SNAP TO READ

REIMAGINING ASSESSMENT: LEARNERS' VOICES ON PORTFOLIO-BASED PRACTICE IN AN INTENSIVE TOEFL CLASSROOM

Cut Mawar Helmanda[1], Siti Hajarul Nadia[2], Siti Safura[3]
[1,2,3]*Universitas Muhammadiyah Aceh, Indonesia*
cut.mawar@unmuha.ac.id, sitihajarulnadia2001@gmail.com, sitisafura11@gmail.com

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Abstract:
Assessment in language education is gradually shifting from single, end-of-course measurements toward approaches that emphasize process, reflection, and learner agency. Portfolio-based assessment is central to this shift, yet empirical accounts of how learners make sense of this practice remain scarce in high-stakes, test-oriented contexts like intensive TOEFL preparation. This qualitative case study explored how seven undergraduate students at a private Islamic university in Aceh, Indonesia, experienced and perceived portfolio-based learning. The portfolio required students to document their learning journey, formulate action plans, reflect on progress, and evaluate outcomes across targeted language skills. Data were collected through semi-structured interviews and supporting documents, then analyzed using Braun and Clarke's thematic analysis framework. Findings reveal that students viewed portfolio work as a demanding yet worthwhile companion to test preparation, attributing to it enhanced self-awareness, perceived skill improvements (writing, reading, grammar, vocabulary, and oral communication confidence), and sustained motivation. Concurrently, participants reported frustrations regarding time constraints, feedback consistency, and the emotional burden of continuous self-monitoring. Rather than contradictory, these

findings demonstrate that portfolio pedagogy is not self-executing; its efficacy depends on targeted scaffolding to balance reflective demands with test preparation constraints. The article concludes with practical implications for designing reflective assessment tasks within compressed, examination-driven EFL curricula.

Keywords:
portfolio-based assessment, learner perspectives, Intensive TOEFL course, reflective learning, EFL classroom

INTRODUCTION

Contemporary language pedagogy has moved beyond assessment practices that reduce learners' achievement to a single final score. Instead, increasing emphasis is placed on assessment approaches that document learning over time while encouraging students to actively evaluate their own progress. Portfolio assessment reflects this shift by requiring learners not only to collect evidence of their work but also to justify their selections, reflect on their learning process, and identify areas for improvement. Such practices promote learner autonomy, self-regulation, and metacognitive awareness, which are widely recognized as essential components of effective language learning (Sari, et al., 2026). Consequently, portfolio assessment has become increasingly common in English as a Foreign Language (EFL) classrooms, where students are expected to participate actively in constructing and monitoring their own learning.

Within higher education, portfolios serve both assessment and learning functions. Beyond documenting academic achievement, they encourage students to set learning goals, monitor their progress, revise their work based on feedback, and assume greater responsibility for their learning (Chang, et al., 2023). These qualities are particularly relevant in intensive TOEFL preparation courses, where learners are expected to develop independent learning habits alongside the language skills required for standardized examinations. Therefore, although previous studies have established the potential of portfolio assessment to support learner engagement, reflection,

and autonomy, less attention has been given to how learners themselves experience and respond to portfolio-based assessment in intensive TOEFL preparation classes. This context is distinctive because intensive TOEFL instruction is typically characterized by concentrated learning periods, strong test-oriented goals, and sustained performance demands. Examining learners' voices in this setting can therefore provide a more context-sensitive understanding of how portfolio-based assessment is perceived, experienced, and negotiated by EFL learners. Previous studies also suggest that portfolio assessment can foster higher-order thinking and reflective learning when supported by appropriate instructional guidance (Mahmud, et al., 2025). Furthermore, the increasing use of digital portfolios has expanded opportunities for collaborative feedback, multimedia learning, and continuous reflection in technology-enhanced learning environments (Pospíšilová, & Rohlíková, 2023).

Despite these advantages, portfolio implementation is not without challenges. EFL learners frequently report difficulties in maintaining motivation, managing time, organizing portfolio tasks, and interpreting assessment expectations, particularly when feedback is limited or inconsistent (Cheng, 2022). These challenges may result in incomplete or poorly organized portfolios, reduced learner engagement, and difficulties in demonstrating learning progress, thereby limiting the effectiveness of portfolio-based assessment. Such challenges are particularly important to consider in the Indonesian EFL context, where the implementation of portfolio assessment may be influenced by classroom conditions, teachers' assessment practices, students' readiness for autonomous learning, and the availability of consistent feedback. Therefore, examining how portfolio assessment is implemented and experienced in Indonesian EFL settings is necessary to understand whether its potential benefits can be effectively realized. Although portfolio assessment has been increasingly adopted in Indonesian higher education, existing studies have focused predominantly on its instructional effectiveness, while relatively limited attention has been given to students' lived experiences,

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perceived benefits, and challenges in intensive examination-oriented contexts. Tinto (2022) note that understanding learners' perceptions is essential because these perceptions strongly influence motivation, engagement, and learning outcomes. This represents an important research gap, particularly in Intensive TOEFL programs where academic demands and time constraints may shape students' experiences differently from those reported in general EFL classrooms.

