

Using portfolio to assess Rural young learners' writing skills in English language classroom

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ABSTRACT

This study aimed at discussing the benefits of portfolio assessment in assessing students' writing skills. The study explores the use of authentic assessment in the classroom. Eleven primary school children from Year 4 in a rural school in Sabah participated in this study. Data were collected by observing them during the English Language lessons and at the end of the series of observations, an interview session was conducted with each of them for triangulation. Through the observation, the children can be categorized into 4 groups of improvement, which are "emerging", "beginning", "developing" and "expanding" using the coding from British Columbia (1999). The results of this study revealed that using portfolio to assess young learners' writing skills is beneficial and effective in helping them to write in the English language classroom. The value of this study is to suggest the use of a more authentic classroom assessment, particularly in English language teaching and learning.

Keywords:

INTRODUCTION

Portfolios are emerging as one of the many types of alternative assessment being carried out today. McMillan (2007) stated that a portfolio has significant advantages over conventional approaches to assessment pertaining to collecting of and evaluating students' work. In addition, Popham (1999, p. 181) wrote in his book that "Assessment should be a part of instruction, not apart from it". Popham (1999) highlighted that portfolios measure each student's achievements and at the same time allowing individual differences between them. He also provided an overview on the differences between portfolios and standardized testing practices.

The core of a portfolio lies in the reflection the teacher and the students do on a task given. Stiggins (2001) highlighted that reflection from the students' part is significant in making the portfolio a meaningful one. Stiggins (2001, p. 476) provided one reflective question that students can always ask themselves, "What do I think is very special about my work and why?" regardless of the task they are working at.

All in all, portfolio is seen as a popular educational tool to assess students' performance. It is meant to reduce stress on the students as well as on the teachers. We hope to find the answer for the central question of this research – How does portfolio help in improving students' writing skills? – and that will answer how effective portfolio assessment is in my English language classroom.

Birgin and Baki (2007) felt that recent developments and demands in science and society have deeply affected education in a way that theories such as constructivism and multiple-intelligence as well as new social trends such as changing labor market, information-age needs engendered to radical change in traditional approaches of learning, teaching and assessment. This has led to a more student-centered

teaching elsewhere because teachers are getting more frustrated day after day with standardized examinations (Hansen, 1993, as cited by Thomas et al., 2004).

It is positively argued that traditional tests do not assess the child as a whole. They do not reflect the current theories in learning, do not portray a vivid image of how the child excels in the classroom, and also do not provide constructive feedback for growth (Chen & Martin, 2000). As such, to curb the problem of standardized exams, many scholars such as Popham (1999), Stiggins (2001) and McMillan (2007) suggested that portfolio should be given consideration in an attempt to see changes in assessment. They agreed upon a common basis – Portfolios are much more than large student folders containing examples of student work. They come with terms to the idea that portfolio prepares the platform for a more relaxed assessment, where stress is no more on getting distinctions but the emphasis is on the learning.

In relation to the English language, students' writing has always been a problem and a focus (Mohd. Saat Abbas, Suzihana Saharan, Yahya Che Lah & Abd. Rashid Mohamad, 2005). What more for students in rural areas where access to the English language is limited. To add to the problem, students and teachers are burdened with an exam-oriented education system which does not emphasize creativity but focuses only on achieving A's in the examination (Mohd Sofi Ali, 2003 & Gomez, 2003).

According to Mitchell (1992) as cited by Thomas et al. (2004), portfolios are becoming the most well-known form of performance assessment being used from kindergarten through graduate school. This shows that alternative assessment such as portfolio seems to win the hearts of the teachers and is attracting them to use a more on-going and authentic assessment to evaluate students' performance.

To date, to our knowledge, massive studies on portfolio effectiveness are only carried out at tertiary education level. Angelo (2009) highlighted a similar study to this paper in the context of higher learning. Angelo found that portfolio assessment helped in guiding and motivating students in their writing. Fewer studies (Garcia, Meyer & Walsh, 2002; Lipson, Mosenthal, Daniels, & Woodside-Iron, 2000) have been conducted on how portfolio assessment improves students' English language writing skills particularly at the primary school level. Thus, we would like to see how much an alternative assessment, in this case study -- portfolio assessment, as opposed to traditional standardized multiple-choice tests -- is effective in improving students' English language proficiency and in particular, their writing skill.

The Study

This study focused on getting to understand how portfolio helps in improving students' writing skills. It was carried out in a school in Kudat district in Sabah. The design of the research was an interpretive one (Creswell, 2008) because we used qualitative approach in gathering the data for this study.

