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**PORTFOLIO ASSESSMENT IN LEARNING AND DEVELOPING ENGLISH WRITING SKILLS: A CASE STUDY AMONG UNDERGRADUATE STUDENTS OF UITS**

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**ABSTRACT**

This is a case study on the implementation of portfolio assessment in a group of undergrate students of English writing Skill in University Of Information Technology and Sciences (UITS). The data has been generated from the write ups of students and these are piled up in individual folders for assessment by portfolio management. The study focuses what actually the students need to learn to develop their writing skill and how the development gradually occurring in their write ups throughout the session by using portfolio assessment. A simple tool as "Listing –Generalization and Follow up" has been implemented in the assessment process. Feedback considered as the key in the process of learning which ensured the optimum engagement of the students in the process and at this point the portfolio assessment differs from the conventional assessment processes. Students' motivation is gained by the researcher by ensuring the 60% marks with the assessment process and also by close discussions and continuous feedback sessions. A transparent representation of the data in two tables puts forth all the evidences to the students which have been used for the study as well. The paper ends with some suggestions how portfolio management could be used in a broader version to trace the development in the ESL teaching and learning in Bangladesh.

Keywords: Listing components, write ups, folder management, motivation, feedback

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**INTRODUCTION**

Portfolio assessment in ESL classes is comparatively a new method. Solis (1993) in her research under Intercultural Development Research Association (IDRA) was reported by the staff of IDRA that secondary ESL teachers had used this assessment very successfully as a "Promising Assessment strategy". Apart from ESL teaching and learning, language portfolio got an immense popularity in Europe with the patronization of "The Council Of Europe" which launched European

Language Portfolio (ELP) all over Europe during 2001 ( Iturain, 2007). In Bangladesh, it is yet to use frequently by the ESL teachers as an assessment method in the classroom environment. Therefore, it is yet to gain its popularity here.

This research is a case study about the impact of portfolio assessment among a group of undergraduate students of University of Information Technology and Sciences (UITS) who are taught English Writing Skills by the Researcher. Thus, the assessment considers the writing skill of the

students and its impact focuses on the benefits and overall their development on writing skill. On the other hand, it examines the procedure of portfolio assessment in a undergraduate classroom of Bangladeshi context. A relevant and brief background of the usual assessment process in Bangladesh is mentioned here to establish a reasonable ground for this study.

Students in Bangladesh study English as a compulsory subject in their secondary and higher secondary as well as in their undergraduate level. In the communicative methods of English learning the conventional term examinations are still the center for assessment and evaluation of English learning. Among the two types of assessment such as summative and formative assessment (Ahsan, 2009), the prevailing assessment is mainly summative through term examinations (NCBT, 1995) "This is mostly true in Bangladesh since assessment of learning is mostly practiced in the form of summative assessment." (Mukut, 2012).

Where many countries in the world adopted the communicative method for language teaching, the testing confined to discrete items, lower order thinking and a focused on form to test with the same traditional pattern rather than meaning (Brown, 2004). In this process examinations show the achievements of the students on the basis of their marks or grades but no way give any feed back to the students to identify their mistakes and rectify them by further learning. Again, it seems a common scenario among these ESL learners that they do not feel encouraged and motivated enough to access the teachers for their problems in English. Because students lack in motivation they retain the same problems or mistakes all through their career in terms of English language. It has another relation with how they are in a habit of learning English. In the classroom environment mostly the learning targets the completion of syllabus and the students target only to achieve good grades in the year ending or semester ending examinations. No where the self engagement is evident such as the students could identify their mistakes and they could act as a DOER in the development process. As a result students fail to relate any objectivity of learning English for the real life implementation other than

just for academic examination pass out purpose. Rahman, Babu & Ashrafuzzaman (2011, 98) state "Feedback can either be positive or negative and may serve not only to show learners how well they have performed but also to motivate them and build a supportive classroom climate". In this regard the traditional summative done by routine examination based on syllabus creates a relativity between learning and practical use to a low extent.

The researcher identified that English learning for the selected students had been totally teacher directed and the teacher found a good match with the statement given by Newman, Smolen, Lee, Jr., & Aron.(1996) as "They do not have the concept, as demonstrated by their entering behaviors, of self-initiated learning, goal setting, self-reflection or self-evaluation, which are the skills and attitudes integral to the portfolio philosophy and process." Thus the researcher had chosen portfolio assessment to understand the learning and development of English writing skill of the students. Besides this the study ensures motivation and involvement of students in the process of learning. By keeping these two as basics in the study, the researcher targets the development of the students in writing skills. It also explores how portfolio assessment could be implemented alongside the conventional examination procedure to ensure students' optimum development by ensuring free accessibility of the students to the teacher and explores impacts of feedback to the learners' growth. Above all, the researcher could test whether through this assessment an actual learning and development process occurring or not.

