

The Effects Of Using Portfolio In Writing Activities Aimed At Developing The Arabic Language Discourse Competence Of 1st Secondary Grade Students In Housha Secondary School For Girls In Jordan

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Abstract

The focus of the present study is the investigation of the effects of using portfolio in writing activities aimed at developing the Arabic language discourse competence of 1st secondary grade students in Housha secondary school for girls in Jordan. The study sample was chosen purposefully. It consists of two sections for the first secondary grade, namely: the experimental group and the control group. The experimental group consisted of twenty (20) females, while the control group consisted of twenty (20) females as well. The treatment represented in using portfolio was conducted through an academic semester that lasted for three months. At the end of the semester, both groups were tested in using discourse competence components. The results showed that there was a statistically significant difference in favor of the experimental group in using elements of discourse competence due to the treatment. In light of the results, the researcher presented some recommendations at the end of the study.

Keywords: Portfolio, writing activities, discourse competence

Introduction

Portfolio is an ongoing process. It does not evaluate the progress and performance of learners through impromptu paper and pencil tests, neither does it require instructors to evaluate their students' performances within a very limited period of time (Tabatabaei & Assefi, 2012).

Gosselin (1998) states that ongoing assessment is a learning process that examines and documents the learner's progress at certain intervals. The main goals of portfolio assessment are encouraging learners to become more autonomous, to take control of their learning, to make decisions, to

participate in the evaluation of their own work, and to solve the problems they may face individually.

Two basic types of portfolio in language learning are: process-oriented learning (working portfolios) and the product-oriented reporting (showcase portfolios). The learning portfolio can include various process-related materials: action plans, learning logs, drafts of work, comments by the teacher and peers, students' reflections, submitted works, and evaluation criteria and checklists to evaluate progress with regard to clearly defined learning objectives. The reporting portfolios, on the other hand, are used to document language learning outcomes for a variety of purposes, such as giving marks in schools and institutions, applying to a higher education institution, or compiling the purpose of documentary language skills when applying for a job (Kohonen, 2000).

Discourse competence is defined as the ability to understand and produce the range of spoken, written, and visual texts that are characteristics of a language. These texts are to be well-formed and clear. This also includes the ability to convey information appropriately and coherently to those who are listening or viewing the said information. Discourse competence is basically knowing how to interpret the larger content and how to construct longer sentences of language so that when the parts come together, they make up a whole coherent unit. Discourse competence differs from the norm by asking how words, phrases, sentences, etc., are put together to create understandable conversations and other units of language. This term also refers to a speaker's knowledge of the rules governing a language. The term was coined because the combination of utterance and communicative functions are discourse, and this is a component of communicative competence (Canale & Swain, 1980).

Discourse fluency refers to the ability to use the rules and conventions of combining grammatical forms and meanings to achieve unified spoken texts in different genres. This unity of text is achieved through cohesion in form and coherence in meaning. Cohesive devices include pronouns, synonyms, conjunctions, and parallel structures. These devices help to link individual utterances and show the logical or chronological relationships among a series of utterances. Coherence refers to the logical sequencing of the ideas in a text. Discourse fluency is seen as an overall measure of spontaneous speech behavior in peer-interactive situations. The observational categories pertaining to the appropriateness of the language used in a natural way, combined with the functions implementing the communicative goal, can be characterized as a global measure of discourse fluency. They include both linguistic and paralinguistic behaviors (Pillar, 2011).

Discourse competence concerns the selection, sequencing, and arrangement of words, structures, sentences, and utterances to achieve a unified spoken or written text. This is where the bottom-up, lexicogrammatical micro-level intersects with the top-down signals of the macro-level of communicative intent and socio-cultural context. This intersection expresses attitudes and messages as well as create texts (Omaggio, 2001).

There are many subareas that contribute to discourse competence: cohesion, deixis, coherence, generic structure, and the conversational structure inherent in the turn-taking system in conversation (Muricia et al., 1995).

Question of the Study

The study asked the following question:

1. Are there any statistically significant differences (at $\alpha=0.05$) between the students' pre-test scores and post-test scores in the experimental and control groups in discourse competence due to the treatment (portfolio)?

Significance of the Study

This study hopes to provide Arabic language teachers with the proposition that using portfolio, as a possible indicator of learners' progress and self-reflection, is an effective technique that may improve their discourse competence.

Limitations of the Study

This study is limited to first secondary female students in Housha Secondary School for Girls in Al Mafrq City in Jordan, who are enrolled in the literary stream of the academic year 2015/2016, second semester. They are distributed into two sections. Each section consists of 20 students. One of the two sections is assigned as the experimental group, while the other section is assigned as the control group.

