

Students' Responses on the Application of Authentic Assessment in EFL Reading Class

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Abstract

Reading offers a combination of challenges for EFL students. In this case, they meet layered difficulties from language barriers to lack of exposure to critically interpret the reading materials. Being aware of this circumstance, the present study attempts to examine the students' responses in an EFL reading class where authentic assessment is being implemented to help them learn to read in English. In particular, this study is conducted to discover the students' responses if the instructional framework could accommodate their needs in learning to read in L2. Further, a qualitative case study is applied, and data are collected from questionnaire and 16 meeting field-observation. Results of the study indicate that the students gradually respond positively to the application of authentic assessment. They reveal that authentic assessment (1) motivates them have a reading routine, so that they can find a lot more vocabulary and get used to English discourse, (2) trains them to demonstrate their reading comprehension in more constructive ways such as writing reviews, presentations, and discussions, and (3) helps them assess their own reading performance. In sum, the students admit that authentic assessment helps most of the them enjoy reading throughout a series of social practices, in this case, the application of authentic assessment components including portfolios, performance assessment, and self-assessment.

Keywords: students' responses, authentic assessment, EFL reading

A. INTRODUCTION

In this case, reading foreign language has been a challenging skill to acquire since it requires layered capabilities in understanding L2 texts and communicating their comprehension of texts while dealing with language barriers (Zhang, 2010). According to the pilot observation results in an EFL reading class that we are studying, 27 EFL students tended to be passive in communicating their reading comprehension in both oral and written modes. The previous reading achievement of most of the students was low, and they tended to be passive in discussions. Many of them admitted that reading was hard.

First, most of them did not have a reading routine in their native language, and it got worse in English as their foreign language. Second, due to their infrequent reading outside class, they had to encounter a lot of vocabulary unfamiliarity while reading in class. Consequently, due to the time limit the teacher set for the students to finish their independent reading in the class, many of them were not able to grasp thorough comprehension of the text. Most of them doubted their comprehension, thus, they chose to stay silent during discussions.

Authentic assessment (O'Malley & Pierce, 1996) was applied to help the students improve their considered-low reading motivation and achievement. This EFL reading class was the continuation of the previous reading class from the previous semester where many students obtained low scores. According to O'Malley and Pierce (1996), authentic assessment is a kind of assessment that reflects students' learning development and achievement, and students' learning attitudes during teaching and learning process. They explain that authentic assessment consists of performance assessment, portfolios, and student-self assessment. They underline that authentic assessment may be a type of assessment, but when it is integrated into instructional framework, it appears to be an interesting instruction.

There have been a number of studies investigating the use of authentic assessment in language teaching, especially reading. Nevertheless, those studies were literature reviews that promoted the application of authentic assessment as an alternative assessment beside standardized testing (DelliCarpini, 2009; French, 2003). In this case, several previous studies promoted that authentic assessment could bring positive impacts to the students to learn to read in English (French, 2003; Karge, 1998; Montgomery, 2002; Valeri-Gold et al., 1992). Nevertheless, there has been no empirical research investigating the students' responses of the application of authentic assessment to help students learn English reading. Therefore, the present study particularly aims to discover the EFL students' responses of the application of authentic assessment to help them learn English reading. In this circumstance, three research questions were posed: How do students respond to the application of authentic assessment

- (1) in motivating them to read longer texts in English?
- (2) in helping them improve their reading skills?
- (3) in helping them enjoy the learning process in EFL reading class?

B. REVIEW OF LITERATURE

Authentic Assessment in Language Teaching

A number of previous studies indicated that authentic assessment has been strongly promoted to teach reading and writing for native English students (French, 2003; Karge, 1998; Montgomery, 2002; Valeri-Gold et al., 1992), English language learners (ELLs) (DelliCarpini, 2009; Murphy, 2009; Lenski et al., 2006), and EFL students (Geeslin, 2003). For instance, French (2003) reviewed literature and strongly suggested the use of authentic assessment to assess students' reading skills as an alternative assessment beside high-stakes testing because it could give teachers more information about students' reading development. Besides, Montgomery (2002) also promoted the use of authentic assessment in college courses to provide solid proof of students' recorded reading progress through authentic assessment tools.

