# The effect of portfolio-based writing assessment on the development of writing skills of EFL students

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ABSTRACT

This study evaluates the effectiveness of writing portfolio assessment in EFL learners' writing skills and writing self-efficacy. The study follows a mixed-methods approach. For the implementation process, all the students in the study group attended an Academic Writing class for two hours once a week. A total of five writing portfolio tasks were assigned to the students. Students had the opportunity to observe their areas of weakness based on the feedback given through some comments on their paper. The data of the research was collected through scoring rubric, self-efficacy scale and focus-group interviewing. Results indicate that the writing scores of students gradually increased over time. There was no statistically significant difference in the levels of self-efficacy at the end of the implementation. However, based on the data from the focus group, an increase on the students' confidence with regard to writing skills was adhered by the interviewees' remarks. To better portray how errors are pointed out by a teacher, observation should be implemented within the classroom practice.

## Introduction

The ways in which a student's writing can be more effectively responded to has been a matter of great importance for researchers (Silva, McMartin-Miller, Pelaez-Moralez & Lin 2012). Until the 1980s, educational practitioners witnessed a shift in foreign language writing pedagogy from an emphasis on the final product to create more investment in the writing process (Butler-Pascoe & Wiburg 2003, p.143). Although the traditional product-oriented model is out of date, process-oriented writing pedagogies are increasingly pervasive almost everywhere, as well as in the American educational milieu (Hedgcock 2005). There are several ways to assess writing proficiency, including the testing of writing in the traditional way, such as by means of a written exam given at the end of the school semester (Lucas 2007, p.23; Starkie 2007, p.124); multiple choice writing tests; writing assessment via impromptu writing samples (Chung 2012); peer evaluation, which is commonly used among educators in an attempt to promote higher performance goals and improved teaching and learning outcomes through the sharing of complementary proficiencies for a familiar intent (Cole & Watson 2013, p.115) and the process-based writing assessment (Lucas 2007, p.24). With the introduction of this new form of evaluation, portfolio development in writing and reading has gained acceptance over the years and is increasingly being considered an effective alternative to the traditional assessment for those skills. Portfolios actually involve two main components, the product and the process (Lucas 2007, p.25; Dogan, 2013). The portfolio is used for both assessment and instruction (Lucas 2007, p.24).

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Today, the implementation of a portfolio assessment system into lessons is of great interest to teachers at every level of education (Nezakatgoo 2011, p.232). Portfolios are collections of students' work over time (Lucas, 2007). A portfolio generally includes a selection of student's work and the selection process often entails student's decisions about quality. Thus, selection promotes self-assessment (Hamp-Lyons & Condon, 2000). Portfolio assessment requires reflective writing in which teachers invite their student to reflect on their writing (Aydin 2014; Hamp-Lyons & Condon, 2000; Lucas, 2007; Web et al., 2014). A portfolio can be a folder containing the student's written works and the student's evaluation of the strengths and weaknesses of his/her written products (White & Wright, 2015). A portfolio often documents a student's best work and may include some other information, such as drafts of the student's self-assessment of their work. Portfolios may be used for evaluation of a student's abilities and improvement (Lucas 2007, p.24).

The process and product are inextricably interwoven in portfolio development. The developmental process is fundamental for a successful portfolio product. This process can be the very first experience for most of the students. As for the teachers, this process can initially be a time-consuming one although one that is well worth the time and effort (Aydin, 2010b; Lucas 2007, p.24; White & Wright, 2015). Designing a portfolio-based writing assessment necessitates a great deal of planning and effort and is contextualized by its nature. Furthermore, Hamp-Lyons and Condon (1993, p.177) added the greatest benefits of portfolio-based assessment come when critical eyes are brought to bear on it. With the help of instant feedback while students are still working on their papers, students benefit the most, and portfolios also give the teacher a solid foundation on which to deliver the instruction (White & Wright, 2015). Lee (2005) reiterated the effectiveness of instant comprehensive feedback in her study and found that over 82.9% of her participants believed that comprehensive error treatment helped them better address their mistakes. In Lucas's (2007, p.31) research, the portfolio assessment with a high level of feedback opens the channel of communication between the teachers and the students. In so doing, students can improve their linguistic, cognitive, affective and social areas.

