

# A Critical Review of Portfolio Assessment as an Alternative Tool in English Language Teaching Classrooms

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## Abstract

Recent developments and issues in the education has brought radical changes in the way learners' and teachers alike need to reconsider about assessments, particularly in ESL/EFL learning and teaching classrooms. As such, alternative assessment tools are meant to be worked out as solutions over traditional approaches, so that learners are truly assessed for the calibre of work that is produced by them. Hence, this paper will delve upon portfolio assessment as an alternative tool to gauge learners' true potential over traditional testing methods. The paper has critically reviewed about portfolio assessment under five sub-sections with discussions about portfolio assessment in ESL/EFL teaching and learning being first, followed by the types of portfolio assessments as the second item. Then, models and implementation of portfolio assessment in the ESL/EFL classrooms next, with merit and demerit points of portfolio assessment being the fourth and fifth items to be discussed respectively. The critical review is summed up by providing some recommendations and concluding remarks for the whole piece.

**Keywords:** portfolio, alternative assessment, traditional assessment, learners' feedback

## 1. Introduction

Recent demands and developments in the repertoire of fields, particularly in education sector have called in the educationalists to come up with measures to assess the learners' ability based on the input, which should be transparent and highly authentic. Theories such as multiple-intelligence, constructivism and other emerging trends in the information age require radical modifications in traditional approaches towards teaching, learning and more imperatively assessments. As asserted by Fourie and Van Niekerk (2001), if the approaches to learning changes, it affects the assessment approaches and procedures. Today, much talk has been going around the table regarding evaluating learners' ability and their achievements during or after the teaching process finishes in the four walls of a classroom. This has initiated several assessments to be shelved and new ones being implemented.

According to the argument by Huang (2012), evaluating the learners' ability is indispensable from language teaching and learning. By right through evaluation, both the teacher and the learner can get optimistic as well as pessimistic output in teaching, if the input is not executed properly. The author further argues that by evaluating the learners' performance, teachers can evaluate their own teaching methods and strategies to rectify the problem from both the ends, thus making the required adjustments in their assessment procedures. In supporting this argument, Zimmaro (2004) states that most of the evaluation that needs to be done for the learner is based on assessments, the processes of collecting, assorting, describing, and quantifying information based on the performances of the learners.

As asserted by Joshi, Gupta and Singh (2015), assessments are the crucial component for the entire education system of a country. It is there to serve dual purpose of proving and improving. However as claimed by the authors', the procedures of the assessments in the education system have become archaic and requires dire changes due to the transformation in the system. In terms of transformation, teaching strategies in language classrooms are shifting from traditional approaches to rather learner friendly approaches, so that the unacquainted learners could be trained well with the effective assessments to succeed in the real world (Caner, 2010). Teachers of digital era are expected to highly focus on current language teaching strategies, which should include embedding critical thinking skills in learners' assessments, which should lead to overall holistic development of a child. As such, assessments should highly be designed to suit the needs of each learner.

However, the author also mentions that it would be virtually impossible to assess learners' skills through

traditional assessment methods and this could be rather considered a difficult task. Therefore, there is a dire need to develop new form of assessments, which are tailor made for the learners' and are highly conducive for a classroom (Caner, 2010). In most of the instances, traditional assessment approach develops a learner to memorise and learn things by heart, rather than the conceptual understanding and application of it practically in real life scenarios (Dochy, 2001). So much so, traditional assessment approaches also provide scant information on learners' fathoming of knowledge, which is considered as an inadequate ability to assess high cognitive skills for example, critical thinking, problem solving, and reasoning (Romberg, 1993), does not measure students' ability to organise and reorganise pertinent information (Shepard, 1989), and assess what is easier to assess, such as procedures and memorisation of rote learning skills (Mumme, 1991).