The other factors associated with portfolio assessment are active participation of the students which means more engagement of the students with English learning and reciprocation of their needs in the process of learning. In this study, motivation was gained by a very open discussion with the students that "how do they want to learn English and what they need to learn?" in the beginning of the session. It was a new experience for the students as they had never been asked about their own need and choice in the learning process. However retaining motivation was further carried by a recurrent interaction of the students with the course teacher

and off course a rapport building initiative taken by the teacher, so that shyness had not been felt by the students while assessment took place. By doing so, a fair assessment was ensured. In addition to this, inside classroom and outside the classroom the teacher ensured her availability during office hour throughout the semester which further enhanced the successful learning. However, the case study confines to writing skills of the students in relation to portfolio assessment.

#### **Literature review**

"Portfolios are used in various professions to gather typical or exemplary samples of performance"... "Many approaches have been suggested for developing language arts portfolios. The one common element in all of the approaches is that portfolios are places to collect samples of a student's work." Roger (1991). There has been a grown interest in implementation of portfolio in classroom shown by the educators in the last five years as surveyed by Newman, Smolen, Lee and Aron (1996) . They found that the key advantage of portfolio "as an assessment tool for the process as well as product of learning". With the aid of the sample works which demonstrate learners' progress is reflective in day to day classroom environment. This assessment has been adopted as one of major assessments and has reached to a higher level of implementation in Newzealand and Australia (Mills, 1989; Newman and Smolen, 1993). Archbald and Newmann (1992: 169) stated "a portfolio is a file or folder containing a variety of information that documents a student's experiences and accomplishments." According to Price and O'Malley (1992) portfolio assessment uses the records of students' works over time and different modes are used to show the depth, breadth and development they acquire. These records are purposeful and systematic collection of the works done by students which reflects accomplishment relative to instructional goals and objective. In these assessment students reflection and self monitoring are key components. This summarizes their view on writing assessment as they further mention that writing assessment determines the written communication capability of students in which teachers using the direct measures of functional

literacy, such as writing samples, process writing, and dialogue journals. Writing samples can trace the growth in writing skill. In answer to the question "How do assessment portfolios differ from norm-referenced or other criterion-referenced testing programs?" Gómez (1999) states the difference between portfolio assessment and simple test mentioning as portfolio represents a broader picture of students' achievement than do the test alone and provides detailed information about what students know and can do in an array of events. She adds more that assessment portfolio includes the results of commercially –developed, norm-referenced tests or single occasion, criterion –referenced tests along with additional measures of student achievement such as writing samples or lab reports. Portfolios have been used most widely in the teaching of reading and writing, with a strong focus on classroom instruction, student ownership and self – evaluation and teacher autonomy (Graves, 1983; 16.Tierney, Carter & Desai, 1991).

Solice (1993) defines a common set of objectives which correlate ESL teachers and students in portfolio assessment are: self-concept, motivation level, and task performance level, oral competence, reading skills in the content areas, and writing skills in the content areas. She adds that this assessment involves ongoing, periodic reflection of growth by both teacher and student .In this connection Gómez, (1999; 3) says "Portfolios can provide a continuous picture of student progress, rather than a snapshot of student achievement that single-occasion tests provide." Iturain, (2007) views portfolio as a popular and effective measure which motivates young learners and let them to review language in a fun way. It also helps them to set objectives of leaning, to understand and to succeed in learning. A conclusion has been drawn by Garcia-Carbonell and Watts and Rising (1998) as portfolios are in consonance with the current trends in language assessment, with pedagogical advantages and clarity is the most desirable assessment. Students can show their knowledge and facilitators accumulate more information to judge students in their progress.

Methodology: This research is both qualitative and quantitative in nature and based on

primary data. The qualitative data was generated from the observation by the teacher based on the reaction and response of the students towards portfolio assessment in the 26 classes. The quantitative data incorporates the percentage of listing components in two tables of midterm and final term session. These two tables are termed as follow up tables and juxtapose the percentage of mistakes or problems that the students had in the midterm and final term session. Thus in a comparative presentation these tables traced mainly the development in writings of these students in the process of portfolio assessment.

The assessment involved 18 students of Pharmacy department. They were in first semester and had taken "English Language –BPH 116" a writing course and the researcher was the course teacher. Where the semester was of six months duration, classes were of 90 minutes duration and all together 24 classes had been utilized for portfolio assessment.

