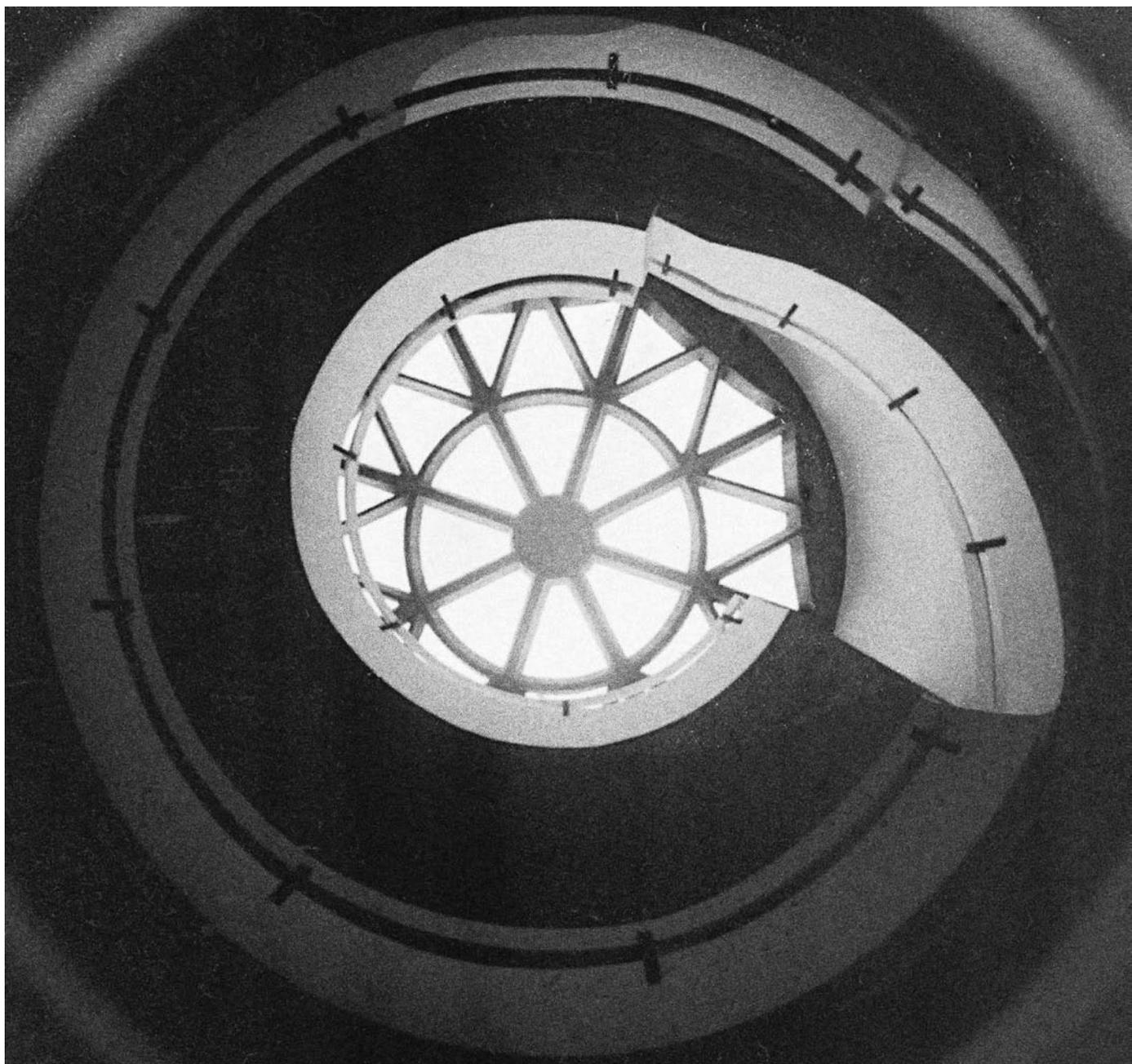


Using portfolios as to foster and



a powerful strategy develop students' writing skills in EFL

RESUMEN

El presente artículo hace referencia al uso de portafolios como una estrategia fundamental para monitorear el rendimiento de los estudiantes en la habilidad de escritura en Inglés como Lengua Extranjera. Además, busca promover la producción escrita cuando se tienen en cuenta los intereses y opiniones de los estudiantes al momento de producir diferentes tipos de composiciones. Algunas de las ideas incluidas en este artículo provienen de un proyecto de investigación llevado a cabo con niños entre los 9 y 13 años, quienes al momento de la investigación se encontraban en el nivel Intermedio de los "Cursos de Extensión" ofrecidos por la Universidad Pedagógica Nacional. El componente referente al análisis de datos aún se encuentra en proceso y es parte de la tesis propuesta por el autor del presente artículo, para la Maestría en Lingüística Aplicada para la Enseñanza del Inglés como Lengua Extranjera en la Universidad Distrital "Francisco José de Caldas".