Authentic assessment has also been promoted to teach literacy to English language learners because it can provide more accurate information about ELLs' reading growth (DelliCarpini, 2009). In this case, DelliCarpini (2009) explained that in the United States of America where the number of ELLs in mainstream classrooms kept growing rapidly, high stakes testing could not really provide accurate information about ELLs' reading potentials. In this case, DelliCarpini added that ELLs in mainstream classrooms where most of the students were native English speakers had to deal with their second language acquisition as well as meeting the standards of state exams, and teachers were wondering if the state exams could really tell the ELLs' true potentials. Therefore, DelliCarpini underlined that there must be an alternative assessment that could provide more accurate information about ELLs' English proficiency including their reading skills, and authentic assessment became the one recommended.

Geeslin (2003) reviewed literature related the application of authentic assessment to teach Spanish as a foreign language. Nevertheless, Geeslin tended to focus on one part of authentic assessment only. In this study, she aimed to promote the use of self-assessment to help students learn a foreign language in the setting of student-centered learning. In this case, she explained the procedures of how self-assessment could be incorporated into instruction, and underlined that self-assessment could help students monitor their learning progress, thus, they would get more motivated to achieve the learning goals.

Beside a number of literature reviews that focused on promoting the application of authentic assessment in teaching reading, there have also been a number of studies conducted that had a tendency to employ only one or two types of authentic assessment to teach reading.

For instance, Hasit and DiObilda (1996) and Valeri-Gold, Olson, and Denning (1992) discovered that the use of portfolios in reading class could cultivate more accurate information about college students' reading abilities which the standardized test could not thoroughly reveal. Then, Hasit and DiObilda (1996) added that by comparing the portfolio assessment and the standardized-test results, results of the study showed that portfolio assessment could be an alternative method of assessment to significantly support the students to gain academic success because it provided plenty information about students' learning development and performances.

Other two previous studies focused on discussing the procedures of integrating portfolios in the teaching and learning process (Gillespie et al. 1996; Spence et al., 1999). In this circumstance, Spence, Theriot, and Spence (1999) underlined the benefit of portfolios that gave students opportunities to get feedbacks on their performance, so that they could improve their weak areas, and perform better. Besides, Gillespie, Ford, Gillespie, and Leavell (1996) emphasized that portfolios could provide teachers rich information about students' learning progress because portfolios provided an evidence of student work collections overtime.

In terms of performance assessment, Chen, Wang, and Chen (2014) employed a computer application as a media for the seventh grade students to demonstrate their reading comprehension through a piece of writing. Chen et al. indicated that the learning strategies, in this case, encouraging the students to demonstrate their reading comprehension to written texts and get feedbacks from their peers, enrich their perspectives and deepen their comprehension of L2 texts which they read. Beside implementing portfolios to assess fifth semester students' reading abilities, Spence et al. also emphasized the benefit of using performance-based assessment to encourage fifth-semester students demonstrate their reading comprehension through writing. In this circumstance, Spence et al. added that integrating portfolios and performance assessment into an instructional chain could help students to be more responsible for their learning progress, and aware of their position in their path of achieving the learning standards.

A number of studies conducted in self assessment were mostly literature reviews (Andrade et al., 2009; Dochy et al., 1999, Geesline, 2003) even though some empirical studies were also found (Mican, 2015; Nguyen et al., 2016). In this case, several previous studies on using self-assessment to enhance students' learning process revealed that this type of assessment was potential to motivate students to optimize their potentials in the process of achieving the learning standards (Andrade et al., 2009; Dochy et al., 1999; Geeslin, 2003;

Mican, 2015; Nguyen, 2016). Nguyen, Janssen, Rijlaarsdam, and Admiraal (2016) conducted an experimental study about the students' self-assessment in learning literacy and found out that doing self-assessment on students' reading comprehension could raise students' awareness of their own reading comprehension quality, then, it may influence their involvement in their development of learning reading. In this case, they underlined that self-assessment made the students become more active to communicate their reading comprehension.

In sum, numerous previous studies conducted in this area were either literature reviews promoting the use of this authentic assessment or focusing on one type of the assessment only. In this case, there has been scarcity on the empirical research of the application of authentic assessment in facilitating students to learn a foreign language. Therefore, the present study attempts to bring a new perspective on how a group of EFL students perceive the application of authentic assessment as a chain of assessments to help them learn English reading.

C. METHOD

The present study took place in an EFL reading class in one of universities in East Java, Indonesia. It involved 27 students consisting of 22 female and 5 male students. The reading class was the highest level of the subsequent reading classes the students in English major had to take. In this case, the present study applied qualitative case study to achieve the purpose of the study.

