



The Efficacy of Portfolio Assessment in Enhancing Students' Writing Skills in ESP Courses

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Abstract: This study explores Vietnamese university students' perceptions of an English for Specific Purposes (ESP) writing course, with a particular focus on instructional objectives, course materials, and teaching methods. Centered on the assessment framework proposed by Uçar and Yazıcı (2016), the research investigates the role of portfolio assessment in shaping students' learning experiences and writing development. A mixed-methods approach is employed, integrating quantitative data collected through a structured questionnaire with qualitative insights gathered from semi-structured interviews, allowing for a comprehensive and nuanced understanding of learner perspectives. The findings indicate that students perceive the course as largely effective in building upon their prior knowledge and foundational writing skills. They report moderate success in terms of the course's ability to promote critical thinking, an essential component of advanced academic writing in specialized contexts. Notably, students expressed strong satisfaction with the relevance and applicability of the course materials to their academic and professional needs, as well as with the accessibility of the instructor and the consistency of timely, constructive feedback—factors identified as key contributors to their writing improvement. These elements are seen as particularly supportive within a portfolio-based learning environment, which emphasizes progress, reflection, and iterative

revision. By focusing on portfolio assessment within the Vietnamese ESP context, this study contributes to a relatively limited body of research, shedding light on culturally embedded challenges and identifying concrete areas for pedagogical refinement. It underscores the value of learner-centered assessment practices that encourage autonomy, self-evaluation, and sustained engagement with writing tasks. The findings offer practical implications for course designers, educators, and policymakers seeking to enhance the effectiveness and responsiveness of ESP instruction through reflective and process-oriented assessment models.

Keywords: *Portfolio assessment techniques, Writing skills, Vietnamese students, ESP courses.*

1. Introduction

In the age of globalization and digital communication, proficiency in English writing has become a fundamental skill for university students worldwide—especially for those enrolled in English for Specific Purposes (ESP) programs. In Vietnam, the growing demand for professionals who can communicate effectively in technical and professional English contexts has prompted a shift in teaching practices within higher education institutions. This shift includes an increased emphasis on communicative competence, learner autonomy, and task-based learning. However, traditional summative assessment methods remain prevalent in many Vietnamese ESP classrooms, where learners are evaluated through final exams or one-time writing tasks. Such methods often fail to capture the dynamic nature of writing as a process or provide learners with meaningful opportunities to improve. As a result, educators and researchers are exploring more formative and learner-centered assessment practices, such as portfolio assessment techniques, which are believed to foster deeper engagement with the writing process and enhance overall writing proficiency.

Portfolio assessment, broadly defined, is the process of compiling a purposeful collection of student work that demonstrates their efforts, progress, and achievements in a particular skill area over time. In writing instruction, portfolios allow learners to engage in cycles of drafting, receiving feedback, revising, and reflecting on their growth. According to Richards and Renandya (2002), a typical portfolio contains a student's complete writing output, serving both as an assessment tool and a record of development. This method aligns with the principles of formative assessment and reflective learning, offering a more nuanced and personalized picture of students' writing abilities compared to traditional exams.

International research has consistently highlighted the benefits of portfolio assessment in developing L2 writing skills. For instance, Uçar and Yazıcı (2016) found that Turkish ESP students who were taught through portfolio-based instruction significantly outperformed those in traditional classes across various



writing sub-skills, including organization, vocabulary, elaboration, and conventions. Similarly, Bánhegyi and Fajt (2023) demonstrated the efficacy of a process-based portfolio approach in enhancing university students' ESP writing performance, citing its adaptability to individualized learning needs. Guo and Li (2024), in a study conducted in China, reported not only improvements in writing quality but also significant gains in writing self-efficacy among students using electronic portfolios. These studies collectively suggest that portfolio assessment fosters improved writing outcomes by encouraging ongoing practice, personalized feedback, and active learner engagement.