Evaluation of writing proficiency via portfolio in EFL classes is beneficial in several ways for the students. First, portfolios involve the students in the learning process, which in turn makes the students responsible for their own continuous learning (Starkie, 2007, p.124). Portfolios motivate students to promote student self-assessment and self-understanding (Hamp-Lyons & Condon, 2000; Starkie 2007, p.124). It helps to reinforce the language use structures, enhance EFL students' vocabulary (Javed et al. 2013, p.130). While the process of writing via portfolio decreases writing anxiety at a significant level, (Bayat, 2014). It also allows the total writing process to be considered as an assessment of writing proficiency rather than an assessment of one single occasion on an exam paper. The portfolio also helps improve the writing process by making the students examine their own writing process as it teaches them to value the process of writing (Lucas, 2007, p. 31). Practicing and learning through a writing portfolio contributes to other language skills such as listening, speaking and reading (Javed et al. 2013, p. 130). In process-based methodology, a multi-draft portfolio is an effective teaching, learning and assessment tool since it provides a formative feedback cycle about learners' cognitive operations, and also because it helps learners have a greater understanding of writing as a process of "language socialisation" (Duff & Hornberger, 2008). Another known benefit of a writing portfolio is the development of writing instruction where assessment is interwoven with teaching (Taki & Heidari, 2011, p.193). As a portfolio is a process-based approach, the use of portfolio assessment on writing gives the students the confidence to continue to write and continue to develop their skills and overcome their problems in writing (Nezakatgoo, 2011, p.232). Lastly, portfolio evaluation motivates students to put their best effort into each writing task and to take ownership of their finished product. The learning process cannot serve the purpose unless the learner achieves full autonomy for himself and trusts his own capabilities for improvement (Lucas, 2007, p. 32).

Studies show that portfolios make a substantial contribution to the foreign language learning process. Hirvela and Sweetland (2005, p.209) suggest that language practitioners should be aware of the fact that if they succeed in recognizing the need to nurture an ongoing portfolio culture, students can better understand what the portfolio pedagogies are meant to achieve and how they are expected to operate in accordance with the portfolio pedagogies. As found by Aydin (2010b, p.200), EFL learners improve their research skills and organisational knowledge of paragraphs and composition with the help of the portfolio process. Romova and Andrew (2011, p.120) concluded that when students are actively engaged in reflecting on the difficulties

they face during the writing process, they gain a deeper appreciation of academic writing strategies such as pre-writing, brainstorming, outlining, drafting, self-editing and proofreading. According to White and Wright (2015) there is a need for students' active participation in the writing class if effective learning is to take the place. Nobody can write well without having something to say, so students must invent, discover, write and revise. They must also develop some kind of authority over the material. As noted by Hamp-Lyons and Condon (1993, p. 189) including more writing tasks and a greater variety of writing for a judgment will make that judgment more accurate. They also added that the portfolio system allows the learners to access to support and knowledge of the more experienced ones. On the other hand, portfolio keeping can be boring and tiring as students need to study every week to complete their assignments (Lam, 2014) and prevent creative writing (Aydin, 2010a). Reading and evaluating a mass of portfolios can be daunting. Even 20 portfolios at the end of a writing course form a formidable pile of papers and this poses another set of problems (White and Wright, 2015). It was also found that some of the students suffer from the fear of negative evaluation by their peers (Aydin, 2014).

