

An Investigation into the use of Writing Portfolio in Improving Writing Competence for Pre-Intermediate Non- English Major Students in Some Intense English Writing

Nguyễn Thị Kim Anh

Vietnam

*Corresponding Author: Nguyễn Thị Kim Anh, Vietnam. Email: anhntk@huit.edu.vn

Abstract: This research investigates the use of writing e-portfolios in improving writing competence for 60 pre-intermediate students enrolled in online courses at HUIT. The students were randomly divided into two groups: the control group and the experimental group. Both groups took pre- and post-tests; however, the experimental group engaged in a learning technique called writing portfolio for 12 weeks, while the control group followed the traditional learning method, which included learning theory and completing homework. Prior to the intervention, the teacher was trained by an IELTS expert to accurately score the students' writing based on IELTS criteria. During the 12-week period, students in the experimental group were introduced to six types of IELTS Writing Task 1. They spent two weeks on each writing type. For each type, students tackled three topics; for each topic, they were required to write an initial draft and a final version after receiving feedback from the teacher and participating in peer discussions. After 12 weeks, the post-test results showed a significant improvement in the writing scores of the experimental group. The improvement was evident across different writing criteria, including Vocabulary, Grammar, Task Achievement, and Cohesion and Coherence. These results demonstrated that the use of writing portfolios could effectively enhance students' writing competence. Additionally, questionnaires and interviews conducted with the teacher and students from the experimental group revealed that while students faced challenges during the 12-week writing portfolio process, peer discussions were particularly beneficial in supporting their learning.

Keywords: Writing e-portfolio, Writing Competence, IELTS Writing Criteria, Online Courses, Peer Discussion

1. INTRODUCTION

1.1. Rationale

The landscape of language education has developed significantly, leading to the need for effective pedagogical strategies to improve learners' English competence at all levels. Writing, one of the four essential language skills, is crucial for EFL students as it enables them to produce original writing across various text genres (Weigle, 2002). Despite Vietnam's active integration into the global market through ASEAN and WTO, the quality of English education still falls short of international standards, even with significant attention and resources (Hoang, 2010; Pham, 2014; Phan et al., 2014). This emphasizes the importance of English education in the country and the need for effective learning policies, particularly at the pre-intermediate level, where students transition from basic to more complex language skills. According to Hoang (2018), students should focus on regular learning rather than evaluations, as grade pressure can lead to anxiety and hinder cognitive growth.

The use of writing portfolios offers a reflective approach to language development, with Hamp-Lyons and Condon (2000) identifying nine qualities, such as student-centered control, delayed evaluation, and tracking progress over time.

1.2. Aims and objectives

1.2.1. Aims

This research aims to explore the effectiveness of incorporating writing portfolios as a teaching tool for pre-intermediate students in intensive English writing courses. It seeks to provide insights into enhancing writing competence and addressing the limitations of traditional methods.

1.2.2. Objectives

Investigate the impact of writing portfolios on improving English writing competence.

Assess how portfolios affect grammar, vocabulary, coherence, and organization.

Identify challenges students face when using writing portfolios.

1.3. Scope of the study

The research scope of this study centered on investigating the influence of writing portfolio on the enhancement of English Writing Competence among a group of 60 pre-intermediate learners learning at Huit University.

1.4. Research questions

- How does the use of writing portfolios impact the quality of writing practice among pre-intermediate students?
- What are the specific areas of English writing where pre- intermediate students demonstrate proficiency or struggle?
- What challenges do pre-intermediate students face when using writing portfolio?

1.5. Definition of terms

An "portfolio" is a collection of an individual's work, including documents, charts, and multimedia (Lorenzo & Ittelson, 2005). It allows for interactive feedback and reflection, enhancing learning (Greenberg, 2004). There are three types of portfolios, but this study focuses on those used for assessing learning and career development (Lorenzo & Ittelson, 2005).

Writing Competence consists of abilities, knowledge, and attributes, such as skills acquired through practice, factual knowledge, and natural qualities like thoughts and feelings (University of Victoria, 2011).

1.6. Significance of the study

This study contributes significantly to educational methods, theory, and the learning environment by exploring the impact of writing portfolios on pre-intermediate students' English writing competence.