Beyond measurable improvements in writing performance, portfolio assessment is also associated with positive changes in learner attitudes and motivation. Saavedra and Campos (2019), for example, observed that Chilean pre-service teachers perceived writing portfolios as beneficial to their writing and reflective thinking skills. Similarly, Rezadoust et al. (2024) found that Iranian EFL learners and teachers held favorable views toward using e-portfolios, citing increased motivation, enhanced confidence, and a more inclusive learning environment. Such perceptions are particularly important in ESP contexts, where the pressure to master domain-specific vocabulary and structures can create anxiety and hinder student engagement.

In the Vietnamese context, however, research on portfolio assessment in ESP writing instruction remains scarce. While recent studies have explored related assessment methods, such as the use of analytic rubrics in self- and peer-assessment (Phuong et al., 2023) or online self-evaluation strategies (Al-Mwzaiji & Alzubi, 2022), there is a notable lack of inquiry into the use of portfolios as a central pedagogical tool. This gap is significant, given the potential of portfolio assessment to support long-term language development and foster essential 21st-century skills such as critical thinking, self-regulation, and reflective learning.

Moreover, little is known about how Vietnamese university students perceive portfolio assessment, or what factors shape these perceptions. Understanding students' views is crucial because learners' beliefs and attitudes can significantly affect their engagement with a particular teaching method and, consequently, their learning outcomes. Several international studies have identified factors that influence learners' perceptions of portfolio assessment, including the quality of teacher feedback (Guo & Li, 2024), the degree of learner autonomy it promotes (Al-Hawamdeh et al., 2023), the relevance of writing tasks to students' academic and professional goals (Jafari & Alemi, 2020), and the technological challenges involved in implementing e-portfolios (Kwok, 2011). However, these factors may manifest differently in the Vietnamese higher education context, where curriculum design, teacher training, assessment culture, and student learning styles can vary



considerably from other national settings.

Furthermore, studies in Iran (Mostafavi et al., 2021; Jafari & Alemi, 2020) and Ethiopia (Al-Hawamdeh et al., 2023) suggest that students' perceptions of ESP instruction and assessment can be shaped by the extent to which the course meets their needs, the authenticity of the materials, and the opportunities for self-directed learning. Drawing parallels to the Vietnamese setting, where many ESP programs are criticized for lacking practical relevance or sufficient learner-centered activities, portfolio assessment could serve as a valuable intervention—provided that students see its value and engage with it meaningfully.

Against this backdrop, this study aims to investigate the efficacy of portfolio assessment techniques in improving Vietnamese students' writing skills in ESP courses, with a specific focus on their perceptions and underlying reasons for those perceptions. By examining students' experiences and attitudes, the study seeks to uncover the educational, cognitive, and emotional factors that affect how portfolio assessment is received and utilized. This approach not only contributes to the growing body of research on alternative assessment methods in EFL and ESP contexts but also provides practical insights for curriculum developers, teachers, and policy-makers in Vietnam and other similar educational systems.

To achieve this aim, the study is guided by the following research questions:

- What are Vietnamese students' perceptions of portfolio assessment techniques in improving their writing skills in ESP courses?
- What are the underlying reasons for the students' perceptions of portfolio assessment techniques in improving their writing skills in ESP courses?

By addressing these questions, this study intends to fill an important gap in the literature on writing assessment in ESP instruction in Vietnam and offer evidence-based recommendations for more effective and engaging writing pedagogy. The findings are expected to inform not only classroom practices but also broader institutional strategies aimed at enhancing the quality and relevance of ESP education.

2. Literature Review

The use of portfolio assessment in language education, particularly in English for Specific Purposes (ESP) writing instruction, has gained increasing attention over the past two decades. A substantial body of research has examined its impact on writing proficiency, learner autonomy, and student perceptions across various educational contexts.



The Impact of Portfolio Assessment on ESP Writing Skills

Portfolio assessment has been widely acknowledged for its role in improving writing performance among learners of English as a Foreign Language (EFL), particularly in academic and professional settings. Unlike traditional summative methods, portfolio-based instruction emphasizes process writing, multiple drafts, and continuous feedback, which are central to the development of writing competence in ESP.

