

Portfolio - An Alternative Form of Assessment in EFL Context

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Abstract: *For long time, the use of standardized language test has dominated the language assessing practice. Assessment has focused on measuring how thoroughly students have mastered knowledge and skills. However, traditional standardized tests have been criticized for removing the human element and restricting communication between students and teachers; for eliminating the opportunity for students to draft and to revise their work; and for not allowing students to participate in choosing work that would better represent their abilities. The changes in education objectives lead to a change in assessment. Performance based assessment seems to be well suited in reflecting what a person can do. In contrast to measuring what they know, as found in formal measures, performance assessments measure how students can apply the knowledge they have acquired rather than what they perform in a test. This paper tries to raise the appropriateness of portfolios as a form of assessment that can allow students to see their own improvement over time, resulting in a sense of accomplishment as well as establish learning goals and to identify their strengths and their weaknesses.*

Key words: standardized test, portfolio assessment, performance based assessment, students' performance.

I. INTRODUCTION

1.1. Rationales

The term assessment in education is viewed as a process of gathering data about students by observing, describing, collecting, recording, scoring, and interpreting information to make decisions about placement, promotion, retention, or graduation. Traditionally, assessment has focused on measuring how thoroughly students have mastered knowledge and skills. Black (2002) generates three main purposes of assessment: to confirm students' achievement for certification or transfer to the next process; to provide accountability to public stakeholders, and to improve students' learning. Others include motivating students (Earl, 2003) and preparing students for the future (Irons, 2007).

However, traditional standardized tests have been criticized for removing the human element and restricting communication between students and teachers; for eliminating the opportunity for students to draft and to revise their work; and for not allowing students to participate in choosing work that would better represent their abilities (Black, Daiker, Sommers, & Stygal, 1992; Maeroff, 1991). Sheppard (1989) admitted that "...accountability testing in the 1980's is having a pernicious effect on education. Standardized tests have always been fallible, limited measures of learning goals" (p. 9). Wiggins (1992) considered that traditional testing over-assesses student knowledge and under-assesses student know-how with knowledge. Hart (1994) elaborated on the following drawbacks of standardized tests: (1) their results are "often inconsistent, inaccurate, and biased" (p. 6); (2) there is doubtful validity (how well the test measures what it purports to measure) of some tests; (3) they mostly measure students' test-taking abilities; and (4) they inflict damage on the nature of teaching and learning by emphasizing the recall of information, implying that there is only one single and acceptable answer to every question, turning student into passive recipients of information, by forcing teachers to teach to the test. Having mentioned many limitations, the traditional standardized assessments should be replaced by other forms of assessment for a better performance of language learners. That is more than measuring students' achievement, assessment can improve students' learning, motivation and preparing them for the future.

1.2. Formative and summative assessment

Assessment is often divided into formative and summative. However, the division is not strictly clear (Airasian & Russell, 2007; Freeman & Lewis, 1998). It is agreed widely that summative assessment is often carried out at the end of a learning process, such as a project or a term, to judge the overall success of that process (Airasian & Russell, 2007; Boyle & Charles, 2013; Freeman & Lewis, 1998). Conversely, formative assessment focuses more on providing reflective information to improve student learning during the process (Black & Wiliam, 1998). Indeed, summative assessment may also be formative if it provides clear, detailed information, including feedback for students to improve their learning (Bennett, 2011; Irons, 2007). Therefore, the distinction between summative and formative assessment is fuzzy (Sambell, McDowell & Montgomery, 2013).

Despite the divergence of perspectives on summative and formative assessment, it is undeniable that, for decades, summative assessment has dominated all levels of education including higher education (Stiggins, 2002). Formative assessment has only gained more attention in both education practice and research after the review of classroom assessment practice by Black and Wiliam (1998). The review emphasises that formative assessment can improve students' learning, especially for low achievers (Black & Wiliam, 1998), whereas summative assessment is seen as a tool for providing a snapshot of student learning without effectively and instantly affecting instruction (Stiggins, 2005). Although the review reflects mainly assessment practice at school, it is still helpful to identify the importance of formative assessment in education. Recent emphasis on the acquisition of competences rather than ranking students required teachers to use more formative assessment activities to enhance student learning, develop their competencies throughout a course, this called for a balance of summative and formative assessment to maximise the benefits of assessment for students (Stiggins, 2005). It should be noted that formative and summative assessment complement (rather than replace or compete with) each other.

