# Arguing for the Use of Portfolio in L2 Classrooms

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*Abstract*—**Pursuing the traditional assessment in education has been a subject of considerable debate among educational experts particularly in language teaching. Depending on the needs of societies, suitable facilities, the purposes of the curricula, and highly educational demands, alternative assessment has been considered to meet the required outcomes. Portfolio, the most well-known of alternative assessments, is generally considered a purposeful collection of student work that shows the student's effort, progress, and achievement in a target area as it not only provides a source for assessment but also enhances learning opportunities. Teachers, students, and researchers need to be well briefed on the benefits of portfolio in the classrooms. However, portfolio is not a perfect assessment tool specially with respect to grading on a large scale, its subjective design, logistic application, and reliability. To enjoy a probable foolproof assessment in language teaching, newer methods and approaches that assist a better and more authentic assessment should be welcomed.**

*Index Terms*—**traditional assessment, alternative assessment, portfolio**

## I. INTRODUCTION

Lack of authentic assessments in education with respect to students' attemptsand abilities has, all the time, been a very serious matter of issue for experts in education. According to AbdSamad (2004, p. 100), this is due to the role of the traditional assessments as one-shot and indirect tests with no feedback provided to students, decontextualized test tasks, product of instruction, and intrusive and judgemental procedure. In general, experts in education believe that traditional assessments are not accurate and fair enough to deal with students' potential. According to Tsagari (2004), there are some types of dissatisfaction with formal assessment procedure like dissatisfaction with type of gathered information in which learning as a process is denied, dissatisfaction with standardised tests that focus only on skills for the examination, and dissatisfaction with teacher-made tests that overemphasise the grading function.

In response, alternative assessments are currently and widely used in the field of education as assessments coping with longitudinal and direct tests providing feedback to students. On the other hand, alternative assessments are contextualized, reflect the process of instruction, and proceed as integrated and developmental test (AbdSamad, 2004, p. 101). Alternative assessments are given warm welcome not only because of the weak points of traditional assessments, but also because of the new visions of schools of thought in psychology and educational development like constructivism and multiple-intelligence learning theories which accelerate the radical changes in the field of assessment (Birgin & Baki, 2007). In the cognitive version of constructivism, constructivists place emphasis on importance of L2 learners and believe that L2 learners construct their own representation of reality. They take the role of students into consideration in the process of learning. As Slavin (2003, pp. 257-258) state, "learners must individually discover and transform complex information if they are to make it by their own, a more active role for students in their own learning than typical in many classrooms." The role of teachers, in this view, is to create a learning environment that makes opportunities for an analysis of learning. Teachers should facilitate learning, group and pair work.

In recent theories, teachers are supposed to consider and arrive at three basic areas. That is, teachers as facilitators not only should have the knowledge of the subject matter and should be able to handle skills and techniques, but also should generate a psychological climate directing to high quality learning. According to Klenowski (2002), "a teacher should build up the student-teacher cooperation in consonance with the student's learning, available support, and collaboration" (p. 126).

The impact of constructivism has changed experts' and teachers' views and has brought about the changes in assessments in depth. Consequently, various types of alternative assessments have come into existence ranging from physical demonstration to peer assessment, but it is obvious that the most frequently used one among the assessments is "portfolio assessment." This paper attempts to indicate the rewarding and challenging aspects of portfolio in the classroom and brief the stakeholders through the reasons to use the portfolio in the classroom, although it is obvious

that some teachers and experts might profess some shortcomings.

## II.   DEFINITIONS AND CONTENTS OF PORTFOLIO

There are several different definitions for portfolio based on the fields and the objectives of the fields. Yang (2003) mentions that portfolio is a compilation of work through which students demonstrate the effort they have put into their work, their progress and achievement in their learning, and their reflection on the materials chosen for the portfolio. According to Nunes (2004), portfolio is considered as part of an alternative assessment which can contain either students' best work or their accomplishments.

In the field of education, the best probably belongs to Wyatt III and Looper (2004) who mentioned, "an educational portfolio is a very personal collection of artefacts and reflections about one's accomplishments, learning, strengths, and best works which is dynamic, ever-growing, and ever-changing" (p. 2). To be more precise in an L2 context, Snavely and Wright (2003) define portfolio as the direct evidence of a student's efforts, accomplishments, and advancement throughout a period of time that play both a role as a purposeful collection of student work to show the student's efforts, progress, and achievements   and as a teaching tool which helps the development of L2 skills of the student as well as how well students have learned the subjects, what they have not learned yet, and what they still need to improve (p. 3).

