

Portfolio in the EFL Writing Classroom: Students' Perspectives

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ABSTRACT

This study investigated the benefits of keeping portfolios on improving English writing skills among English major students in Hebron University. It also examined if there are differences in students' attitudes towards keeping portfolios due to gender. The sample of the study consisted of 55 male and female students of two sections (The first section is selected as a control group and the second is an experimental group) of an undergraduate Writing II course offered by the English Department in the second semester of the academic year 2014/2015. A pre-questionnaire and a post-questionnaire consisting of twenty statements following a five-point Likert scale were used. The findings revealed that there are statistically significant differences in students' attitudes between the control group and the experimental group favoring the experimental group. However, there is no statistically significant difference in students' attitudes in the post-questionnaire within the experimental group due to gender. Moreover, the results of the study lent support to the findings of the previous studies where the students found the portfolio-keeping process as motivating and a worthwhile experience.

Keywords: Keeping Writing Portfolios, Motivation, Writing Skills

INTRODUCTION

In the 1980s, a number of innovations have shaped our English language learning programs. Recent teaching methods emphasized the importance of more authentic and meaningful communication in language learning. Moreover, they emphasized learner centered approaches over teacher centered ones. One of the language learning tools that overlaps with the current innovations is keeping a portfolio where students collect all of their activities in a file. Portfolio as a tool is deeply rooted in the social constructivism theory and experiential learning where students write, revise and reflect on their writing (Farrah, 2012; Kolb, 1984). Early research about student portfolio started three decades ago when instructors and administrators began to think about writing as a process. Thus, portfolio writings captured the researchers'

attention as an instruction and assessment tool. Hamp-Lyons and Condon (2000) argue that "portfolios provide a broader measure of what students can do because they replace the timed writing context, which has long been claimed to be particularly discriminatory against non-native writers" (p. 61). If used in the right way by English instructors, portfolios can have an important potential in writing instruction. They can be very beneficial tools for learners in the writing process. Portfolio writing is a motivating tool to students, as they are collaborative in nature and more learner-centered.

Definition of Portfolios

A Portfolio is defined as a compilation of student academic work that demonstrates student's progress, accomplishment and improvement (Stiggins, 1994). According to The Northwest Evaluation Association, as cited in Barrett (2005), a portfolio is "A purposeful collection of student work that illustrates efforts, progress, and achievement in one or more areas [over

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time]. The collection must include: student participation in selecting contents, the criteria for selection, the criteria for judging merit, and evidence of self-reflection." All these definitions have something in common: compilation of student academic work, learner's stages of growth as a writer, and evidence of learner's self-reflection and self-assessment. Accordingly, portfolios meet the call for authentic learning and authentic assessment of students' skills and performance that emerged in the recent years (Boud, 2000; Guilkers, Bastiens & Kirschner, 2004, Vangah, Jafarpour, & Mohammadi, 2016; Orhon, 2016).

Literature review

Several advantages are reported by researchers for portfolio writing. Among these benefits for the students is that they promote learner autonomy and enables learners revise their work and to monitor their own progress, evaluate themselves and identify their points of strengths and weaknesses. Sommers (1982) explains that "portfolio itself tends to encourage students to revise because it suggests that writing occurs over time, not in a single setting, just as the portfolio itself grows over time and cannot be created in a single setting" (pp. 153-154). Weiser (1992) noted that portfolio assessment motivates EFL students to learn and improve their performance. He emphasized that the portfolio helps the students to see

How much they have written during a semester, and not only do they take pride in the sheer amount of writing they have done, they take pride in the progress they have made. They read their earliest papers with new vision, with a consciousness of what they know now about writing that they did not know before. They realize that they have ideas about improving their work that they did not have and could not articulate early in the term. They have, in short, begun to see themselves, if not as writers, as people who write (p.95)

So, portfolios offer the students with opportunities to revise their work and evaluate their progress. Swain (2002) highlighted that the reflection process enables

learners to "evaluate experience, learn from mistakes, repeat successes, revise, and plan" (p.12). Similarly, Song and August (2002) illustrated that portfolio "can accommodate and even support extensive revision, can be used to examine progress over time, and can encourage students to take responsibility for their own writing" (49-50).

