



Has Portfolio Assessment Become Common Practice in EFL Classrooms?

Empirical Studies from China

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Abstract

This paper describes the results of an investigation into the use of portfolio assessment (PA) in Chinese context, beginning with a survey of the rationale for the use of portfolios with students. Then the empirical study is presented and the teacher's and the student's as well as the English teaching advisor's voices are revealed through excerpts collected from the questionnaire and the interviews. The findings show that portfolio assessment is in its infancy. The factors that might have hindered its progress are discussed.

Keywords: Portfolio Assessment (PA), Chinese context, Infancy, Factors

1. Introduction

My students will be English teachers of young learners after they graduate with a certificate in education. To be qualified teachers, they need to be aware of what is required from the National English Curriculum (NEC) issued by the Ministry of Education in 2003 and what the main objectives are for teaching English so that they can teach with clear goals in their mind and they can know what they should try to achieve and how they can assess whether they have achieved what they are aimed for. As a tutor who teaches them how to teach young learners English, I feel obliged to help them get to know the NEC requirements.

Unlike the previous syllabi which in general put the mastery of language knowledge and language skills as the first priority, the NEC gives the priority to the development of students' interest, motivation, confidence and learning strategies, advocates more humanistic assessment models and requires teachers to use portfolios in classrooms as a form of formative assessment to change the widely-accepted practices where teachers are used to teaching according to what is tested and give an evaluation to students only by testing them. Portfolio assessment (PA), together with other measures, is hoped to bring about changes in Chinese educational development. Since 2001 there has been a wide body of theoretical research at home that recommends the use of portfolios in EFL classrooms and interest about portfolios seems high among experts and educators (He 2002; Wang 2003; Yi & Chen 2004). However, there are very few empirical studies on how it has been used by teachers and learners in EFL classrooms in Chinese context, and what consequences of PA and the reactions of and impact on learners and teachers in the assessment context. Such questions interest me and consequently prompt me to conduct the present research. I hope I will be able to have a better understanding of its application to Chinese context by the end of this paper.

This paper describes the results of an investigation into the use of PA in Chinese context, beginning with a survey of the rationale for the use of portfolios with students. Then the empirical study is presented and the teacher's and the student's as well as the English teaching advisor's voices are revealed through excerpts collected from the questionnaire and the interviews. Next, the factors that might have hindered the progress of PA are discussed. Finally, a conclusion is made by referring to some possible solutions to the existing problems.

2. Viewpoints about the use of portfolio assessment

Though interest about PA has been high among researchers and experts since the NEC was issued and even though some teachers may be ready to follow their lead, still most teachers and administrators remain uncertain about how best to deal with the question of assessment. This uncertainty may influence people's attitudes towards it and how well it works in practice. So, before I enter the empirical study, I'd like to provide a brief overview of some principles and practice of PA in the PA literature. In this part, the focus will theoretically fall on the definition of portfolios, the contents of portfolios and the reasons for portfolios.

2.1 What is a portfolio?

Many researchers in language testing have defined it as a collection of student work which represents both the

capability and the progress of a learner. Cameron (2001:237) has explained the original use of portfolios by saying: “Artists, photographers and architects often build up portfolios, in which they put together pictures they feel best represents their style and skills. They then use the portfolios to demonstrate what they have to offer to potential customers and employers.” But applied to language learning and testing, a portfolio in classrooms today, which would include such things as samples of writing and lists of books read (O’Malley and Valdez Pierce 1996), has come to mean the collection of evidence that learning has taken place (Davies et al., 2001.).

A range of definitions of the portfolio has developed, illustrating the growth and diversity of its use. For some teachers the portfolio is part of an alternative assessment program, and it can either include a record of students’ achievements or simply document their best work. For other teachers, the portfolio documents the students’ learning process, and still others use it as a means of promoting learner reflection.

Portfolio assessment has been adopted in many subject areas and embraced in a variety of contexts so that many descriptions of portfolios exist. Portfolio approaches to assess literacy have been described in a wide variety of publications (For example: Flood & Lapp, 1989; Tierney, Carter & Desai, 1991; Valencia, 1990; Wolf, 1989; Hamps-Lyons, 1996). Professional growth portfolios which value the learning process and reflection in pre-service teacher education have been described by Antonek, McCormick, and Donato (1997); and by Tanner, Longayroux & Beijaard et al., (2000). A reflective portfolio assessment of pharmacy students’ knowledge about prescribing has been described by Ashcroft & Hall (2006). They all stress that a portfolio is not a random but a purposive collection of observations or student products; it is systematic and related to major instructional goals.

Then what makes a good portfolio? According to Gnensee & Upshur (2000:104), a good portfolio for learners should “build on what students have done and help them recognize what they have accomplished; praise students for specific techniques or strategies they have used and point out the positive effects of those strategies; listen and respond carefully to students’ concerns about their progress or difficulties; offer reasonable suggestions in response to these concerns; discuss process and strategies as well as products; be realistic in setting goals; be positive and supportive at all times.” Therefore, a portfolio will not work effectively if it focuses on what has not been done or what goes wrong with what has been done; be judgmental about student work; make too many suggestions or goals and take over discussion of students’ work.

2.2 What can be included in portfolios?

Many teachers and experts have offered suggestions on portfolio contents based on their experience with using PA.

Portfolios are often grouped into four types according to Mandell and Michelson (1990):

- * Showcase—student only puts best example or best product in for each objective
- * Cumulative—Student place all work relevant to each objective into portfolio
- * Process—Student places pre/post-samples of work for each objective into the portfolio
- * Each type of portfolio should include all of the essential components of a portfolio listed above

Crockette (1998) considers portfolio contents to fall into five categories:

- found samples, which refer to pieces done to fulfill class assignment
- processed samples, or the students’ analyses and self-assessment of a work previously graded by the teacher
- revisions or samples of student work that have been graded and then revised, edited, and rewritten
- reflections, which are related to the processed samples but are applied to the portfolio as a whole, providing a chance for students to think about who they are, what strengths and weaknesses are
- portfolio projects, which cover work designed for the sole purpose of inclusion in student portfolios.

Crockette suggests that the portfolio should include the contents mentioned above as well as other items considered relevant to its specific purpose.

And essential components of a portfolio suggested by Campell, Melenyzer and Nettles et al. (2000) should be:

- * table of contents with page numbers
- * personal introduction describing the students background and capstone experience
- * Program outcomes, with artifacts linked to the outcomes

Each artifact should be described in a short narrative (included with artifact) reflecting upon what it is, how it demonstrates obtainment of the objective, and what the student learned as a result (self-reflective). Requiring more than one artifact/objective increases scoring reliability (Campell, Melenyzer, Nettles & Wyman, 2000).

Lu (2005) lists the portfolio contents being Chinese characterized, which may seem a little too demanding for young

learners but still can help broaden our horizons about what can be included in a portfolio.

- * self-assessment
- * feedback given by parents, teachers, group members
- * two sets of quiz papers(one is the most satisfying and the other is the most unsatisfying)
- * latest written test score report
- * plan including time table for the next stage
- * products that won prizes
- * two self-written essays(one is the most satisfying and the other is the most unsatisfying)
- * writings published
- * self-made artifacts
- * daily or weekly English diaries
- * homework assignments(one is the most satisfying and the other is unsatisfying)
- * group projects
- * work assignments finished in class (53)

Different from Lu's portfolios, the European Language Portfolio includes the 'I can do statements' (Council of Europe, 2001), which seems to be specific and realistic, I believe.