It aims to provide educators with evidence-based insights into portfolio use as an instructional tool, focusing on improving task response, vocabulary, cohesion, and grammar. These findings could influence curriculum design and enhance both student outcomes and future academic and professional success.

1.7. Theoretical Background

Language education is a continuously evolving field which has a purpose of meeting the demand of learners. In today's time, writing skill is a basement for successful language acquisition because good writing skills allow learners apply grammar and vocabulary in meaningful context which helps them develop their communicative competence as well.

1.7.1 Importance of writing skills

Writing is crucial for pre-intermediate students' progress (Hyland, 2006). It allows learners to express their thoughts and adhere to genre limitations (Harmer, 2004). Coherence and cohesion, essential for writing, help ideas flow smoothly (Odell & Hobbs, 2001; Clark, 2006). Grammar and vocabulary play a central role in producing effective writing (Fidan, 2016; Ellis, 2008), while vocabulary mastery is key to writing proficiency (Pigada & Schmitt, 2006). Task achievement involves responding well to all criteria (Verhelst et al., 2009).

1.7.2. Portfolio as an Intervention in Writing Instruction

Portfolios offer a dynamic and reflective process for improving writing (Yang, 2003), with origins in the art world (Barrett, quoted in Wang & Liao, 2008). Empirical studies show portfolios enhance

proficiency, motivation, and metacognitive skills (Reynolds & Patton, 2014; Anderson & Bowman, 2017). The process-based approach emphasizes writing as a constructive process (Matsuda, 2003).

1.8. Review of Previous Studies

Barnard and Deyzel (2003) describe a portfolio as a deliberate collection of work reflecting individual development and growth. Jee (2008) explored portfolios for process writing, showing enhanced student motivation and literacy. Bacabac (2012) found that e- portfolios improved students' technical writing and professional competitiveness. Kocoglu (2008) highlighted how portfolios help students adapt to digital advancements, while Akçil and Arap (2009) noted the long-term learning benefits. Jenson and Treuer (2014) noted their role in fostering deep learning. In a study by Muin and Hafidah (2021), 88% of Indonesian students agreed that portfolios enhanced their English proficiency. In Vietnam's context, the government's push for modernization makes English vital (Lingoda, 2023). Various studies, like Kabilan (2016) and Thang et al. (2012), support the use of portfolios for professional and language skill development, particularly within Malaysian university.

2. RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

2.1. Research design

This study utilized both quantitative and qualitative methods, employing pre-tests and post-tests along with a rubric to assess students' writing based on four IELTS Writing Task 1 criteria: Task Response, Coherence and Cohesion, Lexical Resource, and Grammatical Range and Accuracy. The participants were divided into two groups: experimental and control. Both groups took identical pre- tests and post-tests, but only the experimental group participated in the writing portfolio intervention. A pair t-test and an independence test were used to measure the significance of differences between the two groups. To explore difficulties faced by students using portfolios, semi-structured interviews with open-ended questions were conducted.

2.2. Selected subject

The study involved 60 pre-intermediate non-major English students who were selected through entrance tests. Thirty students were randomly assigned to the control group and thirty to the experimental group. The control group only completed pre- and post-tests, while the experimental group engaged in writing portfolios on various topics and genres.

2.3. Sampling

The sampling included 60 pre- and post-test papers from both groups, along with 630 writing portfolio papers from the experimental group.

2.4. Data collection

2.4.1. Research Instruments

Pre-test and Post-test Assessments

Both groups took a pre-test aligned with pre-intermediate English proficiency to assess their writing competence. A post-test followed the writing portfolio intervention to evaluate its effectiveness by comparing the pre- and post-test results.

Semi-structured Interviews

Focus groups and semi-structured interviews with open-ended questions were conducted to understand the challenges students encountered while using writing portfolios.

Questionnaires:

A five-point Likert scale was employed in these multiple-choice questions, which is a widely recognized tool for measuring attitudes, opinions, and perceptions. The Likert scale allows respondents to rate their agreement or disagreement with a particular statement on a numerical scale, typically ranging from 1 to 5.

2.4.2. Research Procedure:

The research procedure consisted of two primary components: pre- tests and post-tests, as well as the writing portfolio intervention. Semi-structured interviews were conducted to explore students'

challenges with the writing portfolios, utilizing reflective, closed, and open-ended questions to collect comprehensive data on their experiences.