Several studies examined the effects of using portfolios on students' learning (O'Malley & Chamot, 1990; ; Baker, 1993; Hamp-Lyons & Condon, 2000; Song & August, 2002; Paesani, 2006; Öztürk & Çeçen, 2007; Chambers & Leah, 2007; Yurdabakan and Erdogan, 2009; Huang, 2012; Vangah, Jafarpour, & Mohammadi, 2016; Orhon, 2016). Öztürk and Çeçen (2007) examined the effects of portfolio keeping on the writing anxiety of students. They found that using portfolios may help students to have a collection of their work, monitor their progress, reduce writing anxiety and trigger communication by giving more opportunities to share reflections. They believe that portfolio keeping would result in an increased student motivation towards English writing. Chambers and Leah (2007) reported positive results for the process showing that students found that the portfolios helped them understand their own learning processes and develop better transferrable skills. In Paesani's empirical study (2006), it was found that portfolio helps learners integrate the development of proficiency skills, content knowledge, and grammatical competence. Hamp-Lyons and Condon (2000) pointed out that the "greatest theoretical and practical strength of a portfolio, used as an assessment instrument, is the way it reveals and informs teaching and learning" (p.4). Murphy (1999) states that portfolios accomplish various goals in the language classroom: "teaching tools, professional development, and assessment purposes" (p. 4). Murphy explained that they present learners with a sense of ownership and motivation. Yurdabakan and Erdogan (2009) aimed to examine the students' attitudes towards portfolio assessment. They concluded from the analysis of the students' answers to the open-ended

questionnaires that portfolio assessment was a fair method of assessment and enhanced students' responsibility and motivation.

In order to examine the various claims about the benefits of portfolios, Baker (1993) examined several attitudes about portfolio-based. Although she did not see that portfolio can improve students' achievements and attitudes, they responded positively to the portfolio experience. O'Malley and Chamot (1990) pointed out that portfolios enhance student self-assessment and reflection. They perceived a few advantages for portfolios. For example, students take responsibility over their language learning goals; they broaden their perception for what they are learning. Similarly, Elango, Jutti and Lee, (2005) emphasized the importance of self-reflection in the learning process.

Arslan (2014) reported that portfolios appear to be helpful tools to combine feedback practice into writing process. His study revealed that that portfolio keeping improves students' writing in basic elements of writing skill such as process, organization, content, language use, vocabulary, mechanics, and accuracy. Moreover, he recommended the integration of portfolios into writing classes in order to achieve better benefits from writing practice in EFL contexts. Similarly, Aydin (2010) found that portfolios significantly contribute to the writing skills. Nezakatgoo (2011) compared the final score for two groups of students. He found that students whose work was evaluated by a portfolio system had improved in their writing and gained higher scores in final examination. Ok (2014) explored reflections of freshmen learners on the portfolio process with respect to their progress in language and vocabulary use. He found that portfolio keeping presented the learners with the opportunity to develop their level in writing with respect to language and vocabulary use. Moreover, the portfolio keeping process gave the students the opportunity to evaluate their progress. It is also found that the portfolio-keeping helped the students to build their self-confidence in language and vocabulary use. He concluded that

portfolio enable the students to observe and assess their personal growth and achievement in writing. He believes that students' involvement in a portfolio-keeping in reading and writing activities "can be done based on the principle of 'meaningfulness' in an integrated model". This will lead learners to 'participate in the process with a high level of motivation and get pleasure out of intelligible language production" (p.2). Weigle (2002) pointed out that portfolio keeping encourages reflective practice, helps students become better learners, promotes their self-assessment and increases their motivation and improves their performance. Erdogan (2006) found that the students liked the portfolio study and gained more responsibility towards their own learning.

From the above reviewed literature, it appears that portfolio keeping has positive effects on improving the language skills of foreign language learners. This study seeks to explore the benefits of keeping portfolios in writing classes on improving English writing skills, increasing motivation, enhancing creativity, and critical thinking among university students.

Statement of the problem

A considerable number of university students have problems in the writing skills, and they seem to have little satisfaction and motivation. Fortunately, portfolio keeping is suggested as an effective learning tool that would increase students' interests and motivation. To the researcher's best knowledge, portfolio keeping is not used nowadays in writing classes in Palestine. Consequently, there is a need to gain some insights about portfolios and to examine learners' attitudes towards them. The researcher aims to demonstrate that portfolios have benefits for both learners and educators in higher education. For the learners, they will act as a means to meet their interests, enhance their motivation express their thoughts and feelings, and develop their personal reflection. For educators, portfolios provide them with tools that are relevant to authentic teaching practices and authentic assessment.