In this research, purposeful sampling (Creswell, 2008) was used to select the participants of the study. Purposeful sampling was adopted in order to understand the phenomenon and to develop a more in-depth understanding of the problem faced (Creswell, 2008). Participant observation was also carried out during the lessons. A writing process checklist adapted from McKenzie and Tompkins (1984) was used in observing the students' gradual improvement in the writing tasks given namely pair writing, dialogue scripting, picture description and journal entries.

We prepared a set of interview questions adapted from Wafa Fahed (2007) and Losardo and Notari-Syverson (2001). The interview questions consisted of process writing as well as how the students felt about portfolio, what they liked most about portfolio, what put them down, how much the teacher helped them in their writing, what should be done to improve the assessment and how they felt about the 'new' assessment that was taking place in their classroom.

There are 11 participants in this research. The following are descriptions of each participant. We maintain the ethics of research by not revealing the real name of the participants who were also our pupils (Lincoln & Guba, 1985).

Emma: A girl of 10 years old, very neat and tidy in appearance, she comes to school every day without fail. Her attendance record is good. She acquires satisfying level of understanding for most subjects and English, in particular. Her father is a woodcutter who works on contract basis while her mother is a full time home maker. She is the eldest in her family and she has two younger brothers who are in the same school. Based on the interaction in the classroom, she loves English Language so much and wants to be an English Language teacher when she grows up. Both her parents studied until PMR (formerly known as SRP) level and

they put some effort to guide Ema with her homework every night. She finishes all her homework in time and she is also the class monitor. She is the school's target of 5A candidate for UPSR.

Ros: Comes from a medium family of 8 members and has only 2 rooms in the house. They have to share everything. Her attendance to school is good, just like Ema. She is Ema's best friend. They come to school together. Ros has never failed to greet all the teachers in school every morning in English. Compared to Ema, Ros is not proficient in the English Language. She has problems saying new words out loud and is quite a shy girl if she is alone. Her father is a fisherman who comes home only thrice a week. So, they are left with their mother most of the time. Ros has two elder brothers and one elder sister. Her younger sisters are 5 and 2 years old respectively. Ros is left alone to study at home because all the three elder siblings are in boarding school and they only come back once every fortnight. Both her parents are illiterates. Despite that, she does finish her work but she makes a lot of errors in spelling and sentence construction.

Arif: A cute boy who was registered to school a year later of his actual date. So, he is 11 years old but he is in Year 4. Arif is a very active boy but he has some eye-sight problem. He has to squint his eyes every time he reads notes on the board. The school has taken proper measures to inform his parents about his condition. His parents are very protective and blame the school for accusing that their son is blind. The school is serious about Arif's condition. Due to that, we assign Arif to sit in the front row seat closest to the board. Arif usually gets 30%-40% in his English Language exams. Arif does not always complete his homework and his attendance is at a worrying stage. He only comes to school 2 or 3 days. This is because he has to take his father's boat to school. Arif lives in Kampung Palak Laut as opposed to Ema and Ros who live in Kampung Palak Darat. Arif's reason for absence is no fuel for the boat. Arif comes to school with his best friend, Haziz. Arif's mother is an immigrant from the Philippines while his father is a local. Both his parents are also illiterates. Arif has 3 siblings. His eldest sister is in Form 1.

Haziz: Petite, but he is the school sprinter. Haziz lives in the fishing village or affectionately known as Kampung Palak Laut. He has 11 siblings. Both his parents are immigrants from the Philippines. Haziz is not good in the English Language but he is a very hardworking boy. He makes sure that he finishes all his work and indeed, his work is of good quality. The only problem with Haziz is his attendance. He can only come to school if Arif is around. Haziz's family does not have a boat of their own. Some of Haziz's elder brothers and sisters are schooling; meanwhile three have dropped out. Haziz is the school librarian and is very active in sports too. He is a very polite boy and all the teachers like him so much. The teachers in the school are planning to 'adopt' him until UPSR so that his academic performance can be improved.

Lily: Lily is a very sweet girl. She is never talkative and is very neat with all her work. She has always been the one to help out with class decoration and cleaning. Lily is an average student. She loves reading, both Bahasa Melayu and English Language books. Lily is the third in her family of 6 siblings. Her two elder sisters are in secondary school while her eldest sister is a nurse in a government hospital. Her father is the religious teacher (*ustaz*) who teaches quran recitation in the surau at the village while her mother is a housewife. Lily is quite slow in sentence construction but she is very good in spelling. She is usually top of the class after Ema. She is liked by all the teachers because she is a responsible girl and she makes sure she finishes all the homework given daily.

