

Beyond preparatory year composition: applying e-portfolio to lead EFL students toward writing empowerment in Saudi Arabia

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Abstract:

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Writing is a crucial output skill that requires various sub-skills, including thinking, analysis, reasoning, arguing, processing, drafting, and concluding. Better writing skills empower a person to convey their message successfully and present or systematically record their ideas. Teachers can teach writing skills as a process rather than a product, which cannot be developed in a semester or program. Teaching writing skills in Saudi Arabia can be challenging due to cultural and linguistic differences (Al-Seghayer, 2019). However, paper-based and electronic portfolios can be valuable tools for students to develop their writing skills (Al Badi et al., 2020). The Preparatory Year Program (PYP) at Royal Commission Colleges & Institutes (RCYCI) emphasises writing skills for EFL students and has transitioned from paper-based to online e-portfolios using Blackboard learning platforms. This study involved 970 first-year, second-semester ENG 002 students from the English Department of the RCYCI. Students received writing training using a paper-based portfolio (pre-mid-term) and an e-portfolio (post-mid-term) on Blackboard software. The quantitative data analysis revealed that students' writing quality significantly improved when taught using the Blackboard-assisted e-portfolio compared to the paper-based portfolio class.

Keywords: EFL, Writing skills, Teaching skills, Writing portfolio, Preparatory year program, Blackboard, Writing training, Electronic portfolios, Online e-portfolios.

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1. Introduction

Writing is considered an output skill that requires many other sub-skills, such as thinking, analysis, reasoning, arguing, processing, drafting, and concluding a point of view. Better writing skills empower a person to convey their message successfully and present or systematically record their ideas. Teachers can assign students to a high level of attainment in writing by teaching writing skills as a process rather than a product itself. It is a skill that cannot be developed in a semester or even by completing a program. Scholars are always looking for better ways to teach writing skills (Saeed et al., 2022). Basal methods (like modeled writing, guided writing, etc.) are less effective these days than they were in the past in producing influential writers (Chen, 2017). Some common problems with paper-based writing portfolios include time and resource consumption, limited feedback, and teacher biases (Lee & Kim, 2019). Thus, many institutes offer writing center services to their students to help them understand how to build their ideas through writing effectively. The internet and modern technology have brought many new ways of teaching (Rehman et al., 2021). Glenn (2019) identified twelve activities to improve teaching writing skills by integrating technology:

- a) Use video game technology to teach narrative writing.
- b) Research a game developer to write informative essays.
- c) Scene setting for imaginary writing
- d) Quizlet to make flashcards
- e) Simulation technology to teach narratives
- f) YouTube music to write a brief biography of the composer.
- g) TED talks for taking notes
- h) Prezi to enhance presentations
- i) Online crossword puzzles to create worksheets
- j) Padlet, to motivate students for peer writing exercises and
- k) Maintaining E-Writing Portfolios

This research primarily focused on applying e-portfolios, which have become increasingly popular worldwide as a tool for students to showcase their learning and progress, in general, and in Saudi Arabia, in particular, due to unique cultural and linguistic differences. The following literature review examines the research on teaching writing skills in Saudi Arabia. The foundation year/preparatory year program is considered a critical time for Arab students to learn various communication skills, and e-portfolios effectively improve EFL students' writing skills (Al Badi et al., 2020; Ahmed et al., 2021).

