Student teachers' initial perceptions of portfolio tasks in EFL argumentative essay writing

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Abstract

This study explored student teachers' initial perceptions regarding using portfolios in an advanced English as a Foreign Language course that aimed, among other objectives, to develop students' argumentation skills through argumentative essay writing. The research involved 20 participants enrolled in an advanced language development course at a state-owned university in Mar del Plata, Argentina. Participants completed a pre-portfolio questionnaire comprising 23 Likert scale items and one open-ended question, designed to capture their views on the potential benefits, feedback mechanisms, motivational aspects, and practical challenges associated with portfolio tasks. Quantitative findings revealed positive initial attitudes towards the portfolio's role in promoting reflection and structured feedback, while qualitative data provided detailed insights into specific concerns regarding motivation and workload management. Comparative analyses with recent studies validated these findings, highlighting both consistencies and divergences. Limitations identified included the small sample size and the absence of post-intervention data. Recommendations for future research emphasize the need for longitudinal studies and mixed-method approaches that incorporate post-intervention evaluations to assess portfolios' effectiveness in EFL contexts more comprehensively.

Keywords: argumentative essays; EFL writing; feedback mechanisms; portfolio tasks; reflective practice

1. Introduction

The integration of portfolios in English as a Foreign Language (EFL) writing classes has increasingly gained attention as an effective instructional and assessment approach (Khodashenas & Rakhshi, 2017; Marin, 2020). In this study, a portfolio is understood as a purposeful, curated collection of students' written work compiled over time to document development and to support reflection and feedback (Paulson et al., 1991). Portfolios allow learners to engage in reflective practice, continuous revision, and structured feedback, ultimately fostering greater autonomy and proficiency in writing (Guo & Li, 2024). Specifically, in argumentative essay writing, portfolios offer opportunities for learners to critically evaluate their ideas, systematically improve their writing, and develop critical thinking skills essential for effective argumentation (Tsai & Chuang, 2013; Roohani & Taheri, 2015).

This work investigates student teachers' initial perceptions regarding the use of portfolio tasks within an argumentative essay-writing context. It examines students' views on the potential benefits of portfolios, their expectations of structured feedback, and the motivational and practical challenges they foresee (Khodashenas & Rakhshi, 2017; Muin & Hafidah, 2021). To capture these baseline perceptions, data were collected prior to the implementation of the portfolio-based approach through a pre-course questionnaire combining Likert-scale items and open-ended prompts. This mixed-methods design provides a detailed examination of the strengths, concerns, and expectations reported by learners before the portfolio work began.

This chapter begins with a literature review, which highlights existing research on portfolio tasks in EFL contexts, especially focusing on writing and argumentative essay skills. Following the literature review, the research questions guiding this investigation are presented. The next section describes the research context and participants. Results from the quantitative and qualitative data analyses are then detailed, followed by a comprehensive discussion connecting these findings to previous literature. The paper concludes by outlining the limitations of the current research, suggesting directions for future studies, and providing recommendations to optimize portfolio implementation in EFL writing courses.

2. Literature Review

Portfolio assessment can be defined as the systematic, curated collection of learner work gathered over time, typically accompanied by reflection, which is used to document progress and/or make evaluative judgments about performance. Building on the foundational principles outlined by Hamp-Lyons and Condon (2000), portfolios in writing pedagogy are commonly operationalized in several forms, including (a) working/developmental portfolios (drafts and process evidence), (b) showcase portfolios (best work selected for presentation), and (c) assessment portfolios (purpose-built collections aligned with scoring criteria). In language teaching contexts, portfolio tasks have become increasingly prevalent due to their capacity to integrate reflective practice, formative cycles of drafting and feedback, self-regulated learning, and learner autonomy. Research in EFL writing similarly reports positive effects of (e-)portfolio use on writing performance and related learner variables, particularly when reflection and feedback are systematically embedded in the process (Khodashenas & Rakhshi, 2017; Farrah, 2018; Marin, 2020). In particular, portfolios are highly suitable for teaching argumentative essays as they encourage students to develop structured arguments, critically evaluate their ideas, and engage in iterative revision processes informed by comprehensive feedback (Tsai & Chuang, 2013; Roohani & Taheri, 2015).