Nita: This 10 year old has just been registered in the school in June. Nita was schooling in another school before both her parents passed away. Her mother died when she was much younger and recently, in May, her father passed away from cancer. She is now looked after by her two elder brothers who are working as woodcutters. Nita is just like Lily, very soft spoken and diligent. In comparison to Lily, Nita is weaker in studies and is a slow learner. She needs a lot of drills in the subject and she seeks help from her brothers who only studied until SPM. Nita comes to school with Ros and Lily. They are best friends. They also sit in the same row in the class. Nita loves to work with Lily and Ros. Nita is a very creative girl. She created the reading corner in the classroom by bringing old newspapers and story books from home. She encouraged her friends to do so and now, our class has a reading corner. Apart from that, Nita was also a school librarian in her previous school. She usually spends her time reading and she is neat in her work too. All her textbooks and exercises books are neatly wrapped and kept in her school bag. Nita has never been absent from school since registering in this school in June.

Steve: This boy is from the remedial kelas (Kelas Pemulihan). Steve has a lot of problems in reading and writing, both in Bahasa Melayu and even weaker in English. Steve comes from a very big family. There are 14 of them in Steve's family. A surprise is that Man (will be described later) is Steve's nephew and both

of them are in the same class! Steve has an elder brother in Year 6 and younger brothers, one each in Year 1, 2 and 3. Steve is very good in skill work but is weak in academics. He has a lot of problems in attendance to school and this affects his studies even more. Both his parents are illiterates and will rarely be present in any of the school meetings. This makes it even difficult for us to discuss Steve's affairs with his parents. Other than that, Steve is just like other boys, playful and funny but he has never caused any serious disciplinary problems in the school.

Asran: Asran and Steve are cousins. Asran is much better in academic performance in comparison to Steve. Asran does have an attendance problem but not as serious as Steve. Asran has personally told us that he likes English Language because he likes games that we use in the classroom. Unlike Steve, Asran is from a small family of 4 members. He only has a younger brother in Year 3. His father does not stay with them because he works in the town. He only comes home once a month with groceries and money for them. Asran and his brother are taken care of by their mother who washes clothes from house to house to generate more income for the family. Asran's mother studied until Year 6. This helps him with his studies. His mother will be with him and his brother every night until they finish their homework. Asran comes in as number 3 after Ema and Lily in class. Asran has got potential but needs to be polished well so that he can perform in the UPSR. Asran is active in class and liked by all his friends.

Man: This nephew of Steve is just the size of Haziz. He loves to joke in the class and he will always have something to say that will make the whole class laugh. Man has the most beautiful writing among the boys. He writes neatly and he keeps his books clean and tidy. Man loves tenses so much but has much difficulty stringing words into sentences. Man, similar to Steve, is from a big family. There are 12 of them in his family. Man is the youngest. All his brothers, except one, are married. Man is slow in writing because he makes sure that he does not make any errors when he writes. This leaves him with not being able to copy what is written on the board in time. The teachers complain that Man is a very slow learner. As for us, we do disagree with that. Man, as we see him, is active and just wants to make sure his work is tidy. He is not like other children who will erase the mistake until the paper is torn. Man uses a pen to write and he makes sure he only puts a small line on the wrongly spelt words before continuing the work.

Rafi: It is a unique case with Rafi. He only came in to Year 4 in June after the school decided that he was no longer suitable for Year 3. Rafi was registered to Year 1 together with his younger brother but Rafi was 8 years old compared to the others in Year 1 who were only 7. Rafi acquired the lessons much faster than his classmates. The school discussed with his parents that he could be performing well in his studies if he is moved to Year 4, suitable with his age and maturity. Rafi is another active student in class. Even though he joined the class only in June, he is doing much better than his new classmates in Year 4 now. Rafi is the son of our school gardener. His father can speak English at a satisfactory level where message conveyed is understood. Rafi's father has asked me personally to give extra guidance to Rafi as his situation is different from his classmates. Rafi has a brother in Year 3 and a sister in Form 1. All the three of them are good in their studies and excel in class. Rafi wants to be a policeman when he grows up. He has never failed to offer us a smile every time he walks in front of us with "Hello" always the next word from that sweet boy.

Fida: Lastly, the cute Fida. Fida is like Nita, an orphan. Fida is looked after by her grandmother. This leaves her with a lot of house chores to be completed after school. Fida has an attendance problem and it is escalating weekly. Fida tells us that she was absent because she was tired after washing the clothes early in the morning! Like other girls in the class, Fida loves pink and her writing is neat too. She comes to school with her best friend in Year 3, Haridah. Fida is a very quiet girl. She does not talk until she is approached. We had difficulty in the beginning of the year identifying and relating to this girl because she did not talk at all when she was asked a few questions about herself. As days went on and activities were done in the class, Fida started talking a little. She still remains silent and will only ask question when probed. Fida needs a lot of guidance in reading and writing, what more in speaking where English language is concerned. She does not have any contacts with the language except in the classroom, just like her other classmates. In reference to the observation checklist, we can say that Fida's attendance is similar to Steve's. Fida's attendance is worrying teachers.