Pre-test

The pre-test was crucial in establishing a baseline of students' English writing proficiency. It consisted of three parts:

Writing Portfolio Intervention:

The 12-week writing portfolio intervention focused on different IELTS Writing Task 1 chart types, with peer review and teacher feedback guiding the revision process.

- Weeks 1-2: Line Chart
- Weeks 3-4: Bar Chart
- Weeks 5-6: Pie Chart
- Weeks 7-8: Table
- Weeks 9-10: Map
- Weeks 11-12: Process

Post-test

The post-test, administered after the portfolio intervention, mirrored the pre-test structure to evaluate improvements in writing competence. By comparing pre- and post-test results, the research assessed the effectiveness of the intervention.

Semi-structure Interview

In addition to quantitative measures, qualitative interviews conducted after each writing portfolio assignment provided deeper insights into students' challenges and experiences throughout the intervention.

2.5. Data analysis

2.5.1. Reliability

The reliability Statistics of the questionnaires

The Cronbach's Alpha of the questionnaires was 0.712 > 0.6, so the questionnaires were valid to be used

2.5.2. Validity

To ensure the validity of this research, a pilot test was conducted before the full-scale study commenced. The pilot test involved a small group of participants from the target population (10 students), randomly selected, to undergo a simplified version of the experimental procedure. This allowed for an assessment of the research instruments and procedures.

2.5.3. Data analysis tool

The researcher used Paired t-test and Independence test from SPSS to determine the Mean scores (M) and Standard Deviation (SD) in Pre-writing test in both classes (experimental class and controlled class) which were compared to identify the statistically significant difference.

3. RESULTS AND FINDINGS

3.1. Results

The impact of writing portfolio on the writing competence of pre- intermediate students.

Table 3.1

Mean Scores of the Pre-tests of Both Groups

Table 3.1. indicated that the writing performance of both control and experimental groups were equal before the writing portfolio intervention

	Pretest Group	N	Mean	Std. Deviation	Std. Error Mean
Pretest of Two Group	Control Group	30	4.3173	.30026	.05482
	Experimental Group	30	4.2603	.30201	.05514

Table 3.2. Mean Scores between the Pre and Post test of the Control Group

Mean		N	Std. Deviation	Std. Error Mean	
Pair 1	Pretest Control group	4.3173	30	.30026	.05482
	Posttest Control Group	4.3443	30	.31162	.05689

The mean scores from the pre and post-test of the control group were 4.3163 and 4.3431 respectively. The two-sided p-value (0.054) was just above the standard significance threshold (0.05), indicating that the difference between pretest and posttest scores was not statistically significant at the 0.05 level.

Table 3.3. Mean Score of Pre-test and the Post test of the Experimental group

Mean		N	Std. Deviation	Std. Error Mean	
Pair 1	Pretest Experimental	4.2603	30	.30201	.05514
	Posttest Experimental	5.4377	30	.33704	.06154

The mean scores from the pre and post- test of the experimental group are 4.2603, and 5.0107 respectively. The very low p-value (< 0.001) showed that this difference is highly statistically significant.

Table 3.4. Mean Scores of the Post-test of both Groups

	Posttest Group	N	Mean	Std. Deviation	Std. Error Mean
Posttest of Both Group	The control group	30	4.3443	.31162	.05689
	The experimental group	30	5.4377	.33704	.06154

The mean score of the post-test was 4.34 in the control group and 5.43 in the experimental group. There was a statistically significant difference between the post-test scores of the Control and Experimental groups (Z 12 weeks of practicing writing).

When asked which were the most difficult and the easiest charts in all types of IELTS Writing Task 1, students were able to choose more than one option. 100% of students said that the easiest was the line chart.

While 21.58% of students identified the map and charts with no time change as the hardest, a close 20.14% found the table most difficult. 80% said that the hardest part was the bar chart with no change in time. 80% of students found it hard to describe processes and maps because there were no specific sample structures to describe trend.

3.5. Discussion of findings

First, regarding to question 1 “How does the use of writing portfolios impact the quality of writing practice among pre- intermediate students? These improvements were particularly evident in the pre- and post-test comparisons, where the mean scores for the experimental group increased significantly from 4.2603 to 5.4377, showing a substantial enhancement in writing skills over the 12-week intervention period.

