

BACKWASH EFFECTS OF PORTFOLIO ASSESSMENT IN ACADEMIC WRITING CLASSES¹

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Abstract: This paper discusses a study investigating students' opinions and reflections on backwash effects of portfolio assessments applied in Academic Writing course. To obtain the data, the researcher carried out interviews with 70 students of English Education Department (EED) of *Universitas Muria Kudus* (UMK) who took Academic Writing I and II courses. A qualitative analysis was then administered by identifying and classifying contents of students' opinions and reflections expressed in the students' responses concerning the backwash effects of the portfolio assessment applied in the courses. This investigation concludes the followings. First, all the research subjects support the use of portfolio assessment in Academic Writing Classes. Second, portfolio assessment provides various positive backwash effects on the student learning. Third, the students consider the portfolio assessment a fairer assessment. These findings suggest that the students respond positively to the portfolio assessment. Thus, it is recommended that the application of portfolio assessment in academic writing classes be maintained.

Key words: backwash, portfolio assessment, academic writing

One of the effective ways to enhance student learning is to apply an appropriate form of assessment. Principles of language assessment, according to Brown (2004: 15-30), covers practicality, reliability, validity, authenticity and backwash. Practicality means that assessment procedure needs to be affordable, time-efficient, specific and relatively easy to understand. Reliability refers to test consistency and dependability. Validity implies that assessment results are representatively appropriate, meaningful and useful in terms of the purpose of the assessment. Authenticity is indicated by the following: (1) the language in

the test is as natural as possible; (2) its items are contextualized rather than isolated; (3) topics are meaningful (relevant, interesting) for the learners; and (4) tasks represent, or closely approximate, real-world tasks. Backwash is the effect of testing on teaching and learning. Backwash also implies that students have ready access to the teacher/lecturer to discuss the feedback and evaluation he/she has given.

The term backwash implies the (either negative or positive) effects of assessment on teaching and learning. Some writers believe that it is possible to bring about changes in language teaching by changing tests (Wall and Alderson, 1993 in Cumming and Berwick, 1996). If an assessment has positive backwash effects, it will exert a good influence on the learning and teaching that takes place before the assessment (see Heaton (1975: x), Cumming and Berwick (1996), Brown (2004) and Harmer (2007)). However, language tests are frequently criticized for having negative impact on teaching – the so-called “negative backwash”.

Portfolio assessment is one type of assessment that has gained some theoretical supports. It is a systematic collection of a student work that is analyzed to show progress overtime with regard to instructional objectives (Valencia, 1991 as quoted by O’Malley & Pierce, 1996).

There are several types of portfolio. First, showcase portfolios which are typically used to present a student’s best work to parents and school administrators. The process itself in this type of portfolio is missing. Next, collections portfolios which literally mean all of student’s work that present how students deal with day to day class assignments or *working folders* which may include rough drafts, sketches, works-in-progress, and final products. This type is able to cover both process and products. Finally, assessment portfolios which are specifically presented as reflections of specific learning goals that contain systematic collections of students’ work, student self-assessment, and teacher assessment. The contents are often selected to show the progress over time (O’Malley and Pierce, 1996:37). The current investigation is best relevant to the last type of portfolio.

Yancey (1992), in Park (2010), states that all portfolios share three essential characteristics. Firstly, they are longitudinal in nature. Secondly, portfolios are diverse in content. That is, as a system, the portfolio is open rather than closed and its contents are intended to be diverse and inclusive. Thirdly, portfo-

folios are almost always collaborative in ownership. In other words, portfolios are created collaboratively by the student as author, working with the teacher and other students as partners, who respond to and advise the writer, helping to evaluate and rework and select pieces to be submitted for the institutional assessment that fully determines the grade. Examples of portfolio entries include writing samples, reading logs, drawings, audio or videotapes, and/or teacher and student comments on progress made by student. One of the defining features of portfolio assessment is the involvement of students in selecting samples of their own work to show growth or learning over time.

According to Harmer (2007: 340), judging different pieces of student works written over a period of time is seen by many people to be fairer than “sudden death” final test which is often considered controversial. He implies that measuring student’s ability at certain time is risky. One shot measurement or “, sudden death test” does not give a true picture of how well some students could do in certain situations (Harmer, 2007: 380-381). In line with that, O’Malley and Pierce (1996) maintain that a portfolio assessment has a strong content validity. It well represents what students are doing in the classroom and reflects their progress toward instructional goals. The contents reflect the authentic activities through which the students have been learning in the classroom. Unlike single test scores and multiple choice tests, portfolios provide a multidimensional perspective on student growth over time. Portfolios reveal much more about what students can do than do standardized tests (O’Malley & Pierce, 1996: 35).

