



Portfolio Assessment: Benefits and Challenges in the Implementation Process

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Abstract: Recent educational innovations, namely constructivism and multiple intelligence theories have triggered radical changes in teaching approaches of instruction and assessment. Accordingly, a need of a paradigm shift from teacher-centered to learner-centered approach and assessment in which learners are at the center of the educational process and dedicated to show more creative language output is indispensable. Moreover, foreign language teachers are getting dissatisfied and fed up with the use of standardized tests as a preferable method of assessing their learners. The appearance of portfolio assessment is one of the results of that teaching transformation. The purpose of this paper is to introduce portfolio assessment in terms of its merits as well as difficulties that foreign language teachers face in the process of implementation. Along with that, recommendations for a better and more successful application will be suggested in the contexts of tertiary and university level.

Keywords: Portfolio assessment, benefits of portfolio, drawbacks of portfolio

I. INTRODUCTION

Recent educational innovations, namely constructivism and multiple intelligence theories have triggered radical changes in teaching approaches of instruction and assessment. Accordingly, a need of a paradigm shift from teacher-centered to learner-centered approach and assessment in which learners are at the center of the educational process and dedicated to show more creative language output is indispensable. Developments in educational systems have also reflected that fact that teaching does not merely put an emphasis on final learning product, but also accentuates learning process. For that reason, standardized assessments which stimulate learners to memorize knowledge when performing tests rather having a decent grasp of imparted information as well as making what they understand practical become consistently dysfunctional (Birgin & Baki, 2007). Eventually, the ignition of alternative assessments has been commencing to fill the gaps of the existing traditional assessments. Portfolio assessment is among those alternative assessments, which according to Klenowski (2002) can have the potential to align with current changes in assessments and learning theories.

This notion of portfolio assessment has been recently flowing across the Vietnamese educational system, particularly in tertiary education where portfolio implementation gradually becomes a norm. As a teacher with real experience and exposure to portfolio implementation and assessment especially in productive skills, that is to say speaking and writing skills, I perceive this practice brings revolutionary changes to what is called long-existed assessments in the University context in Vietnam. However, there are very few empirical studies on how portfolio assessment has been employed by teachers and learners, what benefits as

well as downsides of this approach for the involvers, and what necessary amendments need to make to successfully implement this practice particularly in tertiary educational context.

II. PORTFOLIO ASSESSMENT OVERVIEW

Definitions of portfolio

To have a good conception of portfolio assessment, portfolio definition needs to be understood first. In fact, there is not any fixed definition of portfolio. Indeed, its definition is diverse and may change according to teachers' purposes and usage methods (Birgin & Baki, 2007). Yang (2003) defined portfolio as a compilation of students' work, which documents their effort, progress and achievement in their learning, and their reflection on the materials negotiated for the portfolio. In line with this, Zhang (2009) further added as a part of an alternative assessment program, portfolio also documents learners' best work.

Portfolio assessment characteristics

Portfolio assessment is used as an evaluation tool for reviewing the status of student progress and development (Bryan, 2002). The abovementioned definitions acknowledge the developmental nature of the assessment process involved via portfolios and emphasize the paramount importance of learners' involvement in portraying what they know and can do. Another significant dimension which can be drawn from these definitions is the centrality of learners' self-evaluation and reflection in the process of portfolio complement. To this end, Klenowski (2002) stated that learners need the cognitive tools to be able to understand their development. "This is why metacognition is an essential proves that needs to remain central to the development of the portfolio assessment" (p.10). In order for portfolio assessment perfectly performs its role, Zhang (2009) indicated that regardless of the portfolio' contents, they should be built in class assignments and correspond with the curriculum, hence the components of the portfolio can be diverse according to are teachers-learners' decision through an agreement of the involvers (Bryan, 2002). Another major feature of portfolio assessment is clear criteria which should be jointly built and discussed with learners for them to be clear about what they are expected to collect, select and reflect.

