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Teacher and Learner Perspectives on Portfolio Assessment

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1 INTRODUCTION

This study is an evaluation of the use of portfolios for assessing language learning. I was motivated to research this topic by a number of factors. Firstly, my experience of using portfolios to assess learners of English suggests the technique is a challenging one to implement. Secondly, I was aware that colleagues using portfolio assessment with their learners had mixed views about it. And finally, given that portfolios are a recent innovation in Oman Basic Education schools and there has not been any research into their use, I felt it would be timely to examine English teachers' and learners' perceptions of this innovation.

2 PORTFOLIO ASSESSMENT

2.1 Formative Assessment

A very simple definition of assessment is that it is the process of collecting information on a learner's attainment or performance. Its function is to determine what a learner is actually achieving in relation to agreed criteria. Formative assessment is on-going assessment that informs subsequent decisions about teaching and learning. Summative assessment is the kind of assessment which takes place at the end of a course or term and it is used to find out how much learners have learned or how well the course has worked (Hedge, 2000). In Oman, English has traditionally been assessed summatively but in recent years the new Basic Education curriculum has also introduced various forms of formative assessment, including portfolios.

According to Genesee & Upshur (1996), a portfolio is an on-going, organized and systematic collection of a learner's work that demonstrates their effort, progress and achievement. A portfolio should include a wide selection of work produced by the learner. It should also include material which shows the process by which such work was produced. A portfolio can encourage learners to reflect on what they have

learnt and can serve as a starting point for further learning (Brown, 1998).

2.2 Advantages and Limitations of Portfolios

Portfolios have several strengths but there are some limitations too. The first strength of portfolios is that they make it possible to track learning over time. Secondly, portfolios provide evidence not just of the work that is completed but also of reflections and revisions learners made during the process. Finally, portfolios can provide the basis on which teachers and learners can collaboratively plan further learning.

There are three notable limitations of portfolios. The first one is that they may be seen as less reliable or fair than more quantitative assessments such as test scores. The second disadvantage is that they can be very time-consuming for teachers to evaluate, especially if they are an addition to traditional testing and grading. Finally, if goals and criteria are not clear, the portfolio can end up just being a mixed collection of artifacts that do not show patterns of growth or achievement (Brown, 1998; Crockett, 1998; Hedge, 2000).

2.3 Assessing Portfolios

Portfolio assessment is the systematic, longitudinal collection of learners' work created in response to specific, known instructional objectives and evaluated in relation to well-defined criteria. According to Crockett (1998), Hedge (2000) and Klenowski (2002), criteria for assessing portfolios should be established before learners undertake their work. This ensures that learners understand what is expected and that teachers actually assess what they intend to assess.

In Oman, criteria for assessing portfolios are defined by the English Language Curriculum Department (ELCD). These criteria are effort, organisation, co-operation, and initiative. Each criterion is assessed out of 5, with 5 being the highest mark. Part of this study involves examining teachers' application and understanding of these criteria.

3 METHOD

3.1 Research Questions

The aim of the study was to evaluate the use of portfolios in assessing English in Basic Education classrooms. Specifically, I wanted to answer the following questions:

1. How clear, for teachers, are the criteria for assessing portfolios?
2. What are learners' knowledge and feelings about portfolios?
3. What skills are the portfolios used to assess?
4. What factors might affect the effective use of portfolios?

3.2 Participants

There were three groups of participants in this study – learners, teachers and Ministry curriculum specialists. There were six learners and they were in Grade 7 (age 12-13) in two Basic Education schools. In selecting these individuals I consulted

the previous year's results to ensure the sample included learners with a range of achievement in English (from high to low). I chose Grade 7 learners because they had prior experience of using portfolios and would be well-placed to comment on their experience. In addition to these learners, teachers of English and Ministry of Education specialists contributed to this study, as explained below.

3.3 Data Collection

Data were collected through teachers' assessments of portfolios, questionnaires, and interviews and I now discuss each of these.

3.3.1 Assessment of Portfolios

For the first part of this study, three Grade 7 teachers each assessed three different learner portfolios. The assessment was blind (i.e. teachers did not know the others' assessment scores nor did they know which learners had produced the portfolios). In assessing these portfolios, the teachers used the Ministry of Education criteria referred to earlier. These criteria generate a total score out of 20 for each portfolio.

3.3.2 Questionnaires

To explore teachers' and learners' knowledge of and views about portfolios, two questionnaires were used. Twenty-five questionnaires were distributed to English language teachers and 20 were returned. Some teachers said that the questionnaire was very long and they did not do the second part of it (which consisted of Likert-scale items). The learners' questionnaire (see Appendix) had short open-ended questions written in both English and Arabic. The questions were direct and in very simple language. I distributed 12 questionnaires to learners in four schools and all were returned. The majority of the learners wrote their answers in Arabic.