1.1. Background

The Preparatory Year Program (PYP) at Yanbu English Language Institute offers two English courses to newly enrolled high school passed students. The first course is ENG001 (CEFR A1-A2), and the second is ENG002 (CEFR A2-B1). These are three credit hours courses each to pursue students for their undergraduate studies in science, engineering, and business programs at Royal Commission Yanbu Colleges and Institutes (RCYCI), where the medium of instruction is English. The courses are part of the Foundation Year English Program and follow an integrated approach where students are exposed to the four language skills, vocabulary, and grammar, as well as balancing general and technical English. The courses use blended learning strategies that emphasize student-centered learning, the use of ICT, and collaborative activities

that promote 21st-century skills. These courses have a variety of assessment activities, both formative and summative. The assessment activities cater to all language skills and competencies. Both courses offer several writing portfolios for the last five years (2018–2022) covering various genres, such as descriptive, opinion, narrative, and comparative paragraphs, stretched throughout 16-week-long semesters. Portfolios were considered an alternate assessment approach because of their less exam-focused evaluation. They are frequently utilized for writing exams because they can gauge students' emotional qualities and cognitive abilities. Some researchers (Willard-Traub, 2002; Pierson, 2012; Underwood, 1997) have demonstrated that portfolio-based evaluation offers an authentic and relevant collection of student work and correctly indicates the accomplishment or development of the students. These writing portfolios (WPs) have been integral to the PYP curriculum. They are given 10% weight in the course assessment and are formally graded. Initially, the paper-based WPs were assigned to the students in the classroom, and students were supposed to write and submit their first draft. Students would then edit and submit their revised draft in response to the teacher's feedback.

In the Internet era, computer technology profoundly impacts education and has transformed old evaluation methods into electronic ones incorporating computer-mediated communication. Babae and Tikoduadua (2013) state that electronic portfolios help students develop their reflective skills, teamwork, peer and self-evaluation, and self-control. In addition, many scholars are interested in social media and virtual learning for contemporary learners since they align with this generation's learning preferences. Considering the importance of modern technology, the RCYCI academic council has moved WPs from paper-based to online e-portfolios. In 2020, teaching was moved online and into hybrid mode, where the Blackboard learning platform was used for writing portfolios. The transformation from the traditional method to the e-portfolio was well planned, with proper training for teachers and students. The transformation was done in phases, and training sessions were designed to provide hands-on training to the faculty.

1.2. Teacher training

A comprehensive teacher training and professional development plan was designed and successfully conducted to ensure the smooth and effective implementation of the electronic portfolios. The program was conducted in three phases over one week.

The project's first phase aimed to introduce teachers to electronic portfolios and provide them with the skills to navigate and implement the Blackboard Learning Management System (LMS) for e-portfolios. Teachers were introduced to the decision to implement e-portfolios in PYP courses, and the purpose and benefits of using technology to teach writing skills were explained. Hands-on training was conducted on the second day, with teachers assigned dummy sections to practice uploading, writing comments, giving feedback, grading, and returning them to students for the final draft. A technical support committee was established to address any questions or challenges.

The second phase focused on effectively integrating e-portfolios into EFL classrooms using Blackboard. On Day 4, a workshop on portfolio design was held, where strategies were shared to train and encourage students to use e-portfolios. The built-in plagiarism tool was also demonstrated to help reduce cheating and plagiarism.

The third phase focused on assessing and evaluating the effectiveness of electronic portfolios in enhancing EFL learning outcomes. Teachers were supported through online forums, instructional videos, pictures, and one-on-one consultations to ensure the successful implementation of electronic portfolios using the Blackboard LMS in EFL classrooms.

1.3. Statement of purpose

Electronic portfolios in EFL are becoming increasingly popular globally; thus, to optimize their advantages in the context of EFL, their design, development, and assessment should be carefully examined (Aliweh, 2012). Although there has been less research on portfolios at the college and university level, their use is growing (Saad & Noor, 2007). The use of portfolios in college and university English courses in the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia has received little attention, particularly in PYP writing classes. In light of the previously described study's logic, it is worth the time and effort to look into how using conventional and electronic portfolios with students who are proficient in English at the CEFR A2-B1 level affects their writing achievement.

1.4. Objectives

The research objectives are to find out the attainment level of students in traditional writing classes (quantitative pre-data), apply e-portfolio writing strategies in the ESL preparatory program (intervention), examine students' and teachers' issues and challenges when applying e-portfolio writing strategies. (qualitative interpretation) and record the change in the attainment level of students using the data acquired after the successful implementation of e-portfolio strategies (quantitative post-data).