The complex and multifaceted writing skills has encouraged many composition specialists to begin to search for ways of measuring student writing in a way that would be more consistent with the emerging process approach to writing, allowing other views of student writing than the single, timed test, usually placed at the end of a writing course (Park, 2010). Portfolio assessment is one type of assessment that is considered appropriate to accommodate this need. Trotman (2010) agrees that a portfolio assessment gives a great impact or ‘backwash’ on L2 writers. It provides the students with the opportunity for reflection. It also enables them to develop a sense of pride and ownership of their work since they have control over both the conditions for their writing and also the selection of the content of the portfolio. They may also use the portfolio for self-assessment, especially if given clear criteria with which to evaluate and re-

wise their work. In addition, Harmer (2007) states that being encouraged to keep what they have written, the students are motivated to write well and with care. He argues further that portfolio assessment of this kind has clear benefits and provides evidence of students' effort. It helps students become more autonomous, and Nunes (2004: 334), as quoted by Harmer (2007), states that portfolio can foster the students' reflection (and) help them to self monitor their own learning'. It has a clear validity since, especially with written work, students will have had a chance to edit before submitting their work, and this approach to assessment has a positive wash-back effect.

However, there are also some pitfalls of portfolio assessment as pointed out by Harmer (2007) as follows. (1) It is time consuming. (2) Teachers need clear training in how to select portfolios and how to give them grades. (3) Students may be tempted to leave portfolios until the end of the course. (4) Working out of the classroom and on their own way, students may be helped by others. There are also some concerns about portfolios, particularly when used for large-scale performance evaluation. The lack of research demonstrating conclusively that portfolios are more effective than other forms of writing assessment is also another concern. It is, therefore, essential to investigate the backwash effects of this assessment since it may present both negative and positive backwash effects. This study is to investigate the students' opinions and reflections in relation to especially backwash effects of the application of portfolio assessments in Academic Writing I and II classes in the academic year of 2009/2010 and 2010/2011. The purposes of this study are as follows: (1) to explore the students' response to the application of portfolio assessment in Academic Writing Classes and (2) to identify positive points and negative points of the application of portfolio assessment in Academic Writing Classes.

METHOD

Portfolio assessment has been applied in Academic Writing classes at EED of UMK, i.e. Academic Writing I and II. The main objective of Academic Writing I is to enable the students to compose academic essays on issues in English education, while the Academic Writing II is especially devoted to research proposal writing for final project (or *Skripsi*). The students have been

told in advance that the evaluation for both courses is mainly based on the portfolio assessment.

In this small-scale investigation, the portfolio refers to a collection of students' work and assignments in Academic Writing I and II classes over one semester period. In Academic Writing I, as a review of the previous writing courses and an entry to essay writing, in the first two meetings, the students were asked to compose simple, compound, complex, compound-complex sentences and paragraphs. After that, they attended theoretical sessions on how to compose a good essay and they were asked to analyze several model essays on English Education. In the following meetings the students had to compose some essays based on several choices of topics related to English Education. The lecturer gave individual students feedback on their writing. Peer editing was also incorporated in the sessions to improve the quality of the essays. Next, individually they had to compose a number of essays based on videos of classroom English teaching. In the following weeks they had to present their composition in a group discussion in which the group members would do peer-editing of each other's work. Based on the suggestions from the group members, the students had to edit and improve their essay. The revised essay was then discussed with the lecturer for final drafting. For the final assignment of the course, the students had to compose an essay on a topic of their own choice. All their works and assignments must be compiled in a note-book of their own design and we called it "the portfolio book", on which the assessment of the course was based.

In Academic Writing II subject, the students learnt to compose a research proposal. In the first few meetings, they reviewed the theories on research proposal composition (based on official manual and academic convention) and discussed various models of research proposal selected based on agreement between the lecturer and the students. The students then received a proposal checklist containing all proposal elements to be completed step by step. In every step, self-editing, peer editing and instructor editing must be done to continually improve the quality of the draft. The assessment was based on the portfolio of two kinds of assignments done by the students over the semester, i.e. a summary of research report and a research proposal.

