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PORTFOLIO ASSESSMENT: TEACHERS' EXPERIENCES OF IMPLEMENTATION IN PRIMARY ENGLISH LANGUAGE CLASSROOMS IN PAKISTAN

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ABSTRACT

This qualitative study explored the potentials and challenges of using portfolios to assess students' English writing in Pakistan. Four primary English Language teachers participated in a six-month intervention on portfolio assessment through monthly workshops. Classroom observations were undertaken to see how portfolio assessment was implemented. Additionally, teachers were interviewed to ascertain their experiences of portfolio implementation. This article presents findings specifically from participating teachers' post-interviews. Analyses revealed that teachers considered portfolios as a comprehensive assessment tool that widened their repertoire of assessment strategies, encouraged collaborative learning, promoted thinking in learners and developed pupils' and parents' interests in English writing. Nevertheless, teachers experienced challenges such as increased workload, the novelty of the approach, instances of pupil negativity towards peer assessment and parental resource-related concerns. The implication is that there is a need for professional development programmes for teachers in order to implement portfolios as a complementary assessment approach in classrooms.

Key words: Portfolio assessment; students' portfolios; English as a second language; English writing; primary classroom

1. INTRODUCTION

This article discusses the findings of a research study that was conducted in primary classrooms in Pakistan as part of my doctorate. The aim of this qualitative study was to capture the experiences of teachers' use of an alternative assessment approach – portfolio assessment – in primary English language writing classrooms in Pakistan.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

In Pakistan, as in many other developing countries, assessment practices are predominantly rooted in summative processes (Siddiqui, 2010; Khan, 2012). Little, if any, attention is given to alternative assessment approaches. One such approach that has gained increasing attention in the field of language teaching (Caner, 2010) and about which much has been written in terms of its implementation in education (Woodward & Nanlohy, 2004), is the use of portfolios as an assessment tool. Portfolio assessment is the best-known and most popular form of alternative writing assessment (Hamp-Lyons & Condon, 2000).

While many definitions of portfolios abound in the literature (Hashemian & Azadi, 2011) some authors suggest that the key attributes of collection, pupil selection, pupil reflection, and revision of work completed over a span of time commonly underpin portfolio projects (Wolcott, 1998; Hamp-Lyons & Condon, 2000; Yang, 2003).

A range of purposes of the portfolio has developed over time. For instance, a portfolio might comprise an 'alternative assessment programme' where pupils' best work and achievements are documented; teachers might use portfolios to document their pupils' learning processes while others might use it to promote pupil reflection (Nunes, 2004). Thus, a portfolio of work can fulfil various assessment purposes – accountability, summative assessment, certification, selection, promotion, appraisal and assessment in support of teaching and learning processes (Klenowski, 2002). For the purpose of this research, however, portfolios are explored in the context of primary L2 classrooms with the intention of assessing pupils in the skill of English composition writing.

Murphy and Camp (1996) discuss three principal benefits of portfolios to students: portfolios offer opportunities for reflection and the development of self-awareness; students develop a sense of ownership of their writing which leads to a sense of responsibility; and, portfolios can serve as a basis for self-assessment by pupils if they are given clear criteria and opportunities to assess their work. Furthermore, the variety of texts within a portfolio can give teachers insights into pupils' strengths and weaknesses in writing (Wyatt & Looper, 2004). Getting pupils to complete a reflective essay can help teachers to understand the processes that their pupils are using in writing and the pupils' perceptions of their own strengths and weaknesses (Birgin & Baki, 2007; Weigle, 2007).

Nonetheless, a common challenge associated with portfolio assessment is that it is time and labour intensive for teachers and students alike (Weigle, 2002; Birgin & Baki, 2007; Burke & Wang, 2009). While teachers who have worked with portfolios frequently believe that the time and effort invested is worth the benefits received, they often admit that it is extremely time-consuming.