Moreover, the ongoing process that involves the learner and instructor in making sound judgements about the learners' development in language by using the non-conventional strategies is called alternative assessment (Hancock, 1994). Looking at the other definition, Hamayan (1995) defines alternative assessment as "those techniques that could be used within the context of instruction and can be easily incorporated into the daily activities of a classroom". On the other hand, according to Huerta-Macias (2005) there is no specific definition of alternative assessment. In fact, she states that "a variety of labels has been used to distinguish it from traditional standardised testing". However, as argued by Ocak and Ultu (2009), today's instructors strongly believe that learners shall be far educated as people, who should be able to evaluate knowledge themselves, discuss its truth and validity and be able to productively contribute to the learning and teaching processes.

Therefore, one of the alternative forms of assessment which has gained much popularity in twenty first century learning and teaching is portfolio assessment. Various definitions have been used to define what a portfolio is and how it originated. Interestingly, the conceptual origin of portfolio development is derived from the field of fine arts, where portfolios were used to showcase illustrative samples of an artist's work (Jongsma, 1989). However, in educational terms portfolio assessment is defined as "a collection of materials, made by a professional that records and reflects on the pertinent key events in the professional's career" (Hall, 1992). A purposeful collection of the activities by a learner which is kept in a folder, box, or a container and which measures his/her progress, achievements and improvements is called a portfolio (Javanmard & Farahani, 2012).

In brief, this paper is going to dwell upon the criticisms about portfolio assessment in English language teaching. It will shed light on the major aspects of portfolio assessment under the following rudiments. The first sub-section is going to discuss about portfolio assessment in ESL/EFL teaching and learning, followed by the types of portfolio assessments. The third section will delve upon models and integration of portfolio assessment in the ESL/EFL classrooms, with advantages of portfolio assessment being the fourth item to be discussed. The fifth section will provide the disadvantages of portfolio assessments in English language teaching classroom. Finally, concluding remarks about portfolio assessment and why it should be considered as an alternative assessment tool in this current digital era will be discussed. The below mentioned information are the careful review, analysis, and evaluation of current literature regarding portfolio assessment.

## **2. Portfolio Assessment in ESL/EFL Teaching and Learning**

As stated by Neiman (cited in Al-Serhani, 2007), portfolio assessment is defined as the collection of the selected work of a learner over a span of time. This form of assessment develops the individual learners' ability to think independently and critically to solve problems and find the best desired solutions. As asserted by Göçtü (2012), portfolio in educational term stands for a kind of student-centred learning assessment. Unlike the traditional assessment, which is heavily dominated by the teacher, portfolio assessment allows the learner to engage in evaluating his/her own work and provide the authentic feedback. Practically, portfolio works as the working library for a learner in which extensive research is done to collate most imperative materials to be recorded in the folder or file. It may also contain evaluations, reports of grades/examinations (Lynch & Shaw cited in Huang, 2012).

Moreover, being the product of paper-based portfolio assessment while doing my diploma; I strongly felt that I was assessed for my true effort based on the requirements of the assessment. As portfolios provide the richness of the learning process, it is often seen as a high validity instrument to measure the assessment. However, the contents in a portfolio, being often highly descriptive demands more justification in terms of interpretation before it could be finally assessed (Moss cited in Van der Schaaf, 2005). I believe this is good because the learner will be challenged to think critically and give in his/her best work to be assessed. This is equally supported by Wolf and Dietz (cited in Schaaf, 2005) who concludes that, portfolio normally allows the learners to showcase their true talent and rightfully deserve to be assessed by on their own ability and knowledge by the assessor.

### 3. Types of Portfolios

According to Danielson and Abrutyn (1997), as more and more teachers are introducing portfolios to measure learners' assessments, most of them are still in an ambiguous situation to define the types of portfolios. Different literatures have given different types of portfolios; however, they are somewhat relatable to each other. As stated by Mokhtaria (2015), she has identified six types of portfolios, which are stipulated below in the diagrammatic version.

