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The Application of Portfolios to Assess Progress in Writing of EFL Students at Secondary Schools in Banda Aceh

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Abstract

Portfolios are one of the alternatives that can be used for writing assessment. Portfolios are not common in the curriculum. The lack of dissemination to language teachers have made portfolios disregarded. In order to encourage teachers to use them for assessment of writing, they need to have adequate information about portfolios, how they can be used for assessment as well as the benefits of using them for assessment. This study discusses why teachers do not use portfolios for assessing writing done by senior high school students. It focuses on English teachers at Islamic senior high schools in Banda Aceh and Aceh Besar, and also looks at alternatives to help teachers use portfolios for assessment. The 26 teachers who participated in this study were given a questionnaire in order to find out their background knowledge related to portfolios and the difficulties they faced as teachers. Data from the questionnaire was supported by observations made by the researcher whilst monitoring their teaching. The results of this study showed that a large percentage of teachers found it difficult to design a rubric/set of instructions for using portfolios for writing assessment, whilst from the observation it was revealed that the complexities of correcting portfolios discouraged them from using portfolios as one of their means of assessment.

Keywords: Portfolios, classroom assessment, competency based learning, school based syllabus.

1. INTRODUCTION

1.1 Background

In language teaching, assessment has become a major focus for how to assess the results of EFL language teaching by integrating the four language skills together. The fact is that the assessment systems used with most EFL teaching still focuses only on

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certain basic skills such as grammar, listening and reading (Waters, 2001). Despite the implementation of communicative language teaching, which integrates the four macro skills in language, the language assessment still follows traditional methods. The four language skills are assessed in isolation, and writing skills are not usually included in the formal tests like the summative tests which are normally used at the end of each semester in order to measure the results of what students have learned.

In addition, teachers frequently neglect the development of writing skills in the classroom. This is due to the fact that teaching and assessing of writing takes more time for teachers to conduct. Some English teachers claim that they rarely give writing practice in the classroom and tend to skip the topic when it comes to writing practice. Whilst in reality students are required by the curriculum to be able to write for certain purposes which have been set out in the syllabus basic competence indicators. The neglect of writing assessment is also believed to be one of the major causes for the inability of students to produce good written work, particularly academic writing. Therefore, it is very important to teach writing. Teachers need to be aware of the best ways to teach writing and to assess it as well due to the foregoing facts that a majority of students studying EFL find writing in English difficult. Based on the writer's general observation as a secondary school teacher, students at this level still consider building sentences, choosing colloquial words, and finding ideas as the most difficult factors handicapping them from producing good written products in the classroom. In the case of secondary schools in Banda Aceh, the portion of time teaching writing skills seems to be less than that for reading and speaking, this has lessened the interest of the students in learning to write well.

This situation has also been worsened by the lack of support from some teachers for teaching writing skills. Teachers have their own excuses for not providing proportional time allocation to teaching writing, this is mainly because of the time needed for teachers to do assessments. There are not many teachers who have effective ways of assessing students' writing. Portfolios can thus be an alternative solution to overcome this problem since they provide space for teachers to leave comments and feedbacks related to the students' writing. Moreover, students themselves can be stimulated to self-reflection and self-improvement through the teacher's feedback in their portfolios.

1.2 Research Questions

The introduction above about the situation faced by teachers in assessment of writing in EFL teaching at secondary schools in Banda Aceh, raises two questions:

1. What are the problems that make teachers not want to use portfolios for the assessment of writing done by EFL students?
2. What are teachers' perspectives toward using portfolios for the assessment of writing done by EFL students?

