INFORMING PORTFOLIO ASSESSMENT IN WRITING CLASSES
An Analysis of Writing Portfolio Assessment using Weir's Sociocognitive Framework for Language Testing

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Introduction

Seeking effective ways to respond to student writing has been a matter of great interest to teachers (Silva, McMartin-Miller, Pelaez-Moralez & Lin, 2012, as cited in Ozer & Tanrıseven, 2016). One such response is through portfolio assessment, which involves assessing students' writing as it is documented in dossiers that showcase their progress and achievements in the writing process (Genesee & Upshur, 1996). Portfolio assessment is an approach used in process-writing classrooms that constructively brings together teaching, learning, and assessment of writing by using different sources of feedback, turning learners' writing output into pedagogical input, and providing opportunities for revising (Grabe & Kaplan, 1996). The justification for using portfolio assessment in the writing classroom is that writing assessment should be personalized, longitudinal, and contextualized instead of being standardized and removed from learners' familiar contexts outside the classroom (Hamp-Lyons, 2006).

As a result of the rise of the process approach to writing and the use of alternative assessments in native English-

speaking contexts, portfolio assessments are more commonly used in second-language English speaking contexts (Lam, 2016), despite the lack of professional language assessment training for teachers administering them (Burner, 2014; Hamp-Lyons, 2006). Thus, its formative potential as an assessment tool has not been maximized in the contexts of English as a second language and English as a foreign language because the assessment focus has been primarily summative (Burner, 2014b). The aim of this paper is to inform the classroom-based implementation of portfolio assessment by highlighting its formative potential through application of a socio-cognitive framework of language testing (Weir, 2005). First, it will define the formative assessment of writing using portfolios. Second, it will discuss its relevant issues, tensions, and trends. Finally, it will investigate the key considerations for teachers and learners in implementing the portfolio assessment of writing formatively. It is hoped that through this analysis, writing teachers who are using this type of assessment will have a better understanding of the contexts in which it occurs, and its implications for teaching and additional considerations for students.

Definition of formative assessment of writing using portfolios

Black and William (1998) state that, when teachers and students employ assessment activities to obtain information to improve instruction to address students' needs, assessment becomes *formative* because "learning is driven by what teachers and pupils do in classrooms" (p. 81). Formative assessments typically have low stakes (Ashton, 2016), and have five key characteristics, according to William and Leahy (2015): first,

teachers share and clarify learning intentions and criteria for success with students; second, teachers design classroom activities that elicit evidence of learning; third, feedback from the teacher and self-assessment is used to help students understand and improve their performance; fourth, learners work collaboratively to help each other; and fifth, students have a sense of ownership towards their learning. Overall, formative assessment potentially allows students to direct their own learning and helps teachers adapt their teaching to make it more responsive to students' needs (Bachman & Palmer, 1996, as cited in Rea-Dickins & Gardner, 2000).

Formative assessment is also known as *assessment for learning,* which focuses on how teachers and students use evidence to enhance the learning process and help students become autonomous learners (Lee, 2016). This is often contrasted with *assessment of learning* or *summative assessment*, which monitors educational progress by measuring how much students have learned in relation to their peers or certain performance standards, typically through high-stakes standardized tests (Bell & Cowie, 2001). However, this distinction is not always straightforward; whether assessment is formative or summative depends on how assessment data is used (Rea-Dickins & Gardner, 2000).

In writing assessment, there is a tendency to focus more on summative purposes rather than formative ones (Elbow & Belanoff, 2009; Huot & Williamson, 2009; Lee, 2016). For example, Lee (2011) argues that teachers, especially in English as a Foreign Language contexts, concentrate too much on marking errors and grading student writing following generic criteria, which results in retrospective evaluation that does not promote student learning. She suggests that traditional assessment practices like these do not maximize formative benefits and only

minimally impact teaching and learning. Thus, exploring alternative assessments like writing portfolios may be a solution.

A *writing portfolio* is defined as a purposeful collection of writing that shows students' progress, effort, and achievement in written tasks (Weigle, 2007) that students have developed and reflected upon for an extended time period (Burner, 2014b). It highlights students' learning process and progress (Klenowski, 2010) because students collect their work, select what to include considering teacher and peer input, and reflect on their progress. Thus, collection, selection, and reflection are the essential elements of writing portfolios that reveal the process that students underwent in creating the final written product (Hamp-Lyons, 2006). Collection involves following through and improving drafts, while reflection typically entails self-assessment and is also manifested in selecting portfolio entries (Burner, 2014b).

