

Student perspectives on writing portfolios and authentic assessment in an intensive English program at UAE University

Litz, David ✉

UAE University, United Arab Emirates (davidralitz@yahoo.com)

Smith, Allison

UAE University, United Arab Emirates (allielitz@yahoo.com)



ISSN: 2243-7754
Online ISSN: 2243-7762

OPEN ACCESS

Received: 20 October 2012

Revised: 26 November 2012

Accepted: 14 February 2013

Available Online: 6 April 2013

DOI: 10.5861/ijrsl.2013.234

Abstract

The main purpose of this study was to explore the degree to which English foundations students within the University General Requirements Unit (UGRU) at UAE University perceived the use of competency/outcomes-based or evaluation portfolios to be an effective learning tool within the writing curriculum. In order to gain some useful baseline data on the students' opinions, a short survey was conducted with 68 female students at the completion of their writing course. In addition, another 7 (approximately 10% of the total survey participants) students were also interviewed in order to gain a fuller and more enriched understanding of their reactions and overall feelings about portfolio use. In this case the results demonstrated that although there were some perceived difficulties, many students had relatively favorable views towards portfolios in their writing classes. In particular, it was found that students felt as though they were effective pedagogic instruments that had important contextual contributions to various aspects of their learning.

Keywords: writing portfolios; alternative assessment; authentic assessment; ES/FL writing; writing assessment

Student perspectives on writing portfolios and authentic assessment in an intensive English program at UAE University

1. Introduction

Authentic assessment is an overarching concept that generally refers to a more meaningful, worthwhile, or significant form of evaluation (Wiggins, 1999). Researchers such as Goodrich-Andrade (2000) and Hart (2004) suggest that assessment is authentic when it enables students to communicate their academic strengths, as well as their educational needs. It has also been argued that this type of assessment enables students to move away from passive or simple responses to the active construction of meaning and it mirrors good classroom instruction as students are now being asked to demonstrate, in a significant and personal way, what they know and are able to do rather than merely measuring specific or isolated skills (Montgomery, 2002). Moreover, it gives students ongoing feedback that enables them to reflect on their learning accomplishments, identify future learning needs, and develop goals and strategies to achieve them. As a result, this type of assessment may not only empower students to become self-directed or autonomous learners, but it may also allow teachers to use class assessment information for future instructional improvement.

While authentic assessment can involve a vast array of teaching and evaluation techniques, it is the use of academic portfolios that has become one of the most popular and recognizable components of authentic, or alternative, assessment in many educational settings. An academic portfolio has been described as a being a device for storing student's work (Fox, 2006; Herman, Aschbacher, & Winters, 1992) and a collection of a learner's work that is gradually assembled over time (Chang, 2001; Feuer & Fulton, 1993). In essence, it is a systematic, organized and multidimensional compilation of evidence that is designed to observe, examine, and assess students' abilities, knowledge, and attitudes (Chang, 2001).

While many educators in school boards/districts and higher education institutions in places such as Australia, Canada, the USA, the UK, and other Western European nations have been using portfolios as a means for authentic assessment for more than ten years (Baturay & Daloglu, 2010; Chang, 2001; Wooster, 1993), the lack of studies on these assessment devices in developing countries and non-Western environs, as well as their recent increase in popularity in many overseas intensive ES/FL programs make them worthy of further research and discussion within these contexts.

2. Literature review

Portfolios have long been regarded as a pedagogic tool in fields such as crafts, fine arts, visual arts, design, and fashion. In these areas, people would typically assemble a compilation of their work for presentation to others or when seeking to provide evidence of their abilities for the purposes of securing admission to some type of educational program or for securing employment. However, they are increasingly being used in a variety of K-12 and vocational educational settings, teacher in-service programs, and language learning contexts (Baturay & Daloglu, 2010), and they are generally seen as a means of describing or exhibiting a learner's ability in a way that provides amore enriched and complete picture than traditional forms of tests and assessments alone. This is due to the fact that they not only serve as a concrete form of documentation of standards met, but they also include artifacts of authentic work which demonstrate mastery of real-life tasks (Fox, 2006; Balliro, 1993).

With respect to language learning, there are several types of portfolios that are suitable for ES/FL contexts. According to Cooper and Love (2001, as cited in Ali, 2005), portfolios can be seen as formative or summative. The purpose of a formative portfolio is a particular student's process of learning and one such example of this type of portfolio is when it is used as a grading tool (e.g. report) for parents, guardians, or even the learner themselves (in adult learning contexts). Additionally, it may hold examples of a student's work collected

throughout a specific time frame in order to reveal changes over an extended time period. Alternatively, summative portfolios have learning outcomes as their focus as they do not focus on the learning process. Assessment of these types of portfolios focuses on the skills and knowledge a student has acquired and it is typically cumulative.

Cooper and Love would also suggest that there are three separate types of summative portfolios: (A) Competency-based or outcomes-based portfolios – samples of a student’s work that are collected as evidence of his/her abilities and knowledge, which is relative to a curriculum or syllabus; (B) Negotiated learning portfolios – collections of work in which the products of a particular negotiated learning process are graded through a portfolio; and (C) Biographic portfolios – collections of work which are a record of accomplishment and completion. This type of portfolio typically contains a compilation of a student’s work which is collected over a specified or pre-determined time period and organized chronologically (Ali, 2005).