Additionally, introducing portfolio assessment takes up time to ensure that everyone understands the purpose of the portfolio, the requirements for assembling the portfolio and the criteria that will be used for scoring the portfolios (Wolcott, 1998).

In the context of this research both 'portfolio assessment' and a 'process approach' to writing were implemented in primary English language classrooms in Pakistan. Research recommends the use of portfolios in ESL classrooms (Hedge, 2000; Rea, 2001). Portfolios are thought to be suitable for ESL learners because they "provide a broader measure of what students can do, and because they replace the timed writing context, which has long been claimed to be particularly discriminatory against non-native writers" (Hamp-Lyons & Condon, 2000, p. 61).

In the context of this study portfolio assessment was used as an alternative approach to assess the skill of composition writing of primary school pupils. However, portfolio assessment is not restricted to the assessment of the skill of English writing. On the contrary, the literature is replete with examples of portfolio assessment in other subjects as well (e.g. Simon & Forgette-Giroux, 2000; Carr & Claxton, 2002; Woodward & Nanlohy, 2004). Nevertheless, as the focus of this research was on pupils' writing *per se*, the latter was assessed using portfolios.

Thus, a 'process-oriented approach' to 'writing' fitted into the broader assessment approach of the use of portfolios to assess pupils' 'writing'. Overlapping elements of a process approach with portfolio assessment (e.g. editing, peer assessment) were examined within the wider framework of portfolio assessment that aimed to promote pupil reflection, look at progress over time and encourage pupils towards greater autonomy in pupils' writing skills (Song & August, 2002; Nunes, 2004).

3. OVERVIEW OF THE PORTFOLIO PROJECT

The portfolio project comprised a series of six monthly workshops for teachers. These two and a half hours' workshops fulfilled a number of purposes such as providing content related to the meaning, purpose and benefits of portfolio assessment through researcher input, discussion of handouts and engaging participants' in different activities.

By way of classroom implementation teachers first elicited the meaning of 'portfolios' from pupils through whole class brainstorming. A list of topics for paragraph writing was generated through brainstorming and teachers subsequently engaged pupils in the techniques of 'brainstorming' and 'power writing'. This was followed by the opportunity to provide peer feedback on writing tasks. Finally, pupils organised their portfolios based on specified criteria and reflected on the portfolio experience in terms of their learning and dis/likes.

4. METHODOLOGY

The aim of this qualitative study was to find out teachers' experiences regarding the use of portfolio assessment in the primary English language writing classroom. The study was conducted in three (a government and two private) schools. Convenience sampling was employed to select schools and the participant teachers. Willingness of the school management for its teacher(s) to participate in the study was one of the criteria for participants' selection. Four primary school teachers who taught English Language in Class V¹ and agreed to participate in the research study were recruited. Data collection took place from November 2003 to May 2004. Multiple data collection tools were used: unstructured classroom observations², semi-structured interviews with participant teachers and examination of related documents such as teachers' reflective journals, their lesson plans and samples of pupils' written work. This article, however, focuses on themes that emerged specifically from interviews with participant teachers.

5. FINDINGS

Teachers stated that portfolio assessment had a number of benefits.

A comprehensive assessment tool

Participants felt that the assessment rubric was one of the main advantages of portfolio assessment. With its pre-specified criteria the rubric was seen as a less 'subjective' means of assessment than customary paper-pencil tests: "Rubric was a useful tool to assess pupils' writing ... I did not have any experience of how to grade pupils in this

¹ The Head of a government school requested training in portfolio assessment for two of her teachers. She provided the name of a Class IV teacher who was thereby 'recruited' even though he did not meet the criteria of teaching at Class 5 level.

² Altogether, forty lessons were observed – ten observations for each teacher.

way [i.e. using a rubric] previously. The rubric helped [me] because the criteria were there” [Mark³: Interview, May 22].