1.5. Research questions

The research question is what is the student's attainment level when using paper-based writing portfolio assessment? What is the student's attainment level after applying e-portfolio techniques through the Blackboard learning management platform? What are the issues and challenges students and teachers face when applying e-portfolio writing strategies?

1.6. Hypothesis

The hypothesis for the study is a significant improvement in the student's writing scores when applying the blackboard-based writing e-portfolios.

2. Literature review

2.1. Writing portfolio

A writing portfolio is a collection of work that showcases a student's writing skills and progress over time. The following literature review examines the research on writing portfolios and their impact on writing skills.

Paulson et al., (1991) revealed that writing portfolios in a high school English class enhanced writing skills and student self-assessment abilities. The research revealed that students who

utilized writing portfolios performed superiorly on writing tasks and showed enhanced proficiency in identifying their strengths and shortcomings in writing.

Another study by Yancey and Spooner (1998) found that using writing portfolios in a college-level writing course improved students' writing abilities and capacity for self-reflection. The study showed a positive correlation between students' use of writing portfolios and their enhanced performance on writing tasks. Additionally, students who employed writing portfolios exhibited a heightened ability to recognize and address areas requiring development in their writing.

Huot (2002) revealed that using writing portfolios in a collegiate writing course enhanced students' writing proficiency and capacity for self-evaluation. The study demonstrated that students who utilized writing portfolios had superior marks on writing tasks and showed enhanced proficiency in identifying their strengths and shortcomings in writing.

White and Frederiksen (2005) found that implementing writing portfolios in a middle school writing class enhanced students' writing abilities and built confidence. The study revealed a positive correlation between the usage of writing portfolios, elevated results on writing tasks, and an enhanced ability to identify areas for growth in writing.

Overall, the research suggests that writing portfolios can be an effective way to improve writing skills. Portfolios allow students to reflect on their writing, self-assess it, and showcase their progress over time. As such, they can be a valuable addition to writing courses and help students become more confident, independent, and skilled writers.

2.2. Problems/issues with writing a paper-based portfolio

While writing portfolios can effectively improve writing skills, some potential problems arise. The following are some common problems with writing portfolios:

2.2.1. Time-consuming

Students and teachers can take plenty of time to create a writing portfolio. Students must select and organize their writing samples, while teachers must spend extended time reviewing and assessing the portfolios.

2.2.2. Lack of standardization

Writing portfolios needs more standardization, which makes comparing student work across different classes or schools difficult. This can also make assessing portfolios' effectiveness as a teaching tool challenging.

2.2.3. Limited feedback

Writing portfolios may not give students enough feedback on their writing. While students can reflect on their writing and identify areas for improvement, they may need more feedback from teachers or peers to make significant progress.

2.2.4. Bias

Writing portfolios can be subject to bias, as teachers may have different expectations or preferences for writing styles. This can lead to consistency and bring subjectivity in grading and assessment.

2.2.5. Limited scope

Writing portfolios may cover only some aspects of writing, such as grammar and punctuation. This can limit their effectiveness in improving overall writing skills.

Overall, while writing portfolios can be a valuable tool for improving writing skills, it is essential to be aware of these potential problems and to address them to maximize the benefits of using them in the classroom.

2.3. E-portfolio

E-portfolios are gaining popularity in education as a tool for students to showcase their learning and progress, particularly in improving writing skills. Research shows that using e-portfolios in writing courses improves students' writing skills, self-assessment, and ability to identify strengths and weaknesses. Studies by Chen et al., (2015), Al-Naibi et al., (2017), Lee et al., (2018), and Alshahrani and Wendeatt (2012) all found that students who used e-portfolios had higher scores on assignments and better identified their strengths and weaknesses.

