

## Reading Portfolio Assessment: The Case of Taiwan EFL Learners

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### **Abstract**

The study is intended to find out the effects of reading portfolio assessment and students' perceptions of the implementation in Taiwan. The subjects are a class of third-year junior college students who take an EFL reading class with the researcher. The experimental period lasts one semester.

Both qualitative and quantitative data, including data from reading aloud activities, questionnaires, and student portfolios are collected in the research. The data are collected and analyzed by the researcher. The results indicate that students are more willing to spend time on outside reading than they were before. Another finding is that students become more interested in reading English materials because they have freedom to choose what to read. Besides, students claim that portfolio assessment is an effective way to reflect their learning processes and improvements.

### **Introduction**

English language learning is part of the curriculum in colleges in Taiwan. For the coherence of curricula, teachers need to know where the students are in terms of their language

proficiency and then design the curriculum that is most suitable for students. Traditionally, standardized tests have played an important role on measuring students' language proficiency level. However, traditional standardized tests have undergone serious attacks, for its failure to reflect students' language proficiency level (Brandt, 1989; Haney & Madaus, 1989; Kohn, 2000; Neill & Medina, 1989); therefore portfolio assessment becomes an alternative way to assess students' language proficiency.

The characteristics of reading portfolio assessment include the collection of students' reading materials, reading logs, and the assessment of students' reading progress, which includes students' self-assessment, peer assessment, and teacher assessment (Heath, 2002). Even though proponents have enthusiastically proposed the advantages of using portfolio assessment, research results are few and far between. In previous studies concerning portfolio assessment, researchers often stress literacy development, which combines both reading and writing skills, or they mix all language skills as a whole while using portfolio assessment. Seldom do they emphasize reading competence alone. However, beginning level EFL learners' receptive language competence is larger than their productive language competence. Hence, their reading competence should be better than their writing competence. It won't be reasonable to infer students' reading competence through mix-skilled portfolio assessment. Therefore, in the present study, the researcher would like to focus on the reading competence of the EFL students as the research topic.

This study is intended to find out the effects of employing portfolio assessment in an EFL reading class and students' perceptions of the implementation. The research questions are as follows:

- (1) do students' reading habits change after the experiment;
- (2) do students become more interested in reading English materials after the experiment;
- (3) what are students' perception of using portfolio assessment in the reading class; and

- (4) do students' reading ability improved after the experiment. The significance of the study is that it tries to bring solid experimental data to help EFL teachers understand the effect of using portfolio assessment in the EFL reading class.

### **Literature Review**

In this section, two topics are addressed. The limitation of standardized language proficiency tests is elaborated in the first part and portfolio assessment is introduced in the second part.

#### **The limitation of standardized language proficiency testing**

Standardized language proficiency tests often consist of test items that measure a single unit of language skills, and most of these skills assessed are low-level skills (Haney & Madaus, 1989). A test taker who gets high scores on these tests doesn't necessarily show high ability of communication. Sometimes a correct answer doesn't even mean that the student understands the issue (Kohn, 2000). These tests don't care about the reasons behind the responses students make (Wiggins, 1989); nevertheless, the reasoning behind each answer might offer important feedback for teachers.

Besides, standardized tests are context reduced and it is difficult for language minority students to take context-reduced tests. These tests are not culture fair. Research results show that though standardized tests are related to academic success, the relationship becomes weaker when minority groups are involved (Moffat, 1993).

Most standardized tests are timed, which means students take the tests under the pressure of time. It seems that one of the important aims of the test is to measure whether students have the ability to answer questions quickly and under pressure (Kohn, 2000). Besides, standardized tests won't help teachers and students decide what kind of meaningful activities they should do in the class (Heald-Taylor, 1989). Some teachers would let students

do a lot of drills to bring up the scores instead of normal instruction (Haney & Madaus, 1989).