Research procedures

One of us taught the class while at the same time becoming a teacher-researcher, another of us became participant-researcher. At this point, we cooperated carrying out the study including gathering and analyzing data. In terms of the teaching concept, in every meeting, authentic assessment was integrated in the instruction. For example, it was first started with in-class independent reading, followed with discussions or presentation as a form of performance assessments. In this circumstance, teacher provided reading materials for the independent reading, and guided students with a set of inquiry for class and group discussions, and determine techniques used for group work. For home readings, it consisted of individual reading routines recorded in reading log, and demonstrated in book reviews. In this case, we provided them a number of books for the students to get easier access to books written in English. But, they read any other books which were not in the list.

We observed the students' behaviors in the classrooms in each meeting, collected students' reading logs and book reviews. Then, we described the details in the observation

tables, and analyzed them together. In between the meetings, we had a discussion by reflecting on the practices to sharpen our analyses on the students' responses of the application of authentic assessment in helping them learn to read in English.

Data collection

In order to answer the research questions, we employed a qualitative case study for 16 weeks, and collected data from questionnaire and observation. In particular, open-ended questionnaires were used, and they were distributed twice. First, it was distributed after the third week to find out the students' impressions in the beginning of the semester applying the authentic assessment, and after the sixteenth week to discover the students' opinion after dealing with authentic assessment throughout their reading class. Whereas, observation was done in every meeting, and any students' responses were recorded to support the data obtained from questionnaire.

Data analysis

Data gathered were analyzed inductively. In this case, both data obtained from questionnaire and observation were analyzed separately. In terms of data from questionnaire, we grouped the students' responses into the same themes, for instance, students' responses of the role of authentic assessment in motivating them to read English texts, in helping them improve their reading abilities, and enjoy their learning process.

Second, in analyzing the observation, we employed a table format of "reflective and analytical observation notes" by Burns (1999). In this case, we described the occurrences in the EFL reading classrooms that especially focused on the students' behaviors, and wrote our analyses regarding those occurrences. Then, we grouped the analyses according to themes. Finally, we put the results of analyses of both data side by side to answer the research questions. In this case, results and discussion were described in the next section.

D. FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

Findings

Students' responses to the role of authentic assessment in motivating them to read English longer texts

Students must read the texts during in-class reading because they had no choice. Nevertheless, when they were encouraged to demonstrate their reading comprehension orally, most of them hesitated to demonstrate their reading comprehension. Then, when they were asked to demonstrate their reading comprehension in a brief in-class writing, they complained

for not remembering what the text was about. For the out-class reading, for the first half of the semester, all the students only finished one book to read recorded in their reading log, and for the students' first book review, eight students plagiarized book reviews taken from internet. It showed that the students' motivation to read was low. Despite disappointing results in the first half of the semester or the first 8 weeks, authentic assessment was still employed in the instructional framework to further assess the students' responses on this particular assessment to help them learn.

In the second-half of the semester, the students still frequently worked in groups to confer their reading comprehension. At this point, they got used to this kind of instructional chain, and gradually showed eagerness to demonstrate their reading comprehension orally through presentations and discussions, and in writings through gallery walks and mind-mapping. The students admitted that they felt more comfortable to be very active in groups rather than representing themselves as individuals such as in class discussions. In this circumstance, they admitted that interacting with friends were fun, thus, they were subconsciously immersed in their own activities. Besides, they added that with the supervision of teacher during the discussions, they understood the purpose of the reading activities and started to like reading. One of them started, "I started think what I do in the classroom and the benefits to improve my reading skill."

As they got accustomed to the type of assessments, the students started to show higher motivation in their home readings as well. By the end of the second half of the semester, more students finished at least two books in 8 week-duration, and none of them was caught plagiarizing book reviews from the internet. Many of them admitted that the intense reading exposure gradually motivated them to read more. One of them admitted, "*Saya dulu lihat buku aja udah males. Sekarang sejak selalu disuruh membaca dan mengutarakan apa yang saya paham, saya jadi mulai menikmati membaca* (I started to feel reluctant just because of the sight of books. Since I was encouraged to read and demonstrate my comprehension, I started enjoying reading)." Nevertheless, one student admitted that this instructional chain did not really motivate them to read. He said, "My reading improved is not better because I am not very often to read books every day." At this point, the student was not affected at all by the application of authentic assessment. He also admitted that he did not take the reading routines seriously because he basically did not like reading.

The contradictory results showed that beside the strong points in authentic assessment to provide students clear ways to improve their reading intensity, we also have to consider that

students' inner motivation determined the final results. On one hand, most of the students gradually felt motivated to read more even though it took them a long time to feel that way. At this point, the students were open enough to the help offered by the teacher. On the other hand, there was a student resistant to the instruction because he was not willing to comply with the guidelines provided by the teacher.

