



Portfolio based assessment and learner autonomy practice among ESL students

Nurbaizura Baharom ^{a 1} , Azianura Hani Shaari ^b 

^a *School of Languages, Civilization and Philosophy, Universiti Utara Malaysia, Malaysia*
^b *Fakulti Sains Sosial dan Kemanusiaan, Universiti Kebangsaan Malaysia, Malaysia*

APA Citation:

Baharom, N., & Shaari, A.H. (2022). Portfolio based assessment and learner autonomy practice among ESL students. *Journal of Language and Linguistic Studies*, 18(Special Issue 2), 1289-1305.

Submission Date:18/10/2021

Acceptance Date:25/12/2021

Abstract

This research is administered according to the research objectives and questions that govern its parameters. It examines how portfolio assessment implemented in an English proficiency course promotes learner autonomy among Malaysian tertiary learners. A case study approach has been selected as it provides a suitable context to accomplish the aim of the study. To achieve the objective of the study, Sociocultural theory (SCT) and a reconceptualized construct of learner autonomy are adapted. This paper will discuss the use of portfolio assessment and its development of the psychological dimension of autonomy among English as Second language (ESL) tertiary students of different ethnicity. In this pilot study, data was collected from two students via background questionnaire form, face to face interview, and observation field notes. Participants were selected through purposeful, and homogeneous sampling. It is found that these participants experienced the motivational and affective sub dimensions of the psychological aspect of autonomy while completing their portfolio assessment. Findings from this study highlighted how portfolio assessment enables the participants to practice autonomous learning in its different psychological sub dimensions due to conditions such as self – confidence, portfolio assessment process, portfolio requirements, teacher factor, and the identification of strengths and weaknesses. It is hoped that the findings would benefit the ESL instructors and learners in their attempt to understand and consequently improve the teaching and learning of the writing skills by using portfolio assessment and provides insight into the practice of autonomous learning among learners of different cultural background.

Keywords: Language Assessment; Portfolios; Portfolio Assessment; Learner Autonomy; Sociocultural Theory

1. Introduction

In order to determine and improve learners' ability in language learning, their development and performance are usually assessed by their respective language instructors through different types of assessment. Language assessment is the process of gathering information about learners' language knowledge or ability so that it can be described and analysed, usually for the purpose of making various decisions. This type of assessment delivers different purposes, resulting in placement assessment, progress assessment, also known as short – term achievement assessment, achievement assessment and proficiency assessment (Brown & Hudson, 1998; Brown, 2004).

¹ Corresponding author.

E-mail address: zura@uum.edu.my

Where writing is concerned, Othman (2010) posited that student's acquisition of literacy expressed through writing is considered as one of the important tasks in learning at school, for the acquisition of written literacy could serve as the "vehicle of learning" and also "a means of achieving other goals as well" (p.1). In the context of English as a second language (ESL), Weigle (2002), earlier stated that effective writing ability is becoming much more important for ESL students because of the increasing role of writing instruction in L2 language education. In the Malaysian ESL context, even then, it seems that writing in English language has always been a problem to students (Abbas et al., 2005). This also seems to be the case for Malaysian students at the tertiary level, demonstrated in several researches with Malaysian tertiary students as participants. These researches conducted by Ismail et al., (2012); Ong and Maarof (2013); Ashrafzadeh and Nimechisalem (2015) did indicate that writing in English language could be problematic to ESL Malaysian tertiary students. In addressing the issue, Ong and Maarof (2013) for example, agreed that the changing educational needs and approaches of the present-day classroom requires the exploration of different approaches, methods and pedagogies of teaching and learning. According to them, because of the lack of interest and ability in the writing skills of the majority of the Malaysian students, a more interactive pedagogy in teaching writing is seen as a suitable alternative to replace the traditional method of teaching writing. In the context of writing and assessment, Hamp – Lyons and Condon (2000) earlier on suggested that more programs at every level, college level included, are increasingly acknowledging and responding to the shortcomings of the traditional, holistic assessment. This resulted in the repositioning from the traditional, holistic assessment of student writing onto portfolio-based assessment. In the context of this research, even then, tertiary educators in Malaysia had already begun to focus to alternative assessment and non – traditional assessment such as portfolio assessment as the instrument to gauge and improve students' academic performance (Mohd Saad & Mohd Noor, 2007). In addition to that, the implementation of portfolio assessment is also received positively by the Malaysian students (Fook & Sidhu, 2010). It is also a notion repeatedly highlighted that the emphasis on learner centred approaches over teacher centred ones has enabled portfolios to become one of the innovative language learning tools in teaching writing. With the right approach by English instructors, portfolios provide an important potential in writing instructions as learners can benefit from them as tools in the writing process (Farrah, 2018). Recently, the use of portfolios as an alternative in assessments has become increasingly popular due to the current development in the English as a Foreign Language (EFL) field (Hakim & Srisudarso, 2020).

Portfolio assessment is a contrast to the traditional assessment of indirect testing and direct test of writing which is based on the positivist paradigm that emphasizes the standardizing of the testing instrument and focuses at whether learner achieve a high score. It is different because it customizes the evaluation to fit a specific local context and in turn, is interested in looking at how learners achieve a high score (Murphy & Grant, 1996; Hamp – Lyons & Condon, 2000). In addition, this assessment advocates strong support for many of the most effective teaching and learning strategies in composition, which could fit the ESL tertiary education level's requirement of written literacy. Researchers such as Javanmard and Farahani (2012) highlight that traditional assessment methods do not involve the students in their learning, teaching and assessment process as there is no direct or indirect connection between them, but portfolio assessment provides students the opportunities to be actively involved in the learning, teaching and assessment. Hence, portfolio assessment is seen as an assessment that allows the students more autonomy, enabling them to become more assertive and independent thinkers. It also enables the students to monitor their own learning progress, control their learning and reflect on their learning process and progress. According to Farrah (2018), portfolio writing is seen as a motivating tool to learners due to its collaborative nature and learner centred approach. It also promotes autonomous learning by permitting learners to do the following: revise their work, monitor own progress, self-evaluate and identify own strengths and weaknesses in the process.