Portfolios are considered to be more applicable for assessment of writing done by EFL students than other methods of assessment like exams. Therefore, this study wants to find out the barriers that teachers face at school that deter them from implementing portfolio assessment, and to disseminate information on the implementation of portfolios for writing assessment of EFL students, as well as to reveal teachers' perspectives towards the introduction/implementation of portfolios for assessing writing. At the end it is hoped that teachers will consider portfolios as a way for

teacher-friendly assessment particularly for assessing writing done by EFL secondary school students in Banda Aceh.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1 Portfolio Assessment

2.1.1 Definition of a Portfolio

There are several definitions created by experts for a portfolio. First of all, Winch, et al. (2001, p. 272) define a portfolio as “a systematic collection of student’s work that is analyzed to show progress over the period of time with regard to specific instructional goals”. With portfolios, the collection of each student’s work can be in many forms such as reports, essays and other products which can provide accurate evidence for the learning achievements of that student. Students may also be allowed to decide for themselves the type of work and the topics they are going to work on which will further involve the student in a meaningful learning process.

Furthermore, a portfolio is also defined as the collection of a students’ work which is presented to her teacher for the purpose of evaluating the student (Salinger & Chittenden, 1994). Another definition from Cooper (1999, p. 3) states that a portfolio is “the collection of evidence that demonstrate skills, achievements, learning, and competencies”. So it is inferred that portfolios have a big potential to engage learners in the learning process since they are not only created for the purpose of scoring but also for monitoring the achievements of learners through evidence: products, feedback and commentaries, etc.

In terms of the use of portfolios for language assessment, some researchers have proved that portfolios have not only increased achievement by students but have also increased the motivation of students, since the assessments were done continuously and every teacher documented the progress of every student (Salinger & Chittenden, 1994). By documenting students work in portfolios, the teacher can easily review each student’s progress throughout the year without having to rely on memory. They have got the concrete data in the portfolios; this can also help teachers if they have to have discussions with students and/or their parents.

Portfolios, in fact, give many possibilities for teachers and for learners to actively participate and be involved in learning activities as well as to continuously monitor their learning progress. Portfolios give evidence as well as feedback of what each student has achieved. From their records, teachers and students can also reflect on what has been going on related to the teaching and learning process and students can learn to be more responsible and independent in learning. After all, a portfolio can be seen as a number of selected materials and work or products of a student which connects the teacher and the learner in order to find better ways of improving and achieving each student’s learning goals.

As an alternative for assessment, portfolios are very flexible to implement in the classroom as teachers can design them for a variety of purposes. Moreover, portfolios can be adapted and modified based on the needs of the student learners. Learners find portfolios appealing and engaging since they are actively involved in selecting their own work to be included. In addition, learners need not be penalized or low marked if

they cannot finish their work well the first time. Teachers can assist them to improve their work by directing their learning and giving comments and feedback.

2.1.2 The Roles of Teachers in Portfolio Assessment

Writing is considered as the most complicated skill for EFL learners to master, not only because of vocabulary and grammar but also because the writing styles of the two languages is usually different. Mostly, the Asian style of writing, particularly that of Indonesian writing, tends to follow a circling pattern (Ballard & Clanchy, 1984), in which more general things are put down first and then the writing leads into the particular topic or main idea not necessarily in any order. Meanwhile, English writing tends to follow a logical progression that leads to the main point.

Furthermore, Broadfoot (2007) argues that what makes students achieve better learning is when the teachers can help learners with what they need and avoid using grades or marks which can lead to less confidence if they get a lower mark. Psychologically, ranks, grades and marks seem not to motivate learners positively to progress in learning. Students tend to concentrate on their marks rather than on what they are learning. The result is their competence, intelligence, as well as critical thinking is not improving, since they are score oriented instead of content oriented. Moreover, teachers need to tell a learner what learning success is, which are not merely getting a higher score or grade but mainly is increasing their competence through the knowledge they gain. Teachers also need to help and guide learners using step by step learning, so that they have a clear idea on what to do next.

In relation to this issue, it is considered that portfolios can help teachers to assist students to improve their EFL writing. Therefore, it is suggested that EFL teachers in secondary schools in Banda Aceh should make more use of portfolios in teaching and assessing writing.

2.1.3 Portfolios in Assessing Writing

Many professionals in education are now focusing on the use of portfolios in assessment. Furthermore, Stiggins (1997) discusses the possibilities of applying performance assessment including portfolios as a tool in classroom assessment. Teachers have to consider how the students' achievements in writing as well as their progress from a low level of proficiency to a higher level of proficiency can be monitored and evaluated. In addition, teachers ideally should have a record of each student's progress in order to make a fair judgment about each student's achievements. Consequently, portfolios are considered a valuable aid to help teachers evaluate teaching and learning processes in the EFL classroom.

