ABSTRACT

Alternative assessments are said to be suitable for young language learners, but are rarely used by language teachers from all educational levels. One of the causes is teachers’ lack of knowledge regarding the best ways to utilize alternative assessments. This research explores how an English teacher for young learners can use portfolio, an alternative assessment, as a source of information about learning process. Data from journal entries and stimulated recall sessions that focus on the participant’s lesson plans were collected every week to reveal how portfolio was used, while initial and final interviews were done to reveal the participant’s perception about portfolio. The results indicate that portfolio could help the participant identify learners’ weaknesses, strengths and needs as she started exploring a topic; determine the teaching focus, suitable teaching materials and appropriate teaching strategies; monitor learners’ development; and decide whether the topic needs to be explored further. The participant also has a positive perception about using portfolio. Some issues about portfolio, such as its use alongside other forms of assessment, are also revealed. The results provide new, more specific information about how teachers can use portfolio.

KEYWORDS: assessment, English, young learners, portfolio

INTRODUCTION

Language learners aged 2-12 years old, or young language learners, have distinct characteristics that make them different from the adult ones. Unlike adult language learners, young
learners’ ability to learn has not been fully developed when they learn the target language (Philp, 2008; Pinter, 2012). Hence, teachers need to provide support that is adjusted to their level of development. For example, young learners aged 2-7 years old, or younger children, have limited ability to do self-reflection, while young learners aged 8-12 years old, or older children, have higher ability to perform the same task (Pinter, 2012). Therefore, the amount of support given to each group must be adjusted to their needs. Adjustments like these also need to be implemented when teachers of young learners perform assessments.

Assessments for young language learners need to record their progress so that teachers can figure out their strengths, weaknesses and needs. When teachers are aware of the three aspects, it will be easier for them to formulate teaching practices that can support learning (Nikolov, 2016). Furthermore, Nikolov (2016) states that psychological aspects, such as motivation and confidence, must also be considered in the process of assessing young language learners.

In the field of language teaching, there are several terms and classifications regarding assessment. One of the dichotomies known in the field involves the terms “alternative assessments” and “traditional assessments”. Traditional assessments are often linked to tests, formal procedures that are completed by the takers in a certain amount of time and aimed to provide samples of the takers’ performance in certain areas (Brown, 2004). Meanwhile, alternative assessments seek to record learners’ progress from time to time; highlight learners’ strengths instead of weaknesses; put context into consideration; and are authentic (Coombe et al., 2012). Some forms of assessment that can be classified as alternative assessments are self-assessment, observation, conference and interview, and portfolio.

In some countries, alternative assessments have been recommended as a type of assessment that is suitable for young learners. Alternative assessments focus more on how the assessment results can boost the quality of teaching and learning (Nikolov, 2016), which matches young learners’ needs for assessments that can maintain their motivation and positive attitude toward learning process as well as support them in making progress. Furthermore, alternative assessments consider not only the final products that learners create, but also the process that they go through (Brown & Hudson, 1998). This type of assessment helps teachers record and understand what learners experience, so that they can provide the kind of support that learners need.

Despite scholars’ and governments’ recommendations, alternative assessments are still rarely used by not only teachers of young learners, but teachers from all educational levels (Butler, 2009; Efendi et al., 2017; Rukmini & Saputri, 2017). According to Butler (2009), this phenomenon is caused by several factors, one of which is teachers’ lack of knowledge regarding the best ways to utilize alternative assessments. This claim is supported by the fact that the number of research on how alternative assessments can bring positive impacts to learners is abundant (Butler & Lee, 2010; Efendi et al., 2017; Kaur & Samad, 2013; Monika, 2013; Natalia, 2010; Rukmini & Saputri, 2017), while the number of research on how alternative assessments can be utilized by teachers is
limited. Hence, it is important to conduct research that explores the issue (Gomez, 1999; Nikolov, 2016).

This research explores how portfolio, a form of alternative assessment, can be used by an English teacher for young learners. Portfolio is basically a collection of learners’ work that demonstrates their efforts, progress and achievements in certain areas (Brown, 2004). Essays, reflective notes, test results, artworks, project reports and self-assessment results are some items that can be included in a portfolio (Brown, 2004). Teachers can determine the ways in which they wish to utilize portfolio (Brown, 2004; Clarke & Boud, 2018).

Brown (2004) and Gomez (1999) present similar ideas about the steps of implementing portfolio in an institution. Brown (2004) states that there are several technical aspects that need to be determined before using portfolio. The aspects include portfolio’s function; the types of entry that are going to be included in portfolio; time allocation for entry arrangement and evaluation; portfolio storage system; and portfolio scoring standards. However, Gomez (1999) presents another important point, which is that portfolio should be implemented gradually. It should be implemented in a small environment, such as a small-sized class, before it is brought to a bigger one, like an entire institution.