Portfolio assessment may be done summatively (showcase portfolios) or formatively (learning portfolios), depending on the assessment purpose (Burner, 2014b). However, employing portfolio assessment formatively allows students to experience the writing process holistically (Lee & Coniam, 2013) because activities like assessing work through self-reflection and peer input, giving feedback, having multiple drafts, revising, and selecting texts are all built into portfolio assessment (Klenowski, 2010). Consequently, writing portfolios can facilitate formative assessment in classrooms (Burner, 2014a). However, there is a need for writing teachers to become more aware of how to conduct formative assessment using portfolios, because many of them have not received sufficient training to utilize its formative functions (Lam & Lee, 2009). The rest of this paper explores this formative potential.

Analyzing formative assessment of writing portfolios using Weir's (2005) framework

Characteristics of writing portfolios and use in formative assessment

Portfolios have been used in writing classrooms since the mid-1980s (Belanoff & Dickson, 1991), but their use in language assessment is fairly new (Brown & Hudson, 1998, as cited in Burner, 2014b). Writing portfolios may vary according to form and function, but they have nine common characteristics, as enumerated by Hamp-Lyons and Condon (2000): collecting texts, displaying a range of performances, delaying evaluation to allow for revision, selecting texts, allowing for student-centered control, providing opportunities for reflection and self-assessment, growing along specific parameters, and developing the product over time to show progress. Additionally, Daiker, Sommers, and Stygall (1996) note that writing portfolios may also include multiple writing samples from a variety of genres.

Portfolios have been typically used in process-writing oriented classrooms, which advocate student familiarity with the composing process through developing pre-writing, drafting, and editing skills, and encouraging personal expressions in writing (Lam, 2016). Portfolio pedagogy is often used with process writing (Lam, 2015) because it promotes student growth in writing as evidenced in collecting, selecting, and reflecting on multiple drafts (Genesee & Upshur, 1996). Specifically, the teacher facilitates writing activities and guides the students as they autonomously create texts, reflect on these, revise them, and select the best that will appear in their portfolios. In the portfolio, these final products are accompanied by the preceding drafts to show progress (Lam & Lee, 2009) and self-reflective pieces, which are considered the most authentic and significant

in the portfolio (Belanoff & Dickson, 1991). The portfolio approach, thus, can be seen as flexible in delivery (Lam, 2015), specific to the learner's context, oriented towards the reader, and supportive of students' writing progress (Burner, 2014b).

However, there are numerous issues surrounding portfolio assessment, which are summarized by Calfee and Freedman (1996) as follows: identifying the assessment purpose, selecting what tasks to include in the portfolio, deciding what standards and criteria to apply in grading, ensuring validity of the assessment, and considering how assessment results will be used. In discussing these issues, the framework of language assessment proposed by Weir (2005) will be used, because it helps establish the evidence-based validity of a certain type of language assessment that classroom teachers use, such as writing portfolios.

Cognitive validity and portfolio assessment

Cognitive validity pertains to the extent to which a test measures what it is purported to measure and is usually based on a particular theory of language proficiency (Weir, 2005). Current theories of writing development adhere to the constructivist perspective, where writing is conceptualized as a process, not a product (Murphy & Grant, 1996), and the cognitivist perspective, which considers writing as a complex activity entailing different intellectually demanding and recursive tasks, like planning, revising, and goal-setting (Lam, 2015). Thus, students ought to be recognized as autonomous writers who are actively involved in the writing process, instead of being made to replicate "standard" compositions through controlled practice (Ferris & Hedgcock, 2014). Additionally, multiple feedback sources are emphasized so that improvement

and reflection can be encouraged as students keep track of their progress (Hamp-Lyons & Condon, 2000).

Despite growing understanding of such theories, writing ability is still commonly measured using traditional proficiency examinations, where students are made to generate written responses to essay prompts in timed and controlled conditions (Larson, 1996). Students' writing ability is typically assessed on the basis of one sample, with no opportunities for research or revision. Thus, generalizing a student's writing ability based on this cannot give a valid picture of writing proficiency (Elbow & Belanoff, 2009; Huot & Williamson, 2009; Larson, 1996; Murphy & Grant, 1996; Weigle, 2007). First, multiple samples of writing, in different genres, and in multiple sittings, are necessary (Elbow & Belanoff, 2009) to account for the effect of changes in psychological and physical factors of exam takers (Daiker et al., 1996). Second, writing generated for various purposes entails different strategies and processes, and is also affected by individual writers' personal and cultural characteristics (Murphy & Grant, 1996). Thus, it seems as though another form of assessment may be more appropriate to measure writing ability.