Significance of the Study

Several studies revealed that using portfolios in education can improve learning and teaching. Instructors and learners consider the portfolio as an authentic learning tool where learners revise their work, reflect their writing practices and watch their personal development. The study highlights the importance of portfolio keeping as an effective tool for teaching and learning among writing students. Consequently, results of this study will be very beneficial for writing students as well as instructors of writing teaching English as a foreign language.

Objectives of the study

This paper aims at examining the benefits of keeping portfolios on improving English writing skills, increasing motivation and critical thinking skills of English major students at Hebron University. It also aims to explore if there are differences in students attitudes due to gender. In particular, this study aims to:

- examine if there are differences in students' attitudes in the experimental and control groups between the pre and post questionnaires towards portfolio-keeping?
- explore if there are differences in students' attitudes due to gender
- examine students' general attitudes towards portfolio keeping in the writing EFL classroom.

Research Questions

The research questions of the study are:

Question One: Are there any statistically significant differences in students' attitudes in the experimental and control groups between the pre and post questionnaires towards portfolio-keeping?

Question Two: Are there any statistically significant differences between the attitude of the female students and male students within the experimental group towards portfolio- keeping?

Question Three: What is the general attitude of the respondents within the experimental group towards

portfolio-keeping?

Methodology

The present section discusses the population, research instruments, procedure, and developing the questionnaire and its reliability.

8. Population

The sample for the study included 55 male and female students from two undergraduate Writing II classes in the second semester of the academic year 2014/2015. The majority of the respondents were females (see Table 1) which reflects the overall population of Hebron University, Palestine. Details of gender breakdown of the sample are given in Table (1):

Table (1)

Gender of Respondents

Variables	Male	Female	Missing	Total
Students	11 (20%)	44 (80%)	0 (0%)	55 (100%)

As Table (1) shows, the overwhelming majority of students 46 (80%) were females, 9 (20%) were males.

9. Research Instruments:

Design and Distribution of the Questionnaire

A questionnaire (See appendix I) was designed based on the literature review related to keeping portfolios in writing courses and was distributed by the end of the second semester 2014/2015. The questionnaire consisted of three parts. The first one is for the demographic information. The second part is for the 20 questionnaire items. Another part is an open ended question about the advantages and the disadvantages of the portfolio keeping process as perceived by the students. Quantitative data was analyzed statistically by using the SPSS program version 18.

10. Procedures:

The students were encouraged to write daily or weekly and keep their writings in a portfolio. By the end of the semester, the majority of the students had a

reasonable collection of assignments and activities they wrote throughout the semester.

Reliability and Validity of the Questionnaire

The reliability coefficient of the questionnaire was tabulated. The result showed that the overall Cronbach Alpha Coefficient of the questionnaire is high ($r = 0.82$) indicating a high degree of internal consistency, and therefore presenting a considerably reliable instrument.

The questionnaire was validated by three experts from Hebron University and one expert from An-Najah National University. They were asked to validate the content of the questionnaire and to assess its clarity and suitability to examine the degree to which the scale of items reflected portfolio writing. They commented on the

questionnaire format, structuring of some items and if each item in the questionnaire was applicable for a Likert-scale student response. Their comments were taken into consideration and incorporated in the final questionnaire.

Discussion and Results

This section presents the results of the Questionnaire:

A t-test was carried out to ensure that the students in the experimental and control groups have the same attitudes towards portfolio keeping. This was carried out using the pre-questionnaire. The results are shown in Table (2).

Table (2)

t-test for Equality of Means

	Group	N	M	SD	T	d.f	Sig.
Attitude	Experimental Control	29	3.90	.26376	1.519	53	0.66
		26	4.0	.39082			

The t-test reveals that the students in the two groups (experimental and control) have the same attitudes towards portfolio keeping as shown in Table (2) and no significant difference at $\alpha = 0.05$ were found.

The following sections aim at answering the research questions of the study as reflected in the post-questionnaire.

