



Research Article

Self-Assessment Portfolios for Learner Autonomy and Diagnostic Practice in Pre-Intermediate English Language Classrooms: Insights from Iranian Learners and Teachers

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Abstract

This study investigates the perspectives of pre-intermediate English as a Foreign Language (EFL) learners and their instructors regarding the efficacy of self-assessment portfolios in identifying individual strengths and weaknesses over 12 weeks. The research sample comprised 31 EFL students and 12 educators, with coursework based on the American English File 2 textbook. Participants maintained structured reflective journals appropriate for their proficiency level, documenting weekly self-assessments across speaking, listening, reading, and writing skills. Semi-structured interviews were also conducted to capture learner and instructor insights. Employing an inductive thematic analysis design, this qualitative investigation analyzed a total of 372 entries derived from the journals and interview transcripts, utilizing NVivo 12 software for data management. The analysis was carried out in several stages, including initial open coding, axial grouping into sub-themes, and selective refinement into core themes. Findings revealed that portfolios enhanced learners' self-awareness, reflective practices, and skill recognition. Participants reported increased motivation, autonomy, and metacognitive skill development. Educators valued portfolios for instructional guidance and promoting learner accountability. Despite challenges like increased workload and need for clear guidance, both groups recognized portfolio assessment's substantial benefits for deeper learning and critical thinking. These findings underscore self-assessment portfolios' pivotal role in fostering reflective, autonomous learners and advancing EFL teaching and assessment practices.

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Keywords: Learner autonomy; Learner reflection; Metacognition; Pre-intermediate EFL learners' proficiency; Self-assessment portfolios; Structured reflective journal; Teacher perceptions

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1. Introduction

In recent decades, educational assessment practices have undergone substantial scrutiny, particularly in Western contexts, as scholars and practitioners question the efficacy and relevance of traditional, exam-oriented approaches (Brown, 2019; Earl, 2003; Sayad Deghatkar et

al., 2022). Conventional assessments, which typically prioritize the assessment of learning over assessment for learning, have been critiqued for serving as summative endpoints rather than developmental tools that foster ongoing growth (Bookman, 2019; Hadjiconstantinou, 2017; Sherrin, 2020; Tahmasebi et al., 2025). This has led to a paradigm shift toward authentic assessment methods

that more closely mirror classroom realities and support meaningful, context-driven learning (McMillan, 2018). Among these alternative approaches, portfolio-based assessment has emerged as a particularly effective strategy for capturing the complexity of student learning. Unlike standardized tests, portfolios are criterion-referenced and rooted in real-life instructional objectives, offering a broader and more nuanced perspective on learner progress (Brown, 2019; McMillan, 2018). Portfolios consist of curated collections of student work that chronicle learning trajectories over time, providing both teachers and learners with longitudinal insights that surpass the limitations of one-off assessments (Sandford & Hsu, 2013; Vogt & Tsagari, 2024). In the context of foreign language education, portfolios are especially valuable, as they enable the collection of diverse evidence—such as writing samples, group projects, and reflective exercises—that more accurately reflect communicative competence and learner development (Ma'arif et al., 2021; Vogt et al., 2024).

The pedagogical advantages of portfolio assessment are multifaceted. For educators, portfolios facilitate more nuanced evaluations of student capabilities, informing differentiated instruction and responsive feedback (BaniYounes et al., 2024). For learners, the process of compiling and reflecting on portfolio artifacts fosters metacognitive skills, self-regulation, and a greater sense of responsibility for their learning (Burner, 2014; Fernandes et al., 2020). These benefits are underpinned by constructivist educational theory, which emphasizes learner agency and self-directed learning (Dewey, 1933; Kouzouli, 2012; Piaget, 1936).

Despite these recognized benefits, standardized assessment formats continue to dominate language education in many global contexts, including English as a Foreign Language (EFL) instruction. Such formats often fail to capture the dynamic, multidimensional nature of language learning, focusing instead on discrete knowledge and skills at the expense of cognitive, strategic, and motivational dimensions (Baker & Taylor, 2024; Barootchi & Keshavarz, 2002; Lam, 2017). High-stakes testing environments further exacerbate this issue by promoting rote learning and conformity, thereby limiting opportunities for autonomy and critical thinking (French et al., 2023).

In response, educational stakeholders are increasingly advocating for process-oriented, learner-centered assessment methods such as portfolios, which align more closely with the goals of communicative language teaching and lifelong learning (Fernandes et al., 2020). Research demonstrates that reflective portfolio use can enhance metacognition, motivation, and critical thinking among EFL learners by providing structured opportunities for self-assessment and goal-setting (Alam & Aktar, 2019; BaniYounes et al., 2024; Lam, 2017, 2020; Nopitasari,

2024). Nevertheless, there remains a need for greater understanding of how learners and teachers in specific cultural and institutional settings—such as Iran—perceive and implement portfolio assessment.

This study seeks to address this gap by exploring the perceptions of EFL learners and teachers regarding self-assessment portfolios, with a particular focus on their utility for identifying language strengths and weaknesses. Drawing on insights from Turkish, Saudi Arabian, and Iranian contexts (Abduljawad, 2024; Efe, 2016), the research investigates how reflective portfolio practices are experienced and interpreted in resource-constrained environments. Additionally, it examines the attitudes of Iranian teachers toward portfolio assessment, considering both its pedagogical value and the practical challenges associated with its implementation (Abduljawad, 2024; Wang & He, 2020). By capturing these perspectives, the study aims to inform context-sensitive strategies for integrating portfolio assessment into EFL curricula in ways that align with national standards and institutional realities.

Accordingly, the research is guided by the following questions:

RQ 1. How do pre-intermediate EFL learners perceive the usefulness of self-assessment portfolios in identifying their strengths and weaknesses?

RQ 2. How do EFL teachers perceive the role of self-assessment portfolios in helping learners identify their strengths and weaknesses?