Uçar and Yazıcı (2016) conducted a quasi-experimental study involving Turkish undergraduates in ESP courses and found that portfolio assessment significantly improved students' writing performance compared to traditional methods. The experimental group, which utilized portfolios, showed notable gains in key sub-skills such as organization, vocabulary, elaboration, and conventions. This finding was echoed by Bánhegyi and Fajt (2023), who implemented a process-based portfolio approach with a large group of Hungarian university students. Their results demonstrated statistically significant improvements in students' ESP writing proficiency, confirming that portfolios effectively support individualized writing development in specialized contexts.

Further supporting evidence comes from Guo and Li (2024), who employed a mixed-methods approach to study Chinese EFL learners using electronic portfolios. Their findings revealed significant improvements in overall writing performance and specific aspects such as content, coherence, and language use. Importantly, their study highlighted the role of digital tools (Edmodo) in facilitating writing instruction and tracking learner progress over time.

Similar effects were observed in other international studies that compared portfolio assessment with traditional summative methods. Al-Hawamdeh et al. (2023) found that Ethiopian EFL learners in a portfolio-based instruction group outperformed those in a control group in terms of writing complexity, accuracy, and fluency. The results also suggested that portfolios had broader benefits, including reduced writing anxiety and enhanced learner autonomy.

In the Vietnamese context, while few studies have focused specifically on portfolios in ESP, research by Phuong et al. (2023) demonstrated the effectiveness of using analytic rubrics for peer- and self-assessment in EFL writing. Although the study did not use portfolios per se, its findings reinforce the value of formative and process-oriented assessment tools in improving writing quality, particularly in content development and language use.

Taken together, these studies affirm that portfolio assessment has a measurable and positive effect on writing skills in ESP and EFL contexts. The iterative nature of portfolios—encouraging planning, drafting, and revision—aligns



with the pedagogical goals of ESP, which emphasize clear, purposeful, and audience-appropriate communication.

Learner Perceptions and Affective Outcomes of Portfolio Use

In addition to cognitive and linguistic benefits, portfolio assessment also contributes to the development of positive learner attitudes, self-efficacy, and motivation—all of which are critical to successful language learning. Understanding students' perceptions of portfolio use is vital, as these perceptions can influence engagement levels and the overall effectiveness of the approach.

Several studies have reported favorable student attitudes toward portfolio assessment. For instance, Uçar and Yazıcı (2016) administered an attitude questionnaire to participants and found that students viewed the portfolio process as a helpful strategy for improving writing skills and receiving structured feedback. Similarly, Guo and Li (2024) identified increased motivation, greater confidence, and enhanced self-regulation as recurring themes in interviews with students who participated in electronic portfolio-based instruction.

Saavedra and Campos (2019) explored Chilean pre-service teachers' perceptions of writing portfolios and found that learners appreciated the opportunity to reflect on their progress and recognized improvements in both their writing and critical thinking abilities. However, participants also expressed concerns about time management and the workload involved, suggesting that while perceptions were generally positive, successful implementation requires careful planning and support.

Rezadoust et al. (2024) further highlighted the inclusive nature of portfolio assessment in the Iranian EFL context. Both teachers and students reported that portfolios increased learner motivation and confidence, while also fostering a more equitable and participatory learning environment. Their findings stress the importance of institutional support and teacher training in maximizing the effectiveness of portfolio practices.

In contrast, Kwok (2011) found that while Hong Kong university students using e-portfolios appreciated the flexibility and learner control, the level of student engagement varied depending on individual motivation and academic ability. These results suggest that for portfolio assessment to be effective, it must be aligned with students' learning preferences, technological skills, and broader curricular goals.

In Vietnam, although direct studies on student perceptions of portfolio assessment are limited, related research provides valuable insights. For example, Jafari Pazoki and Alemi (2020) examined engineering students' motivation to learn ESP and concluded that relevance to real-life applications and long-term goals significantly affected student attitudes. This implies that Vietnamese students may



view portfolio assessment more positively if they perceive it as contributing to their academic or career success.

Moreover, Al-Mwzaiji and Alzubi (2022) found that online self-evaluation practices improved writing skills and learner self-awareness among EFL students, despite the low effect size. Their results suggest that self-regulated assessment strategies—such as those embedded in portfolio work—can enhance learner engagement when combined with proper guidance.