In conclusion, as emphasized above, the use of portfolio assessment by EFL teachers acts as a catalyst for students' writing development. Student portfolios provide the teacher with a record of student strengths and areas for improvement. However, getting the most out of the process depends mostly on the teacher (White & Wright, 2015). Although an automatic connection does not exist between writing and critical thinking, thanks to program expectations and teacher's guidance there is a distinct link between the two (Condon & Kelly-Riley, 2004). Meanwhile, there are some potential questions which remain such as the amount and type of feedback a teacher provides and error correction strategies. Furthermore, the research conducted in Turkey is too limited to draw conclusions about the positive or negative effects of EFL learners' portfolio keeping on writing (Aydin, 2010a). In this sense, it is necessary to test and evaluate the efficacy of the writing portfolio for a variety of reasons. First, it is believed that implicit error correction will work efficiently. The time on task and time spent on discussing the errors are valuable points to be investigated (Lee, 2011; Lucas, 2007). Few teachers have the patience to give a lot of feedback in detail (Ferris, 2010) which makes such studies more difficult. It is revealed that there is a connection between self-efficacy perception of writing skill and writing achievement (Büyükikiz, Uyar & Balcı, 2013). Second, the writing portfolio is a time-saving tool even though some teachers can find giving elaborated feedback for an extended period to be time-consuming. However, the careful examination of the students' drafts is well worth the time and effort. A steady increase in the number of successful error corrections by students signalled a possible increase in self-awareness as part of the foreign language learning process. Third, writing the second draft after plenty of error correction by the student is believed to gradually end up with an increase in writing self-efficacy beliefs of the students. The use of the writing portfolio to develop and assess the writing proficiency of students in the introductory English course for a semester is a pure process-based approach supported by extensive feedback. Students receive extensive feedback throughout their studies in a variety of types and formats (formal/informal feedback; written feedback; peer feedback). In conclusion, though similar results have been found, the study differs from others as it places emphasis on reporting the effectiveness of a writing portfolio under a high level of feedback. The overall purpose of this study was to examine the efficacy of the writing portfolio assessment in the development of EFL students' writing skills. In this regard, the following research questions were addressed in this study:

1. Is there a difference among the writing portfolio task scores of EFL students according to the repeated measures?

2. What is the effect of portfolio-based writing assessment on the EFL students' efficacy beliefs on writing?

3. What are EFL students' perspectives on the effectiveness of a writing portfolio in developing their writing skills?

## Method

The study follows a mixed-methods approach, in which both quantitative and qualitative methodologies are combined (Lodico & Spaulding, 2006, p.17) to address the research questions. Mixed-methods research can be useful for obtaining a more complex understanding of a particular topic while

simultaneously testing theoretical models (Fraenkel, Wallen & Hyun, 2012, p.561; Lodico, Spaulding & Voegtle, 2006, p.17). Silverman and Marvasti (2008, p.157) suggested that mixed-methods studies can serve a purpose of triangulation and hereby improve the reliability of a single method. In this study, the use of both quantitative and qualitative data were therefore used to enable an in-depth study on the use of writing portfolio assessment with extensive feedback.

Quantitative methodology was used to address the research questions, which seek to explore the difference between the students' writing task in time and the change in students' beliefs before and after the class, respectively. Qualitative methodology was employed to address the other research question which intends to explore EFL students' perspectives on the effectiveness of the writing portfolio practice together with intensive feedback.

**Participants**

The participants included 14 male and 18 female students from a writing class at Adana Science and Technology University located in the south of Turkey. Every student is required to take an English language placement test prior to enrolling in courses at the beginning of the Fall semester. The placement exam measures language use, writing skills, reading and listening comprehension and discriminates students between the following levels: beginner, elementary and pre-intermediate. All 32 participants of the study are placed in pre-intermediate level English. Their ages range from 18 to 24 and they learn English at language preparatory classes for one year. The number of students enrolled in the Engineering Faculty makes up 53.1 percent of the participants. It is followed by the students from the Faculties of Business and Tourism Faculty with a percentage of 37.5 and 9.4 respectively. In order to select our interview participants, extreme or deviant case sampling was used, which is the process of selecting extreme cases of the phenomenon the researchers are interested in that are considered outliers and those cases seem to be the exception to the inference that is emerging from the analysis (Given, 2008, p.697). The opinions of the students regarding the effect of the writing portfolio on their writing skills were collected. Four students were selected based on their gender and course scores (Teddlie & Yu 2007, p.84). Focus-group interviewing was used to collect data about the perceptions of one male and one female students with the highest total scores and one male and one female students with the lowest total scores on their writing portfolio.