In regard to the assessment of writing, Winch, et al. (2001) say that mostly teachers assess the way students write different kinds of writing based on their experience about the content and the structure of different genre, the awareness of the target readers or the purpose of the writing, the control of the linguistics aspects in the writing, such as spelling, grammar and punctuation, the vocabulary used and the attitudes expressed in the writing. Furthermore, it is suggested that in assessing writing, teachers should be required to consider Bloom's Taxonomy of Educational Objectives (1956), by which teachers can understand the learning process of learners and facilitate learners with adequate assistance if they find any difficulties. In line with writing

assessments, Bloom's taxonomy suggests teachers assess different aspects, not merely syntax, vocabulary, and grammar but also the structure, order and content of the writing especially related to knowledge (the ability to recall ideas), comprehension (the ability to interpret and communicate ideas), application (the ability to apply information in a new context), analysis (the ability to expand and scrutinize information critically), synthesis (the ability to formulate ideas), and evaluation (the ability to make judgments on ideas, products and/or works).

Based on the elaboration above about how writing assessments should work, obviously, encouraging learners to create products and provide feedbacks on what they have produced are the actions that teachers must do with portfolios. Such a tool for assessment also allows learners to do retrospective self-assessment which is considered to further stimulate their independence in learning (Stiggins, 1997; Broadfoot, 2007; Manning & Manning, 1996). Moreover, self-assessment from portfolios will promote learners to reflect to what they have learned and how to continue their learning as well as to learn from their weaknesses. This appears to be good for both teachers and learners, in the case of stimulating self-learning cultures in which learners will focus more on knowledge or competence rather than grades or ranks. Consequently, portfolios can gradually increase learners' achievements in writing since they can also learn independently from their own work which has been commented on by teachers. Besides, for low competence learners, teachers' comment will not make them feel so down as marks, scores, or grades do, since there need to be no rank which indicates how good or poor they are (Brady & Kennedy, 2005).

Furthermore, the roles of portfolios for assessment of writing can be important in building a learning community. This means that by having portfolios as the tool of assessment, educational institution can provide reliable records and evidence if asked by the community or the parents of learners about the progress of learning of their children (Shohamy, 2001). In this case, portfolios are the trusted results and documents which can provide evidence of continuing improvement in the skills of the learners. Starting from that point, parents as well as learners and teachers can evaluate the things that need to be improved and revised in terms of teaching and learning practice. Clearly, these documents will implicitly build responsibility for parents as well as learners and teachers towards their job.

2.2 Strengths and Weaknesses of Portfolios in Assessment of EFL Writing

2.2.1 The Benefits of Using Portfolios

To help teachers get a more in depth understanding of the value of using portfolios for assessment of learning EFL writing, it is worthwhile to look at the positive and negative sides of them. Portfolios are considered to contribute much benefit not only for teachers but also for learners and parents as portfolios provide evidence about progress in learning through the teaching and learning process. From portfolios teachers can monitor and reflect on whether their approaches to teaching have been effective or not (Paris & Ayres, 1994). Portfolios can help teachers develop their professionalism as well, since they can learn and invent new techniques from the evidence they find in students' portfolios (Riggs & Sandlin, 2000). Besides, teachers can also have opportunities to collaborate with other English teachers and to design

their own authentic assessments which they can create based on contextual needs (Khattri, Kane & Reeve, 1998).

For learners, they can each learn and improve their skills from their own collection in their portfolio which has been commented on by their teachers and also they can learn from making comparisons with the portfolios of other students in their year or even with those from previous years. Portfolios encourage learners' self-assessment which leads them to perform independent learning and portfolios provide more chances to develop learner's skills (Phye, 1997), and to apply them in real life, for example when they are doing a project either individually or in a group they will need to do research in the field for their project (depending on what areas their project is in, such as culture), and they will need to collaborate and communicate with other people in order to gain data. This will increase the learner's social and communication skills as well.