To obtain data, this investigation administered (written) interviews with 10 students of Academic Writing I and Academic Writing II subjects in the academic

year 2009/2010 and 60 students who took Academic writing I in the academic year 2010/2011. The subjects had a couple of questions to answer and the responses should be in written form. When necessary, a direct clarification to the subjects was done. The questions investigate the students' opinions and reflections on the backwash effects of portfolio assessments in Academic Writing I and II courses. The data collection took place between July-September 2010. The supporting information is also obtained by examining the progress of the students' composition (drafts) in the portfolio projects during the courses.

A qualitative analysis was administered by identifying and classifying contents of students' opinions and reflections expressed in the students' responses especially those associated with the backwash effects of portfolio assessment applied in the course.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

Findings

The Students' Response to the Application of Portfolio Assessment and Its Impacts

This section describes the opinions and reflections of the subjects on whether or not they agree with the application of portfolio assessment in the academic writing classes. All the research subjects express their complete support to the use of portfolio assessment in Academic Writing Classes. In addition, they stated that it gives various positive effects (the backwash) to their learning.

The following are some examples of students' opinions and reflections (1a to 1g) showing their acceptance to the use of the portfolio assessment.

(1a) Yes, I could not agree more. Actually portfolio assessment helps students to express their personality on their assignments. It will be fairer for the students too in getting the mark. The mark is taken not only at the tests (mid and final tests). The struggle to get the best mark starts from the beginning. From the portfolio assessment we will learn in steps and we will not be judged at the time when we make mistake. If in the

first time we did a mistake, next time we would do better without worrying to fail and to have no chance any more.

(1b) Yes, I do. I do agree with the last portfolio assessment for academic writing classes. The portfolio assessment gives significant contribution to my study. Making an academic essay is not only to write English sentences without any rules, but also to consider some aspects: vocabularies, cohesion and coherence, grammar and many others. Practice is a good teacher and the last portfolio assessment is a good way to improve our writing skill.

(1c) Of course, (I agree with portfolio assessment) because the portfolio assessment for Academic Writing classes influence my learning. It gave good effects for me. Why? I could explore my knowledge to make essays based on the topic. Before I joined academic writing I, I didn't know what an essay is. After I joined it in the 5th semester I know what an essay is and also I could make a good essay based on the correct structure of essay. For academic Writing II, it is a special step. After I joined Academic Writing II, I knew the correct structure to make a research proposal because the lecturer corrected the students' research proposals including my proposal. .

(1d) Yes, I absolutely agree with portfolio assessment for academic writing classes. Portfolio assessment in academic writing class was totally useful. Firstly, the strict rules in composing the assignment truly opened our way to expert in writing formally, sweetly, and correctly. For those who are lazy, it was really hard in obeying the rules. On the other hand, the smart students would regard this as the clue to be better English Department students as well. Secondly, it enabled peer supervising, editing, and assessing to happen. This created the real fun academic atmosphere. While the students did not re-

cognize their error in writing, others would correct them and vice versa. Moreover the discussions run conducive under the lecturer's supervision and moderation of the classroom. Finally, it seemed to a perfect classroom of academic writing with all the activities within. At least, the students got what they deserved to obtain; the skill of formal writing. In the end, the result was satisfying in the assessment.

(1e) Yes, it did. Undoubtedly it did. While the students did their work in portfolio, they recorded their work and their error. They could track their skill progress by using this portfolio. They themselves, their classmates, and their lecturer were the participants. Portfolio assessment including them all made the portfolio assessment become a flawless task. How it couldn't be? First, they had self-editing, then their friends edited them and finally the lecturer did the final editing. This created a perfect work. Through this way, the students would realize their mistake and corrected them all. In short, the effect of portfolio in academic writing class made us keep on progressing in writing correctly.

(1f) I agree because portfolio gives the students more chance to explore their writing skill. I admit that after I did portfolio assessment my skill in writing became better and I could use more time to read.

(1g) Portfolio was effective because the students studied not only in class (with the limited time) but also at home or in the other places to fulfill their portfolio.

Observations on the artistic aspects and physical designs of portfolio books made by the students also confirm the findings. The portfolio books are beautifully designed by the students showing their personal characteristics, creativity, courage, enthusiasm, and regularity in composing essays in it. It implies that positive backwash effects occur during the portfolio assessment.

Positive Points of the Application of Portfolio Assessment

The study found that portfolio assessment is viewed by the students as a fairer type of assessment and marking. It presents multiple positive effects for students' learning as well. The students have more time to prepare, to read, to edit, to revise and to write the compositions. It also allows them chances for making corrections and improvement. It makes them more disciplined and feel more confident without being worried to fail. In particular, the portfolio assessment is perceived to well stimulate and improve the students' reading and writing skills. They enjoy preparing and doing the portfolio projects. The students also state that the portfolio helps them master other subjects they learn. Furthermore, the self-designed books of the portfolio enable the students to express their personality and enhance their creativity. It also boosts students' responsibility. In short, portfolio serves as an instrument for assessment as well as a learning activity that is student-centered and step by step.