Based on some of the advantages of portfolio assessment discussed above, it is conceivable to say that portfolio assessment is also the type of alternative assessment that embraces and encourages autonomous learning. Portfolio assessment is seen as a type of assessment that could enhance learners' opportunities to do more in their learning and be responsible and in control of their tasks not just in the classroom but also when they are on their own. However, despite reported effectiveness of portfolio assessment in encouraging autonomous learning, minimal research attention has been directed toward the understanding of the relationship between portfolio assessment and learner autonomy especially in English as a second language (ESL) writing research involving learners of different ethnicity as demonstrated by the studies discussed in the literature review concerning portfolio assessment and learner autonomy. Thus, this pilot study will demonstrate how portfolio assessment designed for an intermediate course at tertiary level promotes the development of autonomous learning in ESL learners of diverse educational and cultural background. Specifically, the objective discussed in this paper is to identify the contributing conditions that lead to learners' practice of psychological autonomy in their portfolio assessment process. In sum, this study will be adapting from Sociocultural theory (SCT) and Murase (2007, 2015)'s reconceptualised construct of learner autonomy as frameworks to understand how portfolio assessment promotes the development of autonomous learning and the type of psychological autonomy practised by these ESL participants of diverse educational, and cultural or ethnic background.

2. Literature Review

2.1 Language Assessment

In the past, to assess the effects of teaching on students learning a second language, traditional methods such as paper and pencil tests and performance tests were carried out. Such tests were applied by teachers to determine the outcome or product of learning (Tavakoli & Amirian, 2012). However, recent years have seen alternative assessment techniques garnering much interest. These alternative assessment techniques strive for a more democratic and task-based methods of evaluation to test learners' language proficiency as well as evaluating both process and product of learning. Furthermore, opportunities for authentic, active language learning and a much more detailed evaluation of student's progress offered by this type of assessment have made the shift onto alternative assessment garnering support not only from the western educators, but also from their eastern counterparts. This also includes the acceptance of portfolio-based assessment to assess students' language performance (Moradan & Hedayati, 2012).

2.2 Portfolio

To better understand this type of performance assessment, it is important to understand what portfolio is in the context of language learning. Moya and O'Malley (1994) defined portfolio as "a collection of a student's work, experiences, exhibitions, self – ratings (i.e. data)" (p.2). In terms of writing assessment, it is seen as a collection of written texts prepared for different purposes over a certain period of time" (Weigle, 2002). Hamp – Lyons and Condon (2000) listed the nine characteristics of a well-designed portfolio. In their opinion, a portfolio which is designed with more of the listed characteristics will provide richer and more useful information, thus making it a well-designed, effective assessment tool. The exclusion of some of the characteristics however, will make it a less effective one. The nine characteristics include: collection, range, context richness, delayed evaluation, selection, student – centred control, reflection and self- assessment, growth along specific parameters and development over time. Among the nine characteristics, Hamp – Lyons and Condon considered collection, reflection, and selection as the most important components of a portfolio.

Lo (2010) summed that past research in foreign language learning attempted by Delett, Barnhardt and Kevorkian (2001); Banfi, (2003); Yang, (2003) and Allen (2004) have all revealed portfolios to be an effective instrument to combine pedagogy, learning and evaluation while simultaneously promoting critical thinking and learner autonomy. Recent literatures have also shown the ongoing interest on portfolios. However, these literatures look mainly at the effects, benefits and challenges of a writing portfolio and participants' perception and attitude towards the writing portfolios (Farrah, 2018; Askarzadeh & Mall – Amiri, 2018; Saavedra – Jeldres & Espinoza, 2019; Ghoorchaei & Tavakoli, 2020).

2.3 Portfolio Assessment

Scholars discussing portfolio assessment provided various definitions to explain it. Moya and O'Malley (1994, p.2) described it as “the procedure used to plan, collect, and analyse the multiple sources of data maintained in the portfolio”. Hamp – Lyons and Condon (2000) on the other hand defined it as “a collection of writing that contains a multiplicity of texts and that incorporates information about the writing context, not merely the writing itself” (p.118).

Many studies on portfolio assessment are focused on the subjects of portfolio assessment within the first language context, perceptions, reflections and experiences of teachers within the first language context. (Singh et al., 2015). Previous research on portfolio assessment has also seen the main focus directed on students' and teachers' perceptions of its benefits and how it affects students' motivation as well as general writing abilities (Lam, 2014). There are also numerous empirical studies conducted on portfolio assessment and portfolio as an assessment tool in second and foreign language teaching and learning. These literatures are mostly on the benefits and drawbacks of using portfolio as an assessment (tool) in the writing classroom: (Ghoorchaei et al., 2010; Hassaskhah & Sharifi, 2011; Hashemian & Azadi, 2011; Tabatabaei & Assefi, 2012; Azarfam & Kalajahi, 2012; Tavakoli & Amirian, 2012; Javanmard & Farahani, 2012; Singh & Samad, 2013; Roohani & Taheri, 2015; Lam, 2015; Singh et al., 2015) and some other studies discussed perceptions of portfolio assessment as an assessment tool: (Mohd Saad & Mohd Noor, 2007; Fook et al., 2010; Chung, 2012; Singh & Samad, 2013).

Many researchers agreed that portfolio assessment is an alternative approach to writing assessment that can allow broader inferences about writing ability compared to single – shot approaches to evaluating writing, both in the individual classroom and on a larger scale (Weigle, 2002). Portfolios are also especially regarded as suitable assessment tools to be used with non-native English – speaking students because they enable a broader measure of students' ability, and also because they replace the timed writing context, which has long been argued to be particularly discriminatory against non-native writers (Hamp – Lyons & Condon, 2000). To understand the study discussed in this paper, it is important to highlight Brown and Hudson's (1998) notion of the advantages of portfolio assessment as reported by the literature. They noted that literature on portfolio assessment reveals at least three advantages of portfolio assessments clustered into three categories: strengthening students' learning, enhancing the teacher's role, and improving testing processes. On the same note, researchers Javanmard and Farahani (2012) posited that in comparison to traditional assessment methods which do not involve the students in their learning, teaching and assessment process as there is no direct or indirect connection between them, portfolio assessment provides students the opportunities to be actively involved in the learning, teaching and assessment. Hence, portfolio assessment is seen as a type of assessment that allows the students more autonomy, enabling them to become more assertive and independent thinkers. It also enables the students to monitor their own learning progress, control their learning and reflect on their learning process and progress.