Portfolio is believed to have some positive impacts for both learners and teachers. In a number of research, it is found that portfolio can boost learning quality by giving learners the opportunity to reflect on their own learning journey (Efendi et al., 2017; Kaur & Samad, 2013; Natalia, 2010; Rukmini & Saputri, 2017). It is also said that portfolio can help teachers identify learners’ strengths, weaknesses and needs so that they can create teaching practices that match the three aspects (Kim & Yazdian, 2014). Moreover, digital portfolio can be a good option for teachers who implement distance or online learning (Gaytan, 2006).

Besides positive characteristics, portfolio also has some negative traits. As a form of alternative assessment, implementing portfolio can be considered impractical as it requires a lot of extra time and energy (Brown, 2004; Kim & Yazdian, 2014). Moreover, it might be difficult for institutions that are used to numeric scores to accept the nature of portfolio, and a number of research suggests that portfolio is ineffective when implemented nationally (Clarke & Boud, 2018).

Portfolio is chosen as the center of this research because its characteristics match young learners’ needs and characteristics. Even though the analysis is more focused on the use of portfolio, the participating teacher was allowed to utilize other forms of assessment complementarily and simultaneously. This decision was made to maintain the quality of teaching and assessment and is based on theories presented by several scholars (Brown & Hudson, 1998; Coombe et al., 2012; Maki, 2002).

Based on the background issues, the main research question has been formulated, which is how an English teacher for young learners can use portfolio as a source of information about
learning process. The main question is divided into three focuses, which are:
- How can an English teacher use portfolio as a source of information about learning process in identifying learners’ weaknesses, strengths and needs?
- How can an English teacher use portfolio as a source of information about learning process in designing effective teaching practices for young learners?
- How does an English teacher for young learners perceive the practice of using portfolio as a source of information about learning process?

The main goal of this research is to reveal detailed and specific information about how an English teacher for young learners can use portfolio as a source of information about learning process, so that the problem expressed by Butler (2009) can be minimized. The goal is also divided into three focuses which are based on the research problem. It is hoped that the research findings can be used as a reference by practitioners and educational institutions, especially those that handle young learners, improve the quality of teaching and learning as well as fill the gap in the relevant field of research.

METHODS

This research employed a type of qualitative study called case study. An English teacher for young learners, who will be referred to as Teacher N afterwards, acted as a participant in this research. When the research was conducted, Teacher N was 27 years old. She got a Bachelor’s degree in English literature in 2014 with English teaching as her concentration. Teacher N had been working for an English course in Jakarta, Indonesia, since 2012. During her time as an employee there, she joined a number of training and professional development programs. This research’s initial interview and analysis reveal that Teacher N had the tendency to use multiple forms of assessment and consider learning process when assessing learners. However, the way she utilized the forms of assessment is unstructured and instinctive. In fact, she did not seem to realize that she had been using those forms of assessment.

The English course that employed Teacher N, which will be referred to as Institution X afterwards, is the location of this 10-week research. Gomez’s (1999) suggestion about implementing portfolio gradually is the reason behind the selection of this location, as English courses usually provide small-sized classes. The research focuses on an English as a Foreign Language (EFL) class that Teacher N handled at Institution X. Teaching and learning sessions for the class were done twice a week. There were three young learners in the class, Student F, Student K and Student V. They were around 7 to 8 years old and went to schools that taught English as an additional subject. According to Teacher N, Student K was an independent and good language learner, Student V was similar but needed more assistance compared to Student K, while Student F needed a lot of support when working.
Three methods of data collection were implemented during this research, which are semi-structured interviews, stimulated recall procedures and journal writing. The data take the forms of audio recordings from the initial interview (11 minutes, 47 seconds), the final interview (11 minutes, 22 seconds) and stimulated recall (42 minutes, 36 seconds in total), as well as a journal with 10 entries. To obtain supporting data, some relevant documents were also collected and analyzed in this research. The supporting documents include lessons plans for 20 sessions and term reports that Teacher N wrote for Student F, Student K and Student V before she started using portfolio.

The instruments used in this research include portfolio, training materials for Teacher N, list of questions for the interviews, journal and stimulated recall.

Portfolio

The portfolio that was used in this research is adapted from Council of Europe’s European Language Portfolio (ELP), particularly one of its elements called dossier. The type of dossier that was adapted is process dossier. The portfolio that Teacher N used in this research embodies one of portfolio’s function stated by Brown (2004), which is a document that records and provides information about learners’ achievements throughout the learning process. The steps of implementing portfolio that Brown (2004) and Gomez (1999) state were combined with this research’s procedures in order to obtain data, help Teacher N in utilizing portfolio and mitigate the negative traits of portfolio.

