

Portfolio Assessment, can it be a Multifunctional Tool? An Investigation of its Impact on both EFL Learners' Critical Thinking and Speaking Skills

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Abstract:

The current work aims at exploring the impact of portfolio assessment on third year students' critical thinking and speaking skills at the department of English at Guelma University. In order to reach this aim, a mixed method has been used. More precisely, a quasi-experiment to investigate the aforementioned impact, and a post experiment interview to reveal students' perceptions towards the use of portfolio assessment. Two control and experimental groups of 20 students each were selected and assigned pre-post-tests. The scores recorded from the experimental group t-tests reveal that the participants attained higher scores in the majority of the speaking sub-skills, and have a higher level of critical thinking if compared to those marked in the pre-test. Moreover, the participants show a positive attitude towards the implementation of portfolio assessment. Based on those results, the investigation proves the effectiveness of portfolio assessment in promoting students' critical thinking and speaking skills.

Keywords:

Alternative assessment, portfolio assessment, critical thinking skill, speaking skill

Introduction :

“If we teach today's students as we taught yesterday's, we rob them of tomorrow”. Though said in 1915 by John Dewey, the message that this quote carries still relevant nowadays. The quote denotes a need to change the instructional approaches and adopt more appropriate ones that go hand in hand with the 21st century societal requirements. This latter calls for creating active, creative, and autonomous learners who are trained and equipped with the necessary skills to deal with the demands of the different workplaces.

EFL learners and teachers as well cannot be excluded from the process of selecting adequate teaching/learning methods that divorce them from the traditional mode of instruction, and which favors a rote type of learning. This type leads to the creation of passive learners who usually respond in a mechanical automatic way. In fact, adopting an appropriate teaching method that encourages a meaningful learning has to be accompanied by an assessment mode that fits the requirements of a constructive learning, as teaching and assessment are “two sides of the same coin”¹. Alternative assessment, more specifically, portfolio assessment is an ongoing process that aligns instruction with assessment. More importantly, it has the advantage of not only controlling students' performance, but also developing it. As a result, portfolio assessment can have a positive impact on promoting learners' different skills and competences.

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According to EFL Algerian learners, speaking is one of the most difficult skills to be mastered and among the main priorities for them. However, this is not the case for learners only, teachers also face many challenges when it comes to teaching speaking. A key question that comes to mind here is whether what occurs in a speaking class is a task of 'teaching' speaking or 'doing' teaching². Furthermore, those learners have developed the habit of taking everything for granted, i.e. they accept, believe, and absorb whatever material presented to them without analyzing, interpreting, and evaluating the information or the source itself. In other words, they lack what is known as the skill of thinking critically. Accordingly, the current research endeavors to delve into this problem and investigate the impact of portfolio assessment on both EFL learners' speaking and critical thinking skills.

As it is the case in any research, there must be some questions that address the issue and pave the way for the study to take place. Likewise, the current work tries to find answers to the following raised questions:

- Is portfolio assessment a potent tool for instruction and assessment?
- Can the integration of portfolio assessment into oral classes be effective in enhancing EFL learners' speaking skill?
- To what extent can portfolio assessment contribute in developing students' critical thinking level?
- What are the students' perceptions towards the use of portfolio assessment?

Those questions direct the research towards testing the following hypotheses:

- The use of portfolio assessment may improve students' speaking skill
- The use of portfolio assessment may improve students' critical thinking skill
- Students may have a positive attitude towards the use of portfolio assessment

Hence, in order to answer the research questions and test its hypotheses a mixed method has been adopted. Description of the method, data gathering tool, in addition to results' analysis will be dealt with, but before that, an overview of the theoretical basis of the study is required.

1-Alternative Assessment:

Teaching and learning are two interrelated processes that affect, complement, and reinforce each other. However, teaching cannot be complete unless it incorporates an important component that ensures whether the process of learning took place or not, i.e. a process that bridges the gap between teaching and learning. Accordingly, assessment came to fill that gap and becomes an indispensable part of instruction that surpasses the act of controlling learners' performance to improving the quality of both teaching and learning. Assessment "is a broad term covering any conscious effort on the part of a teacher or student to draw some conclusions on the basis of performance"³. In other words, assessment is the collection of evidence for the sake of understanding the state of learning as well as learners' progress during their journey of meaning making. In fact, assessment is a priority for both teacher and learner, as it enables the former to check their prior knowledge before providing instructions and gauge student's learning development.

A new philosophy in assessment that goes beyond the paper and pencil test marked a shift in the realm of language assessment. Due to dissatisfaction with the traditional mode of assessment, mainly standardized tests, researchers and experts in the field started thinking about other alternatives that meet the needs of the learner, hence, came what is known as alternative assessment. This new trend in assessment is compatible with the new teaching methods that call for learner-centeredness, autonomy, and self-feeding. That is, assessment is no longer that part which ends the process of teaching and learning, rather it is integrated in it.

Simply, alternative assessment is any method, which is not standardized or traditional test, that has the function of gathering information about student's knowledge and actions⁴.

Similarly, “alternative assessment refers to procedures and techniques which can be used within the context of instruction and can be easily incorporated into the daily activities of the school or classroom”⁵. In comparing traditional assessment with alternative one, this latter refers to situations in which “students are evaluated on what they integrate and produce rather than on what they are able to recall and reproduce”⁶. In the same vein, alternative assessment

is usually taken to mean assessment procedures which are less formal than traditional testing, which are gathered over a period of time rather than being taken at one point in time, which are usually formative rather than summative in function, are often low-stakes in terms of consequences, and are claimed to have beneficial washback effects⁷.

