Improving University Students' ESP Writing Skills through a Process-Based Portfolio Approach

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Abstract. Today's employers expect university graduates to possess appropriate written ESP skills, which are most effectively taught through individualized ESP writing skills development. This paper provides an account of the ways a self-developed portfolio approach may be exploited to improve EFL learners' ESP writing skills in a university environment. Through a quasi-experimental research design (N = 168), this project hypothesised that, and tested whether, our process-writing-based portfolio approach has a beneficial impact on participants' ESP writing skills and examined if the portfolio approach in question was an effective means of improving participants' ESP writing skills. For the testing of this hypothesis, a quasi-experimental research design was used with an experimental (N = 84) and a control group (N = 84), and participants' test results were compared to examine the effectiveness of the applied portfolio approach. The findings of the study show that the portfolio approach applied in the scope of the present research project proves to be an efficient way of improving students' ESP writing skills and can thus justifiably be applied at other institutions of higher education for improving such skills.

Keywords: business English, ESP, portfolio approach, tertiary education, writing skills

1. Introduction

The English language has become the most frequently used language for communicative purposes over the past few decades. At multinational companies, and increasingly at smaller companies, too, employees are often required to communicate with their customers and colleagues in English since very often English is the company's working language. Even if the majority of students has reliable English oral skills, these days the development of writing skills poses greater than ever challenges to teachers of ESP, as students, even if diverse sample texts on business issues are available online, typically do not have the necessary foundations to communicate about professional issues in writing or produce written materials from diverse inputs (Chan 2018, Zhou et al. 2022). On the other hand, the portfolio approach has been identified as a means of enhancing L2 learning motivation (Baas et al. 2019, Hyland and Hyland 2019, Lam 2018b) and learner autonomy (Baharon and Shaari 2022, Lam 2018b, Pospisilova 2018, Tyas 2020). As discussed in the literature, both L2 learning motivation (Dörnyei 2005, Mercer, Ryan, and Williams 2012) and learner autonomy (Benson 2011) are of key importance in L2 learning, as both are important predictors of successful L2 learners. In fact, both L2 learning motivation and learner autonomy – the latter through, e.g., formative feedback (Bader et al. 2019, Hyland and Hyland 2019, Lam 2018, Lopez-Pastor and Sicilia-Camacho 2017, Ryan and Deci 2020) and student engagement (Adams et al. 2020, Han and Xu 2019, Yu and Liu 2021, Winstone et al. 2017, Zhang and Hyland 2018, Zhang and Hyland 2022) – can support the development of students' writing skills. In an attempt to combine an L2 learning-motivation and learner-autonomy-driven approach (in a similar way as the one described by Yu et al. 2020) with writing skills development, this paper aims to demonstrate that writing skills can be effectively developed with the help of written portfolio tasks completed individually, in pairs, and through group work.

2. Portfolios

Portfolios have been used in tertiary education since the 1990s as a form of evidencing active use of knowledge and knowledge performance: portfolios have been applied as a means of demonstrating one's ability to solve complex problems related to their field of studies or specialization, and likewise as a way of demonstrating one's knowledge (Fathi et al. 2020, Lam 2018b). In addition, portfolios have also been used as a means of assessing students' knowledge. As a formative way of assessment (i.e. causing changes in students' linguistic behaviour with the help of teacher feedback), portfolios have been used quite successfully for language teaching purposes.

When discussing the nature of language portfolios in general, Hamp-Lyons and Condon (2000) identify nine principal characteristics of different portfolio approaches (discussion based on Weigle 2002). Portfolios:

1) are a collection of several written works rather than presenting one single writing sample;

2) exhibit a variety of written tasks: typically in diverse genres, for different audiences and for a range of purposes;

3) reflect the learning situation and show what the writer has accomplished in that context;

4) work with delayed evaluation of student work;

5) offer a selection of works for inclusion in the portfolio;

6) offer student-centred control through enabling students to select and revise their best pieces of writing for inclusion in the portfolio;

7) include reflection and self-assessment concerning the works included in the portfolio;

8) show and measure development with respect to certain criteria;

9) can be used to measure and document student development over time.