Addressing this gap, the present study investigates students' perspectives on the implementation of portfolio projects in an Intensive TOEFL course at the University of Muhammadiyah Aceh. Unlike previous studies that primarily evaluate portfolio effectiveness from instructional or achievement perspectives, this study focuses on learners' experiences by examining how they perceive portfolio-based learning, the benefits they associate with it, and the challenges they encounter throughout the learning process. By exploring these dimensions, the study seeks to provide a more comprehensive understanding of portfolio assessment in an examination-oriented EFL setting and to offer practical insights for improving portfolio design and implementation in similar contexts.

Understanding Students' Perspectives in Portfolio-Based Learning

Students' perspectives play a central role in determining the effectiveness of portfolio-based learning because learners' beliefs, attitudes, and experiences strongly influence their motivation, engagement, and learning outcomes. Tinto (2025) argues that students' perceptions shape the effort and persistence they invest in learning activities, while Baniyounes, et al.,(2024) emphasize that supportive learning environments encourage greater participation and responsibility. In portfolio-based learning, students are expected to reflect on their work, monitor their progress, and evaluate their own development. Consequently, whether portfolios function as meaningful learning tools or merely as assessment requirements largely depends on how students perceive their value.

Several factors contribute to these perceptions. Motivation is one

of the most influential, as intrinsically motivated learners are generally more willing to engage in reflection and continuous improvement than those driven solely by external rewards (Clanton, 2024). When learners are intrinsically motivated, they are more likely to actively review their learning experiences, identify strengths and weaknesses, and use these reflections to make adjustments to their learning strategies and future performance. In this way, motivation can facilitate a continuous reflective process in which learners monitor their progress and make informed decisions about how to improve their learning. Learners' previous experiences with reflective tasks, their understanding of portfolio purposes, and the perceived relevance of portfolio activities to their academic goals also shape their level of engagement (Pourdana, & Tavassoli, 2022). In addition, self-assessment encourages learners to recognize their strengths and weaknesses, develop learning autonomy, and regulate their own progress, although its effectiveness depends on clear assessment criteria and constructive feedback. Social interaction represents another important dimension of portfolio-based learning. Interaction with peers and instructors can provide learners with opportunities to exchange perspectives, discuss their learning experiences, and receive feedback on their work. These interactions can encourage learners to reconsider their understanding, recognize areas for improvement, and develop greater confidence in managing their own learning. In portfolio learning, such collaborative processes may therefore strengthen reflection and foster a stronger sense of ownership over learning (Yacob, et al, 2021). Collectively, these factors indicate that students' perspectives emerge from the interaction of motivation, self-assessment, prior learning experiences, and the social learning environment.

Theoretical Foundations of Portfolio-Based Learning

Portfolio-based learning is supported by three complementary theoretical perspectives: constructivism, self-regulated learning, and authentic assessment. Constructivist theory views learning as an active process in which learners construct knowledge through experience, reflection,

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and interaction (Misra, 2023). Portfolio activities reflect these principles by encouraging students to collect evidence of learning, revise their work, and reflect on their progress, thereby promoting deeper understanding and greater responsibility for learning (Pais, & Herrington, 2022).

The theory of self-regulated learning further explains how portfolios encourage learners to set goals, monitor progress, evaluate outcomes, and modify learning strategies independently. Through this process, learners become more actively involved in managing their own learning by identifying areas that require improvement and making deliberate adjustments based on their learning experiences. Portfolio activities therefore provide a structured space for learners to develop greater awareness of their learning processes and take responsibility for their continued improvement. Meanwhile, authentic assessment emphasizes evaluating students through meaningful learning tasks rather than relying solely on traditional examinations. Since portfolios document both learning processes and learning products, they provide a more comprehensive picture of students' competence, critical thinking, and continuous development (Syzdykova, et al., 2021). Together, these theoretical perspectives explain why portfolio assessment is widely recognized as an approach that promotes reflective, autonomous, and meaningful learning.

Benefits and Challenges of Portfolio Projects

Previous research consistently identifies portfolio projects as beneficial for developing students' reflection, autonomy, motivation, and metacognitive awareness. Through regular reflection and self-assessment, learners become more aware of their strengths and weaknesses, enabling them to plan improvements and take greater responsibility for their learning (Paethrangsi, et al., 2024). Portfolio work also strengthens intrinsic motivation by giving students greater control over their learning process, while continuous revision allows them to recognize incremental progress that supports long-term engagement. Furthermore, the flexibility of portfolio assessment accommodates diverse learning preferences by allowing students to demonstrate learning through different formats, thereby creating a more

inclusive learning environment.