Overall, the literature indicates that learner perceptions of portfolio assessment are largely positive across diverse contexts. Students value the opportunities for self-expression, improvement, and reflection that portfolios provide. However, the success of such practices depends heavily on factors such as teacher support, feedback quality, workload balance, and the perceived relevance of tasks.

Despite the growing body of international research highlighting the pedagogical benefits of portfolio assessment in enhancing writing proficiency and fostering learner autonomy, there remains a significant gap in studies focusing specifically on Vietnamese tertiary students within ESP (English for Specific Purposes) contexts. Most existing research has been conducted in general EFL or secondary school settings, often overlooking the unique linguistic and academic demands of ESP courses. Additionally, while many studies have emphasized the cognitive and affective gains of using portfolios, few have delved into the underlying reasons behind learners' perceptions or resistance toward this assessment method, particularly in Vietnam where educational culture, assessment expectations, and institutional constraints may influence learner attitudes. This lack of context-specific inquiry limits the applicability of global findings to Vietnamese higher education. Therefore, there is a need for in-depth exploration of how Vietnamese students perceive portfolio assessment techniques in ESP writing instruction and what factors shape their perceptions.

3. Methodology

3.1 Research Design

This study adopted a qualitative case study design to explore Vietnamese university students' perceptions of portfolio assessment techniques in ESP writing courses, along with the underlying reasons for these perceptions. This approach was chosen to enable an in-depth examination of students' attitudes and experiences in their real educational setting. A case study design is particularly appropriate when the aim is to understand complex educational phenomena within their context, such as learners' emotional and cognitive engagement with alternative assessment methods like portfolios.



3.2 Research Participants

The participants of this study were 300 undergraduate students enrolled in English for Specific Purposes (ESP) writing courses at a Vietnamese public university. These students came from various academic majors including Business, Engineering, and Hospitality Management, where ESP writing is an essential component of the curriculum. Participants were selected using purposive sampling, as they had direct experience with portfolio assessment in the ongoing semester. The sample included both male and female students from second and third-year cohorts. Their English proficiency ranged from intermediate to upper-intermediate levels (CEFR B1–B2). Participation was voluntary, and informed consent was obtained from all students prior to the study.

3.3 Research Instruments

Two main instruments were used to collect data: a questionnaire and semi-structured interviews, both adapted from the framework developed by Uçar and Yazıcı (2016), who investigated students' attitudes toward portfolio use in ESP writing instruction. Their framework focuses on five key dimensions: perceived usefulness of portfolios, impact on writing skills, learner motivation, assessment fairness, and emotional responses to portfolio assessment.

The questionnaire consisted of 13 closed-ended items rated on a 5-point Likert scale (ranging from "Strongly Disagree" to "Strongly Agree"), and 5 open-ended questions. The closed items assessed students' perceptions across the five thematic areas identified by Uçar and Yazıcı (2016), while the open-ended questions allowed for elaboration and deeper personal reflection. The questionnaire was administered at the end of the semester, after students had completed their portfolios.

The semi-structured interviews were conducted with a subgroup of 10 participants selected to represent variation in academic major, gender, and portfolio performance. The interview guide was designed to explore the reasons behind students' responses in the questionnaire and to gather detailed insights into their experiences with portfolio assessment. Questions focused on how portfolios influenced their writing development, learning strategies, motivation, and their preferences compared to traditional assessment methods.

Both instruments were first piloted with a small group of five students to ensure clarity, relevance, and cultural appropriateness. Minor adjustments were made based on the pilot results to improve the reliability and comprehensibility of the tools.



3.4 Data Collection

Data collection occurred over a six-week period during the final half of the semester in which portfolio-based assessment was implemented. The questionnaire was distributed in paper format to all 300 participants during the final week of the semester, ensuring that students had experienced the full portfolio process before giving their feedback.

Semi-structured interviews were conducted one-on-one in a quiet room on campus. Each interview lasted approximately 30–40 minutes and was conducted in either English or Vietnamese depending on the participant's comfort level. All interviews were audio-recorded with participants' permission and later transcribed for analysis. The combination of quantitative and qualitative data allowed for triangulation and richer interpretation of students' perspectives.

