

Exploring EFL Students' Perceptions of Washback of Portfolios in Reading Assessment

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Abstract

The study aims to find out how Indonesian EFL students perceive and make use of washback of portfolio assessment in reading academic texts. To explore washback of portfolios, 20 students from English department at the faculty of education were interviewed. The result revealed that the students had positive perceptions because the washback improved their reading strategy, contributed positive changes to their learning attitude, and cultivated their learning autonomy. They also perceived portfolio assessment a 'novel' method in assessing their reading and a helpful tool in learning; therefore, they made use of portfolio assessment for future teaching and learning guidelines. In spite of the positive washback of portfolios, a further study has to be done because teachers have some challenges, such as preparing an appropriate design and taking time into account when applying portfolios in language assessment.

Key Words: washback, EFL students, portfolio, assessment.

Introduction

Assessing student's progress and achievement in particular learning circumstances requires teacher's advanced skills and methods. The most common method to assess students' skills in language learning is testing, such as multiple choices. This traditional assessment has been employed by almost all language testing administrators as well as language teachers. In fact, there are many forms of alternative assessment which have been applied widely in the field of language assessment, such as students' journals, portfolios, self-assessment, peer-assessment, conferences, and interviews (Brown, 2003). A lot of research in this field has also been done with regard to seeking the usefulness and effectiveness of alternative assessment. Until recently, most research has focused on the effects of portfolio assessment in writing skills (e.g. Nunes, 2004; Ozturk Cecen, 2007; Tavakoli & Amirian, 2012). Regarding washback, much more attention has focused on high-stakes testing area, (e.g. Rashidi & Javanmardi, 2011; Akpinar & Cakildere, 2013; Fan, Ji & Song, 2014). However, very few studies have been conducted on the actual washback of portfolio in reading skills. Thus, this study aimed to explore the EFL students' perceptions of the washback of portfolios in reading academic texts and how students make use of the portfolios.

Portfolios' washback in reading assessment

Several studies in language assessment have been carried out to explore the theory and practice of assessing language. Abundant studies based on prominent key concepts such as washback (the impact of teaching and learning) and portfolios (students' collected works) have contributed to language assessment. Sukyadi and Mardiani (2011), for instance, who conducted a study to explore the washback effect of the most known English National Exam (ENE) in Indonesian secondary education context, found that the ENE obviously had an influential impact on the feelings and attitudes of the students.

Similarly, Wang, Yan, and Liu, (2014) conducted similar high-stakes testing to find the actual washback of Internet-Based College English Test Band 4 in China, and they found that the actual effect of the test in the area of students' learning was the students' autonomous learning ability. The findings of these studies lead to the question: whether an alternative assessment such as portfolio assessment may result in positive washback in the area of students' learning as well as high-stake testing.

In the same fashion, studies on the alternative assessment which intend to explore its effects on teaching and learning have been carried out widely in a number of settings. Lam and Lee, (2009) proved that portfolio had a positive effect on students' motivation. Likewise, the experimental study conducted by Charvade, Jahandar, and Khodabandehlou (2012) on EFL learners showed that there is a difference between the impact of traditional testing methods and portfolio assessment on EFL learners' reading comprehension ability. Besides this, the study also proved that portfolio assessment had a positive impact on EFL learners' reading comprehension ability. However, a further study is still needed to investigate what Indonesian EFL students perceive on the actual washback from portfolio assessment in reading and how they make use of portfolio assessment.

Methods

Research Design

This study was designed to explore what actual washback generated from portfolio assessment in reading, how the students in reading class perceived portfolio assessment, and how they made use of portfolio assessment. The students were interviewed and requested to fill the questionnaire after being experienced with the portfolio assessment.

Participants

The participants were Indonesian students who took reading classes at the fifth semester in English department, faculty of education. There were 20 students who had high, mid, and low scores of English achievement test designed by the faculty.

Instruments

This study employed two types of instruments: *interview* and *questionnaire*. Both the interview and questionnaire were used to gather data regarding washback on students' learning, perception of the use of portfolio in reading assessment, and how to make use the result of portfolio assessment in their reading. The design of the questionnaire and interview were formulated based on review of conceptual framework of washback (Bailey, 1996) and adopted from Fan, Ji, and Song (2014) to meet the characteristic of research participants and objective of this study. By using two scales (agree & disagree), the questionnaire provided 21 items consisting of 7 items (1 - 7) for students' perception, 6 items (8 - 13) for wash back with the aspects of students' learning attitude, 4 items (14 - 17) for wash back with the aspects of learning content, 1 item (18) for wash back with the aspect of students' motivation, and 3 items (19 - 21) for washback with the aspect of students' learning strategy. These types of instruments were used to answer two research questions: what is the actual washback in students' learning and what are students' perceptions of the use of portfolio in reading assessment.

