



## Malaysian students' perception on the use of portfolio as an assessment tool in ESL classroom

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### Abstract

This study aimed to understand students' perception on the use of portfolio as an assessment tool in ESL classroom. Past studies have indicated that students' used to have a negative perception to the portfolio assessment due to the heavy workload given by teachers. This qualitative case study examined 15 secondary school students studying in Kubang Pasu District. Data were collected via semi-structured interviews and document analysis. Data analysis revealed students' only have a negative perception at the early stage, but continuous use and encouragement given by teachers demolished their negative thoughts towards portfolio assessment. When they used to it, they feel enjoying using portfolio and be proactive towards portfolio assessment.

**Keywords:** portfolio assessment, ESL, students learning

### 1. Introduction

Malaysia is one of the countries in the world that are trying to make the education system less exam-oriented (Mutalib & Ahmad, 2012) <sup>[17]</sup>. In May 2003, the then Minister of Education of Malaysia reiterated the need to rely more on school based assessment to gauge students' academic performance. In the quest to become less exam centric, authentic assessment, alternative assessment are seen as one of the way that can be used to evaluate students' learning process (Chappuis, Stiggins, Chappuis & Arter, 2012) <sup>[2]</sup>. Today teachers are greatly interested in implementing a portfolio assessment system in their classroom as portfolio seems can be a good tool to evaluate students learning process (Kaufman, 2018) <sup>[10]</sup>. Jacob & Parkinson (2015) <sup>[8]</sup> suggested three main reasons for using portfolio in classroom teaching are; as teaching tools, for professional development and for assessment purpose.

In the recent wave of ESL assessment in Malaysia, portfolio assessment is seen as one of the approaches that have shown considerable promise (Tong, 2016) <sup>[25, 26]</sup>. It is believe that portfolios are better predictors of students' performance in an authentic situation and can improve students' higher order thinking skills (Graham, Hebert & Harris, 2015) <sup>[6]</sup>. Research that has been done at school level indicates a contrast findings compare to the studies done at college and university level. Students do have negative thoughts towards portfolio assessment as it gives more workload for them (Follmer & Stefanou, 2014) <sup>[5]</sup>. However, all these presented studies were done outside Malaysia. To date, little research has been done on the use of portfolio in ESL classroom especially at the early stage.

Since there are two different views towards portfolio assessment, this article will draw attention about Malaysian secondary school students' perception about portfolio assessment as it is newly implemented in Malaysian education system. More importantly, this study will help teachers and stake holders the potentials of assessing students' through portfolio.

### 2. Portfolio assessment

Many researchers have described various concerns and problems when using traditional testing approaches for assessing student achievement (Griffin & Care, 2014) <sup>[7]</sup>. Lam (2015) have listed some of the problems that associated with current traditional assessment practices such as; students are viewed as subjects of testing rather than as partners in testing, testing consumes an enormous amount of instructional time, most tests do not reflect the essence of the literacy in today's classrooms and the rationales for test administration denote assortment of purposes.

These problems have led to a remarkable increase in research delving into alternative assessment methodologies such as portfolio assessment (Lam, 2016) <sup>[13]</sup>. Portfolio assessment has many benefits such as depicts the processes by which students generate work, capturing a wider array of what students comprehend and can perform and also provides an accurate representation of what students know and can do in real life situation (Qvortup & Keiding, 2015) <sup>[22]</sup>. Portfolio also allows educators to align assessment with what they consider to be important learning outcomes (Chappuis, Stiggins, Chappuis & Arter, 2012) <sup>[2]</sup>. Complex problem solving, critical thinking and independent thinking are the meaningful outcomes which can be assessed and portrayed by using portfolios. Portfolio assessment also provides a continuous and ongoing record of students' progress (Lam, 2016) <sup>[13]</sup>. It delivers effective feedback and encourages students to observe their own growth. Portfolio also been identify as a tool to integrate assessment with instruction in a way that fosters active student engagement in learning and student responsibility for control of their own learning (Kapambwe, 2010) <sup>[9]</sup>.

Portfolio assessment also seems can improve achievement and integrate assessment with students' learning process and provides the potential to tell detailed stories about a variety of student outcomes which are harder to get information by using traditional method of assessment (Qian, 2014) <sup>[21]</sup>. An interest in portfolio as a performance tool has been growing

in U.S since the late 1980s. A prominent rationale for using portfolios to measure student performance is the belief that you get what you assess and you do not get what you do not assess (Wiliam & Thompson, 2017) [27].

**3. Methodology**

**3.1 Qualitative Methodology**

This study employed a qualitative design using naturalistic methods. This study focused on the students’ perception on portfolio assessment in ESL classroom. This would allow participants of this study to draw from their own experiences in using portfolio in their ESL classroom. It is important for the qualitative researcher to be fully aware of the participants’ experiences. The qualitative researcher needs to be a good listener, not only through the participants’ verbal words but also tuned to the channel of their body language which might show comfort or discomfort (Barun & Clarke, 2013) [1].

