

The Impact of Portfolio Assessment on The Moroccan EFL Students' Writing Engagement



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ABSTRACT: Although the pedagogical value of portfolio assessment is widely investigated, its impact on students' engagement is still under-explored. Accordingly, this study intended to examine the impact of portfolio assessment on the Moroccan EFL students' writing engagement. To this end, two groups of high school students were involved in the study. The two groups were randomly assigned into experimental and control groups. The experimental group received the treatment; portfolio assessment accompanied with various reflection and assessment techniques (i.e. self-and peer-assessment and teacher-student conferences) whereas the control group followed the regular summative writing achievement tests. To enrich the data, the experimental group students' views about portfolio assessment were elicited via students' written reflections. The analysis of the quantitative data showed that the experimental group students achieved a higher and more significant level of writing engagement than the control group students. Furthermore, the analysis of the qualitative data revealed that the students positively perceived portfolio assessment to impact their writing engagement at various levels.

KEYWORDS: Summative Tests, Alternative Assessment, Portfolio Assessment, Students' Engagement, Students' Attitudes.

1. INTRODUCTION

Assessment of students' writing skills is becoming more and more challenging day after day in today's EFL and/or ESL classrooms. With the new conceptualizations of 'writing' as a highly complex and multidimensional skill, the focus has shifted from the product approaches to writing instruction which center only on the linguistic aspects of writing to process approaches to writing instruction that care more about the learner/writer, the cognitive processes he/she proceeds through while writing, and the context and the audience for which and for whom he/she is writing (Grabe & Kaplan, 1996; Harmer, 2007; Raimes, 1983). These transformations have resulted in several calls to think about other ways of assessment that can help transform the role of students' from that of passive recipients of assessment to that of active participants in it. Correspondingly, the Moroccan Ministry of National Education (MEN) has called through several referential documents for the integration of a variety of alternative assessment methods like portfolio assessment and the related assessment techniques (self-assessment, peer-assessment, and student-teacher conferences) as an essential part of the assessment practices in the Moroccan EFL writing classes (MNE, 2007). As put in the Pedagogical Guidelines, writing should no longer be viewed as "final fool-proof products to assign a passing or failing grade" (MNE, 2007, p. 27), but rather highly dynamic experiences where students are given a more central position. However, in spite of this high interest in the various alternative assessment techniques as a means for improving students' engagement in various instructional and assessment processes, their use in the Moroccan EFL classrooms is still very limited compared to the traditional summative writing examinations (Ghaicha & Omarakly, 2018). This gap in terms of practice can be attributed principally to very practical considerations, at the very heart of which time and workload constraints. Yet, it might also be due to the scarcity and/ or lack of empirical investigations on the pedagogical utility and relevance of the new modes of assessment to the needs of the Moroccan EFL context. This study aims to fill this gap by examining whether or not portfolio assessment and the related assessment techniques can have any significant impact on the Moroccan EFL students' levels of engagement in writing classes. Moreover, the study intends to explore the students' attitudes toward portfolio assessment as a means for enhancing their writing engagement. Writing engagement is defined as a multidimensional construct that reflects the degree of students' behavioral, cognitive, and affective involvement in different learning and assessment activities in the Moroccan EFL writing classes before and after being exposed to portfolio-based writing assessment activities (Appleton, Christenson, Kim, & Reschly, 2006; Fredricks, Blumenfeld, & Paris, 2004; Veiga & Robu, 2014; Veiga, Reeve, Wentzel, & Robu, 2014).

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2. LITERATURE REVIEW

1.1 Portfolio assessment

Portfolio is one of the most widely used alternative assessment tools, especially within the framework of the constructivist learning theories and the more recent language teaching methodologies (Brown, 2004; O'Malley & Pierce, 1992). The interest in its use has first emerged in the literature in the field of composition and writing before its widespread use in other disciplines. There is not a single definition as to what the term portfolio typically means since there is no consensus regarding neither its' form nor its content though there is a general agreement concerning the key elements that a portfolio should include. Still, the definition as well as the implementation of portfolio may vary greatly depending on the purpose it is designed for. The very early definition of portfolio was a movable collection of papers and prints that was originally associated with artists, journalists, or architects for the purpose of being able to show examples of their works (Sandford & Hsu, 2013, p. 217). The term portfolio is derived from Latin words *portare*, which means "to carry", and *fogilo*, which refers to a large collection of materials such as documents, pictures, papers, audio, and videotapes, etc (Sandford & Hsu, 2013).