2. Literature Review

Portfolio assessment is fundamentally grounded in constructivist learning theory, which posits that learners construct knowledge through active engagement, reflection, and interaction with authentic tasks. Unlike traditional, summative assessment methods that provide static snapshots of learner achievement, portfolio assessment emphasizes formative, process-oriented evaluation, capturing learners' ongoing development and learning trajectories (Bani Younes et al., 2024; Sulistyono et al., 2020). This approach is closely linked to concepts of self-regulated learning and metacognition, as learners are encouraged to reflect on their progress, set goals, and assume ownership of their educational journey (Biglari et al., 2021; Taheri & Mashhadi Heidar, 2019). By compiling diverse work samples, reflections, and self-assessments, portfolios offer a comprehensive and dynamic record of language growth, enabling both learners and teachers to identify strengths, weaknesses, and areas for further improvement. This aligns with Little's (2022) advocacy for learner autonomy and reflective practices in language education, positioning portfolio assessment as a tool for both assessment and learning. The theoretical underpinnings of portfolio assessment are also informed

by sociocultural perspectives, particularly Vygotsky's (1987) view of learning as a socially mediated process. Portfolios, as learner-generated artifacts, foster knowledge construction through feedback, dialogue, and iterative improvement, supporting scaffolding and the zone of proximal development by enabling learners to refine their skills through guided self-assessment and teacher interaction.

A growing body of research has explored the implementation and impact of portfolio assessment in EFL classrooms. Suherman (2018) found that the use of portfolios in an EFL writing classroom not only enhanced learners' writing competencies but also fostered holistic writing outcomes by promoting planning, monitoring, and revision. Learners reported increased engagement, motivation, and self-reflection, which contributed to more active and proficient writing behaviors. These findings underscore the role of portfolios in cultivating positive attitudes and behaviors toward complex language tasks.

Similarly, Ghoorchaei and Tavakoli (2020) examined Iranian EFL learners' perceptions of portfolio assessment in an essay writing course. The results indicated improvements in writing sub-skills such as focus, elaboration, and organization, alongside positive learner attitudes toward portfolio use. The study highlighted the potential of portfolios to enhance writing performance and foster a more reflective and autonomous approach to learning.

Atifnigar et al. (2020) conducted a systematic review of alternative assessment methods, including portfolios, across Asian EFL contexts. Their analysis revealed that learners generally held positive perceptions of alternative assessments, viewing them as more authentic and engaging than traditional exams. These methods were seen to promote deeper learning, self-reflection, and critical thinking, although challenges such as increased workload and the need for clear guidance were noted.

Ma'arif et al. (2021) further supported the efficacy of portfolio-based assessment, reporting that learners appreciated its role in fostering self-reflection, responsibility, and active engagement. Compiling portfolios enabled learners to track their progress, identify areas for improvement, and develop critical thinking and self-assessment skills. However, the study also identified challenges, including the increased workload and the necessity for structured support from instructors.

2.1. Self-Assessment and Learner Autonomy

Self-assessment is a central component of portfolio assessment, enabling learners to engage in metacognitive processes that support self-regulation and lifelong learning (Alibakhshi & Sarani, 2014). Alghanmi (2023) found that self-assessment in EFL speaking classrooms positively influenced learners' self-regulated learning

skills, critical thinking, and speaking performance. Factors such as prior experience, motivation, and awareness of assessment criteria shaped learners' perceptions of self-assessment, which was shown to foster greater awareness of learning goals and progress.

Doroudi et al. (2024) highlighted the role of learning-oriented assessment, including peer and self-assessment, in promoting self-awareness, intrinsic motivation, and positive shifts in learners' attitudes toward assessment. Peer assessment was found to enhance interaction, evaluative skills, and learner ownership, while self-assessment deepened engagement and supported the development of a growth mindset.

2.2. Teacher Perspectives and Implementation Challenges

While the benefits of portfolio assessment are widely recognized, practical challenges persist. Derakhshan and Ghiasvand (2022) noted that Iranian EFL teachers acknowledged the value of learning-oriented assessment for promoting engagement and learning, but its implementation was hindered by insufficient training, lack of institutional support, and the dominance of exam-oriented cultures. These barriers limit the widespread adoption of portfolio assessment, particularly in contexts where traditional assessment practices remain entrenched. Pourdana and Tavassoli (2022) explored electronic portfolio assessment and found significant improvements in learners' lower-level writing skills, with qualitative data revealing positive emotional responses but some discrepancies between teacher and learner assessments. This highlights the importance of clear criteria, feedback, and ongoing dialogue between teachers and learners to maximize the effectiveness of portfolio assessment.

2.3. Portfolio Assessment in the Iranian EFL Context

Over the past decade, English language education in Iran has undergone significant reforms aimed at modernizing instruction and promoting communicative competence (Moharami & Daneshfar, 2022; Tajeddin & Chamani, 2020). Despite these reforms, classroom practices remain largely teacher-centered and exam-driven, with limited student interaction and underdeveloped communicative skills (Moharami & Daneshfar, 2022). The rise of private language institutes has increased access to more interactive instruction but has also exacerbated educational inequalities (Rassouli & Osam, 2019). Many learners continue to struggle with real-world communication and skill retention after formal education. In this context, portfolio self-assessment emerges as a promising alternative, aligning with curricular goals of fostering reflection, autonomy, and communicative competence (Aliakbari et al., 2023). However, successful

implementation requires supportive infrastructure, ongoing teacher training, and a shift in assessment culture (Moharami & Daneshfar, 2022).

The literature consistently demonstrates that portfolio assessment, particularly when integrated with self-assessment, offers significant benefits for EFL learners by promoting reflective practice, autonomy, and a deeper understanding of language development. However, successful implementation requires careful planning, clear guidance, and institutional support to address challenges such as increased workload and resistance to change. The present study builds on this foundation by investigating the perceptions of pre-intermediate EFL learners and teachers regarding the use of self-assessment portfolios for identifying strengths and weaknesses, contributing to the ongoing discourse on alternative assessment in language education.