The content of portfolio is quite different and depends on the focus of the course and level of learners. According to Pettis (2004), "any kind of material that a teacher would use to determine a learner's level would be appropriate" (p. 39). Writing samples (possibly with the various versions before the final copy), tests, lists of books or stories that a learner has read and completed questions on, a checklist of language tasks with the completed ones marked off, a tape of an interview or presentation, spelling tests, a completed answer sheet from a listening task, and so on might be some possibilities depending on the level.

As general guidelines, Bauer et al. (2007) suggest five different groups of materials that may be included in the portfolio of students: 1) Samples that are considered class assignment requirements, 2) processed samples that were previously graded by the teacher,3) revisions of student work that are graded and then revised, edited, and rewritten, 4) reflections that are associated with the processed samples and these reflections give students opportunities to identity their own strengths and weaknesses, and 5) portfolio projects that include work mainly designed for students to put into their portfolios.

Endecott et al. (2004) claim that the contents of a portfolio for the education purpose can be whatever that facilitates the application of teaching and learning theories to practice, enables students to develop skills for reflective practice, and provides evidence of competence.

Among various views towards the contents of a portfolio, perhaps the most completed one is of four sections presented by Bailey (1998, p. 218) in Figure 1:
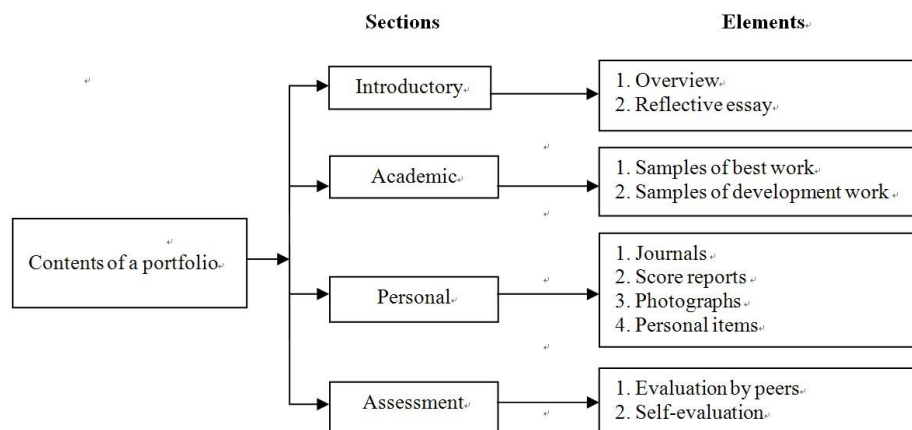


Figure 1. Contents of a Portfolio (Adapted from AbdSamad, 2004, p. 103)

The first section helps students express their thoughts and feelings about the portfolio. The second section demonstrates students' achievement in the skill areas. The third section illustrates students' experiences with the English language. And, the fourth section shows the reflections of peers and students themselves towards what they have achieved.

However, the definition and contents presented in this study are confined to educational portfolio; otherwise, there are several other portfolios with different definitions and contents like art, professional, and many others including some subdivisions. In fact, it is not a safe notion to generalise a certain definition for all and even for some of them. The realm of portfolio application is so vast that for each part of this realm, resourceful researchers and experts of that part should get engaged.

## III.   PROS AND CONS OF PORTFOLIO

The abovementioned definitions and even the one defined by Wyatt III and Looper (2004) have, in practice, their own proponents and opponents. Both groups account for their claims and try to justify what they stress on. Although the opponents have not completely denied the implementation of portfolio, they find fault with it. On the other hand, the proponents insist on many positive traits of portfolio and encourage teachers and students to use it.

Proponents like Trotman (2004) consider portfolios an instrument that helps teachers get a much clearer picture of their students' abilities. The single timed test is not able to declare many invisible capabilities of students, such as learning strategies, thinking process, reflection on the real world, and so forth. Teachers consider students' abilities not at a short time relevant to exams and based on raw scores. They can sometimes find even some special achievements in portfolios that may not be found in formal exams. In fact, teachers can move through the layers of students' works during the sessions, stay more with the students' abilities, and find out something deeper and more tangible about the students' capabilities.

Proponents also mention that when portfolio is written throughout the whole course, based on various forms of input, the results will be authentic (Trotman, 2004). Students do not just prepare themselves for the exam in a short period of time. They are continually dealing with presenting the learned material in portfolio that shows the real form of learning. Longer involvement certainly increases the real contact with real learning. It is obvious that students who practice continuously and exceedingly learn better and deeper.

