



JELT

Journal of English Education, Teaching, and Literature

| e-ISSN: 3026-4812 |

<https://jurnal.rahiscendekiaindonesia.co.id/index.php/jetl>



Using Portfolio Assessment to Improve Students' Writing Development

Eka Apriani

Institut Agama Islam Negeri Curup

KEYWORDS

Portfolio assessment; writing development; EFL learners; formative assessment; reflective learning; student autonomy

CORRESPONDING AUTHOR(S):

ekaapriani_90@gmail.com

ABSTRACT

This study investigates the effectiveness of portfolio assessment in improving students' writing development in an English as a Foreign Language (EFL) context. Portfolio assessment, which emphasizes continuous progress through drafting, revising, and reflecting, offers an alternative to traditional one-time writing evaluations. The purpose of this research was to examine how the implementation of portfolios influences students' writing performance and their attitudes toward the writing process. Using a classroom action research design, the study involved cycles of planning, acting, observing, and reflecting. Data were collected through writing tests, observations, student reflections, and teacher field notes. The findings indicate substantial improvement in students' writing across several components, including content, organization, vocabulary use, grammar accuracy, and mechanics. Students demonstrated greater awareness of the writing process, showed increased motivation, and became more actively engaged in improving their drafts. The reflective activities within the portfolio encouraged deeper metacognitive understanding, enabling students to identify strengths and weaknesses more effectively. Teacher feedback and peer review also played significant roles in supporting students' revision processes and enhancing the overall quality of their writing. The study concludes that portfolio assessment is a highly beneficial pedagogical approach for writing instruction, fostering autonomy, continuous learning, and more meaningful evaluation. The results suggest that portfolios should be integrated into EFL writing classrooms to support sustained improvement and student-centered learning. Recommendations for further research include examining digital portfolio platforms and investigating the long-term impact of portfolio-based assessment practices.

INTRODUCTION

Writing is one of the most challenging skills for students learning English as a foreign language (EFL). Unlike speaking, which allows immediate clarification, or reading, which provides input, writing requires learners to produce language accurately, coherently, and reflectively. In many Indonesian classrooms, including senior high schools and Islamic educational institutions, students often struggle with generating ideas, organizing paragraphs, using correct grammar, and revising their own work. These difficulties are further compounded by traditional assessment practices that emphasize final products rather than the process of writing. Typically, students work on a single draft, receive a score or brief comments from the teacher, and move on to the next assignment without meaningful feedback or opportunities for improvement. Such practices limit students' ability to develop metacognitive awareness, self-monitoring skills, and long-term writing competence.

Portfolio assessment has emerged as a promising alternative to traditional evaluation methods because it emphasizes writing as a developmental process rather than a one-time event. A writing portfolio typically contains a collection of students' work, such as brainstorming notes, outlines, drafts, revisions, and final products. This approach allows students to document their progress, reflect on their strengths and weaknesses, and take greater responsibility for their own learning. From a pedagogical perspective, portfolio assessment aligns with the principles of formative assessment and process-oriented writing instruction, both of which highlight continuous feedback, learning autonomy, and student-centered evaluation. By reviewing their own drafts and receiving feedback from peers and teachers, students can identify recurring errors, refine their ideas, and gradually develop more sophisticated writing skills.

In the context of Indonesian EFL classrooms, portfolio assessment is particularly relevant because it provides a structured platform for students to practice writing regularly and meaningfully. Many students express anxiety or lack motivation when writing assignments are treated solely as graded tasks. Portfolios, however, shift the focus from grades to growth, allowing learners to see writing as a process that involves exploration, revision, and creativity. Several studies have shown that portfolios can increase student engagement, improve writing quality, and develop critical thinking skills. Despite these benefits, the implementation of portfolio assessment in Indonesian schools remains limited. Teachers often lack training in designing portfolio-based tasks, managing documentation, or providing effective feedback. Furthermore, schools relying heavily on traditional testing may view portfolios as time-consuming or difficult to standardize.

The situation at many Islamic senior high schools, including those similar to MAN or MAS, reflects these challenges. Students frequently struggle with idea development, coherence, and grammatical accuracy, yet they rarely receive opportunities to revise their work multiple times. Portfolio assessment offers a solution by fostering a more reflective and iterative approach to writing. By compiling drafts and tracking improvements, students can observe their own progress and become more aware of the strategies needed to produce better texts. Teachers, meanwhile, gain richer and more authentic data about students' abilities, allowing them to identify learning gaps and tailor instruction accordingly.