3. Method

This study employed a qualitative thematic analysis design to investigate pre-intermediate EFL learners' and teachers' perceptions of self-assessment portfolios' effectiveness in identifying language strengths and weaknesses (Braun & Clarke, 2020). Thematic analysis was selected for its flexibility in identifying, analyzing, and reporting patterns (themes) within rich qualitative data, particularly suited for exploratory perception studies in EFL contexts (Braun & Clarke, 2020). This design facilitated systematic extraction of meaning from 372 reflective journal entries and semi-structured interview transcripts through inductive grounded theory coding procedures—open, axial, and selective coding—using NVivo 12 software (Corbin & Strauss, 2015; Saldaña, 2021).

3.1. Participants

The study involved 31 male pre-intermediate EFL learners (aged 12-15, CEFR A2) from two intact classes at Dolat and Mellat Language Institutes in Rasht, Gilan, Iran, who engaged in portfolio self-assessment. Inclusion criteria were: (a) enrollment in pre-intermediate classes using American English File 2, (b) confirmed A2 proficiency via institute placement test, (c) regular attendance ($\geq 80\%$ of 12-week sessions), (d) completion of ≥ 10 weekly journal entries, and (e) informed consent for participation/interviews. Exclusion criteria included $>20\%$ absence, <10 journal entries, or interview refusal ($n=0$ exclusions occurred).

Additionally, 12 EFL male teachers from the same institutes participated. Inclusion criteria were: (a) 5-15 years of EFL teaching experience, (b) B.A.-M.A. TEFL qualifications, (c) familiarity with pre-intermediate instruction, (d) direct engagement in portfolio

implementation, and (e) availability for interviews with consent. Exclusion criteria included inability to complete interviews ($n=0$ exclusions).

3.2. Materials and Instruments

The instructional resource was American English File 2, written by Latham-Koenig et al. (2012), Oxford University Press, which provided structured content and tasks across the four language skills—listening, speaking, reading, and writing—aligned with the pre-intermediate proficiency level. The following were the instruments used in this study:

Structured Reflective Journal Template. Learners used a structured reflective journal, adapted from Ferreiro (2025), to document weekly self-assessments. The journal included clear, accessible prompts for pre-intermediate learners, encouraging them to reflect on their progress, challenges, and goals for each language skill. This instrument promoted regular, focused reflection and captured metacognitive engagement over time.

Semi-Structured Interviews. Semi-structured interviews were conducted with both learners and teachers. Interview guides, based on Soodmand Afshar and Bastami (2012) and Mahmoodi-Nasrabadi et al. (2024), included open-ended questions about the impact of portfolios on self-awareness, motivation, language development, and teaching practices. Interviews were audio-recorded with consent and transcribed for analysis (Appendix A).

3.3. Data Collection

This qualitative study aimed to comprehensively capture the views of pre-intermediate EFL learners and teachers on self-assessment portfolios. The primary data source consisted of structured reflective journals, adapted from Ferreiro (2025), which 31 learners completed weekly over 12 weeks. These journals included prompts to help learners evaluate their progress and set learning goals, resulting in 372 entries that offered insights into metacognitive engagement and self-regulation (Little, 2022).

To deepen the understanding of learner experiences, semi-structured interviews were conducted with all 31 participants during the final week. The interview protocol, based on Soodmand Afshar and Bastami (2012) and Mahmoodi-Nasrabadi et al. (2024), posed open-ended questions about the impact of portfolios on self-awareness, motivation, strengths, autonomy, and overall usefulness.

These 20–30-minute interviews were held in a supportive setting, audio-recorded with consent, and transcribed verbatim. Additionally, interviews with all 12 EFL teachers explored the diagnostic and instructional

value of portfolios, along with any implementation challenges.

The teacher interview guide encouraged detailed discussions on how portfolios informed their decision-making and supported learner autonomy. All interviews adhered to qualitative protocols (Creswell & Poth, 2018), were audio-recorded with consent, transcribed, and anonymized.

Ethical standards were upheld through institutional approval, informed consent, and secure data storage, allowing for a nuanced examination of perceptions related to the research questions.

3.4. Data Analysis

Data analysis followed a rigorous qualitative approach to ensure credibility and depth. Reflective journals from 31 learners, totaling 372 weekly entries over 12 weeks, were first read holistically to understand evolving self-reflections.

Thematic analysis was then applied using grounded theory procedures—open, axial, and selective coding—supported by NVivo 12 software (Braun & Clarke, 2020; Corbin & Strauss, 2015; Saldaña, 2021). Initial open coding generated inductive codes (e.g., “grammar error recognition,” “speaking confidence”) directly from the data. Axial coding grouped these into sub-themes by identifying relationships, patterns, and consequences. Finally, selective coding refined core themes through constant comparison.

Semi-structured interview transcripts from learners and teachers were transcribed verbatim and analyzed similarly. Two researchers coded transcripts independently to enhance reliability, resolving discrepancies through discussion (intercoder agreement: 92%).

Prominent themes related to self-awareness, motivation, strengths/weaknesses identification, autonomy, instructional adaptation, and implementation challenges were triangulated with journal data for a comprehensive interpretation (Creswell & Plano Clark, 2017). This systematic, inductive process—combining NVivo tools with manual iterative review—ensured trustworthy, contextually grounded findings that directly addressed the research questions on perceptions of self-assessment portfolios.

4. Results

Reflective journal entries (372 total) and semi-structured interviews with 31 experimental learners and 12 EFL teachers were analyzed to address both research questions. Learner interviews explored portfolio impacts on awareness, motivation, strengths/weaknesses

identification, autonomy, challenges, and usefulness. Teacher interviews (84 responses) examined diagnostic value, instructional benefits, and implementation barriers. Using NVivo 12, Braun and Clarke's (2020) six-phase thematic analysis was integrated with grounded theory coding (open, axial, selective; Corbin & Strauss, 2015; Saldaña, 2021). Open coding generated initial codes (e.g., "awareness of progress," "learner motivation," "implementation challenges"). Axial coding grouped codes into sub-themes, and selective coding refined three main learner themes and four teacher themes: Enhanced Self-Awareness, Teacher Scaffolding, Instructional Adaptation, and Implementation Challenges. Initial memos from teacher data identified recurring concepts ("reflection," "feedback," "scaffolding"). Themes were refined through constant comparison, merging related codes (e.g., peer/teacher feedback), with an intercoder agreement of 92%. Findings were illustrated with examples and contextualized within EFL literature.

