

**DEVELOPING AND IMPLEMENTING
E-PORTFOLIO AS A WRITING ASSESSMENT
TOOL FOR ESL LEARNERS IN A MALAYSIAN
UNIVERSITY**

WIRAWATI NGUI YI XE



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UNIVERSITI MALAYSIA SABAH**

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DECLARATION

I hereby declare that the material in this thesis is my own except for quotations, equations, summaries and references, which have been duly acknowledged.

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Wirawati Ngui Yi Xe
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ABSTRACT

This study highlights the development and implementation of e-Portfolio as an assessment tool at a public university in Malaysia. The e-Portfolio was implemented as part of a 14-week advanced English language course for undergraduate students at Universiti Malaysia Sabah. This study aimed to investigate the how the use of the e-Portfolio contributed to the students' writing skills. The first part of the study focused on the development of the e-Portfolio based on the ADDIE model, taking into account the context and the needs of the learners. This was done by investigating samples of students' work in past semesters and obtaining students' opinions via questionnaires. Apart from that, the views of course instructors and subject matter experts were also referred to. The second part of this study looked into the actual implementation of the e-Portfolio which involved a total of 46 students from the Teaching English as a Second Language (TESL) programme and the International Relations (IR) programme. This was a qualitative case study whereby open-ended questionnaires and interviews were employed to investigate students' experiences of using the e-Portfolio. The opinions of three instructors who used the e-Portfolio were also obtained through interviews. Another data source originated from online discourses namely the comments contributed by the students in the e-Portfolios. In addition, the students' writing performance was examined by assessing the essays they produced. All of the data were imported to NVivo 12 and thematic analysis was used as the primary method of data analysis. Having analysed the data based on the e-Portfolio features and the writing stages, the findings demonstrated that using the e-Portfolio had a positive impact on the students' writing skills. This was affirmed by the strengths and benefits expressed by the instructors and the students in relation to their e-Portfolio experiences such as the use of writing stages and digital artefacts, accessibility, a personalised writing experience, the ability to exchange feedback and communicate as well as motivation in using the e-Portfolio. On the other hand, the findings revealed that the instructors and the students experienced challenges when using the e-Portfolio particularly in relation to poor Internet connectivity and difficulty adapting to the e-Portfolio. Nevertheless, the use of e-Portfolio was perceived as an effective assessment by the students as it contributed to the development of their writing. On the whole, this study established that the e-Portfolio is a promising assessment tool for second language learners in the context of Malaysian higher education.

ABSTRAK

PEMBINAAN DAN PELAKSANAAN E-PORTFOLIO SEBAGAI ALAT PENTAKSIRAN PENULISAN UNTUK PELAJAR BAHASA INGGERIS SEBAGAI BAHASA KEDUA DI SEBUAH UNIVERSITI DI MALAYSIA