Despite these advantages, portfolio implementation also presents several challenges. Students frequently experience difficulties in managing time, maintaining consistent motivation, and producing meaningful reflection, particularly when they have limited experience with reflective learning or receive insufficient instructional guidance (Gatchu, 2022). Reflection itself may become difficult if learners lack clear evaluation criteria or constructive feedback. Therefore, effective portfolio implementation requires structured guidance, explicit assessment expectations, regular feedback, and continuous instructional support to ensure that portfolio activities function as genuine learning experiences rather than merely administrative requirements.

Portfolio Assessment in Intensive TOEFL Learning

The English classroom today functions as a dynamic space in which learners engage not only with the formal structure of the language but also with its practical use in genuine communication. More broadly, education has increasingly moved from teacher-centered approaches toward learner-centered models that emphasize students' active participation and responsibility in the learning process, and Ly (2024) describes the corresponding transformation in the teacher's role, from primary source of knowledge to facilitator who guides students through meaningful learning experiences, a shift that reflects a recognition that language learning is not purely cognitive but also emotional and social in character.

A classroom organized around communication invites learners to voice their ideas, pose questions, and respond to one another, and when students are actively involved across speaking, listening, reading, and writing tasks, their learning tends to run deeper. Lakew, et al (2025) argues that this kind of active interaction supports the development of both fluency and accuracy, and the overall success of an English classroom hinges on the interplay among teaching strategy, student motivation, and how closely the lesson content maps onto learners' own goals.

The Intensive TOEFL course provides a specific context in which

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learner-centered teaching and assessment practices can be implemented and observed. It is designed to prepare students for the TOEFL examination by concentrating on the four core language skills: reading, listening, speaking, and writing. Unlike general English instruction, intensive TOEFL classes are more narrowly targeted and outcome-driven. Courses of this kind typically follow a structured curriculum built around regular feedback, practice testing, and explicit instruction in time management, and they tend to draw heavily on principles of self-regulated learning, since students are expected to track their own progress, set improvement goals, and reflect on their test performance (Ridwan, 2025). Within this structure, instructors function less as lecturers and more as coaches, helping learners identify weak points and offering concrete strategies for addressing them.

Available evidence further suggests that intensive TOEFL programs can bolster learner confidence and motivation (Sardi, et al., 2022). Asma, et al., (2026) finds that when students feel adequately prepared through continuous practice and sustained support, their test-related anxiety tends to diminish and their performance tends to improve; such courses also make room for a degree of personalized instruction, allowing teachers to tailor lessons to individual learner needs. Taken together, these features mean that TOEFL preparation functions not merely as test-strategy coaching but as a substantive English learning experience in its own right. This broader learning context creates a need for assessment practices that capture learners' ongoing development, reflection, and engagement rather than focusing solely on their performance on standardized test tasks.

In sum, embedding intensive TOEFL preparation within the broader English classroom offers learners a route to stronger academic skills, more deliberate self-regulated learning habits, and readiness for authentic communication in academic settings. This kind of focused, high-engagement environment aligns naturally with portfolio-based and authentic assessment approaches, which is precisely what makes the Intensive TOEFL course a fitting site for examining how learners experience portfolio work in practice.

The shift toward learner-centered education has also influenced TOEFL preparation, where students are expected not only to improve language proficiency but also to develop independent learning strategies. Intensive TOEFL courses typically emphasize continuous practice, self-monitoring, timely feedback, and strategic learning to prepare students for standardized examinations (Hikmah, & Daniel, 2025). In this context, portfolio assessment complements conventional test preparation by documenting learning progress, encouraging reflection, and supporting self-regulated learning throughout the course.

Unlike traditional assessments that primarily measure final achievement, portfolios provide opportunities for students to evaluate their own development across multiple language skills while identifying areas requiring further improvement. Previous studies have also reported that intensive TOEFL instruction supported by continuous feedback can improve learners' confidence, motivation, and academic performance. These characteristics make Intensive TOEFL courses an appropriate context for examining how students experience portfolio-based learning in a high-stakes academic environment.

Review of Related Studies

Two earlier studies bear directly on the present inquiry. The first study, conducted by Ma'arif, et al., (2021), investigated portfolio-based assessment and its bearing on the learning experiences of Indonesian junior high school students. The study traced how younger learners perceived the use of portfolio-based assessment during English lessons and examined the resulting effects on their learning attitudes and behaviors. The findings indicated that the practice helped students build self-monitoring habits, encouraged a stronger sense of responsibility, and gradually shifted learners' attention away from scores and toward the underlying learning goals. The study's conclusions were tempered, however, by a modest sample size and a reliance on semi-structured interviews as the sole data source.