Murphy and Grant (1996) argue that portfolio assessment addresses the shortcomings of traditional assessments, because of its formative nature, for several reasons. First, it provides multiple examples of student writing and prevents overgeneralizations. Second, it exhibits writing produced in more authentic settings relevant to students. Third, it reflects the ongoing curriculum that students are learning, instead of external and possibly irrelevant purposes. Fourth, it offers data that is directly applicable to teaching practice. Finally, it involves students in the assessment process and addresses their needs for improved instruction in different aspects of writing. Thus,

portfolio assessment responds to the multifaceted and nature of language development because it gives students opportunities to practice and demonstrate authentic language use (Delett, Barnhardt, & Kevorkian, 2001).

Context validity and portfolio assessment

Context validity refers to the features and demands of the task and the setting of test administration (Weir, 2005). This entails how writing tasks are related to the performance conditions in which they are tested, and should be as representative as possible of authentic situations students may be in (Weir, 2005). Portfolio assessment evaluates writing in more natural contexts than standardized exams, because it is "personalized, longitudinal, and contextualized" (Lam, 2016, p.2) and introduces students to situations where they will most likely encounter different writing tasks in.

Murphy and Grant (1996) point out an issue regarding context validity: decisions must be made on whether portfolio contents will be standardized. Standardization pertains to the extent that portfolio contents are specified ahead of time, and to the degree of similarity in writing conditions for students. They suggest that balance between standardization and contextualization is ideal because emphasizing standardization "undermine[s] rather than support[s]" portfolio assessment conditions (p.294).

Despite this concern, portfolio assessment recognizes the multiplicity of writing purposes, audiences, and genres (Lam, 2015; Murphy & Grant, 1996). It also emphasizes that students need time to develop their writing skills through revision and reflection (Burner, 2014b). Finally, it makes assessment criteria clear to students so they know the demands of the task and how

they can successfully achieve it (Lee, 2016). Overall, it offers a more solid basis for writing assessment than traditional examinations because it focuses both on the process and product of writing and makes progress visible to learners and teachers (Burner, 2014b), and informs teaching practice due to feedback practices (Hattie & Timperley, 2007). Fittingly, Daiker et al. (1996, p.259) observe that "it makes sense to evaluate students on the basis of their best work, not their average work."

Scoring validity and portfolio assessment

Scoring validity is concerned with the extent to which scores are arrived at based on appropriate criteria, display consensus in their marking, are free from measurement errors, are consistent over time, and are reliable bases of decision-making (Weir, 2005). This aspect of portfolio assessment is contentious due to issues of validity and reliability, since writing assessment has traditionally focused on standardization (Huot & Williamson, 2009), and portfolios present the most rigorous challenges to traditional assessment (Moss, 1992).

Because of their contextual, flexible, personal, and individualized nature, some teachers and authorities view portfolio assessment as lacking rigor, because validated scoring rubrics are not generally available. Consequently, it is not always seen as a reliable source of students' performance in comparison to their peers or standards (Larson, 1996). White (1985) argues that a disadvantage of portfolio assessment is that it has yet to display reliable, consistent, and criterion-referenced scoring that allows solid judgment about students' writing proficiency. More recently, Hamp-Lyons (2006) and Lam (2015) have called for more empirical research to substantiate the

advantages of portfolio assessment, particularly in improving the textual quality of students' writing.

However, researchers have challenged traditional notions of reliability and believe they are inapplicable to portfolio assessment (Elbow & Belanoff, 2009; Huot & Williamson, 2009). Moss (1992) believes that the local and contextualized reading of portfolios is more appropriate and valuable in their assessment and is aligned with their construct validity.

Several researchers have argued that one way of achieving inter-rater reliability in localized portfolio assessments is through portfolio norming and collaboration (Durst, Roemer, & Schultz, 2009; Elbow & Belanoff, 2009; Larson, 1996; Murphy & Grant, 1996). For example, groups of educators in the same department can consider and compare specific scoring criteria and standards they will use for evaluating students' writing skills, evaluate each other's students' portfolios, discuss students' development alongside curricular goals and instruction, and clarify concerns about assessment (Durst et al., 2009; Murphy & Grant, 1996). Doing so prevents isolation, addresses anxieties about grading, and challenges teachers to articulate and negotiate their standards; in this way, the grading process becomes more valid since it reflects the standards of a particular educational community (Elbow & Belanoff, 2009).