Advocates of alternative assessment discussed a number of common characteristics related to it. Unlike traditional type of assessment, alternative assessment urges learners to take part in the process of assessment and contribute in a way or another in the decision made of or about them⁸. Moreover, it takes language as one entity rather than discrete pieces, that is, it embraces a holistic view of language. Furthermore, it taps into higher order thinking, and problem-solving skills. Additionally, this mode of assessment takes into account the cultural background of the learner, hence, permits teachers to depict the appropriate picture of their students’ language profile and contextualize their performance according to real world situations. More importantly, it provides a thorough portrait of the learners’ progress, potentials, and weaknesses⁹.

Alternative assessment is not restricted to only one type, rather, it enjoys different forms that share some common characteristics mentioned earlier. The most famous forms of alternative assessment are: self-assessment, peer-assessment, and portfolio. Since this latter is one of the main focuses of this study, we will shed light on its different aspects.

2-Portfolio Assessment:

Portfolio is a type of alternative assessment that has become in vogue over the past few decades due to its numerous merits. It is a parcel of data that students or others gather for the sake of communicating their potentials and interests to others like teachers, peers, parents, etc¹⁰. In other words, portfolio is a means through which students exhibit their performances and productions revealing by this their progress, goals, strengths, and weaknesses. In the same context, “portfolio assessment is one means of alternative assessment and refers to the purposeful, selective collection of learner work and reflective self-assessment that is used to document progress and achievement over time”¹¹.

However, while portfolio is a collection of data, portfolio assessment is the procedure of planning, gathering, and analyzing the different artefacts comprised in the portfolio¹². Consequently, one should notice the difference between portfolio and portfolio assessment, as this latter is a type of the former.

Portfolio assessment is based on a constructivist view of language, in which the learner takes an active role not only in learning, but in the assessment process as well. However, achieving success in implementing the portfolio does not merely depend on the student. In fact, teachers play a pivotal role in making portfolio procedure and goal explicit to students¹³. To reach that aim, teachers need a prototype for portfolio assessment in order to effectively integrate it in the classroom. An examination of the literature reveals that many researchers¹⁴ have suggested different portfolio assessment models in order to ensure a structured reliable assessment. More specifically, a model for ESL that is composed of six connected levels of assessment tasks has been introduced as follows:

- 1) Identify the purpose and focus of the portfolio procedure
- 2) Plan portfolio contents
- 3) Design portfolio analysis
- 4) Prepare for instruction
- 5) Plan verification of procedures

6) Implement the model¹⁵

The model proposed by Moya and O'Malley and other models are inefficient if they are not characterized by certain features. Again, researchers¹⁶ who are interested in developing an effective portfolio assessment model provided a number of characteristics. Yet, there are three essential features without which portfolio cannot exist. These three are: collection, selection, and reflection. Indeed, their importance lays in the fact that the other characteristics can be inferred from them.

According to Hamp-Lyons and Condon, the act of *collecting* involves the compilation of more than one performance, as the chief aim behind using portfolio is to pave the way for assessors to examine a variety of products. That is, students' portfolio should exhibit their abilities in different contexts, for different purposes. Moreover, portfolio folder contains preliminary performances in addition to the finished ones, hence, provides a clear picture of students' progress and achievement. *Selection* is another significant characteristic that requires students to choose their best work to be submitted for assessment. Students in that phase are free to select works that well represent their abilities, and display their achievement or progress in certain skills. More importantly, the process of selection fosters self-assessment, as it permits to take decisions about the quality of the work. Last but not least, *reflection* which is considered as the most important element in the portfolio, and without which the portfolio acts just as a compiler. This process entails the assessment of one's own performance by using several forms of reflective commentary.

Conferencing is the process that marks the completion of portfolio journey. In other words, after finishing with the three phases of collection, selection, and reflection, the teacher plans a face to face interview with the student in which they discuss the content of the portfolio and the student's progress. A portfolio conference is very useful for learners especially in recognizing "how successful they were, and facilitate new experiences where they can apply their learning"¹⁷.

3-Critical Thinking Skill:

Although much ink has been spilled over critical thinking and its nature, researchers did not agree upon a single precise definition of this term. The complexity of the term resides in the multiplicity of the processes that critical thinking comprises, hence, cannot bear a simple definition. In other words,

one difficulty in discussing critical thinking stems from the lack of a common definition. In part, this difficulty is the result of a plethora of terms describing the cognitive activity. The process is variously referred to as reasoning, higher order thinking, intelligent behavior, creative thinking, and thinking, each with its own meaning¹⁸.

Similarly, "critical thinking scholarship is in a mystified state. No single definition of critical thinking is widely accepted"¹⁹. Many researchers are tempted to provide a definition that covers all aspects of critical thinking, and what they came up with seems to have some common points. Basically, critical thinking is about formulating one's own arguments while accurately evaluating others' claims²⁰. In other words, it involves a variety of actions and processes, mainly inferring, judging, evaluating, and interpreting in order to deal with different kinds of sources. In the same context, critical thinking is a process of judgement where adequate conceptualizations and strategies are used in order to take decisions and make actions in connection with available data²¹.