Palabras clave: escritura, enfoque de proceso escritural, portafolios, intereses de los niños.

ABSTRACT

This article emphasises on the use of portfolios as a powerful strategy to monitor the students' writing performance in EFL and foster their writing production by means of taking advantage of their interests and beliefs when creating different types of compositions. Some of the ideas included in this article come from a large project research carried out with children between 9 and 13 years old who were in the Intermediate level of "Cursos de Extensión" at Universidad Pedagógica Nacional. The data analysis component is still in process and it is part of the thesis proposed by the author for the Master in Applied Linguistics for the TEFL at Universidad Distrital "Francisco José de Caldas".

Key words: writing, writing process approach, portfolios, children's interests.

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Writing has always been one of the main concerns for the academic community, due to the fact that this is a process that requires conditions such as time, thought, accuracy, coherence, cohesion among others. Consequently, as part of the academic community, I have always had a particular interest in working with writing development skills because it is known that this is an essential system to communicate our ideas and thoughts. This area needs to be elaborated efficiently because, different to speaking, in most opportunities there is no chance to clarify immediately the concepts or ideas that are not understood as the author intended to.

The problems related to EFL that I have identified during the time I have been working with children come from different sources: lack of vocabulary, linguistic problems and grammatical confusions, among others. For this reason, I decided to work on this area and I did it with the intention to promote and improve the children's writing competence by implementing different workshops and to explore their perceptions towards writing in English and producing different compositions based on the topics they were interested in. Work based on the process approach permitted children to develop their writing skills in a better way and, at the same time, they perceived writing from a different perspective in which they understood writing is more than part of a test but, on the contrary, it is a possibility to communicate and share with others what they think.

A VIEW ON WRITING

Writing goes beyond the simplistic idea of just putting symbols on a piece of paper. When you write, you are part of a community and you let the world know who you are and what you think about the theme selected to be written about. I agree with Byrne that writing is clearly much more than the production of graphic symbols. (Byrne, 1988). These words cause a great impact because at first, it is necessary to understand that

the writing system is not just a mere representation of a given language but the representation of ideas, beliefs, ideologies, concepts, etc., that take place within specific social contexts. Ferreiro (1990) states that one of the primary objects of her study is "the understanding of the evolution of the systems of ideas children build up about the nature of the social object that is the writing system". (In Goodman, 1990, p. 13). Having in mind these ideas we can conceive writing as a way of producing and expressing a person's own ideological concepts according to the contexts he/she is in contact with.

As Vigostky (1978) states in Dyson (1989), "written language is a complex social tool that functions in varied ways in our society. Children learn about this tool – its purposes, its features, its processing demands – as they encounter it in meaningful activities". (p. 3). Based on this view, it is possible to consider writing as a social condition. As reported by Lerner (2001), Olson (1998) asserts that mastering writing is a social condition and that when we read or write a text, we are part of a textual community. (p. 94).

Generally, the ability of writing has been seen from different perspectives: social, cultural, political, cognitive, etc among others. Due to the fact that the workshops carried out during the project were based on the stages of the process approach, they needed for children to be attentive to develop certain cognitive skills when producing their drafts and then based on some conventions be able to make the necessary connections to identify the elements to rewrite their compositions and make them look better from the perspective of producing texts with better quality.

WHAT ARE PORTFOLIOS AND WHY USING THEM?

When as teachers, you find out during your classroom practices that students face serious problems with writing tasks, you start considering the possibility of how to implement certain activities to make them improve such skills. It is here when the idea of using

a determined strategy comes to mind. You begin reading and documenting about previous research and approaches to writing development and you may find that portfolios are pedagogical tools you can implement in your classroom due its usefulness.

There is plenty of definitions about portfolios but I decided to focus on just some of them because of their pertinence and clarity to express what portfolios really are. Weigle, S. (2002) defines portfolios as collections of written texts for different purposes over a period of time, in which their most important components are collection, reflection and selection. (pp. 198,199). Oonchitti, 1993 also describes portfolios as “collections of samples of students’ work throughout a specific period of time. There are key elements which nourish and

become the nature of portfolios such as samples of students’ systematically collected, student self-assessment and clearly stated criteria for the evaluation of multiple aspects concerning curriculum”. (In Ariza and Viáfara, 2004, p. 27).