**Data Collection Tools**

In relation with the research questions, three data collection tools were used. Firstly, a "Self-efficacy Scale", developed by Yanar and Bümen (2012), for English was employed to collect the students' beliefs on writing. The writing self-efficacy scale for English consists of 10 items with a five-point Likert type. The Cronbach's alpha for the overall internal consistency reliability is 0.97 and 0.88 for the writing sub-scale. High grades collected from the scale mean high English self-efficacy beliefs (Yanar & Bümen, 2012). Respondents recorded their response for each reference group using a five-point Likert scale with no neutral response option.

Secondly, a portfolio assessment rubric, especially designed with regard to portfolio assessment in academic writing (Savage & Masoud, 2012), was used to assess the writing products. The rubric consists of five items, and proper grammar, spelling and punctuation make up 20 percent of the total points. The topic sentence, concluding sentence and supporting sentences make up 20 percent each. Another 20 percent is to assess how effectively the writer addresses the writing task. The first draft of each assignment accounted for 30 percent and the second draft for the other 70 percent of the final score. Together they make up the overall total score of that assignment. All the calculations were carried out using those total scores.

Thirdly, this study employed semi-structured focus group interview, and participants were asked to articulate their views based on two questions: (1) How does a writing portfolio with extensive feedback affect your writing skills? (2) Do you think there is any difference between your first writing portfolio product and the fifth one? Explain. In order to determine expert validity, the items in the interview were sent to two experts to be reviewed for clarity. In the light of the feedback provided, the interview questions were revised and finalized.

**Data Analysis**

First the normality of the distribution was checked, and it was verified that it had a normal distribution. Therefore, one-way repeated measures analysis of variance was conducted so as to determine the difference in measures of total writing scores in each assignment. In order to figure out the beliefs of the students, a paired sample t-test was employed to compare the scores of writing self-efficacy conducted at the beginning of the semester and at the end of the semester. A qualitative descriptive analysis was performed to address the third research question which intended to explore EFL students' perspectives on the effectiveness of the writing portfolio practice together with intensive feedback. To this end, an interview was conducted which is an important way for a researcher to verify or refute the impressions he has gained through observation (Fraenkel, 2012, p.450). The interview was recorded with a voice recorder. Qualitative descriptive analysis provides a framework where the opinion of the students can be analysed for the oral clues that they include. The flexible nature of qualitative descriptive analysis makes it a preferable method to understand the interpretation of subjective experiences (Liamputtong 2009). In the data collection phase for the interview, one researcher performed the initial data collection as the other researcher verified the data extraction. Verbatim quotations were used to illustrate responses.

**Procedure**

All the participants attended an Academic Writing class for 2 hours a week. Although the course was taught on a 16 week semester calendar, two weeks were designated as exam weeks. Therefore the students attended the writing course for a shorter period, that is, about a total of 28 contact hours during the Fall semester. In the first week, they were informed about the writing portfolio, role of feedback in their writing, scoring rubric, and they were also given a self-efficacy scale for writing in English. However students can be unfamiliar with this kind of portfolio assessment. Students, before starting the print portfolio implementation, first should be familiar with the assumptions of the assessment process (Lucas, 2007; Trevitt & Stocks, 2012). To this end, students were instructed to read and use feedback.

Only after completing 8 hours, students were asked to write a paragraph on a topic they chose. They started writing the first draft after going through some prewriting exercises. Each student had to submit a first draft biweekly. Students who did not like their first drafts were free to rewrite their first drafts. After completing these new drafts, they selected one of them to be assessed as first draft. Then, the teacher provided feedback by making written comments on students' papers. In so doing, students had the opportunity to observe where they were weak based on the feedback given through. Students' previously submitted first drafts were returned to them and they wrote the second (final) draft in accordance with the feedback they had received. The final draft reached the course teacher after all the necessary changes had been made by the student. The students also visited their teacher in his office hour every week. When a student submitted the second draft, the teacher and the student together reviewed the paper. Thus, by listening to the student's comments, the teacher tried not to deprive students of the authority which all writers need to make additional corrections not suggested by the teacher. After all the ten drafts were returned, the teacher was accompanied by an assessor from the school who did not know the students personally, scored all available documents in the portfolio using the rubric.