Marin (2020) highlights the value of portfolio-based tasks in promoting reflective practice, enabling students to recognize their learning trajectories clearly. This systematic reflection not only facilitates improvements in writing quality but also significantly enhances critical thinking skills. Similarly, Esternon and Diva (2024) have quantitatively demonstrated how portfolios systematically enhance grammatical accuracy and textual coherence among secondary school students. Their findings underline that portfolios are not merely evaluative instruments but also tools for ongoing language development.

Khodashenas and Rakhshi (2017) provided additional evidence for the positive impact of portfolio tasks in English language teaching (ELT) environments. Their study emphasized how portfolios significantly enhance writing performance and bolster self-efficacy,

especially when supported by explicit instructional strategies that address challenges like task complexity and student workload. Such findings parallel concerns expressed qualitatively by students about the practical burdens of maintaining portfolios, emphasizing the importance of structured support systems.

The motivational dimensions of portfolio-based work were foregrounded in recent evidence syntheses. In particular, systematic reviews of (e-)portfolios used for formative purposes emphasized that portfolio tasks tended to be most meaningful when they were embedded in iterative cycles of reflection and continuous, structured feedback, including input from both teachers and peers (Gün-Tosik et al., 2023; Zhang & Tur, 2024). Complementary synthesis work on portfolio assessment in educational settings reported overall positive effects on learning-related outcomes (i.e., learning attitudes) and similarly highlighted the role of sustained feedback processes in supporting learners' ongoing engagement with portfolio work (Doğan et al., 2024). This aligned closely with the qualitative insights from the present study, which showed that student teachers particularly valued consistent feedback mechanisms as a key condition for sustaining investment in portfolio tasks.

Muin and Hafidah (2021) further explored students' initial perceptions of portfolios, identifying instructional clarity and explicit expectations as critical factors influencing student acceptance. The study concluded that clear, transparent instructions and consistent teacher support substantially reduce student apprehensions and facilitate better engagement with portfolio tasks. This finding is consistent with qualitative observations from students who reported challenges associated with unclear expectations and instructional gaps.

Empirical research provides additional quantitative validation for the efficacy of portfolios. Nezakatgoo (2011) found that students who engaged in portfolio-based tasks demonstrated superior performance in writing skills compared to those assessed through traditional methods. Similarly, Hudori et al. (2020) documented positive outcomes of portfolio use in secondary education contexts, noting marked improvements in students' overall writing quality.

Research by Guo and Li (2024) further corroborates the effectiveness of portfolios in ELT contexts, highlighting their positive

impact on enhancing learners' metacognitive skills, autonomy, and overall language proficiency. Additionally, Tsai and Chuang (2013) demonstrated how portfolios facilitate improved argumentative writing through structured revisions and collaborative feedback processes, reinforcing the suitability of portfolios specifically for argumentative essay writing tasks.

Despite the broad agreement on the positive impacts of portfolio use, the literature also acknowledges challenges. For instance, Mohamadi (2018) notes that portfolios may initially overwhelm students unfamiliar with reflective writing practices. To mitigate this, clear instructional frameworks and consistent feedback loops are recommended. Similarly, Roohani and Taheri (2015) emphasize the importance of scaffolding portfolio tasks to ensure that students fully understand expectations and can effectively manage the workload involved.

