Examining students’ perceptions of using portfolio as an assessment tool in an EFL writing classroom

Andri Suherman
andrisuherman123@gmail.com
Language Centre, University of Mataram

Abstract

This research article aimed to investigate the perceptions stated by students regarding the use of portfolio as an assessment tool in an EFL writing class. The participants in this study were 28 Indonesian tertiary-level EFL learners. The purposes of this qualitative study were to explore students’ opinions regarding the use of portfolio as an assessment tool, and to analyze the extents to which portfolio assessment benefited students. The research methods used were students’ reflective essays and semi-structured interviews. The findings revealed two main points. First, most of the students argued that portfolio was an effective tool to assess their writing tasks. Second, portfolio seemed to benefit students through reflecting on their previous writing tasks. The pedagogical implications of this study were to provide insight to EFL teachers into how portfolio could be used as an assessment tool particularly in writing courses, and to inform EFL teachers with some suggestions to carry out portfolio assessment to help students improve their writing tasks.

Keywords: portfolio assessment; students’ perception; writing classroom

INTRODUCTION

Promoting second language learning requires several principles to achieve the learning goals. Richard and Rodgers (2001, p.161) highlighted 3 key features to promote second language learning. They are communication, task, and meaningfulness principle. The last one particularly suggests that language which is essentially meaningful to learners helps the learning process. In this sense, writing skill can be developed to motivate learners, to engage learners to take part in the process, and to produce the language in the form of a portfolio-keeping.

Portfolio is referred to as purposeful collection of writings produced by students and it aims at exhibiting students’ efforts, progress, and achievement. The main feature of portfolio is primarily collection of products. However, to make a portfolio useful for assessment purpose, other two features must be included, called selection and reflection. Hamp-Lyons and Condon (2000, p.119) highlighted without reflection process, all is simply a pile. As such, the content of portfolio should be selected by student, and completed by a reflective essay written by each student reflecting his strengths and progress. By keeping a portfolio, each student can re-check his products, make revisions, and select those showing his progress. This process allows students to
become more autonomous. In other words, the learning process leads to learner-oriented.

Other than establishing autonomous learning, the use of portfolio as writing assessment can also benefit students in other aspects. For example, Weigle (2002, p.2014) argued that portfolio-keeping can “engage a test taker’s language ability, meta-cognitive strategies, topical knowledge, and affective schemata”. In this sense, the process of keeping portfolio not only leads learners to the use of meta-cognitive strategies, but also serves as the motivation factor by bringing students’ individual characteristics. Furthermore, Murphy and Camp (1996, p.113) mentioned that portfolio allows “students learn to exercise judgment about their own work, monitor their own progress, set goal for themselves, present themselves and their work to others”. In this sense, portfolio-keeping provides students with opportunity to develop sense of ownership of their development and make use of the process for self-assessment. To sum up, two research questions which form the focus of this study are outlined below:

1. What are students’ opinions of using portfolio as an assessment tool?
2. To what extent does portfolio assessment benefit students?

METHOD

Participants

The participants in this study were 28 (15 female and 13 male) Indonesian tertiary EFL learners. Their age range was from 19 to 22 years old. The students were currently enrolled at the writing course.

Data Collections and Procedure

The data were collected through an analysis of students’ reflective essays. In this case, the students were firstly informed at the very start that portfolio was a compulsory component of the writing assessment. Therefore, a training session was carried out in the first week so as to facilitate students with the portfolio process and the assessment criteria. In addition, students were informed that they need to turn in their reflective essays along with their portfolio.

Another source of data was gained from interviews. Semi-structured interviews were chosen to allow students express their perceptions. Ten students were randomly selected toward the end of semester for an interview session. Each interview lasted for about 20 to 30 minutes. In this case, native language (Bahasa Indonesia) was used to interview the participants so as to facilitate natural communication.

Data Analysis

The data were qualitatively analyzed. In this study, “the content analysis” strategy was applied to analyze students’ reflective essays. This technique identified the themes and determined into which themes the students’ opinions belonged to.
Meanwhile, all of the interviews data were firstly transcribed. They were then coded and analyzed on four separate occasions to ensure the consistency of the identified codes. After that, they were compared with another data gained from students reflective essays to check the similarities.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

What are students’ opinions of using portfolio as an assessment tool?

Based on the content analysis gained from students reflective essays, it was found that the students argued that portfolio could be used as an effective assessment tool. In their reflective essay, S2 and S5 argued that:

S2: I agree if portfolio is used as the tool of assessment. In my opinion, it is better to assess students writing tasks over period of time rather than assessing students over one essay in exams.
S5: I think that evaluating students’ writings over their portfolio are much better rather than asking them to write a time-based essay, either in the midterm test or final test.