4.1. Tables

Theme 1: Increased Awareness Through Structured Reflection

Structured weekly journal reflections significantly increased learners' awareness of their language abilities, with 71% of entries explicitly identifying strengths or weaknesses. Regular documentation enabled learners to recognize performance patterns, such as recurring grammar errors. NVivo word frequency analysis further showed frequent use of evaluative terms like “good” and “hard,” reflecting a growing ability to self-assess. This process supports metacognitive development and aligns with research highlighting journaling's role in fostering critical thinking and language growth.

Sub-Theme: Self-Identification of Strengths and Weaknesses. The journal prompts effectively encouraged learners to explicitly recognize and articulate their language learning strengths and weaknesses, a vital component of learner autonomy and self-regulation. Approximately 71% of entries included such self-assessments, demonstrating the efficacy of structured reflection, reflecting awareness of both comprehension success and vocabulary gaps.

Example: “I did well when I read a short story about a dog. It was interesting, but some words were new” (Week 4). *Sub-Theme: Recognition of Learning Patterns.* Weekly reflections enabled learners to identify recurring trends in their language learning, such as frequent grammar errors or consistent performance variations across skills like listening and speaking. This pattern recognition supports targeted learning strategies and self-monitoring, essential for self-regulated learning

Table 1. Main and Sub-Themes Extracted from the Reflective Journals

Main Theme	Subtheme	Empirical Data Source (Theme/Code Extraction)	Analytical Framework / Source of Coding & Themes	Prevalence
Structured Reflection and Awareness	Self-identification of strengths and weaknesses	Learners' weekly structured reflective journals (372 entries)	Codes derived through open coding	71% of entries (264/372)
	Recognition of learning patterns	Learners' reflective journals	Axial coding to cluster recurring codes into subthemes	62% of learners (21/31)
	Enhanced language performance in articulation	NVivo-based analysis of reflective journal corpus	Theme validated through pattern frequency analysis and the review phase of thematic analysis	High lexical recurrence
Recognition of Strengths	Task-specific achievements	Learners' reflective journals	Codes generated via open coding	62% of entries (231/372)
	Consistent documentation of strengths	Learners' weekly portfolio reflections	Subtheme developed through axial coding of recurring strength-related	68% of learners (21/31)
	Positive self-perception and confidence	Reflective journals triangulated with learner interviews	Selective coding integrating journal and interview data; theme confirmation	Linked to 77% of interview responses
Goal-Oriented Weakness Identification	Explicit identification of weaknesses	Learners' reflective journals	Open coding of difficulty-related statements	66% of entries (246/372)
	Setting specific, actionable goals	Learners' "Goal for Next Week" journal sections	Axial coding linking weaknesses to goals	Recurring across the dataset
	Focus on speaking and listening skills	NVivo matrix coding of journal data	Theme review and validation stage	Most frequent weakness domains

Example, "I keep making mistakes with past tense verbs, so I need to focus more on grammar exercises" (Week 5).

Sub-Theme: Enhanced Language Performance Articulation. Regular reflection fostered learners' ability to articulate and evaluate their learning experiences, as evidenced by frequent use of evaluative terms like "good" (189 entries) and "hard" (142 entries).

This development of metacognitive vocabulary is crucial for strategic planning and insight in language learning. Example: "I felt good about my presentation today because I used new vocabulary correctly" (Week 8).

Theme 2: Recognition of Specific Strengths

Learners often utilized the "Effort Reflection" section to acknowledge their strengths, with 62% of entries (231 out of 372) highlighting accomplishments in particular language skills. This theme was especially prominent in reflections related to speaking and reading, where learners expressed satisfaction with tasks such as "describing a

picture" or "reading a menu." Analysis using NVivo coding queries revealed that 68% of learners (21 out of 31) regularly recorded at least one strength each week, indicating that the portfolio effectively supported positive self-perception and boosted confidence in their abilities.

Sub-Theme: Task-Specific Achievements. Learners frequently identified successes in specific language tasks, such as speaking or reading, which reinforced their competence.

Example: "I did well when I answered a question in class without help" (Week 3).

Sub-Theme: Consistent Strengths Documentation. A majority (68%) of learners regularly recorded at least one strength each week, indicating that the portfolio encouraged ongoing positive self-assessment and supported a growth mindset. Example: "This week, I improved my pronunciation during the oral presentation" (Week 7). *Sub-Theme: Positive Self-Perception and Confidence.* Focusing on strengths helped learners build confidence and maintain motivation, especially during challenges.

Table 2. Themes and Sub-Themes Extracted from Learners' Semi-Structured Interviews

Main Theme	Subtheme	Empirical Data Source (Theme/Code Extraction)	Analytical Framework / Source of Coding & Themes	Prevalence
Enhanced Self-Awareness of Learning Progress	Self-monitoring and progress tracking	Learners' semi-structured interview transcripts (31 interviews)	Initial codes derived through open coding of interview transcripts; theme generated via thematic analysis	84% of learners (26/31)
	Goal setting and adjustment	Learner interviews	Axial coding is used to group goal-related codes; theme refinement	71% of learners (22/31)
	Recognition of strengths and weaknesses	Learner interviews	Codes clustered and validated during theme review phase	90% of learners (28/31)
Confidence Through Strength Identification	Recognition of specific skill strengths	Learners' interview transcripts	Open and axial coding of confidence-related statements	77% of learners (24/31)
	Emotional empowerment through achievement documentation	Learner interviews	Theme constructed inductively using reflexive thematic analysis	65% of learners (20/31)
	Motivation reinforcement	Learner interviews	Theme confirmation through constant comparison across interviews	74% of learners (23/31)
Challenges and Adaptation in Self-Assessment	Difficulties in accurate self-evaluation	Learner interviews	Open coding of challenge-related data	35% of learners (11/31)

Example: "I feel more confident speaking in class now because I know I can answer questions" (Week 6).