Published research conducted with Spanish-speaking participants also supported the relevance of portfolios for EFL writing instruction and assessment. In Chilean English teacher education, writing portfolios were examined as a pedagogical strategy to promote reflective learning, and findings suggested that teachers and student teachers did not always align in how they understood the portfolio's purposes, benefits, and implementation demands (Saavedra Jeldres & Campos Espinoza, 2024). Evidence from other Spanish-speaking EFL settings likewise framed portfolio assessment as conducive to formative monitoring of writing development and learner autonomy (Tomalá Guzman & Almeida, 2025), and earlier work with Spanish-speaking university students in Venezuela also examined portfolios as a means of evaluating written production in English (Lunar, 2007). In Argentina, although research with Spanish-speaking EFL learners and teacher trainees has documented key tensions around writing assessment and feedback practices, portfolio-focused evidence has remained comparatively less visible, which justified further inquiry in this context.

3. Research Questions

Based on the literature and the identified gaps, this study addresses the following research questions:

1. What are students' initial perceptions regarding the effectiveness of portfolio tasks in enhancing writing skills and reflective practices?
2. How do students perceive the role of structured feedback and guidance in managing portfolio tasks?
3. What specific challenges related to motivation, task complexity, and workload do students anticipate when engaging with portfolio-based writing instruction?
4. To what extent do quantitative perceptions of portfolio effectiveness align or diverge from qualitative insights provided by students?

4. Method

4.1. Context and Participants

This study was conducted within the course *Comunicación Avanzada II* (Advanced Communication II, ACII), a language development course taught during the fourth year of the Teaching English as a Foreign Language (TEFL) program at a state university in Mar del Plata, Argentina (National University of Mar del Plata). Students enrolled in this course have previously completed and passed *Comunicación Avanzada I* (Advanced Communication I, ACI) and other language development courses in earlier years of the program. The primary focus of ACII is on developing argumentative essay writing and persuasive oral communication skills. The course meets for eight hours per week throughout one academic semester.

In the course, the portfolio consisted of a series of handwritten essays produced under a fixed time limit, mirroring the conditions used in in-class assignments and tests. Essay prompts were provided by one of the ACII teachers. For each essay, students first planned their text and submitted an outline alongside the final version. All outlines and essays were kept in a single folder. After completing the full set of essays, students selected the piece they considered their strongest and placed it at the front of the folder. This essay was followed by a self-assessment paragraph on a separate sheet of paper, in which students explained why they considered it their best work by referring to the main criteria used for peer review. Peer review was guided by a peer feedback sheet, which functioned as a structured checklist/rubric aligned with course expectations for argumentative

essays (e.g., clarity of the position, support for claims, cohesion, and language accuracy) and prompted reviewers to comment on core aspects of essay quality and to provide specific, actionable suggestions for revision. Students also selected a second essay for peer correction, which was placed as the third page of the folder entry, followed by the classmate's written feedback as the fourth page. A revised second draft—produced by the original author in response to the peer feedback—was included as the fifth page. The remaining essays were placed at the end of the folder. Essays containing plagiarism or produced with the assistance of artificial intelligence tools were not reviewed or graded, as portfolio writing was intended to approximate the conditions of the course mid-term exam and to capture students' independent writing performance.

The participants in this study were 20 pre-service English teachers enrolled in the ACII course, aged 21-35 years. The majority of participants were women. Participation was voluntary, and students were asked to use nicknames to ensure their anonymity and protect their ethical rights as research participants. This measure was taken so that, in the post-questionnaire administered at the end of the process, the researchers could still identify each participant and analyze their longitudinal development and their perceptions regarding the impact of using portfolios. All participating students completed an informed consent form in which they authorized the researchers to use their data for research purposes, in compliance with established ethical standards.