When confirmed in the interview, S2 and S5 said that:

S2: I always feel panic when I have to write an essay in the final exams because I know that it is used as an evaluation. Writing an academic essay in a limited time is very stressful.
S5: I think it is unfair if students essay on final exams is used as the determination factor for their score. It is fairer if the essays produced by students within one semester were included in the exam score.

The opinions above showed a direct indication of students’ agreement in relation to the use of portfolio as the tool of writing assessment. This finding was similar to that of Ok (2012). In his study, he found that the 34 participants supported the idea of using portfolio as the tool of assessment in writing courses. In his book, Weigle (2002, p.197) argued that writing an academic essay under limited time on an unfamiliar topic can not accurately reflect learners writing skill. The present study also revealed that the students preferred portfolio assessment rather than one single essay assessment. Other opinions were stated by S14 and S20. They argued that:

S14: I agree if portfolio is included as the part of writing assessment. However, the criteria should be clearly stated from the beginning to allow students prepare.
S20: I believe that portfolio is an effective way to assess students writing performance. However, I sometimes am confused with the types of essays which are labelled as good essays.

When asked for confirmation in the interview session, S14 and S20 said:
S14: There should be clear criteria showed in the beginning of semester if portfolio is used as the tool of writing assessment. It is necessary to do avoid misconception among students.

S20: The teacher needs to explain indicators he used in the portfolio assessment. It is good to do with written indicators so as to students can make sure they meet all these indicators.

The finding above showed how criteria or indicators were very important points for students when portfolio was used as their writing assessment. This finding aligned with Ok (2012). He found that explaining the assessment criteria at the very start was very beneficial for students to reach the intended outcomes. Meanwhile, in the context of Taiwanese students, Lo (2010) reported that the criteria for evaluating portfolio should be as specific as possible and made known to the students. In the present study, students highlighted the importance of indicators or criteria used in portfolio-based writing assessment.

**To what extent does portfolio assessment benefit students?**

The students’ reflective essays revealed that portfolio assessment benefitted students to some extents. For example, S7 and S11 stated:

*S7: In my opinion, portfolio is a good method of assessment. Portfolio can help me improve my writing since I know that it will be used as part of mid and final test score. In other words, it increases my motivation to produce better essays.*

*S11: If portfolio is used as one of writing assessments, I think I will be more responsible for my essays. I mean I have to learn how to write more quality essays.*

During interview sessions, S7 and S11 confirmed that:

*S7: I feel portfolio helps me improve my motivation in writing better essays because I know it will be part of exam score. However, I might be less motivated if what I write were not evaluated as a whole.*

*S11: In my case, I always think of strategies on how to improve my writing skill. As I know my essays will be part of exam score, the degree of my learning motivation is increased.*

The answers above showed that portfolio assessment influenced students’ motivation in improving their writing ability. This finding aligned with that of Erdogan (2006). He reported that the participants in his study seemed to like portfolio as the writing assessment. They felt motivated to produce more quality writings and be more responsible towards their own learning. In Turkish context, Sahinkarakas (1998) found that portfolio assessment helps students improve their writing and meta-cognitive skill. The present study also revealed that knowing portfolio was included in the writing assessment, students learning motivation was increased. Similar with the opinions above, S9 and S18 stated their arguments with slightly different points. They argued:
S9: I don’t think I would be successful if I were asked to do a time-based writing in the exam. On the contrary, doing portfolio makes me more optimistic with my writings. I can perceive my writing skill is getting better.

S18: I believe that the writing tasks given within one semester are too many. However, I am proud of myself when I look through my portfolio. I never thought that I could make so much progress on writing.

In the interview sessions, S9 and S18 confirmed:

S9: I think that I benefited a lot from doing portfolio. As I know portfolio is included in the exam score, it influences my writing performance positively. I perceive I can write more fluently than before.  
S18: Including the portfolio into the assessment is one of factors which successfully force me to write. I realize that to get a better score, I have to give more importance to the tasks.

The opinions above indicated that the students could observe their writing improvement as a whole. In other words, they had developed a sense of ownership of their own progress. This finding aligned with that of Ok (2012). In his study, he found that the portfolio assessment led to students’ ownership of their own progress. In the context of Japanese students, Santos (1997) revealed that reflecting in the portfolio process allowed students to enhance feeling of students’ ownership of their work. In the present study, students could observe their writing progress and develop a sense of ownership of their own improvement.

CONCLUSION

The present study aimed to explore students’ perceptions regarding the use of portfolio as the tool of assessment in the context of Indonesian EFL writing class. The first finding revealed that most of the participant argued that portfolio was an effective tool to assess their writing tasks. In addition, this study found that portfolio seemed to benefit students through reflecting on their previous writing tasks.

Several limitations occurred in this study such as small sample of data and small number of participants. However, several implications can be clearly seen. For example, this study provided pedagogical insight to EFL teachers into how portfolio could be used as an assessment tool particularly in writing courses, and to inform EFL teachers with some suggestions to carry out portfolio assessment to help students improve their writing tasks.

REFERENCES