BEFORE USING THE PORTFOLIOS

Something you need to have clear from the beginning of the process is to understand that children have their own interests and beliefs. Thus, as teachers, first of all you need to explore the topics they are interested to write about instead of just “imposing” the themes you consider may be relevant for them. If your intention is to promote writing, you can not assume that the type of texts you decide to include in



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your classes necessarily matches the students' interests and, therefore, the results may not be the ones you and your students expected or hoped for.

Carry out a needs analysis

A good idea is to start by analyzing the current situation that is present during your classroom practices. You can do so by going directly to the source (the students) and asking them what their opinions towards writing are. This information will help you when, at the end of the whole process, you have the opportunity to contrast information and see if the pedagogical intervention had the effect you expected¹. (See the appendix # 1 for a questionnaire sample on writing).

You can also carry out a survey in order to know the students' topics of interest to write about, so you can use them to implement different workshops along the process. This will be useful because we know that for the successfulness of many classroom activities, it is very important to hear the students' opinion due to the fact that they are principal actors in the process of learning. This is something that is included as part of the transformative curriculum, in which all the academic community (teachers, students, parents, head department, etc.) should take an active part in the design of the curriculum.

Designing and implementing the workshops

Once you have plenty information to base your workshops on, you start designing the workshops with activities that permit the students to integrate their previous knowledge with the EFL skills². The fact that you are focusing on developing writing skills does not mean that you leave out the other skills because knowledge can not just be divided, on the contrary, it must be integrated to succeed in the learning process.

The activities proposed for the workshops can vary depending on the type of population you are working with: the number of students, their interests, their ages, etc. All in all, these activities must be student-centered and they have to be appealing for them so they feel a

good atmosphere and their attitudes towards the class may have a positive effect.

It is very important also to organize a schedule for the workshops in which you state in detail the type of activities, purposes, goals and objectives, as well as time and resources needed to carry out the tasks proposed.

HOW TO USE PORTFOLIOS?

Now that you have the organization of the workshops, it is important to analyze the manner in which writing will be assessed. Personally, I consider that working under the parameters of the writing process oriented approach provides a really good path to monitoring the students' writing performance, and at the same time, it shows the students' reflections upon writing itself. What is the Writing Oriented Process Approach?

It is known that writing has been studied from a large number of perspectives and analysed by different approaches like the product approach, the genre approach or the process approach. If your intention has to do with dealing with the development of certain abilities to master writing in EFL, I consider that the process approach is the best option due to the fact that it permits to explore the diverse factors that influence such processes.

The first influential model of the process approach was the one proposed by Hayes and Flower (1980). "Hayes and Flower described the writing process in terms of the task environment, which included the writing assignment and the text produced so far, the writer's long-term memory, including knowledge of topic, knowledge of audience, and stored writing plans, and a number of cognitive processes, including planning, translating thought into text and revising" (Weigle, 2002). Certainly, this was the first attempt to analyse the different stages we follow when deciding to write any type of composition. Of course, later on this model was implemented and judged by other researchers who were also interested in studying such a process.

This approach also has some characteristics that are of a great advantage when discovering the purposes of this process. The list below was adapted from Shih, 1986 by Brown, 1994):

- Focus on the process of writing that leads to the final written product.
- Help students writers to understand their own composing process.
- Help them to build repertoires of strategies for pre-writing, drafting, and rewriting.
- Give students time to write and rewrite.
- Place central importance on the process of revision.
- Let students discover what they want to say as they write.
- Give students feedback throughout the composing process (not just on the final product) to consider as they attempt to bring their expression closer and closer to intention.
- Encourage feedback both from the instructor and peers.

As it is evident, all the characteristics above fit correctly in the idea of seeing writing from a perspective in which the students feel that they are really participating in a course of action which allows them to choose what to write about, so they encounter in meaningful activities that guide them towards having a broader view of what writing is.

During the process approach, students can not only record thoughts, feelings and ideas, but also generate and explore new thoughts and ideas. This process has the advantage of being student-centered so he/she has the possibility to reflect upon his/her own process by means of using an alternative assessment form as the portfolio. In here, the students can express their ideas, thoughts, beliefs, concerns, reflections, etc., following certain stages such as brainstorming, drafting, revising, editing and socializing in a natural form as they work collaboratively with their peers. (Kern, 2000).