With a view to the above features, the portfolio approach offers numerous benefits as far as the development of students' English writing skills are concerned. Below, some of these advantages are discussed in some detail.

Li (2010) and Lam (2018b) claim that students' writing abilities develop if they are given the opportunity to produce several versions of the same text and if students are assessed on numerous occasions. Also, portfolios are capable of demonstrating students' language development over time, as Hamp-Lyons and Condon (2000) and Lam (2018b) note. Furthermore, for encouraging students to become less dependent on their teachers for guidance concerning their written works and for facilitating the development of a critical approach to their written compositions, the portfolio approach can naturally be paired up with the process writing approach. In general, it can be stated that through evaluation and feedback, portfolios contribute to students' writing skills development, as attested by Lam and Lee (2010).

Continuous and large amounts of instructor feedback is provided when using portfolio approach, which contribute to increasing students' L2 learning motivation, as discussed by Ma and Bui (2022) as well as Tsao et al. (2017). In addition, the portfolio approach encourages and helps students to be self-reflective in their writing, as discovered by Lam (2013), Lam (2018b), Ziegler and Moeller (2012), and Martin-Beltrán et al. (2018). This approach helps students identify and correct their typical mistakes, to phrase their thoughts more precisely, and to know their strengths and weaknesses as far as written text production is concerned. As the portfolio approach allows students to be more aware of their progress, to think critically about themselves as language users, and to assume

increased responsibility for their own development – the importance of which is underscored by Lam (2018b) –, the portfolio approach increases students' independence during their learning process.

The portfolio approach engages and involves students in all phases of writing through reflection and formative evaluation, and for this reason, it can naturally be paired up with the process writing approach. When exposed to a portfolio approach, students develop a "critical consciousness" (Bennett-Bealer 2015) and an "evaluative sense about [their own] writing" (Hout 2002: 79). This way, students acquire the ability to self-correct their texts. In general, it can be stated that through evaluation – be it formative or summative – and feedback, portfolios contribute to students' writing skills development, as attested by Lam and Lee (2010).

In his discussion about the realization of the genre writing process in general, Bennett-Bealer (2015) lists the following stages as constituents of the writing journey: brainstorming, drafting, peer review, revising, editing, assessing, and student reaction to feedback. All of these stages can easily be integrated into a process-writing-based portfolio approach and can be documented in portfolios. As the portfolio approach allows students to be more aware of their progress, to think critically about themselves as language users, and to assume increased responsibility for their own development – as underscored by Delett et al. (2001), Banfi (2003), Yang (2003), and Allen (2004) –, the portfolio approach increases students' independence during their learning process including decreased dependence on instructors for advice and help as far as language development and the planning of such development are concerned (Esteve et al. 2012; Kohonen 2012).

It needs to be noted, at the same time, that research on the effects of the portfolio approach on ESP writing skills in the Hungarian context is virtually non-existent, and therefore the present paper also aims to fill this gap.

3. The portfolio used in the present study

The literature defines portfolios in numerous ways, mostly depending on the field of education where such portfolios are used. A broad definition of the portfolio is offered by Davis and Ponnamperuma (2005: 279), who state that a "portfolio is a collection of various forms of evidence of achievement of learning outcomes", which collection exhibits students' efforts and progress.

With respect to the process-writing-based portfolio used in the scope of the present study – which contains a range of student assignments collected, revised, and edited by the students themselves and is used for both formative and summative assessment during a language course –, the following definition has been adopted by the authors: a collection of texts of diverse genres produced

through process writing that evidences students' best knowledge and is compiled by students after revisiting and correcting their assignments produced over a period of one academic semester.

As far as the specific portfolio tasks are concerned, the portfolio consisted of four tasks:

– a text containing personalized professional introduction,
– a graph analysis,
– a list of field-of-study-related terms, and
– a case study.