Students' responses to the role of authentic assessment in helping them improve their reading skills

During class discussions where the teacher was probing them with open-ended questions related to the texts they just read, the students chose to stay quiet. Only a few of them answered the teacher's questions, and they always expressed their personal opinions without presenting a connection with the texts they read. For instance, after reading an article entitled "Bollywood Bonanza", the teacher asked the students a question "Would you invest money in Bollywood movie? Why or why not?" Upon responding to the question, one of the students stated "I think I will invest money in Bollywood because Indonesian tv station broadcast Bollywood movie and serial drama every day. I think it will be good business." From the example, it shows that rather than supporting their opinion with evidence from the text, they tended to express their personal opinion.

In this case, more than half of the students in the class admitted that comprehending texts in a critical way by providing a connection with their every day lives was still hard. It might be better to just read the text, but when the teacher encouraged the students to also demonstrate their reading comprehension, it became double challenges. One of the students expressed her concern,

"It is still hard for me to comprehend stories or passages and speak in the class. I think I am not a good reader. I will read more books and practice my comprehension to find ways to understand every passages and books."

Moreover, those few students expressing opinions were mostly the same students. The rest of the students were quiet and passively participating in the discussions.

Besides, the students were getting better in constructing opinion throughout a lot of discussions inside the class. For example, after reading an article entitled "Curb Appeal", the teacher inquired them with a question "Do you think Stephannie Erbes' neighbor was serious when she offered to let Erbes walk through her place and take what she wanted?" In this case,

in their arguments, more students attempted to provide a connection with the texts. One of them stated,

“No. It is not serious. I think it is sarcastic. We can look at the passage ‘a mom with a mission.’ You can read from paragraph 22 that it just becomes her habit. She take too many things. So, the neighbor said that as a sarcastic joke rather than serious.”

The excerpt shows that the student tried to substantiate her claim. In this case, she got to deepen her comprehension of text by being able to unveil the underlying philosophy which was not explicitly written on the text.

At last, the students could also start figuring out the metacognition of being a good reader through a long process of practices. We can take a look at the sample of excerpts below.

“I think you must selected before you read. Choose your favorite genre and if the book is strange for you, you can see from the title of the book. The important thing is do not read a complicated book such as Harry Potter even though you are curious.”

“They reread sentences if they do not know the meaning, or asking to another friend.”

“Have focus, have background knowledge about what they read, e.g. political book, economic book, etc.”

“For novels, I think ones have to recognize the emotion. Because in novels, author don’t provide pictures to describe the scene, but they deliver emotions. So understand the words and got to the emotion.”

The excerpt above shows that the students had different strategies to accomplish their reading tasks, and at the same time, the reading strategies they chose showed that the students have gone through a learning process that helped them aware of their strengths and weaknesses in English reading (Mican 2015, Valerie-Gold et al., 1992), so that, they could choose a reading strategy that can help them develop their reading abilities.

Students’ responses to the role of authentic assessment in helping them enjoy the learning process

Throughout 16 weeks, the students reacted differently to the instructional framework applied to help them read in L2. In the beginning of the course, many students complained that they had to do so much work inside and outside the class. As the course progressed, the number of students complaining about the instructional chain were decreasing. Some of them quietly accepted all instruction, and most of them did well on the portfolio projects such as reading log and reviews. Despite all the complaints, the students gradually enjoyed the learning process. It was showed when they were going through the social practices. For instance, when they made mind-mapping, they went all out by making their mind mapping pretty and colorful. After that, they also enjoyed their time to explain their mind-mapping to their friends (to be noted, students

have five different articles to read). Their interaction seemed relaxed and productive. Without waiting for instruction, they knew their place, started the presentations, and actively participated in discussions. Some students expressed that they personally liked the idea of doing mind-mapping presentation, and obtained benefits from doing it.

“I think I am improving since several last meetings when we do ‘mind mapping’ and presentation. That makes me enjoy reading more.”

In terms of the portfolio projects, even though in the beginning of the course many students complained for having to do reading routines, recording their reading activities in the reading log, and writing reviews, most of them gradually enjoyed their reading activities. In particular, some students made the most of the opportunities to try reading different genres, so that they could find a genre they were most comfortable with. Other students preferred easy books, so that they could maintain their reading interest. Whereas, some of them kept falling for the same genre. We may take a look at the following excerpts.

