

Chapter 14

Assessment Training in the Use of Portfolios: Voices from Writing Teachers



Ricky Lam

Abstract Despite the benefits of writing portfolios, scholars remain unclear about how assessment training influences teacher use of portfolios for writing assessment in China. The chapter investigates the role and effectiveness of assessment training when Chinese teachers attempt portfolio assessment. The study was conducted in a doctorate degree programme in Hong Kong. Three informants from Mainland China registered an 11-session content course on English language assessment. The assessment training consisted of three lectures and two workshops on the principles of language assessment and writing portfolio assessment respectively. Data were collected by an open-ended questionnaire, post-workshop individual interviews and reflection papers, and analysed by qualitative methods. Implications are drawn to suggest future directions of developing teacher assessment literacy in China and beyond.

Keywords Portfolio assessment · Assessment training · L2 writing · Teacher assessment literacy in China

14.1 Background

Portfolios are broadly defined as dossiers to document a learner's efforts, professional growth, and achievements. In language education, portfolios are viewed as a learning-cum-assessment tool. Of various types of portfolios, writing portfolios have been widely used in L1 but not in L2 or EFL contexts. In the past few decades, there has been a body of research exploring the benefits of writing portfolios when applied as an instructional approach or an assessment tool (Burner, 2014). Yet, there is relatively little research to reveal what and how teachers learn to implement portfolio assessment (Lam, 2018). In studies of assessment literacy, scholars state that most teachers spend up to one-third of their professional time to evaluate students, but

R. Lam (✉)

Hong Kong Baptist University, Kowloon Tong, Hong Kong SAR, China

e-mail: rickyjam@hkbu.edu.hk

© Springer Nature Switzerland AG 2022

L. Hamp-Lyons, Y. Jin (eds.), *Assessing the English Language Writing of Chinese Learners of English*, https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-030-92762-2_14

235

receive limited or no training in assessment which possibly bring about harmful effects on student learning (Stiggins, 2014). Thus far, not much is known about how systematic assessment training plays a role in enhancing teacher use of performance assessments, especially in the context of Chinese learners of English. Because of this, the focus of the paper is to look into how Chinese teachers attempt portfolio assessment to promulgate teaching and learning of writing alongside standardised testing. Its purpose is to test out whether a training approach could enhance Chinese teachers' assessment competence in EFL writing. More specifically, the paper aims to identify the role and effectiveness of assessment training when EFL teachers attempt writing portfolio assessment. The paper starts with a literature review section, followed by a methodology section. Results and discussion sections are then presented. The paper ends with an implication section on how to facilitate the development of teacher assessment literacy.

14.2 Literature Review

The literature review has three parts, comprising (1) portfolio assessment in L2 writing, (2) the role and effectiveness of assessment training, and (3) the overall (writing) assessment landscape in China.

14.2.1 *Portfolio Assessment in L2 Writing*

Utilising portfolios in writing classrooms corresponds with the process writing movement, where teaching writing emphasises multi-drafting, self- and peer-editing, and self-reflection. Studies on writing portfolios reveal that students become self-regulated in learning writing, and have considerable learning gains in accuracy and idea development (Mak & Wong, 2018). Portfolios can be said to reduce writing anxiety and to provide students with ample opportunities to revise works-in-progress (Lee, 2017). Portfolios for teaching are also likely to foster active agency and metacognitive capabilities when students collate their works reflectively (Curtis, 2018). Despite this positive evidence, there are studies reporting logistical issues, which would discourage both teachers and scholars from trying out portfolios, including standardised content coverage, the conflict between direct and indirect tests, and a lack of assessment training. For content coverage, portfolios originally promote variety, learner choice, and reflectivity, but some portfolio programmes require students to include prescribed portfolio entries to stifle creativity and learner autonomy (Scott, 2005). Regarding the conflict between direct and indirect tests, Hamp-Lyons (2002) stated that teachers might find it taxing to use indirect tests (portfolio assessment) to evaluate writing, given that direct tests (large-scale essay testing) warrant test fairness and scoring consistency. As to assessment training,

Jiang and Hill (2018) discover that teacher learning of classroom-based assessment (e.g., portfolios) remains inadequate, particularly among teachers in the Asia-Pacific region.

Although portfolios have become popular, Hamp-Lyons (2007) stated that their use as assessment to evaluate writing is still problematic, because portfolios involve giving feedback, using feedback to inform teaching, and monitoring student learning formatively. Thus far, these aspects of portfolio assessment are seldom taught in teacher education programmes. On this note, Weigle (2007) suggested incorporating assessment into writing/ELT method courses to instruct writing teachers about assessment. She further described how portfolio assessment could be effectively introduced in L2 contexts. While Weigle (2007) has provided EFL writing teachers with proper assessment training input, more has to be specified concerning how teachers can learn to integrate teaching and assessing writing with constructive feedback in portfolio assessment. To echo the importance of assessment training, Hamp-Lyons (2006) found that the instructor was unable to give revisable feedback to Esing (the only informant in the study) or tell Esing about the strengths and weaknesses of her writing. Because the teacher was not skillful to assess writing, Esing was trapped in a negative feedback loop, showing no improvement in her later drafts. In Lam's (2019) study, while the two teacher informants were considered assessment-capable, they could merely mimic the *form* not the *essence* of portfolio assessment when asking their students to perform self-reflection. Based upon the above review, the following section discusses the role and effectiveness of assessment training.

