

## Challenges of Using Portfolio Assessment as an Alternative Assessment Method for Teaching English in Indonesian Schools

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**Abstract:** Conducting an assessment is a part of teachers' roles and responsibilities. Assessment is a process by which teachers can get feedback for their teaching and students' learning. It can provide data about teachers' teaching effectiveness as well students' learning progress and achievement. Among many alternative authentic assessments suggested in the latest 2013 Curriculum, the portfolio is one of the recommended types of assessment used by teachers at schools lately. However, the reality shows that this portfolio assesment is not used effectively yet in the field. Instead, many teachers still rely on some kinds of traditional tests to assess students' learning. This paper discusses theoretical foundations of this portfolio assessment, followed by a discussion on how to make use of it in the field. Some challenges and possible solutions are also addressed in this paper.

**Keywords:** *authentic assessment, portfolio assessment, traditional test, English teaching*

### INTRODUCTION

One of the important points stressed in the latest Indonesian school's curriculum – 2013 Curriculum - is the emphasis on the use of authentic assessment. Authentic assessment can be generally defined as a comprehensive measurement to the learners' learning outcomes in the aspects of attitude, skill, and knowledge. O'Malley and Pierce (1996) describe authentic assessment as the multiple forms of assessment reflecting students' learning, achievement, motivation, and attitudes toward classroom instructional activities. The term of assessment is the synonym of other terms, like scoring, measurement, testing, or evaluation; meanwhile, the term of authentic has the similar meaning as of original, real, valid, or reliable. So, the use of authentic assessment is expected to enable teachers to get valid and reliable data on students' learning progress and achievement.

In the context of English teaching and learning, there are several types of authentic assessment that can be used in a classroom. O'Malley and Pierce (1996) mention three types of the authentic assessment: performance assessment, portfolios, and students-self

assessment. Performance assessment consists of oral reports, writing samples, individual or group projects, exhibitions, as well as demonstrations in which students respond orally. In the case of writing, it requires students to undertake complex tasks to examine prior knowledge, recent learning, and relevant skills to solve problems. Another type is a portfolio which is formed from a systematic collection of students' works that is analyzed to show the students' progress over time in regard to instructional objectives. Last, student-self assessment reassures students to involve in the teaching-learning process with high motivation and assertiveness because it provides students autonomy to make choices of planning their own learning activities. This paper, however, specifically only discusses the portfolio assessment in the context of teaching English as a foreign language in Indonesia.

The emphasis on using the portfolio assessment in the current curriculum can be understood as a response to many educational practitioners' criticism and objection to the use of traditional assessment in Indonesia (Marhaeni, 2014). The traditional assessment is the conventional methods of testing which usually produce a written document, such as quiz, exam, or paper and pencil-based tests. This includes the practice of standardized tests such as the national exam in Indonesian schools for many years. It is argued that that the traditional assessment like the national exam is not really a valid test to determine students' achievements because it only focuses on students' cognitive domain and has less capacity to assess students' affective and psychometric domains (Afrianto, 2008). The traditional assessment method is also assumed as not sufficient in assessing the real picture of students' academic achievements since they are mainly in the form of objective tests.

This paper, in particular, is aimed at exploring these three questions: First, what is the portfolio assessment?; Second, how to use the portfolio assessment in the context of English teaching and learning in Indonesian schools?; and third, what are some possible challenges in implementing it? These questions will be addressed by critically reviewing existing literature on the topics under investigation.

## **PORTFOLIO ASSESSMENT**

This sections critically review some keywords of this paper, starting from the nature of portfolio assessment, the practical implementation of the portfolio in the context of teaching English, and some challenges in the implementation as well as some possible solutions in dealing with the challenges.

### **Definition**

What is a portfolio? Generally speaking, a portfolio is a systematic collection of a variety of teachers' observations and student products, collected over time, that reflect a student's developmental status and progress made in the learning process. According to Encyclopedia of Childhood and Adolescence (1998), the portfolio was first introduced in 1990's. It defines the portfolio as a collection of samples of student's work. Similarly, O'Malley and Pierce (1996) in Gomez (2000, p.1) define portfolio assessments as "the

systematic collection of students work measured against predetermined criteria. These criteria may include scoring guides, rubrics, checklists, or rating scales". Because the contents of portfolios are scored using specific criteria, the use of assessment portfolios is considered criterion-referenced assessment

Other assessment practitioners like Palson and Meyer (1991) in Kemp (1998) defines it in a slightly broader term; the portfolio is a collection of student's work that displays the student's attempts, progresses, and achievements in one or more areas. Things that must be included in this collection are student's participation in selecting contents, the criteria for selection, the criteria for judging merit and evidence of student's self-reflection.