Theme 3: Goal-Oriented Identification of Weaknesses
The "Goal for Next Week" section prompted learners to pinpoint specific areas for improvement, with 66% of entries (246 out of 372) detailing targeted weaknesses. NVivo matrix coding showed that speaking (32% of entries) and listening (28%) were the most frequently identified areas for development, mirroring quantitative findings of notable posttest gains in these skills. This theme highlights the portfolio's effectiveness in directing learners toward focused self-improvement.

Sub-Theme: Explicit Identification of Weaknesses.
Learners clearly articulated specific challenges, such as grammar or writing, facilitating targeted improvement.

Example: "I need to improve my grammar when writing emails" (Week 5).

Sub-Theme: Setting Actionable Goals. Learners set concrete goals to address weaknesses, turning reflection into practical steps.

Example: "I will review irregular verb forms every day this week" (Week 6).

Sub-Theme: Emphasis on Speaking and Listening.
Weaknesses were most often identified in speaking (32%) and listening (28%), aligning with observed posttest gains and indicating effective targeting of challenging skills.

Example: "I will join the conversation club to practice speaking more" (Week 7).

Theme 1: Enhanced Self-Awareness of Learning Progress

Ninety percent of interviewees (28/31) reported that using the portfolio increased their awareness of language learning strengths and weaknesses. NVivo coding indicated that 84% of responses (26/31) linked the portfolio to improved self-awareness, with frequent references to recognizing both strengths and mistakes. These findings underscore the portfolio's role in fostering metacognitive reflection and tracking progress across language skills.

Sub-Theme: Self-Monitoring and Progress Tracking.
Learners actively recorded and reviewed their learning activities, providing concrete evidence of progress and informing strategy adjustments.

Example: Interviewer: "How do you keep track of your English learning progress?" Learner: "I write down new vocabulary and grammar points in my notebook every day. When I look back, I can see how much I've learned."

Sub-Theme: Goal Setting and Adjustment. Learners set and revised goals based on self-assessment,

maintaining motivation, and adapting strategies as needed.

Examples: Interviewer: “Do you set goals for your English learning? If so, how do you adjust them?” Learner: “Yes, I set weekly goals like learning 20 new words. If I reach the goal early, I increase it for the next week.”

Sub-Theme: Recognition of Strengths and Weaknesses. Learners critically evaluated their skills to identify strengths and areas for improvement, enabling focused practice.

Examples: Interviewer: “What do you think are your strongest and weakest English skills?” Learner: “I’m confident in reading, but speaking makes me nervous. I try to practice speaking more with my classmates.”

Theme 2: Confidence Through Strength Identification

Interview data showed that recognizing strengths via the portfolio increased learners’ confidence, with 77% (24/31) reporting this effect. NVivo sentiment analysis found positive sentiment in 65% of responses about strengths, especially in vocabulary and reading.

These findings indicate that documenting achievements in the portfolio reinforced learners’ self-belief and motivation, supporting deeper engagement in language learning.

Sub-Theme: Recognition of Specific Skill Strengths. Portfolios help learners identify improvements in areas like vocabulary, reading, or writing, shifting focus from weaknesses to achievements and fostering a positive self-concept.

Example: Interviewer: “Which language skills do you feel you have improved the most through your portfolio?” Learner: “I realized I’m good at using new vocabulary because I can see examples of my sentences in the portfolio.”

Sub-Theme: Emotional Empowerment Through Achievement Documentation. Compiling and reflecting on portfolio work provides tangible evidence of progress, boosting pride and self-assurance, and reducing anxiety.

Example: Interviewer: “How do you feel when you look back at your portfolio?”

Learner: “It makes me proud because I can see all the work I’ve done and how much I’ve improved.”

Sub-Theme: Motivation Reinforcement. Recognizing and documenting strengths increases motivation, encouraging learners to set new goals and persist in their studies.

Example:

Interviewer: “Has seeing your progress in the portfolio affected your motivation?” Learner: “Yes, knowing I’m improving makes me want to work harder and keep learning.”

Theme 3: Challenges and Adaptation in Self-Assessment

About 35% of learners (11/31) initially struggled with using the portfolio to identify weaknesses, citing difficulties in articulating reflections and uncertainty about self-assessment accuracy. NVivo coding showed these challenges lessened over time, with 82% (9/11) reporting greater ease by the end of the study. This highlights the importance of providing scaffolding to support effective self-assessment, especially for beginners.

Sub-Theme: Difficulties in Accurate Self-Evaluation. Learners often struggle to assess their language skills reliably due to limited metacognitive awareness, unclear criteria, or subjective bias, leading to over- or underestimation of abilities.

Example: Interviewer: “How confident are you in your ability to judge your own English skills?” Learner: “Sometimes I am not sure if I am right when I say I’m good or bad at something.”

Sub-Theme: Emotional and Motivational Challenges. Self-assessment can trigger anxiety or frustration, especially when confronting weaknesses, which may reduce motivation or hinder honest reflection.

Example: Interviewer: “How do you feel when you realize areas you need to improve through self-assessment?” Learner: “It’s frustrating because I want to do better but don’t know how.”

Sub-Theme: Adaptation Strategies. Learners address these challenges by seeking teacher feedback, using rubrics, comparing with peers, and building metacognitive skills through practice.

Example: Interviewer: “What do you do to improve your self-assessment skills?”

Learner: “I ask my teacher to explain the criteria more clearly.”

Theme 1: Self-Assessment and Reflection

Teachers consistently characterized self-assessment portfolios as powerful tools that cultivate reflective thinking and heightened self-awareness in learners. By systematically compiling, reviewing, and reflecting on their work, learners become more actively engaged in their learning process.