The other thing to support portfolio is that it evaluates the process and product of learning as well as other important learning behaviours (Tsagari, 2004). Through preparation of portfolio, it is possible to focus on both the steps through which a student involves consciously in learning like his or her learning strategies and the outcome of his or her attempts relevant to learning. The student who takes part in the class for writing skill, for example, should steadily and practically use the same skill as he or she is making the portfolio. It is also possible to notice whether he or she approaches the skill objectives or not as he or she goes ahead.

Portfolio, too, makes results meaningful to a variety of stakeholders (Tsagari, 2004). It is easy to interpret and understand not only for teachers but also for students, parents, and administrators. All persons involved in the interpretation of the results can tangibly realise the reality as they consider the result during a meaningful period of time.

Interactivity is the other positive trait of portfolio. It is really high because writers who are fully engaged in using the language for planning, editing, and revising are engaged in using metacognitive strategies and a good personal investment, both of which are motivating factors (Trotman, 2004). Students who deal with portfolio preparation, to some extent, even show their feelings, experiences, beliefs, and interests. In order to move successfully from the starting point to the finishing point, they should get along with some kind of hidden struggle to be able to plan, select, and present the duty in a satisfactory way.

In addition, portfolio has great washback on students because, as Trotman (2004) emphasised, "it not only provides the opportunity for reflection but, since they have control over both the conditions of their writing and selection of their portfolio, it enables them to develop of their work" (p. 2). Students who try to select the most appropriate parts and have the chance to reflect are aware of their improvement process. Awareness increases their care to select the suitable content and consequently makes them improve steadily.

It is certain that portfolio can be used for self-assessment (Birgin & Baki, 2007). Students will be able to understand their weak and strong points in learning as they prepare portfolio and as they monitor their preparation. When they encounter their weaknesses, they attempt to consider and cope with them, and when they are strong in some areas, they attempt to enhance them, or at least, stabilise the strong points. As they observe the instant outcome of their attempt, they actually come to a source of self-assessment. Tsagari (2004) points out that portfolio helps students to become "skilled judges" of their own weaknesses and strengths. Because students can judge their work as they go forward, they can direct themselves better in the process. Portfolio encourages students to make a fuss over what they prepare for a better outcome. Positive outcome is gained when the previous parts in sequence have logical and relevant solidarity. The largest advantage about validity of a collection is that we allow writers time for editing before handing work in. According to Trotman (2004), "it enables the writer to present a much truer picture of how he writes outside the exam room both the classroom and the real world (p. 2).

Students spend enough time on their work as they prepare a portfolio and because they are not under any class related pressure, they several times review their work consciously or subconsciously. Portfolio enhances the feeling of efficacy as a growing person (Tsagari, 2004). Because students are aware of participating in a process that they are able to carry out, they feel satisfied with their improvement and attempt to keep on the process. Efficacy among students is one of the basic factors which motivates students to move ahead and sometimes creates creative students.

Many students take portfolio development very seriously because they plan to use some of the contents to convince teachers that they have unique skills and talents. Students, true or false, come to pass the course successfully with good scores, and because of this, they try to show they have some unique capabilities which must be presented. They find portfolio the best place to present their capabilities.

Banta (2003) wrote, "because an essential feature of preparing a portfolio is reflecting on the content and explaining how components fit together to illustrate what has been learned, portfolios simultaneously develop students' skills of reflective thinking"(p. 2). Reflective thinking, one of the greatest advantages of portfolio, allows students to organise

the material as coherent as it is. The power of choosing and describing the suitable part to be put in the portfolio leads students more towards optimisation.

Face validity in portfolio is high for it consists of materials or skills taught and learnt in the course (Banta, 2003). For example, if students are taught different types of writing formats in the class, they prepare the portfolio with contents and examples of those writing formats. If phonetic symbols are taught, portfolio parts certainly represent phonetic alphabet or phonetic transcription.

Portfolio also influences teaching in important ways. Teachers themselves have mentioned the following positive points for portfolio as Schipper and Rossi (1997) stated, "portfolio improves their instruction by compelling them to be more explicit. It makes them more reflective about their students and teaching process. It enhances their ability to do assessment and it makes teaching more fun" (p. 3). It is obvious that whatever is related to students is more or less related to teachers, too. As it is confessed by teachers themselves, the impact of portfolio on teachers is in a positive and formative manner. So, we see that students and teachers both benefit from the portfolio in many different aspects.