Suggestions on portfolio contents are presented above. No matter what it contains, in practice the content in portfolios should be firstly built from class assignments and correspond with the local classroom curriculum. Secondly portfolios should consist of two major components: a collection of evidence of events and experiences, and a reflection by the student on what has been learned(Baume, 2001; Friedman et al., 2001). This may include written reflections kept in the form of a journal or diary. Typically, these would include reflections on problem areas, what has been learned, what has still to be learned and plans for how new learning will be tackled (Snadden & Thomas, 1998). Besides, teacher notes, teacher-completed checklists, student reading or learning logs, oral performance records(self-, peer-, and teacher evaluation), such as story-telling, interviewing, drama performance, multimedia project work and so forth can be included in a portfolio (Valencia, 1990). All of these are not used all of the time. But on the last page of the portfolio, there should be a summary report by the student and by the teacher according to Wang (2003).

2.3 What Criteria are needed for portfolio assessment?

According to the researchers mentioned above, with portfolios, the teacher needs to make very clear to the students the criteria for assessment. These criteria should not only be made known to the students but also can be discussed and built jointly with the students. For example, both the teacher and the students will agree on the inclusion of all the required entries, the quality of the final products, seriousness of revisions, depth of reflection, layout and design and keeping up to the time schedule (Smith 2002). Students therefore, need to select and put the samples of their work done by themselves in a folder, discuss with the teacher about what they have done. The teacher can also help the students to set targets for their future performance through their self-assessment, e.g. to be able to say 10 words this week, learn to sing an English song, make a birthday card with English greetings, etc.

Setting up clear criteria for assessment is very important when introducing the use of portfolios. Although there is no single correct way to develop portfolio programs, in all of them students are expected to collect, select and reflect. Early in the school years, students are pressed to consider: 'What would I like to reread or share with parents or a friend? What makes a particular piece of writing?' In building a portfolio of selected pieces and explaining the basis for their choice, students get to know in what aspects they will be assessed and what the expectations will be. In L2 situations Wang (2003) suggests that the students' native language should be used in the discussion about the criteria in order to let every student understand and express one's ideas clearly. With clear guidelines and specific examples they can get started on their work, so these discussions need to be well guided and structured. The earlier the discussions begin the better.

Johnson & Johnson(1992) hold that in developing criteria for judging what is good and what needs improving, older students are more likely to be able to help determine the criteria by which work is selected, perhaps through brainstorming sessions with the teacher and other students. Younger students may need more directed help to decide on what work to include. Older students are generally better at keeping logs to report their progress on readings and other recurrent projects. Also, older students often expand their portfolios beyond written material to include photos or videos of peer review sessions, science experiments, performances or exhibits. Younger students, who need added support, may be encouraged to work in cooperative groups. During group work sessions, younger students who are having difficulty gain the support they need, and very able students gain deeper understanding of the materials they are showing as they

explain the materials to others.

2. 4 Why are portfolios used with students?

On the one hand, students have been stuffing assignments in notebooks and exercise books for years, on the other hand students have been frequently assessed in the form of a pencil-and-paper test, so what's new and exciting about portfolios? And why are portfolios used? Someone may ask these questions.

According to Mezirow(1990) and Schon(1991) portfolios capitalize on students' natural tendency to save work and become an effective way to get them to take a second look and think about how they could improve future work. This method is confirmed to be a clear departure from the old writing, handed in, and forgotten mentally, where first drafts were considered final products. Portfolios provide a tool to promote reflection which can lead to meaningful learning and enhance the student awareness of their learning process. But current assessment practices seem to send the following messages:

- Assessment always arrives from the outside;
- Skills that appear on tests are all that really matters in instruction;
- First drafts are finished drafts;
- Standardizing assessment is the ultimate goal (Sanchez & Duke, 2001:59).

Not all people agree with these messages because they think that current assessment practices undermine regular classroom instruction as well as teachers and students' role in the teaching and learning process.

McLaughlin(1991: 249-250)lists five key points she sees as central to our thinking about the testing-teaching relationship:

- (1) It matters what you test: 'because today's tests don't measure...higher-order skills, they discourage classroom practices that are directed toward teaching them' (249);
- (2) Do not confuse standards and standardization: 'almost all test-based accountability schemes in use today employ standardized measures that ignore the complexity and individuality of classrooms and constrain teachers' efforts to develop classroom activities appropriate to their students'(249);
- (3) Tests constitute a limited lever of reform: 'In the absence of adequate supports for the enterprise, telling teachers to try harder—to achieve 'world class standard'—misperceives the problem'(250);
- (4) Test-based accountability plans often misplace trust and protection: 'ironically, accountability schemes that rely on existing testing technology trust the system(the rules, regulations and standardized procedures) more than they trust teachers to make appropriate, educationally sound choices... and they protect that system...more than they protect the students served by the system'(250);
- (5) The process of setting standards is as important as the standards themselves: 'Almost four decades of experience with planned efforts to reform education have taught us that (1) teachers are not inclined to take responsibility for carrying out goals and objectives about which they have had no say and (2) teachers have important knowledge and expertise to contribute to the enterprise'(250);

Besides, a sizable number of authors and researchers indicated that the commonly used series of 60-to-120-minute examinations can only provide teachers, parents and school authorities with a quick and limited view of the knowledge a student has actually achieved during a semester course (Slater, 1997; Wang 2003). Examinations which focus very much on students' memory work on their knowledge and skills learned from the textbooks are often done at the end of a term or a program and in the form of a pencil-and-paper test. The results of such tests, which are often presented in marks or grades, are then reported to the students, to the parents and the school authorities. Test scores can't be used to inform teachers and students of their overall teaching and learning effectiveness. Even if they can reveal some aspects about teachers' teaching or students' learning, it is too late for them to do anything about them as it is already the end of a learning period. Some test items such as conventional multiple choice items are designed to determine what the student doesn't know and do not provide the teacher with enough information to ascertain why the student gave a particular response. And in the context of writing, multiple choice tests of 'writing' cannot identify a writer's proficiency, let alone his or her strength and weakness as a writer. Unfortunately, even student-supplied responses, in-class essays, and quantitative problem-oriented test items are severely limited in scope and complexity due to unavoidable time constrains. All too often students are judged on the basis of a single test score from a test of questionable worth (Darling- Hammong & Wise, 1985; Haney & Madaus, 1989). Student performance on such tests can show day-to-day variation. These deficiencies and others have previously been 'thoroughly described and documented'(Berlack et al., 1992:8).

In contrast, because portfolios include first draft, second draft, even third draft of selected samples of work done by the student and are built up over extended time periods they provide teachers with a wealth of information upon which to

base instructional decisions and from which to evaluate student progress(Gomez, Grau, & Block, 1991). That's why many teachers, educators and researchers believe that portfolio assessment is more effective than 'old-style' tests for measuring academic skills and informing instructional decisions. They hold that portfolios can contextualize and provide a basis for challenging formal test results based on testing that is not authentic or reliable. Portfolio assessment, which is the same as or closely resembles the tasks to be carried out in actually language-in-use situations and provides more accurate measures of the language learner's abilities, is therefore inherently more meaningful.

In addition, portfolios as teaching tools demand of teachers and students' rich concepts and a careful consideration about what kind of good works to be put into them. As students and their teachers work together on the development of the portfolio over the term, the teacher is able to assess the student's growth and learning in the course as well as the excellence reached by the end of the course. Portfolios, then, are 'a tool for thoughtful classroom assessment' (Hamp-Lyons, 1996: 152).