A second relevant study, carried out by Khodi et al. (2024), examined

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how learners perceived the use of electronic portfolios as a tool for developing speaking skills within an EFL classroom. That research found that students generally viewed e-portfolios as engaging and effective, crediting them with helping monitor speaking progress, stimulating creativity, strengthening self-management, and boosting motivation through the feedback and reflection the format encouraged. The authors further argued that e-portfolios support lifelong learning habits and help build learners' digital competence, positioning the format as particularly well-suited to online and blended instructional settings, and they encouraged instructors to integrate e-portfolios more widely to improve learning outcomes. While both studies offer useful insights into portfolio-based assessment and the use of e-portfolios in English instruction, their focus remains largely on general learner perceptions and language-skill development among junior high school and university populations.

However, neither study specifically examines how portfolio-based assessment functions within an intensive TOEFL preparation course, a setting in which learning objectives, student expectations, and performance standards may differ from those of general English instruction. The present study addresses this gap by investigating learners' perceptions and experiences of portfolio-based practice in an intensive, examination-focused course, with particular attention to how the practice supports test preparation, fosters self-regulated learning, and shapes academic motivation in a targeted and higher-stakes learning environment.

METHODOLOGY

Research Design

This study adopted a qualitative approach in order to investigate, in depth, how students experienced the use of portfolio projects within the Intensive TOEFL course at the University of Muhammadiyah Aceh. Lim (2025) notes that qualitative inquiry is particularly well suited to examining individuals' experiences, beliefs, and interpretations, precisely the kind of

data this study sought to gather. A case study design was selected specifically because it permits a close, detailed examination of a bounded group of learners situated within their actual educational context, an approach well matched to the goal of understanding how these particular students made sense of portfolio work and judged its usefulness for supporting their English language development.

The inquiry was structured around three interlocking aims. The first was to understand how students perceived the implementation of the portfolio project and its overall value within the TOEFL course. The second was to identify the specific benefits students associated with portfolio-based learning, whether in terms of language-skill gains, deepened self-reflection, or a stronger sense of learner autonomy. The third was to examine the difficulties students encountered while completing the portfolio, including issues of time management, resource limitations, or complications related to feedback and self-assessment.

Taken together, these aims sought to provide a comprehensive understanding of how portfolio-based practice functions as both a pedagogical tool and a learning experience in an intensive TOEFL classroom. The study also explored the challenges learners encountered and the strategies they developed to manage those challenges.

Research Setting, Population, and Sample

The study was situated within the English Education study program at the University of Muhammadiyah Aceh, with the full population of students in that department constituting the broader pool from which participants were drawn. Because the research questions demanded informants with direct, first-hand experience of the portfolio process, a purposive sampling strategy was used, an approach considers well suited to identifying individuals whose characteristics align closely with a study's specific objectives (Monteiro, 2020)

Seven students enrolled in the Intensive TOEFL course constituted the final sample. The participants met the following inclusion criteria: they were

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enrolled in the Intensive TOEFL course, had completed and submitted the assigned portfolio, and had direct experience of the learning and self-directed study activities associated with the course. All seven participants had also engaged independently in TOEFL preparation, devoting a minimum of thirty hours to self-directed study through online resources such as instructional videos and educational websites. These criteria ensured that the participants had sufficient first-hand experience to provide detailed accounts of the benefits, challenges, and learning processes associated with the portfolio.

Research Instrument

Data collection relied primarily on semi-structured interviews supplemented by a review of relevant documents. Hwang, et al (2023) observes that semi-structured interviews strike a useful balance, offering enough flexibility to pursue emerging themes while still keeping the conversation anchored to the study's core questions. The interview protocol comprised eight open-ended questions, with room for follow-up probes depending on how each participant responded and was designed to draw out students' perceptions of the portfolio as a learning tool while also uncovering how they managed the challenges they faced and how, in their own assessment, the portfolio process contributed to their language development.

Data Collection Procedure

Interviews served as the principal data source, chosen for the flexibility they provided to explore participants' experiences in depth while keeping the conversation focused on the study's key themes (Roulston & Halpin, 2022). A semi-structured interview guide consisting of eight open-ended questions was used to explore participants' experiences and perceptions of portfolio-based learning in the Intensive TOEFL course. The questions broadly addressed students' experiences with the portfolio, its perceived benefits and contribution to language development, comparisons with traditional assignments, motivational and psychological impacts, challenges encountered during the process, and strategies for addressing those challenges. Follow-up questions and probes were used when necessary to clarify responses

and encourage participants to elaborate on their experiences. The interview guide was developed based on the research questions and relevant literature on portfolio-based learning, with the questions designed to elicit detailed accounts of participants' experiences. Every interview was audio-recorded and subsequently transcribed verbatim to preserve an accurate record of each participant's perspective.