Data Analysis

Two main steps were conducted to analyze the data elicited from the interview and questionnaire. Firstly, the researchers transcribed the student's interview, and analyzed the interview data through topological analysis in relation to the students' responses toward washback, perception, and the way to make use of the portfolio assessment in reading. This method of analysis is essential as a classificatory process in which the data were classified into groups, subset, or categories based on comprehensible criterion. Secondly, the data related to the questionnaire were calculated into frequency and percentage indicating to what extent the students provided positive responses and perceptions on washback of portfolios in reading assessment.

Results

1. Wash back of portfolio assessment

The results discovered both positive and negative wash back. As regards to the positive washback, 85% of the students informed that the portfolio assessment improved their reading strategy, while 40% of them stated that the portfolio motivated them on reading.

More interestingly, the students stated that the portfolio assessment positively changed their learning attitude in reading (85%), and some (20%) said that the portfolio could promote their autonomous learning. With regard to the negative wash back, 30% of the students acknowledged that the portfolio spent much time. Below is the table representing the number of students' responses in each category of washback.

Table 1: Overall findings in washback: Interviews Result

Wash back area	Total Response	
	Number	Percentage
Reading Strategy	17	85%
Motivates	8	40%
Learning Attitude	17	85%
Learning Autonomy	4	20%
Spent time	6	30%

Table 2: Overall findings in washback: Questionnaires Result

Item numbers	8	9	10	11	12	13	14	15	16	17	18	19	20	21
Percentage of agree response (%)	86.5	81.1	83.8	86.5	75.7	91.9	67.6	73	83.8	86.5	91.9	81.1	86.5	86.5

2. Students' perceptions of portfolio assessment

The results revealed that students perceived portfolio assessment in reading into three categories. First, all students perceived that portfolio assessment was in overall satisfactory in term of design, objective, and activities. Next, the portfolio was considered as a "novel" method of their classroom learning. Third, they perceived that portfolio was believed as a tool that helps them in reading practices.

Table 3: Overall findings in students' perception: Interviews Result

Students' Perception	Total Response	
	Number	Percentage
Overall Satisfactory	20	100%
Novel Method	6	30%
A tool that helps learning	6	30%

Table 4: Overall findings in students' perception: Questionnaires Result

Item numbers	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
Percentage of agree response (%)	94.6	100	94.6	100	89.2	89.2	94.6

3. How Students made use of the portfolio

This study discovered the way students made use of the reading portfolio for their future teaching, reviewing their learning process, and the learning guideline.

Table 5: Overall findings on how students make use of portfolios

Perception Code	Total Response	
	Number	Percentage
For future teaching	8	40%
For reviewing learning	11	55%
As a learning guideline	10	50%

Discussions

The results revealed both *positive and negative students' perception of washback*. The positive perception of wash back occurred in the area of reading strategy, motivation, learning attitude, and learning autonomy. In contrast, the negative perception occurred in the area of time allotment. There were 85% of the students who stated that

there were impacts on the way they read English texts and articles. It means that there were improvements in their reading strategy, as reported by one student,

- (1) “The positive effect definitely increases my knowledge about how to read.” (PRI)

This finding confirmed some studies which proved that the portfolio assessment could *improve students’ reading strategy* such as the study conducted by Fan, Ji and Song (2014). This finding occurred since the instructions and objectives provided in the portfolio were clearly explained to the students. This is not to exaggerate to say that portfolio assessment plays a role as a learning tool which might result in the improvement of student learning strategy. The positive perception of wash back occurred in students’ reading strategy was various; for instance, students are able to determine gist of a text and main idea and to improve reading speed. Some of the students’ comments support this reason, for example,

- (2) “By taking portfolio, we can determine objectives (in reading) like main idea, note taking, gist, because we might rarely used those things.”(MIR)

- (3) “I learned so much how to find a gist of a text.” (NANA)

Interestingly, these comments are equally stated by all levels of students, not only students in low level but also students in intermediate and high level of reading. In the aspect of *motivation*, 40% of students said that the portfolio motivated them in reading. It is reading activities and feedback given to the students that triggered their motivation. There were eight students who stated in the same expressions about motivation, for instance,

- (4) “I get motivated in reading.” (RA)

These occurrences have been stated in a study by Pan and New fields (2012) that showed exam pressure could boost the motivation for some but slow down the others. Their argument apparently confirmed the findings of this study in which portfolio motivated students in reading, but no one said it slowed down their motivation. Positive wash back in *learning attitude* has higher positive responses from students, with 85% of them being sure that there were changes in their attitude of learning specifically in reading, as stated by the following two students:

- (5) “This portfolio makes me interested to read more.” (AWI)

- (6) “It also improves my interest to read which formerly it wasn’t.” (RAT)

Based on the results of their study, Sukyadi and Mardiani (2011) also mentioned that wash back occurred in the area of students’ feeling of and attitude to learning. This study in the same fashion revealed remarkable positive findings in the area of students’ learning attitude. This might positively impact students themselves because they are rarely exposed to by any alternative assessment before. Students have long been exposed to traditional assessment which has contributed to the low positive wash back. Other findings discovered in the area of positive wash back were about *learning autonomy*. One possible contribution regarding students’ learning autonomy is that reading activities included in the portfolio may challenge students to do more reading activities. High-stakes testing can not only cultivate the students’ autonomous learning ability such as the one found out by Wang, Yan and Liu (2014) but also promote students’ autonomy. This could be inferred from the students’ comments, as stated below:

- (7) “I will review this portfolio when I get it back.” (AWI)

- (8) “I want to try, to create writing portfolio.”(FERA)

The students’ comments above obviously indicated that they wanted to learn themselves to review the portfolio and created other types of portfolio. It could be inferred that they become more autonomous by taking this portfolio assessment. By contrast, the students negatively responded to the aspect of *time* allotted for completing the portfolio. They assumed that portfolio took times a lot, and it was a painstaking process to complete their portfolio. However, those assumptions were not due to students’ low level; it was just because the time given for completing the portfolio was limited, as reported below:

- (9) “Negative point might be time.” (AWI)
 (10) “I stay up late just because to do this (portfolio).” (FERA)

There were 20% of students who negatively responded to the portfolio. These negative perceptions might be due to the fact that some students had a part time job at offices or schools so that they took courses at the English department after working time. The other aspect might be due to the acknowledgement of the students that portfolio was considered as a new method of assessment so that they need more time to make adjustment of it. Portfolio assessment conducted in this study has also sought for *students' perception*; therefore, the students' perceptions of portfolio assessment are discussed in some main aspects.

First, the students felt satisfied as they considered portfolio assessment as a new method and a tool that helps students learn. Second, this study found that students perceived portfolio assessment *overall satisfactory* in term of design, objectives, and reading activities since these activities were actually what students needed and were interesting for them, as seen in the following transcriptions,

- (11) “In my opinion, the design of portfolio is nice” (RAT)
 (12) “The instruction (on the portfolio), in my opinion, was nice.” (FAT)

Next, the students perceived portfolio assessment as a novel method of assessing their reading skill; it was mentioned by 30% of students, as seen in the transcripts below.

- (13) “Honestly, the portfolio is new for us (Students) here.” (AWI)
 (14) “That is the first time I know about it (Portfolio).” (GIK)

The students' responses above could be the sufficient evidence showing that students perceived portfolio assessment is a new method. Such perceptions may be because they have long been exposed to traditional testing, such as a multiple-choice test.

At last, this study discovered that portfolio assessment was perceived to be a very helpful tool for students' learning. This is reported by 30% of students, as seen in their transcription below.

- (15) “It helps us in reading, it is directed, and there are objectives.” (FIJ)
 (16) “The objective helps us to do this (Portfolio) easily.” (TI)

The above data might suggest that portfolio needs to be equipped with clear instructions and directions as some experts have argued that portfolio requires determining objectives (Osman Birgin & Adnan Baki, 2007) because inappropriate objectives would cause useless portfolio. The last finding indicated that the students made use of the portfolio assessment for future teaching, reviewing their learning and learning guideline. They would like to make use of portfolio for their future teaching since they considered portfolio assessment had a positive impact on learning as well as their experience in portfolio assessment. Moreover, they considered portfolio as an important method to study about, and for that reason, they believed that, it would be useful for their future teaching since the participants of this study were in-service students at the English education department. Two students said,

- (17) “Later, I can apply the portfolio to my students.” (FIK)
 (18) “If later I become a teacher, I will example to my students on how to make portfolio” (SUK)

The findings are also in line with a previous study done by Ozturk and Cecen (2007), who argue that portfolio may affect participants' future teaching. Another finding shows that portfolio could be used as a review of learning, and this is stated by 55% of the students, as seen in the two excerpts below:

- (19) “I also will reread how to do portfolio.” (RIL)
 (20) “Probably, I revise it again” (RIL)

This study definitely supported the previous study by Nunes (2004) which concluded that a portfolio can cultivate students' reflection and self-monitor their own learning. This can be inferred that the students responded and paid attention to their own learning processes, which contributed to the student-centered practices.

The other finding is portfolio functioned as a learning guideline, and 50% of the students said this notion, as reported by the following excerpts.

(21) "Later, this portfolio will be used in creating another portfolio." (: AO)

(22) "As a guideline of learning." (FAT)

The portfolio could be useful for various teaching and learning approach. Nunes (2004) also argued that the portfolio could promote students' deeper enrolment in learning such as reflection, self-monitor and autonomy. The way students make use of portfolio assessments as a guideline to create another portfolio would encourage their autonomy.

Conclusions

This study discovered three conclusions. First, the actual positive perception of wash back in portfolio assessment could improve the EFL students' reading strategy, motivate them in reading, contribute positive changes to their learning attitude, and cultivate their learning autonomy though it may not be denied that to design portfolio assessment to obtain wash back will spend much time. Next, the students perceived positively the use of portfolio assessment, considered it as a fresh method in assessing their reading, and regarded it as a helpful method of learning. Finally, the students made use of portfolio assessment for future teaching and learning guideline.

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