

ALTERNATIVE ASSESSMENT: CAN PORTFOLIO ASSESSMENT HAVE POSITIVE IMPACT ON EFLAB ORIGINAL STUDENTS' LEARNING OUTCOME

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Abstract- Lack of empirical research on portfolio assessment in aboriginal EFL English classes of junior high schools in Taiwan may inhibit EFL teachers from appreciating the utility of this alternative assessment approach. This study addressed the following research questions: 1) understand how aboriginal EFL students and instructors of junior high schools in Taiwan perceive portfolio assessment, and 2) how portfolio assessment affects Taiwanese aboriginal EFL students' learning outcome.

Ten classes of five junior high schools in Taiwan (from different regions of Taiwan) participated in this study. Two classes from each school joined the study and each class were randomly assigned as control group and one was experimental group. These five junior high schools consist of at 50% of aboriginal students. A mixed research design was utilized. The instructor of each class was implemented portfolio assessment for 15 weeks of the 2015 Fall Semester. At the beginning of the semester, all participants took a GEPT test (pretest), and the 15th week, all participants took the same level of GEPT test (post test). Scores of students' GEPT test was checked by the researcher as supplemental data in order to understand each student's performance. In addition, each instructor was interviewed to provide qualitative data concerning students' general learning performance and their perception of implementing portfolio assessment in their English classes. The results of this study was used to provide suggestions for EFL instructors while modifying their lesson plan regarding assessment. In addition, the empirical data was used as references for EFL instructors implementing portfolio assessment into their class effectively.

Key words- Alternative Assessment, EFL Learners, Mixed Design, Portfolio Assessment

I. INTRODUCTION

The achievement gap between students of different ethnic groups has been done extensively. For example, in the United States, the achievement between middle-income White students and minority students has existed since the 1960s. In 1966, researchers documented the first student achievement gap that showed Blacks largely behind White students academically. In the 1970s the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) began to track student achievement nationwide and discovered that Blacks and Hispanics students were by average four years behind their White peers (Chubb & Loveless, 2002). In Taiwan, plenty of studies have been conducted to investigate academic gap between aboriginal students and their ethnic Taiwanese counterparts (e.g. Chen, 1997). However, most studies were conducted with emphasis on what factors caused aboriginal students' low academic performance (Cohen, 2005) but none has studied whether non-traditional assessment method should implement into their curriculum in order to benefit students of different ethnics.

Academic achievement gap occurs between aboriginal students and their ethnic Taiwanese counterparts in various subjects and English is one of the major ones (Chen, Huan & Chiu, 2003).

Aborigines consist of approximately only 2% of the entire population in Taiwan but the young aborigines are much more likely to encounter difficulties at academic settings while comparing with their Taiwanese/Han Chinese counterparts. For example, aborigines of Taiwan tend to have higher dropout rate than their Taiwanese/Han Chinese counterparts (Chiu, 1997). In addition, when looking at the recent record of 71.1% of the general population completing higher education, less than 1% of aborigines obtaining education beyond the secondary school level (Cohen, 2005).

In Taiwan, English learning performance has been always connected with parents' educational background, and social economic status. Especially when English is considered a foreign language in Taiwan, which requires parents extra effort to create effective learning environment. Parents' educational background and social economic status is part of students' self-identity. Little research has been conducted regarding whether non-traditional assessment methods can be implemented into class of various ethnic groups but reams of literature have been either published in America or the data was collected there. Thus, using American literature review as guide and collect experimental data in Taiwan could aid further information to this issue globally. Most importantly, such a finding could fill

in gaps and extending prior studies regarding whether non-traditional assessment can improve aboriginal EFL learners' English in Taiwan.