In the context of the classroom, portfolio assessment refers to "a purposeful collection of student work that exhibits the student's efforts, progress, and achievement in one or more areas. The collection must include the student participation in selecting contents, the criteria for selection, the criteria for judging merits, and evidence of student self-reflection" (Paulson, Paulson, & Meyer, 1991, p. 60). Brown (2004) states that a portfolio is much more than a haphazard pile of 'junk'. It is, rather, as most of the other views agree, a well-planned, systematic, and ongoing process wherein students are deeply engaged in managing and assessing their learning from the very outset to the very end, carefully planning, selecting, and compiling the appropriate evidence for subsequent reflection and evaluation. Gottlieb (1995) identifies six basic features of portfolio assessment including; collection, reflection, assessment, documentation, linkage, and evaluation. Collection implies that students should be given appropriate freedom to choose what to include in their portfolios based on pre-specified and clearly defined objectives. Reflection designates that students should be encouraged to reflect upon their learning experiences through using self- and peer assessment, and student-teacher conferences. Assessment means that students should be involved in self-evaluating the quality of their work and progress over time. Documentation refers to the role of students' portfolios in demonstrating their achievement in a specific area. Link refers to the role portfolio plays in linking between students, teachers, parents, and their peers. Evaluation expresses the idea that students' portfolios can be a valuable source of information for evaluation and accountability purposes.

Portfolio assessment, unlike traditional summative tests, is based on the principles of the constructivist approach to assessment which emphasizes the central role of students' active participation in creating and making use of knowledge. Anderson (1998) provides a detailed description of the theoretical underpinnings of this approach to assessment. One of the major guiding premises of this approach is that knowledge has a variety of meanings and is open to differing interpretations depending on each individual's experiences, background, learning style, etc. In this way, learning is no longer treated as a fixed-sacred truth to be transmitted and received as it might seem to be, but rather as an active process whereby constant alterations are made as new concepts and understandings are being developed. This new model of assessment recognizes the multidimensionality of the learning process and involves the whole person by emphasizing a connection between cognitive, affective, and conative domains. This means that both process and product are very central and they do interact with and affect each other in a persistent manner. Therefore, the purpose of assessment, according to this new paradigm, is to facilitate rather than inhibit the learning process.

1.2 Portfolio Assessment and Writing Engagement

The pedagogical benefits of engaging students in the process of portfolio development are well-documented in the literature. One of the most frequently cited advantages of portfolio assessment is that it serves as an intersection that allows both instruction and assessment to be woven together in a way that traditional approaches do not. Compared to the latter, portfolio assessment offers better pathways whereby assessment can better serve instruction through providing ongoing feedback on students' learning and the related assessment practices (Hamp-Lyons & Condon, 2000; Hyland, 2003; Klenowski, 2002; Lam, 2018; Weigle, 2002). Being at the very heart of the instructional processes, portfolio assessment offers both teachers and students multiple opportunities to monitor and negotiate teaching and learning. Hence, maximizing learning opportunities and providing a fairer picture of what every student can do, especially with the adoption of multiple assessment techniques over an extended period of time rather than measuring students' performance only in one way and in a limited time. What is special about portfolios is that they can stay with learners for a long time, giving them the advantage of tracking their progress and reflecting upon their work. Portfolio assessment, therefore, can serve as a vehicle for observing a gradual change in the students' performance and making more valid judgments about it even at subsequent learning stages. Portfolio assessment is characterized as being more student-centered than other conventional methods of assessment. As put by Paulson et al. (1991), "it is something done by the student, not to the student" (p. 61). Hence, allowing students to demonstrate their individuality and uniqueness. Furthermore, portfolio assessment helps students to develop a wide range of metacognitive strategies, which raise their awareness to their strengths and weaknesses and help them become better learners (Gonzalez, 2009; Klenowski, 2002).