### **Portfolio Assessment**

A portfolio is a collection of student works with a special purpose. It demonstrates the endeavor and progress the students make while they learn a particular subject (Weigle, 2002). Portfolios initially are used by artists to keep their work and show other people their interests and abilities (Jongsma, 1989). Portfolio assessment used in assessing students' language proficiency should not be limited on collecting student work. It should serve as a systematically planned method for assessing students (Moya & O'Malley, 1994). Portfolio assessment emphasizing the process instead of the result is a type of alternative assessment. The assessment is aligned with instructional tasks and offers immediate feedback to instructors. The interpretation and design require professional rater judgment (O'Malley & Pierce, 1992).

Portfolio assessment keeps the records of a student's work over time and in a variety of forms to show the student's development and abilities. It can collect the information from both alternative and standardized assessments (O'Malley & Pierce, 1992).

Portfolio assessment allows continuous and authentic assessment of student progress. It can be integrated into the literacy program (Manning & Manning, 1995). For process-oriented teachers, using portfolio assessment is an excellent way of evaluating students' progresses (Hoy & Gregg, 1994). The records kept in portfolios can offer a foundation for teachers to discuss the progress and future plans with the students (Goodman, Goodman, & Hood, 1989).

Overall, collection, a display of a variety of performances, context richness, delayed evaluation, selection, student centered control, reflection, and measuring growth according to different parameters and over a period of time are the important elements of a portfolio (Hamp-Lyons & Condon, 2000). In terms of reading assessment, a portfolio should include a collection of students' reading material and reading logs which the students keep to show their afterthoughts. Students can exhibit a variety of materials they

read. The context richness of the reading logs enables the evaluator to realize the learning situation of the student. The delayed evaluation allows students to take their time to enjoy the reading process. Students are provided the opportunities to select the material they like to read and control the reading speed and difficulty level of the reading material. Students reflect on their reading improvement by keeping reading logs. Teachers can measure students' growth of reading ability by setting different parameters and check them regularly.

Besides, portfolio assessment encourages students to collaborate with their teachers and classmates instead of competition, which usually happens in the traditional classroom where students are asked to take a lot of tests. Students and teachers become partners and help one another to establish the criteria for assessing students' progress (Murphy & Smith, 1991).

In sum, portfolio assessment offers teachers, students, and parents a more comprehensive understanding of students' progress in the certain area and presents the continuum of the change of students (Chen & Martin, 2000). Portfolio assessment can contribute the information that teachers need to evaluate the program and bring in the opportunity for reflective thinking of the students (Ohlhausen & Ford, 1990).

Researchers (Frazier & Paulson, 1992; Hanson, 1992; Hebert, 1992; Standford & Siders, 2001) have done some experiment studies on the application of portfolio assessment for language learning. The results indicate that portfolio assessment presents authentic samples during the learning periods, indicates the knowledge that students know, evaluates more aspects of students' learning progress than traditional assessment, and allows students to take an active role in the assessment process, enhances students' interests in English reading and writing, and students show positive attitude toward using portfolio assessment. However, they often stress literacy development which combines both reading and writing skills, or they blend all language skills as a whole while using portfolio assessment. Seldom do they emphasize reading competence alone. Beginning level EFL learners' receptive language competence is larger than their productive language competence. Hence, their reading competence should be better than their writing

competence. If we ask beginning level EFL learners to write a reading log in the language they are striving to learn, they will have difficulty in expressing their deep feelings. The language assessment based on these struggling writing samples will understate students' reading competence. Therefore, in the present study, the researcher would like to focus on the reading competence of the EFL students as the research topic. More specifically, in order to accurately assess students' reading competence, students are encouraged to keep the reading log in their native language, and the rubrics for evaluating reading aloud activities and group reading activities are designed to assess students' reading progress and serve as a guide to help students polish their reading skills.

