Balancing the dual functions of portfolio assessment

Ricky Lam and Icy Lee

While research on portfolio assessment (PA) has focused largely on the summative aspects of writing assessment, not much has been done to find out its formative potential. Drawing upon student questionnaires and student and teacher interview data, this paper aims to explore the formative functions of PA and, specifically, how the formative potential of PA can be better utilized in the EFL writing classroom. The findings of the study indicate that although students responded positively to the formative aspects of PA, they still preferred summative grading and tended to believe that grades were the best way to inform their current standards of writing. The paper ends with a discussion on how the formative aspects of PA could be strengthened and how PA can integrate teaching and assessment to benefit students’ learning of writing.

Introduction

A writing portfolio is a purposeful collection of student texts that demonstrates students’ effort, progress, and achievement in writing over a period of time (Weigle 2007). Since the mid-1980s, writing portfolios have been commonly used as an assessment tool in the L1 writing classroom (Belenoff and Dickson 1991). Their growing popularity is mainly due to the fact that portfolio assessment (PA) can serve different purposes at classroom level, one of which is to align teaching and assessment in order to facilitate productive learning (Huot 2002; Klenowski 2002). While PA traditionally has a prominent summative function of providing a summary of students’ writing achievements in the writing process, it also enables teachers to provide ongoing feedback that informs both teaching and learning (Gillespie, Ford, Gillespie, and Leavell 1996; Dysthe 2008). Although the dual functions of PA are not mutually exclusive, in exam-oriented contexts, it is likely that both teachers’ and students’ attention is drawn to the summative purpose of PA since PA can easily become another form of testing for teachers and a means to achieve better grades for students.

In writing assessment research, much more attention has been focused on summative assessment than on formative assessment. In PA research, the formative aspect is under-explored, especially in the EFL context. Specifically, there is scant research that highlights the formative potential of PA, and how it can effectively align teaching with assessment. Although there are studies that investigate PA in L1/L2 classrooms, these mainly focus on issues relating to implementation, benefits, and drawbacks (Hamp-Lyons and Condon 2000; Wong 2006) mostly based upon the anecdotal
experiences of teachers who have developed their own portfolio programmes in schools. These anecdotes have to be backed up by more empirical studies (Hamp-Lyons 1996), especially those that examine the impact of PA on student writing and how best PA can be used to strengthen its formative functions. To fill the existing research gaps, this study investigates students’ and teachers’ perceptions of the impact of PA on student writing in an EFL classroom, seeking to answer the following research questions:

1 What are students’ and teachers’ perceptions of the impact of the portfolio process on student writing?
2 What are students’ and teachers’ views of the summative and formative functions of PA?
3 How can PA be utilized to realize the formative functions of writing assessment?

The study
PA in a Hong Kong context

In Hong Kong, although PA has been recommended as one useful means of implementing assessment for learning and is given a high priority on the education reform agenda (Curriculum Development Council 2007), the idea of using writing portfolios is not popular with teachers (Bryant 2002). There are several reasons to account for the under-use of PA. First, the exam-oriented culture in Hong Kong has made it difficult for innovative pedagogical ideas, such as process pedagogy to flourish (Sengupta 1998; Hamp-Lyons 2007). Multiple drafting is considered a luxury because teachers are hard pressed to cover the syllabus to help students prepare for public exams. Second, most practising teachers have not received training in the implementation of school-based portfolio programmes. They tend to think that asking students to document all their drafts in a folder and grading it summatively amounts to PA. They have little idea how to utilize the formative functions of PA to enhance the teaching and learning of writing (Weigle op. cit.). Third, teachers, principals, and parents may not be convinced that such an assessment initiative will work in Hong Kong, unless there is established local research that testifies to its benefits.