During the semester, the students wrote five two-draft writing assignments. The topics of the tasks were taken from the course book and students are expected to write various types of paragraphs by following similar guidelines as suggested therein. All of these tasks involved a writing cycle including necessary steps such as in-class brainstorming and planning. At the end of 16 weeks, students were given the same self-efficacy scale again. Finally, a focus group interview in Turkish was conducted to obtain detailed information about the effect of the writing portfolio and gather feedback from the interviewees.

**Findings**

In order to answer the first research question which asks whether there are any differences among the writing tasks scores of students, one way ANOVA for repeated measures was used to compare the differences within writing assignments over time. The first draft of each assignment accounted for 30% and the second draft for the other 70% of the final score. Together they make up the overall total score of the

assignment. All the calculations were carried out by using those total scores. Table 1 consists of the descriptive statistics and shows the results for ANOVA.

**Table 1.** Descriptive statistics and results for ANOVA

| | Mean | Std. Deviation | N | Source of Variance | Sum of squares | df | Mean Square | f | sig |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| assig1 | 65,80 | 15,742 | 32 | Within subjects | 17733,579 | 31 | 572,051 | | |
| assig2 | 65,64 | 13,680 | 32 | Measure | 2484,376 | 4 | 621,094 | 8,419 | ,000 |
| assig3 | 71,38 | 13,184 | 32 | Error | 9148,216 | 124 | 73,776 | | |
| assig4 | 73,17 | 12,422 | 32 | Total | 29366,171 | 159 | | | |
| assig5 | 75,42 | 10,201 | 32 | | | | | | |

All the five measures extend over a period of 16 weeks composed of theoretical and mostly practical lessons. When Table 1 is examined, it is noticed that there is a statistically meaningful difference among some of the assessments. [$F_{(4-124)}$=8,419, p<,01]. So as to determine the statistically significant difference among the measures, Bonferroni post hoc test was conducted. The results were presented in Table 2.

**Table 2.** Comparisons of the scores obtained from each writing assignment

| (I) assignment I (assessment) | (J) assignment J (assessment) | Mean Difference (I-J) | Std. Error | Sig[b] |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| 1st | 4th | -7,375 | 2,319 | ,033 |
| 1st | 5th | -9,625 | 3,147 | ,046 |
| 3rd | 2nd | 5,741 | 1,735 | ,024 |
| 4th | 2nd | 7,531 | 1,772 | ,002 |
| 5th | 2nd | 9,781 | 2,484 | ,004 |

As it was pointed out in Table 2, based on the results of Bonferroni post hoc test, it was seen that there were significant statistical differences between the first and fourth assignments, in favour of the fourth one (p<0.05); between the fifth and first assignments, in favour of the fifth one (p<0.05); between the third and second measurements, in favour of the third one (p<0.05); between the fourth and second assignments, in favour of the fourth one (p<0.01) and between the fifth and second assignments, in favour of the fifth one.

The second research question seeks to answer whether portfolio-based writing assessment has an effect on efficacy beliefs of EFL students concerning writing in a foreign language. For that reason, the self-efficacy levels were looked at after the implementation. In Table 3, the mean for the level of writing self-efficacy before the implementation is 30.18. The mean for the level of writing self-efficacy at the end of the semester is 32.03.

**Table 3.** Paired samples t-test (pre-test and post-test)

| | Mean | N | Std. Deviation | df | t | p |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| Pre-total | 30,1875 | 32 | 5,43844 | 31 | -2,020 | ,052 |
| Post-total | 32,0313 | 32 | 5,69937 | | | |

The Sig. (2-Tailed) value in the Table is 0.052. This value is higher than .05. Because of this, it is concluded that there is no significant statistical difference between the mean scores for self-efficacy in writing. Although, the Paired Samples Statistics box revealed that the mean number of scores taken from the self-efficacy scale at the end of the 16-weeks was greater than the mean at the baseline, we cannot come to the conclusion precisely. Hence it can be considered that the differences in scores are due to chance rather than to following instruction.