3.3.3 Interviews

The questionnaire answers helped me identify issues related to portfolios to follow up in the interviews with six teachers and three Ministry specialists. These interviews were, with participants' permission, audio recorded. The interviews were semi-structured and this allowed me to ask additional questions as required rather than sticking to a fixed interview schedule. The interviews asked respondents about the purposes of portfolios, their characteristics, and their assessment among other issues (see the Appendix for the lists of questions for both groups).

4 FINDINGS

4.1 Assessment of Portfolios

To examine interpretations of the criteria for assessing portfolios specified by the Ministry of Education, three Grade 7 teachers were asked to assess the same three portfolios. Table 1 below summarizes the teachers' assessments (T1, T2 and T3 are the three teachers). Overall, the teachers agreed in the rank order of their

assessments – in all three cases Portfolio 1 gained the highest overall mark, followed by Portfolios 2 and 3 respectively.

Table 1: Summary of teacher assessments

	Effort			Organisation			Co-operation			Initiative			Total		
	T1	T2	T3	T1	T2	T3	T1	T2	T3	T1	T2	T3	T1	T2	T3
Portfolio 1	4	3	5	5	5	5	5	5	5	5	2	3	19	15	18
Portfolio 2	5	3	3.5	5	4.5	5	4	4	4	4	3	5	18	14.5	17.5
Portfolio 3	3	2	4	4	3.5	3	3	3	4	3	1.5	4	13	10	15

However, the overall marks for the teachers also highlight some differences. For example, T1's total mark for Portfolio 1 (P1) was 19 compared to 15 for T2. This difference relates mainly to the score awarded for 'initiative' – for T1 it is 5, for T2 it is 2. Also, if we compare P3, T2 gave an overall score of 10, while T3 gave 15. Again, this difference relates mainly to the 'initiative' criterion – T2 awarded 1.5, while T3 gave 4. Overall, T2 actually gave the lowest marks on all three portfolios, but their assessments of 'initiative' were particularly lower than those of the other teachers, particularly for P1 and P3. T2's marks for 'effort' were also always lower than those of the other two teachers.

4.2 Questionnaires Results

4.2.1 Learner Responses

The learners' questionnaire asked about their knowledge of and views about portfolios. The majority of the learners could define the term portfolio, and one of their definitions was "it is the file that I keep my work inside". However, learners did not show much awareness of how portfolios were assessed; of 12 respondents, three were only able to describe the assessment of portfolios by saying they received marks; the other nine said they did not know how their portfolios were assessed. Learners were also asked who organizes their portfolio and where it is kept. Most learners said that they organize their portfolios themselves and kept them at home.

There were also a number of questions about learners' feelings about portfolios. Nearly all the learners said they like their portfolios; one explained "I like my portfolio because I enjoy looking at it and it contains all my English work". All learners said they preferred portfolios to tests; one wrote that "I have more time when I do work on portfolio and there is no stress like tests". Half of the learners said they always show their portfolios to their parents, while only two stated that they get feedback from their teachers on their portfolio; the rest said they did not receive any feedback.

4.2.2 Teacher Responses

The quality and quantity of teachers' questionnaire responses varied. The instrument had open-ended questions first, then a section of closed questions; few teachers completed the latter and so here I will focus on teachers' answers to the open-ended questions.

In terms of the skills portfolios are used to assess, teachers reported that these were predominantly reading and writing. Only three teachers answered the question "What are the stages of portfolio development?", two wrote "No idea", whilst the remainder wrote no answer. In terms of how portfolios are assessed, only four teachers out of the 15 said that they followed the criteria defined by the Ministry of Education. Some mentioned alternative criteria such as "accuracy and value of writing" and how interesting the content is. Eight teachers said the criteria for assessing portfolios are not clear, three said they are clear and four said they are very clear. Regarding how often they check their learners' portfolios, six teachers said they did so once a week, four once a fortnight and five once a month.

4.3 Interview Results

Six teachers and three Ministry of Education curriculum specialists were interviewed. The teachers said they do not explain to their learners the purposes of portfolios and the process involved in developing and maintaining them. The teachers were also largely unaware of the phases of portfolio development and unsure about the characteristics of an effective portfolio. All the teachers graded individual work only and did not assess the portfolio as a whole. Finally, only one teacher said she tried to include oral skills in portfolios; the other teachers said this was very difficult to achieve and involved a lot of work.

Regarding the reasons for introducing portfolio assessment, the Ministry specialists said there were purposes related to teaching and learning; for example, portfolios could show development and progression in learning English over time. According to them, a portfolio should show progress and good examples of a learner's work. The specialists also explained two ways of assessing portfolios. One focuses only on assessing "typical pieces of work of the students" and in this sense the portfolio is like any ordinary file to keep pieces of work in. A second way of assessing portfolios is to "assess both the content of the portfolio and the portfolio as a whole". About the types of outcomes that are expected from the portfolios, the specialists agreed that there are no specific outcomes for portfolios. They also agreed that there is a lack of training in using portfolios for teachers and there are not enough resources in schools to support the use of portfolios.