2.4 Learner Autonomy

According to Cotterall and Crabbe (1999), Holec (1979), Dickinson (1987) and Little (1991) agreed that the ability to take charge of one's own learning is the focus of the learner autonomy movement. Decision – making in the learning process is the heart of the concern. In line with the core responsibilities of a teacher, teachers have traditionally made the decisions about the learning goals and how to achieve them. However, with the learner autonomy movement, the challenge is to focus more on both learners' ability to set their learning goals and to organize their own learning activity. Egel (2009) noted that research on learner autonomy have included evidence that learner autonomy and the language classroom, teacher included, complement each other. Mesfin (2008) similarly observed that for learner autonomy to be realized, it has to be understood and accepted as a goal by both students and teachers.

On learner autonomy's definition, Little (2015, p.1) agreed that learner autonomy is a problematic term to define as it is widely confused with self – instruction. It is also a concept that is extremely difficult to define precisely, making it a “slippery concept”. According to Benson (2007), the rise of autonomy in language education started with the Council of Europe's Modern Languages Project that led to Henri Holec's (1981) seminal report's publication where autonomy was defined as ‘the ability to take charge of one's own learning’ (p.3). Holec's definition of learner autonomy has remained as the most widely cited definition in the field of learner autonomy. Little (2015, p.1) noted that many agree that “the practice of learner autonomy requires insight, a positive attitude, a capacity for reflection, and a readiness to be proactive in self – management and in interaction with others”. He added that with this working definition, the challenge of learner autonomy is identified as “a holistic view of the learner that requires us to engage with the cognitive, metacognitive, affective and social dimensions of language learning and to worry about how they interact with one another” (p.1). In addition, as the idea of autonomy progressed beyond the specialist literature into the mainstream language education context, the idea is also being linked to other important concepts in the field such as learning strategies and self-regulation, individual differences and sociocultural theory, motivation and teacher development (Benson, 2007).

Earlier research on learner autonomy also seem to suggest that the western style of autonomy in language teaching does not suit the learning style of each individual student. According to Egel (2009), in a study by Rees – Miller (1993), Asian learners were being taught using western learning strategies. Learners in the study performed poorly because they were prevented from using their own studying strategy of rote memorization. Littlewood (1999) argued that the portrayal of autonomy in language learning is seen as a western concept and this is not applicable to the East Asian context where educational traditions differ. He thoughtfully proposed the need to combine the diverse aspects of autonomy with the characteristics and needs of learners in specific contexts. In later years, Ahmadi and Mahdavi – Zafarghandi (2013) observed that learner autonomy is a difficult notion in the Asian contexts as it challenges the traditional role held by the teacher as the authority figure and initiator in the classroom. Gholami (2016) also contended that in some educational systems, autonomy practice is a rare concern and seems to be more suitable to be applied in the western culture. Additionally, he also observed that it is generally accepted that learner autonomy practice is still unfamiliar to learners in the non – western cultures. It is also interesting to note that the literature on learner autonomy is also progressing on studies conducted with participants from the same, homogenous ethnicity such as Japanese (Murase, 2007, 2015; Mineishi, 2010; Cooke, 2013); Turkish/Anatolian (Demirtas & Sert, 2010); Chinese and Hong Kong Chinese (Ho & Crookall, 1995; Dafei, 2007); Taiwanese (Lo, 2010; Chang & Geary, 2015); Palestinian (Razeq, 2014); and Iranian (Khodadady & Khodabakhshzade,

2012; Ahmadi & Mahdavi – Zafarghandi, 2013; Riasati & Mollaei, 2014; Sani & Vaseghi, 2015; Gholami, 2016).

2.5 Theoretical Frameworks

Following is a brief discussion of the two frameworks on which the research is based: Sociocultural theory (SCT) and Murase (2007, 2015)'s reconceptualised construct of learner autonomy. According to John – Steiner and Mahn (1996), Vygotsky and his colleagues originally “systemized and applied” the sociocultural approaches to learning and development back in the 1920s and 1930s (p.191.). These approaches are based on the concept that human activities happen in cultural contexts, mediated by other symbol systems and language, and can be best understood when they are explored in their historical development. This theory posited that social interaction and cultural institutions like classrooms, schools, etc. play critical roles in an individual’s cognitive growth and development (Donato & McCormick, 1994). Ellis (2008) asserted that SCT is a very prominent theory in second language acquisition (SLA) due to strong support from Lantolf and his colleagues. Lantolf (2000) opined that the primary concept that differentiates SCT is that higher levels of mental activity are mediated. In SCT, external mediation is needed to achieve internal mediation. He proposed that mediation in second language learning incorporates mediation by others in social interaction, mediation by self via private speech, and mediation by artefacts (such as tasks and technology). Lantolf also considered private speech as a type of interaction (the learner interacting with himself or herself). As discussed by Little (2015, p. 1), learner autonomy is a problematic term to define as it is usually confused with self – instruction. It is also a concept that is extremely difficult to define precisely, a “slippery concept”, making measuring or investigating the development of learner’s autonomy a challenging matter both quantitatively or qualitatively. Hence for this study, to examine the development of students’ autonomy while completing their portfolio assessment, Murase (2007, 2015)'s reconceptualised construct of learner autonomy is considered to be used as another framework, alongside Sociocultural theory. This reconceptualised construct of learner autonomy was designed by Murase with Asian (Japanese) students in mind. Here, the construct of learner autonomy has been reconceptualised and operationalised to consist of four major dimensions such as technical, psychological, political – philosophical and socio – cultural autonomy.

3. Methodology

3.1 Research Design: *The Qualitative Orientation*

This pilot study applied a qualitative research design in accumulating information with regard to the development of autonomous learning practices by means of portfolio assessment. To meet the research objectives, data were acquired from two Malaysian students through an open – ended background questionnaire form, a face- to- face semi – structured interview session and a non-participation observation session.

