

## Portfolio Assessment as a Window into Reading Development

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### Abstract

These days the use of portfolio assessment is very popular. If it is believed that students at all levels should be doing more than studying for tests; teachers should be doing more than teaching to tests; students should take a more active role in the learning process; and, then the portfolio assessment is an idea worth exploring.. The aim of this study was to introduce portfolio assessment into our classrooms for improving students' reading comprehension. To achieve this goal, the researcher adopted the quasi-experimental design comprising the pretest-treatment-posttest paradigm. Two classes were selected as the experimental and control groups from Cambridge Institute in Sari. They were 52 female students. The only difference between the two groups was integrating portfolio into learning for the experimental group. The result of this study indicated that portfolio assessment did not have a significant effect on the students' reading skill.

**Keywords:** portfolio, assessment, reading comprehension, assessment of Portfolios.

### Introduction

Recent developments and demands in science and society have deeply influenced education. Especially theories such as constructivism and multiple-intelligence and new social trends like information-age needs engendered to radical change in traditional approaches of learning, teaching and assessment. As long as learning approach is changed, it affects assessment procedures and approaches (Fourie & Van Niekerk, 2001). For instance, the main purposes of earlier academic education enable students to know a certain domain. Since learning of basic knowledge was very important, behaviorist approach generally uses traditional way of teaching. In this instructional approach, knowledge is merely abstracted, and “learning” and “teaching” process is viewed as individual process, and “learning” is conceived as the accumulation of stimulus-response association. Drill and practice play an important role in this process. Also, the assessment practice is mainly based on testing basic knowledge. Because, the proof of learning generally is seen as changing the behaviors and increasing the right answer in test and changing between pre-test and end-test in this approach, tests such as multiple-choice, true false, matching items for assessment are used. This traditional assessment approach mostly develops students to memorize rules or algorithms rather than conceptual understanding, and focus on small, discrete components of the domain (Dochy, 2001). Also, these tests which provide less useful information on students' understanding and learning are not enough to assess higher order cognitive skills such as problem solving, critical thinking and reasoning (Romberg, 1993), not measure a students' ability to organize relevant information (Shepard, 1989), and assess what is easy to test-memorization of rote skills and procedures (Mumme, 1991). On the other hand, the constructivists such as Piaget and Vygotsky believe that students are able to acquire and socially construct their knowledge and understanding. This approach focuses mostly on students' prior learning, their problem solving skills and their collaborative learning (Baki, 1994). Therefore,

there is a need for a broader range of assessment tools that be able to assess the students' skills such as open-ended problem solving, and critical thinking, analyzing, reasoning, be able to apply their knowledge in new problems, and to express oral and writing. For this reason, alternative assessment approaches are needed in assessing both learning process and learning outcomes. This implies that assessment techniques should focus an assessing what students know as well as what they do not know. These recommendations can be achieved through alternative assessments measuring students' performance and developments in learning process. One of the alternative methods in education used in the assessment of the students' individual or group performance is portfolio. Necessity of using portfolio is emphasized by many researches (Birgin, 2003; De Fina, 1992; Gussie, 1998; Micklo, 1997; Mumme, 1991; Norman, 1998;). According to them, portfolio gives more reliable and dynamic data about students for teachers, parents and also student himself. Also, using this assessment method provides getting clear information about students and fulfilling their weaknesses and helps teachers planning teaching progress.

Rudman (1989) asserted that "assessment and teaching are not separate entities and that assessment was, and remains an integral part of teaching. Consequently, assessment has to be a part of instruction. These new trend changed the writing assessment to alternative or authentic assessment".

Alternative assessment is defined as an ongoing process involving the learner and instructor in making judgments about the students' development in language using non-conventional strategies (Hancock, 1994). Hamayan (1995) also describes alternative assessment as "those techniques that can be used within the context of instruction and can be easily incorporated in to the daily activities of the school or classroom" (p.213).According to Huerta-Macias (2005) there is no single definition of alternative assessment. Rather, she says "a variety of labels has been used to distinguish it from traditional standardized testing" (p.339).Ocak&Ulu (2009) argued that today's educators and teachers believe that students should be educated as persons who are able to reach and evaluate knowledge by themselves, discuss its truth and validity, and be productive in learning process. Moreover, today's school system and classroom setting attention from teachers and educators are dominantly affected by the constructivist philosophy. More than two decades with this philosophy both teachers and student's roles in learning processes have been changed. Teachers are becoming facilitator in the classrooms and students become the constructor of their knowledge. This dramatic change in the role of teachers and students influenced the evaluation process. Teachers developed different kinds of assessment materials instead of just using paper pencil test. Portfolio is one of them. It takes great attention from the teachers and educators.