On the other hand, although the types of portfolios are distinctive in theory, the literature shows that they tend to overlap when simply put into practice. As asserted by Joshi et al. (2015), there is basically three types of portfolios. The first type is learning portfolio in which the learner records the reflections of his/her experiences. Here, the learner controls the folio by deciding things that needs to be included. The drawback of this portfolio is that it may only assist the learner and may not be apposite for evaluation during training programmes. Secondly, showcase portfolio contains a learners' best work only. Just as learning portfolio, the contents of this portfolio is entirely controlled by the learner, but the content tends to showcase only pre-eminent works of the learner. This kind of portfolio is mainly used for summative assessment. The final type of portfolio is an assessment portfolio in which the contents of it should be documented based on what the learner has learnt. Therefore, the designer or the instructor of this portfolio must include the reflections of the specific learning outcomes, which should be inclusive of the knowledge, attitudes, and skills. While designing this kind of portfolio, the designer or instructor are expected to be highly diligent enough to generate sufficient evidence towards evaluating the extent of required learning. In brief, all these portfolios can either be recorded on paper based or electronically (Joshi et al., 2015).

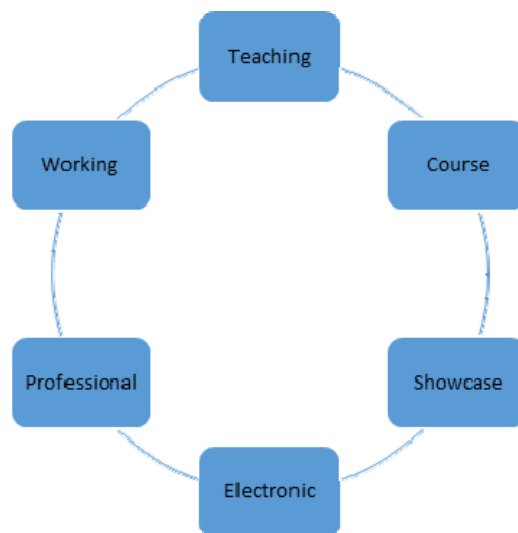


Figure 1. Types of portfolios

### 4. Models and Integration of Portfolio Assessment in the Present ESL/EFL Classrooms

Presently, with the understanding that portfolios are highly beneficial for assessment and learning, there is a dire need of its more widespread usage. However, replacing the portfolio assessment with traditional assessing approaches would be a challenging task, which cannot be achieved overnight (Zubizarreta, 2009). The change needs to be gradual and accommodative, so that the instructor and learner truly understand the potential benefits of portfolio assessment. The paramount imperative step would be the sensitisation and training of instructors on how a portfolio works. With varied designs and requirements of portfolios, it should be kept in mind that the need of a learner is fulfilled, while at the same time learning goals are achieved. Maintaining a portfolio should not be seen as a herculean task by a learner, in fact, it should be seen as something which is fun filled and highly enriching, as much as creative.

As such, to integrate and achieve practicality in portfolio assessment, models are designed to supplement the implementation of portfolio-based assessment in the language classrooms. One of the first examples of such model is shown by Gomez (1999) in which the author has come up with eleven interrelated levels of assessment activities. These are as follows: designing the portfolio assessment programme, deciding about contents and

goals, developing scoring criteria, aligning the assessment tasks to standards and curriculum, providing coaching to staff through professional development, implementing all sites, training teachers to score, establishing guidelines for proper administration, scoring the portfolio, reporting the results, and finally evaluating the programme.

On the other hand, Davis and Ponnampereuma (2005) have composed five stages of detailed model for the implementation of portfolios in ESL/EFL classrooms. These steps I have rather found it to be much more practical and convenient to follow. The first one is collection of evidence of achievement from learning outcomes. The student would be expected to collect the evidence from learning outcome during the daily learning activities in the language classroom. Here, the evidence of collected materials for the portfolio is limited to the degree of learners' creativity. Secondly, reflection on learning is regarded to be an ongoing learning experience of a learner in which s/he is expected to think critically and promote learning and development to help him/her. To personally evaluate on what s/he has learnt, these are some of the questions that should be answered by him/her. What I learnt, what do I still need to learn, did I use extra resources for learning and what further learning is left to be achieved.