This single case study research is qualitative in orientation as the researcher’s intention is to understand the phenomenon to be investigated from the participants’ point of view. According to Merriam (2002), qualitative research is primarily focused on the notion that meaning is socially constructed by individuals in their interaction with their surroundings. In this type of research, the surrounding, world or reality is not “the fixed, single, agreed upon, or measurable phenomenon” as it is seen in the quantitative research (p.3). Rather, the constructions and interpretations of reality are not fixed and are prone to variation and change. Merriam also points that a qualitative researcher is interested in understanding what those interpretations of reality are at specific point in time and context and this is what the researcher intends to do: to investigate the participants’ interpretation of

their experience and how that makes them an autonomous learner while completing their portfolio assessment in an English course. A case study approach to qualitative research design (Merriam, 2002) was proposed to be conducted because it provides “an intensive description and analysis of a phenomenon or social unit such as an individual, group, institution or community” that is to be investigated (p.8). This qualitative study also implemented both the research – before – theory and theory before research model (Berg, 2007) in its process. According to Berg (2007) this approach is possible and it is conceived “spirally rather than linear in its progression” (p.24). This means that the proposed approach begins with an idea, gathering of theoretical information, reconsidering and refining idea, beginning to examine possible designs, re-examining theoretical assumptions and refining the theoretical assumptions and even the original and refined idea. With every step forward, some steps backwards are taken too, so it is no longer a “linear progression in a single, forward direction” (p.24).

3.2 Participants

Participants for this pilot study consist of two tertiary students from a public university in Malaysia. These local participants were selected according to purposeful (Creswell, 2008) and homogeneous (Dornyei, 2007) type of sampling. They were purposely selected because the researcher was interested in understanding the phenomenon under focus. Homogeneous sampling was conducted in participant sampling because the participants were students who have had the experience of completing portfolio assessment in an English language course. Their participation was also on voluntary basis. Following are the details of both participants:

Table 1. Details of the pilot study participants

Pseudonym	Semester	Program	Ethnicity	Gender	SPM English grade	English Course level at the time of study
Ling	4	B. Int.Aff.Mgt (Hons)	Chinese	Female	A-	Upper intermediate
Azura	3	B.Finance (Hons)	Malay	Female	B+	Upper intermediate

3.2.1 Participants' Profile

Participant 1: Ling

Age: 22

Program: International Event Management

Profile: She looks reserved and calm but is actually a friendly and talkative person once one gets to know her. Respectful towards others when speaking, she exudes a calm and polite mannerism when communicating with the researcher and with her classmates. She would usually take some time to

answer the questions and her answers are usually short so she had to be encouraged to elaborate her points through prompts. Soft spoken and speaks in a low volume, making her utterances somewhat unclear at times. She is confident in attempting the portfolio assessment, as she said she is used to doing research i.e. looking for information in completing her other assignments before this, is able to arrange her ideas well and likes to meet her language instructor to get feedbacks throughout the portfolio assessment process. She respects her language instructor and appreciates the learning process with him but also feels confident in her ability to carry out the assigned tasks. A focused and organized person, she makes sure she plans her portfolio assessment activities well so that she could follow the timeline given in order to complete the assessment.

Participant 2: Azura

Age: 23

Program: Bachelor of Finance

Profile: She is a smart, bold and confident young woman, and is rather reserved and careful in expressing her opinions. She knows what she is doing while she does her portfolio assessment. This is evident in the way she planned her tasks in the portfolio assessment process specifically when she was in the earlier stage of the assessment that was when she was selecting articles to be used for her essay, and also in selecting the theme for her essay, resulting in her choosing the more contemporary and the latest theme so it would be easier for her to find the necessary information for the essay. She is usually quiet in the class, occasionally communicating with a classmate who usually sits next to her.

3.3 Setting

A public university in the peninsular part of Malaysia was selected as the setting for data collection. The setting for this study was determined based on the consideration of four criteria suggested by Berg (2007): entry or access to the study site or setting is possible; the target population is likely to be available; there is high probability that the study's focuses, processes, people, programs, interactions, and structures that are part of the research question(s) will be available to the researcher; and the research can be conducted effectively by an individual or individuals during the data – collection phase of the study. Specifically, data collection took place in several classrooms where an intermediate level English course was conducted and in an instructor's office where the interview sessions were organised with the participants.

3.4 Research Instruments

3.4.1 Open – ended Questions from Background Questionnaire Form

In the first meeting with the participants conducted at the beginning of the semester, they were given an open – ended background questionnaire form. This questionnaire was adapted from Alabelwahab (2002). In the first part of the questionnaire, the participants were requested to provide personal details. In the second part, they were required to provide information on their experience in using English and portfolio assessment. The third part focuses on participants' view on learner autonomy.

3.4.2 Interviews

The interviews were semi – structured in nature. This type of interview permits guidance and direction from the interviewer in the form of pre – prepared guiding questions and prompts. It provides freedom for the participants as they will be encouraged to elaborate the issues raised in the discussion (Dornyei, 2007). The interview questions adapted and adopted by the researcher were tested by referring to the review and opinions of 3 experts from the fields of English language education and

applied linguistics and were piloted on the two participants discussed in this study. Revisions to the questions and technical issues were made in accordance to the feedback from the expert reviewers and later from the pilot study findings. The participants were interviewed individually. Each audio-recorded interview lasted from one hour to one hour and a half. Interviews were conducted in both English and Bahasa Malaysia as per request from the local participants who wanted to use both languages in expressing their thoughts on the topics discussed. Field notes were taken to record participants' verbal feedback and body language (gestures, facial expressions) (Creswell, 2013).

3.4.3 Classroom observation

Before the observation sessions started, participants and their classroom language instructor were informed about the observation sessions and procedure. They were strongly encouraged to ask questions about the observation procedure so that they would not be misinformed. An observational protocol or 'a method for recording notes in the field' (Creswell, 2013, p.167) adapted from Creswell (2013) was utilised for note taking during the observation sessions. For further open – ended, first-hand data collection, non-participant observation sessions were conducted in participants' classroom. Participants, their classroom language instructor and their classmates were observed in their classroom for one hour and a half while they were doing their portfolio writing classroom activities.

3.4.4 Data collection, organization and analysis procedures

Data from the participants' semi structured interviews were translated, transcribed and then coded during the data collection period. Data were then analysed following guidelines by Creswell (2008) that is by going from the detailed data in the form of transcriptions and typed notes from the interviews, field notes and documents to the general codes and themes. Collected data were analysed during the collection period with the aim of establishing the major ideas. The raw data from the field notes taken during the observation sessions, interview sessions and documents referred to in the study were edited, corrected and made readable before they were organized and indexed for future references (Berg, 2007).

Data analysis was done iteratively until they reach what the researcher thought as their point of saturation as the researcher repeatedly referred to the data collected while doing the analysis. This was done by reading the interview transcripts and field notes for several times. The researcher then continued to look for the emerging themes from the interview data and field notes by making a personal assessment to the description that suits the themes representing the major categories of information on the subject matter, which means the researcher put forward their own perspective to their interpretation. This was also conducted by making the research question as the point of reference while identifying the emerging themes (Creswell, 2008).