Critical thinking centers around three basic concepts: claims, issues, and arguments. Recognizing, evaluating, and differentiating between those elements is inevitable in order to clearly grasp what critical thinking refers to. While claims are either utterances or writings that aim at expressing one's perspectives and beliefs, an issue is simply a question that is whether a certain claim is true or not. An argument, however, is the core essence of

critical thinking, which implies providing reasons for thinking that a claim is true. Though this last concept looks definable, it can be confused with two other terms; explanation and persuasion. Once again, an argument tries to support a conclusion, whereas, an explanation determines how something operates, what is composed of, or what causes its occurrence. As far as persuasion is concerned, it entails the use of arguments to convince someone about something²².

A general review of the literature uncovers a variety of critical thinking skill classifications. One classification provided two interdependent and intertwined dimensions of critical thinking; the affective dimension and the cognitive dimension, in which this latter is divided into two categories: macro abilities and micro skills²³. Though introduced many years ago, Bloom's (1956) taxonomy can be regarded as one of the most recognized and adapted classifications. In an attempt to orientate education toward a meaningful way of learning, this researcher developed a system of thinking that calls for 'higher order thinking' and creates independent, creative, and thoughtful learners. The taxonomy comprises six categories of cognitive level; knowledge, comprehension, and application are classified as convergent thinking/lower order thinking, whereas, analysis, synthesis, and evaluation are classified as divergent thinking/higher order thinking²⁴. Likewise, the following skills of interpretation, analysis, evaluation, inference, explanation, and self-regulation are by consensus at the very core of critical thinking, and each of which includes a variety of sub-skills²⁵.

In fact, critical thinking can be beneficial at many levels and in different settings and contexts. Students in the classroom learn how to consider others' opinions and arguments, analyze and evaluate them, and defend their own arguments and beliefs. In professional and everyday life, critical thinking stimulates accuracy and precision in the way one thinks and works. That is, critical thinking creates individuals who can solve problems, question assumptions, think creatively, collect and analyze data, draw relevant conclusions and make appropriate decisions²⁶.

4-Speaking Skill:

It is very common that mastering any language denotes the ability to speak that language; even success in learning any foreign language is gauged in terms of the ability to converse easily²⁷. Following that, speaking, in comparison to other skills, can be the first one that attracts the attention of language learners who generally assess their language development in terms of how fluent they became, as "many if not most foreign language learners are primarily interested in learning to speak"²⁸. More specifically, with regard to studying English, a high percentage of learners who intend to study this language, aim at promoting their speaking proficiency²⁹.

Speaking is defined as a "process of building and sharing meaning through the use of verbal and non-verbal symbols, in a variety of contexts"³⁰. It is the means that allows individuals to communicate with each other in order to attain specific goals or to express their ideas, opinions, intentions, hopes, and feelings. However, it is claimed that speaking any new language can be tougher than the other skills because of two main reasons. First, speaking occurs in real time; i.e. the person you are talking to is waiting for you to speak immediately. Second, unlike in writing, the speaker cannot edit or revise what he wants to say³¹. In other words, "whereas a text can be edited and retracted, reread, analyzed, and objectified from outside, spontaneous spoken discourse unites speaker and content at the time of production"³².

The ability to deal with different complex processes and skills at the same time is a prerequisite to master speaking. In other words, the presence of certain conditions paves the way for the speaker to produce a fluent speech³³. Basically, there are three main factors that determine the difficulty of speaking: cognitive, social, and affective factors. In the cognitive factor, the choice of the topic, its relevance to the speaker's schema as well as its

accessibility to his long-term memory play a major role in facilitating the speaking task. Moreover, speaker's familiarity with the interlocutor and the genre of the speech contribute to the degree of the speaking difficulty. The affective factor refers to people's feelings and emotions, however, in this context, it is related to two aspects. The individual aspect, which involves the psychological side like motivation and self-esteem factors, and the relational aspect that is connected to the speaker's sense of his social position in the interaction³⁴. Finally, the social factor concerns the ability to fulfil transactional and interactional goals. Whereas interactional or "interpersonal speech is communication for social purposes, including establishing and maintaining social relationships, transactional speech involves communicating to get something done, such as the exchange of goods and/or services"³⁵.

5-Method:

In order to find out whether the implementation of portfolio assessment has a positive effect on students' critical thinking and speaking skills and to validate as well as get a more in-depth feedback about the treatment, we opted for both quantitative and qualitative data gathering tools, i.e. a mixed method. While portfolio assessment is the independent variable, speaking and critical thinking skills serve as the dependent variables of this study.

First, a quasi-experiment was carried out on an experimental group of third year students, in which integrating portfolio assessment into oral class was implemented as the treatment in this study. Another group with the same students' number which served as the control group, received the usual or the traditional way of assessment. The treatment was accompanied by two tests through which data were collected. The pre and posttests took the same form, which is an individual face to face interview with the researcher to determine each participant's speaking and critical thinking levels before and after the treatment, as "the rated interview is undoubtedly the most commonly used technique, and the one with the longest history"³⁶.

The type of the interview used in this test is a semi-structured interview. This latter serves two objectives. On the one hand, to test the critical thinking skill, in which the kind of the questions asked can reveal the level of the student in the different critical thinking sub-skills like interpretation, analysis, inference, evaluation, explanation, and self-regulation. On the other hand, it is used to test the different aspects of the speaking skill, namely, pronunciation, grammar, vocabulary, fluency, and comprehension. Second, a post-experiment structured interview was designed to gather students' attitudes towards the implementation of portfolio assessment and its impact on their speaking and critical thinking skills.