Moreover, portfolios are extremely valid measure of learners' language abilities. Portfolios are said to have construct validity because basing assessments on works collected over time, on evidence of processes as well as products, fits specialists' views of what is importantly learned in the class, and therefore, what should be assessed (Hamp-Lyons, 1996). They are also said to have consequential validity. Consequential validity, a new and exciting approach to validity, maintains that a major determinant of the validity of an assessment measure is the consequence that the measure has upon the student, the instruction and the curriculum (Linn, Baker, & Dunbar, 1991). There is evidence that portfolios inform students, as well as teachers and parents, and that the results can be used to improved instruction, another major dimension of good assessment (Gomez, Grau & Block, 1991).

In short, portfolios are useful as a support to the new instructional approaches that emphasize the students' role in constructing understanding and teacher's role in promoting understanding. Portfolios can help to capture a wider variety of student performance to provide a fuller picture of what students actually can achieve, show how students work—process orientation as well as a product one, stress realistic context for work—make assignments more authentic, assist teachers in showing where students are in their development and weave assessment into instruction.

2.5 Why are portfolios used with young learners?

It has often been claimed that timed pencil-and-paper tests disadvantages young learners (Wang,2003), who are defined here as being school children from 6 to 12 years old. It's well-known that young learners usually are quick to learn to speak a new language and can show remarkable progress within a short period of time, but they may not be good at writing as they haven't acquired full competence in the grammar or the written form of the language which a pencil-and-paper test often tests. They are in their young age which needs plenty of language input (Krashen,1985) rather than language output which pencil-and-paper tests often test. Being young, they may not be very skillful in taking tests and sometimes become confused by the way the question is asked rather than by the task. Further, competitive tests may not help them develop positive attitudes towards English learning. Moon (2000) and Cameron (2001) also hold that young learners need interesting and motivating activities. They do not often have purpose for learning. They learn perhaps simply because they are happy and enjoy the activities. If they are happy and in a threat-free environment or in the absence of test pressure, they are more likely to enjoy learning and to succeed. Generally speaking, success leads to success and the teacher's task is to design and organize assessment activities from the learner's point of view so that every child is able to succeed at some level (Dean, 2000). When children have a sense of achievement they are more likely to have motivation for further learning (Moon, 2000 & Cameron, 2001).

The characteristics of young language learners, and the implications of these for the assessment of their ability are discussed widely in the 'young learner' literature, such as Halliwell(1992), Vale and Feunteun(1995), Cameron(2001), Wang(2003), Hasselgreen(2005) as well as in the special issue of Language Testing(17,2),e.g., in Rea-Dickins's(2000) article. On the basis of this discussion, there appears to be consensus that assessment procedures for young learners should satisfy the following demands:

- Tasks should be appealing to the age group, interesting and captivating.
- Many types of assessment should be used, with the learner's, the parents' and teacher's perspectives involved.
- Both the tasks and the forms of feedback should be designed so that the learner's strength (what he or she can do) are highlighted.
- The learner should at least under some circumstances, be given support in carrying out the tasks.
- The learner needs to be allowed to try the new language to learn from trial and error and gradually they will become independent learners.
- The teacher should be given access to and support in understanding basic criteria and methods for assessing language ability.

PA, as a positive and non-threatening form of assessment takes the special assessment needs of young learners and their

characteristics into consideration. As a record or a collection of the learner's works and self-reflections, it is more likely to be more valid way to assess the child's achievement and learning potential. In PA, children who have already developed some written skills have time to think and many times to correct their errors in written forms without any pressure from the outside on them. For low beginners the teacher can invite them to draw some pictures by themselves to express their feelings and attitudes towards English learning. Their oral performance, such as songs, chants, story-telling, drama performance and interviewing can be audio-recorded and put inside, together with self-assessment, peer-assessment and teacher evaluation. Talking with someone the 'I can do statements in my language biography' (the Council of Europe, 2001) can be a very encouraging experience. Working together with the teacher on the development of the portfolio can enable them to get timely feedback from the teacher, which finally provides timely feedback for children to know how they are doing and what needs to be improved. The information collected about their learning may help them to set targets for their future performance through their self assessment.

So far, PA has been discussed theoretically without reference to any particular context. Such discussions surely need to be empirically based to inform how it has been used by teachers and learners, whether it has become favored in EFL classes in schools, and what consequences of portfolio assessment and the reactions of and impact on learners and teachers in the assessment context, and whether the intended effects have occurred. In the next sections the focus is turned to the use of PA in today's China. First is the description of the study and then are the discussions of the results.

3. The Study

3.1 The participants

Selection of participants is determined by the nature of the issue under investigation. A study of PA necessitates investigating the people who are its users, facilitators or those who benefit from it. They are school teachers, students and English teaching advisors as shown in Table 1.

Insert Table 1 Here.

3.1.1 Teachers

The teachers who were invited to complete the questionnaire were one hundred and seven English teachers working in different types of primary schools in the city of Dongguan, of whom 79.4% had taught English for at least 3 years, with one having 23 years of English teaching experience. Teachers' teaching experience may affect English teaching, learning and the ways of assessment. With years of teaching experience, this group of teachers should be familiar with their classroom curriculum and should know how to assess learners more effectively. Among 107 participants 15 teachers worked in city key schools and 71 worked in district key schools, taking 80.4% of the total number of the teacher participants. Schools in China are classified into key schools and ordinary schools, state-owned schools and private schools. Key schools are often graded into city key ones or district key ones according to their sizes as well as their teachers and learners' qualification and learning conditions. School type is another possible factor affecting English teaching and learning. Key schools are allotted a larger share of the educational budget, permitted to enroll students before ordinary schools, equipped with better-qualified teachers, and assumed to take the lead in educational reform.

Dongguan is a city lying on the Pearl River Delta under the jurisdiction of Guangdong Province and it is economically and culturally more developed than others. It is well-known that the English learning environment for students in this area is better than that in the less developed areas in terms of the facilities and opportunities available for English learning. Many students in this city, including those in ordinary schools, can afford folders with paper of good quality, and can have an easier access to photocopy machines, audio and video equipments and computers with CD ROMS. If schools adopt PA, teachers and students won't have much financial difficulty in this aspect.

3.1.2 Students

Thirty-six grade-five primary school students at the age of eleven or twelve who had portfolios for assessment for about one term were invited to be the interviewees. They were from two different schools and one was a village school and the other was a district key school. Selection of interviewees took account of student's gender and English level in the hope that different opinions could be sought. For example, a boy student whose English was among the best in his class whereas a girl student whose English was poor in comparison with her classmates were invited. Whether they were bold and willing enough to air their views about PA and to show their individual portfolios was also taken into account in the selection.

3.1.3 Advisors

English teaching advisors in China are those who work in educational departments at different levels to be responsible for assisting teachers in teaching and research as well as the preparation for tests. For example, it is their job to organize teachers' meetings to give guidance in understanding the requirements of the NEC and to evaluate teaching and learning in schools according to the NEC. Normally, they are selected from experienced teachers by the educational departments.

Because of their position, the advisors can persuade schools and individual teachers to use portfolios for students' work. Two advisors were interviewed on the phone for the data collection, one from the city level and the other from the district level. As Dongguan has approximately three hundred and fifty primary schools located in its 32 districts or towns, each district or town has one advisor, who is under the leadership of the city advisor.

3.2 *The instruments*

Three instruments were employed to gather the data for this study to achieve method triangulation and enhance validity: (1) questionnaire survey among primary school teachers; (2) interviews with thirty-six primary school students; (3) telephone interviews with two advisors. The study was conducted between May and July 2006. The detailed descriptions of each instrument are as follows:

3.2.1 Questionnaires

The purpose of administering the questionnaire survey was to find out whether portfolio assessment was used by primary school teachers and how it was used as well as their attitudes toward portfolio assessment. The questionnaire comprised three broad sections with the total of 17 questions (See Appendix A). Part One contained 5 questions mainly designed to gather how many respondents had heard of teachers using portfolios for students work and where they had heard the word "portfolios" for assessment. Part Two consisted of 11 questions and it was intended to obtain information concerning how portfolios were used by the respondents who had already tried them by themselves. Part Three just had one open-ended question designed to elicit factors of non-use of portfolios. The questionnaire was in Chinese because it was easier for the participants to read in their native language and completion of the questionnaires should take less time. The English version of the questionnaire was a translation from the original questionnaire.

