assessment. Socio constructivism includes specialized portfolio skills such as collection, self-assessment, reflection, selection, overdue evaluation, student-centeredness and development over time (Lam, 2018).

2. 2. What is Folio Thinking?

Among the socio-constructivist principles to education is to encouragethe learner to be experiential; that's to say, engaging in personal experience to deduce the learning input and output. This needs to be instilled over the educational career even if in more advanced levels notably university level. It has been noted, in this vein, that:

The transition to being a successful university student is seen as a movement toward more generative and adaptive ways of understanding and being in the world, a process that happens on many levels and through many means . . . The transition to and subsequent experience at the university is not just a time of limbo or a four-year layover on the road to the 'real world'. (Blakely & Pagnac, 2012, p. 17)

Under necessity, there should be a good theorizing, adequate designs and effective learning assessment tools to systematize this experiential learning. Portfolio implementation promotes so-called "folio thinking," a term coined by Helen Chen (2004) to indicate the mental habit of building connections among experiences, skills, and artefacts and of making these connections visible to readers.Hereby, an obvious starting point in any attempt to define folio thinking is to tackle learning by experience. Folio thinking can be looked upon as a process of exploring, establishing experiences, reflecting upon facts and extrapolating into the learner future progress established under what has been experienced over some time. According to Gero and Lindeman (2005, p.96), folio thinking is *"a pedagogical approach which is designed to enhance self-awareness by enabling students to make their knowledge explicit and visible for themselves as well as for others"*.It is meant from this definition that what

might be experienced by the learners in the real-life situations, inside and outside the educational settings could be meaningfully connected with their learning to make it outright and shared with peers, instructors and administrators. It is worth mentioning thatdespite its newness, folio thinking pedagogy is stepping little by little within educational contexts due majorly to the fact that it enhances students' responsibilities about their learning.

3.   The Study

The fundamental objective of this study is to investigate and gain a broader perspective on the folio thinking dimension ofportfolio assessment implementation.The methodological procedures, in this study, went following the qualitative approach. Data about the target situation was qualitatively collected and analyzed. To fit perfectly into this attempt, the researchers opted for a content analysis method that is commensurate with the portfolio's written pieces. Briefly defined, Content analysis is a research method used to determine the presence and the tabulating of the frequency of occurrence of certain words or conceptual frameworks within texts or sets of texts. It has become paralleled with qualitative research despite quantitative studies can be conducted through it. Dörnyei (2007) has argued:

Content analysis has recently become closely associated with qualitative research and we can therefore easily forget that it actually originates from a quantitative analytical method of examining written texts that involves the courting of instances of words, phrases, or grammatical structures that fall into specific categories (p.245)

Content analysis has recently become familiar with many fields of inquiry, such as psychology and cognitive science, media studies, literature and cultural studies, applied linguistics and communication issues, sociology and political science, psychology and cognitive science, and so many fields. In practical terms, the researcher would like to describe 2nd year EFL learners' performances via analyzing the content of **25** portfolios submitted within the modular framework of written comprehension and expression. Learners have become familiar with this newly introduced tool after getting a fuller explanation and clarification by the teacher.

4. The Purpose of the Study

The purpose of the study is to gain a broader perspective on the workability of folio thinking mechanisms. It seeks to give a plausible interpretation for the different folio thinking pitfalls that occurred in the EFL learners' portfolio assessment that were submitted in writing module. Over and above, it strives to suggest implications for the aforementioned problem situation.

5. Results & Discussion

 Before delving deeply into the obtained results, it is worth recognizing that the folio thinking process hinges upon the following main skills: collection, connection, reflection and evaluation (self-assessment). These skills are the subject matter of the current content analysis by which the researcher tried to specify, delineate or describe the cyclical occurrence of this process. Methodologically speaking, the content may be

analyzed in terms of concepts or relations. Phrased in another way, conceptual analysis through which one can determine the frequency of terms and concepts in written/verbal texts, whereas relational analysis seeks to discover the relationships among concepts in texts. Regarding the nature of this study, the researcher looked forward to the exploration of the relationship of the aforementioned steps. Therefore, a relational analysis was seen a commonplace.

Analytically speaking, the first point to consider in the folio thinking process is a collection. In this vein, the portfolio implementation, taking the paper-based form, took place in the second semester which was completely devoted to paragraph development according to the curriculum credited by the administration. The programmed types were descriptive paragraph, cause and effect paragraph, definition paragraph, narrative paragraph in addition to the comparison and contrast paragraph. Although the portfolio was designed as an assessment tool, there was undue tendency to collect artefacts, rules, definitions related to paragraphs. It can be said that collection, as a point of departure for portfolio construction, was respected to a greater extent. Cogently argued, data collection phase plays a key role in the portfolio construction because the upcoming skills cannot be functional without the knowledge and sufficient evidence. For instance, for the learner to reflect upon and draw evaluative decisions, there should be some documented facts. Starting from this point, the collection is looked upon a capstone skill that might be labelled as the "*skeleton of the folio thinking*".

