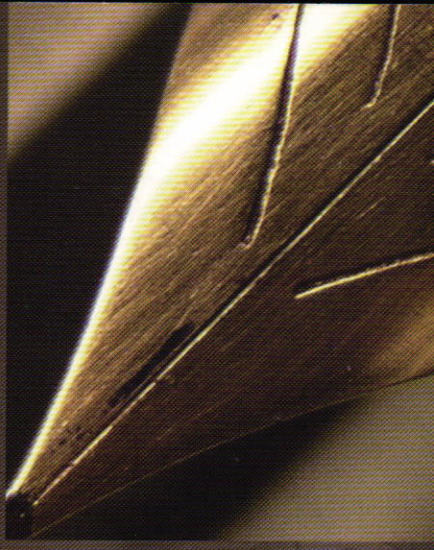


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DİLBİLİM, DİL ÖĞRETİMİ VE ÇEVİRİBİLİM YAZILARI

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CİLT - I

The Effects of Keeping a Portfolio on the Learners' Attitudes towards Research

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Introduction

Portfolios have been used in a range of contexts for a variety of purposes for more than several decades. Portfolios have been used in a variety of professions, such as architecture, photography, art, or advertising usually with the purpose of demonstrating work and potential to clients. Moreover, to sample and judge their own life work, experts often keep longitudinal collections of their ideas, drafts, and questions in their portfolios.

Portfolios have recently become popular in educational circles as a type of performance assessment procedure. The term portfolio became current in the U.S. education system during the early 1970s. For more than a decade it referred to a collection of writings prepared in a single writing class and graded by a single teacher. The current explosion in portfolio-based writing assessment began in the mid-1980s and it began to be seen both practical and beneficial to the students and teachers. At the close of the 20th century, portfolios were used as the grading mechanism for individual classes in many subject areas and at many levels (Hamp-Lyons & Condon, 2000).

Theoretical framework

A portfolio has been defined in a variety of ways by different researchers. For example, Tierney, Cartner, and Desai (1991) see portfolios "as systematic collections by students and teachers that could help both consider effort, improvement, processes, and achievement across a diverse range of contexts that were read or written" (p. 10). Rief (1991) defines a portfolio as a compilation of students' stories in which they act as readers and writers, which are rich with evidence of what students are able to do and how they are able to do it. Similarly, Hill and Ruptic (1994) define a portfolio as "an organized collection of student work and self-reflections that helps paint a portrait of the whole child" (p.21). For Moya and O'Malley (1994), the portfolio is a purposeful collection of materials assembled over a period of time by a learner to provide evidence of skills, abilities and dispositions as they relate to the learners' field of interest. Likewise, according to Genesee and Upshur (1996) a portfolio is "a purposeful collection of students' work that demonstrates to students and others their efforts, progress, and achievements" (p. 26). Finally, Altieri and Larsson view (2000) a portfolio as "a collection of ideas, insights, feelings, beliefs, and observations that shows a student's efforts, progress, and achievement in one or more areas" (p. 6).

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Portfolios have been used in the second language education as an alternative assessment device and as an instrument for self-growth. Portfolios have been suggested as an alternative to traditional assessment (e.g., multiple-choice, short answer, essay) which has traditionally been used to assess students' progress evokes knowledge on discrete, hierarchically arranged units in which increased expertise is represented along a single dimension. Thus, traditional assessment should be complemented with other indicators including alternative assessments that show how a language learner is learning. Alternative assessment, or non-traditional assessment, has become an umbrella term for anything other than standardized, multiple-choice tests. It is a useful means of gathering evidence regarding how learners approach, process, and complete real life tasks in the target language (Gaith, 2002). Portfolios as an example of alternative assessment share three main characteristics: collection, selection, and reflection; and, these three are the basic components from which all language portfolios must be built (Hamp-Lyons & Condon, 2000).

In addition to their being widely used as language assessment tools with the aforementioned qualities, portfolios help learners' self-growth, so they develop intellectual autonomy (Nunes, 2004).

The advantages of using portfolios as a self-growth tool include offering students a concrete way to value their work, reflect on their performance, enhance their learning and autonomy, alter their views of the teacher's role and their own role, and encourage themselves to take responsibility for their learning (Brown, 1998; Paulson, Paulson & Meyer, 1991; Yueh, 1999).