The assessment was done in a writing course consisting 3 credits. The researcher focused on the gradual growth and development in English writing of the particular students implementing the portfolio assessment. On the other hand, portfolio assessment in this study was done by task assessment by maintaining folders for individual students. Individual folder maintained by individual students, contained collection of writing works practiced and prepared by students throughout the session. Through these works an evaluation and learning session took place in the various areas that the syllabus contained and also the individual needs of the students in writing English were fulfilled under the guidance of the course teacher over a particular period of time (a six months semester). Since, this assessment accounted documentation (class works/ activities/ worksheets and so on) of individual student, the periodic assessment by default engaged students in learning process and enables them to act as a "DOER" while learning. This way this is a kind of "assessment portfolio" as termed by Gómez (1999).

Listing, generalization, learning and follow up these were the four tools used by the researcher to carry on the folder assessment. Listing refers to the

collected aspects of writing that the students had problems and evident from the writing practices observed by the students. This listing was done by discussion with the students as well. Basically the listing components had been taught by the teacher in this portfolio assessment and the development on the writings was traced.

Next is "Generalization" was mainly the way the teacher ran the learning sessions in the classroom. The teacher did not mention the name of individual student in the class with the kind of mistakes or problems he/she individually had in writing. The teacher rather discussed and made them practice the listed components with worksheets and various other activity sheets. This Generalization helped students to be more congregated and motivated in learning as individual and as a group or team.

Learning in the context of this case study refers to the worksheet activities. At this point worksheets of listing components had been solved by students sometimes individually or pairs or groups of three members.

Follow up mainly had been derived from the checking of the 16 write ups of the students by teachers and giving feed back to the students. The follow up extended to the teachers observation on the paragraph writing, essay writing and composition writing ,different types letter writing and so on which were in the syllabus. It accounted how effectively every individual student could use the listing components which were taught by the teacher throughout the session. Two follow up tables of listing components had been derived for this study and used as primary data.

The assessment process stated with the introduction of portfolio assessment given by the researcher to the students and with the discussion that how it had to be carried out in learning writing skill. It was more to clarify the students about the benefits of portfolio assessment. However, motivation and involvement of the students remained the most challenging aspects at the beginning of this study. This was because; the students were habituated to relate any kind of classroom activities with marks to contribute to their exam. They could not identify "why the

portfolio was implemented.” This concern was mitigated by the teacher with a declaration that 60% of the marks of each midterm and final term would

be associated with the assessment. The mark distribution follows:

Mid Term 100	Final Term 100
Class attendance: 10	Class attendance: 10
Student’s performance: 10	Student’s performance: 10
Quiz: 10x2=20	Quiz: 10x2=20
Class work presentation: 10x2=20	Class work presentation: 10x2=20
Midterm Exam: 40	Final term exam :40
40% marks contributed to final grade	60% marks contributed to final grade

Apart from this mark distribution the teacher confirmed that the 60% marks would be in assimilation with the regular attendance and performance of every student. The quizzes and class work presentations would be in association with folder management and student’s performance would be evaluated with their overall participation in all the classes. This was the first stage of motivation for the students.

Listing Procedure:

The writing course included composition writing, essay and paragraph, application and informal letter writing, business letter writing (memorandum, notice, minute, complaint, and adjustment), news coverage writing, negative message writing and academic report writing. The listing components had been collected from the discussions with the students mainly asking the two question “What are the problems they face in writing?” and “Which mistakes you do very often when you write?”. Besides the reciprocation by the students about the problems and mistakes they faced in writing , the teacher prompted them also many items ( such as use of double negatives, parallelism, use of capital, punctuation and so on) just to make a check list for the listing items. The students identified with many listing items that the teacher mentioned to them. Moreover there were other items in the listing components which the teacher marked from the writings in all through the write ups which the students practiced and recorded in the folders. These listing components acted as the main source of assessment process to trace the developments.

The collected listing components were , use of capital letter, punctuation, double negatives,

parallelism, homophones and academic writing, subject verb agreement, tense consistency, article, modifier, modal, fragments, transitions, coherence , task assessment were the aspects identified that the students need to learn and develop. These were such aspects that the students were oblivion of the recurrent mistakes they had been doing from the past and nobody addressed these problems to rectify in the classroom. Feedback on these aspects brought the second stage of motivation in the case study and they were highly motivated as these problems had never been pronounced in the classroom environment for learning. At this point the students’ involvement started with effective learning. It is to mention that all these writing works had been kept in individual folders in the name of every individual student.