Anderson and Bowman (2017) highlighted the role of portfolios in fostering metacognitive skills, empowering students to take an active role in their learning process. In general, the students’ mean scores between the first draft and the final draft from all types of IELTS Writing Task 1 showed an increase.

It showed that after the 6th week of the writing portfolio, students start enhancing their writing ability. However, there was a reduction in the mean scores from the week of writing Process, Table and Map- which was considered to be difficult tasks of IELTS Writing Task 1.

However, there was a reduction in the mean scores from the week of writing Table and Map- which was considered to be difficult tasks of IELTS Writing Task 1. Research conducted by Ahmadi, Riasati, & Bavali (2019) on 45 Iranian candidates also showed that students did better in charts compared to tables.

The students’ growth over the 12-week period shows that portfolios offer a structured approach to improving writing proficiency, particularly through the iterative nature of drafting and receiving

feedback. This aligns with Reynolds and Patton (2014), who found that portfolios enhance language proficiency by fostering reflective practices and allowing students to take an active role in their learning process.

Regarding question 2 “What are the specific areas of English writing where pre-intermediate students demonstrate proficiency or struggle?”. Vocabulary showed significant improvement, as evidenced by the data from Chart 1 and pre- and post-test scores.

Pigada and Schmitt (2006) emphasized Norbert Schmitt's assertion that mastering vocabulary is essential as it serves as the groundwork for writing proficiency. One of the most notable areas of improvement observed among pre-intermediate students was their vocabulary usage.

Regarding of question 3 “What challenges do pre-intermediate students face when using writing portfolios in a non-major learning environment? The questionnaires revealed different type of challenges along with improvement and the positive aspects of writing portfolio.

According to Verhelst, Van Avermaet, Takala, Figueras, and North (2009), task achievement was a success in meeting all criteria with well-formed response to the task requirement.

Some students indicated experiencing minor difficulties, leading to procrastination in drafting their essays, including the final versions. These findings are consistent with Wuetherick and Dickinson (2015), who identified digital literacy and technological access as barriers to the successful implementation of portfolios.

Despite these minor challenges, the overall reception of portfolios was positive, with a majority of students agreeing that the portfolio method increased their interest in writing. This supports the conclusions of Aydin (2010), who demonstrated that portfolios foster learner independence and increase motivation through self-directed learning.

It was noted that the collaborative nature of this practice, where they had the opportunity to work alongside their classmates, added a layer to their motivation. Knowing they had to finish their writing in order to discuss it with their peers and avoid falling behind, they made their best effort to complete and review their work to achieve higher scores over time. Aydin (2010) demonstrated that the implementation of portfolios to students taught them self-studying and helped them find their learning initiatives without teachers' guidance.

This research explores the efficacy of incorporating writing e- portfolios as a pedagogical tool to enhance the writing competence of pre-intermediate English learners. The primary aim of the study is to determine how portfolios can improve specific writing skills, such as grammar, vocabulary, task achievement, and coherence, as these elements are critical to achieving success in IELTS Writing Task 1. The investigation further delves into the challenges that students encounter when using portfolios in a non-major learning environment, as well as the areas in which students either excel or struggle.

4. CONCLUSION

To conduct this study, a mixed-methods approach was adopted, combining quantitative and qualitative data collection methods. Sixty pre-intermediate students from 8 different courses were selected and divided into two groups: an experimental group and a control group. Both groups completed a pre-test to measure their baseline writing proficiency, focusing on the four core writing criteria of IELTS Task 1: task achievement, lexical resource, coherence and cohesion, and grammatical range and accuracy. The experimental group then participated in a 12-week writing intervention where they engaged in portfolio writing. Throughout the intervention, students in this group received peer feedback and teacher comments on their drafts, which they used to revise their writing. The control group, on the other hand, followed traditional writing methods, where they completed assignments and received teacher feedback but did not revise their work based on peer discussions. After the 12-week period, both groups took a post-test identical to the pre-test to measure any improvements in their writing abilities.

Additionally, semi-structured interviews were conducted with students to uncover the challenges they faced during the intervention. This qualitative aspect of the research allowed for a more nuanced understanding of the difficulties students encountered in managing their portfolios, time, and external pressures.

