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### **WHAT DO YOU THINK? THE VIEWS OF PREPARATORY STUDENTS ABOUT KEEPING PORTFOLIOS**

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#### **ABSTRACT**

Portfolios are alternative tools in writing in English as foreign language learning, but the portfolio process is not a decision of students, it is decided by English teachers. The main concern of this study is to present the views of the preparatory students about keeping portfolios at Kahramanmaraş Sütçü İmam University. In this study, the sample group includes 50 EFL students. A portfolio use attitude survey was applied. It was found that portfolio keeping is beneficial in EFL writing in terms of vocabulary and grammar knowledge, reading, research, and writing skills.

**Key Words:** Writing, portfolio, EFL.

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#### **1. Introduction**

Nowadays, different teaching strategies in language classrooms are shifting from the traditional way of transmitting knowledge to what students will need to succeed in the real world (Caner, 2010). To be able to think critically, learn to solve problems, work and communicate with others, keeping portfolios is a new way. Given this fact, educators take them into consideration and insert them into their curriculum. However, they have not realized how their students feel about process of keeping portfolio.

Society asks for students who have cognitive skills such as problem solving, critical thinking, analyzing data, and presenting them orally and written format and so on (Dochy, 2001). Therefore, writing is one of the most vital skills to be acquired in their life, and keeping portfolio is an alternative way to improve this skill as much as others. Portfolio is defined as a regular and well-conducted collection of a student's works that can be considered as the direct evidence of a student's efforts, accomplishments and advancement throughout a period of time (Caner, 2010). In a wider definition of portfolio, it is considered to be "a purposeful collection of student work that exhibits student's efforts, progress, and achievements" (Snively and Wright, 2003; p.3) as well as a teaching tool which helps the development of language skills of the student. With the help of portfolio, students represent what they have learned, what they haven't learned yet and what they still need to improve.

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Şahinkarakaş (1998) states that keeping portfolio may have positive influence on students' perceptions about writing. She points that keeping portfolio help learners to improve their writing abilities. Students can learn from their mistakes in their drafts and they become organized and planned. They study during the process rather than just a class time. She also adds that using portfolios in a course is a part of learning process. She states that portfolio implementation and assessment in a class foster learner empowerment.

The literature on language teaching has plenty of studies, which consist of perceptions of students on various topics. A simple search of the internet using the key words "keeping portfolio in EFL" shows how popular this concept is in educational circles; 2.860.000 in general, 839.00 in US-based hits, and about 1.710 in Turkey-based hits. Most of these links are related to teachers and their reflections. However, there are just a few researches which have investigated students' views about keeping portfolio. Gathering information about EFL students' views about keeping portfolio might help teachers and students in terms of an effective teaching and learning English.

Therefore, the purpose of this paper is as follows:

What are the views of the Turkish learners attending at English preparatory programs at universities about keeping portfolios?

## 2. Literature Review

Baki and Birgin (2007) highlight that recent developments and demands in science and society have deeply affected education. According to them, theories such as constructivism and multiple-intelligence and new social trends such as changing labor market, information-age brings about a radical change in traditional approaches of learning, teaching and assessment. Since learning approach is changed, it affects learning process and approaches (Fourie & Van Niekerk, 2001). Many researches emphasized the necessity of using portfolio such as Birgin (2003). They reveal that portfolio gives more reliable and dynamic data about students for teachers, parents and also student himself.

In Turkey, Ministry of National Education (MONE) suggests that the assessment activities should be done in order to find out the weaknesses of students and to fulfill them (MONE, 2004). To reach these goals, keeping portfolios is a beneficial way.

There have been a number of studies to determine the views or opinions of language students about lots of subjects. However, a review of the literature illustrates that there is little research conducted to investigate the use of portfolio with EFL students.