However “Identifying the needs” in this portfolio assessment was mostly boosted by the teacher. The students discussed the kinds of problems they face but it mostly done when the teacher observed the write ups of the students and could sum up various problems occurred in their writing tasks in the “Listing process”. This was because the students were not habituated at all in uttering their individual problems except those which they had in the syllabus. They had a conception that some problems were ever recurring in their writings and there were no solutions to those. The reciprocation of these minute problems aided a lot to the positivity and motivation towards portfolio assessment in this study. Moreover the process of task evaluation----- feedback ----- discussion systematically ensured a regular interaction of teacher and students and recorded

the continuous growth of students' writing skill with is a potential aspect of portfolio assessment.

Procedure for conducting the assessment in Midterm session:

Listing components in the midterm session of 13 classes derived from composition writing, essay and paragraph and different types of applications and informal letter writings. The teacher checked 10 write ups of each individual students and kept a record of the mistakes in the listing components done by individual student. For measuring the numbers of listing components in a single write up, the teacher considered 10 mistakes of each component as to put in percentage for individual students. Then the average of the percentage is done and a table had been created to show the results in midterm.

Declaring the common problems found the wrings by the students the teacher introduced various work sheets of listing components. Mostly two components could be taught in a single class. There were group works and individual work sheets that the students solved. Online test had also been taken in the class when all the students participated together. The worksheets had been peer evaluated to save the time of the class and this was also a new experience for the students. At this stage the optimum engagement was observed by the teacher. The students also started commenting on the other various problems that they had in their writing. Thus, this peer evaluation was a regular process in the following class that the students pursued with full enthusiasm.

Some listing components were taught with task distribution. At this stage the listing components were homophone, double negatives, parallelism, article, and modifier, modal. It is to mention here that the students did not have the concept that how the occurrence of double negatives in their writing was changing the meaning. Then, the spelling mistakes that they were doing very frequently had been with homophones. The teacher made six groups of three students and found out list of homophone, work sheets on double negatives and parallelism from different web sites .Every group exchanged their resources to each other. The teacher briefed the lessons to them.

Though very nominal but at this stage the classroom was learner centered. Article, modifier and modal had been taught by the teacher with work sheets collected from web sites and books. The students solved them and the teacher corrected them in the class and recorded in the folder.

The other listing components such as transitions, coherence, task assessment and aspects of academic writing had been taken together. Again students in group directed to collect list of transitions from web sites. But here how the implementation of transitions to be done to bring coherence had been shown by the teachers. 8 essays had been written and read out by the students and the teacher showed the implementation of perfect transitions in the sentences. Accumulative thoughts to bring coherence in writing and how it brings task assessment had been taught by the teacher with the conventional lecturing session along with the aspects of academic writing. Specimen of 4 informal writings which had been given to the students to correct and to convert into academic writing.

When the listing components were done then the teacher taught writing the effective topic sentence, putting controlling idea, summarization in context of paragraph and essay writing and composition writing as a whole. At this stage students could implement the listing components that they learned up till then. However, all their wrings had been regularly checked and kept in the folder by the teacher and students follow them in their classes. This continuous process of follow up contributed mainly to the students' engagement in all the classes of this course.

**Procedure for conducting the assessment in Final Term session:**

Listing components of the final term session again done from the 13 classes.

Here in this term the individual worksheets and exercises on each individual components had not been practiced by the students rather the teacher let them write the business letter writing (memorandum, notice, minute, complaint, and adjustment), news coverage writing, negative message wring and academic report writing, reminding to use the components cautiously . This

resulted in the frequent queries from the students that whether they were using the components correctly or not. However, the teacher introduced peer evaluation for checking the 5 write ups. A remarkable involvement of the students was evident in the assessment process. Two students sitting beside and exchanging their scripts checked and discussed their mistakes. Among the nine pairs the teacher was always in a move as a guide and solved any confusion the students faced while evaluating peers. Another 5 write ups had been checked by the teacher herself and all 10 write ups were in the folders of individual students. Like the same as midterm the mistakes in the use of components were counted in percentage and then an average of all students had been done and recorded in the table and was kept in their folders. At this stage the discussion and follow up went together when the Mid Term

peer evaluation went on in the class and as the write ups were re-checked by the teacher ending of every class and the feedback was given in the following class. In both the stages all the tasks of peer evaluation and group work created the environment of open discussion in every class. Thus students generated “self reflection” and gradually they got over with shyness and they focused to “self efficacy”.

**Two tables of listing components:**

The first table recorded the midterm and the other recorded the final term write ups of the students. The two tables represented cumulated percentage of problems or mistakes found in the write ups by the students in the two terms of the semester where each term consisted of 13 classes and 26 classes in the whole semester.