3.2.2 Face-to-face interviews

With the help of the two teachers who had used PA with their students for about two years, interview data were obtained through semi-structured two group interviews, which were conducted face-to-face with the 36 students in two primary schools respectively using the interview guide prepared beforehand to ensure that the same topic were covered for all interviews(see Appendix B). The purpose of the interviews was to elicit the students' views on the impact of the portfolios on their learning, their experience of building the portfolio, and their attitudes towards the use of portfolios as a means of assessment. The length of the two interviews varied between 30 and 40 minutes, mainly depending on the interviewees' willingness to talk. Both of the interviews were conducted in Chinese. The group interviews were audio-recorded but not transcribed. In the meantime, seven portfolios were observed with their owners' permission and two portfolios which represented different types of PA were photocopied for further study at the end of the interviews.

3.2.3 Telephone interviews

To obtain the advisors' views about PA and whether they had ever persuaded the teachers to use portfolio assessment in any in-service training programs or on their regular tours of inspections, I conducted two telephone interviews with the two advisors, using the interview guide (See Appendix C). The length of the two telephone interviews lasted about 15 minutes each. I told them that the purpose of the research was to investigate the use of portfolio assessment. Thinking that they were both my old acquaintances, I needn't conceal my true purpose from them. Telling the participants the true purpose of the study was also suggested by Allwright and Bailey(1991). The interviews were conducted in Chinese too.

3.3 *Results*

3.3.1 The result of the questionnaire survey

With the help of my present 113 students who were required to complete one-week observation each academic year as usual in about 30 primary schools taking about ten percent of the total number of primary schools in Dongguan, 140 questionnaires were distributed and in all 107 were returned a week later. The response rate was 76.4%.

Out of one hundred and seven primary teachers who completed the questionnaire survey, forty-seven (1 from private school; 7 from village schools; 9 from city key schools; 30 from district key schools) stated that they had heard of teachers using portfolios for assessment, taking 43.9% of the total number of the respondents in this group as shown in Table 2, whereas sixty teachers(6 from city key schools;14 from village schools; 40 from district key schools) stated that they had never heard of it, taking 56.1% of the total number and thus they needn't go on with the remaining questions in the questionnaire.

Insert Table 2 Here

When asked where they had heard the words PA, the 47 primary school teachers ticked all that applied. It is noticeable in Table 3 that fairly high percentages of respondents mentioned that they had got to know the words from work colleagues, or by reading the NEC or related newspapers and magazines themselves. This can be compared with the far lower percentage of respondents who mentioned that the English teaching advisors had told them.

Insert Table 3 Here

When coming to Question Five, as Table 4 shown twenty-six out of forty-seven respondents stated that their students had or had once had portfolios while twenty-one stated that their students didn't have or had never had portfolios. Therefore they were classified into two groups, with the first group answering Part Two and the second group answering Part Three.

Insert Table 4 Here

Table 5 clearly indicates that a high percentage of twenty-six respondents in the first group had used PA for one or two years in the past five years since the NEC was issued in 2001.

Insert Table 5 Here

As Table 6 shows, portfolio contents mainly included students' best homework, students' artifacts and then students' test papers according to the teachers' point of view.

Insert Table 6 Here

Table 7 clearly indicates that fifty percent of the respondents stated that portfolios were renewed once a term.

Insert Table 7 Here

From Table 8, it is clear that it was overwhelmingly the most common practice to store portfolios in teachers' offices.

Insert Table 8 Here

As Table 9 shows, the replies to this question varied, which may indicate that the teachers gave feedback according to their convention and real situations.

Insert Table 9 Here

Most respondents stated that they would give feedback once a term as it is shown in Table 10.

Insert Table 10 Here

It is noticeable in Table 11 that fairly high percentages of teachers mentioned that teachers and students would decide what were included in portfolios.

Insert Table 11 Here

As Table 12 indicates, out of 26 respondents 12 teachers felt that portfolios were successfully used, taking 46.2 percent of the total number in this group while 11 teachers felt that they were not successfully used, taking 42.3 percent and 3 teachers felt that they were not sure, taking 11.5 percent of the total number in this group. No one stated that they were very successfully used or they were just a complete failure.

Insert Table 12 Here

Replies to Question 15 *Have you any ideas or suggestions about using portfolios?*

Twelve respondents who chose that PA was successfully used in their practice wrote that it was beneficial to students; their students liked building their portfolios which helped develop their confidence and interest in English learning; their students began to enjoy learning English more; Students worked hard on portfolios and their works were wonderful; the student's ability to think creatively and critically was developed in this way. Further, the teachers benefited from using portfolios because portfolios were a record of what their students could do and what they couldn't do; by using them they got to know their students better and could give them timely help and compliment; it was a good way to establish contact between them and their students; it was a good way to involve parents in their children's education programs and to report individual student progress. Portfolios served as a kind of vehicle which went between students, teachers and parents.

But on the other hand, they complained that it was hard for them to handle every portfolio. They stated that they usually taught three classes with each class having about fifty students.

"With more than one hundred and fifty students, I feel exhausted to assess their works in the portfolios. Sometimes, I want to give them up," one stated.

Another wrote: "The school leaders never told us to use PA. The teaching advisor never gave us any ideas on how to use them, and no work colleagues around me used them. Therefore I couldn't get any help from them. I had to surf the internet. It helped but it took time."

"Some parents were not cooperative and they assessed their children's works perfunctorily. What they were concerned about was what scores their children got in paper tests and not works in the portfolio."

"Some students regarded building portfolios as a burden as a kind of homework. By and by, their interest in it faded."

The eleven respondents who expressed directly their unsuccessful use of portfolios felt that it took too much time and energy because their students couldn't complete it all by themselves; almost all the contents were decided by teachers,

not by students; portfolios couldn't show much of students' individual progress because for good students, their works were always good while for less able students, their works could hardly be improved. One wrote: "The idea of PA sounds good, but it is hard to apply it into practice."

The three respondents felt that they were not sure about how well PA was used because they had tried it for only a short period of time and no criteria could help them rate their work; their schools were not adopting PA; apart from English teachers, the teachers who taught other subjects in their school did not use portfolio assessment and thus there was no comparison between theirs and others'.

To inform PA development they put forward some suggestions which are listed as follows:

- *PA Training programs should be offered;
- *Help with PA from advisors, some more knowledgeable people or superior leaders should be available;
- * The education departments should do something to make PA popular;
- * More portfolio samples should be provided;
- * More space in the classroom should be provided in order to store portfolios so that students would be able to share their works with classmates and learn from each other.

As to the reasons why they had never used PA, the second group of the respondents stated: "Though we know PA, we do not really understand the portfolio assessment procedure; our schools are not adopting PA; the school leaders and the English inspectors have never told us to use it, either. We are compelled to give constant tests and the results are compared by the school authority to evaluate our teaching."

One teacher wrote: 'I use tests in my classroom. I also use quizzes—as a way of keeping a check on the children's learning. I also use it to find out what needs to be improved in my teaching and make changes accordingly. I don't need PA.'

3.3.2 The result of the two face-to face interviews

3.3.2.1 The students' view

As to the students' view on building the portfolio, many students said that building the portfolio was a useful learning experience; it gave them a sense of achievement and helped them develop positive attitudes towards English learning.