The changes in the objectives of education make changes in the assessment practice. With rapid production of new knowledge in modern society, the goals of education should expand to include developing learners' skills, such as problem-solving skills and professional skills in real-life contexts. One of the most important goals of education is to develop learners' capacities for lifelong learning to ensure that they can build up knowledge and skills throughout their lives (Boud, 1995, 2000). Therefore, assessment in education is expected to equip students with the ability to undertake assessment of learning tasks throughout their lives, by checking their performance against assessment standards and seeking feedback from people in their environment to improve their learning (Boud, 2000; Boud & Soler, 2015)

1.3. Alternative assessment

In terms of testing, alternative assessments are classified as criterion-referenced assessments, where an individual's performance is compared to a specific learning objective or performance standard and not to the performance of other students nationally or locally. As such, alternative assessments provide "a much needed conceptual framework for thinking about the types of performance-based and so-called authentic assessment that are currently being promoted" (Linn, 1994, p. 12). Alternative assessment generally refers to new assessment techniques in contrast to traditional approaches, e.g., multiple choice or short answer tests. According to Worthen (1993), alternative assessment is a more generic term for such types of assessments as direct assessment, authentic assessment, and performance assessment.

Direct assessment of performance may include judging performance in music and athletics, hands-on assessment in vocational practices, competency testing in medical field, and language proficiency testing in conversation and translation (Worthen, 1993). Authentic assessment is a term used to describe meaningful tasks that require students to perform and produce knowledge rather than simply reproduce information others have discovered. Wiggins (1989) offered two criteria of assessment authenticity: that an assessment reflects the challenges, work, and standards engaging practicing professionals, and that it involves a student with opportunities for dialogue, explanations, and inquiry. LeMahieu (1992) considered assessments to be authentic when "they represent behavior or accomplishments that have real meaning and value" (p. 52). This assessment of student performance is relevant not only to class assignment, but it is also "relevant to life outside of school" (Worthen, 1993, p. 445). As Case (1992) stated, "... authentic assessment refers to measuring the real, actual, or genuine [experience] as opposed to measuring a poor substitute" (p. 19). Performance assessment, according to Burke (1999), "is the process of gathering data by systematic observation for making decisions about an individual" (p. ix). Ryan and Miyasaka (1995) considered performance assessment and portfolio assessment to be parts of authentic assessment.

II. A REVIEW OF RELATED LITERATURE

2.1. Definitions of portfolios

The Longman dictionary of language teaching and applied linguistics defines portfolio as "a purposeful collection of work that provides information about someone's efforts, progress or achievement in a given area. (p. 443). Portfolio is a "flat portable case" or a "large heavy envelope" for carrying paper or drawings as well as designs. Portfolio is created to give protection to works of the architect, fine artist, graphic and textiles designers. The works kept are usually two dimensional works. The portfolio protects the drawings and designs from effect of negligence, weathering and aging. It also stores all paper drawings or painting and design of any media (Ifeagwu, 2005). In Hancock (1994, p. 238), a portfolio is defined as the collection of a learner's work assembled for the purpose of determining how much has been learned. Hancock wrote that the portfolio may include examples of the learner's completion of tasks such as reports, (both oral and written), creative projects such as artwork, contributions to group projects, and student writing (e.g., essays, poems, and written homework). The items chosen for inclusion in the portfolio can be selected by the learner, the teacher, or both, depending on the instructor's purposes. Dalheim described portfolios as longitudinal in nature, diverse in content, and collaborative in their selection and evaluation. Portfolios, Dalheim continued, emphasize strengths, development of skills, and improvements, as well as personal reflections and expectations. Dalheim noted that teachers expect portfolios to provide a broad picture of a student's achievement by showing the unfolding of skills over time something that a one-time performance on a test cannot do. Teachers also use portfolios to encourage students to take partial responsibility, for their own learning, through selection and reflection about portfolios.

Pat Belanoff & Peter Elbow first introduced portfolio assessment at Stony Brook University of New York in 1983. They implemented the use of the portfolios in place of a writing exit exam. In her article *Portfolios and Literacy: Why?* Belanoff explains:

Our initial portfolio use at Stony Brook grew from the need to meet objection raised by timed, self-contained assessment of writing, recognition that process pedagogy is undermined by such testing and a growing awareness of the contextuality of all language use.