The data-collection process began with identifying learners who had completed the Intensive TOEFL course and taken part in the portfolio assignment. The researcher first approached course instructors to secure permission and assistance in reaching potential participants, after which purposive sampling was applied to select students meeting the study's criteria. Prospective participants were then contacted individually and briefed on the study's purpose; once they agreed to take part, interviews were scheduled at times convenient to each participant and conducted in settings quiet and comfortable enough to encourage open, candid conversation. The researcher also kept field notes throughout each session to complement the recorded dialogue. This structured, step-by-step approach was intended to ensure that the resulting data were rich, trustworthy, and closely aligned with the study's objectives.

Data Analysis Technique

Given the richness and density of the material gathered from participants, a systematic analytic procedure was essential for making sense of it. Because the study's central concern was to surface recurring patterns in how students understood and experienced the portfolio process, the data were examined using thematic analysis, an approach centered on identifying patterns and themes within qualitative material (Xu & Zammit, 2020). The interview data were analyzed using Braun and Clarke's six-phase thematic analysis, as outlined by Byrne (2022). The process began with familiarizing the researcher with the interview transcripts through repeated reading. Initial codes were then generated from meaningful segments of the data. Related codes were subsequently compared and grouped according to shared

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meanings and patterns, which guided the development of broader categories and potential themes. The identified themes were then reviewed and refined to ensure that they were coherent with both the coded extracts and the dataset as a whole before being clearly defined and named. Finally, the themes were organized and presented in a coherent analytical report that addressed the research questions of the study.

This was followed by initial coding, in which each transcript was reviewed closely and preliminary codes were attached to relevant passages. Those codes were then organized into broader themes addressing the study's research questions, among them students' overall perceptions of the portfolio, the benefits they identified, and the challenges they described. The resulting themes were subsequently reviewed and refined to ensure they faithfully represented the underlying data and remained aligned with the study's objectives. Finally, the refined themes were interpreted to draw conclusions about students' experiences with the portfolio project and about the benefits and challenges that characterized those experiences.

Trustworthiness

To enhance the trustworthiness of the findings, this study adopted several strategies recommended for qualitative research. First, data triangulation was employed by comparing information obtained from semi-structured interviews with supporting documentary evidence, including students' portfolio projects. Second, member checking was conducted by inviting participants to review the interview transcripts and clarify any statements that did not accurately represent their intended meanings. Finally, peer debriefing was carried out through discussions with academic colleagues to review the coding process and the interpretation of themes. These procedures contributed to the credibility, dependability, and confirmability of the findings by ensuring that the interpretations accurately reflected participants' experiences.

Ethical Consideration

Ethical principles were carefully observed throughout this study. Prior to data collection, all participants were informed about the purpose of the research, the procedures involved, and their rights as research participants. Participation was entirely voluntary, and written informed consent was obtained before the interviews were conducted. Participants were also informed that they could withdraw from the study at any stage without any negative consequences. To protect their privacy and confidentiality, participants' identities were anonymized using codes (R1–R7), and all interview recordings and transcripts were used solely for research purposes and stored securely.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

Findings

This section presents the results drawn from semi-structured interviews with seven students from the University of Muhammadiyah Aceh who had completed the Intensive TOEFL course. The central aim of the analysis was to characterize how these learners perceived the portfolio project, the benefits they noticed, and the obstacles they faced across their language-learning journey. To preserve confidentiality, participants are referred to throughout by the codes R1 through R7 rather than by name.

Overall Experience with the Portfolio Project

Taken as a whole, participants' experience of the portfolio project skewed positive, and several described the process as meaningful or even transformative. Most felt that the portfolio offered a richer, more engaging learning experience than conventional assignments typically provide. One participant, R3, explained that the project drew them more actively into the learning process, since it required thinking carefully about their own progress and devising their own strategies for improvement, a description that illustrates how the portfolio helped students assume a more active role in directing, and reflecting on, their own learning.

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Not every account was uniformly positive, however. R2 described the process as simultaneously draining and rewarding, noting a personal disinclination toward documenting their learning in such a sustained, deliberate way, a comment suggesting that the reflective demands of the task can weigh heavily on learners unaccustomed to that kind of ongoing self-documentation. This blend of reward and strain recurred across several of the participants' narratives, suggesting that a positive overall assessment of the portfolio did not preclude genuine difficulty along the way.