The population chosen for this study use EFL students at the department of Letters and English Language at Guelma University. Students who enrolled in the third year form the sample, with two intact groups of 20 students each. The groups selected are homogeneous, that is, students were chosen based on their speaking performance marks that were gained during the previous academic year, given that they were taught by the same oral expression teacher. What inspired the researcher to choose this sample is the fact that at this level, students must have reached a certain level of oral proficiency that enables them to communicate effectively and express their way of thinking appropriately.

6-Instruments of the Study:

The current study used the following tools to reach its aim:

6-1 Critical Thinking and Speaking pre-posttests:

In order to test the participants' level in both speaking and critical thinking skills, pre-post tests were designed. As mentioned earlier, this study opted for a semi-structured interview conducted with the researcher that took a time frame of eight to ten minutes.

First, in the pretest, each participant was required to give his opinion regarding women's political participation and representation in Algeria. Throughout the interview, students were asked sub questions (related to the same issue) that stimulate their critical thinking sub skills. It is worth mentioning that the researcher was inspired by the type of the questions designed by Facione (2018), which fire up the different critical thinking sub-skills. Simultaneously, students speaking components of pronunciation, grammar, vocabulary, fluency, and comprehension were tested via the same question. Second, in the post test, we took the same measures as the pretest, however, this time students were asked to provide their view concerning youth internet use.

Before conducting the test, the researcher took the participants' permission to record the interview, hence, to have enough time to rate it. In fact, the recording process helps provide fair and accurate judgments. Moreover, in order to obtain rater reliability, two independent ratings were required. Accordingly, another volunteer teacher (in addition to the researcher) helped in scoring students' same performances.

6-2 Speaking Skill Scoring Rubric:

In order to gauge students' speaking sub-skills, an analytic scoring rubric has been used. Though analytic scoring rubrics seem time consuming, they provide a detailed description of the performer's strengths and weaknesses. This is mainly due to its characteristic of dividing the product or performance into discrete aspects and allot each one a specific score. The speaking scoring rubric chosen for this study is an analytic rubric designed by Harris (1969). More specifically, The scope of this scale covers pronunciation, grammar, vocabulary, fluency, and comprehension sub-skills of speaking. This rubric is used to score students' pre and post-tests.

6-3 Critical Thinking Skill Scoring Rubric:

Unlike the speaking skill, the scoring rubric that is used to measure students' critical thinking skill is a holistic one. The holistic rating is characterized by an overall judgement of the performance³⁷. "This single score is designed to encapsulate all the features of the sample, representing overall quality"³⁸. The reason behind choosing a holistic scoring is that it takes less time in comparison to the analytic one, in addition to its practicality, as the assessor is not required to consider each aspect separately. Facione and Facione (2011) holistic rating is the rubric selected to score students' pre and post-tests.

6-4 Post-experiment Structured Interview:

The qualitative data gathering tool of this study is represented in a structured interview between the researcher and seven focal students. Through five different questions, this post experiment one-on-one interview intended to reveal students' attitude towards the use of portfolio assessment and its impact on their speaking and critical thinking skills. The type of the questions asked in the interview varies between open-ended and close-ended questions (mainly yes/no questions). This mixture of questions is a good choice when looking for both objectivity and richness of information and data.

7-Procedure:

As stated previously, the purpose of this study is to explore the impact of portfolio assessment on third year students' speaking and critical thinking skills. Accordingly, a quasi-experiment was designed with an experimental group that received the treatment, and the control group that remained secluded from the experiment variable effect. However, like the experimental group, the control one is tested at the beginning and at the end of the experiment.

The treatment spanned a period of 12 weeks with 24 sessions (one hour and a half per session), in which both control and experimental groups were assigned the same oral

activities. Role plays, discussions, oral reports, and interviews are the type of assignments given to subjects in both groups. Those kinds of oral activities cover both *communicative language functions* that include: greetings and leave-takings, requesting and giving information, describing, and expressing feelings. In addition to *academic language functions* among which are: analyzing, inferring, persuading, synthesizing, evaluating, etc³⁹. While the control group received the traditional type of assessment, the experimental group was assessed through portfolio. Since this latter is a new strategy for the informants, a session was scheduled to explain for them portfolio assessment procedure and all the concepts related to it, essentially, the three basic principles from which portfolio is built, these are collection, selection, and reflection⁴⁰.

It is worth noting that the process of recording oral productions and selecting a partner to comment on those records accompanied all the activities. In the treatment phase, each time the students are assigned an activity, they record their oral productions after brainstorming ideas and outlining the speech (either voice record, or video record depending on the task). Then, on a peer editing form that was already prepared by the researcher, students pair up to exchange their records for peer review under teacher's control. In fact, it is important to direct students how to evaluate each other's work with the help of some guiding questions or rating scales⁴¹. The comments and suggestions provided to each other help them refine their oral productions.

Under the process of collection, students are required to collect all their records (including those before peer review) and upload them in a USB flash drive. By the end of all the predetermined oral assignments, students had to select three preferred oral productions for final assessment. However, portfolio is incomplete without the process of self -assessment and reflection. Hence, students were asked to reflect on the selected records using a self-reflection form, and "the teacher periodically evaluates samples of student work after students have evaluated their own work and set goals for themselves"⁴². The process of portfolio assessment ends up with the teacher's assessment, in which this latter took the form of a conference between the teacher and each student discussing progress, strengths, and weaknesses.