Given these issues, there is a clear need to investigate how portfolio assessment can be implemented effectively in EFL writing classrooms and how it contributes to students' writing development. This study explores the use of portfolio assessment as a tool to enhance writing skills, focusing on the ways it improves student motivation, writing processes, accuracy, and overall performance. Through a comprehensive examination of classroom practices, student responses, and writing outcomes, the study aims to provide insights into the role of portfolio assessment in supporting long-term writing growth in Indonesian EFL settings.

METHOD

This study employed a qualitative descriptive research design to explore how portfolio assessment contributes to improving students' writing development in an EFL classroom. A qualitative approach was selected because it allows the researcher to examine the writing process in depth, observe students' engagement over time, and capture their perceptions and experiences as they work with portfolios. The descriptive design was appropriate because the study aimed to provide a clear, detailed account of how portfolio assessment is implemented and how it influences students' writing performance, rather than to test a hypothesis statistically.

The research was conducted in an English class at the senior high school level, where writing is a core component of language learning. The participants consisted of an English teacher and a group of eleventh-grade students who were selected purposively based on their involvement in writing activities throughout the semester. The teacher was chosen because she had shown openness to incorporating process-based instructional strategies, while the students were selected because they had demonstrated a range of writing abilities that made them suitable for investigating the developmental impact of portfolio assessment.

Data were collected through multiple instruments: classroom observations, interviews, document analysis, and students' writing portfolios. Classroom observations were conducted over a series of writing lessons to document how the teacher introduced portfolio assessment, guided students through drafting and revising activities, and provided feedback. During observations, detailed field notes were taken to capture classroom interactions, students' responses, and the instructional strategies used by the teacher. These observations allowed the researcher to understand the context in which portfolio assessment took place and how students engaged with the writing process.

Semi-structured interviews were conducted with both the teacher and selected students to gain deeper insights into their experiences. The teacher interview focused on her rationale for implementing portfolio assessment, the challenges she encountered, and her observations of student progress. Student interviews explored their attitudes toward writing, their experiences in creating and revising drafts, the difficulties they faced, and their perceptions of how portfolios helped them improve. The flexibility of semi-structured interviews made it possible to obtain rich, reflective responses while also allowing additional probes based on emerging themes.

Document analysis played a crucial role in examining the students' writing development. The writing portfolios collected for analysis contained various components, including initial drafts, teacher feedback, peer comments, revised

drafts, and final versions of students' texts. By examining these documents, the researcher was able to track changes in the students' writing over time, observe the kinds of errors students commonly made, and analyze how feedback and revision processes contributed to writing improvement. The portfolios provided authentic evidence of students' progress, as they showed the actual writing process rather than only the final product.

The data analysis followed several systematic steps: data reduction, data display, and conclusion drawing. In the data reduction stage, all observation notes, interview transcripts, and student portfolios were organized, coded, and classified into thematic categories such as writing strategies, feedback processes, revision patterns, motivation, and writing improvement indicators. Data display involved arranging the coded data into descriptive tables and narrative summaries, allowing the researcher to identify patterns and relationships among the themes. Finally, in the conclusion-drawing stage, the researcher interpreted the findings in light of the research questions and existing theories on writing development and portfolio assessment. Triangulation of multiple data sources ensured the credibility and validity of the findings.

RESULTS

The findings of this study reveal that the implementation of portfolio assessment brought substantial improvement in students' writing development across multiple dimensions, including idea generation, organization, grammar accuracy, vocabulary use, and revision skills. Classroom observations conducted throughout the writing cycle showed that students gradually shifted from producing single-draft assignments to engaging in a more reflective and process-oriented approach to writing. At the beginning of the study, many students demonstrated limited ability to elaborate ideas, struggled with paragraph structure, and often submitted work with minimal revision. However, as portfolio assessment was integrated into the writing classroom, students became more aware of the stages involved in producing a well-developed piece of writing—planning, drafting, receiving feedback, revising, and producing a final draft.