“I prefer fiction, but not too emotional. I really hate something too emotional because I don’t really understand to feel the emotion of characters.”

“I like to read a book which has romance genre, slice of life and families since those genres are related with real life.”

“Novel about travelling, book about travel tips, and etc. The language is understandable and after reading that book I got a new experience.”

Beside enjoying the reading routine, in general, students started to enjoy the intense reading exposure inside and outside the class with particular different reading activities they considered enjoyable. We can take a look at the following Figure 1.

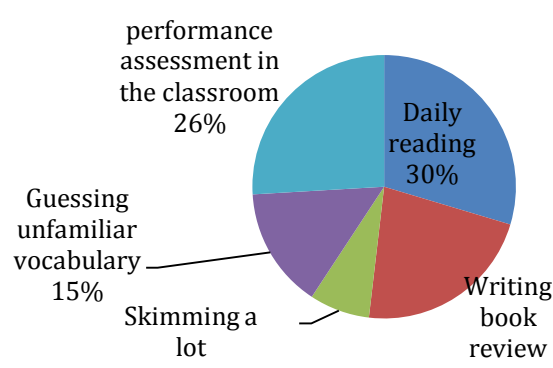


Figure 1. Students' Preference of Enjoyable Reading Activities

In this case, Figure 1 showed that the application of authentic assessment gave students chances to monitor their reading development starting from knowing the level of their reading skill to what kind of enjoyable activities they preferred to increase their reading quantity and improve their reading quality. At this point, they started self-assessing their reading development, which

one was suitable or not for them. It is supported by Mican (2015) asserting that “learners developed awareness of their own learning styles in order to select the strategies that were successful for them.” (p. 14) It shows that it is natural for the students to be aware of their learning direction when they are directly involved in monitoring their own learning progress.

Discussion

What we have learned from the students about their responses to the application of authentic assessment is that they did struggle throughout the process, but finally they could feel the positive impacts which the series of learning activities brought. Furthermore, we can conclude that the reading exposure made the students directly deal with their language barriers, and we can see from the results of the study that they started to be aware of their reading development and have different ways to cope with the challenges.

First, the actualization of authentic assessment through social practices with teacher as a facilitator could gradually help the students positively develop their reading skills (DelliCarpini, 2009; Murphy, 2009; Lenski et al., 2006). It is reflected on the students’ gradual improvement in their eagerness to demonstrate their reading comprehension in both spoken and written modes. This eagerness is later proven in their gradually increased reading quantity and oral participation, and improved quality of book reviews.

Second, those social practices over time also gave students an opportunity to critically engage with texts could also help them to comprehend the texts more deeply. Firstly, with frequent practices actualized in the oral performance assessments, the students could show that they gradually improved, and the teacher could discover extensive information about the students’ reading development (French, 2003; Montgomery, 2002). It is proven when the students made a dramatic progress in perceiving the texts. At the beginning of the course, they tended to only express their personal opinion without liking it to the text. As the course progressed and the teacher persistently encouraged them to perceive the text critically, they finally started to make connections with the text. At this point, the students gradually got to engage with the texts in a critical way in which it shows that their reading comprehension was getting better.

Third, those social practices facilitated by the teacher also gave them authority to self-assess their reading development, so that they could found out their strengths and weaknesses in learning reading and finally trying out solutions to cope with the reading difficulties (Andrade et al., 2009; Dochy et al., 1999, Geesline, 2003; Mican, 2015). It is showed by the

fact that the students figured out reading strategies that matched their styles. Furthermore, the self-assessment also gave them a chance to repair their mistakes (Geeslin, 2003) when they were not being honest with their work. It was showed when they plagiarized other people's book reviews from internet. In the next reviews, the students started to be more aware of the purposes of the reading activities, and get more motivated to be honest and confident showing their reading quality. Finally, Mican (2015) stated that "self-assessment may encourage learners to consider certain actions that are not necessarily regulated by the instructor." (p. 14) It shows that authentic assessment provides space for the students to grow as a responsible individual upon their own reading development.

E. CONCLUSION

In sum, the integration of authentic assessment to the instructional framework gradually yielded positive responses from the students. Most of them admitted that the long process of practices drew them to enjoy reading more, and become aware of their reading interest and their reading development stages. At this point, the reading exposure and the activities that entailed could also help the students to be reflective and critical readers (Sitthitikul, 2007). Future research is highly needed to yield more insights on the application of authentic assessment in foreign language learning, not only in terms of students' responses to its application but also more empirical reseach on the students' foreign language learning development.

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