3.5 Data Analysis

Quantitative data from the questionnaire were analyzed using descriptive statistics (means, standard deviations, and percentages) to identify overall trends in student perceptions across the five key dimensions. Microsoft Excel was used for basic statistical processing. Responses to the open-ended questionnaire items were analyzed thematically to complement the statistical findings.

Qualitative data from the semi-structured interviews were analyzed using thematic analysis, following Braun and Clarke's (2006) six-phase framework. After transcription, data were read and re-read to ensure familiarity. Initial codes were generated inductively, then organized into broader themes that reflected students' beliefs about the effectiveness, challenges, and emotional impact of portfolio assessment. The analysis paid particular attention to the motivations, contextual factors, and personal experiences that influenced learners' responses to portfolio work.

To ensure trustworthiness, member checking was conducted by sharing preliminary interpretations with a subset of participants for feedback and validation. In addition, peer debriefing with two academic colleagues was used to reduce researcher bias and enhance analytical rigor.

4. Results

The findings of this study are organized into two key thematic areas that correspond to the main focus of the questionnaire: Instructional Objectives and Instructional Material and Method. These themes reflect the students' perceptions and experiences regarding the use of portfolio assessment techniques in English for Specific Purposes (ESP) writing courses in the Vietnamese higher education context.



Instructional Objectives

The students generally expressed a positive attitude toward the alignment of the course content with their previous knowledge and experiences. This is evidenced by a high mean score of 4.32 (SD = 0.91), indicating strong agreement that the course content builds upon what they already know. This suggests that the curriculum designers effectively incorporated familiar concepts and scaffolded new information to promote learning continuity, which is critical in facilitating students' engagement and confidence in ESP writing.

S8 shared: *"I liked that the course used what I already knew. It helped me understand new ideas better and made me feel more confident in my writing. Connecting old and new knowledge made learning easier and less stressful."*

Moreover, students moderately agreed that the course enhanced their critical thinking abilities, with a mean of 3.99 (SD = 0.90). This finding implies that the instructional design and portfolio assessment techniques helped to develop higher-order cognitive skills, which are essential in writing disciplines. The critical ability enhancement may also reflect the active involvement required in portfolio compilation, such as reflection and self-assessment, which encourages deeper learning.

S1 stated: *"I feel that this course has helped me think more deeply about my writing. The portfolio work made me reflect on what I learned and improved my ability to analyze my own work, which I hadn't done much before. It wasn't always easy, but it definitely made me more thoughtful and careful in my writing."*

However, when asked if the course objectives corresponded with their personal learning goals, the students showed moderate agreement with a mean score of 3.45 (SD = 0.89). This relatively lower score suggests that while students generally found value in the course, there may be a gap between what the course intends to achieve and what individual students hope to gain. This could stem from differing expectations among students regarding the outcomes of the ESP course, or perhaps a need for clearer communication of learning goals at the start of the course to align students' personal objectives with the official instructional aims.

S4 highlighted: *"Some parts of the course matched what I wanted to learn, but not everything. I think the goals of the course could have been*



explained better at the beginning so I could understand how it fits with what I want to achieve. Sometimes, I wasn't sure if what we were doing was really helping me reach my own learning goals."

Instructional Material and Method

This section reveals a more nuanced perception of the instructional materials and teaching methods employed in the ESP courses. One of the most positively perceived aspects was the clarity and reasonableness of course requirements, which scored a mean of 4.44 (SD = 0.99). This strong agreement reflects that students understood what was expected of them in terms of coursework, assignments, and assessment criteria. It demonstrates that instructors communicated requirements effectively, which is critical for reducing ambiguity and anxiety related to academic tasks.

S10 mentioned: *"The course requirements were clear and fair, which made it easier for me to know what I needed to do. This helped me feel less worried about assignments and tests because I understood what was expected from the start."*

The highest score in this section was related to the alignment between course materials and the unit objectives (M = 4.78, SD = 0.95). This finding indicates a clear perception among students that the instructional materials were well-designed and relevant to the learning outcomes of each subject unit. Such alignment is essential in ESP courses to ensure that materials are contextually appropriate and serve the practical needs of learners.