Context and participants of study

To add to the existing research base on PA, the study was conducted in a post-secondary setting, namely a sub-degree programme in one Hong Kong university which offers courses on the disciplines of humanities and social sciences. A sub-degree normally takes two years to complete, with a possibility for articulation with a relevant undergraduate programme. In the foundation year (i.e. first year) of the sub-degree programme, students have to take general studies courses in order to prepare for the second-year major subjects, one of which is a 15-week core academic writing course with 45 contact hours. Data for the study were gathered from 31 students studying in one of the five classes of the academic writing course (taught by the first author), as well as four instructors that taught the other four classes. The 31 students, all non-English majors and Cantonese speakers, were aged 18–20 years at the time of the study. Their English language level varied from intermediate to lower intermediate, with an average IELT’S score of 5.5. Most of the students were weak in writing: four got a fail grade (i.e. ‘F’) in the writing paper of the school-leaving examination at Grade 11, 13 obtained an ‘E’ (a lower pass), and
the rest a ‘D’ (an upper pass). As for the four instructors, three of them had been in ELT for 6–10 years and the fourth had about one year of teaching experience at the time of the study. None of the 31 participating students or four instructors had used a portfolio approach before.

Portfolio procedure

The portfolio procedure adopted in the study comprised collection, selection, and reflection, as recommended by Hamp-Lyons and Condon (2000). Students were required to write multiple drafts for three different genres, namely narration, illustration, and persuasion, each of 500 words, and collect these drafts into their portfolios. Then students were expected to select two of their best final drafts, out of the three genres, for summative grading. They were also asked to write a reflective journal to evaluate their strengths and weaknesses in writing at the end of the portfolio programme. The students’ portfolios were graded based upon the summation of the scores of the best two pieces. Interim drafts were not graded, so the instructor could make use of formative assessment to support students’ writing development. Submission of the portfolios fulfilled an important summative function. Failure in the PA would render students ineligible for their preferred undergraduate programmes, and they would have to retake the academic writing course. To balance the summative aspect of PA, a number of formative strategies were adopted, including (1) ongoing teacher feedback, (2) conferencing, and (3) peer review. First, teacher feedback was given to students continuously throughout the portfolio process. In each tutorial, students were required to complete part of their drafts in class and then the instructor would read these initial drafts and give them immediate verbal feedback. Second, having finished their first drafts, students consulted the instructor for further comments in a one-to-one conference after class. Third, students participated in three peer review sessions and exchanged comments on their partners’ drafts. They gave written comments and then interacted with their peers orally for clarifications and suggestions. In order to foster a closer connection between teaching and assessment, the assessment criteria focusing on three main aspects (i.e. content, language, and organization) were made explicit and transparent to the students by the instructor before they started compiling their portfolios (Figure 1).

Data collection and analysis

The study relied on three main sources of data: (1) student questionnaires, (2) student interviews, and (3) instructor interviews. The questionnaire data reported in this article were drawn from a larger questionnaire survey administered to students at the end of the study. The student interview, which was semi-structured, was conducted in Cantonese at the end of the portfolio programme (see Appendix 1 for the student interview guide). Six students of different writing abilities were selected for the interview (based upon their writing paper results from the school-leaving public examination). To compare and contrast views from instructors and students, semi-structured interviews were conducted with the four instructors, also in Cantonese (see Appendix 2 for the teacher interview guide).

The questionnaire data were analysed by means of SPSS (Statistical Package for the Social Sciences), generating relevant descriptive data for the study.
Open-ended responses were categorized and summarized. The student and teacher interview data were translated and transcribed. The transcription data were read and re-read to identify themes pertinent to the research questions.

To investigate students’ perceptions of the impact of the portfolio process on their writing (in terms of motivation and writing ability), data from two questions from the questionnaire were reported (also see Tables 1, 2, and 3), focusing on motivation and writing ability, respectively:

- To what extent did PA enhance your motivation in writing? (A six-point scale question.)
- Do you think that the implementation of PA can help improve your writing ability? If ‘yes’, in what way does PA enhance your writing ability? (An open-ended question.)

Below student interview data are used to supplement the questionnaire data, while teacher interview data are used to provide the teachers’ perspective.