14.2.2 Role and Effectiveness of Assessment Training

In research, assessment training refers to one form of professional development, which equips teachers with knowledge, skills, and principles about large-scale and classroom-based assessments. Undoubtedly, it plays a major role in facilitating the development of teacher assessment literacy (Popham, 2011). Recent studies reveal that school-level and university-level teachers are underprepared to perform assessment-related tasks, including preparing students for large-scale examinations adequately and synergising formative and summative assessments to promote learning (Xu & Brown, 2016). They find that teachers are particularly less proficient in performing the latter tasks. Notwithstanding the proliferation of language assessment textbooks, Davies (2008) warned that because the contents of these textbooks were chiefly ready-made and followed a cookie-cutter approach, teachers were unable to tryout those learnt testing theories with students. Some teacher education programmes in Hong Kong and Canada only offer assessment courses as an elective not a core course, so a certain number of pre-service teachers may not benefit from assessment training (Deluca & Klinger, 2010; Lam, 2015). Similarly, the teacher respondents in Europe reported that they learnt about assessment from colleagues and on the job (Vogt & Tsagari, 2014). What makes the assessment training picture

more complex is that a majority of pre-service teachers' mentors, veteran in-service teachers, and language teacher trainers equally lack assessment capability (DeLuca & Johnson, 2017).

Despite an apparent lack of assessment literacy among teachers, the effectiveness of assessment training in classroom-based assessment remains mostly positive. In the US, around 75% of the respondents (mainly university-level instructors) received proper assessment training and were ready to implement alternative assessments (Crusan et al., 2016). Nevertheless, it did not necessarily mean that the respondents knew how to use writing portfolios to improve pedagogies. In China, Xu (2017) examined four novice EFL teachers' assessment literacy in a 3-year longitudinal study. Not until the third year of their practicum, did the two participants develop an enhanced knowledge of performing improvised formative assessment. It was concluded that assessment training together with personal learning and reflection proves to be the most effective. Zhang and Yan (2018) investigated the quality of multiple-choice test items used in a regional English language test in China. The results indicated that the two teachers could write reliable test items, had good intuitions of the level of difficulty of the test, but failed to have sufficient quality control of EFL tests like some ungrammatical items. Given these encouraging results, selected participants in Vogt and Tsagari's (2014) and Lam's (2019) studies demanded more assessment training in conducting writing portfolio assessment, as they felt less competent to do this. The data implied that teachers might know about preparing students for large-scale, standardised tests, so training them in that did nothing to help them use writing portfolios as a tool for improving teaching, learning, or assessment. In fact, the teachers expected to learn how to fulfill both learning and grading functions of assessment with portfolios more effectively. The next section takes a closer look at the assessment landscape in China.

14.2.3 (Writing) Assessment Landscape in China

In China, there has been a long history of utilising writing assessment to select civil servants. The prompts and contents of this archaic writing assessment were analogous to those of nowadays impromptu essay testing, where the examination conditions were highly standardised (Cheng & Curtis, 2010). This deep-seated testing culture has ideologically shaped the current examination system – Gaokao – a nation-wide college entrance examination. Gaokao is said to be a legacy of Confucian-heritage culture, where emphasis is put on effort, test performance, and a competitive learning mode (Carless, 2011). Consequently, high-stakes writing examination like Gaokao is commonly viewed as a means of upward social mobility, allowing students to become elites and professionals in the country. This predominant examination-oriented culture runs counter to the implementation of quality-oriented education reform in China, which promulgates experiential learning, critical thinking, and formative assessment (Tan & Chua, 2015). To obtain the best results in

Gaokao, students generally resort to studying the examination syllabus by rote, and teachers mostly adopt the didactic approach to conducting their lessons.

There are studies revealing how Gaokao negatively impacts teaching and learning in English language classrooms. In Gu's (2014) study, the teacher participant, Shelley, lamented that she struggled to strike a balance between following the curriculum reform initiatives (using formative assessment) and accommodating student needs to perform well in the public examination. Shelley added that her instructional approach was mostly governed by the Gaokao syllabus. Likewise, Yan (2015) reported that there were implementation gaps between new English curriculum requirements and teachers' classroom practices. The teacher participants preferred the product-based pedagogy to the process-oriented pedagogy owing to numerous barriers, including psychological challenges to teachers, students' resistance, lack of school support, and the backwash effect of the prevalent examination culture. To lower the stakes of Gaokao, Gu (2012) suggested that teachers take an eclectic stance of assessment by aligning teaching and testing with formative assessment and adopting multiple methods of assessment. Hamp-Lyons (2016) also noted that a transition from test use for bureaucratic purposes to test use for learning-enhancing purposes requires a high level of teacher assessment literacy, especially in an examination-dominated culture like China.

