

# THE EFFECTIVENES OF ONLINE PORTFOLIOS IN DEVELOPING STUDENTS' WRITING SKILLS IN BUSINESS ENGLISH CLASSROOMS

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## ABSTRACT

In the context of globalization within information technology era, the application of Information and Communication Technology (ICT) for language learning has always been the matter of concern every educator has to wrestle with. The purpose of this study is to look into the use of online portfolios as part of ICT in teaching writing skills in Business English classrooms at a university of foreign language studies in Viet Nam. This study was carried out on two groups – experimental and control groups- each of which consists of 50 second-year students at Danang University of Foreign Language Studies. Before the intervention, both of the two groups were given pre-test of business letter writing. During the intervention, the experimental group was taught with the aid of online portfolios and the control group was taught through the conventional instruction. At the final stage, a post-test was administered to the two groups. Independent samples t-test and paired samples t-test were applied so as to compare differences within the groups. The results obtained from the pre-test and post-test could prove the statistically significant difference in terms of test scores between the experimental and control groups, which confirms that online portfolios are effective in improving writing skills in Business English classrooms. The research puts forward thoughtful pedagogical implications for the application of online portfolios as effective ICT tools for improving students' writing skills in Business English contexts.

*Keywords:* online portfolios, assessment, ESP, Business English, writing skills,...

## 1 INTRODUCTION

Within the context of international integration, the application ICT for language learning has attracted a lot of attention from both teachers and different groups of stakeholders on a global scale and Vietnam is definitely not an exception. According to Vietnam's Foreign Languages Project 2017-2025 by Vietnam's Ministry of Education and Training (MOET), as indicated in Decision No. 2658, a lot of priority is to be given to the utilization of ICT in foreign languages teaching and learning for the period 2010-2025.

In line with national guidelines and objectives, Danang University of Foreign Language Studies has been exploiting the available ICT facilities to support the teaching and learning of foreign languages. The application of technology has always been a matter of concern among leaders, educators and lecturers at the university. In this context, this study aims at investigating the impacts of online portfolios as part of ICT in teaching writing skills in Business English classrooms at the university and it therefore can make contributions to lecturers' efforts in innovating the implementation of ICT at Danang University of Foreign Language Studies.

As mentioned above, the purpose of this study was to examine the impacts of online portfolios as an element of ICT in teaching writing skills in Business English classrooms. In the same light, the study aims at answering the following question: Can online portfolios be beneficial for enhancing students' writing skills in Business English lessons?

The significance of the study lies in its contribution regarding the feasibility of online portfolios into the application of ICT in foreign language education and can therefore develop students' learning autonomy thanks to continuous feedback and reflection throughout the implication of online portfolios.

## **2 LITERATURE REVIEW**

### **2.1 An overview of online portfolios**

It is worthwhile having an overview about portfolios in general before going into further details with online portfolios. In Barrett's definition (as cited in Wang & Liao, 2008), a portfolio is a purposeful collection of students' performance, which consists of students' attempts, personal growth and achievement in one or more certain areas. Hamp-Lyons & Condon (2000) made a list of nine features of writing-portfolio including collection of more than one performance, a variety of performances, context-diversity, time for modification, choice of writer's work, student-centered manipulation, reflection and self-assessment, growth along specific measurement, and continual learners' assessment.

On the basis of portfolios, the concept of online portfolios has been well established by different authors with reference to the aid of technology. The online portfolio is defined by García Planas, Taberna Torres, Domínguez García, and Palaua (2015) as the blending of electronic collection of texts, electronic files, photos, multimedia and blog entries, all of which are accumulated and supervised by a user on an online format. They claimed that online portfolios created the contexts for students to evaluate their abilities and the students' performance are assessed by the staff based on previously established criteria, enabling the students to keep track of their efforts and achievements.