As revealed in Table 1, three benefits of PA were found to be the most important in influencing student motivation for writing (see boldface items in Table 1). They are Item 6 ‘more autonomy to choose their best work to be graded’ (4.8 out of 6), Item 8 ‘improvement in writing through conferencing’ (4.53 out of 6), and Item 11 ‘a supportive environment for enhancing writing’ (4.33 out of 6).
TABLE 1
To what extent did PA enhance your motivation in writing?

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Items</th>
<th>Mean</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1 I was engaged in the writing process.</td>
<td>3.83</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2 I was encouraged to write multiple drafts.</td>
<td>4.10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3 I had sufficient time to revise my writing.</td>
<td>4.20</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4 I could learn how to self-evaluate my writing.</td>
<td>3.80</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5 I could give comments and help correct my partner’s writing.</td>
<td>3.80</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6 I had more autonomy to choose my best work to be graded.</td>
<td>4.80</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7 I could improve my writing steadily through peer feedback.</td>
<td>3.80</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8 I could improve my writing through conferences.</td>
<td>4.53</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9 I enjoyed working with peers in preparing my portfolio work.</td>
<td>3.63</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10 I could develop my writing skills consistently with the implementation of PA.</td>
<td>4.10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>11 My instructor provided me with a good learning environment for enhancing my writing.</td>
<td>4.33</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The questionnaire used a six-point scale, with responses ranging from 6 ‘strongly agree’ to 1 ‘strongly disagree’.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Frequency</th>
<th>Per cent (%)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Yes³</td>
<td>25</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>No</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>n = 30</td>
<td>30</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

³ If ‘yes’, in what way does PA enhance your writing ability?

TABLE 2
Do you think that the implementation of PA can help improve your writing ability?

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Description</th>
<th>Frequency</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>a To improve accuracy of my writing.</td>
<td>9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>b To improve organization of my writing.</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>c To write with more and better ideas.</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>d To improve writing through adequate revision.</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>e To have sufficient time to write initial drafts.</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>f To have more autonomy in the writing process.</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>g PA is low stakes.</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>h To improve style of my writing.</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>i To enhance confidence in writing.</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>j To enhance motivation in writing.</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

In the study, students were allowed to select their best pieces for summative grading, and this was understandably a motivating factor because they were likely to obtain a better grade if they could choose their best work for assessment. As pointed out by a student,

With peer and teacher comments, I become better at choosing the best drafts, and after reflection and revision, I am sure my final drafts can score a better grade. (S3)

Likewise, one of the instructors pointed out that he could motivate students to write by giving them more flexibility in selecting the best pieces:

Definitely some students may not make a right choice, but students, including those less motivated ones, will work hard to select the best drafts to be graded. (Instructor 4)
As for conferencing, students found opportunities to discuss their drafts with the instructor highly motivating, as borne out in the interview data below:

I like the teacher consulting section most. It is because it motivates students to seek teachers’ feedback about their performances. Students and teachers can have a chance to exchange their ideas. It helps to improve teaching and learning. (S3)

The instructors, similarly, found that verbal feedback delivered at conferences could enhance student motivation.

If we want students to write better, conferencing is a good idea because through spontaneous discussion and clarification, students may have a better idea of how to fix their errors in writing. (Instructor 1)

Overall, students found that the portfolio-based classroom provided them with a supportive learning environment to learn writing. Through formative feedback from peers and instructor, students realized that the assessment environment in the portfolio programme was less threatening and much more supportive than in timed impromptu essay tests.

I know we can write better than before because in the past, we wrote the composition for the sake of passing the exam and we had only an hour to write it. Now, we have more time and support such as multiple drafting, peer feedback, conferences and so forth to complete the portfolio work. (S6)

When asked about whether the portfolio process could enhance their writing abilities, the majority of the students (83.3 per cent) responded positively (see Table 2).

For those students who answered ‘yes’, 31 open-ended responses were provided to explain their answers (see Table 3).