Listing Components from 8 write ups (measured in %)															
Mid Term	subject verb agreement	tense consistency	capital letter	punctuation	double negatives	parallelism	homophones	article	modifier	modal	fragments	transitions	coherence	task assessment	Academic writing
13 classes	65%	57%	18%	20%	34%	55%	40%	4%	50%	19%	55%	72%	77%	82%	80%

**Final Term**

Listing Components from 10 write ups (measured in %)															
Final Term	Subject verb agreement	tense consistency	capital letter	punctuation	double negatives	parallelism	homophones	article	, modifier	modal	fragments	transitions	coherence	task assessment	Academic writing
13 classes	5%	2%	1%	18%	7%	49%	11%	0%	33%	11%	44%	12%	22%	30%	23%

The tables showed that in the midterm the students had massive problems with the use of subject verb agreement, 65%. This percentage decreased to 5% in the final term and this implies a massive progress by the students. The second

component was tense consistency which was also in a high percentage in midterm, 52% and this reduced to 2% in the final term. This proved the most remarkable development among the components. Use of capital letters reduced from 18% to 2% from

midterm to final term respectively. However the students could not reduced much of their problems with punctuation and it reduced only to 2% in the final term. The use of doubled negative was also a very remarkable field in which the students developed a lot as they reduced their problems from 345 to 7% in the respective terms. Use of parallelisms reduced to a nominal percentage, from 55 % to 49% only. Homophones seemed another successful component that students win over as it reduced from 40% to 11%. Though the students had very nominal problems of 4% with the use of article, the table showed in the final term all the students could write flawless in the use of article. Modifiers reduced from 55% to 33%. Small development could be seen in the use of modals reduced from 19 % to 11%. Fragments reduced only to 10 %. Development in the use of transition is also very remarkable from 77 % to 12 %. The development in the use of transition impacted the coherence in the write ups of the students as the absence of coherence was of 77% and in the final term it reduced to 22%. Over all the task assessment which could not be seen of 82% in the midterm write ups was achieved till 30 % in the final term. Finally the students could learn academic writing to a greater percentage in which they reduced the problems from 80% to 23%.

The qualitative data generated from the reaction and responses of the students counted the motivation among the students. Mainly the distribution of marks where 60% in each term was associated with the class activities moved the students very positively about the portfolio assessment. The motivation could be marked from the regular attendance of the 18 students in the 26 classes of the whole session. Moreover their responses when the teacher collected the listing components also emphasized their motivation in learning. Many of the students identified their needs of learning the listing components effectively. Regular attendance also affirmed the active participation in classroom mainly while they were doing peer evaluation, group work. More to this as many students headed towards the teacher during the counseling hours (in the office and out of the class) these discussions enhanced the authenticity of their positivity in learning

### **Conclusion**

The success of teaching and learning of any subject could be judged by a proper assessment process. The researcher of this study chose portfolio assessment which authorized the students to determine their individual needs to be proficient in English writing skill. When the students had been the center of this assessment, it generated actual learners as the learners through the regular classroom discussion and feedback could think and understand what to develop and how to develop their writing skill .Through the folder management this processes could up to date the students in their gradual growth in learning process. This assessment made teacher and students to feel inseparable till the process ended up with a successful development of English writing skill of the students. The success in this study was mainly because of the willingness of the students to spend quality time to develop their writing skill. The willingness and motivation had been affirmed by the 60% marks reservation in this assessment process where the other 40% was for their conventional term exams.

However, this is especially in the case of portfolio assessment, which is very demanding about the time and engagement of both teachers and students. This study also involved the students and the course teacher inside and outside the classroom in the six months of the semester. Ensuring regular attendance for both was the most challenging aspect. It also demanded a rigorous task of evaluation and check up of the writing scripts and recording the aspects by the teacher. As the students would develop their writing skill, the teacher also could assess the teaching method and off course the assessment effectiveness. A win-win attitude of both the parties involved in the assessment was the core of overall success.

This study could implement portfolio assessment in a limited boundary of an ESL writing course. The write ups of those particular students in other subjects could also kept in folder for assessment. Teachers of other subjects could also be included for feedback and classroom discussions. In this way a more congruous learning and development could take place. Not only English writing , Reading and Speaking and Listening courses



could be assessed by portfolio assessment which could ensure that the students are truly learning and developing academically and linguistically.

The educational significance of portfolio assessment has not been ignored by academicians all over the world. There are many countries of the world which encouraging its implementation to judge effective teaching and learning. However its massive implementation is yet to take place. This study also confirms as portfolio assessment could be used as a successful assessment process even if the conventional assessment by examinations run simultaneously.

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