Furthermore, the rubric was seen to benefit both teachers and parents in ascertaining pupils’ progress:

The rubric ... was quite helpful for the teacher as well as parents. When they [parents] come to school they can be shown their children’s progress. Also whenever we are preparing any kind of assessment for pupils it [the rubric] helps to grade them in the class. [Mark: Interview, May 22]

A wider range of assessment strategies

Imdad’s comments encapsulate how participants’ use of a wider range of assessment strategies had evolved:

Before I only used to give tests [to assess pupils] ... I wrote a paragraph on the blackboard which pupils copied and learnt by heart. After that I gave written tests to find out how much the pupils had learnt ... now [however] I use many ways to assess pupils [such as] an assessment ‘rubric’, pupils’ writing portfolios and also through activities that encourage peer and self assessment. [Imdad: Interview, May 22]

Encouraging collaborative learning

Participants were of the view that structuring collaborative tasks such as peer assessment in the classroom was seen as beneficial to pupils who helped peers and learned from one another. “Some ‘weaker’ pupils not only sought peer help to address their own weaknesses but then made progress by taking a keen interest and teaching other ‘weaker’ pupils like themselves” [Imdad: Interview, May 22].

Gulnaz stated how pupils learnt from each other through peer assessment activities: “When pupils started checking each other’s work they realized that they could learn from each other too. Usually before that [in reference to her previous practice] there was no culture of peer learning in the classroom.” [Gulnaz: Interview, May 22].

Moreover, both verbal and written feedback by pupils to their peers helped them improve and also helped teachers assess pupils’ writing skills:

Pupils checked their peers’ papers and gave verbal and written feedback. They identified their mistakes and told their peers that they had done mistakes there. In this way they can improve in their writing. It is also an additional way for the teacher to check pupils’ writing capabilities. [Yasir: Interview, May, 22]

The use of peer assessment was seen to be an effective way to help pupils identify each other’s mistakes and learn collaboratively from each other:

Pupils started explaining to each other and pointing out the mistakes in each other’s work during peer assessment ... This [peer assessment] was a ‘better’ [assessment] strategy. Before this, pupils had never been involved in peer assessment. The teacher had been the only one who used to check pupils’ work before. [Gulnaz: Interview, May 22]

Developing a positive attitude

Teachers felt that their pupils took more interest in writing, enjoyed the work and had grown in confidence during the implementation process. In general, the portfolio study was well received by the pupils. In one school, for example, the pupils requested for additional portfolio-related activities (e.g. self and peer assessment) as an integral component of the classroom routine:

The pupils were showing their own interest not only when the researcher visited but also on other days: *Sir, [the researcher] is not here but we are all here, so we can start with the work and when he [the researcher] comes then we can just continue with that ...* Most of the pupils were now on task and really enjoyed the work. They often asked me *Why is [the researcher] coming only on Wednesdays?* [Moreover] the confidence level of the pupils [as a result of the portfolio study] was built up. I noticed this ... the way pupils [were] giving their ideas was very much ‘mature’ in terms of class V. [Mark: Interview, May 22]

³ Participants’ actual names have been replaced by pseudonyms.

Promoting independent thinking in pupils

Opportunities to reflect on their work helped pupils to think about their mistakes and the necessary steps to be taken to deal with those. Through self-reflections pupils realised that they could bring about an improvement in their work:

Through reflection, pupils began to see and think about what mistakes were made and how to proceed. The pupils got an opportunity to think and reflections helped them to assess their work and learn from it. Pupils got an idea through reflection that they can bring about improvement in their work ... as a result their knowledge and skills would improve. [Gulnaz: Interview, May 22]

Increasing parental interest

Parents became aware of the activities that were going on in the classroom and some parents expressed their overall satisfaction with the study:

When pupils do this portfolio [assessment] they go and tell at home. So the parents know what is going on in the class ... Five to six parents openly expressed their happiness. Their comments were: *I am very happy with this portfolio and this composition once-a-week which was not happening before.* [Mark: Interview, May 22]

Despite stating several benefits of the use of portfolio assessment, participants identified challenges as well.