Furthermore, Khattri, Kane, & Reeve (1998) also mention that portfolios give more opportunities for parents to monitor their children's learning progress from constructive feedbacks and comments on their portfolios. Besides, having portfolios as a part of assessment can involve parents in their children's education which is considered to be beneficial for the students' learning environment. Brady & Kennedy (2005, p. 64) claim that there are several additional benefits of portfolios:

Portfolios provide tangible illustration of students' work that can be linked to outcomes, increase the teachers' knowledge of the students and students' own self-knowledge, provide opportunities for teacher-student collaboration in the selection of entries, improves the quality of teaching by integrating assessment and teaching/learning, enables students to self-assess and reflect upon their own learning, enhances students ownership of their own learning, cultivates the notion of individual differences in learning (and) facilitates the accountability of teachers and schools. (Brady & Kennedy, 2005, p. 64)

In relation to competency based learning especially, Cooper (1999, p. 47) provides some advantages of portfolio assessment. Portfolios provide a structure for documenting the process of learning alongside the outcomes of training. This documenting of the learning process can be used to help offset the difficulties that occur where an attempt is made to represent higher professional skills in terms of individual discrete competencies. Portfolios store evidence so that it may be more conveniently and more expertly assessed. Moderation issues become more straightforward because portfolios can be easily reviewed by different persons at different times. Portfolio based assessment reduces the need for assessment training and the associated costs and complexity (Cooper, 1999, p. 47).

From the elaboration above on the advantages of portfolios, they can obviously enable better implementation in teaching EFL learners' writing skills in a context like Banda Aceh. The fact is that most assessment of English learning still uses multiple choice systems with computerized correction which is not suitable for assessing EFL learners' writing skills. The involvement of parents can also make a significant contribution to the development of their children's education instead of only the teachers and school being responsible.

2.2.2 The Limitations of Portfolios

Despite the advantages offered by portfolios, some professionals still see limitations in applying this kind of assessment since there are such broad aspects to be assessed because the teachers have to consider all aspects such as the mechanics of writing, the grammar, the styles of writing, and the communicative ideas as well as having to assess large amounts of writing (Khatti, Kane, & Reeve, 1998). In addition to these, Phye (1997) mentions other issues that make teachers reluctant to use portfolios such as the additional budget that might be needed for portfolios. For example, to provide a large amount of paper and other materials needed for projects. Another constraint is related to the time needed for evaluation. It is indisputable that evaluating and providing feedbacks to portfolios can be very time consuming for teachers.

3. METHODOLOGY

3.1 Participants

The 26 participants for this study were English teachers who were participating in a one-week in-service teacher training program conducted by the Provincial Department of Education in Aceh related to the implementation of a new curriculum being introduced for English, i.e. Curriculum 2013, which puts authentic assessment as an important objective. All the teachers came from Islamic senior high schools (*Madrasah Aliyah Negeri* or MAN) spread throughout the city of Banda Aceh and the encircling district of Aceh Besar. Furthermore, the researcher for this study was the teacher trainer for the in-service training assigned by the Provincial Department of Education (*Dinas Pendidikan Provinsi Aceh*) to disseminate and train teachers related to the implementation of Curriculum 2013. Besides being the teacher trainer, the researcher was also an English teacher at a senior high school (*Sekolah Menengah Atas* or SMA) in Banda Aceh. It was therefore easy for the researcher to observe the teachers and find out information from the participants.

3.2 Questionnaire

The emphasis for this research was on finding out the major problems of EFL teachers in using portfolios for assessment in teaching writing to EFL students. The researcher limited the study to EFL teachers from Islamic senior high schools in Banda Aceh and Aceh Besar. Each school sent one English teacher to a one week training program in Banda Aceh. The researcher found that most of the teachers had similar problems and reasons why they did not emphasize writing practices in their classes. Moreover, the participants in this study had previously discussed writing related issues in English language teaching at school. Regarding to the respondents, all 26 teachers selected and sent to the in-service training program were involved in this research.