One of the recent experimental studies dealing with the effectiveness of portfolio in EFL situations by Heidari and Taki (2010) examined what the students' perceptions about portfolio use. Regarding this purpose, they conducted a research. They chose forty pre-intermediate Iranian English learners as participants. They were randomly divided into experimental and control

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groups of 20 each. In the control group, students' writing skills were evaluated through "teacher-made tests" and through portfolio assessment in the other. The findings of their work indicate that portfolio use has a positive effect on language learning and writing ability. The researchers found out that portfolio helps students' self-assessment and almost all students are satisfied with this method of assessment.

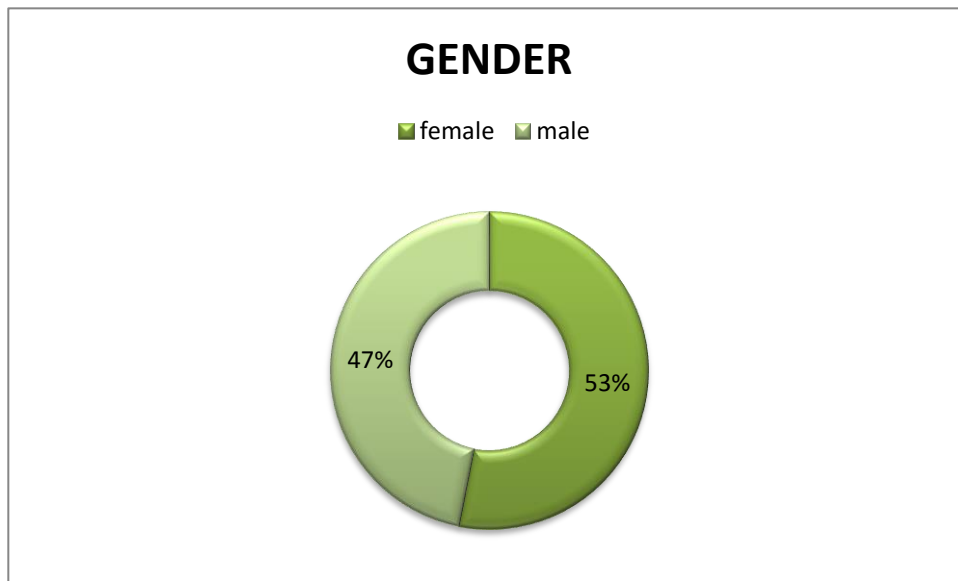
Caner (2010) conducted a recent study on students' perceptions about keeping portfolio. The participants of the study are 140 Turkish EFL students enrolled in the intermediate and upper intermediate prep classes at the School of Foreign Languages of Anadolu University. In his study, students' attitudes towards using portfolio were examined by means of a portfolio attitude survey, semi-structured interviews with the participants and their instructors, and two open ended questions. The results indicated that the subjects of this study generally prefer to be evaluated by the traditional way. On the contrary of the research results of Heidari and Taki (2010), it was found out that a number of the subjects have negative attitudes towards portfolio assessment in their writing courses.

Studies and articles related to perceptions of students about portfolio use have revealed that students' views are changeable according to their processes, levels, ages and so on. However, portfolio use has been established as a reliable basis for important decisions about placement and progress in the case of EFL students, and it also enables teachers to provide ongoing feedback that informs both teaching and learning. Nevertheless, due to the fact that students take part in every phase of portfolio use such as making decision on what to include in portfolio, generally teachers do not ask students whether they would prefer doing what is given or not and how they feel and think about the portfolio.