Valencia and Calfee (1991) and Apple and Shimo (2004), on the other hand, have based their descriptions of portfolios on the degree to which the student has a say in the items that are included. According to these authors, there are three types of portfolios that might be appropriate in the language learning classroom. These include: (A) Showcase – a personalized collection of a student’s preferred work; (B) Documentation – work which comprises a complete representation of a student’s development and growth and which the student often has a role in selecting; and (C) Evaluation – a collection of a student’s work that is evaluated by a format over which the student has very little control.

2.1 Benefits of using portfolios

While many authors (e.g. Baturay & Daloglu, 2010; Gomez, 2000; Short, 1993) agree that portfolios ultimately provide an authentic description of a learner’s achievement and ability, a number of theorists have also recently noted some additional specific pedagogic advantages of using these tools in the ES/FL classroom. For example, Hancock (1994) suggested that they can promote learner autonomy when they are utilized in contexts in which learners are encouraged to select various items for their portfolios in addition to evaluating them themselves. They may also increase a student’s learning by enhancing their personal knowledge of what they have learned, as well as the learning process for they will have an actual record of their work that they can refer to whenever they want. Similarly, portfolios can include a history of the developmental process leading to a final product (e.g. various drafts of a writing project). As such, it is likely that students can develop a better understanding of how they changed and improved (i.e. learned) over a period of time in order to construct a final product (Hancock, 1994). Consequently, the process of portfolio development ultimately “results in the reformulation of a meaning perspective [which allows for] ... a more inclusive, discriminating, and integrative understanding of the learner’s experience” (Brown, 2002, p. 241).

Brown and Hudson (1998), on the other hand, have argued that they may improve learner motivation by providing the students with opportunities to engage in interesting, and out of the ordinary activities. Brown and Hudson have also suggested that they can improve student-teacher interaction through the development, selection, and eventual review of portfolio contents and they promote student learning of metalanguage by making them talk about language learning and the language learning process.

Lastly, some authors have pointed out that there are a number of specific advantages of using portfolios for teachers. For example, they may encourage teacher professionalism, thoughtfulness, and creativity as more responsibility is given to the teacher for developing the actual portfolio instrument that will eventually be used with students (Valencia & Calfee, 1991). Similarly, Tanner, Longayroux, Beijaard, and Verloop (2000) have argued that they provide for better teaching and learning opportunities as the portfolio review process draws attention to areas that students need to improve on an on-going basis which can be then be pedagogically addressed through further teaching and learning activities in the classroom.

2.2 Disadvantages of using portfolios

While portfolios are undoubtedly effective pedagogic tools, many authors have also highlighted some issues with using these instruments. First, they can be costly as extra materials are often involved, and both teachers and students may need training in order to implement the portfolio process (Gomez, 2000; Valencia & Calfee, 1991). Moreover, activities such as negotiating artifacts with students, reviewing and assessing the contents, and conferencing with students during the review process can be time-consuming (Tanner et al., 2000).

Additional problems with portfolios are related to the assessment of these types of instruments. For example, Brown and Hudson (1998) have pointed out that it is not only difficult to choose the evaluation content, but it is also difficult to decide who should actually choose the content. For instance, while many benefits may accrue from student involvement, this can lead to widely divergent views as students may have different favorite artifacts than the ones a teacher may select. Alternatively, teachers may want to include particular items that students object to in order to insure content validity for evaluation purposes. Similarly, Barrett (2004 as cited in Fox, 2006) has suggested that problems can arise if the purpose of the portfolio is not entirely clear. For instance, if the portfolio is to be used as an assessment tool, a teacher must decide if it will be summative or formative.

Other choices involve whether the portfolio will serve as a collection of items that demonstrate mastery according to previously set criteria or if it will merely involve the completion and inclusion of artifacts that are part of a general checklist. Likewise, the teacher must decide if the portfolio will be part of a balanced system of assessment that includes a reflective component and emphasizes the process of learning and individual growth or if it will solely focus on the final product and goal attainment. Moreover, Gomez (1990) has noted that it is often difficult to select scoring criteria because it requires a great deal of personal initiative, time, and specific training that are sometimes not available in all contexts. Furthermore, it is difficult to report on the results of portfolio assessment as there are varying types of work that are typically involved, as well as a low degree of reliability of grades because of inter-rater disagreement due to differing tasks and the fact that no two educational settings are alike (Valencia & Calfee, 1991).

3. Purpose and rationale of study

A great deal of research has been conducted on the roles, functions, advantages and disadvantages of authentic assessments and portfolios in a variety of 'Western' educational settings and to a lesser extent in ES/FL contexts. To date, however, there has been limited amount of research that has been carried out in higher educational settings in developing nations such as the United Arab Emirates (UAE) (Chang, 2001). Moreover, while portfolios have been used in the writing strand at UAE University's University General Requirements Unit (UGRU) for several years, no study or analysis has been conducted on students' perceptions of their worthiness, effectiveness, and function in this context. Consequently, the aim of this particular research project is to gather some useful baseline data from students on their use of portfolios within the writing strand of the intensive English language program at UGRU. In particular, the central purpose of the research will be to test the hypothesis that competency/outcomes-based or evaluation portfolios are an effective and worthwhile learning tool within the writing curriculum at UGRU.