To gather the information about the benefits and drawbacks of using portfolios, each participant was given a set of rubrics/instructions and a questionnaire with open ended questions. The questions were designed to retrieve the information needed for the study from the teachers (Dörnyei, 2003). By using a questionnaire as a survey

instrument, the teachers should not feel intimidated, threatened or scrutinized so the information given should be realistic and reliable, not fake or counterfeit.

The data was then analyzed and described qualitatively to learn about the problems that the teachers felt they faced in using portfolios as well as their neglect of teaching English writing skills and of using portfolios in their teaching of writing. The writer was then able to recommend further action to improve the situation.

3.3 Observations

In addition to the questionnaires, the researcher also observed the participants during their practice teaching sessions whilst doing their in-service training. Each participant was given a chance to perform a mini-teaching assignment which covered the opening until the closing, including the processes of assessment of their teaching. During this time, the researcher was able to find out the extent of teacher understanding and mastery towards authentic assessments with a focus on using portfolios and portfolio assessment.

4. RESULTS OF STUDY

Based on the results collected from the answers to the questionnaire and the observations, it was revealed that most of the participants claimed there were difficulties in using portfolios for assessment of writing skills. The findings are elaborated below.

4.1 Questionnaire

Regarding teacher's previous knowledge towards authentic assessment using portfolios, the data showed that most teachers had only a superficial understanding towards authentic assessment techniques and only a few knew much about using portfolios.

Regarding the problem of why teachers are not using portfolios for assessment of students' writing assignments, the participants gave quite similar reasons: the biggest problem appeared to be how to design a good system for evaluation or assessment.

A number of 19 participants (73 %) said they 'understand' the requirements for good assessment, only two participants said they 'strongly understand' about good assessment requirements and five said they had 'little understanding'. In the case of process, there were 17 out of 26 opted 'understand' for their answer, while other eight teacher said 'less understand' and only one who answered 'do not know at all', in which the portion of participants answer is the same as the question about the instrument used in authentic assessment.

The following items was about mechanism and procedure, in which many respondents chose 'understand' rather than 'less understand' (57% and 42%). Interestingly, for the question about scoring or marking processes, three respondents left it empty, a number of 12 (46%) respondents said they 'understand', nine chose 'little understanding' and only one chose 'did not know at all'.

For the question about designing rubrics, i.e. evaluation/examination instructions, about 17 respondents said that they 'understand' rubric design. About nine teachers

chose 'partly understand' while none chose 'highly understand' and 'do not know at all'. Similarly, for the question about designing items for a rubric, the participants gave similar percentage as the previous one viz 65% and 34% for the same choices; 'understand' and 'partly understand'. With the question about using rubrics for evaluating writing, 11 teachers said that they used them 'frequently', eight chose 'seldom', six chose 'never' used rubrics for assessing writing, and one selected 'always' used them.

Related to portfolios, most of the participants, about 21 of them, chose 'understand', none chose 'did not know at all', only two chose 'highly understand' and three selected 'partly understand'. However, although 80% said they understand about portfolios, nearly half (about 12 respondents or 46%) 'seldom' chose to use this form of assessment to monitor the progress of their students whilst four 'never' assessed their students through portfolios. Meanwhile, nine 'frequently' used portfolios and only one 'always' portfolios to monitor students' learning progress.

When asked about the need to keep students work as portfolios, there was agreement amongst the teachers that it was necessary to have portfolios to monitor students' learning progress. A number of 12 respondents said it was 'highly necessary', and 13 said 'necessary', one answered 'not really necessary', and none said 'unnecessary'.

Finally, the participant teachers gave various reasons on the use of portfolios. A number of 13 respondents said portfolios could be used as authentic documents for teachers to show parents in case they wanted to know about their children's learning progress or when the parents complained about the results of their studies; seven said that portfolios could be used as an instrument to monitor each students' learning progress and one said that portfolios were for teachers' administrative use only.