Following the nature of process dossier, all of learners’ work were stored in the portfolio. Portfolio entries were arranged based on the topic and the time they were produced. A title page that tells the topic is followed by the first entry. The other entries were put after the first entry based on the time they were produced by learners.

This research was affected by novel corona virus or COVID-19 that started spreading in Indonesia in March 2020. During the first five weeks of the data collection process, Teacher N was able to conduct two 60-minute offline classes every week. However, the COVID-19 crisis forced her to start implementing distance learning on the second session of Week 5. Distance learning was implemented by sending instructions and activities to learners through emails or Whatsapp, giving them a day instead of 60 minutes to finish the activities and collecting their work through emails or Whatsapp.

COVID-19 also affected the form of the portfolio used in this research. During the first five weeks, physical portfolios, which take the form of physical folders, were used to store learners’ work. However, Teacher N had to start using digital portfolios, which were created using Google Drive, during the last five weeks. The researcher, Teacher N, the three learners and their parents had access to both forms of portfolio.
Training Materials for Participants

Before using portfolio, Teacher N received brief trainings from the researcher. The trainings particularly highlighted theories and ideas regarding the use of portfolio. The trainings were provided to ensure that Teacher N could use portfolio in the ways that would enable the researcher to answer the research question. Besides that, it is important to provide trainings for teachers who are going to use portfolio to ensure that they can use it well.

List of Interview Questions

Two interview sessions were conducted throughout this research. One was done at the beginning of the research, while the second one was conducted at the end. The initial interview involves questions that were meant to reveal Teacher N’s views and behaviors, especially in regards to assessments and lesson plans, before she started using portfolio as a source of information about learning process. Term reports that Teacher N created for her three learners were also discussed during the initial interview. Meanwhile, the final interview aimed to reveal the participant’s views regarding the use of portfolio after she used it for around 10 weeks.

Journal

In every teaching and learning session, learners worked on various tasks and activities that Teacher N prepared for them. Then, Teacher N collected their work in their portfolios, checked them and wrote journal entries on a weekly basis. In the journal, Teacher N had to write about the information that she obtained from each learner’s portfolio along with her interpretations, her plans to follow up the information she obtained and her opinions about the information. The journal entries were collected to help the researcher figure out how Teacher N used portfolio in assessing learners’ weaknesses, strengths and needs and designing teaching practices.

Stimulated Recall

Teacher N participated in a stimulated recall session every week. Each session was done right after she finished planning her lessons. In every session, Teacher N was asked to recall the process of creating the relevant lesson plans. To help Teacher N in the recalling process, guiding questions that are based on the items mentioned in the relevant lesson plans were asked during the sessions. Stimulated recall was done to reveal whether the information obtained from portfolio was utilized by Teacher N and how she utilized it.

The research procedures involve six stages. This research began with the initial interview
that was based on the list of interviews questions. The initial interview was followed by the training session. Then, Teacher N started using portfolio as a source of information about learning process. While using portfolio, Teacher N also wrote journal entries and participated in stimulated recall sessions on a weekly basis. After 10 weeks, the final interview was conducted. The final stage of this research is the data analysis.

The fourth stage of the research procedures, which involves journal writing and stimulated recall sessions that began on Week 0 or the first week after the training session, includes several more steps. To illustrate, during Week 0, Teacher N created lesson plans and delivered them in class as she normally did before participating in this research. However, she started collecting learners’ work from the week’s sessions in their portfolios. After that, Teacher N examined the work and wrote her journal entry, which was given to the researcher afterwards. With the information about learning process that she obtained from portfolio in mind, Teacher N created lesson plans for the two sessions in the following week, which is Week 1. As soon as the lesson plans were done, Teacher N participated in a stimulated recall session, which was meant to reveal her thinking process while creating the lesson plans and whether the information obtained from portfolio was useful for her. After that, Teacher N delivered her lesson plans in class and collected learners’ work from Week 1’s sessions in the portfolios. Then, she would check Week 1’s work, wrote her second journal entry, created lesson plans for Week 2 and participated in her second stimulated recall session. This cycle was repeated until Week 10.

After all the data were collected, voice recordings from interview and stimulated recall sessions were transcribed manually based on the guidelines provided by Creswell (2012). Along with the data obtained from the journal, the transcripts were analyzed using two qualitative data analysis techniques presented by Nunan and Bailey (2009), which are card sort and pattern identification. The data were arranged based on the time they were collected before being divided into groups based on their relation to the three focuses of the research question. Then, the researcher worked to identify patterns in the data.

