



An Action Research on the Relationship between the Assessment Strategy of Knowledge Envelopes and Academic Performance in Writing

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1. Introduction

As language teaching has moved in the direction of learner-centered approach, testing and assessment have begun to incorporate the measures that reflect the type of tasks which are more learner-centered and authentic (Birenbaum, 1996). However, it seems that the current trend in some educational systems is that teachers provide students with a single test at the end of the course. Whereas standardized tests serve a purpose in education, they are neither infallible nor sufficient. Many educators like Flood and Lapp (1989) acknowledge that any "single score . . . almost always fails to accurately report student overall progress" (p. 509). A single measure seems incapable of estimating the diversity of skills, knowledge, processes, and strategies that combine to determine student progress. Therefore, the multifaceted nature of language proficiency makes it difficult for any single test to measure it (Genesee & Upshur, 1996). To compensate for limitations associated with using standardized tests, professionals in ESL education often use a combination of formal and informal assessment techniques for monitoring student language development. One of the assessment techniques which represent the combined and integrated form of formal and informal assessment is portfolio assessment. What distinguishes assessment from testing is that assessment integrates instruction into itself in the sense that assessment is at the service of learning and measuring, but the area of testing can be characterized by a separation of instruction and testing activities, and by measuring products solely in the form of a single test (Wolf, Bixby, & Glen, 1991 p. 53).

1.1 Portfolio Assessment

The concept of portfolio assessment is not new. Portfolios originated with artists' collections of their works and have long been used to demonstrate competencies. In response to the need for alternative and more authentic assessment practices, portfolios have become a common alternative to the traditional assessment methods (Mayer & Tusin, 1999). Based on the constructivist theories, which advocate that learning has to be constructed by the learners themselves, rather than being imparted by the teachers, portfolio assessment requires students to provide selected evidence to show that learning relevant to the course objectives has taken place. They also have to justify the selected portfolio items with reference to the course objectives (Steffe & Gale, 1995). Biggs (1996) holds that the preparation of an assessment portfolio is an active process involving collecting, synthesizing and organizing possible relevant items to provide the best evidence of achievement of the learning objectives; a process that demands ongoing assessment, reflection and justification. There is also the assumption that during the process of preparing an assessment portfolio, learning is enhanced as students are encouraged to reflect on their experience, identify learning needs and initiate further learning (Harris, Dolan, & Fairbairn, 2001). Such an assumption, however, should be supported with empirical evidence if the full potential of portfolio assessment is to be realized. Genesee and Upshur (1996) define portfolio as follows:

A portfolio is purposeful collection of students' work that demonstrates to the students and others their efforts, progress, and achievements in given areas. Student portfolios have been inspired by



professionals such as photographers and architects as a means of keeping a record of their accomplishments to show to others. Second language portfolios can have a very specific focus, such as writing, or broad focus that includes example of all aspects of language development. Students should have their own portfolios, which can be a conventional file folder, a small cardboard box, a section of a file drawer, or some other such receptacle (p. 99). They maintain that the value of portfolios is in the assessment of student achievement. They are particularly useful in this respect because they provide a continuous record of students' language development that can be shared with others. Genesee and Upshur clearly state that reviewing portfolio can increase the students' involvement in and ownership of their own learning. The positive effects of portfolios student learning arise from the opportunities they afford students to become actively involved in assessment and learning.

When examining the related background theory of literature, a very useful assessment strategy defined by S. Rogers as a KNOWLEDGE WALL was found quite inspiring. Other studies filtered from the knowledge wall were KNOWLEDGE FOLDERS. They were folders in which student homework and studies were kept. With a slight modification in the name, the strategy was defined as KNOWLEDGE ENVELOPES. The relationship between the study skill of free writing and the assessment strategy of knowledge envelopes was the question to be answered in this study.