Assessment of student achievement is an important part of the teaching and learning process. In addition, assessment has been seen as a difficult issue for instructors who teach EFL learners. One primary reason centers on selecting appropriate and effective tools to assess EFL students' learning progress and outcome. In addition, though educators attempt to quantify students' learning progress, the process can be highly subjective; however, judging a student's progress in a foreign language can be very complicated (Jacobson, Sleicher, & Maureen, 1999). Researchers have suggested that foreign language learners need to learn their second language as naturally as they learnt their first language. As real as they learned the first language the same context must be for the second language acquirement. Understanding and communicating meaning "through thematic instruction can help students learn to communicate in real-life situations where they are required to convey important ideas and collaborate with others to solve problems" (Singmaster, 2010, p.1). How to achieve that level? Assessment plays an important role. In other words, how teachers assess students' learning outcome affect how students learn the language.

As a result, some researchers broaden the meaning of assessment and define it as collecting any data that can be used to assess learners' language abilities (Cohen, 1994). Furthermore, assessment data can be further used as references for benefitting EFL instructors while modifying their teaching strategies (Camp, 1993). Such a broad definition allows language instructors to implement alternative assessment to evaluate their students' learning outcomes, in addition to using traditional assessment.

Constructivist educators believe alternative assessment should replace traditional assessment because the latter tends to label students unfairly, while forcing them to a restrictive learning environment with limited learning goals (Fullan, 1993). Most importantly, educators believe alternative assessment is a powerful tool that allows for a wide range of curriculum outcomes not easily tested by traditional methods (e.g., multiple choice, True or False, etc.). One type of alternative assessment is called portfolio assessment, a technique frequently used in education, second language learning, and other academic fields (Coleman, 1996; Davis et al, 2001; Jongasma, 1989).

Portfolio assessment (PA) was described by MacIsaac and Jackson as "a purposeful collection of a learner's

work assembled over time that documents one's efforts, progress, and achievements" (1994). According to Wolf, PA has the capacity to portray learners' performance based on multiple sources of evidence collected over time in genuine settings as well as it can captures dimensions of learners competence that tend to be lost through traditional forms of assessment (Wolf, 1989). In addition, compared with the traditional approach to assessment of practice, the performance-based approach is potentially more valid (Gonczi 1994).

The collection must include student participation in selecting content, the criteria for selection, and evidence for student self-reflection. One important characteristic of PA is it allows students to assume ownership in ways that few other instructional approaches allow. In other words, PA requires students to collect and reflect on examples of their work (Paulson, Paulson & Meyer, 1991).

PA consists of a variety of a student's works and his/her reflection (Wolf, 1989). As a result, PA can be as varied as the students that create them. For example, for language learning, students' portfolio might include a conversation tape, an English news report recording, journal entries, essays etc. Students' reflection papers focus on their growth in language learning. Thus, students might describe a number of characteristics involving their work, their learning progress, and/or goals that they have accomplished.

PA allows teachers and students an opportunity to evaluate their learning process. Specifically, teachers and students can discuss the processes involved in creating worthwhile work, the components of a useful critique, and ways to apply comments to an ongoing work (Gredler, 1995). One principal value for PA is that it allows students to view assessment as an occasion for learning and not just for taking a test.

Far less attention has been paid to English as Foreign Language (EFL) learners' perceptions regarding how PA affects their learning outcomes when instructors implement this particular assessment (French, 1992). Traditional assessment is still the primary evaluation method within Taiwan, and is the traditional assessment for evaluating learners' learning outcome (Chang, Wu, & Ku, 2004). Therefore, there is a need to know how instructors perceive PA and the potential challenges they might face when implementing it as an alternative assessment in assessing EFL learners' outcomes.

Purpose of Study

The purpose of this study was to understand how aboriginal EFL students and instructors of junior school in Taiwan perceive portfolio assessment as

well as the impact on aboriginal students' English learning outcome. In addition, the findings may provide EFL teachers a better understanding regarding how to use alternative assessment method to narrow down or even close the achievement gap between aboriginal and Han Chinese students.

II. RELATED LITERATURE

An increasing amount of scholarship focuses on PA and the value of testing effectiveness on English learners' English learning outcome has been well recognized. For example, Hamp-Lyons and Condon (2000) stated that when assessing EFL students' English writing ability, a portfolio needs to be frequently used and replace timed writing, which was declared as discriminatory against non-native writers. In addition, portfolios can provide a wider range of measuring a student's ability.