Since the majority of businesses insists on employing staff with a good command of English, the above tasks were chosen to be featured in the portfolio. The above tasks closely reflect what graduating students will be expected to produce in English, both orally and in writing, in the scope of a job interview. The above listed four portfolio tasks are described below in more detail as they were used at the Budapest Business School University of Applied Sciences (the former name of Budapest Business University; henceforth all references to this institution – irrespective of the actual name of the University in different periods – as: Budapest Business University) during the ESP course entitled the *Language of Finance and Accountancy*, in the autumn semester of 2019/2020, when the research was carried out.

3.1. Personalized professional introduction

The first portfolio task was to compose a personalized text discussing students' professional background and experience in a 200-to-300-word-long coherent text to be structured around various topics, including education attainments, employment history, work experience, strengths, interests, and career plans.

3.2. Graph analysis

The second task was to study a graph or a series of graphs in pairs. In this task, students were to analyse a graph about one of the topic areas covered in the course. The length of the text was 250-300 words. In the analysis, students were required to outline the background of the graph's topic, identify and analyse trends visible in the graph, give some general details concerning the graph, and describe future tendencies based on the graph. For this task, the same score was awarded to collaborating students.

3.3. List of field-of-study-related terms

The third task was the compilation of a terminology list related to the students' field of study. Students were to find a total of 30 new terms related to a maximum of 2 business topics covered during the course. In the portfolio, the terms had to be topically arranged (e.g. income statement). For each of the 30 words, a definition in English alongside with the Hungarian equivalents were to be included, and the use of the English term in context also had to be illustrated (e.g. by citing a sentence from a dictionary).

3.4. Case study

Students had to write a case study in groups. The topic of the case study was to address a topic covered during the course. In a total of 500-600 words, the case study was supposed to be structured as follows: introduction, background, problem description, problem analysis, suggestions for the solution of the problem, and conclusion.

4. Research questions

The present research aimed to test the applicability and usability of the above portfolio approach in developing university students' written ESP skills. Therefore, through the use of the above portfolio approach, this research posed the following research questions:

RQ1 – Does the portfolio approach applied in the scope of this research have a beneficial impact on participants' ESP writing skills?

RQ2 – Is the current portfolio approach more effective in developing written ESP skills as compared to non-process-based and non-formative ways of teaching writing?

RQ3 – Do any previous (tertiary education) studies, former experiences of compiling portfolios, work-related professional experiences, and having to use written English at work contribute to students' increased written ESP performance?

The data obtained with respect to these questions enable us to determine the applicability and usability of the portfolio approach presented above.

5. Methods

In order to find answers to the above research questions (RQs), we adopted a quasi-experimental research design, as it allows for the investigation of effectiveness of different teaching methods. To produce a tightly controlled environment (Johnson and Christensen 2019), we decided to create an experimental group and a control group: the former received special treatment, i.e. students were requested to compile a process-writing-based language portfolio, whereas the control group was not required to rework their texts or produce a portfolio, and thus students were to complete only the regular course tasks assigned by their instructors. In this research design, the purpose of having a control group was to possibly rule out as many factors impacting the results of the experiment beyond the ones under investigation as possible.

The quasi-experimental research design meant that in the autumn semester of 2019/2020 a pre- and a post-test were administered to examine whether there was any discrepancy between the experimental and the control groups in their end-of-term written performance. In this context, written performance was assessed through an e-mail writing examination task compiled and standardized by the Department of Languages for Finance and Business Management acting as competent department.

5.1. Participants

For the recruitment of the participants, purposive sampling was used, and the sample consisted of Hungarian university students studying finance and accountancy at Budapest Business University in the autumn semester of 2019/2020. For the research project, the total number of participants was 168 (N = 168), out of which 84 belonged to the experimental group (n = 84) and 84 to the control group (N = 84). The mean age of the participants was 21.75 years (M = 21.75; SD = 1.40), and in terms of gender 82 males and 86 females participated in the research. All participants of the study took the compulsory course titled the *Language of Finance and Accountancy* in the semester in question. The mother tongue of all participants was Hungarian.