The two most significant perceived impacts of the portfolio process on students’ writing were (a) improvement of accuracy and (b) generation of more and better ideas in writing. One student commented that the portfolio approach had enhanced his writing ability, especially his grammatical accuracy:

Now, I think more carefully and critically, so that I can reduce the number of mistakes in my writing. My English proficiency will improve as well. (S4)

Another student remarked on the benefits of the portfolio process in enriching his ideas in writing:

I perceive the portfolio process as a very constructive learning experience and I have learnt a lot during the writing process. I think I have made more progress in ideas and organization. (S1)

The instructors also agreed that the portfolio process could enhance the accuracy of students’ writing and help them with generation of ideas:
Their work is obviously polished and refined in comparison with their in-class assessment. I can see that the number of their grammatical, punctuation and spelling mistakes drops enormously. (Instructor 4)

Having written so many pieces of work over the term, I can see students are making consistent progress in their compositions especially in terms of organization and ideas. (Instructor 3)

The student and instructor interview data showed that both students and instructors were appreciative of the formative aspects of PA, despite the predominant summative purpose that it served in the programme. Through the portfolio process, students became more aware of the differences between the traditional product-oriented classroom and the portfolio-based classroom, as well as the benefits the latter could bring:

Students’ choices are restricted in traditional writing assessment. We finish the work just for the sake of examination. At the end, students’ learning is very limited. (S5)

To me, portfolio assessment is a novelty. It is because in the past, we finished our writing very hurriedly and when the teacher returned the papers to us, we just received some brief comments. Unlike now, with teacher verbal feedback and peer comments, I feel much more confident in revising my drafts. (S5)

One student said that high-stakes writing assessment had left him no room for learning genres other than those tested in the exam:

I think we have to do a lot of drillings if we want good results. Other learning activities may be sacrificed. (S6)

Another student felt that portfolio-based assessment promoted high-order thinking in her writing:

I become more critical in generating ideas for each draft. In secondary school, as teachers adopted one-shot approach to writing, I was only expected to produce one draft and there wasn’t much room for deeper thinking. (S2)

This student further articulated that multiple drafting could make her produce better writing as she had sufficient time to revise and think about her work:

I have plenty of time to polish my drafts and go through various stages in the writing process now. In Secondary 5, I had to submit a piece of writing to my English teacher in a double lesson (about 80 minutes) and I think I didn’t learn much in those composition lessons. (S2)

The formative potential of PA was also highlighted by the instructors:

A big problem of traditional assessment now is that students do not learn, they are only concerned about the marks and they do not know how to improve. Portfolio assessment is different, because students receive ongoing feedback which is purely formative, and they have to improve based upon the comments they received. (Instructor 1)
Process writing can also benefit students as they may have more time to research on their topics and revise their earlier drafts which they can’t accomplish in traditional one-off assessment. (Instructor 3)

Specifically, instructors found delayed evaluation in the portfolio programme (where grades were given only to final drafts) beneficial:

I think we should not give students a mark during the process, we should only focus on giving comments so that the students will pay more attention to ways to improve themselves. They will be more eager in knowing how they can improve in their writing. (Instructor 2)

Another instructor stressed that the majority of students only focused on the grade instead of comments, so it was important to de-emphasize grades:

90 per cent of them focused on the grade, only proficient students would focus on my comments . . . (Instructor 1)

For students, although they were positive about the learning potential of PA, the idea of delayed evaluation did not readily sink in after 15 weeks’ exposure to the portfolio approach. When asked about delayed evaluation of PA, all six students interviewed said that they preferred their interim drafts to be graded. There seemed a belief among students that grades could motivate them to improve their writing. One student explained:

And I think grade can serve as a performance indicator. If I usually get grade B and suddenly get a D, then I know I have to work harder. (S4)

Another student said:

If I get a D and my classmates get a B, then I will have strong motivation to work harder. (S5)

Such preoccupation with grades is not surprising, given that these students were brought up in a norm-referenced assessment culture which accustomed them to comparing themselves with each other rather than with their own previous learning. Also, as the PA in the sub-degree programme was rather high stakes (a prerequisite for entry into the undergraduate programme), it seemed natural for students to attach so much importance to grades, even for interim drafts.