Improving the compositions

Following the parameters of this process, you can follow the next stages:

1. *Brainstorming*: The students use their prior knowledge and with the help of the teacher they gain new vocabulary to be used during their compositions.
2. *Free writing*: The teacher provides a model so the students can start producing their first drafts.
3. *Revising*: The teacher uses some proofreading marks to make students correct their previous compositions. (See appendix 2).
4. *Editing*: The students revise the teacher's marks and they re-write their compositions.
5. *Socializing*: This is an opportunity to socialize the students' compositions and their views on the topics they wrote about.

Reflecting upon the process

As I stated before in the portfolios definition, they are more than just a mere collection of papers. Portfolios are to be used as reflective tools towards different issues, depending on the purposes established at the beginning of the course. The portfolios I used with children were based on the students' writings, and they were a vital part of the primary sources for the large project study. I used the content of the portfolios to guide students through the process of brainstorming, free writing, drafting, revising, editing and socializing their compositions. Also, I took advantage of their compositions by having them reflect upon their own processes and analyze the perceptions and beliefs they had. I could then compare their initial compositions and ideas about writing at the beginning of the process to the last productions and beliefs towards the end of such process.

Taking into consideration that portfolios are a very effective technique to analyze the students' reflections and views about certain topics, their use has become more and more important as part of the teaching-learning process inside the classroom. (See the appendix # 3 for

THE IDEA OF USING PORTFOLIOS UNDER THE PARAMETERS OF THE PROCESS APPROACH ALSO GUIDES THE STUDENTS TOWARDS WRITING STRUCTURAL AND SYSTEMATICALLY. IT ALSO DEVELOPS COGNITIVE SKILLS THAT PERMIT THEM TO REALIZE WHEN THEY MAKE A MISTAKE SO THEY CAN CORRECT IT BY UNDERSTANDING THE NATURE OF SUCH MISTAKE.

an example of a journal included in the portfolios to explore the students' opinions)

SOME OPINIONS ON THE USE OF PORTFOLIOS

Due to the fact that I have detailed how portfolios are a very powerful strategy to foster and develop writing skills, I include in this article a couple of samples that emerged from the data I have analyzed so far. This collection of data came from the implementation of some instruments specially designed to gather the students' opinions and perceptions about the use of portfolios and the stages of the process approach. Although I used a questionnaire, journals, portfolios and conferences, here I will provide some samples solely from the conferences since they can illustrate descriptively the students' opinions.

Teacher: ¿De qué manera se les facilitó a ustedes la corrección de los ejercicios que ya habían hecho teniendo en cuenta lo que ustedes escribieron en el journal?

Student A: Pues a mí se me facilitó muchísimo más porque era mejor era ver los errores y pues corregirlo y pues ahí uno se daba cuenta de que eran errores bobos que de pronto uno pues no podía haberlo hecho mejor.

Student B: Pues personalmente yo tengo mala gramática entonces esto me ayudó a mejorar mi gramática y mi vocabulario.

Teacher: ¿Qué aprendieron al tener que re-escribir sus composiciones?

Student A: Que pues los errores que uno tiene esto pues se pueden corregir y pues no son tan difícil hacerlo.

(Taken from the conference # 2, group 1)

Another good instrument informing us about students' perceptions on their self-assessment process is the inclusion of a reflection log, in which they can record their opinions about different issues of the process. (See Appendix # 4).

CONCLUSIONS

Throughout the article the main intention has been to highlight the importance of using portfolios inside the classroom to foster writing, not only as a way to develop writing skills but also as a means to consider and understand the students interests and opinions when deciding on what to write about. Moreover, it is necessary to recognize writing as a social practice in which you let the authors feel they are part of a determined community.

The idea of using portfolios under the parameters of the process approach also guides the students towards writing structural and systematically. It also develops cognitive skills that permit them to realize when they make a mistake so they can correct it by understanding the nature of such mistake. It facilitates the correcting process and deters students from being dependent on the teacher all the time. What students can do is to have peer revision and work collaboratively to improve their compositions without relying too much on the teacher and/or the use of dictionary.

APPENDIXES

APPENDIX # 1

QUESTIONNAIRE

Nombre: _____ Edad: _____ Fecha: _____

Sexo: _____ Nivel: _____ Horario: _____

1. ¿Te gusta escribir? ¿Por qué sí o por qué no?
2. ¿Te gusta escribir en Inglés? ¿Por qué sí o por qué no?
3. ¿Te consideras un buen escritor(a)? Por qué?
4. ¿Qué características consideras debería tener un buen escritor?
5. ¿Qué pasos sigues cuando escribes?
6. ¿Sigues los mismos pasos cuando tienes que escribir en Inglés?
7. Cuando escribes, ¿lo haces como un requerimiento o como algo que te gusta? ¿Por qué?
8. ¿Qué aspecto(s) te gustaría mejorar cuando escribes? (Estructuras, coherencia, cohesión, vocabulario, etc.)
9. ¿Qué recursos utilizas cuando escribes? (Internet, diccionario, libros, etc.)

