

FEATURES

MONITORING GROWTH IN WRITING THROUGH PORTFOLIOS

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Abstract

Portfolios are widely used nowadays in schools, colleges, universities and teacher education contexts in many different countries. One of the key advantages of portfolio assessment is that it integrates instruction and assessment. This study has been conducted in the context of an in-service teacher education programme. The teachers in this programme put together a portfolio that included all the essays, self-assessment reports and reflective pieces they had written over a period of two months as part of their course. The reasons for asking these teachers to maintain this portfolio was to develop their writing abilities, to monitor their growth in writing and to also to use assessment for developmental purposes. In this study, I will examine how teachers have grown in different ways through this portfolio project.

Keywords: Portfolio, teacher education, self-assessment reports, reflective pieces

Introduction

In the Indian education system, the term evaluation is associated with examination, stress and anxiety. As stated in the National Curriculum Framework (2005), current procedures of evaluation which measure and assess a very limited range of learner faculties, are highly inadequate for measuring and assessing the skills and competencies involved in language reception and production. Moreover, they do not provide the complete picture of an individual's abilities or progress towards fulfilling the aims of education in general and second language learning in particular.

As far as writing in a second language is concerned, it is a common practice to collect and evaluate individual writing pieces as single performances, and make inferences from these performances about the writing ability of the students. However, this method of assessment has several limitations. As pointed out by Weigle (2002), two of the most serious limitations are: (1) writing done under timed conditions on an unfamiliar topic does not accurately reflect the conditions under which most writing is done in non-testing situations, or writing as it is taught and practised in the classroom, and (2) it is difficult to generalize from a single writing sample to a much broader universe of writing in different genres and for different purposes and audiences. Durairajan (2015) points out that when we assess students, we need to assess "three aspects of capability, called the three p's; progress, product and whenever possible, some of the learning processes". She feels that alternative assessments can evaluate not only the product but also progress in learning. Portfolio assessment is an alternative approach to writing assessment that allows broader inferences about writing ability than are possible with single-shot approaches to evaluating writing (Weigle, 2002). Such an assessment is therefore assessment for and not of learning. Assessment for learning must find a way of capturing the writer's growth in writing. This is possible with a "progress portfolio". A progress portfolio gives us information about the ways in which the writing of a learner has improved. This kind of a portfolio, also becomes a good record of continuous assessment (Durairajan, 2015).

A portfolio may be broadly defined as "a purposeful collection of student work that exhibits to the student (and/or others) the student's efforts, progress, or achievement in (a) given area(s)" (Northwest Evaluation Association, 1991; cited in Weigle, 2002). In terms of writing

assessment, a portfolio is a collection of written texts written for different purposes over a period of time, evaluated to assess the process the writer undergoes while writing, the product and also the growth in writing. This way, the continuous and comprehensive evaluation of writing skills can be carried out in the classroom, which helps in capturing individual growth trajectories of students (Durairajan, 2016).

In India however, portfolios have not gained much currency. This is because teachers themselves are not aware of the potential benefits of portfolios. They are not sure about using them for developing students' language proficiency, especially their writing skills. The National Curriculum Framework (2005) as well as the National Curriculum Framework for Teacher Education (2010) place greater emphasis on the use of portfolios in schools and teacher education contexts. As teachers teaching English in primary schools are not so proficient in English, this study is an attempt to serve a dual purpose. Teachers will improve their own proficiency by writing and reflecting on their writing and also learn to work with portfolios by experiencing it themselves first hand.

The Context

The context for the study was an in-service teacher development programme. The teachers involved in the study belonged to a single cohort (67 in number). They taught English along with other subjects in primary schools. They had varied teaching experiences but limited proficiency in English. In fact, enhancing their English language proficiency was one of the challenges of the training programme.