4.2. Instrument for Data Collection

Data were collected using a pre-portfolio questionnaire consisting of 23 Likert scale questions, in which responses ranged from 1 (strongly disagree) to 5 (strongly agree). The questionnaire was adapted from the one used in Mohammed A. A. Farrah's 2018 study. This questionnaire was validated by three experts from the National University of Mar del Plata. They were asked to validate the content and clarity of each question. Their comments helped us make minor adjustments and adapt the questions for the final version of the questionnaire. Additionally, an open-ended question was included at the end of the questionnaire, allowing students to provide further insights or comments not captured by the Likert-scale items. The

questionnaire was designed using Google Forms and distributed electronically. It aimed to capture students' initial perceptions of portfolios in terms of benefits, feedback expectations, motivation, and potential practical challenges. To preserve confidentiality and ethical standards, students' identities were kept anonymous throughout the data collection process: students picked a pseudonym to compare their perceptions towards portfolios before and after the experience, with another questionnaire. The questionnaire was administered before the portfolio task experience was implemented, providing a baseline understanding of student expectations and concerns.

5. Results

5.1. Reliability Analysis

A reliability analysis was conducted using Cronbach's Alpha to assess the internal consistency of the questionnaire items used in this pre-instructional survey. A higher alpha indicates better internal consistency, with values above 0.7 generally considered acceptable. The Cronbach's Alpha calculated for this questionnaire was **0.77**, indicating good internal consistency among the survey items. Table 1 summarizes the top five items according to their item-total correlations, reflecting each item's correlation with the combined scores of the other items.

Questionnaire Item	**Item-Total Correlation**
The portfolio encourages self-examination and reflection.	0.71
The portfolio helps me to become a critical thinker.	0.69
The portfolio helps me to profit from more instances of peer and professor feedback.	0.68
The portfolio is a useful learning tool.	0.60
The portfolio should be part of every writing course.	0.60

Table 1. Top Five Questionnaire Items by Item-Total Correlation.

Figure 1 visually presents the item-total correlations for all questionnaire items, highlighting their relative contributions to the survey's overall reliability.



Figure 1. *Reliability Analysis (Item-Total Correlations)*
Note: Authors' own work. Figure created using think-cell software (QSR International, 2024).

These results confirm that the questionnaire is reliable for capturing students' initial perceptions, making it appropriate for subsequent comparative analyses after instructional intervention.

5.2. Quantitative Analysis

This section presents the descriptive analysis of student perceptions gathered through the pre-questionnaire administered to twenty student teachers before engaging in a portfolio-based approach to argumentative essay writing. The questionnaire items, structured using a Likert scale from 1 (Strongly Disagree) to 5 (Strongly Agree), explored students' initial attitudes toward various aspects of the portfolio method, including learning benefits, motivation, writing skills development, and overall effectiveness.

Table 2 summarizes the descriptive statistics, including mean scores, medians, modes, and standard deviations for each questionnaire item.

Questionnaire Item	Mean	Media	Mode	Std. Dev.
Helps to revise my work	4.60	5	5	0.50
Encourages self-examination & reflection	4.40	4.5	5	0.68
More peer/professor feedback	4.35	4.5	5	0.75
Useful learning tool	4.20	4	4	0.62
Helps with time management	4.20	4	4	0.77
Develops the ability to self-assess	4.20	4	4	0.70
Perceives growth and development	4.10	4	5	0.97
Better learner	4.10	4	4	0.64
Chance to evaluate my work	4.05	4		0.51
Worthwhile experience	4.00	4	4	0.65
Should be part of every writing course	3.95	4	3	0.83
Recognize strengths/weaknesses	3.85	4	5	1.04
Responsible learner	3.80	4	4	0.95
Grammar accuracy	3.70	4	4	0.86
Critical thinker	3.65	4	3	0.93
Meaningful and rewarding	3.40	3	3	0.82
Acquire vocabulary	3.40	3.5	4	0.68
Improves understanding of the material	3.15	3	3	0.67
Increased motivation	3.00	3	3	0.97
Exercise is boring	2.40	2	2	0.88
Writing texts is easy	2.30	2	3	0.98
Little help in writing	2.10	2	2	0.91
Waste of time	1.75	2	2	0.79

Table 2. Descriptive statistics of pre-questionnaire responses ($N = 20$).
Note: Authors' own work

As indicated in Table 2, the initial responses reveal generally positive perceptions regarding the portfolio's educational value. Students strongly agreed that the portfolio significantly assists them in revising their work (Mean=4.60, Median=5, Mode=5), reflecting a robust initial recognition of its potential benefits for writing improvement. Similarly, high scores were reported for self-examination and reflection (Mean=4.40), receiving more extensive feedback from peers and professors (Mean=4.35), and overall usefulness as a learning tool (Mean=4.20).