Empirically, several studies threw light on the role of portfolio assessment in enhancing students' writing engagement though this later has not always been the major concern of these studies. Song and August (2002), as a case in point, confirmed that although

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portfolio and traditional writing assessment students exhibited no significant differences in terms of their writing performance in their study, the portfolio assessment students were much more motivated and able to demonstrate their readiness for the next level than the control group students. Likewise, Hung (2006) revealed, through consulting the views of 39 undergraduate students about their experiences with an electronic portfolio project, that e-portfolios contributed effectively to raising their metacognitive awareness, their writing strategies, and their overall awareness of the nature of the academic writing as a result of their incessant engagement in the writing processes and the related reflective practices. Furthermore, Lucas (2008) and Kathpalia and Heah (2008) investigated the effect of portfolio assessment on developing students' communicative competencies. Based on the analysis of students' reflective essays, the two studies arrived at four major areas of improvement, namely linguistic, cognitive, affective, and social. These four dimensions were at the same time recognized as being highly instrumental in the enhancement of students' communicative competencies.

Other studies by Ghoorchaei, Tavakoli and Ansari (2010), Romova and Andrew (2011), Chelli (2013), Al-Qadi and Smadi (2014), Yaghoubi and Mobin (2015), Ozer and Tanriseven (2016), Farahian and Avarzamani (2018) all reflected better levels of students' writing engagement during and after the process of portfolio development. The elicited data, mainly the qualitative type in each of these studies, demonstrated that portfolio assessment served students' writing engagement through, (a) encouraging them to invest more time and energy in their writings; (b) drafting more than once; (c) self- and peer-checking their work; (d) exchanging feedback; (e) communicating their progress; and (f) overall enjoying and appreciating their writing assessment experiences. Nonetheless, most of these studies, as previously stated, were not mainly concerned with the engagement variable and treated it only in the follow-up stages of their designs. Additionally, most of these studies were exploratory in nature and could not tell whether there were any statistically significant differences in the students' writing engagement level before and after being exposed to portfolio assessment activities.

3. RESEARCH QUESTIONS

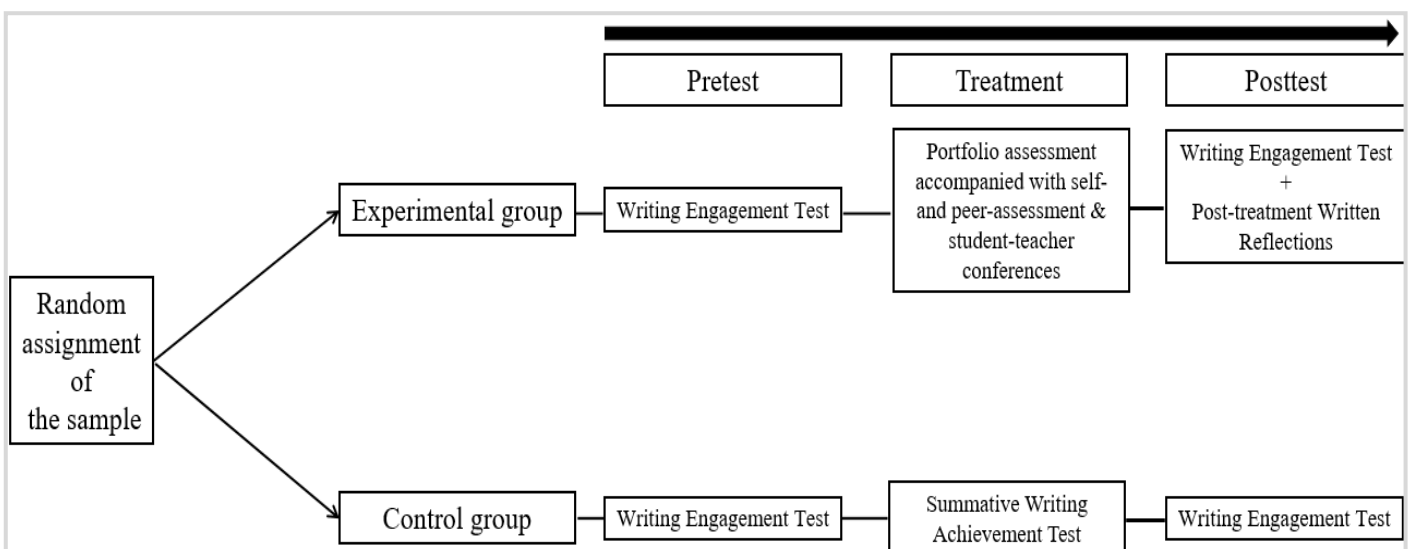
Based on the considerations above, the current study aims at examining whether or not portfolio assessment can have any significant impact on the Moroccan EFL students' writing engagement. Correspondingly, the study seeks to address the following major questions.