Thirdly, evaluation of evidence will be judged by the teacher once the learner has submitted the contents of portfolio to be evaluated. The teacher rates the learners' submission of portfolio with careful outcomes of the rating scales, affixed with justified elucidations and detailed descriptors at each point on the rating scale. By adhering to the rating scale, it helps the teacher to set the benchmark for standard-setting process of portfolio assessment. Because of the subjective nature of the assessor, it is crucial that rating scales are highly justified so that the learner is evaluated based on his/her true input. The next stage is defence of evidence, whereby the teacher might be needed to interview the learner to discuss about how well the portfolio has reflected learners' achievement of the learning process. Based on the learners' strengths and weaknesses, the final score will be awarded for the portfolio.

According to the authors Davis and Ponnampereuma (2005), the last stage talks about assessment decision in which rating scales with precise definitions of the descriptors are used to assess the evidence being submitted with the portfolio. Prior to the expected standard of performance by the learner, the teacher is supposed to know the rating scale well, so that without any major hiccups the portfolio is assessed. However, should there be any disagreements between the learner and the teacher regarding the performance; it should be discussed during the interview with the learner before the final grade is given. Essentially, the final grade of the portfolio will be given by the teacher based on the consensus. In short, all the above stipulated stages would help towards implementing portfolio assessment in the ESL/EFL classroom with precise learning outcome for both the instructors and learners.

Furthermore, as asserted by Hamp-Lyons (2007), there are three basic principles that are serving as the requirements for the successful portfolio assessment implementation. These are collection, selection and reflection. Following the introductory statement made by the author, it could be agreed that portfolios must include the collective samples of learners' work rather than all the work done. More so, what needs to be included in the portfolio should entirely be selected by the learner individually as per what is mentioned in the textbook *A Resource for Integrating Collaborative Language Portfolio* published by Manitoba Labour and Immigration (2004) that "The items added to a portfolio need to be selective". It also tends to describe that a portfolio is a selection of language tasks that may not include everything a learner may have done throughout the course. The portfolio may only contain the samples of language tasks that are completed by the learner and which selectively should show what the learner has become able to do. In this way, the learner is going to be evaluated in the most transparent way based on the input that s/he has given.

The final principle that is pointed out by the author and which is highly crucial part of portfolio assessment is reflection. It is expected that learners' think about their strengths, weaknesses, goals and needs in language learning. For example, if they are questioned regarding their best work then they can give some genuine answers based on what they have produced and reflect on it. As asserted by Neiman (2009), a good collection of items in a portfolio can lead to a meaningful learning experience for a learner, if reflection is involved in it. Equally supporting this view, Santos (2001) says that portfolios may remain a meaningless and empty folder, if learners' do not actively show any progress by means of reflections. This has been further supported by Pierce and Malley (1992), who avers that learner reflection and monitoring are the fundamental elements of success for the portfolio assessment implementation.

## **5. Merit Points of Portfolio Assessment**

As mentioned in the last paragraph of the introduction, this section will talk about the merits or advantages of

portfolio assessment in language teaching classrooms. Many researchers have come up with countless advantages of portfolio assessment, as stated by (Davis, 2005; Huang, 2012). Learning from the literature shows that, portfolio assessment allows the learners to work on a variety of documents over a span of time, which not only monitors their own creativity but at the same time it allows them to unleash their true potential. By compiling the contents of a portfolio, the learners will be able set goals, reflect and improve on their received feedbacks, keeping tabs of their progress, conduct self and peer assessment by consulting the given rubric by the teacher (Huang, 2012). Personally reflecting, I also had the similar experiences about what I was assessed for my paper-based portfolio assignment, when I was a diploma student. The comments provided by the teacher really assisted me a lot.

Another major advantage of portfolio assessment is that it provides involvement and enhances collaboration towards the learning processes and its assessments. As claimed by Al-Serhani (2007), teachers should be doing more than just making the learners' sit for the tests, while learners should also do more than just sitting for the tests. In other words, learners' and teachers should engage actively in the process of assessment, so that both can achieve the learning outcome of the portfolio assessment. This is equally in line with Davis (2005), who has stated that portfolio assessment can focus on the initiation of collaboration between the learner and teacher. Further, through this collaboration learners tend to gain the sense of responsibility and ownership for the work, which they are assigned to do. This would allow them to practice working independently and make sound decisions for the future.