Portfolios have been one of the most pervasive innovations recommended by educational reformers of the 1980s and 1990s. In 1990, for example, the Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development identified portfolios as one of the nation's top three curriculum trends. O'Malley & Valdez Pierce (1996) state that "an assessment portfolio is the systematic collection and evaluation of student work measured against predetermined scoring criteria, such as scoring guides, rubrics, checklists, or rating scales". Portfolios can provide a continuous picture of student progress, rather than a snapshot of student achievement that single-occasion tests provide. Depending on school or district requirements, portfolios can include performance-based assessments, such as writing samples that illustrate different genres; solutions to math problems that show problem-solving ability; lab reports demonstrating an understanding of a scientific approach; or social studies research reports demonstrating the ability to use multiple sources. In some cases, multiple drafts of student work showing improvements are included.

Portfolio assessment is the procedure used to plan, collect and analyze the multiple sources of data maintained in the portfolio. The process includes student participation in the selection of work, in criteria, goal setting and through self-assessment. Students and teacher collaborate in assessing and evaluating students learning from evidence in portfolio collection, then use the information to make plan and set goals for further learning. That means, the assessment is not unilateral. Portfolio assessment contain guidelines for content, criteria for evaluating process and product as well as evidence of students' reflection (MacLeod & Erlandson, 2012).

Portfolios, like most types of performance-based assessments, are considered tools to guide instructional practice. If a portfolio assessment system is correctly implemented, instruction should be expected to: (1) pay more attention to the process of learning, (2) lead teachers to think, evaluate, and modify their own practices, (3) change students' traditional role from a passive one to one in which they take charge of their own learning and the evaluation of that learning, (4) be guided by current theories of development and the process of learning, and (5) make explicit what content is valuable for both teachers and students. Gitomer and Duschl (1995) indicate that good portfolio practice requires fundamental changes in conceptions of (scientific) knowledge, teaching, learning, and assessment.

2.2. Performance-based assessment

A growing number of business and education leaders recognize the importance of the kinds of assessments that are used to evaluate student learning. Fadel, Honey, and Pasnik (2007), for example, have suggested that the workplace of the 21st century will require "new ways to get work done, solve problems, or create new knowledge"(p.1), and that how we assess students will need to be largely performance-based in order to evaluate how well students are able to apply content knowledge to critical-thinking, problem-solving, and analytical tasks. David Conley, in his book, *College Knowledge* (2005), reports that higher education faculty valued "habits of mind" even more than content knowledge, including the ability to think critically and analytically, to independently draw inferences and reach conclusions, and to solve problems. Performance-based assessments require students to use high level thinking to perform, create, or produce something with transferable real-world application. Research has also shown that they provide useful information about student performance to students, parents, teachers, principals, and policymakers (Matthews, 1995; Koretz et al., 1996; Vogler, 2002). Research on thinking and learning processes also shows that performance-based assessments propel education systems in a direction that corresponds with how individuals actually learn (Herman, 1992).

The term performance-based assessment is often used when referring to a broad spectrum of assessment types. Among those are alternative assessments and authentic assessments. However, some important distinctions in terminology between these terms should be noted. Authentic assessment can be defined as a special kind of performance assessment conducted in an authentic context as part of regular classroom learning rather than as contrived, intrusive assessment tasks (Gipps, 1994). Alternative assessment, as characterized by Aschbacher (1991) requires problem solving and higher level thinking, involves tasks that are worthwhile as instructional activities, uses real-world contexts or simulations, focuses on processes as well as products, and encourages disclosure of standards and criteria. What is important to note is that although performance-based assessment can be authentic, it is not necessarily so (Meyer, 1992) and performance based assessment does not inherently include all the characteristics of alternative assessment. Performance-based assessment then, is a general term encompassing many aspects of both authentic assessment and alternative assessment.

Performance-based assessments typically consist of tasks designed to have students actively solve problems and apply knowledge. One purpose is to observe the strategies that students use to solve problems rather than merely seeing the right answer asked for on a test. A good performance task allows for the examination of challenging content as well as the use of particular skills and an assessment of overall performance. These tasks can include science experiments, oral presentations, essays, video

documentations of performances, and so on. The essence of a performance task is that the skills and knowledge being assessed are contextualized, and the performance requires the student's active, rather than reactive, participation.

