PORTFOLIO AS AN ALTERNATIVE ASSESSMENT IN LANGUAGE TESTING

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ABSTRACT

Traditional assessments have been used extensively to obtain students' grades, which decide students' performance and achievement. However, these assessments cause students concern more on their learning product, i.e., grade rather than learning process. This concern may cause students have low understanding on knowledge. Another alternative assessment approach, portfolio, is used to assess, evaluate and grade students' work using rating scale than numerical or letter scores. This article is aimed at exploring the use of portfolio in language testing and to analyse students and teachers' perspectives on its use in the academic setting. A library study through extensive reading was undertaken to obtain the data for this article. The data were searched from Western academic perspectives, which were analysed based on their factor usefulness (Bachman & Palmer, 1996) i.e. reliability, validity, impact, interactiveness, authenticity, and practicality. It had been found that portfolio assessment was possible for language testing as it was able to show students' progress of critical thinking and to reflect their learning process. The interactiveness of portfolio assessment encouraged and developed relationship between student-student, teacher-student, and teacher-parent. It also had impact on teachers, students, educators, and educational institutions. Teachers provide feedback for students' academic improvement and students were able to demonstrate higher order thinking. On the other hand, educators might disagree as the absence of numerical or letter scores were questioned. Yet, educational institutions mostly agreed to use portfolio assessment as it demanded less resources, such as funding and human resources, which were highly required for paper and pencil test. However, inconsistency of the marking criteria was the weakest factor of portfolio assessment as it had not been well-established. This assessment was also time-consuming for teachers, while students felt unsure why they did portfolio assessment. As a result, the use of portfolio assessment would only be limited in the small class size.

Key words: *language assessment, students and teachers' perceptions, learning product*

INTRODUCTION

Assessments have been developed by teachers and educators to test students' academic ability, such as writing skills in language testing. In order to test students' academic ability, summative assessment and formative assessment are used. Summative assessment was to test students' knowledge and understanding of the whole course (Spratt *et al.*, 2005). Meanwhile, formative assessment was used to test how well students understand a part of a course (Spratt *et al.*, 2005). The result of the test is called academic achievement and students would be given a mark or grade. This traditional assessment was the basis of teachers to make judgment upon students' performance (Wilcox, 2002), in which it can cause anxiety for students to wait for test result. Alternative assessment was one of the solutions to reduce students' anxiety to monitor students' learning progressions, and to eliminate daily, weekly, and mid semester grades (Cultbertson & Jalongo, 1997; Daniels *et a.l,* 2001 as cited in Wilcox,

2002). Although parents still object and question the grades elimination, alternative assessment was a good choice of testing students' ability since there was not any time pressure to complete the tasks (Daniels *et a.l,* 2001 as cited in Wilcox (2002).

Alternative assessment was referred to informal assessment protocols which were frequently used in the classroom (Clapham, 2000). It was also understood as the traditional assessment revolution in the US, which moved from multiple choice tasks into other challenging task types (McNamara, 2001). McNamara (2001) also argued that past assessments had lack of classroom context and focused more on high-stakes testing. Furthermore, test score was not able to tell students' learning strategies, their thinking, how they preceded meaningful information, examined and evaluated their own thinking (Church, 1991 as cited in Johnson & Rose, 1997). Shortly, limitations of traditional assessment and unchallenging test types made alternative assessment became another choice for teachers.

There were several benefits of alternative assessment such as its protocols were easy to follow by administrators, teachers, and students (Hamayan, 1995; Hargreaves *et al.*, 2002). It also introduced the authenticity of assessment items, which related to students real-life outside classroom and represented students' critical thinking skills (Zhu, 1997; Hargreaves *et al.*, 2002). Additionally, students would be able to reflect their learning experience throughout the course (Hamayan, 1995). Culbertson & Jalongo (1999) and Hargreaves *et al.*, (2002) also reported that alternative assessment was sensible, self-responsibility, and appreciative on learning process than the learning product. Nevertheless, alternative assessment took more time to do than pencil and paper test (Clapham, 2000). Moreover, it also had validity and reliability issues of inconsistency in marking criteria (Zhu, 1997; Brown & Hudson, 1998; Clapham, 2000).

Portfolio was a type of alternative assessments which had been used largely in which students produced a set of writing (Johnson & Rose, 1997; Zhu, 1997). Tierney *et al.* (1990, as cited in Johnson & Rose 1997) defined portfolio as a medium for continuous assessment containing useful collection of students' work, in which it would assess their performance, ability, progress and learning stages like selecting, contrasting, distributing, self-assessment, and setting learning goals. On the other hand, Herman *et a.l* (1992 as cited in Johnson & Rose, 1997) defined portfolio as a set of students' tasks which were examined and evaluated based on marking standard in order to decide students' performance or a study program.