In a similar way, an electronic portfolio referred to as "a digitized collection of artifacts, including demonstrations, resources and accomplishments that represent an individual, group, organization, or institution" (Lorenzo & Ittelson, 2005, 2) and engage in placing a portfolio within a web-based platform. In the same light, an e-portfolio, as claimed by Hartnell-Young et al. (2007, 1), is "a purposeful selection of evidence by the learner at a point in time, with a particular audience in mind. It is part of a personal online space, where learners can store their work, record their achievements and access personal course timetables. This space can provide digital resources relevant to a learner's personalized information and links to other learners for collaboration and feedback".

The terms "online portfolios", "digital portfolios" and "electronic portfolios" can be used interchangeably as they share the same nature of the availability of supporting technology. According to Barrett (2005), "electronic portfolio" refers to the utilization of technology that facilitates media formats (audio, video, graphics, text) as the means that enables students or teachers to accumulate the portfolio evidence. Under another perspective, the concept of "electronic portfolio", as defined by Barret (2005) refers to the destination on which the portfolio evidence is collected and it is not necessarily online.

In the same vein, a "digital portfolio" is defined as a collection in which the "materials are produced and shared in digital format such as a Web site" (Kilbane & Milman, 2003, 2005 cited in Milman,

2014, p.7). The term “digital portfolio”, according to Wiedmer (1998, 586), refers to “a purposeful collection of work, captured by electronic means, that serves as an exhibit of individual efforts, progress, and achievements in one or more areas”.

It is apparent that the numerous benefits of “online portfolios” have been supported by a great number of scholars all over the world. Online portfolios bring about increased student participation, improved learning results, and increased language acquisition (e.g., Acosta & Liu, 2006; Doig, Illsley, McLuckie, & Parsons, 2006; Hartnell-Young, 2006; Heinrich, Bhattacharya, & Rayudu, 2007; Jenson, 2011; O’Brien, 2006).

## 2.2 Assessment of students’ writing performance

The assessment of students’ writing performance have been given a lot of attention in the literature. The overall writing performance and writing sub skills can be measured with the writing-scoring rubric developed by Wang & Liao (2008). The scoring rubric consists of five areas of writing including focus, elaboration, organization, convention and vocabulary.

In a similar way, Writing Assessment Scale by Cambridge English which was developed on the basis of the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages (CEFR), which involves all the levels of the Cambridge English exams and is divided into four aspects:

- **Content:** This examines the degree the candidate has completed the task, in other words, how well they have done what they were required to do.
- **Communicative Achievement:** This concentrates on how correspondent the writing is to the task, and if the candidate has used the appropriate genre.
- **Organization:** This involves the candidate links all the parts of the writing, in other words, if it is logical and ordered.
- **Language:** This looks at vocabulary and grammar. It includes the diversity of language as well as the accuracy of the language use.

A lot of thought and consideration had been taken by the researcher in the choice of utilizing the Writing Assessment Scale by Cambridge English for the assessment of the writing skills of the participants due to many reasons. Apparently, the scale was developed with explicit reference to the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages (CEFR). This was in line with the current assessment of language skills under CEFR at the university under the research implementation.

## 3 METHODOLOGY

This study aims at examining the impacts of online portfolios in teaching writing skill in Business English classrooms. With an aim to answering the research question, quasi-experimental method (with the intervention of online portfolios implementation) was chosen to achieve the research purpose. To be more specific, the study was carried out from March 2019 to July 2019 at Danang University of Foreign Language Studies. Participants were 100 second-year Vietnamese students (divided into four separate classes) enrolled in Business English courses all taught by the researcher as their lecturer at Danang University of Foreign Language Studies. The participants are aged from 18 to 22.

In general, the students were classified by English placement test at the university as students at B1 level in the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages (CEFR) framework.

Therefore, it can be assumed that they can have the same starting points in terms of their language skills.

### **Stage 1:**

Both the experimental group and control group were given pre-tests of Business English letter writing. The writing task in the pre-test was extracted and adapted from the writing tasks in the course book that the two groups were learning, namely "*Business Advantage*" by Koester, Pitt, Handford & Lisboa (2009). So it can be concluded that the test is equivalent to the level of English language proficiency (B1) of the participants.