Portfolios are a form of performance assessment which involves the systematic collection of student work products over a specified period of time according to a specific set of guidelines (AERA et al., 1999). Research has substantiated that artists, photographers, writers, and others have long used portfolios to represent their exemplary work. In education, portfolios have become increasingly popular in the classroom as an alternative assessment tool to show individual academic progress. As specifically applied in schools and higher education institutions today, portfolios may best be conceptualized as a systematic way of collecting, organizing, and evaluating attainment of core curriculum. As such, portfolios can conceivably serve as the basis for evaluating students' achievements and providing feedback to the students (Reynolds, et al., 2006).

2.2. Characteristics of portfolios assessment

A portfolio has several essential characteristics. First, a portfolio is purposeful. There is a clear reason why certain works would be included and how the portfolio is to be used. Second, rather than reflecting a haphazard collection of samples, the portfolio represents a systematic and well-organized collection of materials that make a sample, not a comprehensive or exhaustive collection, of student work. Third, pre-established guidelines are set up so that it is clear which materials should be included. Fourth, students are engaged in the process by selecting some of the materials and by continually evaluating and reflecting on their work. Fifth, based on clear and well-specified scoring criteria, progress is documented with the evaluations. Finally, feedback is held between teacher and student to review progress, identify areas that need further improvement, and to facilitate student reflection.

Portfolios may include performance tasks and a variety of other student work samples, along with observations and evaluations of student learning from the student and peers as well as the teacher. They provide multiple sources of information about a student's development over time. One important feature of most portfolios is that the student plays a major role in developing and selecting work to include in the portfolio, particularly where the portfolio includes a student's self-selected "best work" along with versions of a piece of work over time. The active participation of the student in his/her own self-assessment process, with the teacher's (and sometimes peers') facilitation, brings a metacognitive element to this approach, helping students learn to evaluate how and what they are learning and to develop their own internal standards. Like an artist's portfolio, a portfolio for assessment purposes is a collection of a student's work that demonstrates his/her achievements, growth, and efforts in many areas or media. It provides documentation of the student's work that displays command of skills and content as well as insight into the learning process over time. As contrasted with the snapshot view of a student provided by a test, portfolios offer opportunities for longitudinal assessment. This supports a developmental view of learning and a keener understanding of each student's own path toward competence. Both portfolios and performance-based assessments are consistent with contemporary developmental and constructivist learning theories. These assessments ask learners to actively synthesize knowledge and apply it in open-ended ways. Skills, knowledge, and reasoning are integrated rather than fragmented when a student is asked to construct his/her own performance or portfolio. The boundaries between assessment, the curriculum, and learning become more permeable while the process of learning becomes more coherent.

2.3. Types of portfolios

The purpose of the portfolio determines its content and influences its organization. The different types of portfolios can overlap conceptually; components from one may be included in another. All types of portfolios focus on students' and are used to benefit students. The four commonly used types are;

Evaluative. The purpose of an evaluative portfolio is to enable the teacher, in collaboration with school personnel and family members, to evaluate a student's progress relative to program goals, objectives, or standards. Teachers select various items for each student's portfolio. These may include, but are not limited to, samples of a student's work (either in-progress or finished products), anecdotal records, reading/writing logs, checklists, rating scales, test data, conference notes, and parent surveys or comments. The portfolio will be full of items documenting progress, providing a basis for determining individual student's strengths and areas of need, and will be used for reporting to administrators and for ongoing curriculum development. Evaluative portfolios can be used for either formative or summative evaluation.

Working. The purpose of a working portfolio is to enable the teacher and the student to assess and evaluate progress together. Both the student and the teacher select samples to demonstrate growth and learning. Friends may also contribute related products resulting from the students' endeavors outside of school. Items highlight the ongoing process of learning, not just finished products. Included in this portfolio are samples of the student's work, teacher's comments and evaluations, collaboratively prepared progress notes, and plans for future work. This portfolio is an evolving repository of a student's thoughts, ideas, growth, and accomplishments. Working portfolios provide a method for formative evaluation.

Showcase. A showcase portfolio shows only the student's best work. Work in progress is not included. It is intended to motivate the student to develop completed projects that show best or favorite work. Both student and teacher can participate in selecting, over a period of time, the contents for this type of portfolio. Students may share their portfolios with relatives or participate in

conferences that focus on their portfolios. This portfolio does not, however, give enough information to guide instruction, because it lacks evidence of daily performance. Rather, it is a form of summative evaluation.