It is expected that the data from this research project may provide practical information on the uses, functions, effects, and overall impact on students' learning of portfolios within UGRU, as well as contribute to the existing literature on authentic assessment. It is also expected that this research will provide unique insights into ES/FL students' perspectives on portfolios that will ultimately assist in curriculum and syllabus planning at UGRU, and contribute valuable information towards possible program changes in the future.

3.1 Research questions

The specific research questions that will guide this study on the use of portfolios are:

- To what extent do learners in the UGRU writing strand at UAE University perceive the use of portfolios to be an effective learning aid?
- To what extent do learners in the UGRU writing strand at UAE University perceive the use of portfolios to be problematic?

4. Methodology

4.1 Learning context

As mentioned previously, this particular study was conducted at UAE University within the English Program of UGRU. The main objective of this program is to ensure that all students entering the university gain the necessary study skills and language proficiency to be successful students in their respective faculties. Students who are entering the university that do not have an IELTS score of 5 or higher are placed into one of three levels depending on their Common Educational Proficiency Assessment (CEPA) score. Level 1 is an introductory English language course while Level 2 is an intermediate course and Level 3 an advanced course. All of the courses are for one semester and students typically study integrated skills with one teacher for 8 hours a week and writing skills with another teacher for an additional 4 hours a week. The integrated skills component makes up 70% of a student's total English score while the writing component makes up 30% of a student's total English score.

Within the writing strand, students in both Level 1 and Level 2 are generally expected to complete several process-writing projects and a final writing exam. While not mandatory, teachers are also encouraged to use a competency/outcomes-based or evaluation portfolio as well. For Level 1 students the portfolio component of their writing course is worth 5% of their overall grade whereas for Level 2 students the portfolio component of their writing course is worth 3% of their overall grade.

4.2 Subjects

The subjects for this particular study consisted of 68 female Level 1 writing students. All of the subjects were volunteers from four classes of students that were new to the foundations program at UGRU. It was decided that it would be useful to use students in a similar range of ability in order to lower the probability of varying proficiency levels having an unnecessary and unplanned affect on the results of the study. It was also determined that it was appropriate to solely focus on Level 1 students as they were new to the program and it was likely that some would not have had a great deal of experience with using portfolios in their previous high school learning contexts (for an example of the breakdown of Level 1 students' portfolio grade see Appendix A).

4.3 Materials and methods

Students were initially provided with information about the general nature of portfolios and the specific Level 1 portfolio requirements by their respective teachers prior to the commencement of the study (see Appendix A). They were also shown examples of model portfolios. Additionally, throughout the semester, the instructors highlighted the importance of keeping the portfolio up-to-date and periodically undertook brief checks during class time on all of the students' portfolio progress.

To assess the students' opinions about keeping portfolios, they (n = 68) were asked to complete a short survey at the same time they submitted their final portfolios to their instructors at the end of the semester. The survey asked the students to rate their responses to five general questions on their use of a writing portfolio during the semester (see Appendix B). To gain further insight into the students' reactions to portfolio use, the researchers conducted semi-structured interviews with several students (n=7) as well (see Appendix C for the interview schedule).

5. Results

As mentioned previously, the first phase of the research project involved the administration of a brief survey in order to gauge the students' perceptions about using a portfolio in their writing course. There were five questions that were designed to give them an opportunity to describe their opinions about using portfolios. The results of this survey are located in Table 1:

Table 1

Survey results (N=68)

| Survey Statements | Learner Statements | | | | |
|---|--------------------|-------------|-------------|-------------|-------------|
| | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 |
| 1 I enjoyed making my writing portfolio | 22 32.4% | 18 26.5% | 12 17.6% | 9 13.2% | 7 10.3% |
| 2 Making my portfolio was a useful experience | 24 35.3% | 19 27.9% | 16 23.5% | 4 5.9% | 5 7.4% |
| 3 Making the portfolio helped me to be a better writer | 16 23.5% | 15 22.1% | 16 23.5% | 11 16.2% | 10 14.7% |
| 4 Making the portfolio helped me to be more organized | 28 41.2% | 23 33.8% | 8 11.8% | 3 4.4% | 6 8.8% |
| 5 It is a good idea to continue using portfolios in this course in the future | 29 42.6% | 25 36.8% | 7 10.3% | 5 7.4% | 2 2.9% |

Note: 1 = Total agree; 2 = Somewhat agree; 3 = Not sure; 4 = Somewhat disagree; 5 = Totally disagree

During the second phase of the study, the researcher interviewed seven students (approx. 10% of the total survey participants) that had completed the initial survey and handed in their portfolio. The summary of the interview results is located in Table 2 and analyses of the significant positive and negative responses of the students are located in Table 3 and Table 4:

Table 2

Interview Results

| Questions | Responses |
|--|---|
| Did you enjoy making the portfolio? Yes or no? | Yes = 6 No = 1 |
| If yes, why? | <u>INTE 1</u> = helped me a little bit with my writing <u>INTE 2</u> = I liked seeing [my] writing change over time <u>INTE 3</u> = helps to organize things <u>INTE 4</u> = helped me to organize better <u>INTE 5</u> = made [it] easy to manage my class work and see the growth in my ability <u>INTE 6</u> = fun to design things like contents and |

| | |
|---|---|
| | letter for Level 2 teacher sometimes |
| If no, why not? | <u>INTE 7</u> = took too much time at end of semester to organize it; not interesting for me |
| Did the portfolio take a long time to make? Yes or no? | Yes = 4 No = 3 |
| Did the portfolio help you to understand the writing process better? Yes or no? | Yes = 5 No = 2 |
| If yes, was this helpful? | Yes = 3 A little bit = 1 Not sure = 1 |
| Did the portfolio help you to produce better writing? | Yes = 4 No = 2 Not sure = 1 |
| If yes, why? | <u>INTE 1</u> = because I could see my writing at the end of course and look at how it changed <u>INTE 2</u> = because it showed me my mistakes and I won't do [them] again or I can study in [the] future from them <u>INTE 5</u> = because it's good for studying and practicing <u>INTE 6</u> = [be]cause I had more fun making it – its different from just making other writing exercises |
| If no, why not? * (used to signify the response of a response that was 'not-sure') | <u>INTE 4</u> = it's not for writing better - I think it's better for keeping and organizing – the way it's used by the teacher; I can study too <u>INTE 7</u> = it really didn't help me in that way – writing in class [was] better * <u>INTE 3</u> = I'm not sure if [the] portfolio helps me to be [a] better writer, but it's good for organizing and keeping work – showing your work |

What are some good things about making the writing portfolio?

INTE 1 = helpful, I could see errors over time and could organize my writing

INTE 2 = helps to organize my work and I can see my writing improve

INTE 3 = I like to see my writing and it's nice to see it displayed together

INTE 4 = helps with organization and [to] get ready and study for the final [exam]

INTE 5 = it is good for study[ing] and organize[ing]

INTE 6 = can see improvement of my work; it's good to have a collection of things

INTE 7 = it is good for some students to keep work I think; can organize and review

What are some bad things about making the writing portfolio?

INTE 1 = takes too much time to organize and hard to make things like table of contents

INTE 2 = nothing really

INTE 3 = nothing I think, but sometimes [its] boring

INTE 4 = time it takes; hard to remember and bring to class for checking from teacher

INTE 5 = none

INTE 6 = nothing, but I didn't like carrying it

INTE 7 = its boring and takes me time at [the] end of semester – I need more time for study[ing]; a little boring [be]cause it's too easy; also [it] didn't help me with the writing too much

Which response best describes your overall opinion about the overall usefulness of the writing portfolio (very useful, a little bit useful, not very useful, or not useful at all)?

Very useful = 4

A little bit useful = 2

Not very useful = 1

Not useful at all = 0

Note. *INTE – Interviewee (number); n=7

Table 3

Total number of statements/utterances

| | Positive | Negative | Positive & Negative (Unsure) | No Response |
|-------------------|----------|----------|------------------------------|-------------|
| Responses Approx. | 60 | 24 | 5 | 1 |
| % | 66.7% | 26.7% | 5.6% | < 1% |

Table 4

Frequency analysis of specific comments

| | |
|-------------------|--|
| Positive Comments | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ➤ Generally helpful for organizing and presenting work (10 comments) ➤ Assists with the development of process writing skills (9 comments) ➤ Assists in writing exam preparation and studying (6 comments) ➤ Constitutes a record of work successfully completed in the course (5 comments) ➤ Acts as an assessment tool that requires creativity and alternate learning skills (2 comments) |
| Negative Comments | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ➤ Better suited as a tool for organizing and displaying work than for developing writing skills (4 comments) ➤ Time-consuming (3 comments) ➤ Boring/not-interesting (3 comments) ➤ Difficult to bring/carry to class (2 comments) ➤ Difficult to remember (1 comment) ➤ Difficult to design/organize some of the components (1 comment) |

6. Discussion

6.1 Positive factors

The study certainly presented several positive results on the perceived pedagogic effectiveness of portfolios. First, with regard to the initial survey, it was apparent that close to 59% of the students felt as though the use of portfolios in their Level 1 writing course was an enjoyable experience whereas 23.5% felt as though it was not a particularly enjoyable experience. Only 17.6% of the students were unsure as to whether they enjoyed using them or not. Similarly, 63.2% of the students felt that making their writing portfolios was a useful experience while only 13.3% did not. Just 23.5% of the students were unsure about their overall usefulness. Furthermore, 45.6% of the students generally found that the portfolios helped them to be better writers. While this number did not comprise a majority, it should be noted that it was still significantly larger than both the number of students who did not think that using portfolios benefitted their writing (30.9%), as well as the number of students who were undecided about the impact of portfolios on their writing (23.5%).

With respect to organization and future use, an overwhelming majority of the students (75%) believed that portfolios helped them to be more organized in general and 79.4% felt as though it was a good idea to continue using portfolios in the Level 1 writing course in the future. On the other hand, just 13.2% of the students found that portfolios did not help them to be more organized and 10.3% believed that they should not continue to be used in the writing course in the future. An additional 11.8% of the students were undecided about the degree to which portfolios helped them to be more organized and only 10.3% were unsure if they should be continued to be used in the course in the future.