The first research question addressed the overall impact of e- portfolios on the quality of writing practice among pre-intermediate students. To answer this question, the researchers compared the pre- test and post-test results of both groups using a paired t-test. The writing scores from the experimental group showed a statistically significant improvement across all four writing criteria, with the largest gains in lexical resource (vocabulary usage). The mean scores of the pre-test and post-test for the experimental group increased from

4.26 to 5.01, reflecting the positive effect of the portfolio method.

On the other hand, the control group showed only a slight improvement in their post-test scores, from 4.31 to 4.34, which was not statistically significant. This clear disparity between the two groups demonstrates the effectiveness of portfolios in enhancing writing performance, particularly by fostering student engagement and encouraging iterative revision through peer and teacher feedback.

The second research question sought to identify the specific areas of English writing in which pre-intermediate students excelled or struggled. Through the analysis of pre- and post-test scores, it became evident that vocabulary was the area where students showed the most significant improvement. This can be attributed to the focus on lexical resource during peer reviews and teacher feedback sessions. The mean scores for vocabulary in the experimental group increased substantially from 4.34 to 4.88. While coherence and cohesion, as well as grammatical accuracy, also improved moderately, task achievement remained a challenge for many students. Task achievement, particularly in describing more complex visuals like maps and tables, proved to be more difficult due to the intricate nature of these tasks, which require a deeper understanding of how to describe trends, changes, and comparisons.

The final research question explored the challenges students faced while using writing portfolios in a non-major learning environment. Based on the semi-structured interviews, several recurring challenges emerged. Time management was the most frequently cited issue, with many students reporting difficulty completing writing tasks within the recommended 20-minute time limit. Although students practiced writing for 12 weeks, the pressure to write four different types of tasks

in one test made it challenging to meet the minimum word count of 150 words, leading some students to submit essays of only 80-90 words. This issue was particularly prominent in more complex tasks like maps and processes, where students struggled to summarize the main points efficiently. Additionally, a small number of students faced technical difficulties when accessing and writing on Google Docs, as some preferred the flexibility of writing on paper whenever possible. Despite these challenges, the majority of students found the e- portfolio experience engaging and motivating. Nearly 90% of students reported that the collaborative nature of peer review and the ability to track their progress through portfolios increased their interest in writing.

Overall, the research findings suggest that writing portfolios can significantly enhance the writing performance of pre-intermediate students, particularly in terms of vocabulary development. While challenges such as time management and task complexity remain, the structured, collaborative nature of the portfolio method encouraged student engagement and provided valuable opportunities for revision and self-reflection. This study contributes valuable insights to the field of language education, offering evidence that portfolios can be an effective tool for improving writing competence in a non-major learning environment. By incorporating these digital portfolios into teaching practices, educators can not only foster more meaningful learning experiences but also help students develop the writing skills necessary for academic and professional success.

4.1. Implications

The findings suggest that portfolios can improve students' writing through structured peer and teacher feedback, enhancing various writing components. Teachers may adopt portfolios to foster student engagement and self-reflection. The study highlights the method's potential across different English proficiency tests, encouraging students to develop self-regulation in their writing.

4.2. Limitations

The small sample size limits generalizability. Additionally, the varied educational and cultural backgrounds of participants may have influenced results. A longer intervention period could offer deeper insights into the long-term effects of portfolios on writing skills. Lastly, technical issues with portfolio usage on Google Sites caused difficulties for some students.

4.3. Suggestions for further studies

Future studies should expand the sample size and consider factors like age, prior education, and learning environments. Extending the intervention duration to an academic year could offer more reliable results and foster stronger writing habits. Research could also explore IELTS Writing Task 2, which requires more advanced skills and critical thinking. The impact of geographical and technological factors should also be considered to ensure broader applicability of methods.

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AUTHOR'S BIOGRAPHY



Ms. Nguyen Thi Kim Anh is currently working in HCM City, University of Industry and Trade as a full-time teacher of English. She earned a BA in English Language Teaching in 1997 and MA in TESOL in 2014. Her research interests include language teaching and learning and language assessment.

Citation: Nguyễn Thị Kim Anh. "An Investigation into the use of Writing Portfolio in Improving Writing Competence for Pre-Intermediate Non- English Major Students in Some Intense English Writing". *International Journal on Studies in English Language and Literature (IJSELL)*. vol. 13, no. 4, pp. 1-9, 2025. Available: DOI: <https://doi.org/10.20431/2347-3134.1304001>.

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