Definitions of Terms

Portfolio: A purposeful collection of a student's work that exhibits the student's efforts, progress, and achievements in one or more areas of the curriculum. It includes student's participation in selecting content, criteria for selection, criteria for judging merits, and evidence of student's self-reflection.

Writing Activities: This is the activities in which the students have tasks that require them to write paragraphs and essays in the classes that are concerned with composition as a part of the Arabic language curriculum.

Discourse Competence: This refers to the learner's ability to use the appropriate cohesive devices whether inter- or intra-sentential, and his/her

ability to convey propositions and ideas logically, coherently, and smoothly. Thus, such competence implies broadening communication, both vertically and horizontally. In this study, it is measured by the scores of the students on pre- and post-tests and criteria elicited from the related literature.

Practical Studies

Flimban (2010) conducted a study that aimed at determining the significance of portfolio, the degree of its usage, and the most familiar difficulties that prevent using portfolio. The study also sought to discover the statistically significant differences between the viewpoints of the studied sample in the fact of using portfolio in evaluating the linguistic performance of sixth grade pupils in Makkah. The results showed that the responses of the members of the sample were highly positive about the importance of using portfolio in evaluating the linguistic performance of sixth grade primary school students.

Al-Nethami (2009) investigated the effect of portfolio program on tenth grade students' writing in Jordan. The study explored the effect of writing, students' perception of writing, and students' writing strategies. Another aim of the study was to find out students' feelings and opinions regarding the use of writing portfolio in learning writing. The results showed that students in the experimental and control groups exhibited improvement in their post-test. There were no significant differences between them that were attributable to the treatment, which is the portfolio program. Portfolios had positive effects on the students' attitudes toward learning writing strategies.

Atai (2012) investigated the effects of portfolio accompanied by small group conferencing on writing accuracy of students' compositions compared with an exclusive portfolio procedure. The results indicated that both groups, whether experimental or control, benefited, and their accuracy was enhanced by the treatments. Moreover, the combination of portfolio and conferencing procedure was conducted at a significantly higher accuracy compared to the exclusive portfolio procedure.

Methodology

Participants of the Study

The participants of this study are the female students who are enrolled in the first secondary grade/literary stream in Housha Female Secondary School. This school is a public school that belongs to the North–West Badia Educational Directorate in Mafraq city in North Jordan. All the participants were 17 years old and have studied in the same school since the seventh grade. They were distributed into two sections, experimental and control, each one consisting of 20 students.

Design of the Study

The present study can be described as quantitative since it relies on its results, which are numbers and percentages elicited from the scores that are achieved in the pre- and post-test. Furthermore, it is a quasi-experimental study since it investigates the effects of using portfolio in writing activities on the development of Arabic language discourse competence.

Instruments of the Study

The data of the present study were collected by using the following instruments:

1. Portfolios: It is a collection of students’ writings to exhibit and clarify their progress in discourse competence. It includes the student’s drafts, revised works, self-reflections, correction criteria, and final products.
2. An evaluation scheme: This is used to evaluate and grade the students’ writing products.
3. Storch’s scale (2009): This includes criteria for classifying writing errors in terms of discourse competence that covers cohesion and coherence. Storch’s scale for classifying discourse errors.

Cohesion	Using transitional expressions (conjunctive adverbs or cohesive devices) that link sentences or phrases within and between sentences (inter and intra sentential). Addition Comparison Concession Emphasis Contrast Example or illustration Summary Time sequence Repeating key words and phrases Using pronoun reference Using parallel form
Coherence	Everything in the writing is logically laid out. Ideas are connected together. Overall consistency (purpose, voice, and style).. Concision. Expression of oneself clearly and continuously.

Procedures

- a. A letter of consent was obtained from the Educational Directorate of North-West Badia in Mafrag city, where the school is situated.
- b. First, secondary school students (who were distributed into two sections, each of 20: experimental and control) were tested in discourse competence by administering a pre-test that was schemed to evaluate their

use of discourse competence components. The researcher prepared the pre-test, and the students were tested at the beginning of the second semester of the 2015/2016 academic year (the beginning of the second week).

c. Students, in both groups, were required to write different paragraphs and short compositions about various topics. These tasks were written during the writing classes which are part of the Arabic language curriculum that includes other branches such as literary texts, syntax, and rhetoric.

d. The students' products (in the experimental group) were corrected, self-reflected, rewritten, and kept in portfolios. Students revised their writings in order to know their errors and points of weakness. Students in the control group were taught by the conventional method i.e. without using portfolios.

e. At the end of the semester, the week before the final exams, students were post-tested in discourse competence through writing a composition (the pre-test).

f. The researcher corrected the pre- and post-tests according to the evaluating scheme and the components of discourse competence in Storch's modal.

g. The researcher used descriptive analysis by using frequencies and percentages to count the errors in every component of discourse competence in both tests for both groups. He also calculated the means and the standard deviations of the students' scores on discourse competence in the pre and post-tests.

h. ANCOVA was used to show if there were any statistically significant differences (at $\alpha=0.05$) between the students' scores in the pre- and post-tests in both groups due to the treatment (portfolio).