Kajian ini memfokuskan pembinaan dan pelaksanaan e-Portfolio sebagai pentaksiran di sebuah universiti awam di Malaysia. E-Portfolio ini telah dilaksanakan dalam kursus lanjutan Bahasa Inggeris untuk pelajar prasiswazah selama 14 minggu di Universiti Malaysia Sabah. Kajian ini bertujuan untuk mengkaji bagaimana penggunaan e-Portfolio menyumbang kepada kemahiran menulis pelajar. Bahagian pertama kajian ini memfokuskan kepada pembinaan e-Portfolio berdasarkan model ADDIE dengan mengambil kira konteks dan keperluan pelajar. Ini dilakukan dengan mengkaji sampel kerja murid bagi semester lepas dan mendapatkan pandangan pelajar melalui soal selidik. Pandangan daripada tenaga pengajar dan pakar-pakar bidang turut dijadikan sebagai rujukan. Bahagian kedua kajian ini melihat kepada pelaksanaan sebenar e-Portfolio yang melibatkan seramai 46 orang pelajar program Teaching English as a Second Language (TESL) dan program International Relations (IR). Ini merupakan kajian kualitatif di mana soal selidik soalan terbuka dan temubual digunakan untuk mengkaji pengalaman pelajar menggunakan e-Portfolio. Pandangan tiga orang pengajar yang menggunakan e-Portfolio juga diperolehi melalui temubual. Sumber data yang lain adalah komentar pelajar di atas talian dalam e-Portfolio. Sebagai tambahan, prestasi penulisan murid telah dinilai berdasarkan esei-esei yang telah mereka hasilkan. Kesemua data telah diimport ke NVivo 12 dan analisis tematik telah digunakan sebagai kaedah analisis data yang utama. Daripada analisis data yang telah dibuat berdasarkan ciri-ciri e-Portfolio dan tahap penulisan, hasil kajian menunjukkan penggunaan e-Portfolio memberikan impak positif kepada kemahiran menulis pelajar. Ini dikuatkan lagi dengan kelebihan e-Portfolio yang telah diperkatakan oleh tenaga pengajar dan para pelajar seperti penulisan secara berperingkat, penggunaan artifak digital, pengalaman menulis secara tersendiri, pemberian maklum balas dan komunikasi serta motivasi untuk menggunakan e-Portfolio. Akan tetapi, hasil kajian juga telah mendapati bahawa tenaga pengajar dan para pelajar menghadapi beberapa cabaran ketika menggunakan e-Portfolio, terutamanya capaian Internet yang lemah dan kesukaran untuk mengadaptasi penggunaan e-Portfolio. Walau bagaimanapun, penggunaan e-Portfolio telah dilihat sebagai suatu pentaksiran yang efektif oleh pelajar kerana ia menyumbang kepada perkembangan penulisan mereka. Secara keseluruhannya, kajian ini telah memperlihatkan bahawa e-Portfolio adalah satu alat pentaksiran yang berkeupayaan untuk pelajar bahasa kedua di institusi pengajian tinggi Malaysia.

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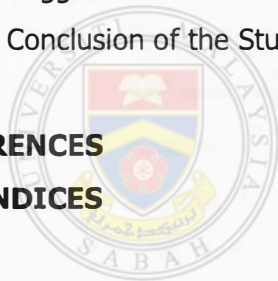
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CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

1.1 Chapter Overview

Good academic writing is a valuable skill in tertiary education (Coffin et al., 2003). When Malaysian students transition from secondary to tertiary education, they are expected to demonstrate literacy skills that meet the academic requirements at university (Normazidah Che Musa et al., 2012). This can however be a challenge for some students since the conventions of writing for academic purposes are distinctively different and doing so in the students' non-native language makes the task even more demanding.

A number of studies in Malaysian and foreign contexts have revealed some of the issues concerning academic writing for non-native students. In Malaysia, researchers have explored students' academic writing in tertiary education (Latisha Asmaak Shafie, Anis Maesin, Nazira Osman, Surina Nayan, & Mahani Mansor, 2010; Ida Fatimawati Adi Badiozaman, 2015; Normazidah Che Musa, Koo, & Hazita Azman, 2012) and acknowledged that the mastery of English in an academic context is a delicate and challenging task for Malaysian undergraduates. Latisha Asmaak Shafie et al. (2010) looked into the difficulties faced by beginner writers using collaborative writing for the course 'English for Academic Purposes' in tertiary education; they discovered weak English language proficiency and the tendency to use first language among the respondents. Ida Fatimawati Adi Badiozaman (2015) studied students' self-concept in academic writing and concluded that various intrinsic (personal beliefs and perceptions about academic writing and English language) as well as extrinsic factors (educational policies and institutions) contributed to second language learners' self-concept. Normazidah Che Musa et al.'s (2012) review indicated that