### **Methods and Procedures**

This section describes the subjects, instruments, data collection, and data analysis of the research. The subjects were 45 students of an intact class randomly chosen from a junior college in Taiwan. They were the third-year junior college students. The researcher met with the subjects four hours every week. The subjects had learned English as a foreign language for at least five years. The questionnaires were used to collect students' background information, reading habits, what they feel about the traditional way of assessment at the beginning of the semester and what their perception of portfolio assessment at the end of the semester, and the time they spent on the reading English materials except for textbooks.

A reading assessment rubric was used to keep the record of students' reading improvement or stagnancy for classroom reading aloud activities and peer assessment. The categories are the parameters the researcher set to measure students' reading growth over time. These categories are reading in adequate phrases, reading with adequate intonation and stress, fluent reading with few decoding breaks, and comprehension the meaning of the reading text, influencing meaning of unfamiliar words from context clues. For each category, students would get 5 points for always presenting the traits while reading aloud, 4 points for presenting the traits most of the time, 3 points for sometimes presenting the

traits, 2 points for seldom presenting the traits, and one point for never presenting the traits (Ediger, 1999).

The experimental period lasted one semester. Both qualitative and quantitative data, including data from reading aloud activities, questionnaires, and student portfolios were collected in the research.

Subjects were asked to complete questionnaires about their background information, reading habits, and what they feel about the traditional way of assessment at the beginning of the semester and what their perception of portfolio assessment at the end of the semester.

Reading aloud activities contained the data that the researcher gathered from taking a running record of students' reading processes. The researcher asked students to read aloud articles chosen from the textbook individually, think aloud while decoding unfamiliar words, and asked students to translate the reading content into students' native language (Chinese) at the beginning, middle and end of the semester. The reading assessment rubric was used to keep the record of students' reading improvement or stagnancy.

Students were asked to bring their portfolios, containing their reading reflections and reading materials, to class and choose one article to read aloud in small groups. Next, the group members would ask the student who shared the article with the group to answer the following questions if applicable: (Ediger, 1999)

1. Would you please retell the story in Chinese?
2. What is the main conflict in the story or the main idea of the story?
3. What is the solution to the conflict?
4. What is your personal response to the story?

Meanwhile, the group members would do peer assessment. The teacher joined one of the groups at a time. This activity motivated students to take more time to digest the reading material, and involved a reflection on the reading task. This activity was done once every month. It took about two class periods to complete

peer evaluation. The reading conference was done at the cost of the teacher's personal time.

Besides these activities, normal reading instruction was given. Midterm and final exams took place as usual. Besides, students were taught word meaning inferencing skills to facilitate fluent reading. Students were also asked to take a computer simulation of General English Proficiency Test at the beginning and end of the semester.

Data were analyzed by the researcher. The analysis focused specifically on the research questions mentioned above. The statistic software used in the study was SPSS version 12.0.

### **Results and Discussions**

In this section, the results of the experiment are presented. First, students' reading habits were changing. Based on the data collected from the questionnaires, 36 students only read the English materials which would be tested in the exams before the experiment; one student spent about 10 minutes every week reading the English materials which would not be tested in the exams (outside reading); one student spent about 11 to 20 minutes on outside reading; three students spent about 21 to 30 minutes on outside reading; four students spent about 31 to 60 minutes on outside reading. The mean was eight minutes, which meant on average students spent eight minutes on outside reading every week before the experiment. On the contrary, while portfolio assessment was used, students started to spend more time on outside reading. One student spent one to 10 minutes every week; three students spent 11 to 20 minutes; six students spent 21 to 30 minutes; 18 students spent 31 to 60 minutes; 17 students spent 61 to 120 minutes. The mean was 62.56 minutes, which meant students spend approximately one hour every week on outside reading during the experimental period. The difference of these two means reached statistical significant level,  $t(44) = -11.013$ ,  $p < .01$ . This indicates that using portfolio assessment encouraged students to spend more time on outside reading.