However, responses were more mixed concerning items related to motivation (Mean=3.00), the portfolio's meaningfulness and reward value (Mean=3.40), and its direct impact on vocabulary acquisition (Mean=3.40) and grammar accuracy (Mean=3.70). This ambivalence suggests that students were initially uncertain about the portfolio's specific contributions to linguistic improvement and motivational aspects.

The lowest mean scores were obtained on statements expressing critical views of the portfolio approach, indicating that participants generally disagreed that the portfolio was a waste of time (M = 1.75) or that it provided little support for writing development (M = 2.10). These responses suggested an overall positive orientation toward portfolio writing. At the same time, students reported some difficulty producing texts for their portfolios (M = 2.30), pointing to a practical concern about task manageability rather than a rejection of the portfolio method.

Table 3 summarizes the implications of these initial findings and provides recommendations for analysis following instructional intervention.

Aspect	Summary	Implications	Recommendations
Revision & feedback	Highly positive perceptions about revision and feedback aspects	Reinforces the strengths of portfolio use	Confirm post-instruction effectiveness with paired analyses
Learning benefits	Generally positive with some uncertainty in grammar and vocabulary	Potential to improve targeted instructional support	Post-test analysis to measure shifts in specific language skill perceptions
Motivation & meaningfulness	Mixed feelings indicating uncertainty or ambivalence	Opportunity to clarify benefits and boost motivation	Measure changes in motivational perceptions post-intervention
Negative perceptions & challenges	Low agreement with negative statements, but some difficulty in writing tasks	Need to address student concerns proactively	Evaluate whether structured guidance reduces perceived writing challenges

Table 3. Summary, implications, and recommendations for post-instruction analysis
Note: Authors' own work

Overall, the data from the pre-questionnaire provide valuable baseline perceptions that can later be contrasted with post-intervention data, thereby allowing a comprehensive evaluation of the portfolio method's effectiveness.

5.3. Qualitative Analysis

To gain deeper insights into students' perceptions, an open-ended question invited additional comments. NVivo qualitative analysis software was employed to systematically organize, code, and interpret qualitative responses, enhancing the rigor and transparency of the analysis (QSR International, 2024). Students' comments highlighted subtle perceptions not captured by quantitative scales. One student (S8) emphasized the challenge of managing time effectively, noting, "*In my experience, students who were assessed through portfolios found it meaningful but also challenging to manage their time effectively."* Similarly, another student (S5) acknowledged the provisional nature of their perception: *"What I chose are my initial thoughts based on previous experiences with portfolios. Maybe my opinion will change after the course."*

Further testimonies highlighted the importance of structured guidance and feedback. For example, a participant (S6) recommended *"clear and consistent feedback from teachers and peers"* to maximize portfolio effectiveness. Another student (S15) positively recognized the reflective component. In this regard, he stated, *"I like the fact that we should include our own reflections and evaluations because this helps us see our own growth."* Conversely, concerns were expressed regarding the potential burden of maintaining the portfolio, with one participant (S10) describing it as a *"useful gimmick to organize and keep track of progress, but might feel cumbersome or unnecessary to some students."*

These qualitative insights provide a valuable context for interpreting the quantitative findings and suggest specific areas for pedagogical improvement in portfolio implementation.