When asked to give their opinion about the use of portfolios in the Level 1 writing course in the qualitative stage of the study, over 66% of the all of the interviewees' responses were positive while only approximately 26.7% were negative. An additional 5.6% of all the utterances were unsure statements and non-responses made

up slightly less than 1% of the total. Moreover, six of the seven participants found the use of portfolios to be somewhat useful in relation to their overall learning experience. While these positive results undoubtedly lend support to the encouraging outcomes of the survey, the students' specific opinions from the interviews were also analyzed with respect to frequency of response (as well as whether they were positive or negative). This was done in order to better understand why the learners generally perceived them to be effective and beneficial learning tools.

With respect to the interviews, at least ten comments were made by all of the interviewees that suggested that portfolios were helpful for organizing and presenting their work. This was comparable to the results of the survey in which 75% of the students agreed that using portfolios helped them to be more organized. Additionally, it demonstrates that many of these learners appreciated and understood the pedagogic value (i.e. learning skills) of being required to keep, order, and display their assignments in a proscribed way as it helped them to rearrange and structure a significant amount of course material in an ordered and well-thought out manner.

Next on the list of positive reasons for using portfolios is related to the development of writing skills. Four of the seven interviewees mentioned that the use of portfolios was helpful in developing their writing ability while an additional nine comments were made about the effectiveness of these instruments in developing process writing skills. These results were also comparable to the survey results in which a considerable number (approx. 45.6%) of the respondents agreed that using portfolios helped them to be better writers. Teaching styles and curricula that incorporate the process writing approach emphasize the general communication of a message, as well as the overall development and attainment of writing skills through the drafting, editing, and re-drafting of a written piece of work rather than solely focusing on a final product of writing (e.g. Heald-Taylor, 1986). In the case of UGRU, Level 1 foundations students are first introduced to process writing through their various projects and portfolio assignments and they are encouraged to continue to use this approach as they move through the higher levels of the program. It would seem from the interviews in this study that this pedagogic approach is having an effective impact on the students as many of the students have not only recognized that keeping a collection of various assignments in the portfolio makes it easier for them to have a record of the ways in which their writing changes and improves over time, but it also provides convenient access to their work for the purposes of revisiting, analyzing, and examining their writing ability.

The third most significant response from the students was that portfolios proved to be an effective tool for studying and exam preparation and a total of six comments were made about this point. In this case, all of the writing students that participated in the study were aware that they had to complete a final writing exam which was based on the topics, skills, grammatical structures, and writing tasks completed in the course. It is quite possible therefore, that many of the students have come to understand the basic notion that keeping all of one's work in a single organized place such as a portfolio is an effective learning strategy as it enables them to effortlessly reference all of the material that was covered in the duration of the course for review purposes. It is also possible that this could lead to increased confidence and self-efficacy when students are preparing for exams as they know that they have a record of all of the important coursework, tasks, and assignments that can be accessed with ease.

Another important response from the students was that the use of portfolios was a good way of maintaining a record of their achievement in the course (5 comments). Several students, for example, suggested that the writing portfolio was an effective testament of the work done in class while others suggested a sense of accomplishment that comes from having successfully completed all components of the portfolio. Given these types of statements, it is possible to conclude that the portfolio not only served as a type of organizational tool that encouraged the students to complete all of the prescribed assignments, but it also may have acted as a form of intrinsic motivation to do better on their various assignments. Essentially, many of the students in this study may have recognized that the writing portfolio was actually a clear and demonstrative illustration of the things that were done well or poorly (or not at all) and this could very well have served as a source of inspiration and pride for some of these learners.

A final positive response indicated that some of the interviewees felt as though the design of the portfolios provided them with an opportunity to use their creative and artistic sides. For instance, a few students suggested that they had fun creating various portfolio components (e.g. table of contents, title page, etc.) that relied on skills that were very different from those that are required for academic writing. Not only did this coincide with the first survey question in which 58.9% of the respondents felt as though making the portfolio was an enjoyable experience, but it also supports the view that the utilization of a diverse array of pedagogic activities that cater to a broad spectrum of cognitive abilities (i.e. multiple intelligences) will undoubtedly assist some students to feel more engaged, motivated, and competent and this may ultimately lead to enhanced learning and language acquisition possibilities (Gardner, 1999).

6.2 Negative factors

Although the responses to using portfolios were decidedly positive, there were some negative findings from the study that are worthy of further consideration. First, a significant number of students (approx. 23.5%) reported in the survey that they did not enjoy using them while another 17.6% reported that they were unsure if they enjoyed using them or not. Both of these percentages make up over 41% of the total. Additionally, one of the seven interviewees felt that the use of portfolios was not a particularly enjoyable experience overall. While it is not entirely clear as to why some students did not equate the use of portfolios in their respective classes with a beneficial experience, some of the interview responses do provide some possibilities. For example, a few of the students suggested that they were time-consuming (3 comments) and in this case it is possible that the portfolios may have been seen to be problematic as the creation and design of its components could have taken more time than some of the students were initially expecting. Compounding this problem was the fact that a portion of the portfolio work was expected to be done outside of class time and students may have felt as though some of the additional required portfolio homework components (e.g. table of contents, cover page, etc.) were not clearly related to the writing work they were doing in their course. Further student comments about the portfolios being both uninteresting and impractical (e.g. difficult to bring to class, difficult to carry, and difficult to design/organize) suggest that a few of the students found that they were not a particularly fun, engaging or worthwhile learning tool and possibly sheds further light onto the reasons why some did not find them to be enjoyable. It also suggests that there are students who find the traditional (mostly written) style of portfolio that is currently in use at UGRU to be somewhat cumbersome and ineffectual.