Results and Discussion

To answer the question of the study which enquires about the possible existence of any statistically significant differences between the participants' scores in the pre- and post-tests due to the treatment represented in using portfolio, descriptive statistics were estimated in which scores' means and standard deviations were calculated. Moreover, ANCOVA was used to show these significant differences.

Table 1 shows an observed difference between the scores' means in the post-test in which the experimental group participants' scores' mean is 13.85, whereas it is 12.05 in the control group participants' post-test scores. The control group was taught by the traditional method, whereas the experimental one was taught by using portfolio in the writing activities.

Table 1. Means and Standard Deviations of Participants' Scores in the post-test

Group	Mean	Standard Deviation	Number	
Experimental	13.85	3.453	20	
Control	12.05	2.685	20	
Total	12.95	3.186	40	

Table 2 shows that there is a statistically significant difference in the post-test scores between the experimental and control groups. ANCOVA was used to calculate this difference and show the degree of significance (at the level of $\alpha=0.05$). As it is clear in the table below, the significance degree is 0.031 which is less than 0.05. This means that there is a statistically significant difference between the post-test participants' scores in favor of the experimental group.

Table 2. Results of ANCOVA of the pre and post-tests' Participants' Scores

Source	Sum of Squares	Df	Mean Square	F	Sig.
Pre	136.570	1	136.570	22.267	0.093
Method	30.724	1	30.724	5.009	0.031*
Error	226.930	37	6.133		
Corrected Total	395.900	39			

However, this significant difference can be attributed to the use of the treatment represented in the portfolio. Students in the experimental group have benefited from the portfolio as a way of assessment. This assessment is continuous and gradable. Students in the experimental group revised their production, and they also reflected on their mistakes. They were conscious about their errors in discourse. Therefore, they intended not to repeat them in the coming assignments. They were aware of the different types of linking words, in addition to the functions of these transitions.

Students in the experimental group showed more usage of discourse competence elements. For example, they employed more cohesive devices whether qualitatively or quantitatively, i.e., they used different linking words with different functions, in addition to increasing the number of these devices. They realized that such devices make writing more relatable and smooth. Moreover, they intended to repeat the key words in order to keep the flow of thoughts unambiguous, which strengthens the readers comprehension of what is being read.

Similarly, using parallel forms was obvious and more emphasized. Students in the experimental group tended to avoid mistakes in writing grammatical structures. They paid more attention to form. As a result, they

used similar structures especially within phrases. Pronouns were used in a better way since students attempted to clarify referents and their pronouns in order to avoid any ambiguity.

As a very essential part of discourse competence, coherence was also improved in the experimental students' group compositions. Ideas were ordered more logically; thoughts were connected together in most productions; overall consistency represented in purpose, voice, and style was clearly improved; and concision and expressing oneself clearly and continuously were also developed. Students showed more care and attention to these elements since they were aware of their importance in writing well-expressed pieces. This indicates that the writer has followed a rational and ordered strategy during the process of writing. Furthermore, this shows that the student was concise and limited the topic without any digression. Students started to realize that writing should be organized, logical, concise, clear, and smoothly linked.

Unity was also developed. Students in the experimental group showed improvement in focusing on and maintaining a central topic that branches into some sub-ideas that directly relate to it. They avoided mixing and confusing ideas that are expressed without much concentration. They expressed themselves more clearly since they started with a certain topic then elaborated into various related ideas. They also contributed to their discussion and exposition with exemplification, narration, facts and opinions, quotations, etc.

Recommendations

In the light of the study results, the researcher presents the recommendations below:

1. Teachers of Arabic language, especially those who teach writing (composition) in particular, are recommended to implement the portfolio as a progressive assessment tool that gradually improves the writings of the students and sheds light on their recurrent errors in various fields.
2. It is recommended that portfolio should be used as an integral part of writing classes and at different stages.
3. Further research on using portfolio as an assessment instrument is recommended in order to prove its positive effect on the students' writing, not only in Arabic language composition, but also in other disciplines.
4. Writing classes had better be low-filtered and awarded grades of less importance since teaching has recently emphasized the process during which learning takes place rather than the product.

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