### **3. Methodology**

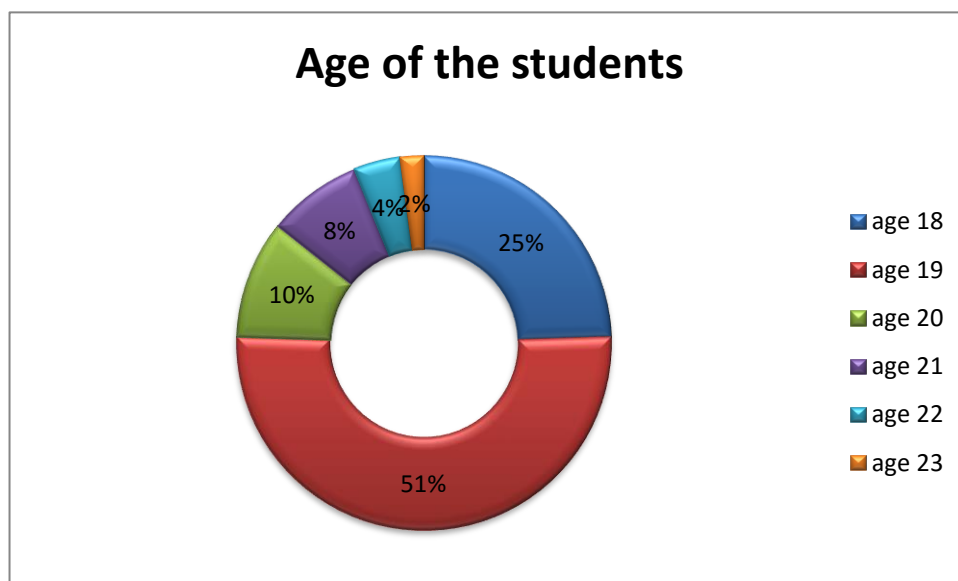
#### *Subjects*

49 intermediate level students from two different classes attending English preparatory program at Kahramanmaraş Sütçü İmam University participated in the study. The classes were selected by using cluster random sampling since there was no certain criterion. The background information of the subjects is given in Figure 1, 2, 3 and 4 particularly.



**Figure 1:** Visual illustration of gender distribution

As figure 1 shows 47% of subjects are male while 53% of them are female. Since the gender was not a variable in this study, the subjects were not classified or grouped in terms of gender; however, nearly an equal number of students from both genders were selected.



**Figure 2:** Visual illustration of age distribution

Figure 2 illustrates the age distributions of the subjects. 76% of students are from 18-19 age groups, and the remaining 24% consists of students from 20-23 age groups. Their mean age was 19.2.

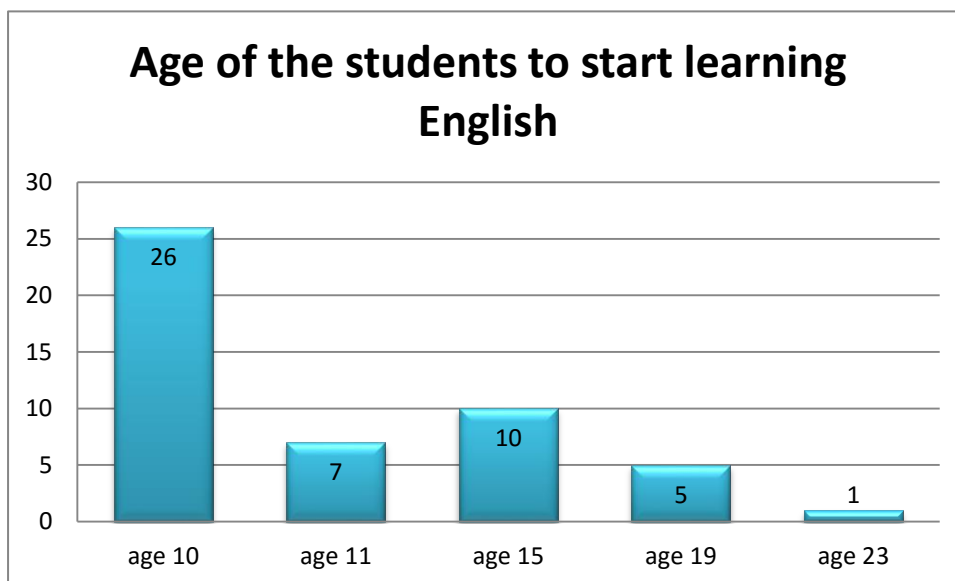


Figure 3: Visual illustration of age distribution of starting to learn English

When the age they started to learn English is considered, as shown in Figure 3, more than 50% of the subjects started to learn English when they were teenagers. On the other hand, about 10 % of them started to study English at the ages between 19 and above. The mean age to start learning English was 12.3.