5 DISCUSSION

I will now discuss the findings of this study in relation to the four research questions defined earlier.

5.1 How Clear are the Criteria for Assessing Portfolios?

The comparison of the three teachers' assessments of three portfolios suggested

a shared understanding of how to interpret the criteria of 'organisation' and 'co-operation' but greater variety in the ways 'effort' and 'initiative' were assessed. When I interviewed the six teachers, they admitted that they did not necessarily use the official criteria in marking portfolios and did often introduce their own. One teacher specifically noted that "these criteria [effort and initiative] are very difficult to judge and are not specific". I cannot say therefore that the official criteria defined by the Ministry for assessing portfolios are commonly understood and consistently used.

5.2 What are Learners' Knowledge of and Feelings about Portfolios?

Learners' questionnaires suggest they are not sufficiently informed about the purpose of a portfolio, how to plan it, and how it is assessed. Learners said they preferred portfolio assessment to traditional ways of testing because it gives them time to think and organize their ideas. Some learners were disappointed at the limited amount of feedback they received on their portfolios. I conclude that learners may not take their portfolio very seriously at least partly because they do not understand its purpose and how it is assessed and also because of the limited attention they feel that teachers give to this work.

5.3 What Skills are the Portfolios used to Assess?

Teacher questionnaires and interviews indicated that portfolios are used almost exclusively to assess reading and writing. Teachers said they focus on writing because it is easier to set work on this topic and easier too to mark. Learners did not necessarily enjoy doing so much writing for their portfolio. As one learner wrote, "I like my portfolio very much, but it is boring because it is always writing".

5.4 What Factors Might Affect the Effective Use of Portfolios?

The evidence from this study suggests that portfolios are not being used very effectively. Learners do not invest personally in their portfolios - they do not take them very seriously and are not selective in deciding what to include (rather, they include every single piece of work). They are not aware of how to develop a portfolio and of the criteria used to assess it.

On their part, teachers are not trained in how to design, set up and use portfolio assessment. This means that they cannot help their learners plan, organize and see the purpose of having a portfolio. In addition, teachers do not encourage their learners to be creative with their portfolios. For most teachers, key factors which work against the use of portfolios are large classes (up to 35 learners) and heavy workloads. Most teachers said that portfolios require substantial work and that is why they do not do them properly.

Teachers also seem to lack an awareness of how to make portfolios work and this may be related to the manner in which this innovation was introduced. The criteria established by the Ministry are not fully understood by teachers (who often use their own alternative criteria). Teachers also have little access to resources and

support which would develop their understandings of how to use portfolios to support the learning of English.

5.5 Limitations

In interpreting the findings of this study, a number of limitations must be acknowledged. Firstly, the range of learners and teachers involved was small; different findings may have emerged if the sample had been larger. Second, as noted above, although the response rate on the teachers' questionnaire was good, in many cases the closed questions were omitted and I was not able to provide quantitative data about teachers' knowledge about and views of portfolios. Finally, I am also aware that the focus of this study may have been seen as a sensitive issue by some teachers and this may have influenced the responses they provided during the audio recorded interviews.

6 CONCLUSION

This study has developed my own understandings of portfolio assessment in language learning. It has also highlighted areas where the implementation of portfolios can be improved. Two particular issues relate to learners' awareness of portfolio assessment and teachers' understandings of the criteria used in such assessment, and addressing such issues is important if portfolio assessment is to fulfil its potential. I hope that these findings will stimulate more systematic research into these issues by teachers and the Ministry of Education.

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APPENDIX: QUESTIONNAIRE & INTERVIEW QUESTIONS

Learner Questionnaire

1. Do you know what a portfolio is?
2. Have you got an idea how your portfolio is assessed?
3. Who usually organizes your portfolio?
4. Do you know where your portfolio is kept?
5. Do you like you portfolio? Why?
6. What do you like more – portfolio or tests? Why?
7. Do you show your portfolio to your parents?
8. Do you get feedback from your teacher on your portfolio?
9. What kind of work do you keep in your portfolio?

Interview Questions for Teachers

1. How can you ensure that your students have a clear idea of the purpose and process involved in developing and maintaining a portfolio?
2. What skills do you use portfolios to assess? How?
3. What are the phases of portfolio development?
4. What are the characteristics of an effective portfolio?
5. Do you assess individual pieces of work or the portfolio as a whole? Why?
6. Do you try to integrate oral skills into portfolio assessment? How?

Interview Questions for Ministry Specialists

1. What are the purposes of including portfolio assessment?
2. What should a portfolio show the student, teacher and stakeholders?
3. How can a portfolio be assessed?
4. What types of outcomes are expected from portfolios?
5. Were there any training courses for teachers on implementing portfolios?
6. What resources are available on portfolios for students, teachers and schools?