Kemp (1998) also gives a detailed characteristic of portfolio assessments, they are; Firstly, portfolio is an assessment in which teachers and students can work together; Secondly, it is not only a matter of a collection but also a selection; Thirdly, it provides samples of students' works which reflect their progress over time; and the criteria for assessing must be clear either for teacher or for students.

From all the definitions provided above, it can be understood that a portfolio assesment is a kind of authentic assesment which is systematically designed by teachers to gainia comprehensive picture of students' learning development through collecting the students' works over a specified time under a systematic and careful means of analysis. This collection is not only used for the assesment purpose, but also as a report for other stakeholders, including for students' parents.

### **A Practical Classroom Application**

The use of portfolio in language teaching is a relatively new practice. Iturain (2007) mentioned that in Europe teachers and learners have been working with Language Portfolios since the mid-1990s and between 1998 and 2000. These were the time when various the European Language Portfolio (ELP) models were piloted in Europe.

Iturain (2007) further describes three examples of using portfolio in teaching English for young learners. They are the passport, the language biography, and the dossier. Each of these has their own characteristics. The Passport, for instance, contains factual information about the language learner. It gives a history of the learners' language learning experiences which in this case refer to learning English. It may also contain any certificates or qualifications which show the learners' level in an internationally transparent manner.

Another example is the language biography. This is a personal account of the learners' language learning experience. For example, it may include a short narrative about the summer camp which they went on and for which they have included the certificate in their passport section. It also includes self-assessment materials, such as the learner checklists and any aims that learners have for the future. These aims might be passing a specific exam, attending a course and feeling well prepared for it or being able to speak English to a visitor.

The Dossier is another example mentioned by Iturain. This is a collection of course work which shows learners' level of English. It may include corrected class or homework, tests and exams or any other piece of work which illustrates where the learner is at. Here, a learner may keep voice or video recordings or any part of project work which they have done. So, by looking at their portfolios, the students can get the feel what they have achieved or how far they have progressed.

In addition, Gomez (1999) explains more detailed steps by steps strategies to develop and implement the portfolio assessment in an English classroom. This is especially for a school or a country which has never used the portfolio assessment before. *First*, the school should decide about goals and content together with stakeholders. At this stage, they can ask things like "What do we want the students to learn?" and choose several goals to focus on, such as focusing on improvement in fluency of speech or independent reading, or collaborative writing. They also need to decide what assessment information is needed and how that information can be provided. A group of teachers should be assigned to lead the development of the portfolio program. This group of teachers and stakeholders decide on the range of products to be included in the assessment portfolio program.

*Second*, the group decides upon common goals for student learning and performance and how students will be assessed, develops scoring rubrics and checklists, and agrees upon standards of performance to be attained. If possible, benchmarks that exemplify levels of student achievement should be articulated, including benchmarks for English language learners.

*Next*, the group aligns the assessment tasks to the state content standards and curriculum frameworks. In the case of Indonesia, the group should align the assessment task with the content standard of 2013 Curriculum. This alignment then is followed by implementing it at pilot sites for at least one year, providing staff development, and analysing results of the pilot project. The analysis of the scored portfolios from those sites is necessary to see the effectiveness of the program. The analysis is further used to see the effects of the assessment portfolio program on English language learners in particular and to determine whether improved information about these students is available as a result of portfolio implementation.

*Then*, once the assessment portfolio program has been piloted and found to be effective, it can be implemented at all sites. The government should train teachers to score using scoring criteria and benchmarks. The training should also include discussion of second-language proficiency and its impact on student achievement. *After that*, all stakeholders should develop guidelines for the collection of students work and decide the time, place, and manner in which standardized prompts will be given to assess students throughout the system. This is followed by the next stage where teachers score the portfolios based on predetermined criteria. This typically is done over several days in a central location by teachers who have been trained. The results of this score information should be given to all stakeholders in a timely fashion, in ways that make the results meaningful to all,

including teachers, students, parents, and other community members. *Last but not least*, Gomez (1999) reminds that after one year the group leaders and stakeholders need to evaluate the effectiveness of the portfolio program and make necessary judgments.