Portfolio, in fact, had been used to underline and represent the authenticity of assessment, students' critical thinking skills, self-evaluated assessment which encouraged flexibility and challenges (Zhu, 1997, Hamayan, 1995). Boyle (1994) also added that the implementation of portfolio in the classroom reflected the dynamic of teaching and curriculum. Yet, it was time consuming and grading system had not been well-developed (Zhu, 1997; Brown & Hudson, 1998; Clapham, 2000). Thus, this paper wants to analyse the use of portfolio in language testing and how students and teachers perceive its use in the academic setting.

Developing Portfolio in Educational Setting and Language Testing

The purpose of developing portfolio assessment was to acknowledge students' understanding throughout a course or a lesson (Haris, 2009). For instance, a child comes home and brings his drawing from school. This was an evidence of a student development and learning progress, which would be collected throughout his period of study (Culbertson & Jalongo, 1999; Harris, 2009).

Portfolio could also be used to review language policy at schools, universities or countries (Little, 2009). The best example is European Language Portfolio (ELP) which underlined learners' autonomy. Hence, Little (2009) did not agree that language learners should be entirely independence. In order to give students' learning guidance, goal-setting, monitoring and self-assessment should be developed in the portfolio of language policy (Little, 2009).

Portfolio was usually collected into a container but commonly in the folder (Boyle, 1994). What should be included in the portfolio? First, *work samples* of students' works such as writing samples. Second, *systematic observation* was used to record students' behaviour in class. Third, a*necdotal records* were used to restore students' learning development and progression. A teacher, then, used *checklist or inventory* to evaluate students' performance. Fifth, *rating scales* helped a teacher track down students' strength and weakness so that he would be able to give feedback which areas needed to be improved. Finally, *interview* between a teacher and parents was used to report students' learning achievement and to get better understanding of students' strength and weakness (Culbertson & Jalongo, 1999).

Furthermore, students were assessed through academic essays which might be peer or self-evaluated at high school and university level (Cole *et al.*, 1997). Encouraging peer and self-evaluations were also emphasising responsibility for their own work and developing their critical thinking towards specific issue (Zhu, 1997; Hamayan, 1999). In order to develop good portfolio, students needed to follow several steps rationale, goals and objectives, evaluation criteria, selecting portfolio content carefully, students' reflection and teacher's responses (Boyle, 1994 and Cole *et al.*, 1997). Rationale was used to describe the reason of why a student wrote a portfolio, for example, a student wanted to be an English teacher. Therefore, appropriate goals and objectives of writing portfolio might be able to design syllabi and lesson plan or to deliver learning materials by using current teaching methods such as Communicative Language Approach (Boyle, 1994; Cole *et al.*, 1997). Also, selected assignments should be fitted into portfolio goals and objectives, for example designing task-based activity for intermediate learners. After that, students should examine and evaluate their own portfolio through self-assessment and peer-assessment. Finally, teacher should make comments and suggestions of students' portfolio (Boyle, 1994; Cole *et al.*, 1997).

Furthermore, portfolio did not provide any test scores but it gave rating scale based on the quality of students' written work (Boyle, 1994). Therefore, students should know each assessment criteria given by teachers, for example a teacher would look at the use *wh pronouns* as students had to formulate complex sentences.

After grading students' works, teachers should examine and evaluate the use of portfolio at the end of the course. Usefulness factors, *reliability, validity, impact, interactiveness, authenticity*, and *practicality* were going to be discussed as the barometer of analysis (Bachman & Palmer, 1996). Portfolio was authentic as the topic used is usually what happened outside classroom (Bachman & Palmer, 1996; Zhu, 1997; Hargreaves *et al.*, 2002). Portfolio also had practicality factor as the selection of its content fitted into learning goals and objectives (Boyle, 1994).

Furthermore, portfolio has several impacts to teachers, students, educators, and educational institutions. Students had more time to study outside classroom, were independent and responsible, and demonstrated higher thinking order and problem solving (Hamayan, 1995; Bachman & Palmer, 1996; Zhu, 1997). Also, portfolio had an impact to teachers who gave comments and suggestion to their students (Boyle,

1994; Bachman & Palmer, 1996). Teachers' comments and suggestions contained positive and negative feedbacks related to students' academic performance. While feedbacks aim at improving students' performance, they also reflect how well students absorb the knowledge during teaching learning process. On the other hand, educators might agree and disagree by the use of portfolio as it did not provide any specific grade for each student (Wilcox, 2002). Additionally, educational institutions would be delighted to use portfolio since it was not a high stake test and it was an informal assessment. Therefore, it would not spend much resources either funding or human resources. Hence, portfolio would be highly criticised for not providing any numerical or letter scores (Bachman & Palmer, 1996; Culbertson & Jalongo, 1999; McNamara, 2001). This fact underlines how important learning product is, particularly for students and parents, who required exact scores to be recorded in the studies record for reasons like pursuing further studies or careers.