It is worth mentioning that portfolio as an assessment instrument bears more advantages, such as enhancing student and teacher involvement in assessment, providing opportunities for teachers to observe students using meaningful language to accomplish various authentic tasks in a variety of contexts and situations, permitting the assessment of multiple dimensions of language learning, providing opportunities for both students and teachers to work together and reflect on what it means to assess students' language growth, increasing the variety of information collected on students, and making teachers' ways of assessing student work more systematic (AbdSamad, 2004, p. 104).

To sum up, Wary (2007) summarises the benefits of portfolio for students, teachers, and even teacher trainers as a dynamic teaching-learning assessment to illuminate the educational philosophies and put them in constant practice, to develop focused reflection in teaching and learning, and to widely indicate the various impacts in the classroom.

On the other side of the picture, there are opponents who mention the drawbacks of portfolio assessment; however, it is interesting that they do not completely reject the application of portfolio. They point out that scoring portfolio is not fair because it is not reliable (Birgin & Baki, 2007). Because it is a kind of subjective assessment related to the form of grading in comparison to multiple-choice test, it seems not to be fair. They are worried about the teacher's personal feeling on the parts of the work believing that different persons have different tastes and different tastes may lead to different understanding.

Another shortcoming for portfolio assessment is that it is very time-consuming for teachers to score, especially if the class is crowded (Birgin & Baki, 2007; Trotman, 2004). For a teacher, for example, in a 20-student class, there is just time for him or her to assess the portfolios. Because different parts of the lesson should be covered in any session, spending much time on one topic is boring, too.

Just as other qualitative data, it is hard to analyse the data from portfolios (Birgin & Baki, 2007). How can a teacher evaluate the exact mind potential and mind process of a student? Even a very experienced teacher is not able to perform abstract assessment efficiently. It is too difficult to read the exact process of a student's mind mixed with his or her feeling as he or she makes the portfolio.

Reliability and validity are considered low because the opponents discuss the possible help from others to assist the student for preparation of portfolio (Birgin & Baki, 2007). They do not deny this doubt that a student may be helped by somebody else like peers or even parents for a suitable portfolio. It is a natural tendency to submit the best work to the teacher, and for this reason, students may be tempted to try to find different possible ways to increase the quality of the work. They sometimes attempt to find shortcuts to prepare their work by getting help from others.

Handling and controlling portfolios in a crowded classroom is difficult (Birgin & Baki, 2007). It is hard for a teacher to control all students' portfolios one by one through the exact procedure. Suppose that we have 20 students in a class and we should consider all of their work, it is nearly hard to control all pieces of work equally and efficiently.

Another shortcoming, as Birgin and Baki (2007) emphasize, is lack of support by parents and community. They are familiar with the traditional score cards at the end of the course and unfamiliar with this kind of new way of assessment, so they react not in a satisfactory manner. In fact, they are in the habit of having the scores of their children in a very easy and formal way.

According to AbdSamad (2004, pp. 104-105), the drawbacks of portfolio, in short, include grading portfolio on large scale, subjectivity in portfolio design, logistic requirements like time and resources, interpretation of students' abstract personal interests, and maintenance of high inter-rater reliability.

## IV.  SUGGESTIONS FOR DRAWBACKS

Perhaps, it seems that overcoming the drawbacks of portfolios is something impossible, but in order to defuse the shortcomings, there are some tips offered by teachers, experts, and researchers.

For the reliability of scoring as an issue in portfolios, it is useful to identify measurable and clear criteria for each item of portfolio. If the purpose of portfolio is clear for teachers and students, it increases the reliability (Birgin & Baki, 2007). It is useful to specify the amount of score for each item as clear as possible. For example, if a teacher should assess a writing part, analytical scoring is more preferable than holistic, and objective scoring is more reliable than analytical. In addition, as suggested by Trotman (2004), "training markers with 'anchor' portfolio to get them to identify specific level of achievement is worth trying" (p. 2). It means that teachers should be trained well to be able to find the

suitable way of scoring based on the content, nature, and subject in the portfolio.

To overcome the time-consuming issue for portfolios, according to Birgin and Baki (2007), checklist (list of objectives or behaviours to be observed), rubrics (descriptions of students performance expectations linked to a scale for evaluating the work), digital portfolio and multiple drafts, and if it is possible, computer-based portfolio can be helpful.

For qualitative case of portfolio, checklists and observation list (notes on observation of student performance) can be useful as well as electronic portfolio (Birgin & Baki, 2007). It is certain that whatever is qualitative is very difficult to be assessed, but with observation list and checklist we attempt to bring the duty to something as objective as possible.

To remove the problem of handling portfolios, electronic portfolio is suggested (Birgin & Baki, 2007). It is easier to classify and put the materials in separate files for better access. Because in the present modern era having access to electronic devices is more or less possible, it is a logical solution to the issue of handling.