1. Does portfolio assessment have any significant impact on the Moroccan EFL students' writing engagement?
2. How do the Moroccan EFL students perceive portfolio assessment to impact their writing engagement level?

4. METHODOLOGY

Given the nature of the study, the study adopted a quasi-experimental design. Two intact groups were involved in the study, namely a control group (N=24) which received the regular summative achievement tests and an experimental group (N=24) which received portfolio assessment. To measure whether or not there are any significant differences between the experimental group and control group regarding their level of engagement in writing classes, both groups were pre- and post-tested. Besides, the differences between the pre-test and post-test were measured for each group. Furthermore, the experimental group students were invited to express their views about the treatment provided. The design of the study is depicted below (see Figure 1).

Figure 1: Study design



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5. PARTICIPANTS

The study involved two common core classes from a public high school in the south of Morocco with a total number of 48 students, 24 students in each class. The sample included 21 male students and 27 female students. The students in both classes shared similar linguistic, educational, and socio-economic characteristics.

6. INSTRUMENTS

In order to examine the impact of portfolio assessment on the Moroccan EFL students' writing engagement, the study adopted a multidimensional questionnaire developed by Badiozaman (2012) to examine the university students' writing engagement. The adapted questionnaire is composed of 18 items including both positively worded and negatively worded statements. The statements are equally distributed between three main dimensions of engagement, including behavioral engagement (from item number 1 to item number 6), affective engagement (from item number 7 to item number 12), and cognitive engagement (from item number 13 to item 18). They appear in a four-point Likert scale, ranging from *false and mostly false* which signify negative or lower levels of engagement to *mostly true and true* which signify positive or higher levels of engagement. The items were simplified to fit the context of the current study which is the Moroccan EFL common core writing classes. The questionnaire was developed based on well-known measurement scales that examined different aspects of the construct. Its past use indicated a fairly-good level of reliability which reached .764. To ensure the validity of the instrument, the items in the questionnaire were carefully examined to ensure their correspondence with the objectives of the study and, accordingly, adapted, then translated into the Arabic language before they were pilot-tested with a group of students other than those involved in the study. Also, the reliability of the instrument was rechecked again and the results confirmed a good level of reliability which reached .84.

In addition to the pre-post writing engagement questionnaire, the study relied on students' written reflections which addressed a question related to the students' experiences with portfolio assessment in writing classes. To elicit enough and more objective details about their individual experiences, the students were ensured that their reflections would not in any way affect neither their place in the class nor their final course grades. Furthermore, they were invited to provide their reflections using the Arabic language.

7. RESEARCH PROCEDURE

The study proceeded according to Hamp-Lyons and Condon's model (2000) which is based on collection, reflection, and selection. The students were required to, first, write their first drafts, second, reflect upon them using self- and peer-assessment along with students' teacher conferences, third, reproduce their final drafts based on the provided feedback, fourth, reflect upon their final drafts and, fifth, select the best products to be summatively graded. Prior to the treatment stage, the experimental group students were introduced to the key stages to follow to develop their portfolios and they were provided with the support they needed during the process of portfolio development. On the other hand, the control group students were tested using only the regular summative writing achievement tests.

8. DATA ANALYSIS PROCEDURES

To answer the basic questions of the study, the collected quantitative data was analyzed using both descriptive and inferential statistics using SPSS software. The means and standard deviations of the experimental and control group students were analyzed. Furthermore, Independent Samples *t*-Test was used to measure the significance of the differences between the two groups. On the other hand, the qualitative data was analyzed using content analysis. Although the question was an open question that invited the participants to discuss their experiences with the treatment, highlighting both its' advantages and disadvantages, the focus was mainly geared toward the statements relevant to the major research question investigated in this study which is whether or not portfolio assessment has any significant impact on the Moroccan EFL students' writing engagement.

9. FINDINGS

9.1 pre- Post Writing Engagement Results

To address the basic research question investigated in this study, the descriptive and inferential statistics of the control and experimental groups were computed in the pre- and post-stages of the study. The results of this analysis are presented in Tables 1 and 2.

Table 1. Independent Samples t-Test of the Differences in Writing Engagement Between the Experimental Group and the Control Group in the Pre-Test and the Post-Test

Groups	Number	Test	Mean	Standard deviation	<i>t</i> - value	Sig. Value	Sig. level
Experimental	24	Pre-test	49,5000	10,13818	,824	,414	Not sig.