APPENDIX # 2

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EDITING AND PROOFREADING MARKS
FOR CORRECTING MISTAKES

The process of writing requires revision to make changes and make your composition better. The following editing and proofreading marks can help you. Your teacher will revise your written task and will mark the mistakes. You will have to correct them and deliver him/her a final copy.

EDITING	EXAMPLE
 = Add a comma	"She has birds, cats and dogs in her house."
 = Make a period	The president of this firm is never late to work.
 = Make a capital letter	One of the main leaders of the <u>american</u> <u>indians</u> was chief Joseph.
 = Add a question mark	What time is it?
 = Add something. There's a missing word (article, verb, preposition.....)	Louis XVI of France was guillotined January 1973.
W.W. = Wrong word. Use a different / appropriate word	And then he <u>told</u> he was sick. w.w.
 = Take this word away	The thief entered through of the window.
 = Spell correctly	There is a ^{sp.} <u>diference</u> between the musical works of Mozart and Haydn.
 = Make a small letter	Don't forget to <u>C</u> ome tomorrow.
 = Change the order of words	This is a <u>house big</u> . Do you know how much <u>is it</u> ?
 = Move word/s to the correct place.	Don't forget to mail the letter before you have lunch. <u>(if you arrive early)</u>
= Separate words	Have you ever visited Canada.

<p>∨ = Add quotation marks</p>	<p>"I don't know if I can[∨], he said, "but maybe I will".</p>
<p>wt. = Wrong tense</p>	<p>..... and then I <u>call</u> her last night to tell her about the date. _{wt.}</p>
<p>gr. = Grammar mistake</p>	<p>She <u>work</u> in this shop every <u>days</u>. _{gr.} _{gr.}</p>
<p>___? = Not clear, confusing</p>	<p><u>Me no money for buy food ?</u></p>
<p>() = Isolated sentence. Include it in a paragraph</p>	<p>.....Noam Chomsky, Morris hale and Roman Jakobson are among America's most prominent linguistics. (They left a legacy to the world.)</p>
<p>{ = Paragraph formation. Write paragraphs, not isolated sentences.</p>	<p>Remember a paragraph consists of main idea, supporting ideas and concluding sentence.</p>
<p>→ = Leave a space between two paragraphs.</p>	
<p>Π = Indent the paragraph.</p>	<p>Π The fluid formation of early modern English underlines the formation of American English. . . .</p>
<p>----- = Very long sentence. Make it short or divide it into several sentences.</p>	<p><u>For many years the human being has depended on nature which has given him all the necessary resources to live in harmony with himself and the others without thinking that natural resources can disappear some day and then destroy him.</u></p>

APPENDIX # 3

JOURNAL TYPE II

JOURNAL (TYPE II) NUMBER: _____ TEMA: _____

NAME: _____ DATE: _____

How do students' beliefs towards writing in English evolve during the implementation of workshops that explore the stages of the process approach?

- What effect does the process approach have on students' writing performance?
- To what extent students' involvement in the stages of the process approach foster their writing development in EFL?

¿Qué pensé cuando tuve que re-escribir mi composición?

Me parece que al usar los símbolos propuestos para editar mi composición, mi escrito...

Al finalizar el ciclo de esta actividad me sentí...

Pienso que a través de estas actividades mi manera de escribir...

Con respecto a este tipo de actividades creo que...

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APPENDIX # 4

SELF-REFLECTION LOG

Name: _____ Level: _____ Date: _____
 Age: _____

El objetivo de este ejercicio es comparar las más recientes composiciones con las hechas al principio del semestre.

Al comparar mis últimas composiciones con las elaboradas al comienzo del semestre, creo que mi proceso de escritura...	
Desde mi punto de vista como escritor, siento que mis composiciones...	
En cuanto a mi motivación para escribir en Inglés, considero que...	
Pienso que mi portafolio { ha mejorado ha empeorado pues... sigue igual	
Mi experiencia en cuanto al aprendizaje de inglés a través del uso de portafolios durante el semestre ha sido...	
Mi experiencia en cuanto a la enseñanza que me han dejado los ejercicios de composición a nivel personal durante el semestre ha sido...	

NOTES

1 When I refer to the results expected, I imply the suc□ of the process.

2 The skills developed in EFL are Reading, Listening, Writing and Speaking. There is also the grammar component which is not necessarily considered a skill. _____