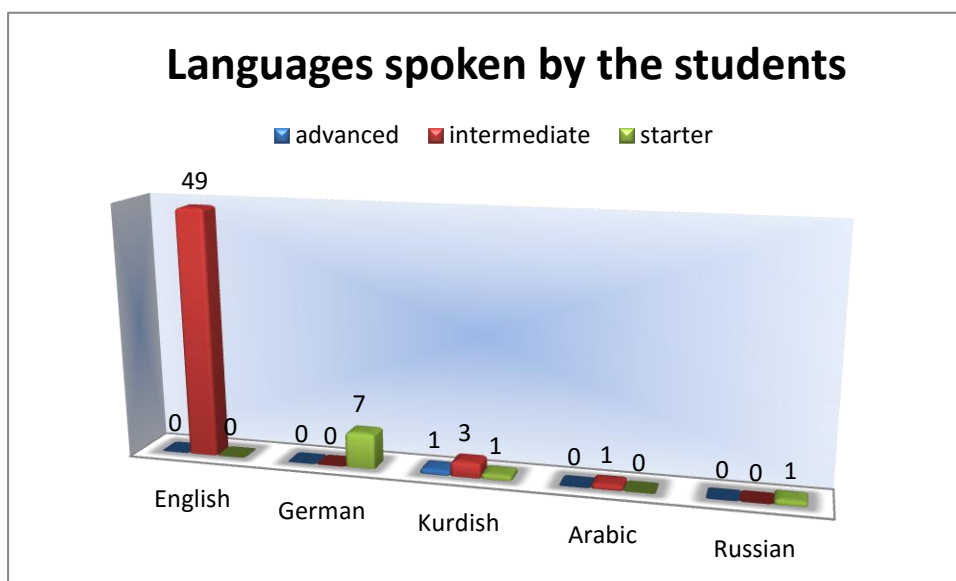
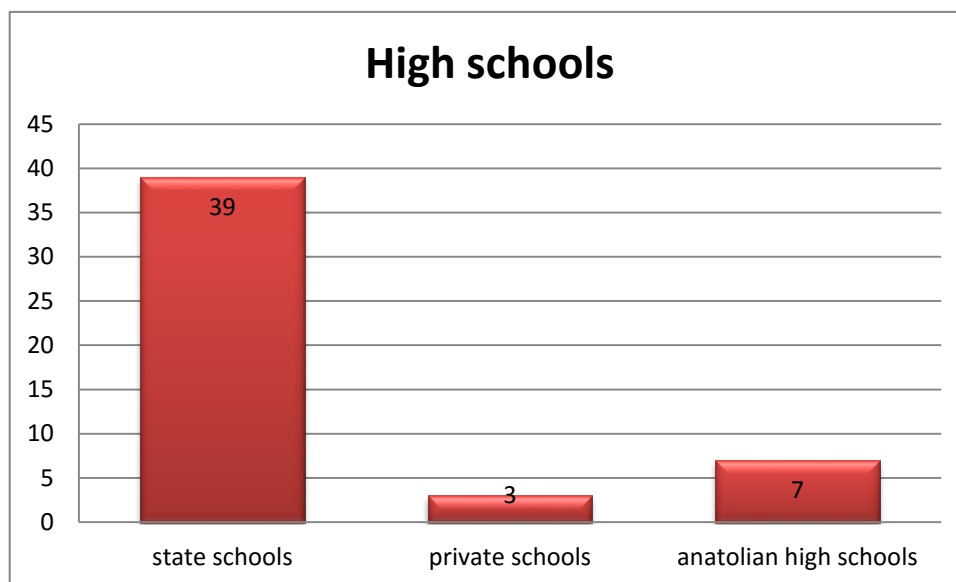


Figure 4: Visual illustration of languages spoken by the subjects

In terms of languages spoken by the subjects, the distribution is the following: 49 students reported that they spoke English at medium level. 6 students stated that they spoke German at starter level while 1 student spoke Kurdish and Russian at the same level. 1 student explained that he spoke Kurdish at advanced level while 1 student knew Kurdish at medium level and 3 other students knew Kurdish at medium level. Finally, 1 student could speak Russian at starter level.