The third research question seeks to answer what EFL students' perspectives are on the effectiveness of a writing portfolio in developing their writing skills? Hence this study employed a semi-structured focus group interview and participants were asked to articulate their views based on two questions: (1) How does a writing portfolio with a high level of feedback affect your writing skills? (2) Do you think there is any difference between your first writing portfolio product and the fifth one? Explain.

Answers to the first question revealed that three out of four students think that writing as a part of a portfolio together with regular feedback was a positive step towards increasing writing skills of foreign

language learners. Interviewees expressed their concerns about portfolio assessment and they were about the amount of time spent and temporary loss of confidence. A student raised concerns that students may be exposed to a busy assignment schedule. Another interviewee expressed her view that portfolio assessment with feedback is an enjoyable process. The fourth interviewee indirectly pointed to their struggle in the complex cognitive process which is intrinsic to portfolio assessment.

> *"Portfolyonun en iyi yanı grameri ve kelime bilgimizi geliştirmesi..."* (The best thing about the portfolio is that it expands our knowledge of vocabulary and grammar.) Fourth Interviewee.

> *"...ama şimdi giriş cümlesi için ayrı düşünüyoruz, onu desteklemek için ayrı, sonuca bağlamak için ayrı düşünüyoruz hem bu bakış açımızı değiştiriyor bir yandan sebeplere bağladığı için hem de yeni kelime de öğrenmiş oluyoruz."* (...but now we reflect upon the topic sentence, also reflect to support it and to pave the way for the concluding sentence. On the one hand, this helps us develop a point of view and on the other hand helps us widen our vocabulary) Fourth Interviewee.

> *"Portfolyo yorucu bir şey. Bizi de sizi de yoruyor. Ama hatalarımızı gidermemize [görüp düzeltmemize] de yardım ediyor"* (The portfolio is exhausting. It makes us and our teacher tired. On the other hand, it helps us solve [see and correct] our mistakes.) Second Interviewee.

> *"...Ben arkadaşıma katılmıyorum. Dersler başladığında benim iyi bir temelim vardı. Ben başarılı bir [yabancı dil] öğrenciydim lisede[yken]. Başlarda güvenim kırıldı ama sonra [başaracağıma] inanmaya başladım."* (I don't agree with my friend. I had a good background when the course started. I was a successful [foreign language] student [when I was in] in high school. In the beginning [of the course], my confidence decreased but in time I earned [built] my confidence [back].) First Interviewee.

> *"Her zaman task üzerine çalışıyoruz ve derste sıkılmıyorum."* (We always study on the [writing] task, so I don't get bored in that lesson.) First Interviewee.

> *"Bence, **draft**'larıma yorum alınca ben kendimi daha önemli hissettim. Beni istekli kılanın da bu olduğunu düşünüyorum."* (I think, I felt myself more important when I received some feedback on my products. I think that was the reason which made me eager to write [better]) Third Interviewee.

In an effort to investigate the views of the interviewees regarding the difference between their first and fifth products, the conversations among the interviewees provide sentences which can be used as data. None of the participants had conflicting views in terms of feedback or process writing. They all emphasized the contribution of feedback over time on their tasks. None of the interviewees but one associated a good performance on their writing portfolio with regular class attendance.

> *"Eskiden biz sadece yazılılarda not almak için yazıyorduk ... ama şimdi kendimizi Ingilizce'de geliştirmek için yazıyoruz üniversitede... [özetle] artık daha az hata yapıyorum."* (In the past, we used to write for [good] grades ... but now at university, we write to excel ourselves in English …[in sum] I make less mistakes now) First Interviewee.

> *"[portfolyo-temelli yazma değerlendirmesi] yorucu olmasına karşın zamanla yazmamı geliştirdi. Şu an kendimi daha iyi hissediyorum."* (Even though it is tiring, it helped me to improve my writing gradually. Now I consider myself stronger.) Second Interviewee.