As for their views on the impact of the portfolio on their learning, the majority of the thirty-six students said that completing a portfolio was a good way to facilitate their English learning and they had gained further insight into their approach to learning by completing the portfolio. They felt that it allowed them to diagnose their strength and weakness and they could see some opportunities to modifying their approach to learning as a result of completing the portfolio.

Nonetheless, the majority of the student interviewees from the district key school said that they would like more information about building the portfolio. Their teachers seldom met with individuals and small groups to talk about how the portfolio was developed and the teachers' oral feedback on it in front of the whole class were often a little too general.

One girl student from the village school said that the portfolio was only a record of their homework assignments and test papers. They stated that without the use of the portfolio, they just did the homework, handed in and then corrected the mistakes marked by the teacher. Now with it they had to do more, such as making self-assessment, asking their parents and group leaders to assess their performance in the portfolio, which increased their workload.

Another boy said: "My parents are too busy to attend to my portfolios."

One boy student said: "I am already the best one in my class. The portfolio is useless for me. But it may help those weak ones."

Another girl, who seemed to be a group leader, said: "Li Jiaqi(one of her group members) is not willing to show me his portfolio. Each time I ask him to hand it in, he makes an excuse by saying that he has left it at home." When asked why he did that, she answered that his parents often wrote negative feedback in his portfolio and it hurt him."

As to their views on the use of portfolios as a means of assessment they all said that they would prefer to be assessed via tests because the tests often had the last say no matter how well they completed the portfolio. They said that their test scores were often ranked and compared with each other; when there was a parent meeting, the teacher would give the test scores to their parents. The portfolio performance only took 10 percent of the total final score at the end of each term while the middle-term test and the final test came up to 90 percent.

One boy said critically: "All the things we do with the portfolio are to earn good grades for the middle-term tests and final tests."

3.3.2.2 The students' portfolios

In the village school, all the entries into the portfolios the students displayed during the interview looked the same

because they were all designed by their teacher. The portfolio was like a big old handbook with all the pages being spirally bound on the left. On the front cover was the student's personal information including name, birthday and class. The second page wrote the student's self-introduction and study plan. From the third page they were all the forms which recorded the student's weekly performance in English learning and its assessing points included how he or she previewed texts at home, how many times he or she answered the teacher's question in English class, how well their homework was done, whether he or she listened to English or spoke English in daily life. Beside each assessing point were students' self evaluation and feedback from group-leaders and parents. This means that each student needed to be assessed at the end of each week by himself or herself, his or her group leaders and parents from three different angles, which were then handed in to the teacher for her overall evaluation. From a three-level scale, the student and group leader were asked to tick their agreement with each statement, namely *You are /I am great*, *You are/I am not far from success and You/ I need to work hard*. Parents must assess their children in written form. One parent wrote to his daughter in the portfolio: "This week you spent too much time watching TV. I hope you won't do it next week. The middle-term exams are coming. I hope you will spend more time reviewing your lessons to score high in them." By contrast, the teacher's assessment seemed to be simple. She used three seals marked with *Very good*, *Good*, *Not Good* to rate the students' weekly performance. "When I was too busy, the monitor would do it for me," the teacher told me later. The last three pages were left for the students to stick their most satisfying quiz or test papers, best pictures and best homework which was usually used to show their good and neat handwritings. It seemed that only on these three pages were the students able to choose what they liked to display. The rest of the assessment was mostly from the outside. The student's entry in the portfolio took about one third of all the entries which mainly focused on the student's weekly performance commented by the parents, the group leader and the teacher. So, the students might not be given much freedom in choosing and developing their own way of thinking and learning. There were no oral performance recordings, no summary and no written self reflection in it, which many experts and educators think are more important for young language learners when they develop their portfolios.

In the district key school the portfolios observed were quite different from the ones observed in the village school. They were plastic folders containing the students' written records of their progress or difficulties in learning English pronunciation and the students' evaluation of strength and weakness in pronunciation as well as their reading and speaking on audio tapes, charts of 48 international pronunciation alphabets (IPA) and peer assessment. The students seemed to have more said in choosing what went into it in this school than in the former one. But here the teacher's and the parent's assessment could not be seen. It seemed that there was not much discussion about the development of portfolios and thus the students might not get timely and individual help from the teacher, which was later confirmed by the students who said that the teacher would look at it at the end of each term and then give a grade.

3.3.3 The result of the two telephone interviews

3.3.3.1 The city advisor's view

The city English teaching advisor told me on the phone that not many primary school teachers had used or were still using PA. He said: "Personally speaking, I am not an advocate of PA because PA is something imported home from abroad by those experts and educators who once studied abroad. Though it seems to be a good assessment approach, it is not very practical in China. Those experts at the top do not know how busy classroom teachers are with their work and how many students the teacher has to teach. Teachers don't have adequate time and energy to design and assess complicated portfolios. They don't have adequate time to work together with individual students on the development of the portfolio. To date there has been no training program contributing to PA sponsored by the city education department where I work, and I have never persuaded teachers to use PA, either. But this does not mean that I am against any attempts and trials in PA. If any teacher or any school succeeded in their trial I would do my best to make it popular by persuading teachers from other schools to go to see it." When asked whether it was necessary for me to introduce PA to my present students, he encouraged me to do so, by saying that these future teachers need know the requirements of NEC, but knowing the theory didn't necessarily mean applying it into practice. "It all depends on what it is in practice. All theories come from practice and serve practice," he remarked at the end of the telephone conversation.

3.3.3.2 The local advisor's view

The local advisor told me on the phone that she had encouraged the English teachers in the district to use PA by taking some of them to visit students' portfolios in a neighboring city about two years ago. "At first, the interest in portfolios was high among teachers, but now not many are still using it. PA has not been used in other subject areas yet and so far as I know, no school here has adopted PA. PA, as a form of formative assessment, is not powerful enough to exert influence on schools, teachers, students and parents as tests do. Not mentioning taking a number of quizzes given at other times, students must have at least two conventional exams each term, namely mid-term test and final test. As long as the testing system exists in the schools, it is hard for PA to be implemented. So, I couldn't force the English teachers in this district to use it even though I personally know its distinct benefits. Almost all parents want to send their children to key secondary schools. However, as key secondary schools are limited in number, only a small portion of

students who have scored high in several competitive exams can manage to get into them. This is an age of tests. Tests are like guards posted at the doorway of almost every educational level and of most occupations,” she remarked with a sigh at the end of the phone conversation.

4. Discussions

This study investigated the use of the portfolio in the city where I work as well as the local teachers', students' and advisors' attitudes and views about using portfolios.

On the one hand, according to some students and some teachers, PA was successfully used in their practice and both the student and teacher benefited from using it, as the survey shows above. And most students' responses to some extent confirmed expectations that the portfolio would help them: to become more autonomous learners; to reflect on their approaches to learning; to contextualize learning and link experience with personal interpretation; and provide an on-going basis for planning goal setting. Similar findings have been previously reported with students in English learning or in other subject areas (Miccoli, 2003; Lu, 2005; Tanner & Longayroux et al., 2000; Valencia, 1990; Baume, 2001; Davies et al., 2001; Friedman et al., 2001; Gorden, 2003).

