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E-portfolio Assessment between the Practical Difficulties and the Future Prospects

محفظة التقييم الإلكترونية بين المصاعب العملية والآفاق المستقبلية

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Abstract

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Assessment is used inside and outside the language classrooms as an investigative procedure that explores the extent to which the teaching-learning process is going effective. This may be done through using a variety of tools such as tests, observations, interviews and so many tools, which sometimes can be practiced implicitly or explicitly and for many purposes. Under necessity, integrating assessment and technology is felt as urgency to consolidate e-learning. Accordingly, many assessment tools emerged, such as computerized tests, online interviews and other tools. E-portfolio, as an alternative assessment and e-assessment tool, is still receiving less obvious views among the EFL teachers in the Algerian universities. This study seeks to illustrate the practical difficulties which might be crucial in the determination of EFL teachers' attitudes towards e-portfolio assessment. Data were collected through a structured interview with teachers which revealed interesting findings. The teachers insisted on the need for the systematic training for the portfolio pedagogy and the development of learners' technology literacy.

ملخص

الكلمات المفتاحية:

يتم استخدام التقييم داخل وخارج أقسام تعليم اللغة كإجراء استقصائي يستكشف مدى فعالية عملية التعليم والتعلم. يمكن القيام بذلك من خلال استخدام مجموعة متنوعة من أدوات التقييم مثل الاختبارات والملاحظات والمقابلات وغيرها من الأدوات، والتي يمكن أحيانا ممارستها بشكل ضمني أو صريح ولأغراض عديدة. في ظل هذه الضرورة، يُعتبر دمج التقييم والتكنولوجيا أمراً ملحا لتدعيم التعلم الإلكتروني. وفق هذا ظهرت العديد من أدوات التقييم مثلا لاختبارات المحوسبة والمقابلات عبر الإنترنت والعديد من الأدوات. المحفظة الإلكترونية، كأداة للتقييم الإلكتروني و التقييم البديل، تتلقى حاليا آراء أقل وضوحاً بين أساتذة اللغة الإنجليزية في الجامعات الجزائرية. بموجب هذا، تسعى هذه الدراسة إلى توضيح الصعوبات العملية التي قد تكون حاسمة في تحديد مواقف أساتذة اللغة الإنجليزية كلفة أجنبية تجاه محفظة التقييم الإلكترونية. فيما يخص البيانات فقد تم جمعها من خلال مقابلة منظمة مع الاساتذة والتي بدورها كشفت عن نتائج جديرة بالاهتمام بحيث أكدوا من خلالها على ضرورة التدريب المنهجي لبيداغوجيا المحفظة الورقية بالإضافة إلى تعزيز المعرفة التكنولوجية لدى المتعلمين.

التقييم البديل
محفظة التقييم الإلكترونية
التعلم الإلكتروني
التكنولوجيا.

1. Introduction

Assessment is an integral part of the teaching-learning process. Teachers use the different assessment methods inside and outside the educational settings as exploratory activities to evaluate the extent to which the teaching-learning process is going effective. This might be done through using different tools such as tests, observations, checklists, interviews, etc. Assessment is used inside the classrooms for different purposes wherein it can be adopted and adapted in accordance to the pedagogical needs.

The recent studies of assessment have emanated from the growing field of educational measurement which offers the basic considerations for assessment usefulness. Assessment is a procedure used by teachers to issue and explore the learners' profiles and the different abilities through making use of various tools. As agents of evaluation and assessment, teachers need to use different tools not only for the sake of learning outcomes, but also for their own professional development. Through using assessment, teachers may bring modifications that adjust perfectly their learning strategies, the adopted materials, even the curricula.