5.2. Measuring university students' ESP writing skills: The instrument

As part of the requirements, in the course *Language of Finance and Accountancy*, our students take a standardized end-of-term test compiled by the Department of Languages for Finance and Business Management. This end-of-term test consists of a reading comprehension task with closed-ended questions (for maximum 30 points; which is of no importance for our present

research purposes, as this task does not involve productive writing skills), and a writing assignment (20 points), of relevance for us. For the assessment of the writing task, a standardized writing assessment grid was created, which specified accuracy, spelling, use of English as well as structure and coherence of the compiled text as criteria of assessment. Each criterion is well defined, e.g. how many grammatical mistakes the writing assignment may have in order for the maximum amount of points to be awarded. This was important in order to ensure that any assessor would award the same final test points when assessing a given text, thus assessment objectivity could be ensured.

5.3. Data collection and data analysis methods

Before starting the data collection process at the beginning of the autumn semester of 2019/2020, all necessary and important information about the research project was shared with the participants, whose participation in the study was voluntary. The data obtained during the research were used and stored according to the applicable GDPR regulations and rules stipulated by Budapest Business University. Data collection was not anonymous: respondents had to provide their name so that the data obtained from the pre-test, the post-test, and the short paper-based questionnaire with participants' demographic information could be matched, coded, and later compared and analysed.

Besides basic demographic questions, such as age, gender, and university programme (cf. above), some questions aimed to collect information about the participants' previous experiences concerning the portfolio approach. These questions were the following:

– whether students had to compile any kind of portfolio (not necessarily English-language portfolio) earlier,

– whether they attended another tertiary educational institution,

– whether they worked (at least) part-time besides their studies, and

– whether those who worked part-time besides their studies had to correspond in English at work.

These additional background variables were of interest, as they were assumed to possibly affect and explain our participants' attitudes towards the portfolio tasks and could also potentially impact their ESP writing performance.

After administering this questionnaire, all participants in the experimental and control groups were asked to take the pre-test in order that participants' initial writing performance could be quantified and later compared and contrasted with the results of their post-tests taken at the end of the semester. For the purpose of identifying any potential change in the test results of our study's participants and for investigating whether there had been any improvement in their writing skills, initial measurements were obtained: a pre-test consisting of an e-mail writing task

was administered at the very beginning of the semester, in the middle of September 2019. This was essential for obtaining insights into the initial level of our students' ESP writing skills. This was followed by the post-test, which took place in the middle of December 2019, when students – as part of their course requirements – completed the standardized end-of-term test including e-mail writing.

As for the assessment of the test results at the pre- and post-tests, the scores of the writing task at the very beginning of the semester (i.e. pre-test with a maximum of 20 points) were compared with the scores of the end-of-term writing task (i.e. a post-test with a maximum of 20 points). In the pre-test, all students were required to individually compose a short business letter of 130-150 words, for which task a maximum of 20 points could be awarded. The letter composed as part of this assignment was assessed by one of the authors and another member of the Department of Languages for Finance and Business Management thoroughly trained in such evaluation, and the average of the points awarded by the two assessors was used for the purposes of the analysis of pre-test results. As previously mentioned, in addition to the pre-test, a post-test was administered at the end of the semester. In the scope of this post-test, students – just like in the case of the pre-test – were to individually compose a text of 130-150 words, which was assessed by the previously mentioned assessors. The average of the points awarded by the two assessors was then used for the purposes of the research project.

During the semester, in addition to the texts composed at the pre-test, each student in the control group was to compose another three pieces of texts (two business letters and a CV) as part of the compulsory course content, i.e. students in the control group had to produce altogether five texts (including the pre-test and the post-test) during the term. Students in the experimental group, who were to compile portfolios, were also required to compose five texts altogether (a personalized professional introduction, a graph analysis and a case study as well as the pre- and the post-tests). The portfolio tasks in the experimental group (cf. the section "The portfolio used in present study") were not closely related, either in theme or in genre, to the end-of-term test even though these written assignments (e.g. case study) strongly focused on professional matters. At the same time, the writing tasks (business letters) in the control group were similar in terms of their genre to the tasks at the end-of-the-semester written exam. This research design meant that students in the experimental group composed as many texts as the students in the control group did, but the production processes were different.