students struggle in university because they lack the ability to analyse academic articles and to write according to academic conventions. Research in foreign contexts such as in Thailand (Puengpipattrakul, 2013), Syria (Al-Mukdad, 2019) and China (Liu & Braine, 2005) have also explored the issue of writing among their respective undergraduate students. Puengpipattrakul's (2013) study explored the use of integrated feedback towards the writing performance of a group of Thai undergraduate students in an English course; it was concluded that classroom practices that focus on process and integrate feedback are essential to improve the academic writing abilities of second language learners in Thailand. Al-Mukdad (2019) investigated students' academic writing problems at Arab International University and proposed for instructors to further encourage student writers due to the respondents' low motivation and perception that writing is a tedious task. Liu and Braine (2005) examined the use of cohesive features in academic writing among a group of undergraduate students in a Chinese university, and consequently recommended pedagogical methods that are more specific toward and focused on the needs of second language learners in China. The aforementioned studies altogether indicate that academic writing is a universal challenge for non-native speakers.

Despite the adversity surrounding English language mastery for second language learners, the use of technology has been impactful especially in providing innovative methods for language testing that were previously unavailable. Examples of improved features for computer-based testing include tracing of learners' achievements, instantaneous feedback, new kinds of tasks, and management that is personalised, protected, and accommodating (Chalhoub-Deville, 2001). Methods to assess knowledge and skills have also transformed along with our improved understanding of effective teaching and learning, with more and more theories and pedagogies taking into consideration various key aspects such as motivation, learner autonomy, self-evaluation, and self-reflection (Stannard & Basiel, 2013). In accordance to these educational shifts, the Malaysian government has included technology as an essential aspect of teaching and learning, and e-learning has become an integrated component across Malaysian higher learning institutions (Ministry of Education, 2013b). The Malaysian Ministry of Higher Education (MOHE) (2011) defines e-learning as using Information and Communications Technology (ICT) to enhance the process of teaching and learning. In a guide entitled *National*

e-Learning Policy: Higher Learning Institutions or Dasar e-Pembelajaran Negara: Institusi Pengajian Tinggi, MOHE (2011) cited assessment as one of the key aspects for the development of curriculum and e-content phases, with the initial stage to include activities involving e-assessment (year 2011-2012), the subsequent stage to witness an increase in e-assessment related activities (year 2013-2014), and for e-assessment to be fully implemented eventually (year 2015 onwards).

An example of a technologically enhanced educational tool is the e-Portfolio. E-Portfolios have been adapted across different countries including Australia (Education Department of Western Australia, 2000), New Zealand (New Zealand Ministry of Education, 2011), and the United States of America (Lorenzo & Ittelson, 2005). An e-Portfolio comprises a compilation of students' work that may be published on the World Wide Web (Sadia, 2005); this collection contains "artefacts" such as images, audio and video files that relate to the learning goals, all of which reflects the learners' progress over a period of time (Challis, 2005; Krause, 2006; New Zealand Ministry of Education, 2011). An e-Portfolio may also incorporate word-processed documents, graphic organisers, online articles as well as blogs, (Stannard & Basiel, 2013), which altogether proves and displays students' abilities and attainments (Cooper, 1999).

Stannard and Basiel (2013) expressed that language portfolios enable the assessment of products as well as process; the significance of process lies in the vast opportunities for students to self-direct and reflect on their learning. Coffin, Curry, Goodman, Hewings, Lillis & Swann (2003) stated that since portfolios assess evidence of learning over time, they allow students to review their work and develop their writing skills through an extended period; to an extent this mirrors the type of writing produced within an authentic professional context. Therefore, when portfolios become electronic in format, the depth of materials and array of skills are intensified (Stannard & Basiel, 2013). Sadia (2005) analysed e-Portfolio in the language classroom, and advocated that the advantages are numerous as it stimulates learner interest, helps to improve language, allows wider involvement among peers and other potential readers, and presents authentic opportunities for assessment since its digital component is representative of the learning and employment setting nowadays. Since an e-Portfolio is also more portable and easily accessible, this means

that data and evidence related to assessment can be distributed effortlessly and widely to stakeholders with an interest in learners' language competency (Stannard & Basiel, 2013). With e-Portfolio, assessment in English language courses no longer needs to be of pen and paper; progress as well as product can now be monitored and documented through audio recordings, podcasts, digital storytelling, and blogs, just to name a few.