"The materials used in the course matched well with the goals of each unit. This made it easier to understand and learn because everything felt connected and useful for what we were supposed to achieve."

In contrast, students reported uncertainty about knowing exactly what they needed to do during class sessions, as shown by the low mean score of 1.99 (SD = 0.93). This suggests that daily classroom activities might lack clear instructions or that students may have struggled with task comprehension. This gap could potentially undermine active participation and learning effectiveness, pointing to a need for more explicit guidance and structured classroom processes.

S7 emphasized: *"Sometimes, I wasn't sure what I was supposed to do during class. The instructions weren't always clear, which made it hard to follow and take part in activities."*



The availability of academic support outside of class was rated moderately low, with a mean of 2.65 (SD = 0.91). This indicates that students perceived limited access to additional help, such as tutoring, consultation hours, or supplemental resources, which may affect their ability to overcome learning challenges. Enhancing academic support mechanisms could improve student satisfaction and outcomes, especially in demanding skills such as academic writing.

S2 shared: *"I didn't always feel like there was enough help available outside of class when I needed it. Sometimes it was hard to get extra support or ask questions, which made learning more difficult."*

Additionally, opportunities for students to express their opinions in class received a moderate score (M = 2.89, SD = 0.94), suggesting that interactive and participatory teaching strategies may not be fully maximized. Student voice is a key component in learner-centered pedagogies and has been linked to increased motivation and deeper learning. Therefore, increasing avenues for student feedback and discussion could be beneficial.

T3 mentioned: *"Sometimes, I didn't feel like there were enough chances to share my thoughts or take part in class discussions. It would be better if the teacher encouraged more talking and group activities."*

Regarding teaching methods, students reported a moderate use of new and varied instructional strategies, with mean scores of 3.27 (SD = 0.93) for innovative teaching approaches and 3.12 (SD = 0.92) for the variety in teaching styles. This indicates that while some diversity in instructional techniques is present, there may be room to incorporate more creative and differentiated pedagogical practices to better engage diverse learners.

T6 addressed: *"I noticed the teacher sometimes tries different ways to teach, but it would be great if there were more new and creative activities to keep things interesting and help everyone learn better."*

Students perceived that instructors presented clear and relevant examples (M = 3.57, SD = 0.97), which is important for contextualizing abstract concepts and facilitating comprehension. However, the overall quality of instruction received a



moderate evaluation ($M = 3.15$, $SD = 0.93$), suggesting that there is potential to improve teaching effectiveness further.

S2 stated: *“The teacher gives good examples that help me understand the lessons better, but sometimes I feel the teaching could be clearer or more helpful overall.”*

On a positive note, the availability of instructors outside of class was highly rated ($M = 4.08$, $SD = 0.91$), indicating that students felt supported and could seek help when needed. Timely feedback about students' progress was also highly appreciated, with a mean score of 4.49 ($SD = 0.94$). Feedback is a critical element in portfolio assessments, enabling learners to reflect on their performance and identify areas for improvement.

S4 shared: *“I really appreciate that the teacher is easy to reach outside of class and gives quick feedback on my work. It helps me understand how I'm doing and what I need to improve.”*

In summary, the results reflect a generally positive reception of the ESP courses' instructional objectives and materials, though certain areas, such as clarity of daily classroom tasks, opportunities for student expression, and academic support, emerged as areas needing enhancement. These findings highlight the complex nature of portfolio assessment implementation and underscore the importance of aligning course design, instructional methods, and learner support to maximize educational outcomes.

5. Discussion

This study set out to explore Vietnamese university students' perceptions of portfolio assessment techniques in English for Specific Purposes (ESP) writing courses and the underlying reasons for those perceptions. Drawing on both quantitative data and students' reflective comments, the results reveal a complex interplay between students' experiences, instructional design, and perceived benefits of portfolio use. This section discusses the findings in relation to the two research questions and situates them within the broader academic literature.

Vietnamese Students' Perceptions of Portfolio Assessment Techniques in ESP Writing Courses

Overall, the results of the study show that Vietnamese students have generally positive perceptions of portfolio assessment techniques in ESP writing contexts, particularly in terms of instructional alignment, feedback, and scaffolding. The high



mean scores related to the use of prior knowledge ($M = 4.32$), clarity of course requirements ($M = 4.44$), alignment between materials and unit objectives ($M = 4.78$), and timely feedback ($M = 4.49$) suggest that students appreciate the structure and support that portfolio assessment offers.