Benefits of implementing portfolio assessment

In light of findings from previous conducted research (Bryan, 2002; Apple & Shimo, 2004; Birgin & Baki, 2007; Abedi, 2010; Nezakatgoo, 2011; Mokhtaria, 2015; Baturay, 2015), advantages of PA can be sizeable in terms of innovating teaching and learning processes. Regarding to learners' benefits, they become more self-regulated and autonomous in their learning through the use of portfolio assessment (Bryant, 2002). In form of the reflection activity during the process of portfolio assessment, Nezakatgoo (2011) found that learners can recognize their own strengths and weaknesses of a particular activity, and therefore consider how to improve weak points. Eventually, learners are stimulated to be active and reflexive (Apple & Shimo, 2004). As stated by Birgin and Baki (2007), a portfolio is a collection of a students' work structurally over time which can be in forms of drawings, written pieces, audio/video tapes of performances, photographs of artwork, therefore, it can accurately demonstrate a learner's progress in the target language, give learners the opportunity to reflect on their own progress and work collaboratively with peers for feedback (Apple & Shimo, 2004). In the same regard, Baturay (2015) revealed that using portfolio assessment fosters student-centered learning, increases motivation and prepares learners for future life.

As for teachers, research by Birgin and Baki (2007) showed that portfolio assessment allows teachers to self-assess their own teaching and growth, become self-directed and reflective practitioners, and enhance their professionalism, which were akin to Bryant's findings (2002). In other words, by getting a good grasp of learners' needs and strengths as well as weaknesses, teachers will appropriately plan their teaching progress and provide sufficient scaffolding for their learners. Noticeably, as stressed by Birgin and Baki (2007), a far-reaching benefit of portfolio assessment is how portfolio assessment can promote teachers to have new perspective in education. Portfolio assessment clears teachers' mind with critical issues about the teaching field such as types of effective or ineffective activities, learners' interests, demands and preference for teaching and learning styles, whether the teaching process is efficient or not.

Most importantly, portfolio assessment enables learners to truly reflect their real performance, which can provide parents and community members with observable products, understandable evidence and a broader picture regarding learners' performance (Bryant, 2002). All in all, portfolio assessment can be an essential tool to assess learners' learning products and process.

Factors hindering the implementation of portfolio assessment practice

Bryant (2002) indicated that although benefits of portfolio assessment are well documented, some teachers are still hesitant in implementing this practice in the classroom. Justifications for teachers' hesitation in using portfolio assessment are clearly given in Mokhtaria's study (2015). First, time is a big concern as teachers perceived that it is time-consuming to assess learners' performance and provide formative feedback, not to mention that they are overloaded with many class activities. In line with this, Batuary (2015) stressed that the problems can be more complicated in a crowded class. Second, teachers feel that they are not familiar with portfolio assessment, thus not having sufficient knowledge or training for implementing this approach. Third, standardized testing is still dominant in many educational systems, especially in Asian countries. Fourth, reliability and validity are problems of concern as it is challenging to establish standards, criteria or scoring systems which can secure the two mentioned characteristics to properly assess learners' performance and ability. Fourth, practicality in terms of feasibility, cost effectiveness, and acceptability will really matter. In this regard, teachers perceive portfolio assessment is a process which requires a lot of efforts of teachers and students, and sometimes space for storing students' work can also be a barrier. Finally, lack of parental and community support for such a new and unfamiliar system of assessment can somehow hold teachers back from conducting portfolio assessment.

As a matter of fact, students' English skills especially speaking and writing skills are still low-proficient regardless of years of studying English. This situation is indeed problematic, and needs to be tackled. The reasons obviously stem from many sources. Vietnamese educational system which put a strong emphasis on standardized tests is the main cause. Many people hold the perception that scores in tests would have the last to say, which drives teachers to tend to teach what is tested. This can explain why portfolio assessment is still in its infancy only and may take a long time to possess a stable place in the educational systems, let alone exerting influence on schools, teachers, students and parents (Bryant, 2002; Zhang, 2009). Furthermore, Birgin and Baki (2007) stated that standardized tests provide single scores which do not reflect or tell educators or parents accurately about learners' overall progress, but it is portfolio implementation that provides teachers with a broader way of evaluate learners' performance, progress, ability, knowledge and improvements. Believing, portfolio assessment can bring a change in improving learners' English proficient skills and raise people awareness of people about the superiority of this method.