However, in applying collaboration to portfolio assessment, administrators must ensure that extensive training is provided to teachers to ensure validity and fairness in scoring (Larson, 1996). Additionally, regular opportunities for dialogue should be provided to guarantee that teachers' opinions are heard and their autonomy is valued, and to minimize dangers of coercion by the majority or leaders in implementing criteria (Durst et al., 2009). Overall, this ongoing standards-negotiation

process is integral to portfolio assessment because of its fluid and nuanced nature (Durst et al., 2009).

Consequential validity and portfolio assessment

Consequential validity refers to the impact of tests on educational and social settings (Bachman, 1990, as cited in Ashton, 2016). The consequential validity of portfolio assessment discussed here deals with washback, or the impact of tests on teaching and learning (Green, 2006).

The formative use of portfolio assessment allows teachers to modify instruction in response to students' progress and needs, especially since it is a work in progress (Jones, 2012, as cited in Burner, 2014b). The cyclical processes of multiple drafting and feedback provision, in turn, allow students to adjust their portfolios and enhance their learning (Hamp-Lyons, 2006). Thus, portfolios become both a record of students' learning progress and the teacher's teaching process because they collaborate in producing the portfolio (Larson, 1996). They are especially valuable both in first language and second/foreign language contexts (Burner, 2014b; Lam, 2015).

Portfolio assessment's formative potential is highlighted as positive washback on teachers because it is a "learning-supportive approach which constructively aligns teaching, learning, and assessment of writing via provision of multiple feedback sources, use of student writing output as pedagogical input, and postponement of summative evaluation to support the learning of writing" (Lam, 2016, p.2). This is due to portfolio assessment's social constructivist roots, which sees learning as an ongoing process that informs teaching practice, especially when it is student-centered (Burner, 2014b).

Its positive washback on learners enables them to become more self-regulated and self-reflective in the composition process (Belanoff & Dickson, 1991; Lee, 2016). Notably, in his literature review of research on portfolio assessment in foreign language contexts, Burner (2014b) cites various studies that claim how students have become more motivated to write because portfolio assessment allows them to write more frequently, enables increased awareness of their writing and language exposure, and develops their critical thinking.

However, more empirical studies are needed to examine how portfolio assessment's formative functions can be strengthened to improve the linguistic and metalinguistic aspects of student writing (Hamp-Lyons, 2006; Lam & Lee, 2009), especially since research on portfolios has mainly concentrated on affective dimensions and benefits, such as increasing students' motivation, ownership of writing, and decreasing writing anxiety (Lam, 2015).

Trends in portfolio assessment

Presently, portfolio assessment has moved towards emphasizing the development of reflection and higher-order thinking skills (Lam, 2016). It continues to highlight the importance of using assessment to encourage self-regulated learning in students and to enhance instruction by promoting and increasing students' role in learning (Lee, 2016). Specifically, portfolio assessment practitioners are embedding metacognitive aspects of learning into their programs to teach students explicitly how to become more reflexive learners (Lam, 2016).

Additionally, the prevalence of technology has increased the use of e-portfolios, or portfolios that have been assembled online. Burner (2014b) concludes that e-portfolios largely share

similar benefits of portfolio assessment, especially since its principles are the same. Students generally have positive attitudes toward e-portfolios (Chau & Cheng, 2010); however, some have expressed anxiety because of exposure to larger audiences online and resistance to technology (Hung, 2012).

Key implementation considerations of portfolio assessment for teachers and students

To maximize the formative potential of portfolios, they must be integrated into classroom instruction, and not become merely "intrusive add-ons" (Herman, Gearheart, & Aschbacher, 1996, p. 27). Teachers and students must understand the rationale behind portfolio assessment and see its benefits in order for them to be willing to adopt the practice (Lam, 2015). This part examines some practical considerations for teachers and students in implementing portfolio assessment.

Considerations for teachers

First, teachers should consider whether adopting a portfolio approach model is appropriate to their context (Lam, 2016). Many approaches come from Western contexts, which have positive attitudes towards portfolio assessment principles, such as emphasizing the writing process and promoting learner autonomy (Lee, 2016). However, teachers should recognize that these models are not one-size-fits-all and their implementation will be affected by sociocultural factors (Klenowski, 2010). Instead, they ought to adopt a broad notion of portfolio assessment that acknowledges contextual factors like their students' diversity, curricular constraints, and other institutional

considerations and attitudes (Lam, 2016). For example, process-oriented portfolio assessments may not be compatible with classrooms that emphasize written products and test scores.