Methods to teach and assess have transformed vastly, prompting classroom processes to become increasingly dynamic and resourceful. As echoed by Tomlinson (1995), language assessment should present learning opportunities for the assessors as well as the candidates who are being assessed. Educators should therefore reflect on how they can assess more effectively in their modern-day, technology-integrated classroom, for the benefit of both instructors as well as students. Seeing that portfolios have been lauded as a suitable substitute for summative examinations especially for non-native speakers of English (Coffin et al. 2003), the application of e-Portfolio in Malaysia's present-day classroom is timely and relevant. Meticulous selection and application of technology however, is important in order to complement learner needs which are to a certain extent largely context dependent. Despite the conveniences offered by technology, a purposeful e-Portfolio needs to be developed and implemented to address the issue of English language mastery particularly in the skill of academic writing within the Malaysian tertiary education context. The following sections will provide more in-depth explanation by clarifying key aspects of the study. Some of the topics that will be addressed include the research context, the problem statement, the aim of the study, the significance of the study and the corresponding limitations. The key terms will also be defined and the study's conceptual framework will be presented.

1.2 Background to the Study

This study focused on the context of Universiti Malaysia Sabah (UMS) which is one of the 20 public universities in Malaysia. It is the ninth public university and was officially established in 1994. There are three categories of public universities: research universities, comprehensive universities, and focused universities; UMS is

classified as a comprehensive university. The main campus is located in the capital city of Sabah in Kota Kinabalu, while two other campuses are situated in Labuan and Sandakan. This study was conducted in the main campus which caters to students of undergraduate and postgraduate levels.

In recognition of the fact that English language mastery is one of the primary conduit for employability in Malaysia (Selvaraj Grapragasem, Anbalagan Krishnan & Azlin Norhaini Mansor, 2014), English language courses are generally compulsory across Malaysian universities. The Centre for the Promotion of Knowledge and Language Learning (also known as *Pusat Penataran Ilmu dan Bahasa* (PPIB)) in UMS offers a variety of English language courses for undergraduate students. Enrolment in English language courses is compulsory for students to obtain sufficient credit hours in order to be eligible for graduation. Commencing the first semester of the year 2016/2017, undergraduate students who obtain band 3 (upper)¹, 4, 5, and 6 for the Malaysian University English Test (MUET) are required to enrol in at least one English course throughout their studies. They may choose from a total of four advanced level English courses namely *English for Academic Reading and Writing*, *English for Research Purposes*, *Grammar in Context* and *English for Employment*. However, TESL (Teaching English as a Second Language), IR (International Relations), and Engineering students who obtain band 3 (upper), 4, 5, and 6 for MUET are required to enrol in all four courses of advanced English.

The reason for selecting the course *UB00402 Academic Reading and Writing* as the basis for this study was relatively straightforward. Firstly, the accountability of English language proficiency in tertiary education has always been a controversial matter in Malaysia, particularly since students are expected to demonstrate satisfactory fluency following 11 years of primary and secondary schooling, and two or more years of tertiary education. Secondly, students' ability to use the English language for both generic and academic purposes greatly affects their future career

¹ A decision was made in 2015 to assign students into proficiency and advanced English courses with the cut-off point being a score of 140-159 which indicates lower Band 3, and a score of 160-179 which indicates upper Band 3 (previous cut-off point was Band 1, 2 for proficiency courses; Band 3,4,5,6 for advanced courses)

opportunities. The two factors also indicate the university's ability to produce articulate graduates for the workforce.