But on the other hand, the questionnaire survey and interviews confirmed the statement that PA was still in its infancy (Hamp-Lyon, 1996). As the figures show clearly PA was implemented only in a very small scale in local area. Only forty-seven (43%) out of one hundred and seven teacher respondents had heard of PA, while just twenty-six teachers (55.3%) out of the forty-seven respondents said that their students had or once had had portfolios, which means that out of one hundred and seven respondents eighty-one (75.7%) had never heard of PA or had never used PA. Out of twenty-six PA users eleven felt that PA was not used successfully and three stated that they were not sure about its outcome because they had just tried it for a short period of time. The survey also shows that there were a number of recognized difficulties or drawbacks in the use of portfolios and as a result PA didn't work effectively. For example, most portfolios were stored in teachers' offices and students might not have an easy access to them; the contents of the portfolios observed were very limited and dull because they lacked the students' self decision or the teacher's timely help; teachers complained that they had no adequate time to assess all portfolios. Besides, the English inspectors held that it was hard and impracticable to adopt PA in the local schools. Then, what factors might have hindered the progress of PA in the Chinese EFL classroom? The questionnaire and interview surveys have shed some light on this problem.

4.1 The first contributing factor might have been the over use of tests in the society and in schools. Tests play a crucial role in the Chinese educational system. Students are faced with numerous exams as soon as they start schools. Each term they have to take at least two tests—mid-term test and final test even though they are just six or seven years old. When they leave primary schools, almost all students wish to go to key junior secondary schools and then to key senior secondary schools, in which they may have more opportunities to enter prestigious universities. However, as key and prestigious schools are limited in number, only a small portion of students who have scored high in several competitive exams including the high-stakes NMT (the National Matriculation Tests) can get into them. At college, students will have to pass CET (College English Test) to get a bachelor's degree. After graduation from universities, they will go on to take a number of tests in order to find a decent job, or to study abroad, or to get a certain professional certificate. As China is a country with the largest population in the world, almost all these tests are held on a large scale with thousands of candidates taking part in them. Nobody would have time to ask every candidate to show his portfolio; nobody would like to look at what is in the candidate's portfolio and no one would care how well it is developed. The scores in tests would have the last say. As a result, even primary schools place strong emphasis on tests instead of adopting PA and in practice most teachers teach according to what is tested instead of what is required from the National Curriculum. Being busy preparing for tests, teachers may have no time for portfolios. Being busy preparing for tests, teachers may forget the characteristics young learners bring into language classrooms. Being busy preparing for tests, teachers may have no time to think about the negative influence tests have on learners. Just as the local advisor said, as long as the testing system exists in schools, it is hard for PA to be implemented because PA, as a form of formative assessment according to the NEC, is not so powerful as tests to exert influence on schools, teachers, students and parents.

Portfolios may not be applicable to competitive large-scale tests for selection purposes in China. If portfolios were used instead of tests as a form of summative assessment in this case, validity and reliability, two chief considerations in language testing, needed to be addressed (Snadden & Thomas, 1998). One issue is that the student work completed beyond the context of the classroom is occasionally subject to issues of academic dishonesty. Another issue in this aspect is that because of 'the close contextualization and task specification inherent to portfolios' (Hamp-Lyon, 1996:157), it is difficult to establish firm criteria or scoring standards which will be applicable to the many kinds of works that learners may choose to put into their portfolios. To date, most portfolio scoring has occurred through holistic scoring of the entire portfolio (for example, Black et al, 2001) or through holistic scoring of each essay in the portfolio (for example, Graham 1992), which must lead to reduced reliability because of the 'superficiality and simplicity of the holistic scoring method in comparison with the complexity of portfolio contents' (Hamp-Lyons, 1996:157). For the

reasons above, PA might not be favored in the Chinese context.

But in primary schools portfolio assessment can be used as a form of summative assessment, not just a form of formative assessment as long as criteria for portfolio assessment is discussed and made known clearly to every learner, and as long as both teachers and learners agree on the inclusion of all the required entries and the quality of the final products according to Smith (2000). When teachers decide the way of assessment, they should take learners' characteristics and need into consideration. Young learners need a happy and non-threatening learning environment. They need interesting and motivating activities, not a competitive test (Moon, 2000; Cameron, 2001; Haliwell, 1992). They also need timely face-to-face help. PA can be appealing to them, interesting and captivating as long as it is conducted properly.

4.2 The second contributing factor might have been that many teachers may not have the assessment skills even though they have the pedagogical skills needed.

The limited nature of the portfolio contents as the survey shows illustrates that the teachers may not really understand portfolio assessment procedure as well as some basic PA knowledge such as what can be included in it and what it is for. For example, the overall goal of the preparation of a portfolio is to promote the student's participation in learning. And the portfolio should document the reflective thoughts of the student and provide evidence that he or she has mastered a given set of learning objectives and plans for how new learning will be tackled (Snadden & Thomas, 1998; Baume, 2001). More than just thick folders containing students' homework, quiz or test papers, weekly performance in learning English and then the student's, peer's, parent's and teacher's assessment of these things, which were observed in the portfolios in the village school, portfolios are typically personalized representations of a student's own efforts and achievements. The development of portfolio should be dialogic and facilitate on-going interaction between the teacher and the student. It cannot be only in written or recorded form and then handed in at the end of each term as I observed in the district key school. On the contrary, it has to be developed in action and shared so that it can facilitate decision-making or joint problem-solving in due time.

Portfolio assessment is an expert system and teachers must have professional preparation in assessment. Because of the contextualized nature of portfolio assessment, the teacher's role seems to be crucial in designing a portfolio assessment. Often, portfolio programs are initiated by teachers, who know their classroom curriculum best. Teachers may develop portfolios focused on a single curricular area, such as writing, math, literature or science and teachers in the West may develop portfolio programs that span two or more subjects, such as writing and reading, writing across the curriculum, or math and science. And, according to Lamme & Hysmith (1991), the assessment information that teachers gather is seen as having the potential for being by far the most valuable and valued form of assessment. If teachers are to play a central role in designing a portfolio assessment, they should be provided with sufficient background training in order to enable them to fully understand either the process or the implications of assessing students with portfolios (Hamp-Lyons, 1996).

4.3 The third contributing factor might have been the lack of teacher education and administrative support relevant to portfolio assessment.

Portfolios highlight regular classroom instruction and teachers' role in education (McLaughlin, 1991) and place additional demands on teachers as well as school resources. Teachers need not only a thorough understanding of their subject area, instructional skills and assessing language ability, but also additional time for planning, conferring with other teachers, developing strategies and materials, meeting with individual students and small groups and reviewing and commenting on student work. In addition, teachers may need extra space in their classrooms to store students' portfolios or equipment such as video camera. However, as the research shows, there was little evidence to date to suggest that portfolio programs provided sufficient administrative support and background training for portfolio designers and readers to enable them to fully understand either the process or the implications of assessing students with portfolios. And training programs are often costly, but Dongguan is a comparatively rich city in China which can afford such training programs. In fact, apart from a few teachers who took the provincial NEC training programs over three years ago, the majority of the local English teachers had never had any chance to attend portfolio training programs. There was none for them at the city level according to the city English inspector who should have known its real situation well because he had been in the position for over ten years.

Unquestionably, assessing every student's works by portfolio is very costly here not in terms of money. It takes much more time for a portfolio reader to read all the works produced by the class than to read a typical timed pencil-and-paper test. Therefore the workload of teachers is increased. Furthermore, with portfolios teachers need to think where they are going to keep them and how to keep them. Teachers also need to decide when they would ask their students to select their samples and how they are going to discuss with them the reasons for selecting the particular sample. All these can be time-consuming for both teachers and students. In this case, teachers need administrative support. They need support materials, such as folders, file drawers, and access to a photocopy machine, and time to plan, share ideas and develop strategies. Teachers and students may also need parents' support. Together with teachers, administrators need to educate

parents about how portfolios work and what advantages they offer over traditional tests. Once portfolios are explained and observed in practice, parents are often enthusiastic supporters (Education Consumers Guide, 1993).