Thus far, the use of alternative assessments in the new English curriculum is high on the agenda in China, namely writing portfolio assessment. Nevertheless, from the reviewed literature, assessment training about the use of writing portfolios for teaching and assessment appears to be scarce and less effective, particularly in the context of Chinese learners of English. Also, there are clear implementation gaps between the assessment reform policies and actual classroom practices when teachers innovate their writing assessment practices. To better understand these dilemmas, the study intends to address the following two research questions:

1. What is the perceived role and effectiveness of assessment training in writing portfolio assessment?
2. To what extent does the assessment training help resolve individual, institutional, and cultural issues when the participants plan to attempt the portfolio approach?

14.3 Methodology

14.3.1 Research Design

The study adopted a qualitative methodology, enabling the author to gain an in-depth perspective of the role and effectiveness of assessment training in writing portfolios. Using a case study approach, the author could specifically examine how the participants experienced the assessment training, and whether the training would facilitate or inhibit the possibility of introducing portfolio assessment in their workplaces. The case study approach was likely to generate unique insights into the importance of

assessment training, especially within the current assessment reform landscape in China. More importantly, it deepened various stakeholders' understanding of how the assessment training fostered the development of teacher assessment literacy.

14.3.2 Participants

Three key informants participated in the study, including Joan, Rebecca, and Taylor (pseudonyms). They were females, attending a first-year doctorate programme at one comprehensive university in Hong Kong. Joan, Rebecca, and Taylor had 3–7 years' teaching experience in China. Joan taught speaking and writing at a private tutorial school in the southern part of China. Rebecca taught general English in a Hong Kong government-funded secondary school, and Taylor taught translation and interpretation at a top-tier Guangdong university. Prior to the study, the informants claimed that they had not received any language assessment training.

14.3.3 The Assessment Course

The three participants received assessment training via an 11-session content course about English language assessment. One topic strand of the course included three lectures on basic knowledge of language assessment, and two workshops on the application of writing portfolio assessment in L2 environments. Each lecture and workshop lasted for three hours. The contents of the lectures covered: basic assessment principles (e.g., validity and reliability); various assessment purposes; theories of classroom-based assessment; and language assessment literacy. The contents of the workshops consisted of: principles, issues and recommendations of writing portfolio assessment, and feedback provision and enactment in L2 writing classrooms.

14.3.4 Data Collection and Analysis

Three data sources were used to collect qualitative data: (1) a pre-workshop open-ended questionnaire; (2) a post-workshop individual interview; and (3) a reflection paper. The questionnaire aimed to understand the participants' views and practices of writing assessment prior to the training. The interview elicited their insights into the usefulness of the assessment training. The reflection paper identified how the participants could mediate individual, institutional, and cultural issues when they planned to attempt writing portfolio assessment. The questionnaire had 3 parts and 17 items, including background, perceptions of language assessment, and assessment training (see Appendix 1). It was administered in Week 2 of the course before

the lectures and workshops commenced. An interview guide comprising 8 questions was adopted (see Appendix 2). The three individual interviews were conducted in Week 9 of the course after the assessment training completed. The reflection paper required the participants to write about why, how, and what should be changed in writing assessment practices in their work contexts. The participants were expected to critique the change process with theories, observations, and site-based evidence.

Data were analysed with the following procedures: assembling, coding, comparing, and interpreting (Burns, 2010). Assembling the data is about reading and re-reading all data sources before coding. Deductive coding was adopted to blend in the two themes under study: (a) the role and effectiveness of assessment training, and (b) the ways assessment training mediates multi-level issues when portfolios are put into practice. Questionnaire and interview data were compared during the coding process. Partial interview and documentary data (reflection papers) were also juxtaposed to check whether the participants' views and actions converged or diverged. After comparing, the author could develop insights by interpreting the processed data relating to the findings of current scholarship on assessment literacy and his own research experience.

14.4 Results

14.4.1 Research Question 1

To address the perceived role and effectiveness of assessment training, this section reports the three participants' pre-training and post-training perceptions.

14.4.1.1 Pre-training Perceptions (Questionnaire Data)

Before the assessment training, Rebecca, Joan, and Taylor said that they received no training in language assessment or any forms of alternative assessment. From the questionnaire, the three key informants were eager to learn about L2 writing assessment, since assessing writing was complicated. Neither did the participants apply writing portfolio assessment in their teaching contexts previously although Rebecca has heard about writing portfolios when working as a teaching assistant in Hong Kong. When asked about whether portfolio assessment could replace one-off, impromptu writing assessment in China, Rebecca emphasised that this idea was not likely to happen due to the issues of practicality and scoring consistency, and Joan mentioned that time would be a major barrier to use portfolio assessment. Interestingly, Taylor was somewhat enthusiastic about using portfolio assessment to replace existing standardised testing, but she proposed that more empirical research was needed to substantiate its large-scale application.