Creswell & Creswell (2017) stresses that qualitative researchers are primarily concerned with process rather than outcomes or products. In Creswell’s words, this study tried to find out the students’ perception of portfolio in their learning process. Second, qualitative researchers are interested in meaning. Meaning is embedded in people’s experience and mediated through the investigator’s own perceptions. It is very difficult for the researcher to find out the meaning outside the phenomenon. This study aimed to do that exactly which is to explore the students’ perception on the use of portfolio as an assessment tool in ESL classroom. The real meaning can only be understood if the researcher is able to be inside the phenomenon as it happens. This research investigated what the students’ experienced and how they interpret this experience.

Third, according to Delamont (2016) [4], the researcher is also the primary instrument for data collection and analysis in qualitative research. As a human instrument, data were collected through the researcher rather than some other inanimate inventory, questionnaire or machine. The researcher as a human instrument responded to the whole context, adapted techniques to the whole context, adapted techniques to the circumstances, expanded what was known about the situation through sensitivity to non-verbal aspects. The researcher was able to get insight into what actually took place through interviews, observation and document analysis.

Finally, Barun & Clarke (2013) [1] stressed that qualitative research usually involves fieldwork and this was exactly what the research did. It enabled the researchers to enter the field and observe behavior in its natural setting. Furthermore, what better way to study portfolio as an assessment tool that supports qualitative assessment than to use qualitative research methodology.

**3.2 Participants**

The participants in this study were 15 secondary school students studying in Kubang Pasu district. The number of participants was not determined prior to data collection, instead it depend on the resources and time available as well as the iterative nature of qualitative data collection (Delamont, 2016) [4]. Purposing sampling method has been used in this study as the researchers want to get students’ perception in two different backgrounds; one side from those who has experienced in using portfolio in elementary school and the other side from those who do not have any

experience. Out of these 15 participants, seven of them are males and eight of them are females.

**Table 1:** Breakdown of participants by Gender, School and Portfolio background

School	Male	Female	With Experience	Without Experience
SK A	2	1	2	1
SK B	1	2	1	2
SK C	1	2	3	-
SK D	2	1	3	-
SK E	1	2	2	1
Total	7	8	11	4

For confidential purpose, all the participants were given nickname. Researchers named them as, Arshad, Abu, Anisah (SKA), Bakhtiar, Beseri, Banumita (SKB), Calvin, Camelia, Cempaka (SKC), Diong, Dang Wei, Dung Shen (SKD), Eshwar, Ewathi and Espari (SKE). Abu, Bakhtiar, Beseri and Espari are those who do not have any experience using portfolio and the rest of them have experience in using portfolio.

**3.3 Data Collection**

Semi-structured interviews and document analysis were used in data collection process. The interview questions were reviewed to ensure that the participants understood the questions and were able to respond. Each participant was interviewed three times throughout the study to ensure the consistencies in their responses. Each interview took between approximately thirty to forty-five minutes. In addition, researchers also did document analysis to strengthen the data collected via interview process. Students’ portfolios were analysis in addition to understand their perception towards portfolio assessment. Data from interview were triangulated with document analysis process. Triangulation process in qualitative research is one of the methods used by many researchers to strengthen and validate the data (Braun & Calrke, 2013) [1].

**3.4 Data Analysis**

Data from interviews and document analysis were coded to yield thematic categories. Notes from interviews were transcribed and content analysis was done through students’ portfolio. As data were compared, categories emerged or review to identify the patterns of students’ perception towards portfolio assessment. Content analysis techniques were used to identify codes and categorize data into units in order to arrive at common themes concerning students’ perceptions.

**4. Findings and discussion**

This study aimed to explore and understand students’ perception on the use of portfolio as an assessment tool in ESL classroom. Data analysis of students perception on the use of portfolio revealed the following themes; portfolio gives more workload, enjoy learning English, self-development.

**4.1 Portfolio gives more workload**

Abu, Bakhtiar, Beseri and Espari say that portfolio gives more workload to them. Through the interview process they claim that by using portfolio they need to do extra work. In classroom, students’ need to prepare portfolio only for certain subjects such as Malay language, English, and

Science. Since that, they feel like these subjects are burdening them.

Teachers ask to prepare many materials before we come to our English class. By the same time we need to do our homework, so I feel like I need to do many works (Beseri/INT2).

Portfolio is very heavy. I need to carry the file each time I have my English class. Some more teacher always ask to find many materials (Espari/INT3).