4.2 Observations

In addition to using the questionnaire, the researcher also spent one week observing the participant teachers to study their understanding of authentic assessment in general, and of portfolios in particular. During these observations, the teachers were also asked in person about their understanding of assessment, the frequency and the way in which they designed portfolios. Similar questions to those written in the questionnaire were also asked of the respondents in person.

In addition, the researcher also observed the teachers performance during teaching practices. During the training, the teachers were required to perform teaching practice by showing all steps they had stated in their lesson plans as well as the assessment they had proposed, in this case they were required to do authentic assessments, as recommended in the current curriculum, Curriculum 2013.

From these observations, it was found that only six teachers out of the 26 were able to show quite reasonable understanding of authentic assessment practice, in this case using portfolios. Meanwhile, the other 20 teachers were still incapable of using this form of assessment. Moreover, there was one teacher who refused to try to perform, due to his incapability of showing his competency.

The problems found in terms of portfolios assessment appeared to be related to various issues. A number of 17 teachers said they found difficulty in designing the systems for assessing writing. Their difficulties appear to be caused by the unfamiliarity of teachers in describing the competency indicators to be used in assessment/evaluation.

Other problems concerned the type of scale to be used. Two teachers said that they felt portfolios as a complicated assessment when they had to associate it to the topic that they taught and to the marking processes.

Moreover, the six teachers who were considered the best when compared to the other 20 teachers were still confused in terms of whether they could still use the same assessment systems and items for the whole topic, and if not, they question the strategies that could be used to create different marking systems for different purposes. Meanwhile, the teacher who did not perform said that he did not have anything to show since this form of assessment was completely new for him, and he did not understand it at all.

4.3 Discussion

Based on the results from the questionnaires and the observations, there were large differences between the findings from the questionnaires and observations. The data analyzed from the questionnaires showed that more teachers were confident about the application of authentic assessment in their teaching, especially assessment for competency in writing. More teachers even claimed that they frequently used evaluation scoring to assess writing, and they were also quite sure that they understood about authentic means of assessment and evaluation for portfolios, including the design of evaluation systems.

In contrast, many problems were found in the teachers' actual practice when using authentic assessment systems. During the observation, it was found that most of the participants failed to understand the authentic assessment systems, particularly those related to portfolios for assessment of writing. More problems were discovered related to synchronizing the competency indicator with the questions or items asked in tasks/exams so that teachers can specifically evaluate students comprehension related to the learning objectives based on the competency indicators. The participants further had difficulties in describing the rubrics which gives criteria for scoring. Other difficulties were associated with the lack of understanding about the scoring and marking systems in authentic assessment because it mostly uses a rubric for the criteria of giving marks. The last problem found was related to the portfolio design in relation to the topics taught and tasks given.

Although the researcher said that the teachers in in-service training could leave the questionnaire anonymous, as it did not contribute to their final scores, there were significant differences between the results of the questionnaire and the field observations. This might have been due to the assumption by the teachers that the questionnaire results were to be part of the assessment for them to pass the training.

4.4 Suggestions and Recommendations

From the results discussed above, it seems true that portfolios can play a significant role in monitoring learners' progress in writing skills. The problems that might still occur is the information and knowledge that teacher should have regarding the methods for portfolio assessment. Following is one idea about how portfolios can be used in secondary schools in Banda Aceh and Aceh Besar.

Considering the current curriculum also allows classroom assessment, it seems that portfolios are necessary for assessment. Furthermore Safari (2004) explains that

through classroom assessment teachers are able to monitor learners' development in learning by assessing them more often. Safari therefore adds that portfolios can meet this need since they can be used frequently either for summative or formative assessments.

In terms of assessing writing, the curriculum (Kementrian Pendidikan Nasional, 2013) suggests some aspects to be assessed with several criteria to be met by teachers; they are fluency, grammar, vocabulary, and spelling. In fluency, teachers see the domain of students' learning and understanding in expressing the ideas by using simple and compound sentences. In the area of grammar, teachers see the grammatical errors that students make in writing. Meanwhile, in the areas of vocabulary and spelling, teachers see the variety of words used by students in their writing properly and appropriately, as well as their correct spelling. The following is an example of portfolios offered by Safari (2004, p. 13) in the classroom assessment based on the current English curriculum in Indonesia which has been translated for this essay.