### **Definition of portfolio assessment**

The concept of portfolio development was taken from the field of fine arts where portfolios are used to indicate illustrative samples of an artist's work. The aim of the artist's portfolio is to demonstrate not only the depth and breadth of the work but also the artist's interests and abilities (Jongsma, 1989). Many educators believe that the purpose of educational portfolios to be similar to that of portfolios used in fine arts, to demonstrate the depth and breadth of students' capabilities through biographies of students' work (Wolf, 1989); descriptions of students' reading and writing experiences (Jongsma, 1989); literacy folders (Jongsma, 1989); collections of pieces of writing (Katz, 1988); comparison reports (Flood & Lapp, 1989); and student work exhibitions (Brandt, 1989). Although portfolios which use the model developed in the fine arts may be appropriate for indicating student work, the model must be expanded to accommodate informational needs and assessment requirements of the classroom. A portfolio

used for educational assessment must not just focus on students' products; it must focus on procedure that has been systematically planned, implemented, and evaluated. A portfolio is a collection of a student's work, experiences, exhibitions, self-ratings (i.e., data), but portfolio assessment is the procedure used to plan, collect, and analyze the multiple sources of data maintained in the portfolio. A portfolio that is based on a systematic assessment procedure can provide useful and accurate information about the depth and breadth of a student's abilities in many domains of learning.

### **Different types of alternative assessment**

Alternative assessment is categorized into three major branches: performance assessment, authentic assessment, and portfolio assessment (Garfield, 1994). Each is briefly discussed below.

*Performance assessment:* According to Stenmark (1991), this type of assessment presents students with a task, project, or investigation, and then evaluates the products to assess what students actually know and can do.

*Authentic assessment:* This type of assessment is a method of obtaining information about students' understanding in a context that reflects realistic situations, and that challenges students to use what they have learned in class in an authentic context (Archbald & Newmann 1988).

*Portfolio assessment:* Pandey (1991) asserts that portfolio assessment is the collection and evaluation of a carefully chosen selection of students' work. The number and types of selections included in a portfolio may vary, but are typically agreed upon by the teacher and student for the purpose of representing what that student has learned.

### **Emergence of portfolio assessment**

In the constructivist post method era, there has been a paradigm shift from testing the product to assessing the learning process. Because of the incompatibility of process learning and product assessment (Moya & O'Malley, 1994), language testers have suggested a number of alternative assessment options including self-assessments, student designed tests, portfolio assessment, learner-centered assessment, projects and presentations that "can be used with great success in today's language classrooms" (Coombe, Folse & Hubley, 2007). It is assumed that alternative assessment provides a strong link between instruction and assessment by forming part of a feedback loop that enables teachers to monitor and modify instruction according to outcome of student assessment (Tzagari, 2004). Assessment and instruction are considered to be inseparably related to each other. Hedge (2000, p.395) stated that assessment is an "interactive and collaborative process in which information is collected in natural classroom instructional encounters". Hence, having portfolios as an assessment method is related to instruction as long as portfolio is regarded as one of the most popular alternatives in assessment, especially within the framework of communicative language teaching (Brown, 2004). Genesee and Upshur (1996, p.99) defined portfolio as "a purposeful collection of students' work that demonstrates to students and others their efforts, progress, and achievements in given areas".