4. Findings and Discussion

The interview questions were piloted to determine their suitability as a research instrument and as an attempt to prepare the researcher who was a novice researcher, for the actual interview sessions that would take place for the actual research. The following findings emerged from the face to face interview and document-based data, analyzed through the concept or theory driven (deductive) and data based (inductive) approaches (Gibbs, 2007) on one of the four dimensions or aspects of learner autonomy as proposed by Murase, namely the psychological dimension. The findings and discussion are in reference to this research objective which guides the discussion in this paper which is to identify the contributing conditions that lead to learners' practice of psychological autonomy in their portfolio assessment process.

There are three sub – dimensions of the psychological dimension of Murase’s reconceptualized construct of learner autonomy. However, only two sub dimensions are to be discussed in this paper. First is the *motivational* sub-dimension which involves one’s intrinsic and extrinsic motivations in the process of preparing and completing portfolio assessment, the capacity to take control of one’s learning by knowing about the strategies to motivate oneself and one’s responsibility for success or failure in learning essay writing through portfolio assessment. Second sub-dimension is *affective* – the capacity to take control of one’s own learning by knowing about one’s affective states such as anxiety, self – esteem and other emotions and how to control these affective factors. Here the participants were to reflect on their own capacity to take control of their learning, their strengths and weaknesses while attempting to write an essay in English and their efforts in controlling or overcoming their weaknesses, all in the process of preparing and completing their portfolio assessment.

4.1 Sub- dimension 1: Motivational: Intrinsic and Extrinsic Motivation

4.1.1 Intrinsic Motivation

Findings from the two participants suggested two conditions that have seemed to be affecting their intrinsic motivation in completing their portfolio assessment. These are self – confidence and the portfolio assessment process itself with the first condition demonstrated by the first participant, Ling and the second condition contributed by data gathered from the second participant, Azura.

a. Condition: Self – confidence

On the extent of intrinsic motivation experienced by her, Ling seemed to be motivated while preparing and completing portfolio assessment because she was confident in her ability to carry out the task. According to her this was not her first time doing the task of doing “research” (that is; finding articles) and also because she thought she was good at arranging her ideas in her essay. These two factors that she thought gave her the inner push in preparing and completing her portfolio assessment were later confirmed by the verbal feedback that she mentioned she obtained from her language teacher. This seems to align with what that has been observed by many scholars who found that portfolio assessment generally enables positive reinforcements of the students’ language skills (Kalra, Sundrarajun & Komintarachat, 2017). The following table documents the excerpt from Ling:

I feel like, quite confident, because I think, I can do it alone...because I’m done my research, and I have, like, arranged my idea well, and I also, will ask lecturer whether can, do this like, the consequences is okay or not. Ha, lecturer give me feedback. Yeah, then when submit, when I do the, final essay, I will write quite confidently, ha.

b. Condition: portfolio assessment process

For the second participant, Azura, doing portfolio assessment is seen as an intrinsically motivating activity for her because she found the step by step approach in portfolio assessment process (that is the preparation of different drafts) facilitated her in writing in English, a finding that echoes the earlier notion put forward by Hamp – Lyons and Condon (2000), which states how the use of portfolios has replace the timed writing context, which is acknowledged to be particularly discriminatory against non-native writers. Portfolio assessment has made her like English more and made her paid more attention to the process involved in writing an essay as she was able to elaborate the writing process she went through in her class while doing portfolio assessment. It also changed her perception of essay writing in English as a difficult task and turned her into a confident student as she now considered writing in English as an easy task. To sum it up, her preference of the process and the language seemed to be the factors that intrinsically compelled her to prepare and complete her portfolio assessment. This is similar to the notion presented by Hashemian and Fadaei (2013) who found that

portfolio (as a learning tool) can greatly enhance the learners' autonomy and motivate them to become dynamic language learners. The following documents the excerpt from Azura:

I like English, because it, when we do step by step, we see it like easier. Ha, like that. It's like it attracts us when the thing looks easy, it's not as complicated as I assumed it would be. Something like that.

4. 1.2 Extrinsic Motivation

Two conditions were found to have affected these participants extrinsic motivations while attempting portfolio assessment. The conditions are portfolio requirements, and teacher factor.

a. Condition: portfolio requirements

Interestingly, again, both participants seemed to suggest different portfolio requirements as the motivation for them in preparing and completing their portfolio assessment. Ling suggested the time limit to complete the portfolio assessment as the requirement that affected her completion of the portfolio while Azura chose the fact that the assessment was graded or assessed as the main requirement that affected her in preparing and completing her portfolio. The following are excerpts from both participants:

Ling: *Um, in specific time set by lecturer. Under time pressure.*

Azura: *Because, it is graded maybe?*

b. Condition: teacher factor

Both of them also seemed to agree that they would complete the portfolio if the teacher requested them to. Ling would prepare and complete the different drafts in her portfolio and submit the finalized essay to the language teacher. Azura on the other hand mentioned that as a part of her work ethic, she would carry out a task once she was assigned to it by her language teacher. The following are excerpts from both participants:

Ling: *I would submit it. Uh, uh I would complete it first, then I would submit it also.*

Azura: *And then uh, because I, if given work, I will still do it, ha, it's like that.*

However, it is interesting to see that when prompted on whether they would prepare and complete their portfolio assessment if it was not graded or assessed by their language teacher, both of them came up with a different response. Ling would still prepare and complete the different drafts in her portfolio and submit the finalized essay to the language teacher but Azura stated that her preparation and completion of an unassessed portfolio drafts would be based on her mood. If she felt like doing the assessment, she would and vice versa. She also added that if she were to do it, she would only write the final essay, without the earlier, accompanying drafts. It seems that in Azura's case, even though she stated earlier that the process of doing portfolio assessment had made her like English and paid attention to the essay writing process, and that her work ethic would prompt her to complete the portfolio if the teacher asks her to do so, her intrinsic motivation is low when there is no external motivation that is if her portfolio assessment were not to be graded or assessed, her willingness to do it was reduced or lacking, which is different from Ling who would still do all of the drafts and submit them because it was a class task requested by the language teacher. It seems that Ling's intrinsic motivation to prepare and complete her portfolio is not affected by the absence of an external motivation (marks) but can also be seen as an act to fulfil teacher's instruction. She possibly saw this as an obligation of a student towards the teacher. As mentioned by Littlewood (1999), it is agreed by many teachers and researchers that the three important sources that have strongly influenced the East Asian students' approach in learning are: the collectivist orientation of the East Asian societies, their acceptance of relationship which is based on power and authority and their belief that effort and innate abilities are similarly important to achieve success. Even though Ling is not a native of the countries in