8-Results and Discussion:

The current study opted for both descriptive and inferential statistics in order to analyze results and draw conclusions regarding the participants' critical thinking and speaking skills. On the one hand, descriptive statistics entails an explicit description, exhibition, or summary of the data taken from both the pretest and the posttest. Since there are two dependent variables, the tests have been gauged according to Harris' (1965) analytic scoring rubric for speaking, and which contains five speaking sub-skills, namely pronunciation, grammar, vocabulary, fluency, and comprehension. In addition to Facione and Facione (2011) holistic scoring rubric to measure the quality of critical thinking displayed via oral performance. The mean as well as the standard deviation of each participant were calculated for the two dependent variables. On the other hand, inferential statistics are used to make inferences about the data that has been exhibited. More precisely, a common type of inferential statistics which is the t-test has been chosen to compare the experimental group means before and after the treatment, so that to see whether there exists any difference between them.

The following four tables show the descriptive statistics of the experimental group in the speaking and critical thinking skills before and after the treatment.

Sub-skill Test	pronunciation	grammar	vocabulary	fluency	comprehension
	M	M	M	M	M

Pre-test	SD	SD	SD	SD	SD
	3.25	2.8	2.95	2.7	3.85
	0.63	0.83	0.94	1.17	0.72

Table (01): Experimental Group Pre-test Results in the Different Speaking Sub-Skills

Table 1 shows the mean scores as well as the standard deviation of the experimental group speaking sub-skills before the implementation of portfolio assessment. As indicated in the table, the mean scores obtained are: 3.25 for pronunciation, 2.8 for grammar, 2.95 for vocabulary, 2.7 for fluency, and finally 3.85 for comprehension. In fact, the displayed results do not reflect the academic level of the participants, as they mark a low speaking proficiency in the different sub-skills, especially in terms of fluency, grammar, and vocabulary. As far as pronunciation is concerned, a minority of the informants suffer from severe pronunciation problems that sometimes when speaking, they can be misunderstood. However, the majority of them frequently commit grammatical errors, particularly those related to verb tense and subject verb agreement. More importantly, insufficient vocabulary repertoire is a stumbling block for the vast majority to express themselves correctly and appropriately, hence, they are most of the time hesitant and silent, and which eventually affect their fluency. Many factors contribute to the existence of such difficulties, and one of those factors can have a relation with assessment regulations.

Skill Test	Critical thinking skill			
	M			
Pre-test	SD			
	2.15			
	0.81			

Table (02): Experimental Group Pre-test Results in the Critical Thinking Skill

Similarly, table 2 records post-test mean score and the standard deviation of the experimental group critical thinking, which are respectively 2.15 and 0.81. Again, results denote a low level in the critical thinking skill. In fact, university students are supposed to be critical thinkers who analyze, interpret, infer, question, and evaluate information not only absorb whatever presented to them. In other words, they are required to hold the characteristics of autonomous and self-sufficient learners who can cope with the 21st century demands.

Sub-skill Test	pronunciation	grammar	vocabulary	fluency	comprehension
	M	M	M	M	M
Post-test	SD	SD	SD	SD	SD
	3.5	3.15	3.2	2.9	3.85
	0.76	0.81	0.89	1.23	0.72

Table (03): Experimental Group Post-test Results in the Different Speaking Sub-Skills

The participants sat again for another test which aims at determining the efficiency of the treatment. As displayed in table 2, the experimental group mean scores of the different speaking sub-skills are as follows: 3.5 for pronunciation, 3.15 for grammar, 3.2 for vocabulary, 2.9 for fluency, and finally 3.85 for comprehension. If we compare the pre-test results with that ones, we can notice a difference in the majority of the speaking aspects.

Though the difference marked is slight, it proves that the implementation of portfolio assessment was effective.

Skill Test	Critical thinking skill
Post-test	M
	SD
	2.25
	0.91

Table (04): Experimental Group Post-test Results in the Critical Thinking Skill

As indicated in table 4, the mean score of the experimental group post-test in the critical thinking skill is 2.25, there is a small increase in the post-test mean score if compared to the pre-test one. Following this result, we can say that the treatment proved its efficiency, and that portfolio assessment has a positive impact on the students' critical thinking skill. However, in order to find out if the variations between the experimental group pre and posttests in the two skills were statistically significant, the t-test was calculated. Table 5 summarizes the results.

		M	SD	T value
Speaking skill	Pre-test	3.11	0.85	1.95
	Post-test	3.32	0.88	
Critical thinking skill	Pre-test	2.15	0.81	1.88
	Post-test	2.25	0.91	

Table (05): T-test Results of both Critical Thinking and Speaking Skills

Considering the results of the t-test displayed in table 5, it can be said that there exists a difference in both speaking and critical thinking skills. On the one hand, in the speaking skill, the t-value, which is 1.95, is well above the critical value for 38 degrees of freedom, which is 1.68. On the other hand, in the critical thinking skill, the t-value (1.88) is greater than the critical value for 38 degrees of freedom which is again 1.68. Consequently, portfolio assessment is a tool that can contribute in the development of both speaking and critical thinking skills.

In order to supplement the results obtained from the posttest experiment, seven participants were selected for a structured interview. This latter's aim was to explore students' perceptions towards portfolio assessment and their experience during the journey of using it.