Question One: Are there any statistically significant

differences in students' attitudes in the experimental and control groups between the pre and post questionnaires towards portfolio keeping?

In order to see if there was a significant difference between the experimental and control groups using the post-questionnaire, a t-test was carried out and the results are shown in Table (3).

Table (3)

t-test for Equality of Means

	Group	N	M	SD	T	d.f	Sig.
Attitude	Experimental Control	29	4.28	.26399	-7.957	53	0.005
		26	3.72	.26399	-7.878		

As Table (3) shows, there are statistically significant differences at $\alpha = 0.005$ in students' attitudes between the control group and the experimental group. Similar results were obtained in a number of studies (Yurdabakan &

Erdogan, 2009; Aydin, 2010; Nezakatgoo, 2011; Ok, 2014; Vangah, Jafarpour, & Mohammadi, 2016).

Question Two: Are there any statistically significant differences between the attitude of the female students

and male students within the experimental group towards portfolio- keeping?

The researcher investigated whether there were statistically significant differences in the

performance of the female students and male students within the experimental group towards portfolio keeping. A t-test was carried out and the results are shown in Table 4.

Table (4)
t-test for Equality of Means

	Group	N	M	SD	T	d.f	Sig.
Attitude	Female male	20	4.30	.25889	.497	25	0.623
		7	4.24	25889	.5157.		

Table (5)
Means and Standard for the Whole Items in the Experimental Questionnaire.

No	Statement	N	M	SD
2	The portfolio helps me to revise my work.	29	4.59	0.733
3	Portfolio writing helps me to recognize my strength and weaknesses.	29	4.45	0.506
20	The portfolio exercise is a waste of time (recoded).	29	4.41	0.568
6	The portfolio increased my motivation in the writing course.	29	4.38	0.622
9	The portfolio helps me to examine myself and reflect on what I have done.	29	4.38	0.561
10	The portfolio helps me to become responsible for my own learning.	29	4.38	0.677
11	The portfolio helps me to become a critical thinker.	29	4.38	0.677
5	The portfolio helps me to perceive my growth or progress in writing.	29	4.34	0.553
4	The portfolio encourages self-reflection.	29	4.31	0.541
12	The portfolio shapes my personal development.	29	4.31	0.604
1	The portfolio helps me to become a better learner.	29	4.31	0.541
7	The portfolio is meaningful and rewarding to me.	29	4.28	0.528
8	The portfolio helps me to exercise my grammatical knowledge.	29	4.28	0.591
15	The portfolio gives me the chance to evaluate myself.	29	4.28	0.591
13	The portfolio should be part of every writing course.	29	4.24	0.872
17	Overall, the portfolio is a worthwhile experience.	29	4.14	0.516
16	The portfolio is a useful learning tool.	29	4.10	0.618
14	The portfolio saves my time and effort.	29	3.75	0.872
19	The portfolio helps me little in writing development (recoded).	29	3.70	0.516
18	The portfolio exercise is very boring (recoded).	29	3.64	0.618

Table (4) shows that there is no statistically significant difference in students' attitudes in the post-questionnaire within the experimental group due to gender. This finding coincides with the one that Orhon (2016) also had where she reported that there were no significant differences between the perceptions of the

learners towards the portfolio-keeping in terms of their gender.

Question Three: What is the general attitude of the respondents within the experimental group towards portfolio-keeping?

Descriptive statistics (means and standard deviations)

were calculated for all the experimental questionnaire items to examine the attitudes of English major students at Hebron University towards portfolio keeping in a writing class. Table (5) shows the calculated means of items and their standard deviation for each statement. As shown in Table 5, most of the items received high ratings. This indicates that the students generally have undergone a positive learning experience. This is in agreement with several studies that showed that students had positive attitudes towards the use of portfolio assessment. (Song and August, 2002; Swain 2002; Yurdabakan & Erdogan, 2009; Farrah, 2012; Huang, 2012). In Table 5, the most promising finding for portfolio keeping is that great number of respondents indicated that portfolio keeping helped them to revise their work as shown in item number 2 (The portfolio helps me to revise my work) ($m=4.59$). This means that the respondents perceived the portfolio keeping process as a positive experience as it enabled them to revise their work. This is in agreement with several studies that reported that keeping portfolios enables learners to revise their work (Sommers, 1980; O'Malley & Chamot, 1990; Song and August, 2002; Swain 2002; Farrah, 2012). When the researcher analyzed the students' answer to the open ended questions the participants considered the process of keeping a portfolio as a valuable experience as they felt more confident about their writing skills and they stated clearly that the process helped them to revise their work. Almost every student indicated that the process helped her to revise her work.