In second language education portfolio studies carried out with students have generally been done for assessment and self-growth (Ballard, 1992; Barootchi & Keshavaraz, 2002). There have also been a few studies with pre- or in-service teachers in which portfolios have been preferred as a means of self-growth and professional development tool (Altieri,Winzer & Larsson, 2000; Atay, 2003).The present study, however, focuses on using portfolios with the upper-intermediate students not as an alternative assessment but as a self-growth tool.

The impetus for the present study comes from my belief that the EFL students are accustomed to traditional way of instruction; that is, they always expect a flow from the central authority, the teacher in this case. The students do not seem to be taking responsibility for their language learning and self-growth. They do not seem to have control over and confidence in their own learning, either. Therefore, the present study aimed to investigate the effects of keeping a research-based portfolio on the attitudes of the upper intermediate Turkish EFL learners' attitudes towards research. The following research question was addressed in this study:

1. Will there be a change in the learners' attitudes towards research after they take part in the research-based portfolio study?

Method

Participants and Setting

The participants of the study were a class of 18 upper-intermediate Turkish EFL learners enrolled in English Preparatory School of an English-medium state university in Istanbul, Turkey. This particular group of students was selected randomly among 16 upper-intermediate level classes at the university at the time of the study. The study took place at the beginning of the second semester of the 2003-2004 academic year. The teacher of this group was the researcher herself.

Portfolio instruction

The students received one class hour of portfolio assignment that was incorporated in the six-hour regular reading instruction for six weeks. In their portfolios, the students included three different research-based assignments, and a reflection paragraph after each assignment The students wrote these paragraphs in order to reflect on the activities they carried out in the research-based portfolio study.

In the first week of the treatment, for Assignment 1, the students were asked to bring a 2-3 page long, unsimplified article about the subject that was being covered in the class during the reading course as a curriculum requirement. Then, the students wrote the summary of their articles, which was their first draft, in the classroom in a given time of 30 minutes. The students explained what they had written to their partners after having been paired up by their teacher. With the help of the feedback they received from their peers, each student revised and rewrote his or her summary in the classroom as the second draft.

In the second week of the study, for Assignment 2, the students were taken to the self-access (the library of the Preparatory School) by the teacher. They were asked to find the same length of an article which related to the content of the lesson and which included different types of experimental studies conducted in different settings. This time, the students summarized their article by especially focusing on the study parts of the articles.

One week later, in the third week, the students prepared a 2-3 page long hypothetical research with a hypothesis by taking the study in the article they had read as a source. They included a hypothetical methodology part in which they had subjects and data collection sections. They shared what they had written with the whole class. The teacher collected these papers, commented on them in the form of individual conferencing.

In the fourth week, for Assignment 3, the students were assigned into groups of three by the teacher. However, groups were formed randomly with the help of the students' name cards. Each group read at least 2-3 articles of their own choice. In other words, this time the topic was self-selected and the groups were free to decide on the topic they wished to cover. They informed the teacher about the topics they chose and showed the articles they picked. The possibility of the topic and the articles were decided all together in the form of conferencing. In the light of these articles, each group carried out a small-scale research on their own. For the fifth week, they

wrote a brief literature review. Following the literature review section in the methodology section, they limited their subjects to 10 and they used questionnaires or interviews as data collection tool. They mostly chose their friends from other classes or their peers who knew English out of school as their subjects. Before they handed their final draft, the students analyzed their data and discussed the results and interpreted them in conclusion part of their research paper.

As the final step of the study, in the sixth week, the students completed and handed in their portfolios after they had a conferencing session with their teacher.

All throughout the study, the teacher reviewed the students' papers at every step and was present to share their experiences and offer advice, suggestions, and guidance when required.

Data collection and analysis

In order to explore the existing beliefs and attitudes of the learners towards carrying out a research, an interview was conducted before the study started. They were asked to talk about what research meant to them during the interview. At the end of the study, the subjects were interviewed again and asked, in addition to the first interview question, if the portfolio study they participated in changed their opinions, beliefs and/or attitudes towards research. With the aim of seeing the long-term effects of the study, the students were interviewed six months after the study. The interviews were conducted, tape-recorded and transcribed by the researcher.