The following are some excerpts from the interviews, which show students' opinions and reflections on the positive points of the use of portfolio assessment.

(2a) Portfolio assessment actually improves students' skill to write anything related to English Education and also makes the students active to do assignment step by step.

(2b) It gives opportunity to the students to correct their mistakes in the learning process.

(2c) Portfolio assessment can develop my writing ability. In this assessment, I can revise my portfolio if there is any mistake.

(2d) The portfolio assessment gives influence in my learning process of academic writing. Usually there are mistakes when we write assignments, but through portfolio assessment we can correct them.

(2e) It makes me perfect in writing English which is related to English education in order to be successful when we make the final project in the future. And a good job for Mr Syafei when he would like to give a correction for our writing in portfolio assessment

(2f) *I feel it enjoyable to do my home work. It also tells me the mistakes that I have done, so I can correct them. This project also helps me better understand the material (of my subjects in English education department).*

(2g) *It makes us more diligent to make good sentences without feeling afraid. Although we don't know how to make a good sentence, we still have time to ask the lecturer when we find difficulties.*

(2h) *Portfolio assessment for academic writing class is very good. It helps me improve my writing skill. I show up my ability in writing related to English Education in my portfolio. And the important thing of portfolio is it makes me confident in writing English.*

(2i) *When we do portfolio assessment, we must have a lot of experiences and we always read more books.*

(2j) *Portfolio assessment for academic writing classes has good impact to students in developing their writing ability.*

(2k) *Of course it would affect the learning process of Academic writing because by using portfolio assessment the students are trained how to make a good essay with right structure.*

(2l) *By doing portfolio assessment, I felt easier in learning process. It made me enjoy the class and the ability is better than before, especially in writing essay and research proposal.*

(2m) *The students become more careful in keeping their works/papers. Portfolio consists of papers which the students write gradually. To make the portfolio, the students must keep all their works or papers.*

(2n) *The portfolio assessment can influence my learning process in academic writing because I become enthusiastic to improve my writing skill, my vocabulary and also my sentence structure. I must read books to improve my knowledge, so I can make an essay about recent issues.*

(2o) *Because every week we have to make and submit an academic essay (regularly), indirectly it makes us to be more discipline. Discipline is the key of success*

(2p) *I can fight against my laziness to study.*

(2q) *It makes me focused on material.*

(2r) *It can increase writing ability to the students and develop their talent.*

(2s) *The student can write down their ideas step by step, so it becomes a good writing.*

(2t) *It makes students read books to increase their knowledge.*

(2u) *It presents regular and continuous writing practice.*

(2v) *I can evaluate my writing skill.*

(2w) *My lecturer will not give me a good score if I can't make a good sentence.*

(2x) *The positive points show the students have much time to do it at home. By doing the portfolio the students can understand and master the material better because they learn by doing. The peer assessment is very useful because from the classmates, the other students can know the mistakes they have done.*

(2y) *I suppose portfolio assessment have more positive points than the negative points. It helps us make the best final project. We are taught everything (how to make good compositions, habit in writing, grammatical elements and good topics, etc).*

Negative Points of the Application of Portfolio Assessment

This section presents the negative points pointed out by the subjects in relation to the use of portfolio assessment in academic writing classes. Although the students give positive response and appreciation toward portfolio assessment, they also indicate some negative points or disadvantages of the assessment as shown in the following excerpts.

(3a) When I haven't had an idea to write, the portfolio assessment makes me confused. I feel difficult when I haven't had an idea to write a sentence or a paragraph.

(3b) The topic is limited only to English Education.

(3c) My assignments look dirty because of correction.

(3d) I spend much longer time and a lot of money.

(3e) Sometimes, they make the students get bored because they have so many assignments.

(3f) The negative point of portfolio is that students may find some boredom in writing. They need another entertainment.

Among the negative perceptions of the portfolio assessment in Academic Writing classes are the lack of ideas of what to write on, the topic restriction, the dirty look of the composition because of the corrections, time and money consumption, and boredom.

Some of the negative points mentioned in the reflections are, however, realized by the students as normal consequences of learning process in academic writing classes. See excerpts 4a to 4e.