The student score averages and the data obtained during the research project – following the coding of such data – were exported to a Microsoft Excel file, which was then transferred into SPSS 28.0. For the analysis of the data, t-tests were used in order to find statistically significant differences between the control and experimental groups' averages of pre-test and post-test scores. The level of statistical significance was $p < .05$.

6. Results and discussion

In this section, the results of our empirical study are presented. As a background, some additional information about the participants is provided: 89.3% of the respondents (N = 150) reported that they were not enrolled at any other higher education institution during or before the data collection, and 10.7% was enrolled at another higher education institution (N = 18). Out of the respondents, 73.8% (N = 124) never had to compile a portfolio at any other course before, and only 26.2% of the participants (N = 44) were required to compile a portfolio of some kind at one of their earlier courses. Our participants were also asked about whether they worked part-time besides their studies. In total, 70.2% of the respondents (N = 118) reported that they had a part-time job. As for having a job besides their studies, our participants were also asked to provide information whether they had to use English at work (i.e. correspond or communicate in English in any other ways): 64.4% of those who worked part-time (N = 76) had to use English for their work on a regular basis.

In the scope of data analyses, the mean scores of both the pre-test and the post-test were calculated for all the participants so that these scores could be compared for investigating whether the portfolio approach applied in the scope of this research is capable of improving university students' ESP writing skills. Consequently, independent samples t-tests were run in order to test whether there are any significant differences in the mean scores of participants in the experimental and control groups. For this comparison, both the pre-test and post-test means of the two groups were examined and compared. The pertaining data are summarized in *Table 1*.

Table 1. *Results of independent samples t-tests between mean test scores of participants in the experimental and control groups*

Pre-/Post-test	Group	Mean	SD	t	df	Sig. (2-tailed)
Pre-test	Experimental	13.17	3.97	.17	166	.788
	Control	13.00	4.05			
Post-test	Experimental	15.59	2.37	3.75	150.73	<.001*
	Control	13.93	3.30			

Note: Statistical significance level of t-tests: *p <. 05.

Table 1 demonstrates that there was no statistically significant difference between the pre-test scores of our participants (M = 13.17 and M = 13.00 respectively). Such unanimity was achieved by a placement test administered to the participants prior to the course. This means participants in the experimental and in the control groups possessed the same level of language proficiency concerning writing skills when the pre-test was administered, which was required

to ensure the reliability of the research. In contrast, students' post-test test scores in the experimental and the control groups demonstrate a statistically significant difference (p < .001), i.e. participants in the experimental group outperformed participants in the control group. This answers our research question and confirms that the portfolio approach developed by our Department was efficient both as a way of general ESP writing skills improvement and, consequently, also as a means of exam preparation. This confirms the authors' initial hypothesis that the portfolio approach is an effective and efficient way of improving learners' ESP writing skills. The above results are in line with the findings of previous research examining the effectiveness of portfolios in improving ESP writing skills (Burner 2014, Lam 2018a, Li 2010, Tabatabaei and Assefi 2012).

The pre-test scores were examined through independent t-tests in order to investigate whether there are any statistically significant differences between the participants' mean scores based on the different background variables, i.e.:

– whether they compiled a portfolio before,

– whether they attended another higher educational institution simultaneously with attending Budapest Business University,

– whether the participants worked part-time besides their studies, and

– whether the students who worked part-time besides their studies had to correspond in English as part of their job.

The mean scores and the results of the independent samples t-tests are presented in *Table 2*.