### **Stage 2:**

During the intervention, two classes of 50 students for each were randomly applied to the online portfolios classroom condition (experimental group) and the other two classes (with the same number of students as the classes experimental group) were assigned to the no-online portfolios classroom situation (control group).

The learning material used in this study is the course book "*Business Advantage*" by Koester, Pitt, Handford & Lisboa (2009) within the setting of PBL of Business English classrooms at Danang University of Foreign Language Studies. The course book integrates business concepts and business theories with problem solving since each unit presents a problem and students are assigned writing projects in which they have to write letters in different business contexts.

Both the experimental group and control group were required to finish the writing assignments for particular business situations given in the textbook. The main differences lies in the fact that students in the experimental group were assigned to make portfolios of their writing tasks which are posted on WordPress, which is free Internet programs. Thanks to Wordpress, the website can hold a large number of online portfolios of the participants in the experimental groups, together with valuable comments from the lecturer and the participants.

In this online platform, students could have a chance to download all the writings of everyone in the class. As a rule, groups of students were required by the lecturer to post their comments on the writings of other groups. The current researcher decided to use Wordpress as the tool for online portfolios because the sign-up process for this program is very simple and user-friendly and the students will just need to get online with the website address and upload their writing assignments onto the online platform. The only thing they needed was the Wordpress website address provided by the lecturer as the researcher. On the other hand, the control group were not required to keep the portfolios as the experimental groups and as a matter of fact, the students in the control group did not have the chance to consult on the writings of other students and fail to get valuable comments from their peers.

### **Stage 3:**

After the treatment had been implemented, a post-test of Business English letter writing was carried on both experimental and control groups with an aim to determining the effectiveness of online portfolios as part of ICT in teaching writing skill in Business English classrooms. The task of the post-test was extracted and adapted from the writing tasks in the course book the two groups were learning, namely "*Business Advantage\_ Intermedaite*" by Koester, Pitt, Handford & Lisboa (2009). This coursebook is designed for students at B1 English language proficiency. Therefore, it is obvious that the post-test was appropriate to the level of B1 English language proficiency of the participants.

The collection instrument was students' test papers from the pre-test and post-test mentioned above. The researcher scored the pre-tests and post-tests according to the writing-scoring rubric developed by Cambridge English. The scoring rubric focuses on the four subskills of writing including content, communicative achievement, organization and language. Whereas content examines the degree the candidate has completed the task, in other words, how well they have done what they were required to do, communicative achievement concentrates on how correspondent the writing is to the task, and if the candidate has used the appropriate genre. In addition, organization involves the candidate links all the parts of the writing, in other words, if it is logical and ordered and language looks at vocabulary and grammar. It includes the diversity of language as well as the accuracy of the language use. The overall score for both of the tests was 10 points (2.5 points for each sub-skill). The scores for projects were then analyzed using SPSS 22 for further reliability in calculation.

#### 4 RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The study aims at determining the effectiveness of online portfolios on overall writing performance of ESP learners. Prior to the intervention, independent samples t-test was carried out in order to look at the gap between two groups in terms of students' writing test results.

**Table 1.** Independent samples t-test analysis for pre-test scores of control and experimental groups

	N	M	SD	t	df	p
Control group	50	5.18	.74751	.11	49	.71
Experimental group	50	5.26	.72309			

It can be seen from Table 1 that the findings produced non-significant results. To be more specific, in terms of pre-test scores of Business English writing test, two groups do not share a statistically significant difference in their overall performance ( $t(50) = .11, p=.71$ ). As a result, it can be inferred that the participants in the two group were comparatively equal in terms of their writing performance and that they shared the same starting point in relation to their writing skill before the implementation of the online portfolios.