Findings and Discussion

We realize that all the participants did have some improvement in their writing process and this is evident in their samples of work. The only participant who did not improve at all was Steve. Steve had serious

problem with attendance and in fact, he also lost many of his writing activity sheets which were supposed to be put together in his portfolio in the classroom.

Table 1 Findings from the observation analysis

Categories	Expanding	Developing	Beginning	Emerging
Name	Ema, Man & Rafi	Asran & Haziz	Ros, Arif, Nita & Lily	Steve & Fida
Features of improvement	-Tremendous -More confident in writing -Helped friends by proofreading	-Gradual -Active in brainstorming but silent from volunteering -Improved on punctuation	-Minor -Had problems identifying errors -Motivation problem -Focus on draft work -Constantly put their work in the portfolio even after data collection ended	-Very little -Attendance problem

Based on the observation checklist analysis as presented in Table 1, we did a case by case analysis and also a cross-case analysis. In cross case analysis, we divided the participants into 4 categories of improvement. We coded their observation checklist by looking at the patterns of improvement. The coding used here was adapted from the British Columbia study (1999) in which they put the students’ improvement into four bands as below:

- i) Emerging
- ii) Beginning
- iii) Developing
- iv) Expanding

Ema, Man and Rafi (Expanding)

They showed tremendous improvement in their writing skills. Based on the observation checklist and the overall view of the portfolio, they constantly improved on their mechanics of writing because all their draft work helped them to make every piece of their writing a better one every time. We also realized that three of them became more confident in writing with some inclusion of Bahasa Melayu words in their reflection entries. All their work was neat in the portfolio and they made sure that they kept all the class tasks given in the drawer in the classroom. Besides that, Ema, Man and Rafi also helped to proofread their friends’ work during the classes. They would always volunteer for their work to be read in front of the classroom even though there were times when each of their work had major grammatical errors. We can say that these three participants have shown that portfolio assessment is indeed a great learning tool in helping them to improve their writing skills.

Asran and Haziz (Developing)

These two boys are of similar improvement traits. We can see that they both enjoyed working together every time there was pair work. They corrected each other’s work and they would only present their work on volunteer basis occasionally. Most of the time, we would just call their names and they would come forward to share their writing with the rest of the class. Both Asran and Haziz were very active in brainstorming activities but they would remain silent when called to read or write voluntarily. They also showed that they love topics related to transportation and building. These boys had much difficulty recalling stories and they said that the stories are ‘girl-type’ of reading. They passed funny comments and remarks but

showed major improvement in their writing activities. They acquired punctuation very well after a series of drilling. They can now write simple sentences in paragraphs.

Ros, Arif, Lily and Nita (Beginning)

What we mean by minor improvement is that these students showed only little improvement in the writing activities when portfolio was used in the class. We can say that these four students can be categorized as improving but needing a lot of guidance. Although their work was neat and tidy, they needed much reminding on punctuation. We instructed them to use the dictionary all the time to check on the spelling of the words that they were unsure. These four students have problems identifying their own errors and they rarely helped their friends with proof reading of the final draft. They also had something in common-- problems coming forward to present their work. Even after we offered some reward for those who volunteered to present their work, these students still remained in their seats. We also realized that they like to focus very much on the draft and as we moved on to the revising component, they tend to be slow there. They needed more time in drafting their work. This is evident in the work in their portfolio.

Steve and Fida (Emerging)

As described earlier, these two students had serious attendance problems. Based on the observation checklist, we can see that they only attended the class twice throughout the data collection period. The percentage of their attendance was 25%. They did have a portfolio each but nothing much was in the content. Steven did publish his writing on the bulletin board once but Fida did not at all. We can say that portfolio assessment did not work with these students because of their attendance problem.

When we asked the participants for their response on what they think if their portfolios were assessed and awarded marks, and later the marks were made as their final marks for English Language, all the nine of them were ecstatic. They agreed and the following excerpts of what they said proved their liking for this authentic assessment:

'I like it. I will get good marks in English. Not like now, I get low marks because I can't do well in exam. If marks are taken from my portfolio, I will be happy. Portfolio is easy. I can discuss with my friends and can share answers. I like projects in portfolio where I can work with my friends.'