Although the participants have not learnt about portfolio assessment, they expressed its relevancy to their teaching jobs and showed interests in giving portfolio assessment a go, especially for Taylor who planned to introduce e-portfolio in her university. Concerning the levels of understanding, even without proper training, Rebecca and Taylor came to grips with some rudimentary concepts and principles of writing portfolio assessment. For instance, Rebecca was concerned with the practicality and scoring issues when portfolios were applied. She further jotted down a phrase 'low reliability' as a challenge in portfolio implementation. To Taylor, she distinguished the differences between large-scale and classroom-based assessments and categorised portfolio assessment as one form of the latter. However, for Joan, she seemed to have limited knowledge about educational assessment. In her questionnaire, she mainly discussed the role of large-scale testing like Test for English Majors 8 and showed little understanding of classroom-based assessment like writing portfolios.

When asked about their expectations towards the assessment training, the participants had different views. For example, Rebecca wanted to learn about giving effective written corrective feedback, because it could help resolve students' immediate writing problems. She believed that written corrective feedback might facilitate the development of self-assessment skills. While Rebecca preferred a quick-fix approach to assessment training, she remained inquisitive to learn how to boost student motivation for keeping portfolios and use feedback to inform teaching and learning of writing. Similarly, Joan stated that she was keen on acquiring some hands-on experience of portfolio-based lessons, including authentic classroom examples and down-to-earth implementation procedures. She felt that these examples could equip her with adequate knowledge and skills in carrying out portfolio assessment. Unlike Rebecca and Joan, Taylor wished to learn about theories and classroom applications of writing portfolio assessment, because she considered both theory and practice were significant for her to conduct research and improve pedagogy.

14.4.1.2 Post-training Perceptions (Interview Data)

Generally, the participants were positive about the role of assessment training, given that they had learnt about the principles, features and procedures of writing portfolio assessment. By attending the lectures and workshops, they developed a deeper understanding of what portfolio assessment entailed. All three participants found the lectures, academic readings, discussion forums, and mini-project task very beneficial, which might enhance their awareness and conceptual understanding of portfolio assessment. Despite its facilitative role, the participants advised the instructor to invite guest speakers (preferably frontline teachers) to share their portfolio tryout experiences. Rebecca proposed to include a workshop on scoring in writing portfolios with well-defined rubrics. Further, Taylor suggested that the weekly reading task should be graded and made compulsory, so that the participants became motivated to read up the assessment literature regularly.

Prior to the interviews, Rebecca and Joan had reservation about the usefulness of the assessment training although they expected to learn about how to put writing portfolio assessment in action. Before the training, Rebecca and Joan thought that portfolios could only serve the formative purpose as its application in large-scale testing remained unproven. After receiving the training, Rebecca changed her mind and believed that portfolio assessment could serve both summative and formative purposes, provided that teachers were able to score student portfolios impartially and accurately. Moreover, before the training, Rebecca misunderstood that portfolio implementation would increase teacher workload. Yet after the workshop, she realised that the portfolio approach, advocating learner autonomy and self- and peer-assessment, might reduce teacher workload accordingly, because students could share assessment responsibility with their teachers together.

For Joan, even after training, she did not have an obvious change in her belief – a trust in high-stakes testing. During the interview, Joan was very skeptical about the benefits of writing portfolio assessment, as most teachers in China did not know this new trend. She added that because of an examination-driven culture, students would ignore the importance of writing development and simply focus on the assessment results. Joan also emphasised that portfolio scoring was subjective and the issue of fairness remained unresolved. She said, *‘I want to know how to set up reliable criteria to assess students in a fair way’*. As to Taylor, she reported that after the training, she developed a better understanding of the principles and practices of portfolio assessment, and decided to research on this approach. Her plan was to set up an e-portfolio system in her affiliated university. Then, she investigated her own portfolio application together with her colleagues via an action research study. Taylor’s proactive initiative to change was borne out by this quote, *‘They (Taylor’s colleagues) are talking about how to change assessment in their lectures. Yeah, they want to bring in formative assessment. And I talked with them about portfolio assessment and they are interested.’*

In sum, the assessment training served as a form of professional development for the participants, especially when all of them received no training in language assessment. The training played a *facilitative* role in enhancing the three participants’ understanding of the principles and practices of writing portfolio assessment. Based upon the data, it seems that Rebecca and Taylor benefited more from the assessment training than Joan due to the fact that Rebecca was reflective upon how she assessed student writing pedagogically (i.e., written corrective feedback) and Taylor was open-minded and passionate about researching a new assessment approach (i.e., attempts to initiate e-portfolios). Joan also gained new knowledge after the training, but still held a deep-seated view that conventional standardised testing was superior to portfolio assessment.

14.4.2 Research Question 2

To address the extent to which the assessment training resolves multi-level issues, this section details the three participants' post-training perceptions and their assessment reform plans in the reflection papers.