2. Methodology

The study was carried out with a preparatory class at Selcuk University in Konya, Turkey with 21 students aged between 17 and 19 and me as a teacher-researcher. The students who were at an elementary level enrolled in different academic majors with different language learning backgrounds coming from different parts of the country. The study was conducted in the first semester of the 2012 academic year. The action research lasted 3 weeks together with the information gathering and assessment procedure. This research focused on how the assessment strategy of knowledge envelopes effected the students study skills in writing, thus their achievement in exams. I decided to implement the strategy of Knowledge Envelopes during assessments (writing) in hopes of the students improving their metacognition and motivation.

The Knowledge Wall assessment strategy by Roger S. involved helping the students learn how to learn. Spence Rogers' Knowledge Wall was a spot on a classroom wall where students could post information they thought they would need to know. Modifying this strategy into a strategy called Knowledge Envelopes - a folder into which each student put all of his/her homework and class work, which could later be accessed during an assessment.

After explaining the students about the research being applied, a pre-test was performed in the classroom on one of the later given 3 topics each week. The topics to be assigned were LOVE, FASHION and SPORTS. The pre-test title was "Do you believe in love at first sight?" Each week the students were required to gather information about the related topic. 1. week- love, 2. week-fashion, 3. week-sports. The information they gathered could be anything from relevant vocabulary to theoretical knowledge. Every week for 2 lessons, the assignments were brought into class for both checking and studying. At the end of 3 weeks a post test was conducted, the title of which was "In your opinion, what are the characteristics of a good lover?" The same topic LOVE was chosen for both the pre and the post test.

During the assessment (post test), the students could pre use their envelopes. However they could not directly copy anything from them. The assessment was not a "copy your notes" test. They could memorize on the spot and then close their envelopes. The student could access his/her envelope at any time and as many times as they needed during the assessment. This put the responsibility of time management upon the student.



3. Data Collection

The actual data collected were the envelopes of each student. When finished with the post tests, the envelopes were given in to the teacher-researcher for analysis. Apart from the envelopes, student surveys, and teacher observational notes of students' behaviour were the qualitative data collected. Informal observations were made by asking the students how they perceived the Knowledge Envelope strategy and observing their behaviour in the classroom for 3 weeks.

4. Data Analysis

Data was collected to verify the usefulness of the Knowledge Envelope strategy in helping students' metacognition and motivation in writing assessments. It was collected through student surveys, teacher observational notes of students' behaviour and written work results. The pre and post tests were analyzed in terms of the grammatical accuracy, vocabulary diversity and the length of the written work.

5. Results

The results of the implication of Knowledge Envelope strategy showed positive improvement in terms of both vocabulary variety and longer written work with the exception of grammatical accuracy. According to the data collected from the students written work, most of the students showed a very big progression in their vocabulary and idea usage. In addition they tended to write even longer, but had trouble in sentence structure.

The qualitative analysis of the Student Surveys yielded positive results. The students indicated that Knowledge Envelopes assisted them in various ways. They agreed that the Knowledge Envelopes helped them put more details in their work and helped them make sure that their work was complete. Most students felt they spent more time studying, but others did not feel this way. The students made positive comments; no negative comments were made in regard to this strategy. The student comments and the teacher observations revealed a positive relationship between the written work data and the implemented strategy.

6. Conclusion

I hypothesized that the students would become more responsible for what went into their Knowledge Envelopes and that they would realize that quality work would lead to a good assessment result. I hoped that the students would realize that writing about the concepts that would be on the assessment would help them to organize their thoughts in order to gain a good grade. I hoped that the result would be that the students would learn to self-monitor their class work and homework. A positive relationship was demonstrated between their work and the Knowledge Envelope assessment, because they were able to directly check if they had completed their work during the assessment. The student could check for understanding of the material when they looked for the answer to the assessment question, which is a writing assessment in this case, in their Knowledge Envelopes. The findings of this action research showed that the Knowledge Envelope strategy helped the students with study skills and improved their written work. I have also concluded that the poorest students were helped the most. Perhaps they had never developed an understanding of the relationship between their efforts and their results on an assessment.

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