Another important negative aspect of portfolios was that a significant number of students felt as though they were better suited for organizing and presenting work rather than for developing their writing skills. In the interviews, for example, an overwhelming number of students suggested that one of the most evident advantages of using portfolios was that they helped them to put their coursework in order. While this result in itself is not entirely problematic, many of these same students also pointed out that portfolios are best used as a tool for systematizing and displaying work rather than for improving their writing ability. Interestingly enough, these findings were seen in the survey results as well as approximately 30.9% of the respondents felt as though portfolios did not necessarily help them to be a better writer and another 23.5% were undecided as to their overall affect on their writing. When added together, both of these percentages make up over half of the respondents (approx. 54.5%). In this particular instance, it is not entirely clear as to why so many students felt this way. One possibility might be that some students were so preoccupied with organizing their portfolios, keeping track of work to display, creating additional required components, and bringing the instrument to class for routine checks that they lost sight of one of its essential functions – to help them understand the process of writing (i.e. drafting, re-drafting, editing, etc.). Moreover, this oversight might be a function of their unfamiliarity with the purpose of writing portfolios as many may have never used them before. It may also have been a result of a lack of explanatory instructions on the part of their teachers.

To sum up, with respect to *Research Question 1*, a majority of the UAEU-UGRU Level 1 writing students did indeed find that portfolios were an effective learning aid. This was largely because the portfolios enabled them to store and present their work in an organized manner. This, in turn, assisted many of them in improve and

develop their understanding of the writing process, study for exams and reference their work, as well as maintain an accurate portrayal of all the work that they had completed. In some instances, a few students were even able to utilize additional creative skills and imaginative talents as they planned, structured, and designed their own unique writing portfolios. Consequently, it is the opinion of these author that teachers at UGRU should not only continue to make use of these pedagogic tools in their classrooms, but also persist in looking for ways to expand their role across the various curricula at UAE University (e.g. Level 3, ESP, etc.) as well.

Alternatively, with regard to *Research Question 2*, one of the main concerns that students had in relation to portfolios were that some found them to be challenging, time-consuming, difficult to design, and impractical at times and this may have caused some feelings of discouragement, disinterest or even outright boredom. Additionally, a few of the students felt as though the functions of portfolios was better suited to organizational purposes and subsequently failed to recognize the value of these tools in developing their writing skills. As such, it is still very important for instructors to take these and other similar viewpoints into consideration when planning for their possible use in future classrooms at UGRU and elsewhere.

6.3 Limitations and recommendations for further research

This particular study was limited by the sample size, characteristics and homogeneity of the subjects, and length of the study, so the survey and interview results may have been influenced by these factors. All of the data, for example, was collected over the course of one semester from female subjects that were between the ages of 18-21. These subjects came from four Level 1 writing sections that were solely using competency/outcomes-based or evaluation portfolios. As such, additional studies could explore how the use of various instructor/learner-negotiated portfolios that do not contain an assessment component (i.e. documentation) would be perceived compared to an evaluation-based portfolio. Further longitudinal and large-scale studies are also needed with students of different genders, ages, levels, and ranges of ability. These studies could potentially utilize statistical correlation analyses to explore the different relationships between coursework grades, test scores, etc and the use of portfolios in various classrooms. Moreover, this study illustrated findings from a specific homogeneous Emirati (UAE) context at UAE University. Therefore, additional research could address portfolio assessment preferences and practices, as well as other related issues in different EF/SL contexts.

Another main limitation was the fact that this study solely focused on analyzing and gauging the opinions of students that were using portfolios and did not incorporate the viewpoints of the teacher(s) that may have been using them in the UGRU writing context. For instance, major questions have been put forward with respect to the assessment of portfolios and further studies could be initiated that examine issues pertaining to validity (i.e. content validity), reliability, and teacher/rater subjectivity. It would also be interesting to assess teacher's opinions about the pedagogic effectiveness and practicality of portfolios and compare it with students' views on the topic. Furthermore, the use of portfolios undoubtedly takes up increased organizational (i.e. preparation and planning) and teaching time and it would be interesting to examine the perspectives of teachers within UGRU and other contexts on these and similar issues. Lastly, the effective use of portfolios often requires a certain degree of experience and training. Consequently, it would be interesting to study the different ways in which they are used across diverse curricula in the Middle East, as well as the extent to which teachers in higher educational contexts such as UGRU have familiarized themselves with current portfolio research and successfully implemented these devices in their classrooms.

A final imitation was that this study concentrated on traditional (i.e. mostly written) portfolios. Students nowadays have grown up in a digital age and are very proficient with a variety of multimedia. Consequently, a number of theorists (e.g. Ali, 2005; Abrami & Barrett, 2005; Hung & Huang, 2010) are increasingly advocating the use of electronic portfolios (i.e. e-portfolios) that incorporate elements such as Facebook, Twitter, email, podcasts, digital storytelling, blogging, texting, etc. as a more effective pedagogic tool for the 21st Century. According to these authors, electronic portfolios are better suited to inspire, interest, and engage contemporary learners as they eliminate storage problems associated with traditional portfolios and allow for a more modern

form of creative thinking, expression, and collaboration amongst students. With this in mind, additional research at places such as UGRU and many others could explore the pedagogic and technical challenges related to the implementation of these unique devices into various classrooms (e.g. examining how they fit in with the new iPad initiative in UAE universities/colleges). Additional studies could even examine their motivational effects of e-portfolios on students' learning habits and practices, as well as other related issues.