> *"Yazdıkça yeni şeyler öğreniyorum [yapılar, söcük dağarcığı vb.] ve bildiklerimin buzdağının [sadece] görünen yüzü olduğunu görünce üzülüyorum."* (As I write, I learn new things [structures, vocabulary, etc.] and feel disappointed to see that [what] I know [is] just the tip of the iceberg) Third Interviewee.

> *"İlk yazdığımı sonuncuyla [yazma ürünü ile] kıyaslayınca memnun oluyorum...Özgüvenim arttı..."* (...When I compare the first writing [product] with the last [writing product], I feel pleased...My self-confidence increased...) Third Interviewee.

> *"[Derslere] sürekli gelsem şu an daha iyi olabilirdim. Çünkü [ilk] düzeltmeler üzerinden [uzun] zaman geçince güzel düzeltme yapamayabiliyorsunuz. [Çünkü] o cümleleri neden yazdığını unutuyorsun."* (If I

attended [the class] continuously [regularly], I could be better than I am now...because if (a long) time elapses after feedback on the first draft, you may not be able to correct them properly. Because you forget why you wrote those sentences). Fourth Interviewee.

Although one student considered it time-consuming, all the four students, as of the end of the semester, regarded writing portfolio assessment with extensive feedback as a supportive learning tool to improve writing skills. The second and fourth interviewees, who got the lowest scores in the course, expressed an awareness of the effectiveness of the portfolio assessment. The fourth interviewee also commented that he could have produced a better piece of writing if he attended more regularly. Absence from classes appears to be the cause of his underachievement in the course. Not only the first and third but also the second and fourth interviewees provided responses that indicated their efforts into the writing tasks and increased ownership of their products.

### Discussion and Conclusions

This study looked into three issues regarding the effectiveness of the portfolio assessment with extensive feedback. First, the study looked into the changes that occurred in the writing skills of the students throughout the process. Second, the scores for self-efficacy beliefs collected at the beginning of the semester and at the end of the semester were compared. Lastly, in order to probe and uncover the underlying beliefs, and to use dynamics of the group, a focus interview was conducted.

The results of quantitative data analysis for portfolio assignments showed that portfolio-based writing assessment helped students' writing skills develop. The finding of this study is consistent with that of Nezakatgoo (2011). It was also revealed that student participants are satisfied with the attitude of the instructor who pointed out their errors. It was also reported that the instructor pointing out errors helped students find their mistakes and become more autonomous (Karatas, Alci, Yurtseven & Yuksel, 2015). This also helped the instructor develop a more targeted instruction. Students showed and understood their improvement across five portfolio drafts and evaluated their learning reflectively. This claim is supported with the finding of Romova and Andrew (2011). This finding was also echoed by Hamp-Lyons and Condon (2013) as they suggested that the process of change is iterative in nature. In each iteration, students correct their mistakes in a different way. Chung (2012, p.44) suggested that portfolios can provide individual attention to students' problems and needs. Looking at the students' work all at once can help instructors make the entire process meaningful and enhance the learning process. In spite of the fact that there are not any statistically significant differences among some measures, there is still an increase when writing assignments are considered as input and output data to learning processes. When the assignments are considered as input and output, the positive linear relationship in favour of the output with regard to assignment scores is apparent. It was also found that portfolio assessment promised some potential benefits to EFL students' writing skills (Heidari, 2011; Lucas, 2007; Nezakatgoo, 2011). This kind of linear increase in the writing scores in time can indicate a potential development of writing skill (Puranik & Lonigan, 2011; Romova & Andrew, 2011). This development can also be interpreted with caution since it is well known that elaborated assignments are decisive and lead to student improvement. In the writing classroom how and when a teacher grade can make a marked difference in the students' development (Nezakatgoo 2011, p.231).

It was also found that the students' level of writing self-efficacy was not significantly different in the post-test compared with the pre-test data. This finding may indicate no visible relationship between self-efficacy and writing portfolio although an increase on the students' confidence was adhered by the interviewees' remarks. In contrast with results of Nicolaidou (2012), which showed the self-efficacy of students who used portfolios for their essay writing process over an academic year increased significantly, the result of our study did not show any statistically significant difference in the self-efficacy of students. Chan and Lam (2010, p.37) demonstrated that self-referenced feedback like that of portfolios was more beneficial to students' self-efficacy than norm-referenced feedback. According to findings of this research, portfolio assessment for academic writing focuses on some aspects of a student's writing such as language use, fluency and content (Aydin, 2014; Nezakatgoo, 2011).