Data collected from the above-mentioned source was analyzed by means a qualitative strategy. The interviews were analyzed by means of pattern coding as suggested by Miles and Huberman (1994).

Results and Discussion

As abovementioned, the data for the study came from the interviews conducted before and after the study. The analysis of the interview conducted before the study revealed that 13 out of 18 (72 %) students had positive opinions about research. They defined research as a tool for improving one's self. The following comment illustrates this point:

Research helps people improve themselves and we gain beneficial knowledge as a result of research.

When analyzed further, it was discovered that 14 out of 18 (77%) students reported that research helped them move away from memorization and rote learning. They also added that learning by means of research was permanent and it led to longer retention. They focused on the creative and the critical side of the research. The students illustrated their views in the following words:

Research has a great role in learning. Memorizing is never enough to learn new things.

I believe that research is the best way leading to permanent knowledge.

Five out of 18 students (30%) stated their opinions about the process such as Internet or libraries and the resources that were used while conducting a research. The following statement came up:

I generally use Internet while doing a research but now I can see that at the university level I can also make use of libraries, bookstores, even people.

Eight out of 18 (44%) students commented on the importance of the content of the research. They said that they preferred to work on a research project if the topic was among their hobbies. They stated that they found research fun and enjoyable when it appealed to their interest areas. As examples, the following remarks emerged:

Research reminds me of boring things if the subject is out of my interest areas. If the subject to be researched is one of my favorite topics, then I enjoy doing a research.

It is always fun and enjoyable if you're doing a research on a subject you like.

As it is clear from the responses given in the pre-interview, the students seemed quite conscious about the importance of doing a research.

To the interview conducted at the end of the 6-week study, 16 out of 18 students (89%) responded that their opinions about carrying out a research changed and that they learned how to conduct a research and how to write a research paper. They expressed their feelings about it through the following words:

Before the portfolio study, conducting a research seemed difficult to me; but it eventually turned out to be habit. In short, it's not hard any more.

Ten out of 18 students (56%) stated that they liked group work, which was the third assignment of their portfolios, more because it was more fun and easier than the individual assignments. On the contrary, 6 out of 18 (33%) students said that they preferred to work alone so they liked individual assignments more. It is seen that students made comments specifically on the last step of the portfolio study in which they formed groups of three and completed this step in this manner. The following response emerged:

Individual assignments we did were harder than the group work. This made the research boring. Group work was both more fun and easier.

Since I always prefer working alone I did not quite enjoy working as a group.

Ten out of 18 (56%) students stated that they found the last assignment in the portfolio study the most enjoyable because the subject of their assignment was fun as they worked on the self-selected topics. They also concluded that they did not just memorize but they really learned about the subject a lot; therefore, the research they carried out was fun and beneficial. The following comments illustrate their point:

I learned a lot of new things on the subject I wrote about. If the topic had been boring one, I wouldn't have enjoyed the assignment at all.

Learning as a result of the research we conducted in the class was more enjoyable and permanent.

As the students' responses revealed, they had already had positive opinions about the research. Their definition of research was based on what they heard rather than what they knew, let alone experienced. The comments made by the students after the study on the meaning of research indicated that they enjoyed being the part of the portfolio study. They stated that they now realized how fun and beneficial it was to be the active participants in their own learning instead of being passive learners.

The interview conducted 6 months after the study indicated that the students still showed a great appreciation of the research study as they conducted similar type of researches in their majors.

To summarize, as the results of the interviews suggest that keeping a research-based portfolio affected students' behavioral intentions to continue language study.

Conclusion

The present study aimed to find out the attitudes of the Turkish upper-intermediate EFL learners towards research. The findings of the study revealed that the 6-week research-based portfolio study broadened the students' perspectives on carrying out a research.

As the findings of the study revealed, students benefited from the portfolio assignment although they knew they would not be graded. I, as the researcher, observed that they prepared their portfolios enthusiastically and they enjoyed the process. Additionally, integrating research-based portfolio study into the regular language instruction with EFL learners contributed to their self-growth. Therefore, such type of an alternative instruction can be implemented at prep schools.

Finally, further research with different proficiency levels of students may yield different findings on the use of portfolios as an alternative teaching tool.

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