14.4.2.1 Post-training Perceptions (Interview Data)

When asked about in what ways the assessment training mediated individual, institutional, and cultural issues, the three participants had different perspectives. At the individual level, Rebecca believed that the assessment training could deepen her understanding of using portfolios as a classroom-based assessment method. At the institutional level, Rebecca thought that the assessment training was able to change school leaders' mindsets, enabling them to be more receptive to innovations. For instance, school leaders might encourage teachers to attempt various alternative assessment approaches. To Rebecca, the assessment training might not successfully mediate a wider cultural issue if portfolios were adopted as a large-scale assessment. She stated that writing portfolio assessment might reduce the stakes of standardised testing and student study pressure. However, she felt that to measure student writing via portfolios remained complex and subjective. Rebecca concluded that the assessment training might change teachers' and school leaders' beliefs in the usefulness of portfolio assessment, but not its large-scale application, because the latter seemed to be logistically problematic and empirically unproven.

For Joan, the assessment training could equip her with fundamental knowledge on portfolio implementation. She believed that the assessment training could enhance her confidence when attempting new assessment methods. However, at the institutional level, she wondered how much school leaders would support teachers when they initiated assessment change. Joan explained that not every school or district in China received sufficient resources to pilot writing portfolio assessment, given that assessment reforms involved additional teacher training, student commitments, school management endorsement, and parent support. She expressed her concerns whether the assessment training could resolve the cultural-related issues, because the current assessment practices in China were heavily examination-driven and governed by bureaucratic education policies. Despite her willingness to attempt portfolio assessment, Joan thought that the assessment training took up a minor role (around 30%) in mediating these multi-level issues.

In the interview, Taylor reckoned that the assessment training was effective to change teacher beliefs about the value of portfolio assessment. Institutionally, Taylor was hesitant, saying that changing school leaders' mindsets to adopt new assessment methods was a long-term endeavour. Also, the assessment training would have more direct impact on teachers than on school administrators. With that being said, Taylor was somewhat hopeful that the assessment training could mediate cultural-related issues. She further added that owing to Gaokao, change in assessment practices

might take time and need communal support. But, at the tertiary level, she could promote writing portfolio assessment more steadily, because university instructors had greater autonomy than school teachers concerning educational reforms.

14.4.2.2 Assessment Reform Plans (Documentary Data)

The use of assessment reform plans served to find out the extent to which the assessment training mediated individual, institutional, and cultural issues when the three participants introduced writing portfolio assessment. In Rebecca's paper, she critiqued journal writing as an assessment tool in one Hong Kong secondary school. Rebecca argued against evaluating student writing by journals due to the following reasons: (a) comprehensive marking; (b) no involvement of students in the assessment process; (c) emphasis on linguistic accuracy; and (d) no timely feedback (journal entries returned to students rather late). After Rebecca identified these feedback issues, she proposed a new assessment plan with eleven steps. She went on to justify why she made such changes. For instance, she planned to promote active learning, greater involvement of students in the assessment process, and use of portfolios to encourage reflectivity. Near the end of the paper, Rebecca suggested that teachers should consolidate their assessment literacy by giving students revisable/timely feedback and by marking student writing more accurately. Rebecca advised that instructed training should be given to students before they were asked to perform self- and peer assessment. From Rebecca's paper, it was clear that she had a thorough understanding of feedback for learning. She was able to identify assessment issues and propose changes with classroom evidence. She has built clear pedagogical insights into the assessment problem that happened in her work place. Although she only briefly mentioned portfolio assessment, she incorporated the notion of continuous feedback into writing portfolio assessment. The assessment training could effectively help Rebecca to mediate individual and institutional issues.

Joan's paper focused on evaluating the likelihood of introducing writing portfolio assessment in Chinese secondary schools. In the paper, Joan displayed a basic understanding of the rationale and principles of portfolio assessment. Additionally, Joan pointed out that teachers and administrators may encounter constraints when introducing writing portfolio assessment, including student weaknesses in writing; packed teaching schedules; and low levels of assessment literacy. Nonetheless, when she discussed three classroom examples of writing portfolios, she only cited three common ELT practices, which were unrelated to portfolio assessment such as displaying student good works on bulletin boards; jotting down useful phrases and vocabulary items; and keeping grammar plus vocabulary correction books. When it came to suggesting ideas on wider portfolio application, Joan was unable to provide concrete recommendations except on the point of school support. The tone of Joan's reflection paper appeared to be less affirmative probably due to limited teaching experience and a lack of exposure to portfolio application. Hence, the assessment

training might moderately mediate the individual issue (change of mindsets) rather than institutional and cultural issues, given that Joan firmly believed in the significance of large-scale assessment.

Taylor's paper focused on proposing a change in the assessment practices of a consecutive interpreting course. In her work, Taylor demonstrated an advanced understanding of formative and summative assessment and articulated why change in assessment was necessary. A well-defined gap to innovate assessment formats was identified from the research literature, namely the benefits of e-portfolios. Because of the availability of resources and accessibility of technology, Taylor could steadily introduce e-portfolios in her programme. Her assessment plan included the newly-added contents of an e-portfolio programme like self-assessment reports, reflective diaries, and selection of best interpretation recordings. For evaluation, Taylor constructed a criteria-referenced rubric relating to these contents. Based upon Taylor's proposal, she was quite determined to innovate the current assessment practices with theoretical justifications and pedagogical rationale. Taylor has even set a 1-year timeline to introduce the assessment change. Given that the assessment training empowered Taylor to be a *change agent*, it enabled her to mediate individual, institutional, and also cultural issues (willingness to challenge the assumption of the psychometric paradigm of assessment).