These findings are consistent with those of Uçar and Yazıcı (2016), who reported that Turkish ESP students responded favorably to portfolio-based instruction due to improved writing sub-skills and increased learner autonomy. Likewise, Guo and Li (2024) emphasized that portfolio assessment—especially when implemented through digital platforms—promotes writing improvement and student self-efficacy. Vietnamese students in the present study similarly valued how portfolios encouraged reflection and deeper engagement with the writing process, as evidenced by their moderate agreement ($M = 3.99$) regarding the enhancement of critical thinking skills.

Notably, students also responded positively to teacher availability and support outside of class ($M = 4.08$), indicating that the teacher's role in guiding portfolio development is crucial. As shown in Kwok's (2011) research, learners' motivation and academic engagement with portfolios increase when instructors provide regular, meaningful feedback and support.

However, despite the general positivity, some perceptual gaps were also observed. Students expressed only moderate agreement ($M = 3.45$) regarding the alignment between course objectives and their personal learning goals. Additionally, certain elements of instructional delivery—particularly clarity during classroom activities ($M = 1.99$), student voice ($M = 2.89$), and academic support ($M = 2.65$)—received lower ratings. These findings suggest that while students may value portfolio techniques in principle, practical issues in implementation can hinder their full engagement or perceived effectiveness.

This discrepancy reflects what Phuong et al. (2023) observed in the Vietnamese context: that even effective assessment tools like analytic rubrics or portfolios may yield uneven results if student expectations, course communication, or classroom culture are misaligned. The issue of unclear classroom instructions in this study points to a need for more explicit guidance and transparent planning, particularly in ESP courses where tasks can be technical or highly specific.

Underlying Reasons for Students' Perceptions

The students' perceptions can be attributed to several pedagogical and contextual factors, including the cognitive benefits of reflection, the structure provided by portfolios, cultural expectations around teacher-led instruction, and access to learning support.

First, many students acknowledged that portfolio assessment helped them reflect more deeply on their writing, which is a core objective of process-based



writing approaches. This reflection enhanced their critical thinking and self-awareness—skills that are central to learner-centered pedagogy. This finding aligns with Kavaliauskienė et al. (2007) and Bánhegyi and Fajt (2023), who highlighted that the reflective and iterative nature of portfolios contributes significantly to students' language development and meta-cognitive awareness.

Second, the students' positive responses regarding the use of prior knowledge and alignment of materials with course goals suggest that portfolios created a coherent learning structure. In ESP settings, where learners often struggle with discipline-specific vocabulary and tasks, the organization and sequencing of materials are critical. The portfolios likely provided students with a clearer picture of their progress and connected learning outcomes to real-world or professional contexts. This was also evident in Karami et al. (2018), where the use of e-portfolios supported Iranian students' academic writing proficiency by organizing learning in a cumulative and manageable way.

However, students' lower ratings of instructional clarity and academic support point to important areas for development. In a traditional Vietnamese classroom culture, students often expect structured guidance and detailed instructions. When daily activities or assignments are not clearly explained, students may experience confusion and disengagement—even if the broader course structure is strong. The dissatisfaction with classroom clarity ($M = 1.99$) could stem from a misalignment between the autonomous nature of portfolios and students' expectations of more teacher-led instruction.

Furthermore, moderate scores for teaching variety and innovation ($M = 3.12$ and $M = 3.27$) suggest that portfolio use alone may not be sufficient to engage students unless accompanied by diverse and interactive classroom strategies. As Alshumaimeri (2011) and Al-Hawamdeh et al. (2023) have shown, incorporating varied tools—such as wikis, peer review, or multimedia portfolios—can increase learner engagement and writing fluency. Vietnamese students, in this case, appreciated when teachers used relatable examples ($M = 3.57$), but desired more dynamic and participatory classroom activities to complement the reflective aspects of portfolio work.