### **Reading portfolios**

A Reading Portfolio is a showcase of a reader's growth, experiences, and achievement. It consists of:

1. Self-selected, representative samples of the student's work drawn from real reading and responses to reading.
2. Written justifications for those selections.
3. Formal presentation of the justified selections to peers, teachers, and parents. (Assessment Strategies, para.2)

The main purpose of a reading portfolio should be to create an environment where students increasingly reflect upon, assess, and control their own reading growth according to program outcomes and goals. To promote this, there must be collaboration between teachers and students, with teachers structuring the planning, establishment, and implementation of portfolios, and students taking responsibility for the particulars of their own portfolios. Such a student-involved classroom environment fosters student participation in the learning process. Learning that is both personal and collaborative encourages critical thinking. Students who are reading, writing, discussing, and interacting with a variety of learning materials in a variety of ways are more likely to become critical thinkers. Critical thinkers are critical and active readers as well. They question, confirm, and judge what they read throughout the reading process. Students engaged in such activities are likely to become critical thinkers and learners. Since reading portfolios require students to be involved in activities as questioning, confirming, and judging what they read, it is likely that they will become critical readers as well as raise their level of autonomy at the end of the portfolio implementation.

### **Merits and demerits of portfolio assessment**

Portfolio has a lot of advantages. Portfolio assessment can improve students' autonomy, critical thinking and linguistic competence. Furthermore, it supports the notion that writing is a process that involves growth, improvement, and learning as well as a product (Weiser, 1992). Students are often able to receive more and better feedback to their work in progress, such as easy drafts, from their teacher and classmates when portfolios are applied in their classes (Shimo, 2005). Moreover, they can help encourage learner autonomy, based on Shimo (2003), especially when the portfolio assignments include:

- a) Decision-making or choice-making tasks which enable students to plan and organize their learning.
  - b) Language tasks related to both in- and outside-class activities.
  - c) Optional tasks to cover students at different levels of motivation and proficiency.
- Apple and Shimo (2005) list seven major benefits of portfolio assessment as follows:
1. Learners can reflect over their learning processes.
  2. Portfolios make it possible to make a continuous assessment over a long time period.
  3. Learners can make their original products and they can feel a sense of achievement more compared to traditional tests.
  4. Learners can take control over their learning and feel more responsibility for it.
  5. Learners can assess weaknesses and strengths, and progress in their ability, and set goals more effectively by looking over their work.
  6. Students are often able to receive more feedback to their work in progress.
  7. Portfolios can help to promote learner autonomy.

There also exist some criticisms against portfolio assessment. For example, Davis and Ponnampuruma (2005) make a list of some of the major disadvantages of portfolio assessment. They believe that:

- a) Portfolios take a long time to complete and assess.
- b) The portfolio process involves a large amount of paperwork.
- c) Difficulties may arise in verifying whether the material submitted is the candidate's own work.
- d) When portfolios are used for summative assessment, students may be reluctant to reveal weaknesses.
- e) Portfolios are personal documents, and ethical issues of privacy and confidentiality may arise when they are used for assessment.

f) Portfolio assessment may produce unacceptably low inter-rater reliability, especially if the assessment rubrics are not properly prepared or are used by untrained assessors.

### **The purpose and significance of the study**

The studies about applying the portfolio assessment in foreign language teaching largely show that they do improve writing skills. The aim of this study is to find out the effects of portfolio assessment on reading skills of students who enroll in a Cambridge Language Institute preparatory class. Within this framework, the following question will be answered: What are the effects of portfolio assessment on the reading skill of the students attending preparatory class?

## **Method**

### **Participants**

This research is an experimental study, where pre-test/post-test control group design was used. The research was implemented on two randomly selected groups, one treatment group (n=27) and one control group (n=25), among 14 classrooms in an English preparatory class in Sari, Iran. Before the implementation, for the equivalence of these two groups (treatment and control), the students' placement test scores were compared and no significant difference was observed between them.

### **Procedure**

The experimental procedures of the study are summarized as follows: First the pre-test was given to the treatment group and control group under same the conditions before the implementation. Then, during the 10-week experimental study, the traditional method was used in the control group, whereas portfolio assessment applications were used in the treatment group. None of the methods and materials utilized in the treatment group was ever used in the control group. The researcher herself was the teacher in both groups. At the end of the 10-week implementation, the testing instruments were given to the groups again.

It must be mentioned that the first session of the term was devoted to the introduction of portfolio since the students had difficulties in understanding the system. The students had difficulty in understanding the aim of the portfolio and they repeatedly asked the same questions about how to start the implementation. The questions were answered by the researcher again and again so as to make all students understand the aim and make them know what they have to do and not to do. They also were given a written information sheet at the beginning of the implementation.