(4a) Portfolio assessment makes a psychological barrier. But this is our consequence which must be accepted by us. "No pain no gain" is the true proverb for this case. I believe in it. So it makes me enjoy doing everything which will be useful for me now and especially in the future.

(4b) *I must give special time. But it never minds because I must correct my writing details.*

(4c) *We have so many assignments but it is okay.*

(4d) *The students have to force themselves to think and to study hard.*

(4e) *Portfolio assignment is not effective for the careless students. The students who are careless students cannot keep their works/ papers well. If one of the works lost, they have to make the new one again.*

Some other students maintain that they hardly find negative points of the portfolio. The followings are examples of their opinions and reflections concerning this.

(5a) *Here I didn't found the disadvantages of using portfolio.*

(5b) *In my opinion, I couldn't find the negative effects of portfolio assessment.*

(5c) *The negative points of portfolio assessment? I find nothing.*

(5d) *I almost couldn't find any negative points of portfolio assessment.*

(5e) *There is almost no negative point in this portfolio assessment, because it has a lot positive points.*

Discussion

The findings show that portfolio assessment is able to discover much about what students can do in Academic Writing classes. The students' reflections inform that a portfolio assessment in Academic Writing facilitates the "discovering ability process" and better accommodates the multiple intelli-

gences perspectives (See Chatib, 2009). The students give firm support to the use of portfolio assessment in Academic Writing Classes. They indicate, through their reflections, various positive backwash effects of portfolio assessment on their learning. In accordance with what Harmer (2007: 340) states, the students in the research consider the portfolio a fairer assessment that gives them more time to read, to prepare, to write, to correct and to revise their compositions. It centers on the students and enables them to be more autonomous, responsible, disciplined and confident in reading and especially writing. The findings are in accordance with the statement that portfolios can be used to encourage students to write well with care (Harmer, 2007). They also clearly suggest that portfolio assessment supports the students' reflection and gives them opportunities to edit their work before submitting it. This is in line with the idea that the portfolio is appropriate for self-assessment. The findings of this investigation also confirm and are in line with the application of hand writing mode to accomplish works and assignments in Academic Writing I Class (Syafei, 2010). Furthermore, they also suggest that portfolio assessment to measure students' writing is more consistent than a single, timed test, usually placed at the end of a writing course. This research therefore indicates that portfolio assessment can bring about positive changes in language teaching and learning by enhancing students' learning, motivation and achievement (See excerpts 2a to 2y).

Backwash effects of portfolio assessment revealed in this research are relevant to some of the principles of language assessment, especially validity, authenticity and backwash. Students' extensive support to the use of portfolio assessment in Academic Writing classes also shows that this kind of assessment meets the principles of language assessment.

The findings also indicate some weaknesses of portfolio assessment, particularly in a way that it is time consuming for most students (as well as instructors) and boring to some students. However, this investigation does not come up with findings that suggest that the students disapprove and want to abandon the work on portfolios, or that they may be helped by others since they do most of the compositions out of the classroom on their own.

CONCLUSIONS AND SUGGESTIONS

Based on the findings and discussion, the following conclusions can be drawn. First, all subjects provide their full support to the use of portfolio assessment in Academic Writing Classes. Second, affirmatively portfolio assessment has various positive backwash effects to the students' learning. Third, portfolio assessment is viewed by the students as a fairer assessment that enables the students to have more time to read, to prepare, to write, to correct and to revise their compositions. It also motivates them to be more autonomous, disciplined and confident in writing. The students state that portfolio assessment is able to stimulate and improve their reading habit and writing skill and help them master other subjects better. Furthermore, portfolio assessment facilitates the application of learning approaches that are autonomous, student-centered, active, gradual, regular and comprehensive. Portfolio assessment also has some negative points; however, the negative points are considered to be a common part of the learning process in academic writing classes. Some students even maintain that they hardly find negative points of the portfolio assessment. Finally, the physical designs of portfolio books also prove another form of positive backwash effect in that most of the books are attractively self-designed by the students, demonstrating their personality, creativity, courage, enthusiasm, and discipline in composing essays included in the portfolio.

In summary, the findings of the study suggest that the use of portfolio assessment receives positive response from the students and has positive effects on their learning. It is therefore recommended that its application in teaching and learning process of academic writing classes be maintained. Further investigations are needed to demonstrate quantitatively the backwash effects of portfolio assessment applied in the academic writing classes.

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¹ This paper was presented in the 57th TEFLIN International Conference on November 1-3, 2010 in UPI Bandung.