the East Asian region such as the Republic of China or Taiwan, she is of Chinese descent and her responses seemed to echo the findings presented by Littlewood in the aspect of the acceptance of relationship based on power and authority specifically to the acceptance of the power and authority of a teacher over the student. In discussing culture and autonomous learning, another researcher, Ivanovska (2015, p. 354) observes that it seems to be accurate that as much as one believe in the idea of “human universals” one cannot entirely avoid one’s own cultural beliefs and practices that have long influenced him or her. Both participants who are from different ethnicities demonstrated different responses to the situation and this might be a result of their own cultural upbringing. Following are the excerpts from both participants:

Ling: *I would submit it. I would complete it first, then I would submit it also.*

Azura: *Okay, it depends on situation, example like that time my mood is okay, ha I’ll do it, mood not okay, no. I’ll see, if I am free, I’ll submit. Ha, maybe I’ll just do the essay, not the drafts*

4.2 Sub – dimension 2: Affective – own

4.2.1 Condition: identification of own strengths and weaknesses

Both of the participants noticed the feeling of anxiety while attempting to complete their portfolio. They also admitted to realize what to be done to counter it. Both of them felt anxious about the difficulties faced in the different aspects of language when they were doing their portfolio assessment. Ling was anxious about her performance in the grammar aspect of the language. However, she concluded that she knew what needed to be done to solve the issue that is for her to learn more to improve her grammar knowledge and ability. Azura, even though had the same concern as Ling, seemed to have more aspects of the English language that she felt anxious about, all these discovered while doing her portfolio assessment. Her anxiety is related to the spelling, grammar, vocabulary and translation aspects of the English Language. However, like Ling, when prompted by the researcher, she agreed that it is good to know about her weaknesses in these aspects of the language because she could learn more to improve her command of English. The findings from both participants seem to be in line with what was mentioned earlier by Hart, (1994) and Hamp – Lyons and Condon (2000): Hart (1994) on one hand posited that portfolio enables students to showcase their ability rather than what they cannot do which is useful for students with limited English proficiency or with the non-native learners. Hamp – Lyons and Condon (2000) on the other hand, agreed that portfolios, among others, are specifically recognised as suitable assessment tools to be used with non-native English – speaking students because they enable a broader measure of students’ ability. The following details their response:

Ling: *Yeah, in some way, because, I find about my grammar, is not so okay, so I need to improve my grammar. Because I do some exercise before I do my final essay, I write, write and compare with the article that I find, and feel eh, sometime it is like, my sentence was, quite lousy sometimes. Then I change it, in better sentence, and, better grammar, because I did some, a bit of grammar error.*

Azura: *Okay, I can see like, my spelling, my language, then my plural singular, all that, hmm. It’s like, I feel like it’s hard to do that thing, ha. I feel like, no...no...no...what is this, it’s hard to do this thing, (I) feel uncomfortable. Another weakness maybe, I, rarely use English, so when I rarely (use English), it’s hard to translate right, maybe I have a sentence in Malay, maybe I want to translate it to English, it becomes a bit complicated, because (I) rarely use (English) so, it’s hard to, I forget how to translate.*

5. Conclusion and Recommendation

The above-mentioned discussion has presented some of the conditions affecting participants' practice of the psychological aspect or dimension of learner autonomy while they were preparing and completing their portfolio assessment. It is found that these participants did experience the motivational and the affective aspects of the psychological autonomy while engaging in this type of assessment. Certain conditions such as self - confidence, portfolio assessment process, portfolio requirements and teacher factor have influenced the participants' practice of the motivational sub dimension of the psychological autonomy while the identification of own strengths and weaknesses seems to be the condition related to their practice of the Affective – own sub dimension. Findings seemed to suggest that the participants' practice of the psychological aspect of autonomy was also influenced by their cultural background and learning preferences, something that echoed Cooke's (2013) observation on how autonomy is not a simple process of transferring the responsibility for learning to the learner; but rather a complex and difficult process when individual personalities and learning traits are involved. However, findings from this pilot study should not be generalized because of the limited sample size of only two participants. In addition, the findings are only limited to the responses via face to face interview and document such as the background questionnaire form and the interview and observation field notes, without other data from the portfolio and the observation session. Furthermore, the findings are only from the learners' perspective. To get a more comprehensive perspective, it is suggested that data should also be obtained from the teacher's perspective.

The discussion also highlighted some insights into portfolio-based assessment and how this type of alternative assessment could facilitate the learning of English language writing skills and the practice of learner autonomy among ESL learners of diverse ethnic background. The findings discussed in this paper also, though rather limited due to the limited data did suggest the need to examine how portfolio assessment promotes autonomous learning in a more specific context rather than generalizing its appropriateness in different cultures.

Acknowledgement

This research is funded by MOHE under the SLAB scheme and Universiti Utara Malaysia.

References

- Abbas, M. S., Saharan, S., Che Lah, Y. & Mohamad, A. R. (2005). *Teaching English language writing the photocopy method*. The Proceeding of the 3rd International Conference on Measurement and Evaluation in Education (ICEMEE 2005) (pp. 265-275). Penang.
- Ahmadi, R. & Mahdavi – Zafarghandi, A. (2013). Autonomous language learning in Iranian context: To what extent do students take responsibility for their learning? *International Journal of Research Studies in language Learning*, 2(5), 17 – 26.
- Alabdelwahab, S. Q. (2002). *Portfolio assessment: A Qualitative Investigation of Portfolio Self – Assessment Practices in an Intermediate EFL classroom, Saudi Arabia Dissertation (Doctoral dissertation, The Ohio State University)*.
- Ashrafzadeh, A., Nimehchisalem, V. (2015). Vocabulary Knowledge: Malaysian Tertiary Level Learners' Major Problem in Summary Writing. *Journal of Language Teaching and Research*, 6(2), 286 – 291.