Perceived Benefits of the Portfolio

Participants collectively pointed to several benefits arising from portfolio work, chief among them the ability to track their own progress, visible gains in English proficiency, and a stronger sense of confidence. R1 noted being able to observe personal progress and correct earlier mistakes, while R5 remarked that the project had meaningfully improved their English ability, both comments reflecting a heightened awareness among participants of how their own learning was unfolding over time.

A second recurring benefit concerned confidence and motivation. R6 described feeling more enthusiastic and self-assured about the TOEFL after observing their own progress from the earliest stages of the course, while R4 spoke of the satisfaction that came from viewing the finished portfolio as a complete body of work. Several participants also credited the portfolio with helping them manage their study routines more effectively, making it easier to plan their time and set concrete learning goals.

Language Skills Developed through Portfolio Work

Participants pointed to noticeable improvements across specific language skill areas and test components. While writing, grammar, vocabulary, and reading directly aligned with the core requirements of the TOEFL preparation, participants also highlighted gains in oral communication through reflective portfolio tasks. The primary areas developed include:

First, Writing and Reading Competencies. Several participants noted stronger organizational skills, better reading comprehension, and more

precise academic vocabulary usage. R6 attributed improved essay-writing ability to the repeated cycle of revision built into the portfolio process, while R4 described becoming more comfortable analyzing reading passages, organizing ideas, and incorporating appropriate vocabulary into written reflections.

Second, Oral Communication and Speaking Confidence. Although speaking is not a direct component of the standard TOEFL test, participants emphasized that recording oral reflections and video/audio logs for their portfolios significantly enhanced their spoken fluency and confidence. R6 linked growing speaking confidence to regular oral self-evaluations, while R7 reported skill improvements stemming from frequent opportunities to articulate learning strategies in both written and spoken forms.

Third, Grammar and Vocabulary Awareness. Through sustained self-monitoring, several participants became increasingly conscious of recurring grammatical errors and lexical gaps in their language use. R6, for instance, described becoming more aware of persistent structural mistakes after systematically reviewing earlier portfolio submissions, underscoring the portfolio's role in consolidating core language competencies needed for the TOEFL examination.

Portfolio Work Compared with Conventional Assignments

Most participants distinguished the portfolio sharply from ordinary coursework, particularly with respect to its emphasis on process and reflection rather than output alone. R3 drew this contrast plainly, noting that while typical assignments focus solely on the final product or the grade attached to it, the portfolio required documenting the learning process itself, formulating action plans, and evaluating outcomes along the way. R4 offered a similar assessment, describing the portfolio as a task that pushed learners to weave writing, speaking, listening, and reading into a single, integrated learning experience.

R2, by contrast, framed the distinction in more practical terms, observing that non-portfolio tasks concentrated on mastering TOEFL

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structures without the organizational or citation demands the portfolio imposed. Collectively, these observations point to the portfolio's role in promoting higher-order thinking, integrating separate language skills, and building metacognitive awareness in ways conventional assignments generally do not.

Motivational and Psychological Effects

The portfolio project appeared to carry a substantial motivational charge. Several participants described feeling more involved, more autonomous, and more confident as the course progressed. R1 reported that the portfolio increased confidence in learning English, and R5 echoed this, noting heightened motivation and confidence that came from being able to observe personal progress directly. R3 similarly reported greater motivation and a stronger sense of personal responsibility, along with a growing recognition that their abilities were genuinely developing, comments suggesting that several participants internalized their learning gains and developed a firmer sense of self-efficacy.

Not every participant, however, reported the same degree of impact. R2 acknowledged treating the portfolio largely as an obligatory assignment rather than as a tool of genuine personal value, a comment implying that the effectiveness of portfolio work may hinge substantially on a learner's personal disposition and preferred learning style.

Challenges Encountered

Time management emerged as the most frequently cited difficulty. R7 identified managing time as the central challenge, and R4 offered a similar account, describing the need for careful scheduling to avoid procrastination. Other obstacles included technical difficulties, such as the effort involved in recording and re-recording speaking tasks until the results were satisfactory, an issue R6 mentioned directly, alongside frustration stemming from unclear expectations in the absence of prompt feedback. Several participants also struggled with selecting an appropriate topic for their portfolio entries; R5, for instance, described the process of settling on a suitable topic as genuinely

difficult. Together, these accounts indicate that although the portfolio delivered clear benefits, it also imposed real cognitive and logistical demands on the students completing it.

Strategies for Overcoming Challenges

To manage these difficulties, participants developed a range of coping strategies. R3 described establishing a fixed routine for completing the daily logbook and setting small weekly goals, while R7 reported seeking supplementary materials such as English-language videos or articles. R4 described relying on discussions with friends or tutors to gain fresh perspective on the work.