6.4 Conclusion

In conclusion, this paper has presented a brief analysis on students' perspectives of the general educational value of competency/outcomes-based or evaluation portfolios within the writing strand of UAE University's intensive language program (i.e. UGRU). Despite a few reported challenges regarding their use, it is the opinion of these authors that the types of portfolios currently being used by many teachers in this particular context are certainly very worthwhile pedagogic tools. This is because the students have reported that they help to facilitate, and ultimately assist in the learning process. It is suggested portfolios do this in several ways:

- by helping students to organize their specific writing work and course content;
- by assisting students to better understand the writing process (e.g. writing/editing/re-writing);
- by encouraging increased participation in the writing process by being a) a record for future reference and/or of accomplishment and b) a tool for exam preparation/studying and;
- by being somewhat motivational in addition to allowing students the opportunity to utilize alternative creative and imaginative skills in the creation/planning and design of their own respective portfolios.

As with all small-scale investigations of this type, one should be cautioned about the potential pitfalls of using portfolios in addition to generalizing from the limited and exploratory positive findings presented here. Nevertheless, the results of this study are promising and it is hoped that other researchers in the Middle East will continue to expand upon this research, as well as test and examine alternative teaching and learning contexts for the appropriateness, applicability, and overall viability of different kinds of portfolios in the future.

7. References

- Abrami, P., & Barrett, H. (2005). Directions for research and development on electronic portfolios. *Canadian Journal of Learning and Technology*, 31(3). Retrieved November 18, 2011, from <http://cjlts.csj.ualberta.ca/index.php/cjlt/article/view/92/86>
- Ali, S. Y. (2005). An introduction to electronic portfolios in the classroom. *The Internet TESOL Journal*, 11(8). Retrieved November 18, 2011 from <http://iteslj.org/Techniques/Ali-Portfolios.html>
- Apple, M., & Shimo, E. (2004). *Learners to teacher: Portfolios, please! Perceptions of portfolio assessment in EFL classrooms*. Retrieved December 10, 2011 from <http://www.jalt.org/pansig/2004/HTML/AppleShimo.htm>
- Balliro, L. (1993). What kind of alternative? Examining alternative assessment. *TESOL Quarterly*, 27(3), 558-561. <http://dx.doi.org/10.2307/3587490>
- Barrett, H. (2004). *Electronic portfolios as digital stories of deep learning*. Retrieved February 27, 2012 from <http://electronicportfolios.com/digistory/epstory.html>
- Baturay, M. H., & Daloglu, A. (2010). E-portfolio assessment in an online English language course. *Computer Assisted Language Learning*, 23(5), 413-428. <http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/09588221.2010.520671>
- Brown, J. (2002). Know thyself: The impact of portfolio development on adult learning. *Adult Education Quarterly*, 52(3), 228-245. <http://dx.doi.org/10.1177/0741713602052003005>
- Brown, J. D., & Hudson, T. (1998). The alternatives in language assessment. *TESOL Quarterly*, 32(4), 653-675. <http://dx.doi.org/10.2307/3587999>
- Chang, C. C. (2001). Construction and evaluation of a web-based learning portfolio system: An electronic

- assessment tool. *Innovations in Education and Teaching International*, 38(2), 144-155.
<http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/1355800010030194>
- Cooper, T., & Love, T. (2001). *Online portfolios: Issues of assessment and pedagogy*. In Australian Association for Research in Education conference papers. Retrieved December 12, 2011, from
<http://www.aare.edu.au/01pap/coo01346.htm>
- Feuer, M. & Fulton, K. (1993). The many faces of performance assessment. *Phi Delta Kappan*, 74(6), 478.
- Fox, S. (2006). Students' perceptions of electronic portfolio development in the elementary classroom. *Instructional Technology Monographs*, 3(2). Retrieved December 20, 2011 from
<http://projects.coe.uga.edu/itm/archives/fall2006/sfox.htm>
- Gardner, H. (1999). *Intelligence reframed: Multiple intelligences for the 21st century*. New York: Basic Books.
- Gomez, E. (2000). *Assessment portfolios: Including English language learners in large-scale assessments*. ERIC Digest. Retrieved December 1, 2011, <http://www.cal.org/ericcl/DIGEST/0010assessment.html>
- Goodrich-Andrade, H. (2000). Using rubrics to promote thinking and learning. *Educational Leadership*, 57(5), 1-8.
- Hancock, C. R. (1994). *Alternative assessment and second language study: What and why?* Eric Digest. Retrieved December 1, 2011, from http://www.ed.gov/databases/ERIC_Digests/ed376695.html
- Hart, D. (1994). *Authentic assessment: A handbook for educators*. Menlo Park, CA: Addison-Wesley Publishing Company.
- Heald-Taylor, G. (1986). *Whole language strategies for ESL students*. Toronto: OISE Press.
- Herman, J., Aschbacher, P., & Winters, L. (1992). *A practical guide to alternative assessment*. Alexandria, VA: Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development.
- Hung, S. T. A., & Huang, H. T. D. (2010). E-portfolio-based language learning and assessment. *The International Journal of Learning*, 17(7), 313-335.
- Montgomery, K. (2002). Authentic tasks and rubrics: Going beyond traditional assessments in college teaching. *College Teaching*, 50(1), 34-39. <http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/87567550209595870>
- Short, D. J. (1993). Assessing integrated language and content instruction. *TESOL Quarterly*, 27(3), 627-656.
<http://dx.doi.org/10.2307/3587399>
- Tanner, R., Longayroux, D., Beijaard, D., & Verloop N. (2000). Piloting portfolios: Using portfolios in pre-service teacher education. *ELT Journal*, 54(1), 20-30. <http://dx.doi.org/10.1093/elt/54.1.20>
- Valencia, S. W., & Calfee, R. (1991). The development and use of literacy portfolios for students, classes, and teachers. *Applied Measurement in Education*, 4(4), 333-345.
http://dx.doi.org/10.1207/s15324818ame0404_6
- Wiggins, G. (1989). A true test: Toward more authentic and equitable assessment. *Phi Delta Kappan*, 70(9) 703-713.
- Wooster, J. S. (1993). Authentic assessment: a strategy for preparing teachers to respond to curricular mandates in global education. *Theory into Practice*, 32(1), 47-51. <http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/00405849309543572>