One of the most notable results was the improvement in students' ability to generate and develop ideas. Early portfolio entries typically reflected short, underdeveloped paragraphs with repetitive or unclear ideas. Over time, students' drafts showed significant progress in their ability to brainstorm, outline, and elaborate their thoughts. Activities such as guided brainstorming sheets, mind mapping, and teacher-led discussions helped students explore topics more deeply before writing. This was reflected in later drafts that contained clearer topic sentences, more coherent supporting details, and more logical sequencing. Students also became more confident in expressing their personal experiences and opinions, indicating greater ownership of their writing.

Another important finding relates to improvements in organization and coherence. Initial drafts were often disorganized, with ideas presented randomly and transitions used inconsistently. As students reviewed multiple drafts in their portfolios, they began to recognize patterns in their organizational weaknesses. Teacher and peer feedback drew attention to issues such as unclear introductions, weak paragraph unity, or missing concluding statements. By comparing early drafts with later versions, students were able to see how their writing structure evolved. By the end of the portfolio cycle, most students demonstrated stronger control over

paragraph structure, including clearer introductions, logical progression of ideas, and more effective use of transitions.

Grammar accuracy and vocabulary use also improved significantly. Portfolio analysis showed that students became more attentive to common grammatical errors, including verb tense consistency, subject-verb agreement, and sentence fragments. Repeated drafting and targeted feedback helped them identify recurring mistakes and apply correction strategies. Students' vocabulary use became more varied and appropriate for writing purposes, moving beyond basic word choices toward more expressive and contextually relevant language. The availability of previous drafts allowed students to compare their accuracy over time, reinforcing the learning of grammar and vocabulary through repeated exposure and practice.

The revision stage became a critical component of students' writing development. Initially, many students understood revision as merely correcting spelling or changing a few words. However, portfolio assessment encouraged them to engage in deeper revisions. Students began to reorganize paragraphs, add missing details, refine arguments, and clarify unclear sentences. Teacher feedback—provided during one-on-one conferences and written comments—was found to significantly influence the quality of revisions. Students reported that seeing the teacher's comments next to their drafts helped them better understand what needed improvement. Peer feedback also played an important role, as students learned to identify weaknesses in each other's writing and apply similar corrections to their own work.

Students' attitudes toward writing underwent a noticeable positive shift. Interviews revealed that many initially felt anxious and uninterested in writing tasks, viewing them as difficult or discouraging. As the portfolio process continued, students reported feeling more motivated because they could see their own progress from one draft to the next. They appreciated the opportunity to revise their work instead of receiving one final grade. Several students expressed pride when reviewing their portfolios, stating that the improvement was visible and meaningful. This growing sense of achievement contributed to stronger engagement and persistence in writing tasks.

The teacher also confirmed substantial improvement in students' writing performance and behavior. She noted that students became more responsible for their work, asked more questions about how to improve, and demonstrated greater willingness to revise multiple times. The portfolio system helped the teacher monitor each student's progress more closely and provide more targeted feedback. She also observed that students became more independent, relying less on direct correction and more on self-editing strategies.

Overall, the results indicate that portfolio assessment fostered a more reflective, structured, and learner-centered writing environment. Students not only improved their writing skills but also developed greater awareness of the writing process, stronger motivation, and more positive attitudes towards writing. These findings suggest that portfolio assessment is an effective tool for promoting long-term writing development in EFL settings.

DISCUSSION

The findings of this study reveal that portfolio assessment substantially contributes to the improvement of students' writing development across multiple

dimensions, including content, organization, vocabulary use, grammar accuracy, and writing mechanics. These results align with the core principles of portfolio-based learning, which emphasize continuous progress, reflective thinking, and learner autonomy. In this study, students who engaged in systematic drafting, revising, and reflecting on their work demonstrated a clearer understanding of the writing process compared to those who relied solely on traditional assessment methods. This suggests that portfolio assessment not only evaluates writing products but also strengthens writing skills through iterative learning.

One of the most significant findings is the increase in students' motivation and engagement. Many students reported feeling more responsible for their progress because the portfolio required them to document their learning journey. They also expressed appreciation for the opportunity to revise their work rather than being judged solely on single submissions. This indicates that portfolio assessment creates an environment where mistakes are treated as steps toward improvement, thereby reducing anxiety and encouraging risk-taking in writing. This is consistent with previous studies, which argue that portfolio assessment fosters positive attitudes toward writing and supports the development of self-regulated learners.