Several participants also proposed changes for future iterations of the course, most commonly calling for faster and more comprehensive feedback. R6 suggested that instructors provide quicker responses, while R5 asked for more specific feedback along with greater assistance in selecting topics. These suggestions reflect learners' capacity to adapt to difficulty while also pointing to concrete areas where stronger institutional support could improve the portfolio experience.

Discussion

Overall, participants held a favourable view of the portfolio project within the Intensive TOEFL course, describing it as conducive to deeper engagement and a fuller understanding of their own learning. Many distinguished the portfolio from routine coursework precisely because it demanded ongoing reflection, careful planning, and a measure of independence. R3, for instance, valued the way the project allowed them to direct their own learning by setting goals and monitoring progress, which made the overall experience feel more purposeful; R4 and R7 offered comparable accounts, characterizing the portfolio as a continuous, personally meaningful learning journey that helped them draw on their language skills in a more integrated fashion. This reflective, learner-centered quality aligns with previous research suggesting that portfolio-based assessment can promote learner autonomy, reflection, and active participation in the learning process

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(Ma'arif, et al, 2021; Khodi, et al, 2024).

With respect to benefits, most participants credited the portfolio with strengthening their English proficiency, especially in writing and speaking. The repeated cycles of revision, reflection, and feedback embedded in the process appeared to support gains in fluency, vocabulary, and grammatical accuracy. R6, for example, reported clearer writing structure alongside a sharper awareness of recurring errors, while R1 and R5 both noted that tracking their own progress over time helped them recognize patterns in their strengths and weaknesses. R3 further suggested that the portfolio supported broader academic-skill development by requiring learners to document not just what they learned but how they learned it. These accounts collectively suggest that portfolio work contributes to more than language proficiency alone; it also appears to nurture planning, monitoring, and evaluative habits that matter for performance on assessments such as the TOEFL.

Another theme running through the interviews concerned the perceived positive influence of portfolio work on motivation and confidence. R4 and R7 both described a sense of accomplishment when seeing tangible evidence of their own progress, an experience that they felt strengthened their enthusiasm for continued learning. R1 similarly suggested that the portfolio made certain forms of perceived improvement more visible than conventional testing might capture. These accounts indicate that participants perceived the portfolio as contributing not only to their learning experience but also to their motivation and confidence. This psychological dimension corresponds closely with self-determination theory, which identifies autonomy, perceived competence, and relatedness as core psychological needs; the portfolio project appeared to support these needs by giving learners a sense of ownership over their work and making their perceived progress visible in a concrete form.

Despite these evident benefits, participants also encountered real difficulties over the course of the assignment. Time management surfaced repeatedly as a central concern: R3, R5, and R7 each described delaying the start of their work or struggling to sustain a consistent schedule for reflecting

on and documenting their progress. Because the portfolio demanded sustained commitment and discipline, an expectation that differed from the more task-bound and test-oriented assignments many students were accustomed to, some participants found the adjustment genuinely difficult. R2, for example, described the process as mentally taxing and unfamiliar because of limited prior experience in tracking and evaluating their learning. Importantly, not all participants viewed the portfolio as an equally meaningful or motivating learning experience. R2 partly perceived the portfolio as an obligation, suggesting that the requirements of the assignment could at times be experienced as an additional academic burden rather than as an opportunity for self-directed learning. This contrasting perspective highlights an important tension in portfolio-based assessment: although the practice may encourage reflection, autonomy, and engagement, its demands for sustained effort and self-management may also generate pressure, uncertainty, or emotional strain for some learners. Access to suitable materials posed a related concern. R2 relied heavily on platforms such as TikTok and YouTube for English exposure (Jovita, et al, 2025), reflecting resourcefulness in using readily available digital materials while also pointing to differences in how students accessed and evaluated learning resources. These contrasting experiences suggest that the perceived value of portfolio-based learning may depend not only on its pedagogical potential but also on learners' readiness, available resources, and capacity to manage the demands of a sustained reflective task.

A further significant obstacle concerned the absence of timely, formative feedback. R6 and R7 both noted that without clear guidance or prompt responses from instructors, they often felt uncertain about the quality of their work, a state of uncertainty that undermined their confidence and made it harder to identify concrete steps for improvement. R4 proposed that access to sample portfolios from previous cohorts could help reduce this confusion and offer a source of inspiration. Emotional and technical strain also surfaced in the data: R6, for instance, described a perfectionistic tendency that led to repeated re-recording of speaking tasks, while R7 struggled to