When asking the interviewees about their perceptions towards portfolio assessment, all of them showed a positive attitude, in that they liked the process that portfolio comprises. More importantly, the participants changed the idea that they have about assessment, as they no longer perceive it as a process that determines their failure or success. In other words, unlike standardized tests and exams that generally mark the end of the learning process, assessment became an integral part in learning. Furthermore, due to a principle characteristic of portfolio assessment (collection) which accumulates students' products, they can easily have a chronicle of their leaning process over a period of time. In addition, according to the participants, portfolio assessment is an appropriate tool that identifies their strengths and weaknesses, hence, determines their actual levels. Some responses are quoted as follows:

“Honestly, I liked portfolio assessment because now I have an idea about my real abilities and I know things that I am good at in addition to my negative points”.

In fact, I used to be sensitive of being assessed, especially when being told about my errors. However, things have changed now with the use of portfolio assessment, as all comments and feedbacks that help improve my level are welcome. My strengths and weaknesses are clear to me now.

Two interviewees stressed the fruitfulness of the retrospective feature of reflecting back on their learning. Their claims are quoted as follows:

“What I liked most about portfolio assessment is that I can see my development by comparing old performances with late ones. Usual tests and exams do not provide that.”

“I think portfolio is more than an assessment tool, it is a learning tool as well. Emm! I can say it is a window through which I can see my progress, and it was a positive one, because my performance is getting better”.

Other interviewees appreciated the portfolio because, on the one hand, it frees them from the anxiety that standardized tests create and turns this anxiety into motivation. On the other hand, they overcame the fear of public speaking and the feeling of guilt and shame when making mistakes, as they no longer perceive themselves as sinners. This can be due to the ongoing continuous assessment that portfolio enjoys, i.e. the more students are being assessed the more they get acquainted to that process. Furthermore, frequent speaking tasks and practices help students to break the ice of fear when speaking in front of the audience. Two answers in that issue are quoted as follows:

“I think I liked portfolio for the simple reason that it helped me to overcome stress and anxiety. I am no longer afraid of tests and exams”.

“I used to avoid speaking in front of my classmates, because I feel nervous and I start shaking, and they are easily noticed. But because of portfolio, I am more relaxed and I am not ashamed when I make mistakes”.

The second question in this interview digs deeply in the process of portfolio, as it asks the subjects whether they liked peer-feedback and self-reflection or not. Following what they reply, they were asked to justify their answers.

The majority of the respondents did like and enjoy peer feedback and self-reflection. The reasons of liking those processes vary from one interviewee to another. Some of their answers are quoted as follows:

I liked the idea of seeing my work through the eyes of someone else and what they say about it. Peer feedback is a good tool that drew my attention towards my mistakes. Concerning self-reflection, it was a new experience for me, I had no idea of how to self-assess my work and the criteria in which I base my evaluation on! However, the exemplary work and the self-reflection sheet helped me a lot to stay in the right direction.

Commenting on each others' work helped me a lot. First, in knowing my mistakes and correcting them, second, when getting access to my partner's work, I benefit from it as it draws my attention towards the things that I forgot in my work, so, it helped me to improve my second performance. And through self-reflection, I learned how to

concentrate on my language problems and think about how to improve them, not only appraise things that I master, which is usually our habits!

Actually, peer-feedback gave me the chance to correct my errors made in the first performance. I used to receive feedback but not, if we can say, as formal as the one gets through portfolio. I mean the peer-feedback sheet. It made things clearer and easier. I was obliged to correct my mistakes in the second performance. As far as self-reflection is concerned, I really felt motivated to evaluate my work. I felt also responsible of my learning, by identifying what I really know and what I do not know, and eventually it is up to me to improve my level, I suppose!

The results indicate that, on the one hand, students perceive peer-feedback or assessment as a useful tool through which they can recognize their strengths and weaknesses and learn from each others' performances. More importantly, they are motivated to consider their weaknesses and improve their abilities. On the other hand, through self-reflection, students can monitor their progress and see exactly where they were, where they are, and where they want to be, hence, they can work to ameliorate deficits that they already identified via the reflective process. Further, this latter is a key vehicle that stimulates questioning, evaluation, and a meaningful learning journey. Accordingly, it can be said that both self-reflection and peer assessment foster autonomy as they help learners to take responsibility of their own learning and development.

However, one interviewee claimed that he has reservations regarding peer assessment. His justification is quoted as follows:

Well, in general, I am not totally convinced about the usefulness of peer feedback if the involved persons are not serious. Because, how can I be evaluated by someone who has the same level as mine if not worse?! I am not sure!! This is first. Second, some students are not serious, so, if I take their comments into consideration, they may lead me to commit errors and finally, provide bad performances instead of improving my abilities. But well, I cannot deny the fact that peer assessment was beneficial for me. Emm! this is what I think I don't know!!

In fact, peer assessment can be misleading if students are reluctant to give feedback or provide irrelevant and vague comments. As a result, this process needs to be under teacher's control. In addition, it can be facilitated by providing a peer feedback form which contains questions that direct respondents to provide relevant feedback.

According to all the interviewees' responses, their different speaking sub-skills have been improved. Typical explanations are presented as follows:

Yes, there is a difference, because when I compared the very first records with the last ones, I noticed that my speech was getting better through time, especially grammar and vocabulary, also I was surprised when I discovered that I was mispronouncing some words which I thought are right, and this was revealed through feedback. I am now more careful about my pronunciation and producing correct sentences. In the past, that is before using portfolio assessment, I know that I was making mistakes during, but I have never tried neither to determine nor to fix them.