5.4. Cross-Analysis of Quantitative and Qualitative Data

Integrating quantitative and qualitative data revealed both converging and diverging insights regarding students' perceptions of

portfolio tasks, directly addressing the research questions outlined earlier.

The first research question explored students' initial perceptions of portfolio tasks in enhancing writing skills and reflective practices. Quantitative results showed positive initial attitudes, particularly emphasizing the portfolio's effectiveness in aiding revision and providing valuable feedback. This quantitative positivity was reinforced qualitatively, as students explicitly highlighted the importance of reflective practices and consistent, structured feedback. Thus, portfolios are generally perceived by students as beneficial tools that foster reflective thinking and ongoing skill development.

The second research question focused on students' perceptions regarding the role of structured feedback and guidance. Both qualitative and quantitative data converged strongly on this issue. Qualitative testimonies from students underscored the need for rich, frequent feedback, corroborating quantitative findings that indicated high agreement on feedback's essential role in effective portfolio management.

Addressing the third research question on anticipated challenges related to motivation, task complexity, and workload, a notable divergence emerged between the datasets. Quantitative findings suggested some ambivalence regarding motivation and perceived meaningfulness and indicated that students were uncertain about these areas. Conversely, qualitative responses explicitly revealed underlying concerns related to managing time and maintaining motivation (S8, S10). These qualitative insights highlighted the complexities and potential burdens perceived by students, underscoring challenges that quantitative data alone did not fully capture.

The fourth research question examined the alignment or divergence between quantitative and qualitative insights. Interestingly, while quantitative responses indicated minimal negative attitudes towards portfolio tasks, qualitative data pinpointed specific concerns regarding practical difficulties and motivational barriers (S10). This divergence accentuates the importance of qualitative data in uncovering deeper, context-specific apprehensions that quantitative measures may overlook.

Comparing these findings with recent studies further enhances their validity. Marin (2020) and Esternon and Diva (2024) quantitatively confirmed portfolios' benefits, closely aligning with the present study's positive outcomes regarding reflective practices and revision. Similarly, empirical evidence from Nezakatgoo (2011) and Hudori et al. (2020) supported portfolios' efficacy in improving writing skills and academic performance.

However, Khodashenas and Rakhshi (2017) also highlight the motivational and practical challenges, aligning with the qualitative concerns raised by students in this study. Muin and Hafidah (2021) similarly emphasize the need for instructional precision, supporting the qualitative data indicating that structured guidance can mitigate students' apprehensions and improve their portfolio experience.

Overall, the integrated analysis effectively addresses the research questions and confirms portfolios' educational potential while highlighting critical areas requiring careful instructional attention.

6. Limitations and Future Directions

This study has some limitations. Firstly, the relatively small sample size restricts the generalizability of the findings to broader contexts. Also, the study was limited to initial perceptions before the full implementation of the portfolio method, meaning longitudinal changes in perceptions and skills could not be assessed. Moreover, the study focused exclusively on student perceptions without incorporating direct measures of writing skill improvements. Future research could expand the sample size and diversity, include longitudinal tracking of perceptions and actual writing skill development, and employ mixed-method approaches that involve both perceptions and objective measures of writing performance. A post-questionnaire was administered after the implementation of the portfolio to effectively compare initial perceptions with post-intervention outcomes. This will be the focus of future studies. Investigating specific instructional strategies that effectively address motivational and practical challenges identified in this study would also offer valuable insights for optimizing the use of portfolios in educational contexts.

7. Conclusion

This study provided a detailed understanding of students' initial perceptions regarding portfolio tasks and highlighted noteworthy benefits in fostering reflective practices and structured feedback. Nevertheless, the findings also underlined critical challenges related to motivation, task complexity, and workload management. Addressing these areas through clear instructional strategies and structured guidance may contribute to maximizing the effectiveness of portfolio-based writing instruction. Future research directions proposed can further refine and enhance our understanding and implementation of portfolios in educational settings.

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