Table 2. *Results of independent samples t-tests between participants' mean test scores at pre-test*

Variables	Yes/No	N	Mean	SD	t	df	Sig. (2-tailed)
(1) Compiled a portfolio earlier	Yes	44	13.77	4.28	1.33	166	.184
	No	124	12.84	3.89			
(2) Attended another tertiary educational institution	Yes	18	14.90	3.77	2.05	166	.051
	No	150	12.87	3.98			
(3) Worked part-time besides their studies	Yes	118	13.32	4.10	1.19	166	.236
	No	50	12.52	3.73			
(4) Worked part-time besides their studies and had to correspond in English at work	Yes	76	13.55	4.33	.82	166	.414
	No	42	12.90	4.39			

Note: Statistical significance level of t-tests: *p < .05.

The results in *Table 2* show no statistically significant differences between students' mean scores with regard to any of the above background variables. This underscores that at the time of the administration of the pre-test, there were

no significant differences in the scores of the participants regarding the above background variables. This means that all groups were relatively homogeneous concerning the above four factors.

Concerning the above variables, it was also investigated whether any statistically significant differences between participants' post-test scores could be found. Independent samples t-tests were used to discover if any of the above background variables have an impact on participants' post-test performance. *Table 3* presents the results of the independent samples t-tests.

Table 3. *Results of independent samples t-tests between participants' mean test scores at post-test*

Variables	Yes/No	N	Mean	SD	t	df	Sig. (2-tailed)
(1) Compiled a portfolio earlier	Yes	44	15.86	2.31	2.91	166	.004*
	No	124	14.37	3.11			
(2) Attended another tertiary educational institution	Yes	18	16.56	3.03	2.75	166	.007*
	No	150	14.55	2.92			
(3) Worked part-time besides their studies	Yes	118	14.69	3.02	-.44	166	.657
	No	50	14.90	2.93			
(4) Worked part-time besides their studies and had to correspond in English at work	Yes	16	15.18	2.96	2.41	166	.017*
	No	102	13.81	2.97			

Note: Statistical significance level of t-tests: *p < .05.

As opposed to the pre-test results, several statistically significant differences were identified in the post-test mean scores of our participants. One of such differences (p = .004) was found between the post-test mean scores of those participants who previously had some experience compiling a portfolio during their studies (M = 15.86, SD = 2.31) and the post-test mean scores of those students who had no such experience (M = 14.37, SD = 3.11). What might explain this is that the students who had to compile a portfolio before realized the importance, benefits, and merits of preparing one: they took the task more seriously and put more conscious effort into producing their work. Alternatively, this finding may also be explained by the following: teacher feedback may have a positive effect on learners' confidence and L2 learning motivation (Ruegg 2014); therefore, participants who had to compile a portfolio before could have taken their teacher's feedback more seriously. This is further reassured by the findings of Ruegg (2017), who investigated teacher feedback on writing and found that learners assume that teachers will provide feedback on writing-related problems, and this will help improve the quality of the texts produced. This assumption may also have contributed to the preparation of our research participants' portfolios,

which have been created in a cyclical manner over several rounds of teacher (and peer) feedback. On the other hand, obviously, learners who previously had some experience compiling a portfolio during their studies also had some advantage, as they were already familiar with the concept of portfolios and probably had some knowledge of how to prepare high-quality submissions.

The second background variable also shows there is a statistically significant difference (p = .007) between the mean scores of the participants who attended another tertiary educational institution (M = 16.56) and of those who did not (M = 14.55): the mean scores achieved by those who participated in courses at another university are higher than the mean scores of those who did not. This could be explained by the increased efficiency and effort invested by these students: such students were probably more motivated to perform well and diligently, and their study and organizational skills may have been more developed than those of other less experienced students. As for the third variable, i.e. working part time during studies, there is only a negligible difference between our participants' mean scores (M = 14.69 and M = 14.90 respectively), and no statistically significant difference was found between these mean scores. It seems that work experience does have some but not a substantial impact on students' performance.