Regarding the place where they started to learn English, all subjects predicated to learn English at school. Besides, 92% students explicated that their mother tongue is Turkish, while 8% students explained that their mother tongues are both Kurdish and Turkish.



**Figure 5:** Visual illustration of high schools of the subjects

Figure 5 illustrates which high schools the subjects graduated from. While 39 students constituting the 80% of the group graduated from state high schools, 7 students including 14% of the group attended at Anatolian high schools. 3 students making up 6% took a degree from a private high school.

All of the students kept portfolios for 9 weeks throughout the first semester of the academic year of 2015-2016. Each week, the topic changed according to their different interests.

### *Instruments*

Firstly background information of the subjects was collected by a questionnaire (See Appendix 1). Then, a portfolio use survey was used in this study. It was adopted from a study of Caner (2010). The survey (See Appendix 2) consisted of 32 items employing a five-point Likert-type scale ranging as strongly disagree (1), disagree (2), neutral (3), agree (4), strongly agree (5). The statements were divided into four areas. The first area was about perception and understanding of the portfolio including 9 items, the second one contained 4 items about portfolio sharing activities. The third area including 4 items was about actual practice in preparing portfolios, and the last one had 15 items about advantages and disadvantages of portfolios.

#### 4. Data collection and Analysis

All instructions, questionnaire and survey were given English (See Appendices 1 and 2) because the all subjects have enough language level to understand clearly. They were informed that this study had no value for their grades. The reason of why they would participate in this study was explained. Approximately 10 minutes were given to complete the survey.

In the data analysis, the frequencies of each area were computed by using Microsoft Excel to answer the research question. There were tables of the four areas below. The numbers and frequencies in percentages were provided in accordance with the responses of the subjects.

#### 5. Findings and Discussion

The aim of this survey was to find out a profile of EFL writers' perception about the use of portfolio.

The survey concluded 4 main areas statements of which to find out:

- Subjects' awareness about the portfolio
- Subjects' opinions related to portfolio sharing activities
- Subjects' attitudes related to actual practice in preparing portfolio, and
- Subjects' attitudes related advantages and disadvantages of portfolio.

##### 1. Subjects' awareness about the portfolio

The following table (Table I) aims to show how much subjects are aware of what they have done in the portfolio process.

Table I. Students' awareness about portfolio

Statements	SD	D	N	A	SA*
Item 1	0	2	31	39	28
Item 4	0	4	28	35	33
Item 7	0	0	6	57	37
Item 13	2	2	41	31	24
Item 17	2	4	35	53	6
Item 19	0	0	20	55	25
Item 20	57	37	6	0	0
Item 24	2	0	33	24	41
Item 29	65	14	19	2	0

\*SD: Strongly Disagree; D: Disagree; N: Neutral; A: Agree; SA: Strongly Agree

Item 1. Keeping a portfolio requires a clear organizing concept.

Item 4. I feel the appearance of the portfolio (including its cover and design) is important.

- Item 7. I have a clear concept about how to keep a portfolio.  
 Item 13. I feel the content of the portfolio (including its organization and details) is important.  
 Item 17. Preparing a portfolio requires good computer skills and artistic talent.  
 Item 19. I think reflection and self-evaluation is the most important part of the portfolio.  
 Item 20. The handout's introduction to the portfolio was not clear enough.  
 Item 24. Looking at the previous students' portfolio samples gave me a better idea about portfolios.  
 Item 29. I still don't understand why we need to keep a portfolio.

For instance, in the first item of the survey, 67 % (total of A + SA) of the subjects emphasize that keeping a portfolio requires a clear organizing concept, and item 7 shows that 94 % of the subjects know how to keep a portfolio.