The teachers assembled portfolios in their writing classes during a two-month in-service teacher development programme at the Regional Institute of English South India, Bangalore. The writing programme was based on portfolio theory and the pedagogical practice related to this theory. In teaching writing, the process-oriented approach was followed. Each week, one writing task was administered to the teachers. The task was completed using the process-oriented approach, which involved various stages such as free writing, prompted discussion, brainstorming, peer assessment, revising and editing. Teachers produced the final piece using these process strategies. The process data such as initial drafts, comments from peers and feedback from trainers were kept in individual portfolios along with the final products. Teachers carried out self-assessment regularly using the self-assessment checklists provided to them. After the completion of all the tasks, teachers recorded their reflections on the writing processes they had followed and on their own development in writing over a period of time.

The portfolio included texts in a variety of forms or genres, written for a variety of audiences and for a variety of different purposes. It consisted of the following tasks:

Introducing a co-learner

A diary entry

A personal letter

An official letter

A report of an event

My philosophy of teaching writing

A self-assessment report of a practise teaching session

A reflective essay on their experience of maintaining a portfolio

In the following discussion, I will focus on one of these tasks—interviewing and introducing a co-learner—and analyse the texts developed by the teacher participants to show how the process writing methodology was followed, how this approach helped teacher participants enhance their writing skills and also how it helped the trainer monitor the teacher participants' growth in writing.

Monitoring Growth in Writing

Task: Interview your co-participant and collect the following information about him/her (name, address, place of work, family, friends, likes and dislikes, favourite person/place, book, achievements, ambition in life, etc.). Write a text of about 100 to 120 words to describe him/her.

This was the initial task given to the teachers. The teachers collected information about their co-participants by asking questions and discussing their answers with them. Once the ideas were generated, they selected the most useful information and arranged it in a sequence.

The writers moved from this “pre-writing stage” to writing the first draft by developing the ideas further. The first draft was subjected to peer evaluation. The teachers worked with a partner and got them to read what they had drafted. The partner made a positive remark on the draft and commented that some points be deleted. This was in line with the process approach as in the initial draft, the focus was on content and meaning and not on grammar and other aspects of language.

The second draft was an improved version of the first draft. The trainer gave feedback to the teachers on their second draft by commenting on their ideas and organization as well as errors in grammar and mechanics. Based on the trainer's feedback, the third and final draft was prepared by the teachers.

Let us now look at the texts developed by one of the teacher participants, namely, Kalaivani.

Teacher participant 1: Kalaivani

First draft

I met my co-learner on 02.07.2015. I talked with her. I collected some interests informations. That persons name is P S Mahalakshmi belongs to Coimbatore district in Tamilnadu. She works in an elementary school at Pommanan Palayam. Her husband loganathan is doing business in Erode. She has only one son who's name is Elango. She is the devotee of St Elango. So, she named her son Elango. Mrs Sankari is her close friend, who is working with her. Both of them had no secrets.

She likes to sing songs. Her voice is very sweet. Always she likes to hum songs. She doesn't like to cheat others as well as she hates cheating also. Her lovely voice is her strength and she is very pleasing and friendly to speak. She is MA literature and passed all the type writing exams. She send articles to magazines also.

Her ambition is to become a member in Tamilnadu ministry.

Third and Final draft

My dear friend...

I met my co-learner on 02.07.2015. I talked with her. I collected some interesting information. That person's name is P S Mahalakshmi who belongs to Coimbatore district in Tamilnadu. She works in an elementary school at Pommanan Palayam. Her husband

Loganathan is doing business in Erode. She has only one son whose name is Elango. She is the devotee of St Elango. So, she named her son Elango. Mrs Sankari is her close friend, who is working with her. Both of them keep no secrets.

She likes to sing songs because her voice is very sweet. She likes to hum songs always. She doesn't like to cheat others. Her lovely voice is her strength and she is very pleasing and friendly to speak. She has qualified MA literature and passed all the type writing exams. She sends articles to magazines also. Her ambition is to become a member in Tamilnadu ministry. I wish her all the best.