Yes, definitely! there is an improvement in my speaking skill. I can say that I speak more smoothly in comparison to what I was before portfolio, it means, I used to have some mm! how to say! yes. fragmented speech and sometimes blocks.....mmmm! my speech was sometimes disorganized and I make grammatical errors. But after

experiencing the portfolio and the extensive speaking practices, I can now produce more organized sentences that do not include many grammatical mistakes to some extent, and my speech is less fragmentary.

If I can give a percentage, it is an improvement of 30%. Ehh! It may seem that the percentage is not that high, but I am really satisfied with it! I think that the rehearsals, having another chance to improve my speaking performance, errrr! and peers' comments were beneficial. I get rid of my hesitation when speaking, which constituted a big obstacle for me. I can use more vocabulary that is related to the context, and my pronunciation problems are reduced.

It is clear from what the interviewees reported that they marked a certain progress in the different speaking sub-skills, in spite of the short period of time (12 weeks) that the experiment took. The majority share the same view about the speaking aspects that witnessed an improvement. They declared that they generally suffer from problems related more to the linguistic area like pronunciation, accuracy, and vocabulary, and which inhibit them from producing a good language. However, after the treatment, students marked a decrease in the aforementioned speaking difficulties. In fact, portfolio assessment is a vehicle through which students can not only identify their speaking weaknesses, but also fix them. That is, thanks to the property of collection, students can save different artefacts that aid them to monitor and reflect on their own oral performance. The portfolio folder can contain students' rehearsals, finished products, peer feedback, self-reflection, and others.

Regarding the fifth question, which requires informants to outline their personal meaning of critical thinking skill, the majority of the students provided their estimations. What they provided reveals that they share the same conception about critical thinking and have a clear understanding about what the term means, hence, they can depict their own progress regarding critical thinking skill. According to them, critical thinking requires skepticism and an examination of claims rather than blindly believing in what is reported. Furthermore, a critical thinker is a reflective person who analyzes, infers, interprets, explains, and evaluates information. He is eager to investigate and probe new evidence, seek and find solutions to different problems. The interviewees responses are quoted as follows:

Critical thinking is a process of analysis, in which it requires a deep understanding of the information not a superficial one. As if you break down the information into separate elements for analysis, and at the end you collect them to make an overall analysis.

“To be a critical thinker it means you have to doubt and question whatever presented to you, that is, we should not take everything for granted, and I think that not anyone can be a critical thinker”

Critical thinking needs intelligence, this is what I see, because when you think critically you analyze the information. It means you understand what is not explicitly stated, you even find solutions to difficult problems. That's why it is a hard and a complex process.

“Critical thinking means thinking in a different way, or let's say.... thinking deeply and analyzing”.

“I believe, errr! It is to examine something carefully, and look at it from different angles in order to evaluate it objectively”

However, two interviewees failed to provide a definition to critical thinking, an example is quoted as follows:

“Errr! I know the term, but I can’t provide an exact definition of it”

When we asked the participants about whether or not the use of portfolio assessment in the period of treatment has made any improvement in their critical thinking skill, the majority claimed that they witnessed a progress regarding this skill, and they explained how. However, two students declared their uncertainty about the impact of portfolio assessment on their critical thinking skill, and one avowed that she did not mark any improvement. Some responses are quoted as follows:

“Well, emm!!! I can’t tell, maybe there is an impact, but I can’t notice. I don’t know!”

“Emm! probably, I’m not sure”.

“No, I don’t think that portfolio made any impact on my critical thinking skill”.

“Yes, I felt an improvement. In fact, the use of portfolio makes me more aware about my learning and studies. I want to say that now, I know exactly where I am and what I should do to improve myself”

Yes, it did. Before using the portfolio, I was... emmm! how to say, my learning was aimless, I know that I have to learn and work to improve my level, but I didn’t know from where to start. I mean, I have weaknesses, but to identify them and focus to improve them, never comes to my mind. The use of portfolio made me think deeply about my learning methods and styles, and set goals to improve them.

The last question in the interview seeks to know the challenges that the participants faced when using portfolio assessment, in addition to its drawbacks. The majority of the interviewees faced almost the same challenges. Some of their ideas are quoted as follows:

I cannot deny the fact that portfolio was beneficial for me, and that I was enjoying when involved in its process. However, sometimes I felt uncomfortable when changing my portfolio partner in each new assignment. Something else, the second performance after peer feedback can be needless in some cases. Mmmm! For example, in one of the speaking assignments, my first performance was good, and I had very few comments from my partner. I felt that I could not make better, but I was eager to make the second performance the best. Unfortunately, I made more mistakes than the first performance, I felt frustrated!

This interviewee thinks that dealing with different students, who provide different feedbacks and then different perspectives, can create discomfort or misleading. In fact, the aim behind integrating peer feedback is to help learners identify their strengths and weaknesses in addition to learning from each other. Hence, the more they get contact with many students, the more they benefit from different experiences, therefore, enlarge their knowledge. Besides, coping with different students creates a collaborative atmosphere, and promotes classroom interaction which fosters learning.

“Sometimes I feel overloaded, because in order to accomplish just one assignment, I have to go through many steps”.