ANALYSIS AND DISCUSSIONS

Throughout the data collection process, Teacher N explored three topics in her class, which are story writing (Topic 1), past tense (Topic 2) and text comprehension (Topic 3). As the three topics were explored, the researcher collected journal entries and held stimulated recall sessions on a weekly basis. The two methods were implemented to obtain data that are related to the use of portfolio in identifying learners’ weaknesses, strengths and needs and designing teaching practices.

The data analysis reveals Teacher N’s portfolio usage pattern. As she started exploring a topic, Teacher N used the information about learning process that she obtained from portfolio to help her identify learners’ weaknesses, strengths and needs. Then, the identification was used as a
reference when Teacher N determined aspects that needed to be given more attention, suitable teaching materials and appropriate teaching strategies for the topic. As the exploration went on, Teacher N also used portfolio to monitor learners’ progress by regularly checking and comparing their work from time to time. Teacher N’s decision to stop or continue exploring a topic was also influenced by her evaluation on portfolio entries. If learners were able to produce satisfying work, Teacher N would end the exploration and move to the next topic. However, if the quality of learners’ work had not met her expectations, Teacher N would continue exploring the topic and change her strategies in order to achieve better results. It is important to note that the identification and decision making processes were not only influenced by information from portfolio as other influential factors were also found, which are the time needed to finish a task; young language learners’ characteristics; the use of other forms of assessment; characteristics of the topic; and external factors, such as COVID-19 outbreak, that affected teaching and learning.

To illustrate, when she started exploring Topic 3 about text comprehension, Teacher N examined the learners’ first work and found that their vocabulary needed to be developed. Based on the identification, she decided to introduce various types of text and give tasks that involve new words to the learners. As she continued exploring the topic and monitored the learning process, Teacher N found that some text types were too difficult for the learners and that two learners, Student F and Student K, faced motivation and performance deterioration. Then, Teacher N decided to continue exploring the topic with some changes in the teaching materials and strategy.

The third focus of the research is related to Teacher N’s perception on using portfolio as a source of information about learning process. Data on Teacher N’s perception were obtained from the weekly journal and interview results, with the term reports that Teacher N wrote for the three learners as the supporting data. Data from the weekly journal that are relevant to this focus are her opinions regarding the information she obtained from portfolio.

In the comments that she wrote for the journal, Teacher N consistently showed positive sentiment. The sentiment was also identified in the final interview. Teacher N repeatedly stated that portfolio was helpful and brought positive impacts for her. Portfolio gave her the opportunity to examine learners’ work more carefully and guided her in designing effective teaching practices for the learners. Teacher N also experienced difficulties, such as more work and preparations before implementing portfolio, which was new to her, and technical problems when utilizing digital portfolio. However, the difficulties did not affect her positive perception about portfolio.

After all the data were analyzed, several issues that are closely related to the use of portfolio as a source of information about learning process were found. The issues include the benefits of using portfolio for teachers; the use of portfolio along with other forms of assessment; Teacher N’s positive perception regarding the use of portfolio; the use of digital portfolio in the context of young language learners; and the relationship between portfolio and young learners’ reading and writing skills.
This research confirms that portfolio can help teachers understand how learners work and identify learners’ weaknesses, strengths and needs, which was previously stated by Kim and Yazdian (2014). However, this research also provides more specific information about how portfolio can be used by revealing a usage pattern that can be implemented by teachers. Portfolio can be used to help teachers identify learners’ weaknesses, strengths and needs when they start exploring a topic; determine the teaching focus, suitable teaching materials and appropriate teaching strategies; monitor learners’ development; and decide whether the topic needs to be explored further or concluded.

It is also revealed that portfolio was not the only tool that Teacher N used in identifying learners’ weaknesses, strengths and needs, especially when offline classes were implemented. Teacher N used portfolio and some other forms of assessment simultaneously and complementarily. The other forms of assessment include observation, conference and interview. However, Teacher N used the other forms of assessment in an unstructured way, which is proven by the fact that she had neither implementation nor documentation system for each form of assessment. The use of multiple forms of assessment by teachers is a good practice that is suggested by many scholars (Brown & Hudson, 1998; Coombe et al., 2012; Maki, 2002). However, its quality can be increased by creating clear systems for the implementation (Brown, 2004).

One of the negative traits of portfolio is the fact that it requires a high amount of extra time and energy from teachers who have already had too many things to do. However, Teacher N did not complain about the negative trait. In fact, she managed to use portfolio well and developed a positive perception about it. This research does not involve procedures that aim to identify the causes of this positive results. However, there are factors that can be linked to the finding, which are the class size; teachers’ beliefs; teachers’ knowledge; the portfolio implementation system; and portfolio’s position in teachers’ perspectives.