The perspectives of the students on the effectiveness of the writing portfolio in developing their writing skills were investigated. Answers revealed that the majority of the students think that writing as a

part of a portfolio, together with regular feedback, was a positive step towards increasing writing skills of EFL students. Portfolio assessment is proven to be useful in this study and this is consistent with those findings of Aydin (2014), Lam (2013), McMartin-Miller (2014) and Webb, Merkley, Wade, Simpson, Yudkowsky and Harris (2014). Lam's (2013) and Aydin's (2010) studies suggested that an environment rich in feedback in the portfolio system can facilitate writing improvement. Students became more self-aware of themselves as language learners and believed they made some improvements in language use and confidence. As students decide which one of their drafts is to be assessed, they make some judgments and they feel more control for learning in their hands. This finding is consistent with that of Webb et al. (2014) and Lucas (2007) in which the students were able to identify three areas of improvement, namely vocabulary, structure and confidence. Romova and Andrew (2011) reported that learners gain a sense of progress and feel an increase in confidence with the use of portfolios.

Students voiced their concerns over a busy schedule of writing portfolio assignments. Half of the interviewees in this study considered portfolio-based assessment exhausting. As Chung (2012) said "if not properly designed portfolio can turn into meaningless work." However, all the interviewees involved in the process also stated it was worth the time and effort. In addition, the majority of them believed that using portfolio in writing helped them practice their grammar and expand vocabulary. It is worth noting that regular feedback on a writing portfolio helped students build their confidence and practice language structures (Nezakatgoo, 2011, p.232). This finding was echoed by Hamp-Lyons and Condor (1993) in a study of portfolio-based assessment in which students undergo a periodic workload with increased time-on-task. Portfolio-based assessment, with its process-based nature, makes it worthwhile for students to find and correct their mistakes throughout the process.

As already noted, this study faced some limitations. In spite of the commonality in the conditions variables that EFL students undergo, one limitation to this study is the sample size, which might not be enough to make generalizations to the entire study population. An observation should be added about how errors are pointed out by the teacher. This kind of "observation" can play a vital role in unravelling the complex nature of EFL writers' processing feedback. As previously discussed another limitation in this study is the amount of attention the teacher devotes. Especially when revision is emphasized by the teacher, student improvement can be attributed to quality teaching as well as portfolio assessment. Therefore the quality of teaching should be considered along with portfolio assessment when analysing the results. Further research into measuring writing self-efficacy beliefs to find a relationship between academic achievement and confidence will contribute to the potential use of portfolios in EFL classes. Also problematic is the fact that 11 students were truant from time to time during the implementation. This may have contributed to a loss of writing performance. Future research in which the number of absentees is lower can be more illuminating. Last but not least, a full-year study that documents the progressive development (if any) of students' writing skills can be useful. The sequence of tasks follows an order in which there is more use of cognitive skills. A task assigned to a student can be perceived as different levels of difficulty by the student and therefore this may cause students to get varying scores. In addition, students should practise critical thinking at the levels of application, analysis and evaluation as an essential part of the education philosophy write-to-learn. However it was limited and difficult for the students in the study to think critically as long as they lack some mastery of grammar and a reasonably wide vocabulary. The students had obviously relatively little instruction in English prior to this experience. For this reason, the focal point of the portfolio assessment in this study was on error correction mostly. However, the fact that the second draft in each task accounted for 70 per cent of the overall score can be interpreted as a step towards encouraging students to process feedback and develop writing skills. Including a sample of advanced learners may help future researchers to better observe the benefits of portfolio assessment as they can engage students in activities which develop critical thinking and critical inquiry. Despite these limitations, this research provides a remarkable foundation for future researchers as a larger sample size enables to find smaller significant difference.

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