- Askarzadeh, H., & Mall – Amiri, B., (2018). The comparative Effects of Portfolio Assessment and Peer Assessment on EFL Learners' Critical Thinking and Speaking Achievement. *Research in English Language Pedagogy*, 6(2), 159 – 181.
- Azarfam, A.A.Y., & Kalajahi, S. A. R. (2012). Writing Portfolios: A Tool for Instruction & Assessment. *Advances in Asian Social Science*, 1(1), 119 – 125.
- Benson, P. (2007). Autonomy in language teaching and learning. *Language teaching*, 40(01), 21-40.
- Berg, B. L. (2007). *Qualitative Research Methods for the Social Sciences (6th Ed.)*. Boston, MA: Pearson.
- Brown, H.D. (2004). *Language Assessment: Principles and Classroom Practices*. New York: Pearson Education, Inc.
- Brown, J. D., & Hudson, T. (1998). The alternatives in language assessment. *TESOL quarterly*, 653-675.
- Chang, L. Y. H., & Geary, M. P. (2015). Promoting the Autonomy of Taiwanese EFL Learners in Higher Education by Using Self-Assessment Learning Logs. *Studies in English Language Teaching*, 3(4), 339.
- Chung, S. J. (2012). *Portfolio assessment in ESL academic writing: Examining the effects of reflection in the writing process* (Doctoral dissertation, University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign).
- Cooke, S. D. (2013). Examining transcription, autonomy and reflective practice in language development. *RELC Journal*, 44(1), 75-85.
- Cotterall, S., & Crabbe, D. (1999). *Learner autonomy in language learning: Defining the field and effecting change*. Peter Lang.
- Creswell, J.W. (2008). *Educational research: Planning, conducting, and evaluating quantitative and qualitative research (3rd ed.)*. New Jersey: Pearson Education, Inc.
- Creswell, J.W. (2013). *Qualitative Inquiry & Research Design: Choosing Among Five Approaches (3rd ed.)*. Los Angeles: SAGE Publications, Inc.
- Dafei, D. (2007). An exploration of the relationship between learner autonomy and English proficiency. *Asian EFL Journal*, 24(4), 1-23.
- Demirtaş, İ., & Sert, N. (2010). English education at university level: Who is at the centre of the learning process. *Novitas-ROYAL (Research on Youth and Language)*, 4(2), 159-172.
- Donato, R., & McCormick, D. (1994). A Sociocultural Perspective on Language Learning Strategies: The Role of Mediation. *The Modern Language Journal*, 78(4), 453 – 464.
- Dornyei, Z. (2007). *Research Methods in Applied Linguistics*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Egel, I. P. (2009). Learner autonomy in the language classroom: from teacher dependency to learner independency. *Procedia-Social and Behavioral Sciences*, 1(1), 2023-2026.
- Ellis, R. (2008). *The Study of Second Language Acquisition (2nd ed.)*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Farrah, M. A. A. (2018). Portfolio in the EFL Writing Classroom: Students' Perspectives. *Dirasat, Human and Social Sciences*, 45(3), 236 – 246.
- Fook, C. Y., & Sidhu, G. K. (2010). Authentic assessment and pedagogical strategies in higher education. *Journal of Social Sciences*, 6(2), 153-161.

- Fook, C. Y., Sidhu, G. K., Ariffin, T. R. & Mohd Zameri, N. A. (2010, 5 – 7 December). *Portfolio Assessment: A Frontier Educational Method in ESL Classroom*. Final submission of the International Conference on Science and Social Research (CSSR 2010) in Kuala Lumpur.
- Gholami, H. (2016). Self Assessment and Learner autonomy. *Theory and Practice in Language Studies*, 6(1), 46 – 51.
- Ghoorchaei, B., Tavakoli, M., & Ansari, D. N., (2010). The impact of Portfolio Assessment on Iranian EFL Students' Essay Writing: A process Oriented Approach. *Gema Online Journal of Language Studies*, 3(10), 35.
- Ghoorchaei, B., & Tavakoli, M. (2020). Students' Perceptions about Writing Portfolios: A Case of Iranian EFL students. *Research in English Language Pedagogy*, 8(1), 21- 42.
- Gibbs, G. R. (2007). *Analyzing Qualitative Data*. London: SAGE Publications Ltd.
- Hakim, P. K., & Srisudarso, M. (2020). A washback study on portfolio assessment. *ELT in Focus*, 3(1), 9-14, doi: 10.35706/eltinf.v3i1.3693
- Hamp – Lyons, L., & W. Condon. (2000). *Assessing the Portfolio: Principles for Practice, Theory, and Research*. Cresskill, NJ: Hampton Press.
- Hart, D. (1994). *Authentic Assessment*. Menlo Park, CA: Addison-Wesley Publishing Company.
- Hashemian, M., & Azadi, G. (2011). Arguing for the Use of Portfolio in L2 Classrooms. *Theory and Practice in Language Studies*, 1(5), 501-506.
- Hashemian, M., & Fadaei, B. (2013). Fostering EFL learners' autonomy in light of portfolio assessment: Exploring the potential impact of gender. *Iranian Journal of Language Teaching Research*, 1, 135 – 151.
- Hassaskhah, J., & Sharifi, A. (2011). The role of portfolio assessment and reflection on process writing. *Asian EFL Journal*, 13(1).
- Ho, J., & Crookall, D. (1995). Breaking with Chinese cultural traditions: Learner autonomy in English language teaching. *System*, 23(2), 235-243.
- Ismail, N., Hussin, S., & Darus, S. (2012). ESL Tertiary Students' Writing Problems and Needs: Suggested Elements for an Additional Online Writing Program (IQ – Write) for the BEL 311 Course. *The International Journal of Learning*, 9(18).
- Ivanovska, B. (2015). Learner autonomy in foreign language education and in cultural context. *Procedia Social and Behavioral Sciences*, 180(2015), 352 – 356.
- Javanmard, Y., & Farahani, H. (2012). Investigating Using Portfolio Assessment and Learning English Language in Qom Secondary Schools. *Global Journal of Human-Social Science Research*, 12(12-E).
- John – Steiner, V., & Mahn, H. (1996). Sociocultural Approaches to Learning & Development: A Vygotskian Framework. *Educational Psychologist*, 31(3/4), 191–206.
- Kalra, R., Sundrarajun, C., & Komintarachat, H. (2017). Using Portfolio as an Alternative assessment Tool to Enhance Thai EFL Students' Writing skill. *Arab World English Journal*, 8(4), 292- 302. DOI: <https://dx.doi.org/10.24093/awej/vol8no4.20>
- Khodadady, E., & Khodabakshzade (2012). The Effect of Portfolio and Self Assessment on Writing Ability and Autonomy. *Journal of Language Teaching and Research*, 3(3), 518–524.