Little (2002) pointed out that students taking traditional assessment tend to score relatively well on examinations without having developed the communicative proficiency that questions are alleged to test. On the other hand, PA provides a basis for specifying a communicative curriculum, planning a program of learning, selecting learning tasks and materials, and developing assessment procedures. Jones (1992) also concluded that PA is particularly appropriate in assessing ESL writers. The study was conducted at Borough of Manhattan Community Colleges of the City University of New York and the results showed that ESL students assessed by portfolio achieved results in the next course that were better than or comparable to those achieved by native English speakers who were assessed on the campus Writing Assessment Test (WAT), a holistically graded timed impromptu essay.

Song and August (2002) conducted a quantitative study to investigate whether PA is more appropriate than traditional assessment when assessing English language learners' English writing ability. The results indicated that several factors might affect students' writing performance, such as instructors' pedagogy, students' own learning motivation, etc. However, these factors are difficult to control; thus, there is a need to conduct studies which would involve in depth data to investigate this issue. When implementing PA, researchers should be concerned regarding how to utilize students' ability to assess their own progress and set clear goals for their learning (Jacobson, Sleicher, & Maureen, 1999). Meanwhile, while implementing this approach, teachers have concerns about a student's ownership in the assessment process (Knight, 1994; Maeroff, 1991). Thus, there is a need to conduct studies to explore these issues.

Research has showed that alternative assessment have been effectively used to assess diverse students' learning outcome. As a group, aboriginal students in Taiwan score lower on traditional assessments than do their Han Chinese counterparts. However, available research provides no reason to believe that a switch to alternative assessments would close the achievement gap between Han Chinese and aboriginal students; the new assessments would not, by themselves, remove the systemic barriers to these groups' opportunity to achieve at high levels (Lachat, 1998). LaCelle-Peterson and Rivera (1994) explored how performance assessment, which they view as a promising alternative to traditional standardized tests, might need to be designed and used differently in order to assess diverse student populations equitably.

Based on the above statement, most study results agree that PA has instructional and assessment advantages for students and teachers. However, none of the studies discussed teachers' perception toward PA, such as what kind of challenge they face while implementing portfolio assessment into their classes. In addition, a lack of empirical research exists concerning PA and students' perceptions of PA.

III. METHODOLOGY

Research Design

A mixed research design was used for this study. Ten classes from five junior high schools in Taiwan participated in this study and the data was used to present a more complete and in-depth understanding. Data collection included surveying standardized English test (intermediate level GEPT test) scores, interviewing, observing, and document analysis.

Data was collected from both perspectives: quantitative and qualitative. Experimental design of Quantitative was used to collect quantitative data. Case studies are considered more suitable for this particular study after comparing it with the other major types of qualitative research methods: ethnography, phenomenology, and ground theory. For this study, the case studies of the aboriginal EFL junior high school students in Taiwan provided insight into understand how alternative assessment--portfolio assessment affect EFL students as well as the impact on their English learning outcome. In addition, teachers was interviewed to provide further information on understanding this issue.

Participants

Participants in this study come from teachers and students of these ten classes. Ten teachers and at least 294 students participated in this study. One common

character of these schools share was they have more than fifty percent students are aboriginal students. In addition, the five junior high schools were purposefully selected as the study was designed to evaluate how portfolio assessment affect aboriginal students' English learning outcome. Overall, the proportion of these students' English ability was approximately the same level. In addition, their English learning experiences, English learning history, and educational background before enrolling are similar and were carefully described during the text. Ten teachers were experienced English teachers.

Data Collection Procedures

This is a mixed design; thus, data collect procedure consists of two sections:

Quantitative Data Collection Procedure:

At the beginning of the 1st week, two classes of each school was selected for this study. The researcher provided a workshop to each English teacher. The researcher discussed portfolio assessment with these teachers and assist them to implement portfolio assessment into their classes.