### **Instrumentation**

In this study, a reading essay test was used to obtain data. The objectives stated in the curriculum of English course were taken as a basis to form up the writing essay test. Language in Use (Doff & Jones, 2002) as auxiliary textbooks was utilized to develop the reading multiple-choice exam. 97 items were written for the reading part. There were 100 multiple-choice questions in the trial exam. In January 2015, that trial exam was tested on 75 students, who successfully finished the preparatory class in the previous year. Considering the lesson objectives, item difficulties, and discrimination indexes, 25 items were selected among 97 items for the reading part. The difficulty indexes (pj) of those selected items for the reading part ranges from .52 to .97; whereas their discrimination indexes (rjx) range from .31 to .83. The KR-20 internal consistency coefficient of this part is .82.

## Results and Discussion

In this study, answer for a basic question was sought after: (a) what are the effects of portfolio on reading skills of the students in Cambridge Institute? Pre-test/post-test control group design was implemented to find the answers for the question. The reading test and was given before and after the experimental treatment to both treatment group and the control group. ANOVA for repeated measures, which provides comparisons taking dependence conditions, was used to find answers for the question of this study.

In order to find the effect of portfolio assessment on students' reading comprehension, the pretest and post-test scores of students in both control group and treatment group were compared with ANOVA for repeated measures. In the treatment group, the mean and standard error measures were  $M=27.55$ ,  $SE=.37$  for the pre-test and  $M=25.96$ ,  $SE=.17$  for the post-test; whereas in the control group, the mean and standard error measures were  $M=21.68$ ,  $SE=.48$  for the pre-test and  $M=23.77$ ,  $SE=.27$  for the post-test. A medium level significant difference,  $F(1,42)=25.59$ ,  $MSE=63.38$ ,  $p<.01$ ,  $\eta^2=.40$  was found between the reading pre-test and post-test scores of treatment group, where portfolio assessment was implemented and control group, where portfolio assessment was not implemented. On the other hand, the between-subject factor between the reading comprehension pre-test and post-test scores of treatment group and control group was not found significant,  $F(1,42)=1.05$ ,  $MSE=2.56$ ,  $p>.05$ . Even though these results show a similar increase in time for both treatment group and control group reading comprehension skills, the insignificant between-subject interaction suggested that portfolio assessment had no important effect on reading comprehension skills.

The result of this study is in line with the study conducted by Yurdabakan and Erdogan (2009). Yurdabakan and Erdogan (2009) examined the effect of portfolio assessment on reading, writing and listening skill of the students. The comparison made showed that the listening and reading skills of those students in treatment group where portfolio assessment was implemented did not differ significantly from those of students in the control group. In other words, portfolio assessment activities did not have an effect on reading and listening skill of students, but it has great effect on the writing skill of them.

On the other hand, the result of the present study is opposed to the study conducted by Charvade et. al (2012). Charvade et. al (2012) examined the effect of portfolio assessment on reading comprehension of the EFL students. The result of the study indicated that there is a significant difference between the performance of the experimental group where portfolio assessment implemented and the control group where the traditional assessment implemented. The comparison made showed that the reading comprehension of the students in treatment group improved significantly but this was not very significant in control group. In another study, Valencia and Place (1994) highlighted the possibility of observing students developing as readers with the help of portfolios which their result is completely different from the result of this study.

## Conclusion

The aim of this study was to examine the effects of portfolio assessment on the reading skill of the students in Cambridge Language Institute. The comparisons made showed that the reading comprehension of those students in the experimental group where portfolio assessment was implemented did not differ significantly ( $p>.05$ ) from those of students in the control group. In other words, portfolio assessment activities didn't have a significant effect on the reading skill of students who enrolled in an English preparatory class. In this study, it was revealed that portfolio assessment is not helpful for the students to boost their reading ability. This study can be regarded important because there exist a few studies which examined the effect of portfolio

assessment on reading skill of EFL students. Many studies done on the use of portfolio assessment focused on writing ability of the students, therefore future studies must examine the effect of portfolio assessment on reading, listening and speaking rather than just writing.

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