Table 1. Example of Portfolio Assessments.

EXAMPLE OF PORTFOLIO ASSESSMENTS											
The collection of monthly products											
Subject :											
Competency :											
Class/semester:											
No/ students' names	Daily work					Daily assessment			Summative	Mean	Comments
	1	2	3	4	...	1	2	...			
Sara	8	9	7	8	...	8	9	...		8.17	Good
Bobi	7	6	5	5	...	5	6	...		5.67	Fair

Explanations: Include written tests, observations/actions.

The scoring is based on scores as follows:

- Very Good (A) : 8.5 – 10
- Good (B) : 7.0 – 8.4
- Fair (C) : 5.5 – 6.9
- Poor (D) : 4.0 – 5.4
- Very Poor (E) : 0.0 – 3.9

In order to improve these students (for example Sara is expected to achieve A next time and Bobi is expected to be able to reach B as a minimum or if possible to reach A next time), teachers might diagnose the skill areas in which competency is difficult for each of them, so that their teachers can assist them in that area. The following Table 2 is an example of a diagnosis for the above portfolios.

Table 2. Wrong answers/aspects produced by students.

No	Student	Work/ Assignments				Daily Assessment		Comments
		1	2	3	4	1	2	
1	Sara	3, 10	8	4,6,9	3,9	5,9	10	Need to read the materials before and after learning

Table 2 continued...

2	Bobi	4,7,10	3,5,7, 8	3,4,5, 6,9	2,3,5, 8,9	2,4,5 6,7,9	5,7 8,10	Two competencies do not have good mastery. Need more reading and practice
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Explanations: the numbers in the table above are the questions that had wrong answers and that need to be discussed individually with each student. If necessary the teachers might involve parents in the discussions. From the above techniques it is believed that each learner's capability in comprehending the materials can be accelerated optimally, so that they are more quickly able to achieve a higher level of competency.

Regarding to teaching the implementation in language teaching by referring to the national curriculum and a slight modification in planning and designing them in writing, the use of portfolios in teaching English as a second or foreign language seems to be able to measure learners' ability more effectively than standardized tests which commonly measure general knowledge and can also be influenced by other factors such as culture, psychology, and other external factors existing around them (Winch, et al., 2001). Winch, et al. (2001) further say that in EFL contexts, English assessment is mostly conducted in written tests in which learners are frequently disadvantaged by the system, for example when they have to perform written tests that have been formatted in certain ways such as multiple choices, or close and open ended short answers in which the answers are not flexible to express their ideas but are based on answer keys. This seems unfair for learners since each learner may interpret and write in a different way. Meanwhile, with portfolios, learners can be encouraged to write in many ways. And in certain circumstances where the student's English is still very basic, the teacher can allow learners to mix English and their mother tongue in their writing. So, there is much more flexibility with encouraging techniques that teacher can create when using portfolios.

Obviously, the current English curriculum in Indonesia, especially in Banda Aceh and Aceh Besar, provides a big opportunity for teachers to implement portfolio assessment in teaching writing. The new syllabus leaves it up to teachers and school staff whether they are willing to grasp this opportunity or not.

In fact, in Banda Aceh, portfolios are not commonly implemented in assessing writing despite their being recommended in the national curriculum. Most teachers said that is not easy to use portfolio assessments since they are not familiar with it. In fact, assessment using portfolios are not as difficult as they think. All teachers need to do is to figure out what kind of portfolios they want to design, and for what purposes. Masters and Forster (1996) as quoted in Winch, et al. (2001, p. 275) suggest three ideas that teachers need to consider in planning and designing portfolios for teaching purposes (Winch, et al. 2001, p. 275):

- Working portfolio: collection of work day-by-day.
- Documentary portfolio: collection of work for assessment which documents the processes used to develop items.
- Show portfolio: where only a student's best work is included.