Table 1

Progress in writing (T1)

| First draft | Revisions made in the third/final draft | Growth in writing |
|---|--|---|
| There is an abrupt ending. | There is a concluding line, "I wish her all the best." | The teacher trainee has revised the content by adding a title, a concluding line and deleting irrelevant details. |
| No title | Has added a title. | |
| She doesn't like to cheat others as well as she hates cheating also. | She doesn't like to cheat others. | The teacher trainee has learnt to use the appropriate tense form. |
| Both of them had no secrets | Both of them keep no secrets. | |
| Task 1: I collected some interests informations. | I collected some interesting information. | The trainee has learnt to use the correct word forms. |
| She has only one son who's name is... | She has only one son whose name is... | |
| She sends article to magazines... | She sends articles to magazines... | The trainee has learnt to use conjunctions to combine two parts of the sentence. |
| That persons name is P S Mahalakshmi belongs to Coimbatore district in Tamilnadu. | That person's name is P S Mahalakshmi who belongs to Coimbatore district in Tamilnadu. | |
| She likes to sing songs. Her voice is very sweet. | She likes to sing songs because her voice is very sweet. | Word order has been changed. |
| Always she likes to hum songs. | She likes to hum songs always. | |

Looking at Kalaivani's drafts, we can see that she has shown improvement in different aspects of writing such as enrichment of the content by addition of additional details, organization of ideas, word choice, word form, use of tenses, punctuation, etc. In the third draft, Kalaivani has organized the ideas in a more logical way. The details related to her co-participant's family have been mentioned in the first paragraph and information about likes,

hobbies, etc., have been given in the next paragraph. She has also included more details such as the reasons for liking her co-participant and the book.

Let us now look at the texts developed by another teacher participant, namely Siddharuda Gogi.

Teacher participant 2: Siddharuda Gogi

First draft

I have met with a friend at RIE. His name was Sharanappa. He is a Assistant teacher at Bevur in Bagalkot district. He joined the service in June 1990. His qualification is BA, TCH.

He has three children. He is enjoying with his family members.

He like to read holy books, GK books and he also likes to visit calm places, hill stations, etc. he dislikes wasting time.

His ambition is to become a good teacher and to serve the nation with utmost sincearity.

Third and Final draft

Here is my friend Mr Sharanappa. He is an Assistant Teacher at Bevur in Bagalkot district, Karnataka. His qualification is BA, TCH. He joined the service in 1990. He has three children. He is leading a happy life with his family members. He likes to read holy books, GK books and he also likes to visit holy places, hill stations, etc. he dislikes wasting time in useless discussions because it produces no fruitful result. His favourite person is Mahathma Gandhi. He likes him because of his simplicity.

He was awarded ‘Jana Mechida Shikshaka’(a teacher who is loved by people) by the Government of Karnataka. His ambition is to become a good teacher and to serve the nation with utmost sincerity.

Table 2

Progress in writing (T2)

| First draft | Revisions made in the third/final draft | Growth in writing |
|---|---|--|
| I have met with a friend at RIE. | Here is my friend Mr Sharanappa. | The teacher trainee has learnt to use a more appropriate form to introduce another person. |
| He is enjoying with his family members. | He is leading a happy life with his family members. | The trainee is able to rephrase the sentence to convey meaning in a better manner. |
| a Assistant teacher | an Assistant teacher | The trainee has learnt to use the correct word. |
| He like to read holy books | He likes to read holy books | Has used the correct word form. |
| sincerity | sincerity | Used the correct spelling. |

It is clear from the final draft that the participant added more details, and has more appropriate paragraphing. The final draft also shows improvement in the use of structure, choice of words and style of writing.

Let us now look at the work of one more teacher participant, Manju.

Teacher participant 3: Manju M.

First draft

In RIE training I met my beloved very diligence, straneous, person in Dept of Education in Kerala. I feel very proud of him, he rendered his dedicated service to his citizens. He did his education in his residence, at Cheruvadi, in the meanwhile he picked very adventure step towards university to grab all his degrees TTC, B Ed, M Ed. To his efforts shows always gratitude.

He's been working as a teacher still in front all the eyes of Kerala's citizen. If God permits he is completing his Dignified service with his Dept exactly twenty years.

He has a very good short and sweet family. He always interested in reading. His major task is to have PG Diploma in CIEFL.

He's written a book in 1999. He published his views on the 'An Enquiry in Child Centred Education'.