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articulate ideas clearly in English. Collectively, these accounts suggest that portfolio-based learning, though valuable, can also prove mentally and emotionally demanding, a difficulty compounded in fast-paced programs operating under tight deadlines. These findings largely echo those reported by Ma'arif, et al., (2021) in their study of portfolio-based assessment among Indonesian junior high school students. In both studies, learners viewed the portfolio as a useful mechanism for strengthening self-monitoring and assuming greater responsibility for their own learning; R5's remark about feeling more accountable for their own progress after sustained engagement with the portfolio, for instance, closely parallels Ma'arif and colleagues' conclusion that portfolio-based assessment shifts learners' attention toward learning itself rather than toward grades alone. The present study, however, extends this line of inquiry by situating the portfolio within a considerably higher-pressure environment, one oriented around TOEFL preparation, that differs markedly from the developmentally focused classroom setting examined in the earlier study involving younger learners. Here, participants had to manage their portfolios alongside the demands of preparing for a consequential examination, one that required careful planning, efficient use of time, and a comparatively advanced level of academic readiness.

Beyond this parallel, the present study contributes a more balanced account by attending not only to the advantages of portfolio learning but also to its limitations, a dimension that earlier research has examined less thoroughly. The difficulties identified here, constrained time, insufficient feedback, and limited access to resources, carry particular relevance for instructors designing portfolio-based programs within fast-paced or examination-driven courses. In this sense, the study extends the existing body of knowledge by illustrating how reflective tools such as portfolios can support language development and strategic learning even within demanding academic settings, provided they are underpinned by adequate support structures, consistent instructor input, and reasonable access to learning resources.

In sum, participants' experiences with the portfolio project suggest that it functions as a genuinely useful pedagogical instrument for building language ability, motivation, reflective capacity, and self-directed learning. Its effectiveness, however, is not automatic; it depends considerably on factors such as a learner's prior familiarity with reflective practice, the overall design of the course, and the level of support made available throughout. While portfolios hold real potential to deepen engagement and sustain learner involvement, realising that potential requires deliberate planning that anticipates the practical and emotional difficulties capable of undermining the benefits the approach is meant to deliver.

Unlike previous studies that have primarily examined portfolio assessment in general EFL classrooms or focused on specific language skills, the present study provides evidence from an intensive TOEFL preparation context in which learning is highly examination-oriented and academically demanding. The findings indicate that students perceived portfolio-based learning as supporting their English language development while also encouraging reflection, learner autonomy, and sustained motivation. At the same time, participants' accounts reveal that these benefits were closely related to the conditions under which the portfolio was implemented, particularly learners' willingness to engage in reflection, their ability to manage sustained learning demands, access to learning resources, and the support they received throughout the process.

In this context, the study contributes a context-sensitive understanding of how portfolio-based assessment may be perceived as a meaningful learning practice in high-pressure, examination-oriented EFL courses. Rather than functioning solely as an assessment instrument, the portfolio was perceived by participants as a space for monitoring progress, reflecting on learning, and taking greater responsibility for their learning, although these benefits were accompanied by challenges related to time management, workload, and self-regulation. Therefore, the study contributes to the growing literature on portfolio-based learning by highlighting the conditions and

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learner experiences that shape its perceived value within intensive TOEFL preparation in higher education EFL settings.

CONCLUSION

This study explored students' perspectives on the implementation of portfolio projects in an Intensive TOEFL course at Universitas Muhammadiyah Aceh. Overall, the findings indicate that students perceived portfolio-based learning as a meaningful and beneficial approach that supported both their language development and reflective learning. The portfolio project encouraged learners to monitor their progress, identify their strengths and weaknesses, and take greater responsibility for their learning. Beyond improving English language skills, particularly in writing, reading, and vocabulary development, the portfolio also enhanced students' motivation, confidence, and self-regulated learning throughout the course.

Despite these positive perceptions, the findings also revealed several challenges associated with portfolio implementation, including time management, sustaining motivation, producing meaningful reflections, and adapting to a learning approach that required continuous engagement. Nevertheless, with appropriate instructional guidance, timely feedback, and clear assessment criteria, students were generally able to overcome these challenges and regarded the portfolio as a valuable complement to conventional TOEFL preparation.

This study contributes to the growing body of research on portfolio-based assessment by providing empirical evidence from an intensive, examination-oriented EFL context, where students experience unique academic demands and learning pressures. The findings suggest that portfolio assessment can serve not only as an assessment tool but also as an effective strategy for promoting learner autonomy, reflective practice, and continuous language development in TOEFL preparation courses.

Several limitations should be acknowledged. This study involved a relatively small number of participants from a single institution, which

may limit the transferability of the findings to other educational settings. In addition, the study relied primarily on interview data and students' portfolio documents. Future research is therefore encouraged to include larger and more diverse participant groups, employ multiple qualitative or mixed-method approaches, and investigate the long-term impact of portfolio-based learning on students' TOEFL achievement and autonomous learning development across different higher education contexts.

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