Another underlying reason behind students' mixed perceptions is likely the limited availability of academic support outside class. This was highlighted in the present study ($M = 2.65$) and echoed in studies like Al-Mwzaiji and Alzubi (2022), where learners reported difficulty navigating writing challenges in the absence of timely feedback or supplementary resources. In a portfolio-based course, especially one involving self-assessment or peer review—students must have access to continuous guidance to feel confident and supported.

Lastly, the moderate alignment between students' personal goals and the



course objectives ($M = 3.45$) reflects a need for better needs analysis and goal setting at the beginning of ESP courses. Research by Mostafavi et al. (2021) and Jafari Pazoki & Alemi (2020) confirms that mismatch between learners' expectations and instructional goals can reduce motivation and perceived course value. Given that ESP learners often come from diverse disciplines with specific writing needs (e.g., business, engineering, tourism), a personalized approach to goal-setting could enhance the relevance and impact of portfolio assessments.

In sum, this study shows that Vietnamese university students generally perceive portfolio assessment positively within ESP writing courses, valuing its structured, reflective, and feedback-rich nature. However, their perceptions are shaped by both instructional quality and classroom implementation. Factors such as unclear task instructions, limited support outside class, and insufficient participatory teaching methods moderate the overall effectiveness of portfolios in practice. To fully realize the benefits of portfolio assessment, ESP instructors in Vietnam should consider clearer task communication, greater integration of interactive strategies, and enhanced academic support structures. Moreover, aligning course objectives with student expectations through early needs assessment could further strengthen learner engagement and writing proficiency. These findings support prior research while adding valuable local insight into how portfolio-based assessment can be improved to suit the Vietnamese higher education context—an important contribution as institutions continue to adopt learner-centered assessment techniques in ESP instruction.

What distinguishes the present study from previous literature is its context-specific insight into how portfolio assessment functions within the Vietnamese ESP higher education setting—a relatively underexplored area. While many studies have examined portfolio use in general EFL or writing classrooms, few have focused specifically on ESP courses where learners' academic and professional writing needs are more specialized and goal-oriented. This study complements existing research by revealing that although Vietnamese students largely recognize the cognitive and organizational benefits of portfolios—such as enhanced reflection, confidence, and understanding—there are distinct implementation challenges shaped by cultural expectations, instructional clarity, and perceived academic support. By integrating both quantitative data and authentic student reflections, this research provides a nuanced, learner-centered perspective that contributes meaningfully to the growing body of work on formative assessment in ESP contexts, particularly in Southeast Asia.



6. Conclusion

This study explored students' perceptions of an ESP course focusing on instructional objectives, materials, and teaching methods. The results showed that students generally felt the course content aligned well with their prior knowledge and moderately enhanced their critical thinking skills. However, there was moderate agreement on the correspondence between course objectives and students' personal learning goals, indicating some misalignment. Students appreciated the clarity and relevance of course materials but reported uncertainty about daily class tasks and limited access to academic support outside class. The availability of instructors and timely feedback were highly valued, though there is room to improve the variety and innovativeness of teaching methods.

The findings suggest that ESP course designers and instructors should continue to build on students' existing knowledge to foster engagement and confidence while enhancing critical thinking through active learning strategies such as portfolio assessments. Greater emphasis is needed on aligning course objectives with students' individual goals, which may be achieved through clearer communication and involvement in goal-setting processes. Additionally, improving classroom clarity and providing more structured guidance during lessons can boost participation. Expanding academic support services and encouraging more student interaction could further enhance learning outcomes. Timely and constructive feedback remains a critical tool for promoting reflection and progress.

This study is limited by its reliance on self-reported data from a specific student population, which may affect the generalizability of the findings. Additionally, the study focused mainly on perceptions and did not measure actual learning outcomes or teaching effectiveness objectively. Future research could include longitudinal designs to assess the impact of instructional improvements over time and incorporate multiple data sources such as observations, interviews, and academic performance metrics. Exploring the role of technology-enhanced learning and personalized instruction in ESP courses may also provide valuable insights for enhancing student engagement and achievement.



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Umar Fauzan: Conceptualization, Supervision, Methodology, Validation, Writing – Review & Editing.

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