2.4. Comparison of paper-based writing portfolios and e-writing portfolios

Basal writing and e-portfolios are different approaches to assessing and improving writing skills. The literature review compares the effectiveness of basal writing portfolios and e-portfolios in improving writing skills. Studies show that e-portfolios are more effective, allowing individualized feedback and assessment. Studies by Lam (2015), Weigle (2007), Sumarno and Shodikin (2017), and Wang (2009) found that e-portfolios facilitate more self-assessment and reflection, making them more effective in improving writing skills.

2.5. The study's need in the local context is that teaching

Writing skills in Saudi Arabia can present unique challenges due to cultural and linguistic differences. Al-Khairiy (2013) highlights the challenges of teaching writing skills in Saudi Arabia, emphasizing the need for more emphasis on writing in the education system. Al-Jarf (2009) points out that cultural differences can also challenge teaching writing skills in Saudi Arabia. Al-Seghayer (2019) suggests that incorporating technology in the classroom can enhance writing skills among students. Al Badi et al., (2020) emphasize providing students with ample writing practice and feedback opportunities to improve their writing proficiency in Saudi Arabia.

2.6. Pedagogical implications

Computer technology is used in many tertiary education courses as an instructional tool. The importance of digital skills and "soft" abilities like critical and creative thinking in the twenty-

first century cannot be overstated. However, learning outcomes are not the only thing that matters—the process or journey of learning is just as significant. In order to show students what their learning objectives are, what they have learned, how well they have known, how far they still have to go to reach their destination, what they should plan and do to achieve their learning objectives, and how to reflect on and assess their learning journey, portfolios for learning and assessment may be the best "pedagogy" to be prescribed.

In this study, portfolio assessment in a writing course for students with limited English proficiency showed promising results in several areas, including enhancing writing ability, assessing one's learning, participating in learning both inside and outside of the classroom, and developing critical and creative thinking skills. This was true regardless of the types of portfolios the students encountered. A typical teacher-centered classroom with examination-based evaluation is unlikely to yield these benefits. The blackboard-based electronic portfolios did not significantly affect the students' writing achievement scores. Still, some essential benefits of using technology in language learning include computer literacy skills, increased student-to-student interaction, and the ease with which work can be submitted and responses from teachers and peers can be obtained. However, it was inevitable that there would be technological issues, such as pupils' lack of digital skills and accessibility to the Internet. It is, therefore, the duty of educators to consider the pros & cons of selecting a portfolio format that best suits their teaching and learning environment.

Additionally, educators are responsible for creating a plan for using this learning tool and maximizing its potential. It might be argued that the success or failure of using portfolio assessment in a writing class depends on a variety of other factors that should be taken into account, including the teaching and learning contexts, the student's English proficiency level, their computer literacy, and their accessibility to the Internet. They exhibited greater confidence while submitting the final draft of their paper. They gained significant knowledge during the revision phase.

3. Methodology

The researchers attempted to fulfill the study's purpose by employing quasi-experimental research. 970 first-year second-semester ENG 002 (CEFR A2 level) students from the English Department of Yanbu English Language Students enrolled in a paragraph-based writing course were actively involved in this study. During the eight meetings leading up to the midterm test, they received lessons on descriptive and explanatory paragraph writing using a paper-based portfolio. Tables 1.1 and Table 1.2 show students' attainment of Pre-Midterm exams.

Table 1.1 Pre-Midterm (WP-1 and WP-2) breakdown of average scores

Total Population	970	
Grade Category	Number of students	Percentage
Below 60%	130.0	13.4%
Between 61-69%	220.0	22.7%
Between 71-79%	380.0	39.2%
Above 81%	240.0	24.7%

Table 1.2 Pre-Midterm Average Scores of WP-1 and WP-2

WP-1 Descriptive	WP-2 Explanatory	Average
6.74	7.14	6.94

After eight weeks, the students received lessons on the writing process and comparative paragraphs with an e-portfolio on Blackboard software. Out of 970 students, 83 either withdrew or dropped out of the course due to personal, educational, or administrative reasons. Teachers who had undergone a week of training in using the Blackboard software supported students in learning how to use Blackboard to submit e-portfolios. Tables 1.3 and Table 1.4 show students' attainment of post-midterm exams.