4.4 The fourth contributing factor might have been that portfolio assessment may assess only a limited part of the mastery of the language.

One of its limitations is its application to oral skills development which is crucial for young language learners. Being paper-based, it is more suited to collecting written development. Learners can include their self-assessment of oral language activities and progress, but it is more complicated to include samples of talk. Recorded tapes may help to some extent but what's on the tape seems not to be so real and dynamic. Because of these reasons some researchers state that portfolio assessment may be inappropriate for measuring students' levels of factual knowledge or for drill-and-skill activities. For very beginning learners, who have not developed a lot of writing skills, it may only include the teacher's, the parent's or peer's assessment as well as pictures related to language learning. Even when advanced learners select their written works to put in their portfolios, as usually happens, they may choose the texts to which they put effort into their portfolios and may choose not to put effort into those they don't plan to include. Over time, this could lead to a de-emphasis on certain writing activities and text types in a writing program (Hamp-Lyons, 1996).

4.5 The fifth contributing factor might have been some practical problems, which are visible in every local school.

In most local schools, each class usually has over fifty students. In classes with over fifty students, it seems so crowded that there is no space left to store over fifty portfolios and those students sitting at the back may even feel it difficult to hear the teacher who instructs from the front. Apart from the over-crowding and poor acoustics in the large classes, there is a distance between the teacher and the student, which reduces rapport and interaction (Hywel Coleman, 1996). Moreover, at primary level in China, subjects are kept very separate and a teacher usually teaches the same subject. Quite often the teacher does not always stay with one class because he or she has to teach in different classrooms and thus there is not much chance available for individual students to talk with the teacher. Compared with primary education in modern Western society, where subject boundaries are blurred and one teacher teaches all subjects with the help of a teaching assistant (TA) to the same students numbered less than thirty in one classroom, which is spacious enough to store portfolios and for teachers to walk around to help students in need, PA approach seems a little difficult to apply in the Chinese context.

In such a large class, the priority is often given to discipline and conformity. For example, the lesson proceeds at the same pace, with the whole class working on the same material at the same speed and all the children belonging to one class do most activities together, including lessons for reading, writing, general knowledge, math, music, dance and painting; physical exercises and games on the sports ground; having meals; taking a midday nap. All children are expected to maintain the same level of achievement. All the children are encouraged to achieve the same expected standard as long as they work hard. Everything is orchestrated strictly by the teacher whereas the student is an attentive listener who just does what the teacher says.

4.6 The last factor might have been the traditional Chinese culture of learning.

The traditional Chinese culture of learning stresses that in Chinese society--in the classroom the priorities are that each person must be part of a group or community; learning interdependency, co-operation and social awareness; becoming oneself in relation to significant others; expressing that which is socially shared rather than individually felt; respecting the teacher's status and teachings (Hywel Coleman, 1996). Besides, traditional learning in primary schools in China gives strong emphasis to memory, imitation and repetitive practice. All these may seem to lead to student passivity and teacher-centeredness, the lack of interaction and individualization and the absence of creativity and self-expression, which may make it more difficult to adopt PA in Chinese context, for PA is a communicative approach to assessment which, in contrast to the culture of learning described above, is highly personalized, needs on-going interaction between the teacher and the student and the ability to think creatively and critically, and highlights self-expression of one's own efforts and achievements. So, the last, but not the least, contributing factor might have been that the traditional Chinese culture of learning has been so rooted in both the teacher and the student's mind that they may feel it hard to tear themselves away from it to adopt communicative approaches from the West even in times of rapid social development in China. Though it is invisible, it is something that we can feel.

People from different cultures come with different expectations of what's going to happen in the classroom. This conformity and teacher-centeredness have become institutionalized as part of a Chinese culture of learning. Not all teachers in the school are aware of the importance of PA approach. Not all the teachers are willing to accept it. The leaders of the Ministry of Education themselves see the latest curriculum as means to force teachers to change their classroom practices but some teachers may not immediately accept it, even though they have attended some short NEC training programs, which might not provide sufficient support to guarantee implementation as planned. Lamb (1995:77) states: "Teachers engage with new ideas and gradually accommodate them within their own belief structures by making adjustments in their own thinking. It may be a long process having little immediate practical effects on their teaching,

and with the tension between previous and recent ideas taking perhaps years to find a resolution.”

In sum, the factors such as the over use of tests in the society and in schools, teachers' lack of PA skills, no adequate background training and administrative support relevant to PA, the limitations of PA itself, some practical problems in Chinese classrooms as well as the strong influence of the traditional Chinese culture of learning on the teacher and the student might have hindered the progress of PA in the Chinese context.

5. Conclusion

This paper examines the use of PA in the Chinese context. Firstly, as the research shows, the benefits which PA offers to both students and teachers can be seen even though PA was conducted clumsily in a small scale. Secondly, the accounts of the study carried out in Dongguan have shed some light on the issues widely existing in Chinese assessment context. PA, I am one of those who believe, is in its infancy. There is a long way to go before PA can become common practice widely accepted and implemented. This is one challenge that must not be ignored.

More than five years have passed since the NEC was issued. It is high time that a major program of research was begun into all these issues or obstacles on the way of the implement of the NEC. Good portfolio projects do not happen without considerable effort on the part of teachers, students, English inspectors, parents, school administrators, and policymakers. If they did not make any efforts, the educational revolution might break down and the tide would turn back to the traditional way of learning and teaching.

However, it is still very likely for PA to be widely implemented in China, for at least three reasons. First, the government officials might have already realized the seriousness of this tendency. The newly-revised Compulsory Education Law issued recently by the Chinese government restates that from September 1st, 2006 when the new term begins, no schools of compulsory education can be graded into key ones or ordinary ones; all schools will be allotted the same share of the educational budget, permitted to enroll the same students, equipped with the same qualified teachers; frequent tests for young learners are forbidden and students' test scores can't be ranked and compared with each other and assessment forms should be non-threatening and positive. Secondly, it is worth noting that the Chinese society is changing rapidly and teachers' culture of teaching and students' culture of learning will probably change accordingly. Finally, with the Chinese population on the decrease, class size will surely become smaller. Therefore, there will be a strong possibility for PA to be widely conducted in China.

Nevertheless, it is teachers that play a central part in designing a PA. In the Chinese context, based on Wang's point of view (2003), teachers should first change their way of giving regular quizzes and homework assignments. In fact, some of the regular quizzes and homework can be replaced by working with portfolios and some portfolio work can be done in class. With the use of portfolios, teachers need to pay attention to the quality rather than quantity of assignments. The tasks chosen for the portfolio should be thought out, meaningful, motivating and challenging to learners. With time saved, teachers can have individual meetings or group meetings with students to discuss with them their strength or weakness in learning, give valuable feedback, provide more guidance and support instead of simply looking at the learner's work and then giving it a grade.

On the other hand teachers should tell learners that they will definitely need to spend more time working with self planning, use of imagination, meaningful language use, creative thinking and reflections. They are required to revise their assignments at least once. So when an assignment is handed in for the first time, it is not finished. The learner is expected to revise and reflect on it in a meaningful and useful way the second time or sometimes a third time. Teachers can ask students to set themselves targets for learning and then meet them to talk about their progress or problems they may have in trying to achieve such targets. In addition, teachers can suggest students to build up computer-based portfolios with recorded samples of speech as well as digitally photographed texts to enrich the contents and arouse learners' interest in the portfolio task (Cameron, 2001).

As an advocate of PA, I feel a strong responsibility for discovering both the problems and solutions about the possibilities of using PA in the Chinese context. I feel it urgent to help my students understand the requirements of the NEC and to persuade them to use PA with young learners. Only when classroom teachers are willing to use PA, really understand PA procedures and have the assessment skills can PA become a successful form of assessment.