According to Beseri and Espari, they feel like portfolio as a burden tools for them. They need to get ready materials before they attend their English class. For both of them preparing material inside their portfolio seems to be a difficult task and even for Espari she feels that portfolio is a heavy file.

I didn't understand what is portfolio, but I just follow my teachers' instruction. Every time I need to carry the portfolio and need to find something new to put inside it. I don't like it (Bakhtiar/INT3)

Bakhtiar did not like to use portfolio as he don't understand about the importance of portfolio. He is using portfolio as it was instructed by his teacher to use it. The other reason why he doesn't like the portfolio because he always needs to find new materials as requested by his teacher. The expression given by Bakhtiar during the interview process also shows that portfolio seems to be burden for him.

I like portfolio because I can put my picture in front of it, but I don't like it because teachers always ask us to find our new materials. If I go back I don't have enough time. Sometimes teachers ask to find from internet, but I don't have internet access at home (Abu/INT1).

For Abu, portfolio seems to be burdens as his teacher ask him to find many materials. The major issue for Abu is internet access as he couldn't access internet at his home. This gives a negative perception for Abu towards portfolio assessment. For all of these students, they feel like portfolio assessment gives more workload for them. Since every time teacher asks them to find out materials for their classroom learning process, they started to have a negative thought towards portfolio.

I don't know why teacher like to use this portfolio, because as well as I know teachers all are using books to do school activity and suddenly teacher asks me to prepare a file called portfolio (Bakhtiar/INT3).

However, in the end of interview session, they still mentioned that they have these kinds of perception due to unclear understanding of using portfolio for their ESL classroom. Bakhtiar and Espari have mentioned that, they even could not even understand the purpose of using portfolio in teaching and learning process. Researchers also cross check these students portfolio. When look at these students portfolio, it give a clear picture that these four students are using portfolio just to compile their learning materials. Unclear understandings towards portfolio assessment gives a negative perception about portfolio assessment and finally this perception make them to use portfolio just to compile all the learning materials.

#### 4.2 Enjoy Learning English

Anisah, Banumita, Calvin, Dang Wei and Dung Shen like portfolio assessment. This is because they can enjoy their English lesson. This is supporting Lam (2016) <sup>[16]</sup> statement saying that alternative assessment can creates students

enjoyment in learning. By using portfolio, they can find many materials and keep everything inside their portfolio. When they keep everything inside the file, the learning materials look well organized.

I like my English portfolio. I love doing many activities through portfolio. My teacher asks me to collect many materials such as my family pictures. I even can work with computer to prepare materials for my portfolio (Anisah/INT2).

I love my portfolio. I can keep many learning materials inside it. When I have many materials, I can learn many things (Dung Shen/INT1).

Anisah and Dung Shen have a good perception towards portfolio. They enjoy using portfolio as they can keep many materials inside it. For them, they can use all the materials for learning purpose.

Sometime I need to search myself, but sometimes teacher will give. I like the colorful learning materials. If I search from internet I will print it in color. I really enjoy using portfolio ( Anisah/INT2).

Portfolio gives chances for the students to learn and explore by themselves. When teacher ask the students to find suitable materials for learning purposes, students need to explore through internet. By doing this, students have to search for suitable materials and this way can help them to enhance their knowledge. Anisah feels happy doing all this things as she loves to explore learning materials through internet.

For me, portfolio is one of the best ways to keep our learning materials in a proper way. We can well organize the materials, so we can have our own collection which can be used any time (Calvin/INT2).

Calvin has positive thoughts towards portfolio assessment. He enjoys using portfolio as he can well organize his learning materials. When the learning materials are kept well organized he can use it anytime for his learning activity. Besides that, by keeping all the materials in one file named portfolio, they can have their own collection of learning materials.

Other than that, students also feel that by using portfolio they can share materials and even knowledge among their friends. Students also will have a chance to compare their friend's portfolio. By comparing the other students' portfolio, it can help them for improvement purpose.

Sometimes when teacher ask me to bring pictures, I can see that my friends can bring better pictures than me. I will compare my pictures with my friends' one. Next time, I try to find something better or like my friends (Banumita/INT2).

If I did any mistakes I even can learn with my friends help. I can look at my friend's portfolio, so it will help me to do corrections. Sometimes, I feel scared to ask my teacher, but I can share with my friends (Dang Wei/INT2).

Portfolio gives a chance for students to share materials and knowledge among their friends. They can look at their friend materials for better learning process and also for improvement. If teacher ask them to find any materials, students can even compare their materials with their friends. Anisah, Banumita, Calvin, Dang Wei and Dung Shen seem like enjoy using portfolio in their ESL classroom. They had a good perception towards portfolio assessment. Besides enjoying lesson, some students do have a thought that portfolio can help them in learning process.