E-assessment is one of the main by-products of powerful influence of technology which is per se resulted from the relentless globalization process. The latter contributed to the emergence of electronic learning that is supposed to meet appropriately the different personal attributes of learners. To realize profound benefits, nothing can be improved without the effective use of assessment. Since the latter is an integral part in the success of e-learning, it becomes a necessity to gather data and cater for the students' learning needs by electronic means, especially under the rallying calls for integrating education and technology. Educational technology does not only contribute to learners' cognitive and metacognitive abilities, but also it stimulates the affective side in the learning process. It is clearly said that *“many classroom teachers using technology have anecdotal evidence of their learners being motivated and engaged, and this is often a reason for using learning technologies”* (Stanley and Thornbury, 2013, p. 02). Hence, there is inevitable growth of e-assessment

and e-assessment competence has become another challenge for teachers, learners and administrators.

Pertaining to e-assessment, electronic portfolio is stepping a little by little in the Algerian universities, more specifically within the EFL context. This techno-pedagogical tool is being adopted as a learning tool or as alternative assessment tool, adapted in accordance with certain goals. In some universities, it has been remarked that the e-portfolio implementation is underused in EFL classrooms. Based upon this, the current paper seeks to expand our understanding of the electronic portfolio implementation in EFL contexts. Also it strives to elicit EFL teachers' attitudes towards e-portfolio and the practical difficulties that may hamper its successful implementation.

2. Language Assessment

Before delving into language assessment, the concept of evaluation needs to be briefly defined because assessment and evaluation are sometimes misconceived concepts among practitioners. To remove this blurring, evaluation is the process of making value decisions and judgments on the basis of valuable data. Assessment is only one component in the evaluation process through which it entails collecting information about certain aspect of learning.

Assessment has recently become a topical issue within the language studies especially foreign language education programs vis-à-vis its leading role for improving the quality of language teaching and learning. Language practitioners use assessment in the classrooms as an exploratory task to judge the effectiveness of the teaching-learning process. This can be done through using a variety of methods such as tests, observations, portfolios, interviews and so on, which sometimes can be practiced implicitly or explicitly by the teachers. In language assessment, the focus of efforts is to make an interpretation about some aspects that concern the individuals' language ability (Bachman and Palmer, 2010, p. 20). Practically and theoretically, any aspect of learning which cannot be assessed it would be hard to improve. In classrooms, language teachers can use assessment either in formal and informal ways. The formal way implies that the assessment process is systematically

programmed by the assessor, taking into account the time and the place. The informal way implies that the assessor engages in assessment and gives remarks and evaluative statements without planning (Brown, 2004).

Given the wide range of the probable language activities, assessment can be used for different purposes. So, designing assessment activities is supposed to be grounded with certain objectives already set by the assessor. If the assessment is done in order to estimate the extent to which the teaching-learning process is getting well, this is formative assessment. In other words, it seeks for the strengths and weaknesses. It has to do with different forms such as observations, portfolios, interviews, and other forms. If assessment takes place periodically for the purpose of evaluating learning outcomes in regard to certain unity, program, or syllabus, this is called summative assessment which typically takes the form of standardized tests. Hence, the more the teacher can know about the students' continuous progress, the better his/her teaching might be effective, that's why formative assessment gains pedagogical superiority over the summative one.

3. Alternative Assessment

Language theories are growing over time. Of course fresh mechanisms about assessment sprang into being, and among these innovative mechanisms is alternative assessment. As the name suggests, the word 'alternative' can be launched on process that proves much more effectiveness and efficiency than its precedent. Alternative assessment is a newly explored assessment pedagogy which is said to become as reaction to traditional testing. It is defined as *"the use of methods other than traditional tests and examinations. In this approach, assessment is not restricted to a uniform test given at a specific place and time, and designed for all subjects"* (Smith, 2003). For Smith's definition, alternative assessment seems to have slight difference with the traditional one, more precisely in terms of place and time. In practical terms, alternative assessment comes to include further qualities such as autonomy, authenticity and performance-based. The latter is the distinctive trait which made it widely endorsed in the present time. In the language learning

framework, alternative assessment tools raise to the forefront in the last decades as an adopted form of assessment. *"This approach stresses the need for assessment to be integrated with the goals of the curriculum and to have a constructive relationship with teaching and learning"* (McNamara, 2000, p.7). Indeed it strives to overcome the lapses of teaching and learning. It is also referred to as authentic assessment, integrative assessment and holistic assessment. In action, alternatives are portfolios, self-assessments, interviews, journals, diaries, etc.