Moreover, in item 29 a great number of students (79 %; total of SD + DA) claim that they understand why they need to keep a portfolio, and only 21% of the subjects state that they still don't know why they need to do this.

## 2. Subjects' opinions related to portfolio sharing activities

Most of the students agree with the idea that sharing activities contribute to their English learning. The following table (Table II) figures out the subjects' opinions related to portfolio sharing activities.

**Table II.** Students' opinions related to portfolio sharing activities

Statements	SD	D	N	A	SA*
<b>Item 2</b>	0	2	28	41	29
<b>Item 6</b>	0	2	33	37	28
<b>Item 14</b>	0	0	14	49	37
<b>Item 21</b>	0	4	37	39	20

\*SD: Strongly Disagree; D: Disagree; N: Neutral; A: Agree; SA: Strongly Agree

Item 2. The portfolio sharing activities offered me chances to learn good English learning methods from other classmates.

Item 6. During the portfolio sharing activities, I was able to share useful English learning resources with my classmates.

Item 14. Portfolio sharing can increase classmates' cooperative learning and mutual growth in English.

Item 21. The portfolio sharing activities were helpful to my understanding of the portfolio.

For instance, item 2 demonstrates that 67 % of the subjects believe that portfolio activities offered them chances to learn good English learning strategies than other classmates and 23% of the subjects state that such activities do not contribute to their understanding of English learning strategies. On the other hand, 28% of the subjects say that they have no idea about the pros or cons of portfolio sharing activities in the classroom.

On the contrary, in item 6, most subjects (65 %) express that they were able to share useful English learning resources with their friends.



Item 14 illustrates that 86 % of the subjects believe that portfolio-sharing activities improve cooperative learning as well as mutual growth in English while 14 % of them don't think so.

When students were asked whether portfolio sharing activities were helpful in their understanding of the portfolio preparation procedure, 59 % of the subjects believe that sharing activities contribute to their understanding of the portfolio, and just 4 % of them find such activities as an unsuccessful process for understanding portfolio preparation procedures.

In general, students' responses to the items related to portfolio sharing activities claim that they had chances to be successful.

*3. Subjects' attitudes related to actual practice in preparing portfolio*

Students' attitudes towards the actual practice in preparing portfolio state that they have positive attitudes towards implementing portfolio into their English learning processes.

The table III shows subjects' attitudes related to the actual practice in preparing portfolio.

**Table III.** Students' attitudes related to actual practice in preparing portfolio

Statements	SD	D	N	A	SA*
<b>Item 5</b>	2	2	31	41	24
<b>Item 9</b>	0	2	24	45	29
<b>Item 15</b>	52	31	15	2	0
<b>Item 25</b>	0	14	41	37	8

*\*SD: Strongly Disagree; D: Disagree; N: Neutral; A: Agree; SA: Strongly Agree*

Item 5. I reflected on and evaluated my learning in each aspect when keeping the portfolio.

Item 9. I have completed most of the learning goals I set up in my portfolio.

Item 15. The goal I originally set up in the portfolio was too difficult and I couldn't reach it.

Item 25. I added appropriate explanations to the samples or records, which I included in the portfolio.

Item 9 shows that almost 74 % of the subjects have completed most of the learning goals they set up in their portfolio, and 24 % of them state that they have no idea whether they have completed or not. Besides, item 15 confirms that 83 % of the subjects reach the goal that they originally set up in the portfolio.

Although, item 5 shows that 4 % of the subjects disagree with the idea that keeping a portfolio reflects and evaluates their learning outcome, and 31 % of them have no idea whether keeping portfolio reflects and evaluates their learning, there are more students including 65 % of whole participants who agree with the usefulness of portfolio.