- Lam, R. (2014). Promoting Self – regulated Learning through portfolio assessment: testimony and recommendation. *Assessment & Evaluation in Higher Education*, 39(6), 699 – 714.
- Lam, R. (2015). Assessment as learning: examining a cycle of teaching, learning, and assessment of writing in the portfolio-based classroom. *Studies in Higher Education*, 1-18.
- Lantolf, J. P. (Ed.). (2000). *Sociocultural Theory and Second Language Learning*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Little, D. (2015). Learner autonomy and second /foreign language learning. Subject Centre for Languages, Linguistics and Area Studies Guide to Good Practice. Retrieved 17 November 2015, from [http:// www.llas.uk/resources/gpg/2241](http://www.llas.uk/resources/gpg/2241).
- Littlewood, W. (1999). Defining and developing autonomy in East Asian contexts. *Applied Linguistics*, 20(1), 71–94.
- Lo, Y. F. (2010). Implementing reflective portfolios for promoting autonomous learning among EFL college students in Taiwan. *Language Teaching Research*, 14(1), 77-95.
- Merriam, S. B. (2002). *Qualitative research in practice: Examples for discussion and analysis*. Jossey-Bass Inc Pub.
- Mesfin, E. (2008). *Learner Autonomy in Learning English: Mekelle Atse Yohannes Preparatory School in focus* (Doctoral dissertation, aau).
- Mineishi, M. (2010). East Asian EFL Learners' Autonomous Learning, Lerner Perception on Autonomy and Portfolio Development: In the Case of Educational Contexts in Japan.
- Mohd Saad, M. R., & Mohd Noor, M. A. (2007). Malaysian University Students' Perceptions on The use of Portfolio as an Assessment Tool in an ESL Writing Classroom. *Masalah Pendidikan*, 30(2).
- Moradan, A., & Hedayati, S. N. (2012). The impact of portfolios and conferencing on Iranian EFL learners' writing skill. *Journal of English Language Teaching and Learning*, 3(8), 115-141.
- Moya, S. S., & O'Malley, J. M. (1994). A portfolio assessment model for ESL. *The Journal of Educational Issues of Language Minority Students*, 13(1), 13-36.
- Murase, F. (2007, October). Operationalising the Construct of Learner Autonomy: A Preliminary Study for Developing a New Measure of Language Learner Autonomy. In *Proceedings of the Independent Learning Association 2007 Japan Conference, Kanda University of International Studies, Chiba*.
- Murase, F. (2015). Measuring Language Learner Autonomy: Problems and Possibilities. In C. J. Everhard & L. Murphy (Eds.), *Assessment and Autonomy in Language Learning* (pp.35-63). Hampshire & New York: Palgrave Macmillan.
- Murphy, S., & Grant, B. (1996). Portfolio assessment: Breakthrough or more of the same? In E. White, W. Lutz, & S. Kamusikiri (Eds.), *Assessment of writing: Politics, policies, practices* (pp. 284 – 300). New York: Modern Language Association.
- Ong, P. L., & Maarof, N. (2013). Collaborative Writing in Summary Writing: Student Perceptions and Problems. *Procedia – Social and Behavioral Sciences*, (90), 599- 606.
- Othman, N. (2010). *Assessment of Direct Writing in Malaysian Secondary Schools*. Publisher Universiti Malaysia Pahang.
- Razeq, A. A. A. (2014). University EFL learners' perceptions of their autonomous learning responsibilities and abilities. *RELC Journal*, 45(3), 321-336.

- Riasati, M. J., & Mollaei, F. (2014). Teachers' and learners' attitudes towards applying autonomous learning in language classrooms. *International Journal of Language Learning and Applied Linguistics World*, 6(4), 188-201.
- Roohani, A., & Taheri, F. (2015). The Effect of Portfolio Assessment on EFL Learners' Expository Writing Ability. *Iranian Journal of Language Testing*, 5(1).
- Saavedra - Jeldres, P.A. & Espinoza, M. C. (2019). Chilean Pre -Service Teachers' Perceptions Towards Benefits and Challenges of EFL Writing Portfolios. *Profile: Issues Teach. Prof. Dev.*, 21(2), 79 – 96.
- Sani, H. N., & Vaseghi, M. (2015). Educational Intervention in Fostering L2 Learner Autonomy. *International Letters of Social and Humanistic Sciences (ILSHS)*, 7, 9-30.
- Singh, C. K. S., Samad, A. A., Hussin, H., & Sulaiman, T. (2015). Developing a Portfolio Assessment Model for the Teaching and Learning of English in Malaysian L2 Classroom. *English Language Teaching*, 8(7), 164.
- Singh, C. K. S., & Samad, A. A. (2013). *Portfolio as an assessment tool: An alternative to students' learning success*. The European Conference on Language Learning 2013, Official Conference Proceedings 2013.
- Tabatabaei, O., & Assefi, F. (2012). The effect of portfolio assessment technique on writing performance of EFL learners. *English Language Teaching*, 5(5), 138.
- Tavakoli, M., & Amirian, Z. (2012). The Effect of Portfolio Assessment on the Development of Metadiscourse Awareness in EFL Learners' Writing in the Academic Context. *Mohammad Hassan Tahririan*, 1.
- Weigle, S.C. (2002). *Assessing writing*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

AUTHOR BIODATA

Nurbaizura Baharom is a Lecturer at the English Language and Applied Linguistics Unit, School of Languages, Civilization, & Philosophy, Universiti Utara Malaysia. Her areas of interest include portfolio assessment, learner autonomy, sociocultural studies, second language acquisition and English language and literature.

Azianura Hani Shaari (PhD) is a Senior Lecturer at Center for Research in Language and Linguistics, Faculty of Social Sciences and Humanities, the National University of Malaysia. She teaches Sociolinguistics as well as Language, Culture and Communication at both graduate and undergraduate levels. Sociolinguistics, gender studies, computer assisted language learning (CALL) and the language of crime are among the areas that stay close to her heart. She has received several awards throughout her career, written more than five books and published many articles in both local and international journals.