Third and final draft

Do you want to know Mr Rahiman...?

This is Rahiman. I met him in RIE training. I feel very proud of him as he rendered his dedicated service to his trainees. He did his education at Cheruwadi. He completed his TTC, B Ed ad M Ed courses in Kerala. He is very fond of teaching. If God permits, he is going to complete his 20 years of service in the Dept by coming August.

He has a small and sweet family. He is always interested in reading books, especially stories, language games, puzzles and literature of great writers. He published a book in 1999 titled as 'An Enquiry into Child-centred Education'. His major goal is to have P G Diploma from EFL University.

Lastly, I would like to say 'I won't miss this friend until my heartbeat stops.'

Table 3

Progress in writing (T3)

| First draft | Revisions made in the third/final draft | Growth in writing |
|--|--|---|
| In RIE training I met my beloved very diligence, straneous, person in Dept of Education in Kerala. | This is Rahiman. I met him... | The teacher trainee has used a more appropriate expression to introduce his friend. |
| No title, no concluding sentence. | A title and a concluding line have been added. | |
| If God permits he is completing his Dignified service with his Dept | If God permits, he is going to complete his 20 years of service in | The teacher trainee has learnt to rephrase the sentence to convey |

| | | |
|--|--|---|
| exactly twenty years. | the Dept by coming August. | meaning in a better manner. |
| He has a very good short and sweet family | He has a small and sweet family | The trainee has learnt to use a more appropriate word. |
| He's written a book in 1999. | He published a book in 1999... | Has used appropriate tense form. |
| I feel very proud of him, he rendered his dedicated service to his trainees. | I feel very proud of him as he rendered his dedicated service to his trainees. | A conjunction is used to combine two parts of the sentence. |
| He always interested in reading. | He is always interested in reading... | Is able to use auxiliary verb. |

If we look at the third column in all the three tables, it is clear that teachers made “small qualitative gains” (Tharu,1981, as cited in Durairajan, 2016) in their writing. All three teachers demonstrated growth in writing by enriching their content in the final draft. This was achieved by: using conjunctions and linkers, using appropriate language expressions to introduce their co-learners, rephrasing sentences to convey meanings better and being more aware of tense forms. However, growth was varied across teachers. T1 learnt to use the correct word form and word order in sentences, whereas T2 learnt to use appropriate articles and correct spellings. T3 learnt to use more suitable vocabulary and auxiliary verbs. Thus, it may be concluded that growth will always be varied and hence needs to be captured differently for different learners (Tharu,1981, as cited in Durairajan, 2016) .

It is also evident from the final drafts that peer evaluation helped the teacher participants to focus on the content, revise the first draft and prepare an improved version of it. The trainer responded to the teacher participants’ ideas and organization, as well as errors in grammar and mechanics. This helped the teacher participants to pay attention to and value feedback on all aspects of the writing. The trainer used a special set of symbols for drawing attention to grammatical features, such as “P” for error in punctuation and “WW” for wrong word.

The final step of process writing was carried out by the teachers themselves. They added more information, rearranged ideas and looked at grammatical accuracy and correctness of form. If we compare the first and the third drafts, we can clearly see that the writers worked hard on the content and detail of the text. Evaluation was thus a continuous process and the teacher/writer received feedback at every stage of the writing process.

One of the virtues of process writing and the portfolio approach as identified by several scholars is that the writer tries to express her/his thoughts more clearly and appropriately and as a result, the language of the final product as well as its overall coherence and effectiveness improves. The texts we have discussed so far provide evidence of the growth in teachers’ writing abilities.

The teachers, initially, seemed to have difficulty in choosing the right words and structures, organizing the content and deciding on the format. They were also not sure of the correct spelling of a few words. However, they used different strategies such as discussing their problems with their peers and the instructor, consulting dictionaries, reading aloud their pieces to others and doing a lot of reference work, to overcome their difficulties. The result

was that the final draft showed considerable improvement as compared to the first and second draft. This approach of creating teacher portfolios helped the trainer in capturing individual growth trajectories with regard to the teachers' writing skills.

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