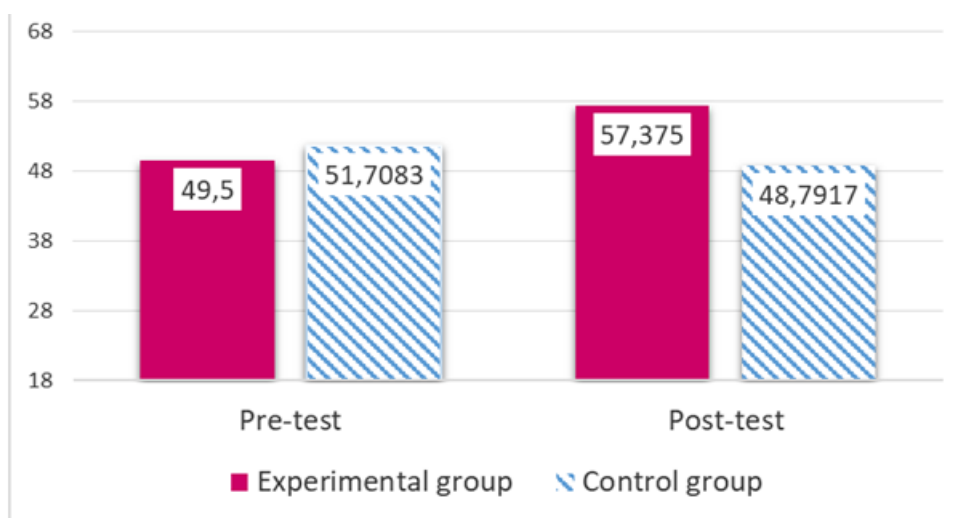
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Control	24		51,7083	8,34828			
Experimental	24	Post-test	57,3750	7,53434	-3,229	,002	Sig.
Control	24		48,7917	10,62392			

Table 1 describes the level of students' engagement in different learning and assessment activities in writing classes before and after the study. It shows that both groups shared approximately the 'same' level of writing engagement before the application of the treatment with a slight difference in favor of the control group. The mean score of the latter was 51,7083 and the standard deviation was 8,34828 whereas the mean score of the experimental group was 49,5000 and the standard deviation was 10,13818. As the *t*-Test analysis confirms, there is not a statistically significant difference between these scores at the 0.5 level at the pre-stage of the study ($p=,414$). Given the total mean scores of both groups before they took the study, it appears that they generally possessed a fairly good level of writing engagement that ranged between 49,5000 for the experimental group and 51,7083 for the control group, which are a little higher than the midpoint of the scale which is 45.

The results of the post-test, on the other hand, indicate that there is a statistically significant difference between the two groups at the 0.5 level ($p=,002$) in favor of the experimental group. The mean score of the control group was 48,7917 with a standard deviation of 10,62392 while the mean score of the experimental group was 57,3750 with a standard deviation of 7,53434. These results show that there were more than 8 points of difference between the two groups in favor of the experimental group. They also demonstrate that both groups were above the midpoint of the writing engagement scale which is 45, but with a more remarkable difference in favor of the experimental group. The latter realized more than 12 points of difference above the midpoint of the scale whereas the control group obtained more than 4 points of difference above it. These differences imply that the experimental group's level of writing engagement has remarkably improved compared to that of the control group. Figure 1 represents these results.

Figure 1. Comparison between the experimental and control groups' levels of writing engagement on the pre-test and the post-test.



To measure the significance of these differences between the pre- and the post stages of the study for each group, the mean scores and standard deviations of both tests have been compared. The obtained results are displayed in Table 2.

Table 2. Independent Samples t-Test Results of the Differences in Writing Engagement Between the Pre-Test and the Post-Test for Each Group