Intensified teachers' workload

Teachers stated that portfolio assessment added to their workload. "We gave extra time to portfolios but our syllabus was held up and we had to make up for this [completion of syllabus] by taking additional classes" [Imdad: Interview, May 22]. Additionally, the requirement for detailed lesson planning was perceived as time-consuming by teachers: "I had to make lesson plans [for each class] in detail now, which took up a lot of my time" [Mark: Interview, May 22]. Furthermore, maintaining a reflective journal was seen as an 'additional' and cumbersome task: "[The researcher] had to push me to maintain my reflective journal. I always remembered that I had not written my journal entries when I saw the researcher in school. Time was a big problem" [Mark: Interview, May 22].

A totally new approach

Another challenge for participants was the novelty of portfolio assessment. There were initial periods of confusion during implementation. For example, when the handout on the meaning and purposes of portfolios was given to participants, Imdad thought that that signified the 'completion' of the portfolio study. Hence, he queried: "Ok, now that we have done portfolio assessment what are we going to do next?"

Negative attitude of some pupils

Some pupils did not seem willing to 'accept' mistakes that were pointed out by their peers and resorted to erasing these errors: "The pupils started erasing their mistakes. This was the first time ... the pupils were not accepting their mistakes" [Gulnaz: Interview, May 22].

On the other hand, some pupils used peer marking as an opportunity to demean their peers as illustrated by Mark's subsequent quote:

Many 'higher level' boys tried to boss around the other boys. For example, if the mistake was not even there they still tried to create a mistake. They probably did this just to keep themselves on top of their partners ... put the others down and project themselves as 'better'. This tended to happen when one 'very good' pupil was paired with a 'very weak' one. [Mark: Interview, May 22]

Some parental concerns related to resources

Some parents were reluctant to have their children participate in the study because they saw it as an expense of time and money:

Parents were reluctant to use portfolios in the class because of the expense [to buy a folder] and time involved. Five parents ... flatly refused. These parents were not interested at all and in the absence of folders the pupils had begun to lose their things [writing samples]. [Gulnaz: Interview, May 22]

Some pupils who came from poorer families could not afford the extra cost involved in buying a folder: "The pupils come from backward areas [poor socio-economic status] ... they are poor and cannot afford any extra expense. It was a challenge for them to bring a file for the portfolio" [Yasir: Interview, May 22].

Imdad placated parents' concerns of cost issues by assuring them that their children were benefiting greatly through a free training on portfolio assessment: "Some parents came to complain about why folders were needed. They were unwilling to buy a cheap cardboard file for their children. So I explained to parents that their children were being provided free training ..." [Imdad: Interview, May 22].

6. DISCUSSION

The use of portfolios by participants was a clear departure from the old 'write, hand in, and forget' mentality, where first drafts were considered final products:

Portfolios of pupils' 'writing' samples provided 'footprints' that showed pupils' competencies (Hamp-Lyons & Condon, 2000) and were seen to be a more comprehensive portrait of pupils' writing ability than merely one composition, written under 'restricted circumstances' (Hirvela & Sweetland, 2005).

Using an assessment rubric with pre-determined criteria was also a novel and helpful way for participants to assess pupils.

Moreover, the usefulness of a rubric is not limited to the teacher alone. As noted by Rolheiser, Bower and Stevahn (2000) the pupils, peers and parents all stood to benefit from the use of a rubric because it clarified criteria, expectations and the quality for a performance/product.

On the other hand, some pupils saw peer feedback as an opportunity to 'criticize' and 'nit-pick'. Thus, it is important that pupils are steered away from their natural inclination to simply point out what they do not like about a piece of work, or what is 'wrong' with it (Moore, 2005). Moreover, the findings of this study also revealed pupils' hesitancy to have their work scrutinised by the 'cleverer' peers whom they feared would make fun of their shortcomings. It was essential, therefore, for teachers to ensure that 'response partners' were of similar ability and worked well together (Clarke, 2005).