Based on these ideas, it seems that portfolios are quite practical for gauging students learning achievements. Teachers can modify portfolios based on their needs. If teachers use portfolios for formative assessments, teachers can design working portfolios which describe learners work during learning progress meeting-by-meeting, and the products can be kept as records. Furthermore, the design of the portfolios can

be changed based on the needs and the responses of the learners especially when a particular learner needs more clarification and assistance for their work. If desirable, teachers could permit learners to mix EFL work with work in their primary language (i.e. Indonesian; n.b. for many Acehnese their first language is Acehnese).

Furthermore, portfolios are very flexible to plan; teachers can create topics related to local conditions with adjustment for points to be assessed. For example, topics can be about current issues in the community or about local culture and other relevant topics. This will make it easier for teachers to find resources.

However, before planning portfolios there are several factors that teachers need to take into account, such as why we need portfolio collections, whether we have time to evaluate them and how to give comments on the work in them, how to make sure that the work is done individually or in a group, where the portfolios are to be stored, at school or with students, and what happens if learners lose their portfolios – what can teachers do (Winch, et al., 2001, p. 276). These things might happen so teachers should prepare in advance when designing their portfolio program. When teachers have considered these issues they will be able to design portfolio programs and use them for assessment.

This way both teachers and students may benefit, particularly in student-centered classrooms. That is where the assessment is the so called student-centered classroom assessment (Stiggins, 1997), where the students are more responsible for their own work and they decide what is appropriate for them. If teachers give more freedom to learners to make decisions, they will learn to manage in their own ways. This also assists teachers in terms of stimulating learners' independent learning.

Regarding the application of portfolios in assessment of writing skills, teachers might provide some samples for students to choose as models depending on whether they are working in groups or individually. The entries that each student collects in their individual portfolios can be in the form of samples of writing from classroom activities, students' choice of writing from different genres, brief evaluations of books read, oral interviews, stories for storytelling, projects or exhibition work, responses to open-ended questions, language activities from a range of curriculum areas e.g., cloze tests, and poetry (Winch, et al. 2001; Butler & McMunn, 2006; Paris & Ayres, 1994).

5. CONCLUSIONS

Finally, the use of portfolios for assessment of writing competency is an alternative way to measure learners' achievements in EFL contexts such as in Banda Aceh. Portfolios are one of the alternatives for assessment of EFL skills as stated in the new English curriculum being implemented in Indonesia. Although teachers have heard about this form of assessment before, the fact is that because of the lack of dissemination of how to apply portfolios in language assessment, English language teachers often overlook the use of portfolios. Portfolios actually bring many benefits to language learning, especially for learning EFL writing skills.

The benefits offered by portfolios as well as the flexibility in designing them will broaden teachers' minds for conceptualizing the teaching of writing. Teachers have to consider that for writing assessment they need to give more chances to their learners to produce their own work, in this case: writing. Therefore, to assess writing skills, teachers need to consider several aspects in which one of them is the flow of ideas. This

aspect cannot be evaluated if teachers do not have the products of the students' writing to assess, as in portfolios.

Despite the benefits of portfolios, teachers are restricted with knowledge on how to evaluate the writings and how to create rubrics/instructions as well as how to determine the components for evaluation and their individual values. However, these limitations are small by comparison with the positive values to be gained. Teachers can encourage learners' to actively participate in learning. For learners, they can be more responsible for their own learning which leads them to be more independent. Learners can also be encouraged to learn positively since they will not be penalized for wrong answers. The ideas given by the experts about portfolios have touched deeply the essence of the philosophy of assessment, in which assessment is believed to bring positive changes or improvements by learners since portfolios not only use a rank or grade but they can be used to assess the overall competency of each individual learner. Above all, it is considered that portfolios will introduce a new paradigm for assessment of EFL writing skills.

The researcher expects that she will be able to generate much more information with much more detail about the implementation of portfolios for EFL learners at secondary schools in Banda Aceh through conducting further research on portfolios and also by conducting training of teachers focusing only on authentic assessment of students EFL writing skills using portfolios. She also feels more research needs to be done into effective systems for evaluation of writing.

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