Similarly, the item that received the second highest agreement is item 3 (Portfolio writing helps me to recognize my strengths and weaknesses) ($mean=4.45$). This means that students think that portfolio keeping helps them recognize their strengths and weaknesses. This is in agreement with a number of studies which indicated that portfolio keeping helps learners to recognize their strengths and weaknesses (Weigle, 2002; Ok, 2014). For example, Ok (2014) concluded that portfolio keeping has distinct learning advantages and helps learners to observe their personal development and

growth. Once again students' response to the open ended questions lent support to this promising finding about the value of portfolio keeping. Most of the students recognized the process as a valuable tool that keeps them updated about their strengths and weaknesses.

The item that received the third place and got a very high rating ($mean=4.41$) is item number 20 (The portfolio exercise is a waste of time (recoded)). The means of this item was calculated after recoding the reversed responses as they were negatively structured. This means that the highest response score should be read a positive rating for the statement. Therefore, this means that the respondents did not perceive the portfolio keeping as a waste of time. On the contrary, they perceived it as a worthwhile experience and recommended its continuity in future writing courses as the other items reveal.

Another four items received very high ratings. These are items 6, 9, 10, and 11. All of them got the same mean ($m=4.38$). The items are:

Item number 6: The portfolio increased my motivation in the writing course.

Item number 9: The portfolio helps me to examine myself and reflect on what I have done.

Item number 10: The portfolio helps me to become responsible for my own learning.

Item number 11: The portfolio helps me to become a critical thinker.

This is in accordance with a number of studies that reported that keeping a portfolio increases learners motivation in writing and helps them reflect on what they have done (Ok, 2014; Lyons and Condon, 2000; Song and August, 2002; Weigle, 2002; Murphy, 1999). Additionally, it is in line with other studies that reported that portfolio as a learning tool encourages learners to become responsible for their own learning and become critical thinkers (Murphy & Smith, 1992; Erdogan, 2006). Murphy and Smith (1992) emphasized the importance of developing responsible learners by saying "by shifting responsibility to our students we ask them to be more than mere recipients of someone else's paper-and-pencil

tests" (p. 58). The students' responses to the open ended questions also supported these findings where most of the students wrote increased motivation, reflection, responsibility, and critical thinking as some of the advantages they gained from the process.

Another item that got a very high rating is Item 5 ($m=4.34$). The portfolio helps me perceive my growth or progress in writing. This is in line with Ok (2014) and Song and August, (2002) who found that portfolios gave the students the opportunity to self-evaluate and examine their progress over time. Moreover, it is in line with Saglam, (2005) who mentioned that portfolios helped learners to better track their development. The students in the open ended question emphasized this idea about growth and progress in writing where most of them reported having watched their growth and progress in writing.

This is followed by items 4, 12, and 1. All of them got the same mean ($m=4.31$). Item 4 addresses how portfolio encourages self-reflection, and item 12 is about shaping learners' personal development. Moreover, portfolio helps students become better learners. This is in line with the findings of several studies (O'Malley and Chamot, 1990; Weigle, 2002; Swain 2002; Elango, Jutti, & Lee, 2005; Ok, 2014; Arslan, 2014).

Similarly, the respondents gave a high rating to item 13 ($m=4.24$) by recommending that portfolio keeping should be part of every writing course. This finding is reinforced by their rating to item 17 ($m=4.14$) where they described the process of keeping a portfolio as worthwhile experience. Moreover, it is a useful learning tool as expressed in item 16 ($m=4.10$). This is in agreement with Weigle (2002), Erdogan (2006), Ok (2014), and Arslan (2014).