When students were asked about whether they became more interested in reading English materials at the end of the

experimental period. Thirty-two students, 71 % of all subjects, replied that they became more interested in reading; five students, 11% of all subjects replied that they were not interested in reading; eight students, 18% of all subjects replied that they were not sure. Most students became more interested in reading because they had the freedom to choose what they liked to read based on their reading abilities. Those students who didn't like to read stated that they couldn't find interesting material to read, and they didn't have time to read because they had part-time jobs. These results implied that interests in reading English materials could be developed by offering students appropriate materials to choose from and enough time to read them.

The third research question was how students perceived the traditional grading system and portfolio assessment. Based on the data collected from the questionnaire, 33 students, 73% of the students thought the grading system the previous teacher used was fair. They all stated that the teacher was nice to them and was not too strict with them. They didn't study very hard but got quite good grades. The other 12 students, 26% of the subjects thought that the grading system the teacher of the last semester used was unfair. The only reason they stated was that they were flunked, and they thought they deserved higher scores. It's quite obvious that the traditional grading system led flunked students to blame the teacher when they got poor scores instead of reflecting on their learning methods. As for the students who passed the reading course last semester, the traditional grading system was great because they didn't need to work hard to gain high scores.

In contrast to the traditional grading system, 42 students, 93% of the subjects, felt that they had to spend more time on outside reading in order to get good grades. When the students were asked about which was a better assessment to help them find out their own weaknesses of reading, 32 students, 71% of the subjects, indicated that through portfolio assessment, they were more likely to find out their weaknesses of reading. Nine students, 20% of the subjects, stated that through traditional assessment they were more able to perceive their weaknesses. Four students, 9 % of the subjects, answered these two assessments were both good.

Students were asked to evaluate their reading progress of this semester and last semester with a five-point Likert scale: 1 point means no improvement; 2 points mean slight improvement; 3 points mean more than slight improvement; 4 points mean a lot of improvement; 5 points mean drastic improvement. Eleven students, 24% of the subjects, reported that their reading ability didn't improve last semester, whereas only one student, 2% of the subjects, reported that this semester. Thirteen students, 29% of the subjects, reported that their reading ability improved a lot or drastically last semester, whereas 26 students, 58% of the subjects, reported that this semester.

Besides, students were also asked to take a simulation reading test of General English Proficiency Test, designed by Taiwan government, at the beginning (pre-test) and the end of the semester (post-test). The test, which students took, was the elementary level test (the easiest level). It contained three parts: vocabulary test, cloze test, and reading comprehension test, with 15, 10, and 10 questions respectively. The maximum score of the test was 120. The mean of the pre-test scores was 67.8 (SD = 10.3). The mean of the post-test scores was 80 (SD=11.8). The improvement of the test scores between the pre-test, and the post-test was analyzed. A scrutiny of the data revealed that the correlation between the difference of the scores (subtracting pre-test scores from post-test scores) and the self-reported reading improvement was high positive and statistically significant ( $r = .80, p < .01$ ). This meant that the more scores the students gained between the pre-tests and the post-tests, the more likely the students would feel their reading abilities improved.

A possible reason was that the rubrics used in the portfolio assessment were well designed and clearly presented; hence, students could improve their reading ability accordingly. This also lent support to the validity of students' self-awareness of the improvement of their reading ability.

**Table 1**

Subjects' improvement in reading abilities assessed by the teacher

Categories	At the beginning		At the end		<i>T</i> - <i>value</i>	<i>p</i>
	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>		
Reads in adequate phrases	3.64	1.09	4.11	.88	-5.7	.00**
Adequate intonation and stress	3.27	1.01	3.98	.92	-10.4	.00**
Fluent reading	3.42	1.14	3.62	1.17	-2.9	.005**
Comprehension	3.18	1.40	3.58	1.30	-5.4	.00**
Inference meaning of words	2.69	1.06	3.4	1.10	-10.4	.00**