To add on, Al Serhani (2007) claims that, portfolio also provides teachers with broader opportunities to know each learner in the classroom, thus allowing him/her to see the learners' uniquely with their talents and characteristics towards working upon the portfolios. It also offers the teachers with essential information towards diagnosing learners' abilities in terms of their strengths and weaknesses to assist them with improving their performances (Davis, 2005). In other words, the assessment of portfolio as a tool can accommodate a repertoire of learning patterns for all the learners', which will surely allow them to realise their true potential and experience success from it. More imperatively, as learners are going to engage in setting goals and reflect on their activities, they can become more self-critical and work independently.

Additionally, portfolio assessment would not only assist the learners to unleash their creativity, but at the same time it will also help the teachers to think about the teaching and learning processes to improve the overall classroom pedagogy (Wagner & Lilly, cited in Al Serhani, 2007). Portfolios would allow the teachers to provide optimistic criticisms to the learners' input, which in return would assist the learners to improve on their future work. This is possible as teachers can equally obtain a clear insight into their teaching. Teaching strategies and plans can be changed to further improve the overall instructional process in language classrooms. During conferences, students can discuss their progress, ask questions, and receive suggestions and strategies for improving work. Dialogues with peers and parents also help students in meaningful reflection and goal setting, which will allow them to sail towards in the right direction.

Portfolios are useful in that they track developmental changes over a period and encourage a learner to engage in self-directed learning to his/her own empowerment. Not only can a learner reflect change, but parents and significant others can also have the privilege of observing and commenting on successes or areas for improvement. A range of unintended skills such as innovativeness, creativity, lateral thinking, divergent thinking, recording, note-taking introspection, and reflection are made possible. More imperatively, portfolios facilitate a community of learners working together as they discuss and share their individual ideas. Metacognition (thinking about thinking) and learning about learning are encouraged. Students feel empowered as they value their own contributions that are recognised by significant others. Direct experiences are reported formatively and summatively.

Subsequently, assessment portfolios require students to continuously reflect and perform self-evaluations of their work. Teachers should convey to students the purpose of the portfolio, what constitutes quality work and how the portfolio is graded. As students judge their work using explicit criteria to identify strengths and weaknesses, they are monitoring their own progress. Also, assessment portfolios promote communication between teachers and students. Some shy students who fail to initiate conversations within the classroom benefit from one-on-one interaction with the teacher, while other students may enjoy speaking about their accomplishments. Those learners who are shy to communicate in the classroom not just with their teachers but with their friends as well, they ought to face a lot of challenges exhibiting their talents. As such, an assessment like portfolio would pave way to work in silence and showcase their hidden talents to the rest of the world. The teachers will also get to 'know' their learners well and design the curriculum as per their needs.

Interestingly, it can also hold students accountable for mastering content standards in a subject area. Portfolios offer students tangible evidence to show their academic achievements, as well as their participation in community service projects. Many employers request portfolios to see if students have the basic skills of problem solving and collaborative work skills. This allows the employers to gauge the abilities of new incumbents and select the most suitable candidate for a job. Below is the table that is adopted from the study of Tierney, Carter and Desai (1991), which shows the use of portfolio assessment over traditional test methods in a language classroom. The study was conducted over a period of three years before outlining the advantages of portfolio in relation to traditional tests.

| Portfolios  | Tests   |
|---|---|
| Represent a wide range of student work in a subject area. | Usually cover a limited content area and may not be a true representation of the student's knowledge. |
| Allow students to be actively involved in assessment.     | Are scored mechanically or by teachers, with little or no student input.                              |
| Allow for student differences.                            | Examine all students on the same dimensions.  |
| Encourage partnerships among students and teachers.       | Are controlled by the teacher.  |
| Are designed with student self-assessment as a goal.      | Do not include student self-assessment.   |
| Focus on improvement, effort, and achievement.            | Usually focus on achievement only.  |
| Integrate assessment with the learning process.           | Separate assessment from the learning process.  |