This theme highlights how portfolios shift learners from passive receivers of feedback to proactive participants in their development, enabling more independent identification of both strengths and areas for improvement. *Sub-Theme: Self-Awareness.* Portfolios give learners concrete evidence of progress, helping them realistically assess their skills and areas for improvement. Most teachers (92%) observed that learners began identifying gaps independently.

Table 3. Themes and Sub-Themes Extracted from Teachers' Semi-Structured Interviews

Main Theme	Subtheme	Empirical Data Source (Theme/Code Extraction)	Analytical Framework / Source of Coding and Themes	Prevalence
Self-Assessment and Reflection	Self-awareness	Teachers' semi-structured interview transcripts (12 interviews; 84 responses)	Initial codes generated through open coding of interview transcripts; themes constructed via thematic analysis	Reported by 92% of teachers (11/12)
	Reflection	Teacher interviews	Axial coding used to cluster reflection-related codes	Reported by 83% of teachers (10/12)
	Identifying strengths and weaknesses	Teacher interviews	Theme refined and validated during the theme review phase	Reported by 75% of teachers (9/12)
Motivation and Engagement	Pride in progress	Teacher interviews	Open and axial coding of motivation-related statements	Reported by 78% of teachers (9/12)
	Reduced anxiety	Teacher interviews	Inductive theme development using reflexive thematic analysis	Reported by 67% of teachers (8/12)
	Engagement	Teacher interviews	Theme confirmed through constant comparison across interviews	Reported by 75% of teachers (9/12)
Learner Autonomy	Goal-setting	Teacher interviews	Axial coding linking reflection-related codes to autonomy	Reported by 83% of teachers (10/12)
	Ownership	Teacher interviews	Selective coding integrating autonomy-related categories	Reported by 75% of teachers (9/12)
	Self-evaluation	Teacher interviews	Core theme integration through selective coding	Reported by 92% of teachers (11/12)
Instructional Shifts	Individualized teaching	Teacher interviews	Open coding of instructional change indicators	44.4% of theme-related responses
	Tailored feedback	Teacher interviews	Axial coding linking portfolio use to feedback practices	33.3% of theme-related responses
	Lesson plan adaptation	Teacher interviews	Theme review and validation through thematic analysis	22.2% of theme-related responses
Language Skill Improvement	Writing fluency	Teacher interviews	Inductive coding of skill-improvement references	50% of skill-related responses
	Grammar accuracy	Teacher interviews	Axial coding grouping linguistic improvement indicators	25% of skill-related responses
	Skill-specific awareness	Teacher interviews	Theme confirmation through cross-case comparison	25% of skill-related responses
Implementation Challenges	Time constraints	Teacher interviews	Open coding of constraint-related data	Reported by 50% of teachers (6/12)
	Learner resistance	Teacher interviews	Axial coding linking resistance to implementation factors	Reported by 33% of teachers (4/12)

Example: Interviewer: *How does portfolio assessment influence learners' self-awareness?*

Teacher: *"Learners start identifying gaps before I point them out—it's quite remarkable."* Sub-Theme:

Reflection. Portfolios promote critical thinking about learning choices and mistakes. Eighty-three percent of teachers noted deeper reflection, with learners analyzing why errors occurred and how to address them.

Example: Interviewer: *What changes have you noticed in learners' approach to mistakes after using portfolios?*

Teacher: *"They become more reflective learners. They start thinking about why they made mistakes and how to fix them."*

Sub-Theme: Identifying Strengths and Weaknesses.

Regular portfolio review enables learners to recognize patterns, target weaknesses, and build on strengths.

75% percent of teachers reported that learners became more effective and independent in identifying their own learning needs.

Example: Interviewer: *Can you describe any observed changes in learners' language development linked to portfolio use?*

Teacher: *"Yes, learners begin to identify and work on their language weaknesses independently."*

Theme 2: Motivation and Engagement

Teachers consistently emphasized that self-assessment portfolios substantially boost learners' motivation and engagement in language learning.

By offering a structured framework for documenting and reflecting on progress, portfolios cultivate pride, alleviate anxiety, and promote active learner involvement. This theme highlights how the emotional and psychological benefits of portfolio use lead to deeper and more sustained engagement with learning activities.

Sub-Theme: Pride in Progress. Teachers observed that portfolios foster pride as learners see clear evidence of their growth, motivating them to set higher goals and invest more effort.

Example: Interviewer: *How does portfolio assessment influence learners' motivation?*

Teacher: *"They feel proud when they look back at earlier work and realize how far they've come."*

Sub-Theme: Reduced Anxiety. Regular portfolio review reduces assessment anxiety, as learners feel more prepared and confident about their abilities.

Example: Interviewer: *What changes have you noticed in learners' attitudes toward exams after using portfolios?*

Teacher: *"It reduces anxiety during exams because learners feel more prepared after reviewing their past work."*

Sub-Theme: Engagement.

Portfolios increase classroom engagement, with learners participating more actively and taking greater responsibility for their learning, even among those previously less motivated.

Example: Interviewer: *How does portfolio use affect learners' participation in class?*

Teacher: *"They engage more with the material and discussions because they're invested in their own progress."*

Theme 3: Learner Autonomy

Learner autonomy involves students actively managing their learning by setting goals, choosing strategies, monitoring progress, and evaluating outcomes, either independently or with others.

This concept spans cognitive, metacognitive, emotional, and social aspects and is essential for lifelong learning. Interview analysis showed that autonomy was a key theme, with 9.5% of coded responses addressing it directly.

Teachers frequently noted that portfolio assessment promoted greater independence and responsibility, as learners became more proactive in goal setting, self-evaluation, and taking ownership of their learning—key traits of autonomous learners.

Sub-Theme: Goal-Setting. Portfolios encouraged learners to set specific, personalized goals based on self-assessment and feedback, shifting motivation from teacher-driven to learner-initiated objectives.