Table 1.3 Post-Midterm (WP-3 and WP-4) Breakdown of average scores

Total Population	970
Withdrawn, Dropped, and failed students (post mid-term exam)	83
Total Remaining Students	887

Grade Category	Number of students	Percentage
Below 60%	63.0	7.1 %
Between 61-69%	83.0	9.4 %
Between 71-79%	309.0	34.8 %
Above 81%	432.0	48.7 %

Table 1.4 Post-Midterm Average Scores of WP-3 and WP-4

WP-3 Process	WP-4 Comparative	Average
8.19	8.5	8.35

During the 16 weeks of teaching and learning sessions, the students practiced each phase of the writing process. The process-writing processes employed in both classroom settings adhered to the guidelines proposed by Oshima Hogue in his book *Writing Academic English* (fourth edition). These steps encompass pre-writing, planning (outlining), writing and editing drafts, and ultimately producing the final document. The pre-writing step in the process of writing involved engaging in activities to help students select the topic they intended to elaborate on. Many pupils often need help articulating the specific issue they wish to write about. Their intellect finds the work to be highly intricate. Typically, they find themselves with a topic that needs to be more general or narrow in scope. To prevent this, the instructor in this research assisted the pupils by creating an inverted pyramid structure (adapted from www.hamilton.edu See Figure 1).

It might help students progressively narrow down their themes, line by line. The pupils were also advised to select topics of appropriate breadth and depth. Following the specification of the topic, the students engaged in brainstorming. The objective was to elicit their thoughts and opinions on the subject matter. Brainstorming may be conducted using word listing, clustering, or free-writing methods. The outcomes of the brainstorming phase were then utilized throughout the planning and outlining phases. The planning step started by creating a sub list.

The sub-list comprised the terms that were included in the brainstorming stage. The words were organized to form logical supporting sub lists and supporting data regarding the issue.

Figure 1: Inverted pyramid structure



After creating the sub list, the teacher instructed the pupils to develop a topic sentence for their respective topics. The pupils had significant difficulties in this phase. Therefore, in this research, the instructor meticulously examined each student's assignments until their topic sentences were deemed suitable and grammatically accurate. Following a relevant topic phrase, the students created an outline for their written work. The instructor presented a prototype of an outline to facilitate the pupils' comprehension. Stage 3 was subsequently completed. During stage 3, the students composed their initial drafts by elaborating on the outline. The instructor assessed the initial versions for their substance and structure. After revising, they swapped their works with a partner to receive peer feedback on grammar, language use, and punctuation. The teacher also provided feedback on their second version. The ideas from both their peers and teachers prompted them to modify the second draft and produce the final drafts. The final manuscripts that were subject to assessment in this research.

Brown & Bailey developed an analytical writing composition scale to grade students' compositions. The assessment evaluated students' writing based on the progression of ideas, structure, lexical choices, grammatical accuracy, and punctuation. The effectiveness of the two teaching styles was examined using a T-test on the students' writing scores after analyzing their works. Furthermore, alongside doing quantitative analysis, the researchers also made brief observations to document students' writing difficulties in both paper-based portfolios and e-portfolio circumstances. Although it was not explicitly stated in the study question, ideas for future practices were offered.

4. Data analysis

This study examined the efficacy of using the blackboard-supported E-Portfolios compared to

paper-based portfolios in a PYP EFL writing course. A dataset of 970 students' papers was subjected to statistical analysis using normality and homogeneity tests to assess whether the data followed a normal distribution and originated from the same population.