A prominent issue relates to the question of using alternative assessment is the break with the traditional one or not. In this sense, it is preferable to use alternative assessment in conjunction with traditional one "standardized testing" (Davidson, 2012). Alternative assessment is also referred to as additional assessment. Indeed, this approach to assessment is said to be more comprehensive than traditional assessment for what concerns the aspects of language being assessed. In this realm, through using different alternatives the assessment cannot only focus on criteria of language accuracy as the traditional one does; different aspects of language use can be also measured. This may be done through different tools even with the use of technology.

Perhaps like any emerging pedagogy, alternative assessment has been criticized and praised for different issues. Some educationalists see it lacking or having fewer degrees of validity and reliability. However, these constructs are said to be enough present in the traditional assessment context. In this realm, it has been pointed out that:

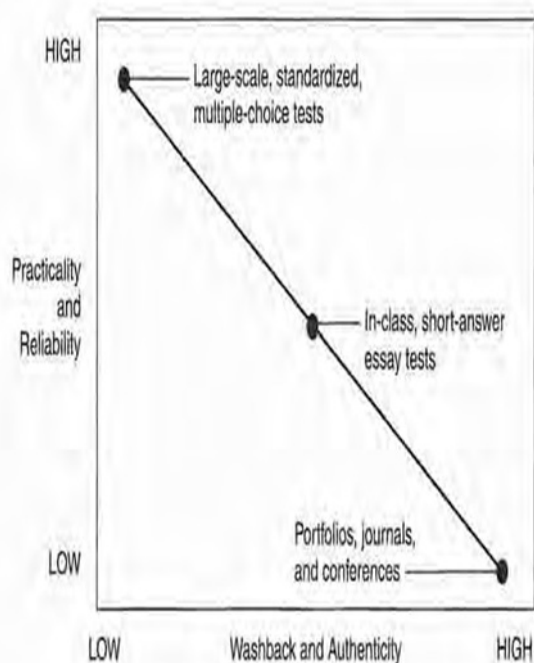
A problem with methods of alternative assessment, however, lies with their validity and reliability: Tasks are often not tried out to see whether they produce the desired linguistic information; marking criteria are not investigated to see whether they 'work'; and raters are often not trained to give consistent marks (Clapham, 2000, p.152).

Not only practicality, validity and reliability, but also authenticity and washback need further comments. In terms of authenticity, alternative assessment has proved to be much more authentic regarding the fact

it is practiced within real-world situations. In terms of washback, the alternative forms of assessment are said to be wealth and this, of course, when it is classroom-based.

The figure given below illustrates the disparities between the aforementioned assessment standards in traditional assessment and alternative assessment. Alternative assessment seems less practical and reliable than traditional assessment. The latter in turn seems less authentic than alternative assessment.

Figure1. Relationship of practicality/ reliability to washback /authenticity



The source: Adapted from: Brown (2004, p. 253)

4. E-Assessment

Because of the unprecedented spread of technologies, life has become easy to manage in timely and effortless manner. It is more likely to be the relentless globalization process that has made technologies spread out over. As a matter of course, education has been powerfully influenced by the technological advancement and every aspect of learning- teaching process has become easy to digitize. Assessment and testing are computerized, and they have become internet-based. In parallel, while traditional ways of

assessment still useful, notably the paper-based tests in their high stakes form, are so demanding in terms of practicality, validity and washback.

Learners' thinking skills may be enhanced via integrating technologies with assessment in language classrooms. Concerning the critical aspect of the pedagogies, technology makes it easy for learners to ask, analyze, compare and construct learning. In order to assess, there should be objective reflections and logical reasoning, therefore, critical thinking skills can be easily acquired through technology. Folio thinking skills may be improved through the use of technologies. For instance, connecting artifacts through hyper-text links is another advantage. Folio thinking skills are also useful for learning purposes. Furthermore, real-life thinking is another skill that can be acquired in which the learner can connect real-world events and objects and the use of interdisciplinary knowledge (Resnick and Klopfer, 1989).