As a result of policy transformation and educational shifts in the government, change was imminent in the course *UB00402 Academic Reading and Writing*. This is in accordance with the priorities that were cited in the Malaysia Education Blueprint 2015-2025 (Higher Education) in which "ICT-enabled learning" and "blended learning models" were highlighted in Shift number nine out of the ten shifts (Ministry of Education, 2013b). The Ministry's emphasis on technology is likewise prevalent across schools. As part of an effort to "Strengthen Quality of Science, Technology, Engineering and Mathematics (STEM) education", the use of blended-learning models to enrich school practices through technology was proposed (Ministry of Education, 2013a: E-11). Another educational shift that is parallel to the changes in the course *UB00402 Academic Reading and Writing* is the Ministry's emphasis on alternative assessment. The use of alternative assessment was outlined in the Malaysia Higher Education 4.0 Framework, as part of the initiative towards a "future ready curriculum" (Ministry of Higher Education, 2018, p. 72). In the document, portfolio-based assessment was cited as an example of alternative assessment that is authentic in context. In fact, e-Portfolio was introduced as one of the innovative approaches to better equip university students for the Fourth Industrial Revolution (4IR) (Ministry of Higher Education, 2018). The MyE-Portfolio functions as a digital curriculum vitae that assesses the learners' abilities through a combination of digital evidences. As a result of the aforementioned focus in the Ministry, the introduction of the e-Portfolio in this study was a relevant and timely move.

On a related note, the use of e-Portfolios has been embraced by several higher learning institutions in Malaysia. In 2017, five public universities participated in an officiation ceremony for the launch of e-Portfolio systems in higher education (Universiti Teknologi Malaysia, n.d.). Universiti Teknologi Malaysia, Universiti Putra Malaysia, Universiti Kebangsaan Malaysia, Universiti Teknologi Mara, and Universiti Islam Antarabangsa Malaysia showcased their respective e-Portfolio systems during the national-level ceremony. Another public university that followed suit was Universiti Sains Malaysia that established an e-Portfolio system for the students and staff (Universiti Sains Malaysia, n.d.). This movement alludes to the e-Portfolio's

potential as an educational tool in higher education. Accordingly, it was deduced that the introduction of e-Portfolio in UMS was likely to have a positive impact on the students. The e-Portfolio was therefore determined as an appropriate and superior replacement of the paper portfolio that was previously implemented in *UB00402 Academic Reading and Writing*.

1.3 Problem Statement

Poor English language fluency was acknowledged as far back as a decade ago in the National Higher Education Action Plan (2007-2010) (Ministry of Higher Education, 2007). A lack of English language proficiency was similarly cited in the subsequent national education policy known as the Malaysia Education Blueprint (Higher Education) (2015-2025) (Ministry of Education, 2013b). The language's impact on employability was revealed in a study whereby employers ranked the ability to converse in English and the ability to use English in written form as the two most important graduate skills (Mohamad Shukri, Rafikul & Noor Hazilah, 2014). Another study also found that employers preferred candidates who demonstrate better language accuracy (Siti, Pillai, Dumanig & Phillip, 2019). Despite the language's significance, a mismatch persists with low English proficiency being cited as one of Malaysian graduates' primary weaknesses in job-seeking (Sheith, 2018; Malaysian Employers Federation, 2016). Although the English language is important for occupational and academic pursuits, its mastery is still a challenge for second language learners.

It is now evident that there is a shortcoming in the present education system that hinders Malaysian students from becoming proficient users of English despite more than a decade of formal schooling. The issue was similarly prevalent in UMS whereby despite English being a compulsory course and a pre-requisite for graduation, a lack of proficiency remains a notable matter among the undergraduate students. This was highlighted through an earlier study conducted at PPIB (Wan Hurani Osman & Anna Lynn Abu Bakar, 2009) that looked into issues concerning the course *UB00402 Academic Reading and Writing*. The study involved 27 medical students and revealed that although the students responded positively towards the