With respect to the last variable (corresponding in English), a statistically significant difference (p = .017) between participants' post-test mean scores was identified: it can be stated that those students who had to correspond in English at work scored significantly higher (M = 15.18) than those who did not (M = 13.81). The authors' assumption here is that the former group had more experience in using English at work, which may well have contributed to their better performance at the portfolio tasks: daily work execution in English must have positively impacted students' language skills. Such students may have had more practice and training in composing texts, which might well have contributed to their achieving better results at writing tasks. Besides, these students – as opposed to ones who did not have to correspond in English – may have realized the potentials of practising and improving their writing skills with the help of receiving more extensive feedback in the scope of the portfolio project. In fact, the exposition to extensive feedback constitutes one of the main benefits underlined in the literature (Alharbi 2022, Dressler et al. 2019, Mujtaba et al. 2021, Ziegler and Moeller 2012), and this may have caused students to invest more effort in the compilation of their portfolios. Concerning the background variables, based on the above data, it can be established that students' prior learning and work experience impact their portfolio performance, as attested by the current research.

7. Conclusions

In general, based on our research data, it can be stated that the portfolio approach developed by the Department of Languages for Finance and Business Management functions as an effective way of improving students' general ESP writing skills. This is attested by the fact that in our research project, our participants scored higher in the post-test than in the pre-test. Through fostering extensive and personalized student involvement in the development of ESP writing skills, the present portfolio approach may help to better tailor language education to individual demands and needs. In addition, such an approach – as previous research carried out by Abdel Latif (2019) suggests – satisfies individual demands more extensively and may result in a lower level of L2 writers' negative affect and a more positive general attitude towards L2 writing. Concerning the findings, the results of this research project are in line with the findings of previous research (Alharbi 2022, Dressler et al. 2019, Lam 2018b, Mujtaba et al. 2021, Pospisilova 2018, Tyas 2020, Ziegler and Moeller 2012), which point out that one of the main strengths of process-writing-based portfolio approaches is to help learners reflect on their own texts, correct their own mistakes, and contribute to their own development more extensively.

It may also be concluded that, similarly to the findings of previous research (Burner 2014, Lam 2018a, Li 2010, Tabatabaei and Assefi 2012), the portfolio approach applied in the scope of this research project is an efficient way of improving university students' ESP writing skills: this approach allows for students' continuous improvement of ESP written texts through the student–teacher dialogue about the texts produced, which evolves during the cyclical and customizable task completion characterizing this process-writing-based portfolio approach. Also, the results of the present research project suggest that it would be worthwhile to introduce English-language portfolios even more extensively to business English courses offered in the scope of tertiary-level degree programmes. Such a scenario may provide students with opportunities to compile several portfolios during their studies, thereby developing their language skills from course to course. Such an arrangement would also enable students to potentially develop different language skills in different courses. In turn, this would eventually offer students the flexibility and opportunity to design their custom-made paths of language development during their studies to the greater benefit of their individual language development. This way, students could decide which ESP language skills they wish to focus on at a certain course and how this will finally form a tailor-made and customizable full-scale language training component during the completion of their degree programmes. In such a setting, students may easily connect their ESP studies with their work experience, which may further enhance the mutual impacts of these two areas on students' professional development.

As far as the limitations of this research project are concerned, the following can be stated. Students who already compiled a portfolio may have had an advantage over those students who had never been involved in such an activity before. This advantage may have consisted in having more knowledge about the potential benefits and merits of compiling a portfolio and in having more practice in completing such a task. This may have influenced the above research findings. Another limitation is that the study did not address the examination of students' development in the individual criteria of assessment. The scrutiny of this may have shed light on what areas are more likely to be improved through the proposed portfolio method. Finally, and additionally, this study is limited by its sample size (N = 168). Therefore, in order to obtain a more comprehensive picture, a similar research project should be carried out with a larger and more varied sample size. This means that the findings of this study are not necessarily transferable to much broader contexts. Even so, the findings presented herein may form a firm basis for further investigation. It must also be noted that, due to these limitations, this study merely reveals potential tendencies, which need to be ascertained through further, possibly larger-scale research.

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