Predicaments in the process of conducting portfolio assessment

Useful as portfolio assessment process could be for teaching and learning processes, there were still some problems which hindered the approach. Through the process of using portfolio assessment in form of presentations to assess learners' speaking skills, portfolio assessment was a time-consuming process in terms of preparation and organizing and assessing, which could deter teachers from using this approach. Teachers invariably endeavored to be patient in the whole process until teachers could witness improvements of their learners. Teacher should make every effort to get their students accustomed to this practice in order to facilitate the process. In some big size classes, teachers were almost overloaded when struggling to assess every individual student. Indeed, teachers did not have enough to look closely at each learner' work, thus making their scores somehow subjective. This problem could be best solved if the number of the students in crowded class was reduced. Or the idea of employing a teaching assistant to share the workload with the teacher-in-charge is also worth considering.

Another downside of portfolio assessment is inconsistent and insufficient criteria to judge learners' work. To handle this difficulty, groups of teachers, learners or parents could sit together to propose appropriate benchmarks or criteria for different purposes and objectives of portfolio assessment.

III. RECOMMENDATIONS AND CONCLUSION

As aforementioned, the benefits of portfolio assessment are numerous especially in terms of heightening learners' consciousness of their own learning process, thus making them more responsible for their studying. Additionally, portfolio assessment also gives tremendous assistance for teachers regarding effective ways to access and judge learners' ability, which will help them find better teaching techniques and strategies to facilitate their learners' learning process. However, the existence of downsides of portfolio assessment is evident. Accordingly, some proposed suggestions will be made for further application of portfolio assessment with the hope to help teachers diminish their difficulties during the implementation of portfolio assessment, thus helping them take full advantages of portfolio assessment.

Firstly, teachers need to have a detailed planning, curriculum, instructional materials along with a variety of reference materials such as sample assessment activities, sample criterion sets, sample effective feedback to speed up the portfolio assessment implementation since this practice is quite time-consuming and labor-intensive. To this end, teachers should be equipped with good knowledge about the ways of implementing portfolio assessment and making portfolio assessment be an efficient and effective method via authentic workshops, seminars, conferences or training courses about portfolio assessment.

Secondly, teachers might need help from the educational system to make portfolio assessment more accessible and popular among schools, students and parents. Ideally, portfolio assessment should be perceived positively among people in the society. To this end, more national budgets and time investment should be devoted to programs applying portfolio assessment in the best possible ways. Possibly, portfolio assessment should be made compulsory in schools for people to take this practice into serious consideration and together carry it out deliberately. Furthermore, with the help of national money allocated to the implementation of portfolio assessment, well-equipped rooms and more spacious rooms for the storage of the students' work will be then followed, helping promoting this practice.

Finally, the class size should be made smaller of a maximum of 20 learners per class only. As a matter of fact, crowded classes have also a source of problem for English teachers to carry out their lesson, let alone applying portfolio assessment practice. By reducing the number of the students in each class, educational quality including the successful application of portfolio assessment will be better secure. Although it might take a long way for the scenario of the small class size in the university setting to be realistic, we still have rights to hope for that fantastic scene.

None of approaches can be imperfect, and therefore weaknesses in the process of implementing portfolio assessment are unavoidable. However, by and large, gained benefits of this process are truly outnumbered those of downsides, of which evidence is based on conducted research and my real application. Importantly, teachers should find ways to adopt, choose what works and eliminate what does not work for their specific teaching context. It is no doubt that portfolio assessment could take time to plan, organize and carry out; however, the results could far exceed difficult aspects. Eventually, it is recommended that teachers should plant a seed about the important role of portfolio assessment by raising people's awareness of portfolio assessment functions and should frequently apply portfolio assessment in order to assess learners. Finally, the collaboration of all people in the society in the campaign to make portfolio assessment realistic and successful is invariably essential.

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