Next, teachers' attitudes towards portfolio assessment must be addressed. Teachers must not feel like the practice is imposed on them, otherwise they may resent it (Larson, 1996). It is important to start implementation with consenting teachers, especially since portfolio assessment can increase their workload significantly. They need to understand the assessment's goals and agree with it if they are to effectively implement the practice (Lam, 2015). They must also be aware of the work involved to reconsider their teaching approach (Larson, 1996) and open to changing their mindsets about portfolio assessment (Lee, 2016). Teachers and administrators must be realistic in their expectations of portfolio assessment, because it takes at least a year before changes can be observed (Burner, 2014a).

Additionally, teachers should have a supportive and collegial work environment, so that the assessment feels less burdensome to them (Elbow & Belanoff, 2009). Such environments are valuable not only in portfolio norming sessions, but in giving teachers the chance to express their concerns, share effective teaching strategies, and foster a culture that values formative assessment (Burner, 2014a).

More importantly, teachers must be given adequate professional development in implementing portfolio assessment, specifically in assessing portfolios and giving feedback (Hamp-Lyons, 2006; Herman et al., 1996; Lam, 2015) and in the mechanics of effective implementation, including managing their time and organizing portfolios (Delett et al., 2001). Examples of professional development activities include negotiating assessment standards with colleagues (Durst et al., 2009), and modeling and applying feedback practices so they

become more helpful, systematic and explicit for students (Burner, 2014a; Hamp-Lyons, 2006).

Considerations for students

Meanwhile, there are also key considerations for students, who should be the center of portfolio assessment. First, its formative benefits must be clear to students so that a change towards their attitude of privileging grades will occur (Lam & Lee, 2009). They should become aware of these advantages and its effects on their learning, such as increased motivation, decreased writing anxiety, additional writing practice opportunities, and enhanced self-regulation skills, so that they will become encouraged to fully participate in it (Murphy & Camp, 1996).

Second, to encourage their development as autonomous learners, students should be given control over the contents of their portfolio (Hamp-Lyons & Condon, 2000). While this may be difficult due to standardization concerns (Murphy & Grant, 1996), students should have a say in their portfolio structure and its presentation, so that they can reflect more deeply on their progress, articulate their needs more clearly, develop better self-regulation skills, and have a stronger sense of ownership towards their work (Hamp-Lyons, 2006; Lam & Lee, 2009). Additionally, they must be given ample time to prepare their drafts for the portfolio (Hamp-Lyons & Condon, 2000).

Third, students must be explicitly instructed in self-assessment and reflection strategies in order to maximize the metacognitive benefits of portfolio assessment (Lam, 2016). Otherwise, the portfolio simply becomes a collection of cumulative works: the students do engage in a writing process, but do not become aware of their growth (Miholic & Moss,

2001). Thus, students should be encouraged to undertake reflection for their own growth, and not just for the sake of fulfilling their teacher's expectations (Burner, 2014a).

Finally, students also need clear instruction on how to give and use feedback effectively to improve their writing (Burner, 2014a; Hamp-Lyons, 2006). The feedback that teachers provide will only be useful to students if they put effort in revising their work (Lam, 2014). Thus, they need to be encouraged to maximize feedback opportunities such as self- and peer assessment and teacher conferencing. They must also be made aware of its contextualized benefits, so that they understand the purpose of the task and do not view it as a burden (Burner, 2014a).

Conclusion

This paper, thus far, has critically reviewed the use of portfolios in the formative assessment of writing. It has defined portfolios and discussed the characteristics that make it suitable for formative assessment. Furthermore, it has explored the issues surrounding the validity of portfolio assessment and has offered different insights regarding these tensions. Finally, it has examined the important considerations of implementing portfolio assessment especially for teachers and students.

This paper has also emphasized several points. First, it has highlighted how portfolios can improve the writing instruction process by providing useful feedback on students' progress. Second, it has emphasized the need for students to have an active role in order for portfolio assessment's benefits to be realized. Finally, it has stressed the need for teachers to be trained in the implementation and assessment of portfolio

pedagogy, since their role in its success is crucial. Overall, it has supported the notion that "portfolios have the potential to be more than just what 'you do' in certain grades for assessment. Instead, they…[can] assume a positive role in influencing the curriculum and culture of the school" (Huot & Williamson, 2009, p. 340).

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