### **Potential Benefits**

As a response to teachers' criticism to traditional tests like national exams, portfolio assessment seems to be an appropriate solution. It is believed that this assessment will generate a lot of advantages. As Dudley (2001, p.19) states "portfolios are a simple yet powerful idea". This is due to the fact that portfolio can cover the weaknesses of the traditional tests. For example, the traditional tests have been accused of their limitation to assess the real picture of students' performance since they only test part of the lessons and quite often in the form of objective tests. Portfolios, on the other hand, can be designed to assess virtually any observable skill or process or content-area knowledge required. The portfolios can indeed provide a continuous picture of student progress, rather than a snapshot of student achievement that single-occasion tests provide. Therefore, the portfolio is more likely to have a valid authentic picture of learning (Gomez, 2000).

Another advantage of using the portfolio assessment is the fact that students are taught to become independent thinkers as well as independent learners (Hancock, 2004). This is probably triggered by the rule that in the process of completing portfolio assessments students are assigned to actively participate in selecting their works to put in the portfolios. They are also encouraged to discuss any progress they have made and set goals for future with the teachers. For this reason, this portfolio assesment is timely recommended in Indonesia as the latest 2013 curriculum has indeed called for more students-centred learning activities.

Doner and Gilman (1998) conducted an observation on how students react to portfolios. They investigated 621 students by giving them an open-ended survey following their final portfolio conference. They found that portfolios give several potential benefits to students. Some of the benefits are that the portfolios are proven as assessments which show a more accurate reflection of students learning than tests; enhance personal skills and self-confidence; improve the relationship with the teachers as well as with classmates; improve skills in organization and development.

In the context of language testing, Dave (1999) claims that traditional tests seem to mainly focus on testing knowledge of the target language rather than on the skills and strategies; on grammatical and lexical accuracy rather than discourse skills, fluency, flexibility, range and delicacy; on the production of scores and grades rather than the supplying feedback for the learners and teachers. In contrast, portfolio assessments mainly focus on assessing students' skills, discourse skills, fluency, flexibility, and giving a wide range feedback for teachers, students, as well as parents.

Dave then further argues that unlike traditional tests which seems to be conducted on relatively brief moments in the extended process of language learning, an assessment

(including portfolio assessment) is more likely based on more extended samples of language performance and is possible to have greater content validity as a measure of overall language proficiency. So, again these assessments are more likely to depict the real picture of student's language proficiency.

### **Challenges of the Portfolio Implementation**

Despite many potential benefits of the portfolio assessment, it is not implemented successfully yet in the Indonesian curriculum. A study by Marhaeni (2014) involving English teachers from 23 junior high schools in three regencies in Bali in 2013, for instance, indicates the fact that many teachers in her research participants reported that among several alternatives of authentic assessments, portfolio, product, and self-assessment are very rarely used.

The use of portfolio assessment in Indonesian schools to replace traditional tests (including national exams) seems to face a dilemma. It has to deal with many challenges. One of the main challenges is relating the issue of its low comparability and reliability. It is not easy to transform many performance-based assessments, including portfolios, into a single score or grade. In fact, the public has got used to seeing a single score as the one in standardized tests (Gomez, 2000). Then, many opponents argue that it is hard to use the portfolios that really meet reliability requirements needed by many schools system since a particular teacher's view toward certain students' portfolios may be different from others'.

When teaching writing, for example, different teachers may have different scores on an exactly the same writing task. One could give 50, but another one could give 60. Because of this, Wolk in Mathew (2004) argues that the single official reason to refuse using the portfolios is due to the fact that they are too subjective.

Moreover, in Indonesia, we still need a national standard of our education. Even, the standard-need movement seems stronger in recent years. Schools' stakeholders, especially the government, eager to have a quick and easy to read data of the accomplishment degree of national education standards. This data is really important for the government to use as a public accountability. How can we assess the achievement of that standard by using portfolio assessments, which usually need a long process and is mainly reported on the form of words rather than a single score or grade like one in standardized tests?

Gomez then further points out that high cost will be another possible problem. This is a logical consequence of nature great efforts to develop this assessment. He argues that designing, implementing, and scoring portfolio items is a hard job and therefore costly. Practitioners have to provide a significant amount of time to suit the assessment tasks with curriculum and develop the scoring criteria and scoring tools. Again, this is assumed to requiring much money. According to a Rand Corporation report on the cost of science performance assessments in large-scale testing programs, the cost of using

performance tests is three to ten times higher than using multiple-choice tests (Stecher & Klein, 1997 in Gomez, 2000).