### 4.3 Learning Process

Third theme that revealed from the data is portfolio for learning process. Some students do have a perception that portfolio as a learning process tool. Through portfolio assessment students will be given feedback for each of the activity done in classroom. The feedback given by teacher will be used for further improvement. Students also feel as they are having second chance to improve on each of the mistakes that they had done. Alternative assessment is mainly aimed for students learning process (Lam, 2015). It is similar to what had been explained by the participants of this study.

Each time I do my exercise for sure I will do mistake, so for all of the mistakes that I did teacher will give comments. For example, if I did spelling mistakes, teacher will write a correct spelling for me, so next time if I don't know the spelling I can refer to the previous exercise. This way can help me for improvement (Eshwar/INT3).

Teacher will help me if I do any mistakes. So I learn from it. Next time, if teacher give almost the same exercise I can refer to that and use that exercise as a guideline (Camelia/INT3).

For every activity, teacher will give feedback. From the comments and feedback I can learn and do corrections. I can learn by this way (Diong/INT2).

Eshwar, Camelia and Diong are making use of all the comments and feedback given by their teacher for further improvement purpose. They look again at the exercises that they did to get better understandings. From that, they can learn through all the mistakes and the comments given by teacher. Calvin, Camelia, Cempaka, Diong, Eshwar and Ewathi have a good perception towards portfolio assessment. From each of the activity they will get a comment or feedback from their teachers. They used all these comments and feedback for their further improvement. In the other hand, it can be concluded that their positive perception towards portfolio makes them to use it as a learning tools.

### 4.4 Portfolio Analysis

As triangulation process, researchers have also analyzed students' portfolio. 15 portfolios were analyzed including the contents, worksheets and feedback given by teacher. Portfolios analyze data shows that Abu, Bakhtiar, Beseri and Espari those who had a negative perceptions towards portfolio do not utilized the portfolio for their learning process. They just keep all the worksheet inside the portfolio. The main reason why they do not like portfolio is because they did not understand why teachers' are asking them to use portfolio. It might be because they do not have any experience using portfolio in elementary school level. Portfolio assessment has been introduced in Malaysian elementary education since it can help students to develop their learning process (Omar & Sinnasamy, 2017; Retnawati, Hadi & Nugraha, 2016) <sup>[18, 23]</sup>. Since these students do not have background about portfolio usage it seems like they do have a negative perception towards portfolio. At the same time, they do not have a deep understanding of portfolio assessment.

However, when the researchers look at the rest of students' portfolio it gives a positive impression towards it. They put a lot of effort to make their portfolio looks great and valuable for learning process.

I love my portfolio because it is my own work, I created

everything inside it (Anisah/INT2).

Even though I really don't know what is portfolio, but I still ask my teacher to explain to me on how to use it (Espari/INT2).

Students will have a good perception towards the education programme if they can well understand about the objective of the programme (Tong & Adamson, 2015; Power, Watkins, Mautone, Walcott, Coutts & Sheridan, 2015) <sup>[27, 28, 4]</sup>. It is very clear that in this study, students had a negative perception due to unclear understandings to the objective of portfolio assessment; however those who can understand the purpose of portfolio assessment had a positive perception towards it. Even though, Abu, Bakhtiar, Beseri and Espari seems like having a negative perception towards portfolio, but they still using it and learning on how to use portfolio for learning purpose.

### 5. Conclusion

In this study, it is clear that students are still in learning process. They can adopt the implementation of portfolio assessment slowly when they can understand the importance of it. Some more, most Malaysian students are not familiar with this kind of freedom and autonomy in the classroom. Portfolio assessment is a new phenomenon to most Malaysian students. It will take some time for them to adopt it and in long running students were able to accept this kind of authentic assessment. When students and teacher can get a clear picture on the alternative assessment they can slowly adopt it and will enjoy using it (Ligard, Thomposon & Sellar, 2015; Lane, Oakes, Powers, Diebold, Germer, Common & Brunsting, 2015; Marcenaro-Gutierrez & Vignoles, 2015) <sup>[15, 16]</sup>. Furthermore, the deep implementation process should start from early stage such as elementary school level as it can give experience for students. When students didn't get a wide exposure about portfolio they intend to have some negative perceptions towards it (Yan & Cheng, 2015) <sup>[29]</sup>. Policy maker should think deeply on this issue as some action must be taken in early stage to make sure students get early exposure regarding portfolio assessment. Teachers also need to get clear information regarding portfolio assessment as teacher can practice to use portfolio in order to increase students interest in using portfolio (Parkay, Anctil & Has, 2014; & Wilson, 2017; Koenig, Blomeke, Klein, Suhl, Busse & Kaiser, 2014) <sup>[19, 28, 11]</sup>. The most important is the ongoing research. Researchers are always encouraged to continue research to on this kind of newly implemented programme in classroom teaching.

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