One of most important issues in integrating technology and assessment is the adequacy of the technologies to the linguistic needs. In this sense, it is pointed out that "advances in the technology of language testing have at times created pressure points between what technology can do and what types of language can be sampled with that technology" (Conor-Linton and Amoroso, 2014, p.51). By virtue of necessity, there should be a clear distinction between online assessment and technology-based assessment. Though there are slight differences, the first is internet-based assessment the e-learning assessment while the second can be conducted without internet such as portfolios (CD Rom). Very importantly, technology is jointly shared between the two sorts. It has become a built-in assumption in language assessment and testing that technology is paralleled only with tests, and the notion of 'computerized tests' is the commonly used concept in the existing literature. In such tests, sometimes, the usefulness is not totally realized, considering the fact that certain standards are critical, such as reliability and validity. But, what is worth noting is that the technologies could be applied to include other assessment tools, notably the alternative ones.

4.1 E-portfolio as an E-assessment Tool

The term of portfolio refers to the documentation of artifacts and personal experience over a period of time. In language learning, the use of portfolios came in the wake of the introduction of the communicative language teaching method (CLT in brief) which over-emphasizes the communicative skills of language learners. Despite still in its inception, portfolio pedagogy started to gain responses in foreign language contexts. Learning about portfolios in the past has become portfolio learning in the present through a shift in emphasis from implementation to inquiry (**Cambridge, Cambridge and Yancey, 2009**). The pressing need for using technology necessitates a shift from paper-based portfolios to the electronic form which has become the most prevalent form nowadays. E-portfolio is the result of integrating portfolio approach and technology. According to (**Barrett, 2000, p.4**):

An electronic portfolio includes technologies that allow the portfolio developer to collect and organize artifacts in many media types (audio, video, graphics and text). A standard-based electronic portfolio uses hypertext links to organize the material, correcting artifacts to appropriate goals or standards.

The concept of electronic assessment, also referred to as online assessment or computer-based assessment, is calling more attention to educationalists and academics, especially under the powerful influence of technology. E-assessment is *“the use of scientifically based electronic tools (technology mediated) to test or measure learning outcomes, in both face-to-face and distance learning environments”* (**Hricko and Howell, 2006, p.6**). It is meant by this definition that integrating electronic tools and assessment is not only restricted to the educational. The availability of the different technologies makes assessment practical even outside the educational setting. The traditional standardized assessment, on the contrary, can be solely adopted inside the classroom walls. Based on this, teachers as assessors need to be competent users of e-assessment. Hereby, this digital world requires them to use different teaching materials that could offer a well-rounded education inside the classroom.

It is obvious that a portfolio is not worth much unless

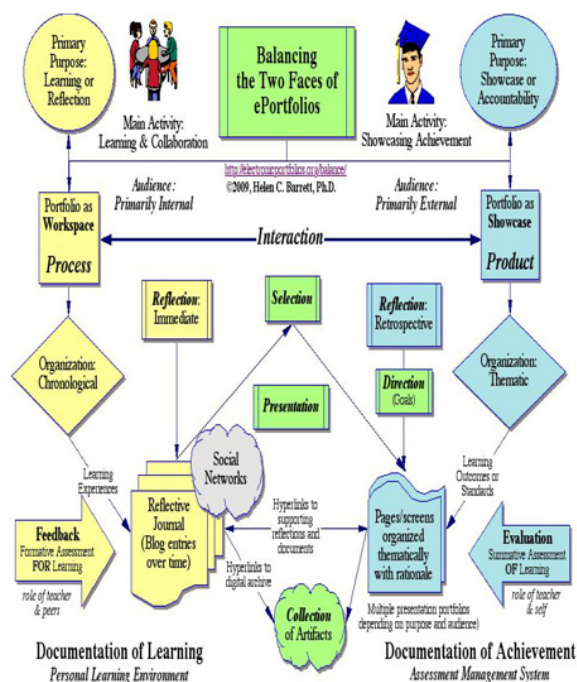
it reflects the experiential aspect of the individual user. Pursuing this line of reasoning, it might be said that compiling portfolios reflect the tenets of constructivism in the sense that it enables students to begin their learning at many different starting points; readercritique challenges the student's original insights, prompting reflection and revision. Another specification worth signaling in the realm of experiences is that the portfolio implementation promotes the so-called “folio thinking”, a term coined by Helen Chen (2004) to indicate the mental habit of building connections among experiences, skills, and of making these connections visible to readers.