In brief, Rebecca and Taylor appeared to be more optimistic about using the assessment training to mediate multi-level issues than Joan who had great faith in high-stakes testing. Having analysed their reflection papers, the author finds that Joan could only use the assessment training to mediate individual but not institutional and cultural issues due to her lack of experience in alternative assessments, whereas Rebecca utilised the assessment training to mediate both individual and institutional issues by reflectively challenging the existing corrective feedback practices. For Taylor, she was probably the most assessment-competent participant, who best used the assessment training to mediate all levels of issues when she was about to launch her e-portfolio programme. Having said that, all three participants, indeed, learned about portfolio assessment well enough to think more deeply and usefully about it. Their self-assured feedback confirmed their willingness to innovate writing portfolios regardless of challenges.

14.5 Discussion

This section characterises the three participants' roles within an assessment training landscape in the use of writing portfolios, followed by a discussion on the usefulness, quality, and needs of assessment training. Rebecca was seeking best written corrective feedback practices which could be applied in her school. She was knowledgeable about the dynamic interplay between the formative and summative purposes of writing assessment. She also had a solid understanding of the assessment principles in general and the theory of writing portfolio assessment in particular. She cautioned the importance of practicality when evaluating student writing with

written corrective feedback. With these in mind, Rebecca can be said *an inquisitive practitioner*, who utilised assessment training to enrich her assessment repertoire.

Joan was keen on learning about the basic principles of portfolio assessment. However, she was concerned with its ethical issues, such as test fairness (e.g., non-standardised assessment conditions) and scoring consistency (e.g., rater subjectivity). Joan believed that students and parents were typically examination-oriented, only focusing on the outcomes of Gaokao but ignoring the advantages of portfolio assessment. Owing to her limited exposure to L2 writing assessment, Joan did not benefit much from the assessment training and remained hopeful about standardised testing. She can be said *a disciple of high-stakes testing*, who considered portfolio assessment not suitable to be adopted in public examinations. Taylor confidently mastered the rationale behind portfolios after the assessment training, which inspired her to launch the e-portfolio programme. Taylor was fervent about applying the principles of portfolio assessment into practice. She discussed the new assessment mode (e-portfolios) and planned ahead the logistics of implementation with her colleagues and the author. She also looked forward to seeing more assessment innovations in China, such as China's Standards of English Language Ability which is a Chinese equivalent of Common European Framework of Reference for Languages. Taylor can be said *a game-changer of writing assessment* as she professionally initiated reforms in the assessment practices.

From the results, the assessment training provided in this study was generally effective although it did not change all the participants' mindsets in the use of portfolios to improve teaching and learning of writing. The three participants were rather positive about the usefulness of the assessment training, because they had not received formal training in L2 writing assessment formerly. Notwithstanding its positive impact, the participants felt that the training should better narrow the theory-practice divide by providing more hands-on experience, examples of authentic portfolio applications, and practical sharing by guest speakers. Except Taylor, it appears that the assessment training might not assist the participants to mediate multi-level issues when they planned to introduce portfolio assessment in their schools. For instance, Joan still had a misunderstanding towards the classroom-based portfolio implementation and did not feel convinced of its use as summative assessment. She also failed to suggest actionable recommendations regarding how her affiliated institution could support her when she introduced the alternative assessment. Therefore, the assessment training may not essentially serve as a panacea for the development of teacher assessment literacy.

In fact, the quality of assessment training matters most if we want to enhance teacher assessment literacy in L2 writing (Lam, 2019). The quality of training entails the scope of meetings, course syllabi, practice opportunities, or authenticity in course materials. There are other factors including teacher commitments, teacher beliefs, institutional support, and a larger socio-cultural setting, which may facilitate or impede practitioners' uptake of assessment knowledge, skills, and principles in the mandate training (Xu & Brown, 2016). Institutionally, the quality of assessment training requires constant updates by hiring seasoned scholars to run short-term to middle-term professional development courses although these initiatives need

financial resources. Nationally, the Ministry of Education encourages school-university collaborations via action research like in Taylor's case in order to promote a bottom-up approach to assessment training. Concerning the needs of assessment training, policymakers could survey frontline teachers' needs by identifying their perceptions towards beliefs, knowledge, and skills about L2 writing assessment (cf. Crusan et al., 2016). Based upon the questionnaire data, service providers could design context-specific assessment training manuals for teachers who evaluate their student writing by portfolios in diverse educational settings and geographical locations.