Appendix A

LEVEL 1 WRITING PORTFOLIO

Name: _____ **ID:** _____ **Sect.** _____

Q. What is a portfolio?

A. It is a separate file which contains *selected* pieces of your writing.

Q. Which pieces of writing will I put in my portfolio?

A. These are listed in the table below. *Arrange them in the same order as in the table.*

Q. When and where will my portfolio be graded?

A. Probably in Week 16, in class.

KEEP THIS SHEET AS PART OF YOUR PORTFOLIO!

| No. | Items | Remarks | Full score | My score |
|--------------|---|--|------------|----------|
| 1. | 1a. Cover page (1 point) 1b. Table of contents (1 point) 1c. Writing Project 1 (<i>Marked Separately – 7% of total grade</i>) 1d. Writing Project 2 (<i>Marked Separately – 7% of total grade</i>) 1e. Initial Writing Sample (1 point) 1f. Final Writing Sample (1 point) | These items should be arranged neatly and be in the same order as on this page . | 4 | |
| 2. | Letter to my next Writing teacher (Guided Reflection) | You do this in Week 16. | 2 | |
| 3. | Information Transfer 1 - An application form | You do this in class in Week 3. | 5 | |
| 4. | Information Transfer 2 - A timetable | You do this in class in Week 9. | 5 | |
| 5. | Information Transfer 3 - A timeline | You do this in class in Week 12. | 5 | |
| 6. | Journal | You do this for homework from Weeks 4 to 10. | 4 | |
| TOTAL | | | 25 | |

Appendix B

LEVEL 1 WRITING PORTFOLIO SURVEY

Instructions:

Please read the following statements and then choose the best number to describe your response. Put an (X) in the box under that number.

1 = I totally agree; 2 = I somewhat agree; 3 = I'm not sure;

4 = I somewhat disagree; 5 = I totally disagree

1. I enjoyed making my writing portfolio.

| 1-Totally Agree | 2-Somewhat Agree | 3-Not Sure | 4-Somewhat disagree | 5-Totally disagree |
|-----------------|------------------|------------|---------------------|--------------------|
| | | | | |

2. Making my portfolio was a useful experience.

| 1-Totally Agree | 2-Somewhat Agree | 3-Not Sure | 4-Somewhat disagree | 5-Totally disagree |
|-----------------|------------------|------------|---------------------|--------------------|
| | | | | |

3. Making the portfolio helped me to be a better writer.

| 1-Totally Agree | 2-Somewhat Agree | 3-Not Sure | 4-Somewhat disagree | 5-Totally disagree |
|-----------------|------------------|------------|---------------------|--------------------|
| | | | | |

4. Making the portfolio helped me to be more organized.

| 1-Totally Agree | 2-Somewhat Agree | 3-Not Sure | 4-Somewhat disagree | 5-Totally disagree |
|-----------------|------------------|------------|---------------------|--------------------|
| | | | | |

5. It is a good idea to continue using portfolios in this course in the future.

| 1-Totally Agree | 2-Somewhat Agree | 3-Not Sure | 4-Somewhat disagree | 5-Totally disagree |
|-----------------|------------------|------------|---------------------|--------------------|
| | | | | |

Appendix C

LEVEL 1 WRITING PORTFOLIO INTERVIEW SCHEDULE

1. Did you enjoy making a portfolio? (Yes or no)
2. If yes, why?
3. If no, why not?
4. Did the portfolio take a long time to make? (Yes or no)
5. Did the portfolio help you to understand the writing process better? (Yes or no)
6. If yes, was this helpful?
7. Did the portfolio help you to produce better writing? (Yes or no)
8. If yes, why?
9. If no, why not?
10. What are some good things about making the writing portfolio?
11. What are some bad things about making the writing portfolio?
12. Which response best describes your overall opinion about the overall usefulness of the writing portfolio (very useful, a little bit useful, not very useful, or not useful at all)?