(Participant 2)

'I like portfolio as my marks because with portfolio I will get high marks. Sir gave me 35/50 for my portfolio. Usually I will only get 10/40 for my paper II. I will be sad. With portfolio, I get high marks and I am happy.'

(Participant 8)

Participants were also asked if the portfolio helped them in writing. The responses were overwhelming because all of them agreed that it helped them in many ways.

'There is improvement in my writing. My writing becomes neater and my paragraphing is better. Now, I think my writing is better because I keep all my exercises from class work in the portfolio and I will refer to it before I start with my new exercise that Sir gives in class.'

(Participant 1)

'Portfolio really helps me in writing. If I don't have portfolio, I may have lost all the photocopied exercises and I will never know how to write sentences. Now, with portfolio, I can write better and Sir says that my writing is neat.'

(Participant 6)

When asked about what they liked best in the assessment, their responses were:

'I like to work with friends because when I forget, my friends remind me and when my friends forget, I remind them. It was fun to do the labelling of the parts of a bicycle, where we work together to get the highest marks for our group.'

(Participant 6)

'I like portfolio because most of the time I don't have to work alone. Sir will divide us into groups and pairs and we get to discuss answers. That is what I like the most in portfolio.' (Participant 2)

The participants were clear about the purpose of portfolio use in the classroom. They came to the realization that, with portfolio, they could learn English better without having to think of low grades that they used to get previously. Their work was systematic and organized with all the task sheets and exercises documented with days and dates written on every sheet.

Portfolio helps in their writing. This is not merely from what is stated in the literature review, but indeed it is proven in the present study. We saw tremendous and gradual improvement in mechanics of writing in our students' work. This is parallel with Hatcher and Goddard (2005) who noted that if students follow closely to the writing format given by the teacher, their writing will eventually improve and it will make them more confident to enjoy their work.

It was also evident in the data analysis that compilation of work helps the students for future references. This goes along with Collins (1992, p. 452) who defined portfolio as "a container of collected evidence with a purpose" where the evidence consists of documents that can be used by "one person or group of persons to infer another person's knowledge, skill, and/or disposition". We agree to this because in this study this is what we found the most. The students use their previous tasks as a guide for the present one as well as to reflect on what was missing in the previous one to avoid the mistake in the present task.

From the portfolio, the students learned to check their work and to help their friends. This is evident in the observation where we saw participants helping their weak friends (not to mention some did scold the others!). The important point is that learning takes place with the portfolio.

Besides sentence construction, we realized that portfolio was also helpful in group work. This is said by the students themselves when they were asked how it helps them:

'I like group work the best in portfolio. I love to see us working in groups and Sir awards something for the group which finishes early and gets the highest marks. I can see my friends and I are all happy with that.'

(Participant 7)

CONCLUSIONS

As far as portfolio assessment is concerned, we believe that educators must be open to an array of ideas from authentic assessment. It is much talked about in today's agenda of educational issues where meaningful, authentic assessment is the key to improving the quality of education.

When portfolio assessment is to be used in the classroom, teachers must be prepared for the workload where if the number of students is unmanageable, teachers must be able to devise a method on monitoring the progress of each child. With that, an assistant teacher would be a helping hand.

The findings from our study suggest that students need attention from the teacher. We understand that from the portfolio, the teacher is able to see where the child is standing on the line of progress and can provide appropriate guidance and remedial activities to help the child further. Baack (1997) and Melville (1996) justified that portfolios also allow the teachers to track progress, view individual growth, and foster student reflection in a less stressful way.

Besides that, as far as teaching and learning is concerned, teachers are always looking for patterns in the students' improvement. The portfolio is the helping tool for teachers to make decisions upon a child's progress and thus, leads to the discussion with parents where evidence of the child's work in the classroom will make parents see where the child is going in his or her academic achievement. Ocak and Ulu (2009) elaborated that by using portfolio, parents agree that their children's progress is clearly evident with the proof of their work being kept and documented well in the portfolio.

Using portfolio in a classroom of young learners in a rural school is beneficial and effective in helping them in writing instruction in the English Language. This is evident from the abovementioned analysis and discussion. Much has been said and it is proven that portfolio use among young learners in assessing their writing skill is indeed a good, valuable idea. Portfolio assessment helps the students to 'tell' their teacher their problems in writing. However, most of the time, teachers tend to cross out mistakes and instruct students to do correction. Worse still, if the corrections are not made by the students and no follow up from

the teacher is evident to see if the students completed the corrections. With portfolio assessment, teachers have a “device” to see if the work is completed and students have a means to use it to express their problems to their teachers.

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