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Appendixes

Appendix A. English Version of Questionnaire for Teachers

Dear colleagues:

I am making a study on using portfolios for students' work in primary schools. Would you please help me to complete the questions on this questionnaire, which is designed only for academic purpose? All information will be treated in the strictest confidence. You can answer the questionnaire either in Chinese or in English, which you feel comfortable about. Thank you for your co-operation.

Zhang Shumei

Dongguan University of Technology

Part One

1. How many years have you been teaching? _____
2. Is your school a _____? Please tick the one that applies. Write your own answer if the following options don't apply.

A. village school	B. district or town key school
C. a city key school	D. a private school
3. Have you heard of teachers using the 'portfolio' for students work?

A. Yes. (If yes, please go on).	B. No. (If no, stop here and you Don't need to answer the following questions.)
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4. Where did you hear the word? Tick all that apply. Write your own answer if all the following options don't apply.

A. My teacher told me about it when I was in my pre-service training program.	B. I got to know it when I read the National English Curriculum by myself.	C. I got to know it when I read certain magazine or newspaper by myself.	D. I got to know it in an in-service training program.
E. My work colleague told me about it.	F. The local English teaching advisor told me about it.		
5. Do your students have or have they ever had portfolios?

A. Yes. If yes, please go to Part Two (See below)	B. No. If no, please go to Part Three (See below)
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Part Two

6. How long have you used them?
7. Have you any support for using portfolios? If yes, which of the following have supported you? Please tick all that apply. Write your own answer if the following options don't apply.
- A, my work colleagues B, my leaders
C, English teaching advisors D, my students
E, parents
8. What is put inside the portfolios?
9. How often are the portfolios renewed?
10. Where are they kept?
11. What do you do with portfolios? Please tick all that apply. Write your own answer if the following options don't apply.
- A. I look at them and give a grade
B. I show them to the parents at the parents' meetings
C. I look at them and then give a star or something similar
D. I look at them and then give written feedback
E. I look at them first and then make oral feedback on them in class
12. How often do you do these things? Write your own answer if the following options don't apply.
- A. once a week B. once a month C. once a term
13. Who decides what should be put inside? Tick all that apply. Write yours if the following options don't apply.
- A. I
B. my students
C. my school leaders
D. parents
E. the local English teaching advisor
14. How well do you think they are used?
- A. very successfully
B. successfully
C. not successfully
D. a complete failure
E. I am not sure.
15. Please explain your answer to Question 9 with some examples. For example, if you choose D, then why you think it is a complete failure.
16. Have you any ideas or suggestions about using portfolios? Please write them here.
- Please leave your phone number here for possible further contact if you like: _____*

Part Three (If you have never used them, please do this part)

17. Please write down the reasons why you have never used portfolios.

Appendix B. guidelines for the face-to-face interviews with the students

Questions:

1. Does every one of you have a portfolio for your own work?
2. What's put inside your portfolio?
3. Who decides what should be put inside?
4. Do you often review and rethink about it?
5. Whom do you often show it to?

6. Do you often discuss it with your teachers and classmates?
7. Do you think it facilitates your learning?
8. Would you like to be assessed by the portfolio?
9. Would you like to add something concerning the influence of PA?

Appendix C: guidelines for the telephone interviews with the advisors

Questions:

1. Do you think that there are many primary school teachers in our city (or in your district) who have ever tried PA?
2. Were there any training programs in our city (or in your district) about how to use portfolios for assessment?
3. Did you ever persuade teachers to use them?
4. Do you think it is necessary for me to help my present students know how to use them?
5. Do you think it is necessary for me to persuade my present students to use them in their teaching practice after graduation?
6. Would you like to add something concerning PA?

Table 1. Participants of the study

Occupation	Number	Mode of participation
Teachers	107	Completing the questionnaire
Students	36	Being interviewed face-to-face
English advisors	2	Being interviewed on the phone
Total	145	

Table 2. Replies to Question 3 *Have you heard of teachers using PA?*

options	number	percentage
no	60	56.1%
yes	47	43.9%
Total	107	

Table 3. Replies to Question 4 *Where did you hear the words 'PA'?*

Options	number of response	percentage
from work colleagues	21	25.9%
by reading the NEC myself	16	19.8%
by reading magazines or newspapers myself	16	19.8%
in an in-service training program	12	14.8%
in pre-service training programs	9	11%
from advisors	7	8.6%
Total	81	

Table 4. Replies to Question 5 Do your students have or have they ever had portfolios?

Options	number	percentage
Yes	26	55.3%
No	21	44.7%
Total	47	

Table 5. Replies to Question 6 *How long have you used them?*

options	number of response	percentage
One year	13	50%
Two years	6	23
Less than a year	4	15.4%
Over 3 years	3	11.5%
Total	26	

It is apparent from Table 6 that high among the twenty-six respondents' choices was that they had support from their students, work colleagues and school leaders. This can be compared with far low percentage of teachers who mentioned that parents supported them.

Table 6. replies to Question 7 *Have you any support for using portfolios?*

Options	number	percentage
Students	18	29.6%
Work colleagues	17	27.9%
School leaders	14	23%
advisors	10	16%
Parents	2	3.2%
Total:	61	

Table 6. replies to Question 8 *What's put inside the portfolios?*

Contents	number	percentage
Students' best homework	19	25.3%
Students' artifacts (For example pictures, handicrafts, students' handwritten newspapers)	16	21.3%
Students' test papers	10	13.3%
Students' self-reflection (progress and difficulties)	9	12%
Students' Essays	7	9%
Parents' assessment and suggestions	3	4%
Newspaper cuttings and favorite stories and sentences from reading	3	4%
Records of oral reading and dictation	2	2.7%
Personal photos	2	2.7%
Study plan	1	1.3%
Teachers' assessment	1	1.3%
Performance assessment at home (For example doing housework)	1	1.3%
Performance assessment in class (For example how many times you raised your hands to answer the teacher's questions in class)	1	1.3%
Total	75	

Table 7. Replies to Question 9 *How often are they renewed?*

Options	number	percentage
once a term	13	50%
once a month	5	19.2%
It all depends	4	15.4%
twice a term	2	7.7%
once a year	2	7.7%
Total	26	

Table 8. Replies to Question 10 *Where are they kept?*

options	number	percentage
in teachers' offices	17	65.4%
in students' school bags	5	19%
in classrooms	3	11.5%
Sometimes in teachers' office and sometimes in classrooms	1	3.8%
Total	26	

Table 9. Replies to Question 11 *What do you do with portfolios?*

Things I do with portfolios	number	percentage
I look at them and then give a star or something similar	17	23.9%
I look at them and then give written feedback.	15	21%
I look at them and give a grade.	14	19.7%
I show them to the parents at the parents' meetings.	13	18.3%
I look at them first and then make oral feedback on them in class.	12	16.9%
Total	71	

Table 10. Replies to Question 12 *How often do you do these things?*

options	number	Percentage
once a term	16	61.5%
once a month	9	34.6%
once a week	1	3.8%
your own options	0	
Total	26	

Table 11. Replies to Question 13 *Who decided what should be put inside?*

Options	response	percentage
I	19	40.4%
my students	16	34%
my school leaders	8	17%
local teaching advisors	3	6.3%
parents	1	2%
Total	47	

Table 12. Replies to Question 14 *How well do you think they were used?*

Options	numbers	percent
Successfully	12	46.2%
Not successfully	11	42.3%
Not sure	3	11.5%
very successfully	0	
a complete failure	0	
Total	26	