**Table 2.** Comparison of pre-test scores and post-test scores among experimental group

	N	M	SD	t	df	p
The pre-test scores	50	5.26	.7230	-12.652	49	.000
The post-test scores	50	6.66	.89466			

In order to compare the mean scores of pre-test scores and post-test scores among the experimental group, a paired-samples t-test was also carried out among the two groups of variables. To be more specific, in terms of their writing performance, it can be seen from Table 2 that there is a statistically significant difference between pre-test scores ( $M=5.26, SD=.7230$ ) and post-test ( $M=6.66, SD=.89466$ ) scores of experimental group ( $t(50) = -12.652, p< .005$ ). Therefore, it can be implied that the application of online portfolios proved to be highly effective in enhancing students' writing performance.

**Table 3:** Comparison of pre-test scores, post-test scores among the control group

	N	M	SD	t	df	p
The pre-test scores	50	5.18	.7451	-4.876	49	.000
The post-test scores	50	5.60	1.01015			

Table 3. demonstrated the results of paired samples t-test analysis for the pre-test and post-test scores of control group. As shown in Table 3, there is a notable gap between pre-test scores ( $M=5.18$ ,  $SD=.7451$ ) and post-test scores ( $M=5.60$ ,  $SD=1.01015$ ) of the control group in terms of writing scores ( $t(50) = -4.876$ ,  $p<.005$ ). It can be inferred that the normal instruction (without online portfolios) in the control group also has minimal impact on Business English students' writing performance to some extent. What's more, the degree of effectiveness of no-portfolio instructions in writing skill development is much lower than that that of online portfolios feedbacks.

**Table 4:** Comparison of post-test scores of experimental and control groups

	N	M	SD	t	df	p
Control group	50	5.6	1.01015	-8.421	49	.000
Experimental group	50	6.66	.89466			

As Table 4 illustrated, there exist a statistically significant gap between the post-test scores of control group ( $M=5.6$ ,  $SD=1.01015$ ) and experimental group ( $M=6.66$ ,  $SD=.89466$ ) after the intervention ( $t(50) = -8.421$   $p<.005$ ). As a result, there is strong evidence from the data in table 4 above that the intervention of online portfolios improved test scores among the experimental group. In this data set, there is a highly significant difference in test scores, on average, by approximately 1.06 points. In addition, results from Table 4 revealed that online portfolios condition accounted for a significant proportion of the test variance, since  $p = 0.000$  in this case (the null hypothesis is rejected). Therefore, it can be said that those who kept track of their progress through online portfolios demonstrated significantly higher writing performance in comparison with those who received the instruction in the control group. To conclude, it can be concluded from the one-sample t-test and paired samples t-test statistics that online portfolios can enhance students' writing competence in the experimental group.

## 5 CONCLUSION

In summary, the results from this study are promising and strongly suggest the continual use of online portfolios approach in this Business English course. It can therefore be concluded that the application of online portfolios improves learners' writing skills in Business English classroom. In this case, students can have many opportunities to keep track of their progress and develop their writing skills thanks to the valuable comments from their lecturer and their peers. The electronic nature of online portfolios help facilitate even greater mobility and higher effectiveness than their traditional paper-based counterpart, which in turn creates favourable conditions for a more efficient and comprehensive reflective process. In this context, students can keep track of their reflective process with more ease and comprehend their growth and development over the course of time (Doig et al., 2006; Riedinger, 2006).

In conclusion, the findings offer an overall picture of online portfolios for boosting writing skills among Business English students at a university in Viet Nam. To be more specific, the results of the study reveal that there is a strong correlation between online portfolios and enhanced writing performance.

The study can pave the way for further research into the utilization of online portfolios in enhancing the other language skills of learners of English, developing vocabulary or language acquisition, boosting learners' autonomy and facilitating teaching and learning activities in many different ways.

Above all, online portfolios can equip teachers with effective tools for developing writing skills in Business English classroom contexts. Teachers are those who should master the online portfolios instructions and procedures with an aim to utilizing and combining them in the most flexible and effective way. In other words, the procedures for online portfolios should be modified by teachers depending on the conditions of the courses, teaching facilities, learners' characteristics and many other affective factors.

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