Nevertheless, students’ preferences for grades did not make them deny the benefits of the portfolio programme, particularly the balance it achieved between the summative and formative aspects of assessment:

I think we need formal assessment to demonstrate our ability to others in reality. On the other hand, I think informal assessment such as self-evaluation or peer review serves the purpose of learning. It is a daily practice which lets us better prepare for examination. (S4)

Overall, students felt that PA had a definite role to play in enhancing their learning (especially when compared with traditional writing assessment), and such assessment innovation could also equip them for summative examinations.
The study has demonstrated the formative potential of PA in empowering students' learning of writing. Although PA serves as a summative assessment tool, its dual summative–formative roles can be balanced in the writing classroom. To maximize the formative potential of PA, the following recommendations are made.

**Promoting learner choice**
Students in the study welcomed the opportunity to select their writing for summative assessment. Writing teachers can make learner choice a key component of the portfolio programme, for example, by asking students to choose their most improved draft or the most useful peer feedback to include in their portfolio, apart from the best two pieces for summative assessment. Such a focus on learner choice can help students develop a greater sense of ownership as well as autonomy in learning.

**Providing a supportive learning environment**
In the study, students felt that they benefited greatly from the supportive learning environment, which placed emphasis on ongoing teacher feedback, peer review, and conferencing. Such a learning environment stands in great contrast with traditional writing assessment, where writing is timed and one shot and where students and teacher work in isolation. It is important that formative strategies like peer review and conferencing are made regular features of the writing classroom, so that students can be supported in their learning process.

**Changing students’ ingrained attitudes about the primacy of grades**
Although students in the study did not fully appreciate the absence of grades on interim drafts, they were positive about the learning that the portfolio-based classroom provided. As pointed out by the instructors, grades could distract students from key issues in writing (Black, Harrison, Lee, Marshall, and Wiliam 2003), and so it is important for writing teachers to help students understand the benefits of delayed evaluation. Ingrained attitudes about the primacy of grades may be difficult to change, but with explicit explanation and repeated exposure, students’ mindsets can be changed. To ensure that assessment has a positive impact on learning, teachers could consider incorporating process elements in the assessment of portfolios, such as learner reflection and students’ overall effort.

**Providing teacher training in PA**
The portfolio approach was new to the instructors in the study, but their classroom experience showed that it was beneficial for students. More teacher development work is needed to help writing teachers understand the role of PA in the writing classroom and train them in the use of PA, so that PA can become an important part of their pedagogical repertoire.

**Conclusion**
The portfolio-based study demonstrates that summative assessment and formative assessment do not necessarily conflict with each other. While summative grades can provide students with an idea about where they are in their writing development, the formative aspects of the portfolio-based classroom can render summative grades more meaningful by making students understand their strengths and weaknesses and what they need to
do to improve their writing. Indeed, PA can go a long way towards balancing the summative and formative functions of writing assessment. It is hoped that more classroom-based PA research can be carried out to shed light on how PA can be used productively in the ESL/EFL context.

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References

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Appendix 1

Student interview guide
1 What do you think about traditional writing assessment?
2 To what extent do you think PA can enhance your motivation in writing?
3 In what way do you think PA can help improve your writing abilities?
4 How do you perceive the various functions of PA?
5 Do you think that PA can perform the dual functions of judging as well as supporting student writing?
Appendix 2

Teacher interview guide

1 How do you describe traditional writing assessment such as timed essay tests?
2 How do you describe alternative writing assessment such as portfolios?
3 Do you think that the portfolio process can enhance students’ motivation in writing?
4 Do you think that the portfolio process can enhance students’ writing abilities?
5 How do you perceive the summative and formative functions of PA?