From the 1st week of the semester to week 5, participants' English was assessed by traditional assessment. At the end of week 15, participants of these five schools took an intermediate level of GEPT test and the scores was analyzed as pretest scores.

During week 6 to week 15, the instructor of each respective class implemented portfolio assessment to assess their students' English learning. For example, at the end of each week, instead of giving a traditional assessment test, all English teachers of these ten classes used portfolio assessment to evaluate students' English learning outcome. At the end of week 15, participants of these five schools took an intermediate level of GEPT test and the scores was analyzed as posttest scores.

Qualitative Data Collection Procedure:

The instructor of each respective class implemented PA as part of five weeks assessment. During week 14 and 15, each student was surveyed to gauge their perception of PA. After the survey, five students from each class was randomly selected for interviewing. At the end of week 15, students' portfolio and quizzes grades was checked by the researcher as supplemental data in order to better understand each individual's performance. In addition, each instructor was interviewed by the researcher to provide qualitative data regarding students' general learning performance; likewise, their perceptions of implementing portfolio assessment in the English classes. Survey data, interview data, observation field notes, and related documents collected from both

teachers and students were analyzed to answer the research question.

Data Analysis

For the quantitative data, data analysis included descriptive analysis. Pretest and posttest scores of the intermediate level GEPT tests was analyzed by using SPSS. Descriptive data analysis method will be used to compare the differences between pretest and posttests scores.

In a qualitative study, data analysis should be conducted during data collection, while the simultaneous processes require the researcher to become immersed in their data. This means data analysis begins with the first interview, first observation, and the first document read (Merriam, 1998). Thus, in this study, the researcher began data analysis as soon as the data collection process begins. The researcher analyzed data through aboriginal EFL students' perception of portfolio assessment or scenarios that was recounted in order to give in-depth descriptions concerning the research questions that were under investigation.

Survey data from students was analyzed as soon as it is completed and reported as qualitative data. Audio-taped interviews was transcribed and checked for accuracy against the original recording. Each case was reported primarily based on participants' verbal transcript (interview raw data), along with observational data and related documents; thus, when necessary, direct quotations will be included to make a statement.

IV. RESULTS

Qualitative data has successfully answered this research question: understand how aboriginal EFL students and instructors of junior high schools in Taiwan perceive portfolio assessment?

Interview data from aboriginal students all indicated that portfolio assessment alleviated their anxiety toward English tests. In addition, they also expressed they have higher English learning motivation while their English teachers implemented portfolio assessment to replace traditional assessment.

However, data from teachers revealed somewhat different perception toward portfolio assessment. In fact, most of teachers stated that portfolio assessment is much more time consuming for them to implement it successfully in classroom while comparing to implementing traditional tests. They also revealed it is hard for them to receive support from administrators while implementing portfolio assessment. Besides the

challenges and difficulties from administration perspective, teachers all believed that aboriginal students seem enjoy learning English more when they use portfolio assessment to replace traditional assesmnet as a way to evalaute students' English learning outcome.

The second research question:How portfolio assessment affectsTaiwanese aboriginal EFL

students' learning outcome was answered based on the quantitative data .

Table 1 reported pre and posttests results.

Table 1 indicated the mean score of pretest listening is 27.2 and the posttest listening mean score is 80.87; the mean score of pretest reading is 24.68 and the posttest reading mean score is 80.12.

Table 1

Table 2 indicated that there is a significant difference between aboriginal students' pre and post test listening scores. In addition, students' pre and post reading scores also showed significant difference.

Table 2

CONCLUSION

Literature review showed that portfolio assessment can increase students' English learning motivation. Results from this study supported findings from previous studies. Qualitative data indicated that non-traditional assessment can improve aboriginal EFL learners' English in Taiwan. Most importantly, such a finding could fill in gaps and extending prior studies. Quantitative data

The findings could help teachers improve their pedagogical skills, aid their students' needs, while helping to increase their students' English

confidence. In addition, results from this study canunderstand how alternative assessment: portfolio assessment affect aboriginal students' learning outcome.

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