As for the data concerning the individual reading aloud activities performed by the subjects at the beginning and end of the semester were presented in Table 1. The results revealed that the mean points the students got for reading in adequate phrases at the beginning of the semester and the end of the semester were 3.64 and 4.11 respectively and the differences of means were statistically significant,  $t(44) = -5.7$ ,  $p < .01$ . The mean points the students got for reading with adequate intonation and stress at the beginning of the semester and the end of the semester were 3.27 and 3.98 respectively and the differences of means were statistically significant,  $t(44) = -10.4$ ,  $p < .01$ . The mean points the students got for fluent reading with few decoding breaks at the beginning of the semester and the end of the semester were 3.42 and 3.62 respectively and the differences of means were statistically significant,  $t(44) = -2.9$ ,  $p < .01$ . The mean points the students got for literal comprehension in reading at the beginning of the semester and the end of the semester were 3.18 and 3.58 respectively and the differences of means were statistically significant,  $t(44) = -5.4$ ,  $p < .01$ . The mean points the students got for inference of unfamiliar word meaning from context clues at the beginning of the semester and the end of the semester were 2.69 and 3.4 respectively and the differences of means were statistically significant,  $t(44) = -10.4$ ,  $p < .01$ . In sum, the subjects showed

improvement in reading abilities in terms of the following aspects: reading in adequate phrases, with adequate intonation and stress, with fewer decoding breaks, comprehending the literal meaning of the text, inferencing word meanings from the context clues.

At last, students were asked for suggestions about applying portfolio assessment in reading classes. Some students suggested that less class time should be devoted to peer evaluation. The main reason was that students didn't trust their classmates had the ability to evaluate their reading performance. However, the correlation between the points the students obtained from peer evaluation and the points students got from the teacher by using the assessment rubric was mid-positive and statistically significant ( $r = .69, p < .05$ ). This revealed that students did have the ability to do peer-evaluation. Some students suggested that the teacher should provide them with a variety of reading materials. These suggestions could be considered for future application of portfolio assessment in reading classes.

### **Conclusion**

This study shows the effects of implementing portfolio assessment in an EFL reading class and students' perceptions of the implementation. The results indicate that students are more willing to spend time on outside reading instead of spending most of their time on reading test materials. This could rectify the long existing shortcoming that instruction becomes the preparation for tests.

Another finding is that students become more interested in reading English materials because they have freedom to choose what to read. Besides, students claim that portfolio assessment is an effective way to reflect their learning processes and improvements. Their weaknesses of reading can be detected, and improvements can be made accordingly. These findings support the proposition of the proponents of portfolio assessment (Chen & Martin, 2000; Hoy & Gregg, 1994 ; Manning & Manning, 1995 ; O'Malley & Pierce, 1992).

In addition, students who feel that their reading abilities improve more after the experiment tend to show more improvement

on their test scores. This indicates that portfolio assessment can serve as an alternative way to evaluate students' progress of reading abilities.

Students suggest that peer evaluation time should be cut short to prevent it from becoming a drag for they don't believe that peer evaluation is objective. However, the data tell us that students do have the ability to do peer evaluation. The teacher may need to spend more time convincing students that peer evaluation is as valid as teacher evaluation. Another suggestion is that teachers could provide students with English materials of different levels to read. Teachers might also set up a small library in the classroom to allow students to get more reading resources.

The limitations of the study are as follows. The data about students' outside reading time is self-report data, and students might lie about it. Besides, it's a single group experiment, without a control group and so the results drawn from it are tentative. Further research on the topic might be needed. The researcher does hope that the data elaborated in the paper could shed light on the improvement of EFL language assessment not only for Taiwan EFL teachers but also for EFL teachers in other countries.

### **The Author**

Chin Min Lin, born in 1969 in Taiwan, was educated in Taiwan from 1970s to 1980s. She received a master's degree in Education from University of Texas at Austin, USA, and a doctoral degree in Bilingual Education from Texas A&M University, USA. She is an assistant professor at the Department of English, National Taichung Institute of Technology in Taiwan.

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