Archival. The purpose of an archival portfolio is to give the student's next teacher a comprehensive "snapshot" of the student's developing abilities (Puckett & Black, 1989). Items for this portfolio are selected because they provide a summative data record of the student's accomplishment during the year. Items may include both in-process or finished pieces of a student's work, checklists, rating scales, and anecdotal records. Informal evaluations, teacher analyses or comments about a student's work, and conference reports should be included, as well. This portfolio is forwarded to the student's next teacher so that appropriate instruction can be planned for the coming year.

III. BENEFITS AND DRAWBACKS OF PORTFOLIOS

3.1. Benefits

Many researchers have indicated benefits and drawback of using portfolio as a form of assessment (Brown & Hudson, 1998; Fox, 2008; Hung & Huang, 2012; Yin, 2013). Brown and Hudson (1998) identified the advantages of portfolio assessment and assembled them into three main categories including: (a) enhancing student learning; (b) informing teachers; and (c) facilitating the assessment process. Two main benefits of portfolio assessment are authenticity and positive washback. Authenticity refers to the natural, contextualized, meaningful, and real-world qualities of language assessment (Brown, 2003). Authenticity can be seen as both the ends and the means of portfolio assessment. In fact, Fox (2008) notes that some scholars even "equate authenticity in alternative assessment with both reliability and validity" (p. 101). Burner (2014) in his systematic review of the potential benefits of portfolio assessment on ESL/EFL writing devotes an entire section to authenticity. Portfolio assessment, according to Burner, (a) creates opportunities for authentic and sophisticated language use; (b) responds to the multifaceted nature of language/ multi-domain learning; (c) generates anxiety-free effects from time-constrained tests and exams; (d) increases students' motivation and time-on-task; (e) promotes interaction in and out classroom; and (f) facilitates communication and sharing of texts online, enhancing ecological validity.

3.2. Drawbacks

Researchers also show common disadvantages of portfolio assessment in terms of design decision, logistics, interpretation, reliability and validity. Yin (2013), drawing on the recent empirical studies, validates the benefits of portfolio assessment with the claim they do the following: (a) antagonize traditional tests and correspond to curriculum goals; (b) enhance language abilities, particularly writing skills; (c) augment students' self-reflection, autonomy, metacognition, and motivation. She points out the challenges of portfolio assessment and characterizes the reality of portfolio assessment implementation by elaborating the macro and micro level decisions for teachers and stakeholders. Additionally, Hung and Huang (2012) add that the most cited benefits of portfolio assessment are its tendencies to cultivate a sense of authorship or ownership and a sense of community. In terms of portfolio assessment weaknesses, their main concerns are still with logistical, reliability, and validity issues. Reliability and validity are the most important and controversial issues in language assessment and portfolio assessment. Reliability is "precondition for validity" (Brown, 2005, p. 220), that is, the assessment must be reliable to be valid. Nevertheless, meeting reliability demands for portfolio assessment is not impossible. In one empirical study, the reliability of portfolio assessment was confirmed, as Song and August (2002) concluded: "when carefully conducted with clear evaluation standards, portfolio assessment can be relied upon as a basis for making judgments about the writing proficiency of ESL students" (p. 63). Despite the questionability of the instruments (the fact that they were teacher-made tests and the manners in which portfolios were assessed) in this report, consistency in portfolio assessment can be reached with carefully planned implementation. The issue of portfolio assessment validity has been gradually addressed. Mai, Nguyen, and Griffi (2011) are among the first researchers to study and affirm the validity for portfolio writing assessment in a long-term project. They worked with a group of teachers and students from a research-based institution in Vietnam to develop the assessment criteria for portfolio assessment. Strictly following the instrument development procedures (drafting, panelling, piloting, trialling, and finalizing), the researchers reviewed the literature in second language writing and portfolio assessment, and then incorporated the local teachers' expertise to validate the construct. As a result of the first two stages, a portfolio writing assessment instrument of two domains, six capabilities, 36 indicators, and 138 criteria were designed which was both theory-driven and context-relevant. The authors concluded that "designing an empirical instrument for a formal assessment of portfolios is a feasible task for concerned researchers and teachers" (p. 175)

IV. CONCLUSIONS

Having discussed the portfolio related issues in language teaching in general and language assessment in particular, it is clear that portfolio can be seen as a good alternative form of assessment for teachers at all educational levels. The implementation of portfolio assessment can have long term effects rather than assessing students with standardized tests in terms of motivating and monitoring learners' autonomy and better performance in their studying.

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