Figure 2. Advantages of portfolio over traditional test

## 6. Demerit Points of Portfolio Assessment

Notwithstanding the merits, portfolio assessment in English language teaching also brings about some problems or disadvantages, which is considered as a challenge to be used in the English language teaching and for future research. One of the major limitations of portfolio assessment is timeliness (Davis, 2005; Pierce & O'Malley, 1992). It can be extremely consuming time for teachers to grade each learner fairly based on their submissions over traditional grading system. As supported by Gomez (1999), juggling with time to assess all the portfolios can be burdensome for teachers if the school tends to promote portfolio assessment over traditional testing methods. The time factor pressures the teachers to feel more anxious, particularly for those who are unfamiliar with portfolio assessment. Teachers need sufficient knowledge to administer portfolios successfully.

Furthermore, teachers would be needed to exert more energy for managing portfolios. For example, they would be required to get involved in developing teaching resources, conferencing one on one with learners', reviewing all the contents of portfolio and providing authentic feedbacks. In addition, many a times concern will also arise about what needs to be included in the portfolio in terms of tasks and how the contents of it will be evaluated? Practically, another major problem that will be encountered during portfolio introduction is reliability and validity of the marking criteria or rubrics. As explained by Van Der Schaaf (2005), "assessing portfolios involves complex interactions between teachers' competences, the portfolio, raters' characteristics, and raters' interpretations; therefore, scoring learners' portfolios will not be easy.

According to Schaaf (2005), validity of portfolio assessment will be difficult to establish, given the fact that whether it would measure the intended constructs or not. This idea is further supported by Davis (2005), who claims that "in the context of portfolio assessment, validity is the extent to which the portfolio assesses the curriculum learning outcome and if it is not going to be measured in the right manner then the learners' hard work throughout the period would go in vain". However, on the part of the learners', it would be quite difficult to judge their work since concerns may arise about the originality of the portfolio that will be submitted for marking. It will be difficult to verify whether the work that has been submitted by the learner for marking is done by him/her, or it has been done by somebody else. Hence, the question of originality and transparency really matters here.

Moreover, as mentioned in the paragraphs above, another major challenge regarding the use of portfolio assessment is related to reliability. Reliability is the consistency of assessments over a stable period (Van Der Schaaf, 2005). Problems of grading the portfolio will surely be a problem as it contains a repertoire work sample based on different purposes that are gathered over a period by a learner. The challenge that will be encountered, while vetting the portfolio would be producing unacceptable low inter-rater reliability, particularly if the assessment rubrics are not justified fairly or are used by untrained teachers (Davis, 2005). This is further supported by Van Der Schaaf (2005), who claims that “the development and use of scoring model must be supported and precisely understood by the raters to avoid any sort of misunderstanding regarding reliability”.

## 7. Concluding Remarks and Recommendations

In summation, portfolio as an alternative assessment tool has a stronger educational significance due to the current demands in learning and teaching of ESL/EFL classrooms. As an educator after reviewing the literature about portfolio assessment, it could be stated that it would provide me with better feedback on my teaching as well as for my learners'. More imperatively, though time consuming for the portfolios to be graded, on a brighter side the learners will be given authentic feedbacks based on whatever effort they have put in, which will surely pave way for their hard-earned effort in the future. Equally, it will also increase the encouragement for the learners to develop further self-reliance and self-directed learning, together with enhancing communication skills. More so, portfolio assessment has much potential to demonstrate learners' skills over time, which would also lead to provide sound feedback about their progress to teachers, parents, and learners' themselves.

The possibilities of enhancing ESL/EFL in a language classroom by means of portfolio would create an inclusive ambience for all the learners”, be it a slow or fast learner. This is the best part of this alternative tool. However, this critical review is not mainly intended to provide the deliberate references of how the portfolio should be used as an assessment tool by the learners' and teachers; in fact, it has elicited some sheer reminders on how wisely and appropriately it can bring about authentic changes about language teaching in the ESL/EFL classrooms. The advantages and disadvantages are supposed to be treated as guidance to the curriculum designers and should not be taken it for granted. As a product of paper-based portfolio myself, this alternative tool indeed made me realise my true artistic potential in many ways and by this critical review, I hope it will surely unleash others hidden potentialities as well.

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