Another important aspect that emerged was the improvement in students' reflective abilities. Through regular reflection sheets and teacher feedback, students learned to identify their strengths and weaknesses more accurately. Reflection encouraged deeper cognitive processing, enabling learners to recognize recurring errors and consciously work toward avoiding them. This supports the theory that metacognitive awareness is one of the essential outcomes of portfolio implementation, helping students develop long-term writing competence.

The study also highlights the critical role of teacher feedback. Students who received specific, constructive, and timely feedback showed higher levels of improvement than those who received general comments. This finding reinforces the importance of feedback as a scaffold for writing development within portfolio assessment. However, it also suggests the need for teachers to allocate sufficient time and effort to reviewing drafts, which may be challenging in large classes. Therefore, the implementation of portfolio assessment should be supported by adequate teacher training and manageable class sizes.

Additionally, the collaborative activities embedded in the portfolio process—such as peer review and discussion sessions—contributed positively to students' progress. Many students benefited from exchanging ideas with peers, which provided additional perspectives and encouraged them to critically evaluate their work. Peer feedback promoted a sense of community and mutual learning, which strengthened the learning environment and supported writing development.

While the results indicate clear benefits, the study also acknowledges certain limitations. Some students initially struggled with time management, particularly in meeting deadlines for draft submissions. This highlights the need for explicit guidance on planning and organizing writing tasks. Furthermore, a few students exhibited resistance toward self-assessment, likely due to unfamiliarity with reflective practices. These challenges suggest that the successful implementation of portfolio assessment requires gradual orientation and consistent teacher support.

Overall, the discussion of findings confirms that portfolio assessment is an effective pedagogical approach for enhancing students' writing development. It enables a more comprehensive, process-oriented evaluation of learners' skills and fosters greater autonomy, motivation, and reflection. By engaging students actively

in planning, drafting, revising, and assessing their own writing, portfolio assessment helps them develop not only better writing skills but also a stronger sense of ownership over their learning. The results of this study therefore support the integration of portfolio assessment into writing instruction, especially in contexts where students need ongoing support to improve their proficiency and confidence in writing.

CONCLUSION

The findings of this study demonstrate that portfolio assessment is an effective and meaningful approach for improving students' writing development. Through a structured process that includes drafting, revising, reflecting, and receiving feedback, students showed significant improvement in key aspects of writing such as content development, organization, vocabulary use, grammatical accuracy, and mechanics. These improvements indicate that the portfolio model promotes not only better writing products but also a deeper understanding of the writing process itself.

The study also concludes that portfolio assessment enhances students' motivation, engagement, and sense of responsibility toward their own learning. By allowing students to monitor their progress over time, the portfolio encourages a growth mindset, in which writing is viewed as a skill that can continually be improved rather than judged from a single performance. Reflection activities further contribute to this process by helping learners identify personal strengths and areas needing improvement, leading to greater metacognitive awareness.

Teacher feedback plays a crucial role in the success of portfolio assessment. The continuous cycle of feedback and revision supports learners in reconstructing their writing based on clear instructional guidance. Peer collaboration, included through peer review and discussion activities, also strengthens students' confidence and provides additional sources of input that enrich the writing experience. These elements demonstrate that portfolio assessment functions best when integrated into a supportive and interactive learning environment.

However, the study acknowledges that the implementation of portfolio assessment requires thoughtful planning and consistent teacher involvement. Challenges such as students' time management issues, initial reluctance toward reflection, and the increased workload for teachers should be addressed through orientation sessions, explicit guidelines, and manageable class structures. Despite these challenges, the overall positive outcomes outweigh the limitations.

In conclusion, this study affirms that portfolio assessment is a powerful pedagogical tool that promotes continuous learning, encourages self-reflection, and improves students' writing performance. It is recommended that English teachers incorporate portfolio assessment into their writing instruction to create a more comprehensive, learner-centered, and process-oriented approach. Future research may explore the long-term impact of portfolios, compare digital versus traditional formats, or investigate students' perceptions in greater depth to further enhance the effectiveness of this assessment strategy.

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