Resource constraints might also impinge on the use of alternative assessment innovations such as 'portfolio assessment'. For example, some parents hesitated about their children's participation in the portfolio project because they saw it as an expense of time and money⁴. Nonetheless, this episode occurred in just one school system and with only a few parents. Besides, it appears that it is not so much the minimal 'cost' at issue, but the more 'traditional' mind-set of parents who view education narrowly as a route to jobs and are caught up in a "... restrictive and textbook-based examination system" (Policy Dialogue, 2003, p. 13). Hence, for such parents the portfolio project appeared to have been a 'digression' from more 'familiar' approaches to teaching and assessment.

Furthermore, implementation of portfolio assessment in a government school reinforced the apathy of some parents to pedagogical innovation. Therefore, teachers in the government system have the onus of pitting themselves against these system-characterised 'odds' while implementing newer approaches to teaching and assessment.

Information provided by this research is useful for teachers because it provides evidence that an innovative form of assessment (portfolios) is generally positively received and contributes towards a more collaborative learning environment where pupils support and learn from each other in the assessment process. This process has been shown to give pupils a sense of ownership, more autonomy and involvement. Teachers, therefore, might be advised to structure innovative assessment strategies in conjunction with traditional modes of assessment so that pupils learn to take responsibility for their own learning which leaves teachers 'free' to monitor and provide ongoing feedback in the class.

With examination pressures in schools teachers will be less likely to use portfolio assessment because of the demands on time. However, if ongoing assessment is accepted and implemented as part of the school system (e.g. portfolio marks contributing to pupils' exam scores) then it is more likely to be sustained in teachers' practice.

7. CONCLUSION

Pupils were keen to try out this alternative approach to English writing and its assessment using portfolios perhaps because they felt more confident of receiving the support from peers and the teacher. "[Portfolio assessment] gives ... students a better opportunity to present their best work without the time pressure of exam writing or of a grade based on a single writing" (Grabe & Kaplan, 1996, p. 336). Nevertheless, the process of using portfolios 'requires time, knowledge, commitment and support if it is to have a positive impact on education' (Valencia & Place, 1994).

Ultimately, it is the teacher who sets in place the conditions and structures for what will eventually become a portfolio culture (Chancer, 1993). Nevertheless, any innovative form of assessment happens relatively slowly, and through sustained programmes of professional development as well as ongoing support provided to teachers (Black & Wiliam, 1998).

⁴ The cost of a folder for the 'portfolio' was approximately Rs. 20/-.

8. RECOMMENDATIONS

Some recommendations now follow:

- ◆ Portfolios place heavy demands on time so teachers need to keep them small and simple while starting out (Lujan, 1997). Initiating portfolio assessment in just one subject area would be useful for teachers starting out for the very first time. It would also be helpful to seek out colleagues who are trying – or might wish to try – portfolio assessment. Collaborating with colleagues is useful to avoiding falling into the trap of being isolated in one's own classroom.
- ◆ Teachers could emphasise to parents that they would be able to see their children's achievements in writing over a period of time. Furthermore, parents could be given some suggestions on how they might support their children in making a portfolio.
- ◆ Some pupils might not initially realise the potential benefits of peer feedback and might see it as a way to criticise their classmates. Teachers need to be aware of this and structure activities that model positive feedback so that pupils can observe desirable behaviour for providing feedback and incorporate this during peer assessment.
- ◆ In some schools the cost of buying relevant resources⁵ for their children might be an issue for some parents because of financial constraints. Such parents could be encouraged to use low-cost or recycled materials (e.g. calendars).
- ◆ English language teachers need exposure to professional development opportunities in order to familiarise themselves with alternative assessment approaches – particularly the use of student portfolios. This would help teachers more fully realise the potential of portfolios to complement traditional methods of assessment in the writing classroom (Hashemian & Azadi, 2011).

⁵ E.g. folders for portfolios.

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