Items 7, 8, and 15 got a high rating (mean=4.28). This indicates that the students felt that "The portfolio is meaningful and rewarding experience as in item 7. Moreover, they felt that they were able to exercise their grammatical knowledge as indicated by item 8. In addition to that, the process gave them the opportunity to

evaluate themselves as shown in item 15. . This is in line with several studies that reported that portfolio keeping had a positive learning experience and helped them to improve their grammatical knowledge and evaluate themselves (Weigle, 2002; Paesani, 2006; Erdogan, 2006; Ok, 2014; Arslan, 2014). Students' responses in the open ended question gave strong support to this finding where most of the students stated that the process helped them evaluate themselves. For example, one of the students wrote: "It improves my writing skills, it helps me to evaluate myself, it opens my eyes on the previous mistakes" (See Appendix II).

The last three items received a moderate rating to some extent. This is due to the nature of these items and because two of them were negatively reversed (item 19 with a mean of 3.70 and item 18 with a mean of 3.64. This is something positive as it means the respondents did not agree with the statement that the portfolio exercise is very boring or it contributes little in their writing development. Finally, item 14 (The portfolio saves my time and effort) was the least item to be agreed with ($m=3.75$). This is true to the nature of the portfolio development. In fact, it is time consuming and takes a lot of the students' efforts. However, the process despite the time and the efforts is a rewarding and worthwhile experience.

Conclusions

There is no doubt that portfolios have a number of benefits for English Language learners. As the findings of this study revealed, there are statistically significant differences in students' attitudes between the control group and the experimental group. However, there is no statistically significant difference in students' attitudes in the post-questionnaire within the experimental group due to gender. Moreover, the results of the study lent support to the findings of the previous studies where the students found the portfolio keeping process as motivating and a worthwhile experience. In addition to that, it helped students learn better, improve their writing skills,

grammatical knowledge and helped them to become better learners. Portfolios encourage students to reflect on what they have written and reflect on themselves. Through this reflection learners observe their learning and the progress they have made over a period of time. It developed in the learners' self-confidence as well as the ability to be responsible writers. Most of all, it proved to be an efficient tool that helped the learners to revise and evaluate their work, watch their progress and observe their personal and educational development. Portfolios aid learners to observe the quality of their writing which makes them to have pride for their achievement. They monitor their progress especially when they compare their first drafts with the final versions. They can easily detect the changes and track their development. Most important, portfolios increase learners' active involvement in and ownership of their own learning. The

whole process enhances learners' competence and increases their self-confidence. Consequently opportunities should be given to EFL writing learners to have portfolios as one of their writing practices as they enable them to reflect on their feelings and improve their English writing skills.

To sum up keeping portfolios helps learners to know where they are in their ability to perform language tasks and what they can actually do. This is strongly rooted in the communicative approach, where learners become the centre of the learning process. It shows them their ability in the use of the language. Keeping Portfolios helps learners demonstrate what they have learned and offers them the opportunity to display their progress. Learners take responsibility over their learning and their motivation may increase.

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استخدام ملف الانجاز في تنمية مهارات الكتابة باللغة الإنجليزية كلغة أجنبية من منظور الطلبة

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ملخص

قيمت هذه الدراسة فوائد استخدام ملف الانجاز في تحسين مهارات الكتابة باللغة الإنجليزية لطلبة قسم اللغة الإنجليزية في جامعة الخليل، وقد تقصت هذه الدراسة أيضاً الفروق في أداء وتوجهات الطلبة التي تعزى إلى الجنس. وقد تكونت عينة الدراسة من (55) طالباً وطالبة يدرسون مساق الكتابة "2" في قسم اللغة الإنجليزية، وذلك في الفصل الثاني من العام الأكاديمي 2015/2014. وكانت هناك مجموعتان من الطلبة: الضابطة والتجريبية. وقد تم توزيع استبانات قبلية وبعديّة؛ مكونة من (20) بنداً حسب مقياس "ليكرت" وقد بنيت نتائج الدراسة وجود فروق ذات دلالة إحصائية في توجهات الطلبة بين المجموعتين لصالح المجموعة الأخيرة. ولكن لم تظهر فروق ذات دلالة إحصائية في توجهات الطلبة بين المجموعتين تعزى للجنس. وقد أظهرت الدراسة أيضاً أن حفظ ملف الانجاز يجعل مساق الكتابة أكثر امتعاً ودافعية لدى الطلبة وتجربة من الجدير الاهتمام بها.

الكلمات الدالة: استخدام ملفات الانجاز، الدافعية، مهارة الكتابة.

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