Another cardinal facet of folio thinking is connection or linkage. It is meant by connection to have the skills of relating the past and the present artefacts and interpreting them for reflection. Put differently, learners are expected to look back at their learning experiences from a new perspective and demonstrate the development over time. Therefore there were little if any, intentions to connect pieces of writing, and this was considered as a misstep. The majority of the portfolios demonstrated a considerable deficit in relating documentation to each other. Theoretically speaking, learners had superficial knowledge about the portfolio implementation, and they ignore some application details that could threaten in action the relationship among steps or skills of the folio thinking process. From strict linguistic sense, it is likely to be a cognitive and meta-cognitive deficit ensued from lacking a solid knowledge considering the fact they are still 2nd-year students, having limited aptitudes to engage in such activities.

A related skill worth pointing in folio thinking is reflection. The critical component of portfolio assessment is the learner's reflection on the individual pieces of work. Conventionally, studies tackling portfolio assessment incorporate reflection in student's ability and readiness to set objectivesto review those objectives and revise all that is written and documented. In practical terms, students demonstrated a sense of introspection through which they did not refer to past artefacts. Disconnection, in the broader sense of the word, was remarkably the dominant critical feature. From a metacognitive standpoint, this kind of reflection is referred to as reflection-in-action (Lam, 2018, p.43). Students, via this kind, can draw formative decisions, and be a full-fledged reflection, there should be retrospective reasoning towards the written pieces

which helps draw summative decisions. Logically, students cannot engage in reflection without the connection episode. Through analyzing portfolios, few students (5 portfolios) demonstrated insightful reflection in the sense they knew the rationale for writing paragraphsor the reasons why certain paragraphswere chosen as representative works for their portfolios. It is worth reminding that those students were asking constantly for instructions during the period of implementation with deep-seated commitment. As a rough generalization, reflection may present a rather puzzling problem because it subsequently brings self-assessment into play.

The last skill or aspect which is always seen under scrutiny in folio thinking is self-assessment. From an assessment perspective, the folio thinker should be an active participant of his/her learning rather than depending passively on the teacher. Needless to recall, self-assessment or any kind of assessment must be coupled with goals and those goals are preferably understood and mentioned by the learner since the beginning, regardless of the folio thinking tool. Before submitting portfolios, it is worth informing that learners got involved in constant communication through negotiating meaning, asking for content and providing peer feedback. Logically, this may be anticipated to increase the incentive for self-assessment of high expectations. By reflecting upon the given portfolios, few students made easily self-judgments and self-observations about their progress and went a step forward while stating the difficulties faced before drawing assessment decisions. On a more general level, there was no clear interrelation between reflection and self-assessment. The assessment decisions were arbitrarily launched away from engaging in a critical comparison between the past learning experiences that included some faults and the present ones which are expected to be adjusted. There was no logical sequence in which students' assessment decisions were not made on reflection basis.

There are several issues from the study that deserves to be worth raising with a high degree of objectivity. To adopt the portfolio approach, there should be priorities for use that go in parallel with the perceived obstacles. For instance, within rallying call for adopting different technologies in education, electronic portfolio raise to the forefront instead of the paper-based one. In this case, though the micro-skills were not our case in point, the electronic form may endanger its reliability and validity since computerized writing is automatically corrected. For example, if there is an intention to investigate the morpho-syntactic errors of writing, such as errors can be surmounted by writers through grammar detector. Paper-based portfolio gives an authentic and real account on students' performances. Another topical issue worth signalling is that the majority of participants mentioned at the beginning of the portfolios certain goals which are identical with the folio thinking skills, but unfortunately, they failed to realize them.

6. Conclusion and Pedagogical Implications

This paper investigated the folio thinking mechanisms used by EFL learners in portfolio implementation. The findings demonstrated that all the practical difficulties found by students emanated from the fact that they did not perceive the interdependence and the overlapping nature of the skills making the folio thinking process. Regarding the nature of this process, skills should be interrelated in the sense

that one doesn't work without the preceding one. In action, it was remarked that lacking the skill of connection inhibited reflection which automatically made drawing self-assessment decisionsunachievable. Overall, the portfolio, as a prominent alternative to assessment, is still in its infancy. Pedagogically speaking, it is highly difficult to introduce this tool for double-fold reasons: for the cognitive and meta-cognitive requirements on the part of learners, and since it is not among the departmental priorities in the Algeria EFL context. Among these requirements,the folio thinking process should notbe disassociated fromthe portfolio use. A good way to instil this habit of mind is to practice more than necessary because more extensive applications of the portfolios may guide students' self-assessment as a capstone skill to be folio thinkers and properly customize teachers' intervention.

Although this study was not of a sufficient scale to be generalizable, we strive to propose some highly generalized solutions that may make students more responsive to folio thinking pedagogy. Teachers, as agents of folio thinking, are recommended to create a culture of making connections, setting goals, and envisioning a learner-centred assessment; integrate portfolio into the daily practices and avoid making it as an "add on"; enable challenge and collaboration that make the learner intrinsically motivated.Anyhow, this study may bring into play forother research works that add further improvements to the workability of folio thinking as a new arrival to language pedagogy.

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