14.6 Implications and Conclusion

The study sheds new light on the importance of assessment training in the use of portfolios, especially within a context of Chinese learners of English. The findings of this study further advance our understanding that assessment training is a necessary but *insufficient* condition to make portfolio application successful in EFL environments. The three participants were qualified, eager, and academically able to try out portfolio assessment. Nonetheless, to allow successful integration of portfolios into the classroom and to use them as a means for both formative and summative evaluations require more than systematic training. Institutional support (e.g., teacher-to-teacher mentoring) and contextual support (e.g., financial support from the government) all play a part in shaping why some teachers are more motivated to implement portfolio assessment than others. Thus, it is indispensable for administrators to scale up the assessment training in portfolio assessment. For instance, our data imply that the participants want to learn how to score writing portfolios summatively, given that scoring portfolios is a highly skilled activity (Hamp-Lyons, 2006). Second, our data also imply that besides setting up portfolio systems, the participants need the skills to evaluate their own portfolio implementation through reflective practices, such as teacher reflection groups, journals, or exploratory practice (Hanks, 2015). Exploratory practice is a form of continued professional development, in which teachers reflect upon and investigate their practice, and improve the quality of teaching life through less rigorous research procedures. Third, in average assessment training courses, there should be a healthy balance between theory and practice. Our participants told us that they came to grips with the principles of writing portfolios, but lacked adequate hands-on experience to attempt the new approach. Future assessment training may include portfolio grading tasks, self-reflection tasks, and online discussion tasks on sharing good portfolio practices by and with frontline teachers. Despite its theoretical contributions, the study has its limitations. It has a small sample size and the findings primarily draw upon self-reported data. However, with data triangulation and objective interpretations, the results of the study remain dependable albeit not generalisable to a larger EFL writing context.

Acknowledgements This work was funded by the Language Fund under Research and Development Projects 2018-19 of the Standing Committee on Language Education and Research (SCOLAR), Hong Kong SAR. The project reference number is (EDB(LE)/P&R/EL/175/4).

Appendices

Appendix 1

Open-ended questionnaire

Part A: Background

1. What is your teaching context? Tick as appropriate.
 Kindergarten Primary school Secondary school Vocational training school Training school University
2. What is your teaching experience?
3. What is the location of your school/university? (e.g., the name of town, city, or province)
4. Besides teaching English, are you responsible for other administrative duties? Fill in 'Yes' and what position do you hold? Or 'No'.
5. What is the last employment before you join the EdD Programme at University A?

Part B: Perceptions of language assessment

6. What is your understanding of writing assessment? And could you give ONE example of classroom-based writing assessment in the Chinese context?
7. What is the relationship between large-scale essay testing and classroom-based writing assessment?
8. Have you heard about writing portfolio assessment? Did you use writing portfolios when you were a school/university student in China? If yes, please elaborate on your experience. If no, please proceed to Q10.
9. What is the rationale behind writing portfolio assessment?
10. Do you think writing portfolios can be used to replace standardised writing assessments like those in TEM or classroom-based writing assessments (composition writing)? Why or why not?

Part C: Assessment training

11. Have you received any writing assessment training such as coursework, seminars, lectures, or online courses? If yes, what have you learnt? If no, proceed to Q12.
12. What is your expectation about EDUD XXX? What do you expect to learn after taking the course? Feel free to elaborate on your response.

13. Do you think learning about writing portfolio assessment is relevant to your job? Why or why not?
14. To what extent does the assessment training help resolve individual (teacher beliefs), institutional (workload or school support), and cultural (an examination-driven society) constraints when you introduce the portfolio approach in the Chinese context?

Individual issues: very likely likely neutral not likely not very likely

Explanation:

Institutional issues: very likely likely neutral not likely not very likely

Explanation:

Cultural issues: very likely likely neutral not likely not very likely

Explanation:

15. What do you want to learn regarding classroom-based portfolio assessment and why do you want to learn about those aspects?
16. Since portfolios have become a trend in L2 writing assessment, what factors will facilitate or inhibit its wider application in China?
17. Other comments:

Appendix 2

Interview guide:

1. What is your understanding of L2 writing assessment?
2. What do you think about the usefulness of lectures and workshops on writing portfolio assessment?
3. Do you have a better understanding of writing portfolio assessment after the workshops? Why or why not? Please give ONE example.
4. Which aspects of the assessment training do you like most and why? And which aspects do you feel less satisfactory and why?
5. What assessment knowledge and skills do you need if portfolios are used to replace the current writing assessment in the Chinese context?
6. To what extent does the assessment training help resolve individual, institutional, and cultural issues when you attempt portfolios as an alternative to writing assessment?
7. In your opinion, how likely do you think teachers/lecturers in China will adopt portfolios to achieve both formative and summative purposes of assessment?
8. Thus far, what form and content of writing assessment training do you prefer and why? Lastly, do you have any comments on the assessment training provided in EDUD XXX?