#### 4. Subjects' attitudes related advantages and disadvantages of portfolio

The survey items that investigate the advantages and disadvantages of portfolio assessment (Items 3, 8, 10, 11, 12, 16, 18, 22, 23, 26, 27, 28, 30, 31, and 32) give a clear picture of portfolio as a favorite instrument. Table IV depicts the subjects' perceptions related to the advantages and disadvantages of using portfolio.

**Table IV.** Students' attitudes related advantages and disadvantages of portfolio.

Statements	SD	D	N	A	SA*
Item 3	0	14	41	37	8
Item 8	0	2	24	45	29
Item 10	0	14	41	37	8
Item 11	2	0	33	24	41
Item 12	0	0	20	55	25
Item 16	0	4	37	39	20
Item 18	0	0	14	49	37
Item 22	0	2	33	37	28
Item 23	2	4	35	53	6
Item 26	0	0	6	57	37
Item 27	0	0	20	55	25
Item 28	2	2	31	41	24
Item 30	52	31	15	2	0
Item 31	52	31	15	2	0
Item 32	0	4	28	35	33

\*SD: Strongly Disagree; D: Disagree; N: Neutral; A: Agree; SA: Strongly Agree

Item 3. It takes me a lot of time to keep a portfolio.

Item 8. The portfolio helped me organize and arrange my English learning.

Item 10. The portfolio increased the burden of my study.

Item 11. The portfolio allowed me to choose what I like to read or listen to according to my personal interest.

Item 12. The portfolio increased my willingness to learn actively.

Item 16. The portfolio allowed me to choose how to plan and learn my English style.

Item 18. The portfolio helped me understand my strengths and weakness in English.

Item 22. The portfolio will be of great help to my future independent learning.

Item 23. I feel some practices (like listening or speaking) could not be easily presented in the portfolio.

Item 26. I feel the portfolio can present my learning results.

Item 27. The portfolio made me realize that I can learn anytime and anywhere.

Item 28. Portfolios can show my efforts in learning English outside of the classroom.

Item 30. When keeping the portfolio, I had a chance to reflect my English learning of this semester.

Item 31. I feel the portfolio is not helpful to my learning.

Item 32. The portfolio helps me to keep the habit of listening to, reading, or writing English regularly.

For instance, in item 31 of the survey, 83 % (total of SD + DA) of the subjects believe that portfolio is helpful to their learning. Similar results are also seen in other items. For instance; items 8, 18, and 26. However, item 10 shows that some of the subjects (41 %) don't have any idea about whether portfolio is a burden of their study.

## **6. Conclusion and Suggestions**

This study aimed to examine the attitudes of EFL preparatory students of Kahramanmaraş Sütçü Imam University about keeping portfolio. In order to find out this aim, the research question inquired, "What are the attitudes of university students as EFL writers about keeping portfolio?"

The responses of the survey confirm that most subjects have positive attitudes about keeping portfolio. For example, 79 % of them know how and why they keep portfolio. In addition to this, 80 % of the subjects think that keeping portfolio help them to learn actively. During portfolio process, they need a preparation, and they share their activities and take feedbacks. The results reveal that they have informed about the onus of learning process.

"Creation" (Cook-Benjamin, 2001) is the right explanation of the portfolio process according to the students' responses. Most subjects of this study find portfolio process meaningful. Similarly, according to the results of a survey conducted by Aydın (2010) the prep students of Balıkesir University have positive perceptions towards keeping portfolio. However, the participants have some problems during the portfolio process. The relevant surveys show that portfolio help students to improve their self-directed learning and raise their awareness on learning strategies.

As a note on limitations of this study, the subjects in the survey were restricted to 49 students studying English as a Foreign Language in the School of Foreign Languages at Kahramanmaraş Sütçü Imam University, Turkey. Therefore, the further studies should be conducted with larger number of students in different contexts.

Finally, a further study may investigate the relationship between EFL students' attitudes towards keeping portfolio and their success in the portfolio assessment. Another research area for further explanation may focus on the relationship EFL students' attitudes towards keeping portfolio and various independent variables such as computer literacy and teachers' attitudes towards keeping portfolio.

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