“Based on my own experience, I think that portfolio assessment is time consuming, many tasks should be done to collect the portfolio, which makes me bored”

Portfolio assessment is a demanding, time consuming process that can be a heavy burden. It may even create feelings of boredom and tiresome as the interviewees

mentioned. This is mainly due to the variety of elements that students should consider. In the case of speaking portfolio, they are required to brainstorm ideas and outline their speech, then record it for first peer feedback, after that, observe comments and make a second performance for final teacher's feedback. And of course, to create their portfolios, they have to collect different artefacts, select, and reflect on their best works. In fact, students' answers were expected, as they are not accustomed to such type of assessment, in which the majority know little about it. Accordingly, dealing with portfolio assessment in particular needs motivation, devotion, and commitment from the part of the learner and the teacher as well.

Sometimes, I doubt whether the portfolio reveals my real speaking ability or not! Because, sometimes I memorize some parts of what I want to say after preparation, or when I have time, I keep repeating the speech till I make sure that it is good.

This student raised a very important issue regarding portfolio assessment criteria. Memorization and rehearsal that are characteristics of rote learning are not congruent with the ideas that underlie portfolio assessment. This latter encourages the construction of one's own understanding and meaning not just memorizing and regurgitating someone else's ideas. So, according to what the interviewee did, portfolio assessment in this case will not give a clear picture of the student's speaking abilities, weaknesses, and achievements, rather, it masks them.

Conclusion:

The current research explored the effect of portfolio assessment on EFL learners' critical thinking and speaking skills. In order to reach this end, a quasi-experimental study was adopted. Moreover, a post experiment structured interview was conducted to investigate students' attitude towards the use of portfolio. Regarding the speaking skill, the analysis of the findings reveals the positive impact of portfolio assessment on students' speaking sub-skills of pronunciation, grammar, vocabulary, fluency, and comprehension. Though the statistics indicated an insubstantial change, the students unveil a satisfaction towards it. As, they witnessed an improvement in their speech mainly in accuracy, fluency, and pronunciation. Additionally, the majority of the students approve and appreciate the use of portfolio because it helped them gain a clear picture of their actual speaking level, their strengths and weaknesses, as well as their speaking development through time.

Furthermore, they are of the opinion that in spite of the time taken to go through the different portfolio processes, the characteristic of the ongoing continuous assessment reduced their speaking anxiety and the stress that exams and tests usually bring. In fact, exams sometimes fail to determine the real level of the learner, his potentials and flaws; they are not even reliable for teachers when it comes to identifying the areas that need development and what is actually achieved. Some students stress the usefulness of both peer feedback and self-reflection in recognizing and correcting one's errors and mistakes. More importantly, portfolio aligns instruction with assessment, that is, portfolio surpasses being an assessment tool only; it is an instructional tool as well, hence, no special time should be devoted to assessment.

As far as critical thinking is concerned, the treatment resulted in an inconsiderable improvement in students' critical thinking skill. This slight progress is the outcome of an increase in students' self-consciousness about their own thinking. That is, the processes of peer assessment and self-reflection gave the students the opportunity to examine and correct themselves as well as their peers. Due to its retrospective nature, portfolio allowed the students to check on their own learning and progress. More precisely, portfolio has the potential of promoting learners' critical thinking skill of self-regulation. Consequently, it

can generate autonomous learners who are responsible of their own learning and development via raising the reflective critical sense.

Overall, though portfolio assessment has a number of demerits and can be challenging to implement it, it can be a multifunctional tool that improves students' different skills, hence, it is highly recommended to be incorporated in the teaching/ learning practices.

In this context, the following lines are some tips that can ease the burden on instructors when integrating portfolio assessment in their classes:

- Portfolio assessment is a process that should not be viewed as an extra work, hence, detached from daily class tasks and routines. Accordingly, teachers are required to manage time for it as they do for other activities.
- The number of the assessed students can be minimized to two or three (depending on the number of the students) in each class session, till teachers finish assessing the whole class. This can be useful, especially for oral language interviews.
- Once the students have command on the processes of self-reflection and self-assessment, teachers then can occasionally examine students' self-assessment and grade students' main products.
- Teachers can benefit from the time allotted to group work, for instance, and evaluate students' performances via rating scales or teacher observation checklists.
- Finally, teachers can communicate portfolio contents to students and other teachers once they get acquainted with it. To do so, they can use various ways, among which: *a narrative summary* that describes students' development, *a portfolio evaluation summary*, which determines students' level in different areas, or *a letter to the follow-on teacher* that identifies students' achievements, their lacks, and their future objectives⁴³.

Footnotes:

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- ¹⁵ Moya and O'Malley, A portfolio assessment model for ESL, pp 17-18.
- ¹⁶ Ibid, pp 14-15, Hamp-Lyons and Condon, Assessing the portfolio, pp 118-120.
- ¹⁷ Belgrad, Susan, Burke, Kay, Fogarty, Robin, 2008, The portfolio connection: Student work linked to standards, USA, p 183.
- ¹⁸ Grant, Grace E, 1988, Teaching critical thinking, USA, p 34.
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- ³³ Thornbury, Scott, 2005, How to teach speaking, England, p 25.
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- ³⁷ McNamara, Tim, 2000, Language testing, UK, p50
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- ⁴⁰ Hamp-Lyons and Condon, Assessing the portfolio, p 120.
- ⁴¹ O'Malley and Pierce, Authentic assessment for English language learners, p 69.
- ⁴² Ibid., p 43.
- ⁴³ Ibid., pp 51-52.

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