From assessment perspective, portfolio refers to one favorable alternative to assessment in language education. The e-portfolio developer needs to plan ahead the purposes for which this tool will serve for. *There is a difference between the electronic portfolios used as assessment of learning and those that support assessment for learning* (**Barrett, 2010**). Phrased in another way, e-portfolios are used for summative and formative purposes. Accordingly, there are two main purposes for which e-portfolio assessment can be implemented: process-oriented portfolio and product-oriented portfolio. The former is mainly concerned with formative e-portfolio assessment, and the latter embodies the summative stamp of the e-portfolio (**Kelly, Kelly and Haber, 2006**). As demonstrated in figure 2, each paradigm has special way of feedbacks, documentation and reflection. Regardless of the aforementioned purposes, electronic portfolio has profound benefits for either students or teachers which may be summarized as follows:

- Minimal storage space
- Easy to create back-up files
- Long shelf life
- Learner-centered
- Increases technology skills
- Through hypertext links it is easier to make argument that certain standards are not.
- Accessibility, especially web portfolios

(**Kankaanranta, Barrett and Hartnell-Young, 2000**).

Figure2: Balancing the two faces of portfolio



The source: Adapted from:Barrett, 2010, p. 01

In language learning, the portfolio needs to be typified with two main specifications: comprehensiveness and communication. For the former specification, teachers can jointly discuss with learners the practical issues of the portfolio through timely feedbacks and information. The second specification is comprehensiveness. It refers to the fact that the portfolio can be formal or informal in terms of techniques, can be used for summative and formative purposes, and used for evaluating linguistic non-linguistic skills.

5. The Study

The rationale behind conducting this study is to diagnose EFL teachers' attitudes towards electronic portfolio and the practical difficulties in case of implementation. Thence, it is descriptive par excellence. Teachers as agents of assessment are expected to explain the circumstances to e-portfolio implementation in EFL context. The ways in which interviews are designed and developed differ in terms of structure, the formulation of questions and the sessions they take.

On the basis of these aspects, interviews are categorized into three main types: structured

interview, the formal one, which goes with questions planned ahead by the interviewer who controls over their order; semi structured interview, also referred to as focused interview, is done without planning a list of questions, but the interviewer steers the conversation; unstructured interview has least formality in regard to the previous types; single or multiple session interviews are considered in terms of time, more specifically sessions (Dörnyei, 2007, p.134). A structured interview seemed the valid tool through which data can be plausibly collected. The interview was conducted with eight university Algerian teachers, affiliated to different English departments.

In the current study, the participants were interviewed individually, and the interviews averaged about 25 to 45 minutes in length because some questions required a great deal of time in response. The interview included 10 questions, mostly taking the form of open-ended questions because the interviewer expected the participants to go deeper in their answers and to identify the possible difficulties that may be encountered in the e-portfolio implementation as assessment tool. Teachers' interviews were content analyzed after getting the results orthographically written. Methodologically speaking, data analysis is purely qualitative.

The most important questions of the interview were:

- In this digital world, what kind of advantages can technology bring into language assessment?
- What are the main difficulties associated with the adoption of e-portfolio approach for assessment in EFL context?
- Do you think that there are certain modules or skills that deserve to be assessed by portfolios? If yes list it/ them?
- Do you think that the summation imposed by the administration is a sliding barrier to the e-portfolio implementation as formative assessment tool?
- What do you propose as recommendations to improve the workability of electronic portfolio in EFL context?