References

- Burner, T. (2014). The potential formative benefits of portfolio assessment in second and foreign language writing contexts: A review of the literature. *Studies in Educational Evaluation, 43*, 139–149.
- Burns, A. (2010). *Doing action research in English language teaching: A guide for practitioners*. Routledge.
- Carless, D. (2011). *From testing to productive student learning: Implementing formative assessment in Confucian-Heritage Settings*. Routledge.
- Cheng, L., & Curtis, A. (Eds.). (2010). *English language assessment and the Chinese learner*. Routledge.
- Crusan, D., Plakans, L., & Gebril, A. (2016). Writing assessment literacy: Surveying second language teachers' knowledge, beliefs, and practices. *Assessing Writing, 28*, 43–56.
- Curtis, A. (2018). Portfolios. In J. I. Liantas (Ed.), *The TESOL encyclopedia of English language teaching* (1st ed.). Wiley. <https://doi.org/10.1002/9781118784235.eelt0326>
- Davies, A. (2008). Textbook trends in teaching language testing. *Language Testing, 25*(3), 327–347.
- DeLuca, C., & Johnson, S. (2017). Developing assessment capable teachers in this age of accountability. *Assessment in Education: Principles, Policy & Practice, 24*(2), 121–126.
- DeLuca, C., & Klinger, D. A. (2010). Assessment literacy development: Identifying gaps in teacher candidates' learning. *Assessment in Education: Principles, Policy & Practice, 17*(4), 419–438.
- Gu, P. Y. (2012). English curriculum and assessment for basic education in China. In J. Ruan & C. B. Leung (Eds.), *Perspectives on teaching and learning English literacy in China* (pp. 35–50). Springer.
- Gu, P. Y. (2014). The unbearable lightness of the curriculum: What drives the assessment practices of a teacher of English as a foreign language in a Chinese secondary school? *Assessment in Education: Principles, Policy & Practice, 21*(3), 286–305.
- Hamp-Lyons, L. (2002). The scope of writing assessment. *Assessing Writing, 8*(1), 5–16.
- Hamp-Lyons, L. (2006). Feedback in portfolio-based writing courses. In K. Hyland & F. Hyland (Eds.), *Feedback in second language writing contexts and issues* (pp. 140–161). Cambridge University Press.
- Hamp-Lyons, L. (2007). The impact of testing practices on teaching: Ideologies and alternatives. In J. Cummins & C. Davison (Eds.), *International handbook of English language teaching* (pp. 487–504). Springer.
- Hamp-Lyons, L. (2016). Purposes of assessment. In D. Tsagari & J. Banerjee (Eds.), *Handbook of second language assessment* (pp. 13–27). De Gruyter.
- Hanks, J. (2015). 'Education is not just teaching': Learner thoughts on exploratory practice. *ELT Journal, 69*(2), 117–128.
- Jiang, H., & Hill, M. F. (Eds.). (2018). *Teacher learning from classroom assessment: Perspectives from Asia Pacific*. Springer.
- Lam, R. (2015). Language assessment training in Hong Kong: Implications for language assessment literacy. *Language Testing, 32*(2), 169–197.
- Lam, R. (2018). *Portfolio assessment for the teaching and learning of writing*. Springer.
- Lam, R. (2019). Teacher assessment literacy: Surveying knowledge, conceptions and practices of classroom-based writing assessment in Hong Kong. *System, 81*, 78–89.
- Lee, I. (2017). *Classroom writing assessment and feedback in L2 school contexts*. Springer.
- Mak, P., & Wong, K. (2018). Self-regulation through portfolio assessment in writing classrooms. *ELT Journal, 72*(1), 49–61.
- Popham, W. J. (2011). Assessment literacy overlooked: A teacher educator's confession. *The Teacher Educator, 46*(4), 265–273.
- Scott, T. (2005). Creating the subject of portfolios: Reflective writing and the conveyance of institutional prerogatives. *Written Communication, 22*(3), 3–35.

- Stiggins, R. (2014). Improve assessment literacy outside of schools too. *The Phi Delta Kappan*, 96(2), 67–72.
- Tan, C., & Chua, C. S. K. (2015). Education policy borrowing in China: Has the West wind overpowered the East wind? *Compare – A Journal of Comparative and International Education*, 45(5), 686–704.
- Vogt, K., & Tsagari, D. (2014). Assessment literacy of foreign language teachers: Findings of a European study. *Language Assessment Quarterly*, 11(4), 374–402.
- Weigle, S. C. (2007). Teaching writing teachers about assessment. *Journal of Second Language Writing*, 16(3), 194–209.
- Xu, H. (2017). Exploring novice EFL teachers' classroom assessment literacy development: A three-year longitudinal study. *The Asia-Pacific Education Researcher*, 26(3-4), 219–226.
- Xu, Y. T., & Brown, G. T. L. (2016). Teacher assessment literacy in practice: A reconceptualization. *Teaching and Teacher Education*, 58, 149–162.
- Yan, C. (2015). 'We can't change much unless the exams change': Teachers' dilemmas in the curriculum reform in China. *Improving Schools*, 18(1), 5–19.
- Zhang, G., & Yan, X. (2018). Assessment literacy of secondary EFL teachers: Evidence from a regional EFL test. *Chinese Journal of Applied Linguistics*, 41(1), 25–46.

Ricky Lam is Associate Professor in the Department of Education Studies at Hong Kong Baptist University. His publications have appeared in *Assessing Writing*, *Language Testing*, *TESOL Quarterly*, and other international journals. He has recently published a book entitled 'Portfolio assessment for the teaching and learning of writing'. His research interests include digital portfolios and language assessment literacy.