Teacher N’s small-sized class, which only had three young learners, seems to benefit her, as big classes can make it difficult for teachers to implement alternative assessments like portfolio (Butler, 2009). Teacher N’s belief that she must try her best to fulfill learners’ needs, which she stated in the final interview, might also had a role in triggering the positive results and views, as stated by Brown (2004) and Yang (2007). Knowledge about portfolio that Teacher N obtained from the trainings can also be linked to the finding, as teachers’ knowledge can influence how they use forms of assessment (Butler, 2009; Yang, 2007). Portfolio’s characteristics, particularly its implementation system and the way it is positioned in teachers’ perspectives, might also contribute to the positive results. The implementation system of Teacher N’s portfolio was created based on her context, and portfolio was positioned as a source of information in Teacher N’s perspective through the trainings. As it has been mentioned before, Teacher N’s portfolio generates positive results. Meanwhile, Desyatova (2020) conducted a research in Canada, which involves a type of
portfolio whose characteristics are the opposite of Teacher N’s portfolio. According to Desyatova (2020), the portfolio was positioned as merely a container for summative assessment results and its implementation system did not consider teachers’ contexts. Unlike Teacher N’s portfolio, the Canadian portfolio generates negative results. This indicates that portfolio’s characteristics affect its results.

As it has been mentioned before, Teacher N had to start implementing distance learning and digital portfolio on the fifth week due to the COVID-19 outbreak. The situation affected the teaching and learning activities in Teacher N’s class. As she implemented distance learning, Teacher N stopped using the other forms of assessment and kept repeating the same teaching pattern as she could not find other feasible strategies for the unprecedented situation. Teacher N stated that digital portfolio helped her monitor learning process that took place at home, but she did not like it as she found it impractical for young learners, whose ability to use technology is limited. As a result, the lessons that she delivered during the period were not as successful as the ones she delivered during the pre-COVID-19 period. This finding is supported by a notion presented by Gaytan (2006), which is that digital portfolio can be useful for teachers who implement distance learning, but it might generate negative washback, as stated by Hung (2012), and relying solely on portfolio is not enough to support learning. Furthermore, this finding shows that it is crucial to conduct more research on the use of technology and the implementation of distance learning, which covers assessment, in the context of young language learners, especially in the pandemic era.

As stated by Pinter (2012), listening and speaking skills are the main focus of the learning process that younger children, or learners aged 2-7 years old, go through. Thus, the development of the other two language skills, which are reading and writing skills, need to be done gradually. Teachers can start by maintaining the focus on words and gradually move to text production (Cameron, 2001). In this research, portfolio was found to be helpful for Teacher N during the time she explored the topics of story writing and text comprehension. Portfolio helped her monitor and support the young learners in developing their reading and writing skills, which were the main focus of the two topics.

CONCLUSIONS

Based on the analysis and discussions, there are three conclusions that can be made. The three conclusions are related to the research question.

First, portfolio can help teachers identify young learners’ weaknesses, strengths and needs as they start and continue exploring a topic. Portfolio is helpful for teachers who are supporting young learners develop their reading and writing skills. However, portfolio works better when it is used alongside other forms of assessment during the process of identifying learners’ weaknesses,
strengths and needs.

Second, portfolio is useful in the process of designing effective teaching practices for young learners. It helps teachers determine aspects of the topic that need to be focused on, the suitable teaching materials, the appropriate teaching strategies and whether the topic needs to be explored further or concluded. However, information from portfolio is not the only influential factor in the designing process as there are other impactful factors, such as the time needed to finish a task and young language learners’ characteristics.

Third, Teacher N as the research participant has a positive perception about the practice of using portfolio as a source of information about learning process. She had to do more work and experienced technical difficulties, but she still perceived portfolio in a positive way as the positive impacts were even bigger than the negative ones. This positive perception might be related to several factors, such as Teacher N’s personal beliefs and knowledge, especially about portfolio.

This research shows that using portfolio is not a simple and easy task as there are numerous aspects that need to be planned and arranged carefully. However, as stated by Brown (2004), the positive traits of a form of assessment cannot be ignored just because its nature is complex. It is hoped that this research can help practitioners handle portfolio’s complexity successfully and achieve positive results.

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ACKNOWLEDGEMENT

I would like to express my deep gratitude to Sisilia Setiawati Halimi S.S., M.A., Ph.D., my research advisor, for her patient guidance, encouragement and useful feedback.