For the parental unfamiliarity with portfolio scoring case, at the beginning of the course, parents should be aware of the method and the positive traits of it (Birgin & Baki, 2007). It is useful to have some regular meetings with parents during the course to view children's portfolios and discuss them with teachers.

## V. CONCLUSION

Because the role of students according to constructivism is not traditionally defined in this modern world with swift changes in all different aspects, it is not logical and wise to go ahead only with the traditional view towards the high scale goals of students who are undoubtedly the real decision-makers and social, political, and economic role-players in future. It is by nature neither possible nor logical but a waste of a lot of financial, human, and administrative facilities and potential if we ignore the vivid positive realities of alternative assessments, including portfolios, which are ratified by scientists and educational deep thinkers. According to constructivists and as stressed by Klenowski (2002):

All students need to acquire skills in self-management, self-regulation, continuing learning, self-evaluation, and planning of future work because of the rapid, radical changes of a global, economic, social, and political nature, implying necessary changes to assessment, pedagogy, and curriculum as described through the use of portfolios. (p. 138)

Moreover, as emphasised by Birgin and Baki (2007), "portfolios are assessment tools based on contemporary learning approach such as constructivist learning theory, multiple-intelligences theory, and brain-based learning theory"(p. 86). Implementation of portfolio is actually supported by theories and proved by researchers in practice that indicates it is beyond the personal taste of teachers, students, or others.

In brief, if we consider the versatile capacity of portfolios, it is a very suitable instrument to satisfy the requirements which are not only based on the needs of the realities of the current changes in the modern world, but also based on a very strong support by scientific notions mentioned in new theories.

As teachers and students pay attention to portfolio, the kinds of dissatisfaction with quantitative format of assessment in the traditional type would be disappeared, or at least, diminished. When students learn and present the subject material in an on-going process and feel they are in charge of producing work in portfolio, the assessment of their potential is more authentic and clearer. When teachers assess students' capabilities frequently, they educate students during the meaningful period of time, and at the same time, they even come to possible reforms about their own teaching approach.

Current learning theories and assessments push the assessment decision-makers to get along with the requirement needed for the suitable adjustment according to those theories. In this way, there will be a positive relationship between curriculum, assessment, and pedagogy. Researchers show that portfolio increases reflection, self-evaluation, and analysis which are not found in traditional forms of assessment. As Klenowski (2002) indicates, "portfolios are being used increasingly for assessment and learning purposes of potential for the associated curriculum and pedagogic practice to foster metacognitive development" (p. 2).

For students, portfolio serves as an authentic source to show practically what a student has achieved. It encourages students to become independent and self-directed learners, and enhances communication among teachers, students, and parents. It shows students their strong and weak points. Portfolio makes students take responsibility for their learning. It increases the cooperation between teachers and students. Portfolio shows both learning process and learning product during the course. It increases students' motivation, awareness, self-assessment, self-evaluation, and self-monitoring. As Birgin and Baki (2007) also mention, portfolio has a potential which enables students to learn during assessment and to be assessed during learning.

For teachers, portfolio improves their teaching approaches as they face students' needs in portfolios. Birgin and Baki (2007) indicate, "portfolio encourages teachers to change their instructional practice and it is a powerful way to link curriculum and instruction with assessment" (p. 84). It also increases teachers' reflection about students' learning process. It makes teaching more interesting as mentioned by teachers themselves.

The present authors strongly believe that teachers should be fully and practically educated in the field of alternative assessment, especially portfolio in order to know its value and role in assessment, appraisal, and promotion, but they should not discard the traditional methods of assessment. Logically speaking, depending on the needs of societies, suitable facilities, and the purposes of the curricula, both approaches should be taken into consideration in order to have a very efficient outcome.

Students should also be informed and very well briefed on the benefits of portfolio. If they know the versatile nature of portfolio including where they should go by using portfolio, how they should go by building portfolio, why they should go by applying portfolio, and what they should meet by preparing portfolio, they willingly get involved in portfolio, and finally, the outcome of the attempt will be highly sufficient and efficient.

In sum, portfolio without any doubt and based on the reasons mentioned in this paper should be used in the classrooms. But because there is galloping progress in all fields of education, there will be certainly more changes in the vision and mission related to assessment in future, and so it is not wise to consider even the alternative assessments as perfect instruments whether portfolio or other stuff. Teachers, students, researchers, and all who are involved in education should welcome the newer methods and approaches that assist a better and more authentic assessment.

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