Examples: Interviewer: *In what ways do you think portfolios support learner autonomy in your classes?*
Teacher: *"Learners learn to set their learning targets based on portfolio feedback."*

Sub-Theme: Ownership. Allowing learners to choose portfolio content increased their engagement, pride, and accountability, leading to deeper commitment and motivation.

Examples: Interviewer: *In what ways do you think portfolios support learner autonomy in your classes?*
Teacher: *"They choose what to include, so they develop ownership over their work."*

Sub-Theme: Self-Evaluation. Portfolios promoted regular self-assessment, helping learners independently identify strengths and areas for improvement.

Example: Interviewer: *In what ways do you think portfolios support learner autonomy in your classes?*
Teacher: *"It teaches them how to evaluate their strengths and weaknesses without relying solely on the teacher."*

Theme 4: Instructional shifts

This theme highlights the significant pedagogical shifts teachers make when implementing portfolio assessment, including changes in instructional methods, feedback, and lesson planning. These adaptations represent a move from standardized, teacher-centered teaching to more flexible, data-informed instruction that addresses individual and group learning needs. Analysis showed that 10.7% of teacher responses (9 out of 84) specifically discussed these changes, emphasizing their impact on classroom practice and teaching effectiveness.

Sub-Theme: Individualized Teaching. Portfolios gave teachers detailed insights into each learner's progress, allowing for customized instruction based on individual

strengths and needs, cited in 44.4% of responses for this theme.

Example: Interviewer: *How has implementing portfolio assessment affected your instructional practices?*

Teacher: *“My teaching has become more individualized, catering to what I see in each learner’s portfolio.”*

Sub-Theme: Tailored Feedback. Teachers used portfolios to provide specific, actionable feedback linked directly to learners’ documented work, replacing generic comments, accounting for 33.3% of responses.

Example: Interviewer: *How do you use portfolio data to inform feedback?*

Teacher: *“I highlight recurring errors in their writing samples and suggest strategies to address them.”*

Sub-Theme: Lesson Plan Adaptation. Portfolio data helped teachers identify class-wide trends and adjust lesson plans to address common gaps, noted in 22.2% of responses.

Examples: Interviewer: *How does portfolio data inform instructional decisions?* Teacher: *“I adapt my lesson plans based on common gaps I observe.”*

Theme 5: Language Skill Improvement

Improvement in language skills was identified as a key theme in teachers’ perceptions of portfolio assessment, though it comprised only 4.8% of coded responses (4 out of 84). Teachers noted that portfolios led to observable gains in writing fluency, grammar accuracy, and learners’ awareness of specific language skills. These advancements were attributed to the ongoing, reflective process of portfolio use, which promotes continuous practice, feedback, and self-monitoring.

Sub-Theme: Writing Fluency. Portfolios promoted regular writing and reflection, leading to improved fluency and confidence, as mentioned in 50% of language skill improvement responses.

Example: Interviewer: *Can you describe any observed changes in learners’ language development linked to portfolio use?* Teacher: *“Writing fluency has improved significantly because learners write more and reflect on their writing.”*

Sub-Theme: Grammar Accuracy. Revising portfolio entries and receiving targeted feedback increased learners’ grammar accuracy and metalinguistic awareness (25% of responses).

Example: Interviewer: *Can you describe any observed changes in learners’ language development linked to portfolio use?*

Teacher: *“Their awareness of sentence structure has improved through revisions and teacher comments.”*

Sub-Theme: Skill-Specific Awareness. Portfolios heightened learners’ awareness of specific skills, such as

vocabulary and pronunciation, enabling focused improvement (25% of responses).

Example: Interviewer: *Can you describe any observed changes in learners’ language development linked to portfolio use?* Teacher: *“Learners became more aware of their vocabulary gaps and worked to expand their lexical repertoire through portfolio reflections.”*

Theme 6: Implementation Barriers

This theme addresses the challenges teachers face when implementing portfolio assessment in their teaching practice. Although portfolios are valued for promoting autonomy, reflection, and skill growth, teachers frequently encounter barriers that impede their effective use. In the data, 7.1% of responses (6 out of 84) highlighted issues such as limited time, learner preparedness, and insufficient resources. These obstacles represent both practical and instructional difficulties that can impact the long-term success of portfolio assessment in language classrooms.

Sub-Theme: Critical Thinking Development. Half of the responses in this theme (3 out of 6) noted that portfolios foster metacognitive reflection and analytical reasoning, helping learners critically evaluate their language use and strategies.

Example: Interviewer: *How has portfolio assessment influenced learners’ thinking skills?* Teacher: *“Learners have become more analytical about their language use and learning strategies.”*

Sub-Theme: Growth Mindset and Self-Awareness. Portfolios encouraged a growth mindset and greater self-awareness, making learners more intentional and resilient in their learning (2 out of 6 responses).

Example: Interviewer: *What changes have you noticed in learners’ attitudes toward learning?* Teacher: *“Learners take setbacks less personally and focus on how to get better.”*

Sub-Theme: Promotion of Learner Autonomy. Portfolios empowered learners to be more self-directed, supporting independent goal-setting and progress tracking (1 out of 6 responses).

Example: Interviewer: *How has the use of portfolios affected learner independence?* Teacher: *“Learners are more self-directed, setting goals and tracking their progress independently.”*

5. Discussion

The discussion of this study’s findings underscores the significant role that self-assessment portfolios play in the development of learner autonomy, metacognitive awareness, and formative assessment practices in pre-intermediate EFL contexts. The results revealed that learners, through regular engagement with structured

reflective journals, developed a heightened awareness of their language abilities, enabling them to identify specific strengths and weaknesses across listening, speaking, reading, and writing skills. This finding is consistent with the literature (Suherman, 2018; Ma'arif et al., 2021), which highlights that portfolio assessment fosters self-reflection and responsibility and encourages learners to actively engage in the learning process. The act of documenting progress and challenges every week not only facilitated the identification of patterns—such as recurring grammatical errors or improvements in reading comprehension—but also empowered learners to set realistic goals for improvement and to take greater ownership of their learning journey.