Is it possible for the Indonesian government to allocate a substantial amount of budget for this? This question should ideally be answered by "yes". Although the amount of national budget invested for national education improvement keeps growing year by year, the classic problem of limited budget does still exist in Indonesian education. Many Indonesian educational problems are closely related to lacking budgets. This includes poor paid of teacher's salaries (especially non-government teachers), insufficient school facilities, and unavailability of advanced teaching and learning aids are still unsolved. So, how come the government could allocate enough financial supports for portfolios development?

Well-trained skilful professional teachers are obviously required to make this assessment work well in the field. This is also a potential burden to use the portfolios in Indonesian school since we do not have many teachers owing that competence. The government, therefore, should train some teachers to achieve the skills. A well designed intensive professional training is important to prepare teachers to use this portfolio assessment.

Gomez (1999) explains that there are several aspects that teachers should be prepared for the professional training. Teachers should first be made aware of the benefits of assessment portfolios so that they become convinced that it is an attractive alternative to their current testing system, especially because portfolios require more work initially than standardized tests. Then, teachers should be guided on how to embed portfolio assessment into their instructional programs, so they can plan for assessment opportunities as they plan their instruction. Professional development plans should also include a description of the teaching strategies that lead students to take responsibility for and reflect on their own learning.

In addition, all teachers working with students learning English should understand the process of second language acquisition and its impact on learning. If possible, individual portfolio users should initiate a school-wide project to develop assessment portfolios with the aim of creating a shared vision of the goals for student achievement. Another important feature of a professional development plan for the effective use of assessment portfolios is to provide opportunities for members of an educational community to discuss student work together. This enables teachers to improve assessment practices, learn how to work better with individual students, and improve the curriculum. Additionally, teachers should be instructed in developing scoring criteria that accurately reflect their course content and trained to use those criteria to score student work equitably. Finally, the professional development plan should provide teachers with enough scoring opportunities to enable them to score portfolio samples reliably and to choose samples of student work that are representative of a specific level of performance.

A large class is also another ultimate problem of using the portfolios in Indonesian schools. It is a fact that most Indonesian classes consist of more than 30 even 40 students. It is quite common to see that many teachers teach more than two classes at the same time. By such many students in the classroom, it is understandable when a teacher finds it too hard to manage and use portfolios in an expected way. How come s/he can conduct the portfolios well if s/he has to deal with abundant students?

By considering those points, although it may be still relevant to use some kinds of traditional tests, portfolio assessment should be promoted more intensively and massively in the process of English teaching and learning in Indonesia. The portfolios by their original characteristics are highly recommended to use, at least, in some pilot project schools where such technical obstacles are minor. Other schools may also try to use them under a well continuously supervised and monitored development from school principals. English teachers, for example, can use them in monitoring the progress of students' writing ability. At the same time, however, we still need to use carefully designed standardized tests to meet the need for a quick readable data about students' academic achievements.

## CONCLUSION

Portfolios assessment is basically a promising tool to assess students' learning in order to get a valid and authentic picture of students' learning and achievements. This seems to be a right choice as a response to people's criticism to the use of traditional assessments like standardised national exams in Indonesia. That is one of the reasons why this kind of authentic assessment is highly recommended to be used by Indonesian teachers in the latest 2013 Curriculum. The assessment is expected not to only provide more valid data of students' progress, it is also hoped to provide more comprehensive feedback for teachers regarding students whole learning development domain – cognitive, affective, and pshycomotoric.

In practice, however, many challenges are inevitable. Despite many potentials benefits, the use of portfolio assessment is limited by some issues such as lower reliability, high cost, high demand for well trained professional teachers and unsupported learning atmosphere in Indonesia. These are some of the reasons why it is difficult to apply this assessment in Indonesia. In addition, the government's demand for national education standard is another reason for keeping the standardized tests, like national exams, still used.

For a short-term goal, it might be still relevant to make these two kinds of assessments – traditional and authentic assessment coexist. Yet, for long term purposes, Indonesian schools should have started using the authentic assessment, including the portfolio assessments. With this authentic assessment, it is hoped that the teaching and learning quality can be improved, the students' learning progresses can be balanced for three domains of development, and the students can be more independent in controlling their own learning development and achievement.



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