Interestingly, portfolio was highly interactive as it encouraged and developed relationship between student-student and teacher-student (Boyle, 1994). Boyle (1994) elaborated that portfolio protocols such as self-assessment and peer assessment underpinned student-student relationship, teacher' observation and response were part of establishing relationship between teacher and student. On the other hand, interview was emphasising teacher-student's relation in order to learn students' strengths and weaknesses.

Reliability and *validity* are discussed latter as these are the weaknesses of portfolio assessment. Portfolio is not multiple choices, gap filling, and true false questions, therefore, it is difficult to measure its reliability (Clapham, 2000). Shortly, portfolio is lack of reliability as the test items are not able to be assessed through a pilot study. Furthermore, evaluation process may be subjective and the result is not presented by scores but *rating scale*. Thus, portfolio was also lack of validity since it did not have well-established grading system (Zhu, 1997; Brown & Hudson, 1998; Clapham, 2000).

Nevertheless, students' works would be evaluated analytically by teachers and they would see if students had put their works in chronological order (Larson, 1991). An analytical evaluation meant teachers would read students written tasks and locate what kind of cognitive strategies they used for completing and interpreting each task (Larson, 1991). For instance, students had to apply different strategies to analyse a narrative text and an argumentative text. Larson (1991) also underlined that teachers would see development and understanding students' reading by putting students' tasks chronologically. Finally, rating scale will be given whether students' tasks are excellent, very good, good, poor and very poor. Although portfolio did not specifically provide either numerical test scores or letter grades, it used holistic scale (1 – 6) in order to evaluate students' writing (Elbow, 1994).

Issues of Portfolio in Language Testing

Apart from lacking reliability and validity, portfolio had several advantages such as bring real world context so that teacher, parent, and student get actual description of students' academic abilities (Cole *et al.*, 1997). Nolet (1992) as cited in Cole *et al.* (1997) also reported that students were able to show their problem solving skills, which was impossible to be done through multiple choice tests. Portfolio also contained clear instructions to bridge student-teacher communication for discussion (Nolet, 1992 as cited in Cole *et al.*, 1997).

The amount of time spent was the most common issue such as students kept asking how much time they should spent to produce a portfolio and evaluated it (Dutt-Doner & Gilman, 1998). On the other hand, teachers also worried about time consuming for reading each task when they have large number of students (Dutt-Doner & Gilman, 1998; Clapham, 2000). To my knowledge, portfolio is an informal assessment, which means the stability of its future use is still questionable. However, small number of students enrol in a course or classroom may make this kind of assessment were effective.

Yet, the use of portfolio should be evaluated through students and teachers' point of views. Most students acknowledge portfolio was able to build their depth-understanding, reflect their knowledge and think of what they had learnt (Dutt-Doner & Gilman, 1998). Students also state that portfolio is motivating them to learn as it requires self-responsibility (Lam & Lee, 2010). Moreover, students underlined supportive learning environment as they were able to write a composition without time pressure (Dutt-Doner & Gilman, 1998).

However, students also feel uncomfortable and insecure before administrators and teachers explain the process of portfolio assessment. Although, they did not fully appreciate the absence of numerical test scores or letter grades, students stated that they needed further explanation of why they were doing portfolio assessment (Dutt-Doner & Gilman, 1998).

From teachers' point of view, they mostly agreed even though portfolio assessment was time consuming (Dutt-Doner & Gilman, 1998). However, they faced a serious problem to relate the result of portfolio to students learning outcomes since parents still asked for grades in students' academic records (Hargreaves *et al.*, 2002). Teachers also reported their uneasiness with various types of tasks in portfolio assessment as they were afraid of students would misunderstand or would not fully understand teachers' instructions (Hargreaves *et al.*, 2002). In order to solve these issues, teachers insisted the presence of joint-review, discussion and sharing between teachers and students, which would be able to maximise the function of self-assessment (Hargreaves *et al.*, 2002).

CONCLUSION

Despite the lack of reliability and validity, portfolio was able to help students to explore their critical thinking and compose them logically. The use of portfolio assessment gave more benefit in educational sectors like language testing. Therefore, it is highly recommended for teachers to use portfolio. Thus, the future use of portfolio assessment will increase as more language teachers concern on students' process of learning than the learning product.

On the other hand, I would say it is difficult to adapt portfolio assessment in the university setting in most universities in Indonesia, where students and lecturers still respect and value test scores (learning product) rather than the learning process. Moreover, most of universities in Indonesia have large number of students, which make a lecturer will fall behind in marking process. However, portfolio has given good implications to future teaching, which can be used as an alternative assessment when a student fails a course or in a smaller class size (15 to 20 students).

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