Table 1.3: Testing the normality of table-type styles

Type	Kolmogorov-Smirnova*		
	Statistic	df	sig.
Paper-based Portfolio	.136	12	.202*
e-portfolio	.116	12	.202*

The normality test in Table 1 revealed a significance value of 0.202, which is more than 0.05. It indicates that the data distribution followed a standard pattern.

Table 1.4: Homogeneity of the variance analysis

Class	Levene statistic	df1	df2	sig.
Based on means	.171	1	24	.683
Based on median	.154	1	24	.687
Median and with adjusted df	.153	1	24	.683
Based on trimmed mean	.163	1	23.796	.682

Furthermore, as presented in Table 2, the homogeneity test revealed a significant value of 0.683, greater than 0.05. It signifies that the data were extracted from an identical population.

4.1 Discussion

The quantitative data analysis in Table 1.5 revealed that the students' attainment significantly improved when taught using the Blackboard-assisted e-portfolio compared to the paper-based portfolio class. This demonstrates the advantageous potential of integrating portfolios and digital technologies.

Table 1.5: Blackboard-assisted e-portfolio compared to the paper-based portfolio class

Pre-Midterm Writing lessons	Population (students)	Average scores	Average Score Paper-based Portfolio
WP-1 Descriptive Paragraph	970	6.74	6.94
WP-1 Explanatory Paragraph	970	7.14	
Post-Midterm Writing Lessons	*83 students dropped out, withdrew, or failed		
WP-3 Process Paragraph	887*	8.19	8.35↑
WP-4 Comparative Paragraph	887*	8.50	

This outcome mirrors previous discoveries in the existing body of research. Indeed, Barrot's study found that online platform portfolios positively influenced students' writing practice. This study's results align with those of a study by Alshahrani and Windeatt, which showed that using e-portfolio software significantly improved the writing abilities of ESL students. The

researchers have concluded that paper-based and e-portfolios can benefit students, depending on classroom conditions and considerations.

4.2. Challenges

It could alleviate one of the challenges in the process writing class: the time constraint. Using Blackboard, specific writing exercises may be completed online while maintaining the teacher's oversight. Therefore, the students may carry out each stage of the writing process, and the teacher can assess their work. The students' feeling of authorship will also increase as they diligently go through developmental processes to produce their best final drafts. A classroom with a subpar internet connection can heighten students' worries and anxiety about writing. Therefore, the teacher's astute and innovative judgment is a cause for concern. In addition, the researchers recorded on the observation sheets that the pupils derived great pleasure from the pre-writing exercises.

Before their current writing classes, they hardly engaged in this particular stage, which posed a significant challenge at the outset. However, when they became familiar with it, it alleviated their confusion in writing. The kids were found to write methodically when they made an outline. Typically, regular students skip the step of establishing an outline and proceed to write their drafts immediately. However, an outline might be advantageous in the writing process. Furthermore, the students enjoyed the revision period, receiving comments from teachers and peers. The students' passion for revising the course was evident as they diligently worked on their final drafts. They exhibited a greater sense of assurance while submitting their final assignment to the teachers.

5. Conclusion

This study investigates whether integrating portfolio and digital application through a supported e-portfolio can significantly improve students' writing skills compared to the conventional paper-based portfolio. The results demonstrated a substantial increase in students' writing scores when taught using the Blackboard-supported e-portfolio compared to the traditional paper-based portfolio technique. Hence, it is advisable to incorporate a Blackboard-supported e-portfolio in the writing course that leads students toward writing empowerment. Following are the recommendations for writing instructors and further research:

- a) This study was carried out with Preparatory Year EFL students who had a restricted degree of English proficiency. Therefore, it would be intriguing to investigate the utilization of various types of portfolios in other courses focused on English for Specific Purposes (ESP).
- b) To enhance the findings' reliability, it is advisable to replicate the study over a more extended period of time. Additionally, caution should be exercised when generalizing the results of additional investigations that involve participants from a single region. Additional studies should be undertaken with students of varying levels of English ability to examine whether they possess divergent perspectives.

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