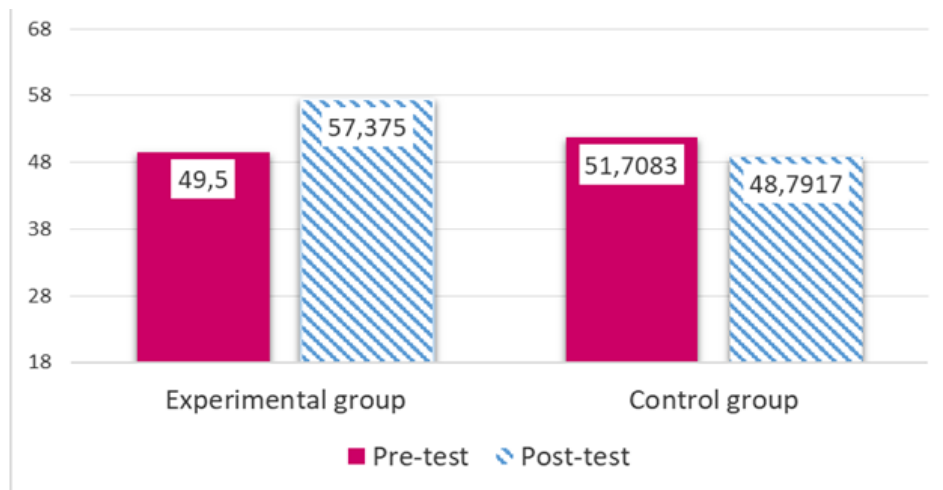
Groups	Number	Tests	Mean	Standard deviation	<i>t</i> - value	Sig. Value	Sig. level
Experimental	24	Pre-test	49,5000	10,13818	-3,054	,004	Sig
		Post-test	57,3750	7,53434			
Control	24	Pre-test	51,7083	8,34828	1,057	,296	Not sig.
		Post-test	48,7917	10,62392			

Table 2 indicates that there are noticeable differences between the scores obtained on the pre-test and those achieved on the post-test for both groups. As already described above, the control group fell from a mean score of 51,7083 and a standard deviation of 8,34828 in the pre-test to a mean score of 48,7917 and a standard deviation of 10,62392 in the post-test with approximately 3

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points of difference in favor of the pre-test. The experimental group, by contrast, jumped from a mean score of 49,5000 and a standard deviation of 10,13818 in the pre-test to a mean score of 57,3750 and a standard deviation of 7,53434 in the post-test. The difference between the two tests was approximately 8 points in favor of the post-test. To measure the significance of these differences, the *t*-Test analysis has been conducted. The results of this analysis affirm that there is a statistically significant difference at the 0.5 level between the pre- and the post-test results in favor of the post-test results for the experimental group ($p=,004$). This significant improvement is not the case for the control group whose $p=,296$, indicating that there is not a statistically significant difference at the 0.5 level between the two tests despite the noted difference in favor of the pre-test. This being found suggests that portfolio assessment has positively affected the experimental group students' writing engagement and, hence, appears to support the existing theoretical and empirical evidence on the utility of portfolio assessment as an engagement tool. Figure 2 depicts these results.

Figure 2. Comparison of the experimental and control groups' level of writing engagement between pre-test and the post-test.



9.2 Written Reflections Results

After the analysis of the quantitative data, the qualitative data gathered from the students' written reflections was analyzed based on the major objectives of the study. The students' qualitative comments were carefully read and analyzed, then translated before identifying the major recurrent statements relevant to the constructs examined in the study. The statements are presented in the following table along with their frequencies and percentages.

9.2.1 Comments related to writing engagement

Table 3. The Coded Comments Related to Writing Engagement

Comments	Frequency	Percentage
I rather see it (portfolio assessment) as a way to express, accumulate, and propose my ideas about certain topics.	1	4%
The portfolio encouraged me to talk and discuss with my friends inside and outside of the classroom.	1	4%
The portfolio is a means for practicing how to express oneself.	1	4%
I do my best to improve my writing.	1	4%
Portfolio assessment encouraged me to look for new words to use while writing.	1	4%
PA incentivized us to keep writing in English.	4	18%
Portfolio assessment helped me to integrate different ideas and information.	1	4%
Thanks to portfolio, I discovered the mistakes I make while writing and I learned from them.	3	13%
Portfolio assessment made me aware of my abilities.	2	9%
Portfolio assessment increased my interest in writing.	3	13%
I think the progress portfolio is a good idea, I like it, it's amazing.	5	23%
Total	23	100%

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It seems from Table 3 that the students' written reflections included numerous comments on how they perceived portfolio assessment to affect their writing engagement. These comments cover different types of engagement, including behavioral, cognitive, and affective levels. The behavioral level is evidenced in six statements (from statement 1 to statement 6) with an average frequency of 38%, the cognitive level is supported by three statements (from statement 7 to statement 9) with an average frequency of 26%, and the affective level is represented by two statements (statements 10 & 11) with an average frequency of 36%. These comments all show that students were highly positive about the impact of portfolio assessment on their level of writing engagement.