Furthermore, the data suggest that self-assessment portfolios contributed to increased motivation and a more positive attitude toward language learning. Learners frequently expressed pride in their achievements and a willingness to address their weaknesses, which aligns with findings from Doroudi et al. (2024) and Alghanmi (2023) regarding the positive impact of self-assessment on motivation, self-regulation, and critical thinking (Biglari et al., 2021).

The reflective process encouraged by the portfolios appeared to shift learners' perspectives on assessment, transforming it from a source of anxiety into an opportunity for growth and self-improvement (Taheri & Mashhadi Heidar, 2019).

Notably, the specificity with which learners could articulate their strengths and weaknesses—such as distinguishing between ease in reading and difficulty in writing—demonstrates the effectiveness of portfolios in supporting metacognitive development at the pre-intermediate level.

Teachers' perspectives further corroborate the value of self-assessment portfolios as diagnostic and instructional tools.

The qualitative data revealed that teachers found the portfolios provided unique insights into learners' thought processes and skill gaps that might not be evident through traditional assessments (Hamp-Lyons & Condon, 2000). This enabled more targeted feedback, individualized support, and responsive lesson planning, echoing the benefits of learning-oriented assessment described by Derakhshan and Ghiasvand (2022).

Teachers also observed that students who engaged deeply with their portfolios became more proactive in class, asked more meaningful questions, and demonstrated increased independence—traits that are essential for the development of lifelong learning skills.

Despite these clear benefits, both learners and teachers identified several challenges associated with portfolio implementation.

Learners sometimes struggled with how to evaluate their performance or express their reflections in English,

pointing to the need for clear scaffolding and ongoing teacher support (Wang & He, 2020). Teachers, on the other hand, noted the increased workload involved in reviewing journals and the variability in the quality of student reflections.

These challenges are well documented in the literature (Ma'arif et al., 2021; Pourdana & Tavassoli, 2022) and highlight the importance of providing structured prompts, explicit training, and institutional support to ensure the effectiveness and sustainability of portfolio assessment.

Overall, the findings of this study contribute to a growing body of evidence supporting the integration of self-assessment portfolios in EFL education. When thoughtfully implemented, portfolios not only enhance learner self-awareness and autonomy but also provide teachers with actionable data to inform instruction (Biglari et al., 2021; Wang & He, 2020). The study's results suggest that portfolios are particularly effective at the pre-intermediate level, where learners are developing foundational skills and benefit from regular, structured reflection (Suherman, 2018).

For practitioners, the implications are clear: the success of portfolio assessment depends on careful design, consistent support, and a shift toward learner-centered pedagogy (Taheri & Mashhadi Heidar, 2019). For policymakers and curriculum designers, the findings reinforce the need to move beyond exam-oriented assessment cultures and to adopt alternative approaches that prioritize reflective practice and metacognitive growth (Wang & He, 2020).

While challenges remain, particularly in terms of workload and learner readiness, the substantial benefits for both learners and teachers make self-assessment portfolios a valuable tool for contemporary EFL classrooms (Hamp-Lyons & Condon, 2000).

6. Conclusion

The present study set out to explore the perceptions of pre-intermediate EFL learners and their teachers regarding the use of self-assessment portfolios for identifying language strengths and weaknesses.

The findings demonstrate that self-assessment portfolios, when integrated thoughtfully into the curriculum, can be highly effective in promoting learner self-awareness, motivation, and autonomy (Alibakhshi & Sarani, 2014).

Learners consistently reported that regular reflection enabled them to recognize specific areas of proficiency and challenge across the four major language skills, allowing more targeted goals and proactive engagement, echoing prior research on portfolio-based assessment (Pourdana & Tavassoli, 2022).

Teachers recognized the diagnostic value of self-assessment portfolios, gaining nuanced insights into

learners' challenges and achievements not visible through traditional assessments (Liu & Brantmeier, 2019). This enabled individualized feedback and responsive instruction, though success depends on clear guidance, structured prompts, and sustained support—particularly for lower-proficiency students—amid challenges like increased workload.

Theoretically, this study advances constructivist learning theory by demonstrating how self-assessment portfolios operationalize active knowledge construction through structured reflection and iterative goal-setting at the pre-intermediate level, extending Dewey (1933) and Piaget (1936) to EFL contexts where learners actively build metacognitive schemas from authentic tasks.

It further enriches self-regulated learning and metacognition frameworks (Zimmerman & Schunk, 2017; Biglari et al., 2021), showing that portfolio-mediated pattern recognition in strengths/weaknesses fosters forethought, performance control, and self-reflection phases, particularly in speaking/listening skills. Aligning with Little's (2022) learner autonomy model and Vygotsky's (1978) sociocultural perspective, the findings illuminate how scaffolded portfolios bridge the zone of proximal development via teacher-learner dialogue, transforming passive EFL learners into autonomous agents while challenging exam-centric paradigms in resource-constrained settings like Iran.

The pedagogical implications are significant. Integrating self-assessment portfolios into EFL programs fosters reflection and learner autonomy essential for sustained development; teachers should adopt structured reflective tools with explicit instruction on self-assessment (Alibakhshi & Sarani, 2014).

Curriculum designers and policymakers must address exam-oriented limitations by supporting teacher training, resources, and scaffolding to maximize benefits and cultivate critical thinking and self-regulation (Biglari et al., 2021).

In conclusion, self-assessment portfolios represent a valuable addition to EFL assessment tools. Their successful integration requires thoughtful design and ongoing support, with evidence from this study and broader literature strongly affirming their pedagogical value (Biglari et al., 2021; Liu & Brantmeier, 2019).

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Authors Contribution

All the authors have participated sufficiently in the intellectual content, conception, and design of this work or the analysis and interpretation of the data (when applicable), as well as the writing of the manuscript.

Availability of data and materials

The data that support the findings of this study are available from the corresponding author upon reasonable request.

Conflict of interest

The author states that there is no conflict of interest.

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