10. DISCUSSION

Although the pedagogical utility of portfolio assessment is well-documented in the existing literature, its role in students' engagement is still under-explored. The present study aspired to close this gap by making use of a quasi-experimental design where the level of students' writing engagement is controlled before and after being exposed to portfolio-based writing assessment activities. The statistical and qualitative forms of analysis that have been performed on the data elicited via the writing engagement scale and the students' written reflections revealed that the experimental group students achieved higher, more positive writing engagement level than the control group students whose writing engagement level fell almost 3 points backward (see Tables 1 & 2). These results suggest that portfolio-based writing assessment activities are more engaging than summative-based writing achievement tests.

These findings find strong support in the constructivist view of learning and assessment which declares the new alternative assessment tools, specifically portfolio assessment as a powerful means for readdressing the imbalances associated with traditional testing and giving students' a more central position in the instructional and assessment experiences (Anderson, 1998; Brown & Hudson, 1998; Hamp-Lyons & Condon, 2000; Huerta-Macias, 1995; Lam, 2018). As put by Paulson et al. (1991), portfolio assessment "is something done by the student, not to the student" (p.61). Therefore, it might be claimed that portfolio assessment is in and of itself a highly engaging assessment instrument that requires of students an amount of time and effort that is obviously different from what the other traditional summative writing tests demand.

Instead of requiring students to sit for a one-shot, paper and pencil-based test, the portfolio assessment project implemented in the current study, as emphasized in the students' written reflections, encouraged the students to direct more attention toward long-term rather than short-term goals, focus on process rather than product only, and keep track of their progress from each writing draft to another and from each writing assignment to another (see table 3). This could give them a sense of power, autonomy, responsibility, and ownership toward writing learning and assessment (Hamp-Lyons & Condon, 2000; Genesee & Upshur, 1996; O'Malley & Valdez-Pierce, 1996).

Also, the encouragement of the students to embrace the role of feedback giving and taking instead of just passively receiving the teacher's feedback might have maximized their engagement opportunities at different levels. As reported by the participants in Lucas (2008) and Kathpalia and Heah's (2008) studies that the interpersonal and intrapersonal experiences they had in light of portfolio assessment helped them improve not only the linguistic aspects of their learning, but also enhance its cognitive, affect, and social sides.

Last but not least, the portfolio assessment model followed in the present study encouraged the students to make a more systematic, conscious, and consistent use of three basic complementary techniques that are often combined in portfolio-based writing instruction and assessment, namely self- and peer-assessment and student-teacher conferences (Hamp-Lyons & Condon, 2000; Hassaskhah & Sharifi, 2011; Kathpalia & Heah, 2008). Lucas (2008), Kathpalia and Heah (2008), Romova and Andrew (2011), and Farahian and Avarzamani (2018) found strong links between the reflective assessment practices and the students' writing engagement, particularly in terms of its cognitive and metacognitive aspects. Henceforth, the various reflective and assessment techniques used in the present study might have had comparable effects on the students' writing engagement in the context of the present study, too. This interpretation becomes more plausible, bearing in mind the students' written reflections which included several statements related to the cognitive and metacognitive aspects of engagement.

11. CONCLUSION

Although the current study yielded significant results regarding the role of portfolio assessment in enhancing EFL students' writing engagement, it should equally be recognized that there existed numerous limitations that should be taken into account when dealing with these results. The first limitation relates to the nature and the size of the sample which stays quite small compared to the numbers of participants involved in previous studies on students' engagement (Kember & Leung, 2009; Veiga & Robu, 2014; Veiga et al., 2014; Lane & Harris, 2015). Henceforth, there is a need to recruit larger and more randomized samples of participants to foster the external validity of such a study. The second limitation is related to the engagement scale used in the study. Although self-report measures stay the most widely used in examining students' engagement (Veiga et al., 2014), there was a concern that the participants might either under- or over-estimate their engagement level. Accordingly, it is highly recommended adopting other research instruments like classroom observation to obtain further insights into the question under investigation. A

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further limitation is that the current study was mainly concerned with the analysis of the impact of portfolio assessment on the students' overall engagement, including its behavioral, cognitive, and affective aspects. However, it would also be worthwhile to go for deeper levels of analysis that examine the impact of portfolio-based writing assessment on each of these levels of engagement.

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