6. Results & Discussion

The aim of this structured interview was to highlight teachers' perceptions towards the portfolio approach. As mentioned earlier, it tackled some topical issues, such as formative assessment practices, integrating assessment and technology, e-portfolio assessment, and the practical difficulties encountered by either the teachers or the learners in the implementation. Indeed, the pre-planned questions helped the interviewer to reduce the possibility of faulty reporting that may threaten the reliability and the validity of study.

The findings issued from the interview revealed quietly the same opinions among the interviewees. To start with, all the interviewed teachers shared the fact that integrating assessment and technology has become a necessity in response to the requirements of modern education. According to the interviewees, e-assessment does not require a great deal of time and is considered effortless to certain extent. In terms of time, the electronic form gives the assessment process a formative profile. Phrased in another way, teachers may rapidly adjust course contents by drawing formative decisions through e-feedbacks. It is worth mentioning that all the interviewees attached e-assessment to computerized tests and no one referred to other methods. Based on this fact, the teaching to test approach seemed clear through all the answers, and there is a clear tendency to standardization. Summation is still the focus of efforts.

The majority of the interviewees endorsed widely the fact that the portfolio approach, either used as assessment tool or learning tool, is beneficial for English language education, though they limited this recognition to theoretical terms since no one of them has experimented it before. As assessment tool, some of them (three teachers) said that the portfolio approach came along with the introduction of the LMD system, so it was resulted from the educational reforms. The advent of portfolio dated back to the communicative language teaching (CLT) and with the rallying calls for educational technology under the Licence-Master-Doctorat (LMD) system, e-portfolio assessment started to prevail by virtue of necessity. In action, the idea of introducing the portfolio assessment

electronically was strongly endorsed by teachers. This seems logically reasonable since not only students' performances will be under evaluation, but also their technological skills will be under scrutiny.

One of the most important issues the interviewees sought to discover is the practical difficulties that actually hamper the e-portfolio assessment implementation. In order of frequency, the need for the systematic training is the most frequent difficulty among the interviewees. It is considered as a sliding barrier since teachers and learners ignore the theoretical and the practical underpinnings of its implementation. Another frequent difficulty was the availability of different technologies that is not attainable for all the students. This may make the assessment process liable to inconsistencies and therefore threatens the reliability. In the same vein, the students' non-mastery of technology was critically acclaimed by teachers (half of the teachers). Other teachers considered the summative feature of evaluation imposed by the administration as a serious obstacle to the e-portfolio implementation within the framework of formative assessment.

Despite the tides in debates over the e-portfolio assessment, the crucial determinant remains getting it experimented in action to move away from the theoretical considerations to the practical applications. Though the extant literature is strongly associated with the writing skill, the electronic portfolio may fit suitably into the assessment of different skills and modules, such as literature and civilization, phonetics, the cultural understanding and others. This fact was properly estimated by all the teachers who thought that the e-portfolio can be adapted and adopted to best suit the needs.

In the light of the interview results, it can be said that teachers have positive attitudes towards the e-portfolio despite all the contextual constraints stated before. Still talking about the theoretical side of the e-portfolio, teachers demonstrated a burgeoning awareness about the advantages that can be added by integrating assessment and the different technologies inside or outside the classrooms. To substantiate this fact, all the interviewees recognized its different

merits. Starting from this point, the idea of introducing the portfolio assessment electronically was strongly endorsed by teachers specialized in didactics. It can be said that they are aware about its effectiveness as an alternative form of assessment, having pre-existing knowledge that make it a viable alternative in practical terms. Noticeably, many teachers expressed that training for the portfolio implementation is felt as urgency, and this was asserted by the teachers who were received their formation far from systemic English, such as literature, civilization, or British and American studies. From evaluation standpoint, attitudes towards e-portfolio assessment are not the same as others due to many considerations such as knowledge or some pedagogical attributes such as the nature of the module wanted to be assessed.

We strived to propose some generalized solutions that may stimulate a responsive motivational thinking towards e-portfolio use. Teachers, as agents assessment, are recommended to create a culture of making connections between performances, setting goals and envisioning a learner-centered assessment; integrate the portfolio approach into the daily practices and avoid making it as an “add on”; enable challenge and collaboration that make the learner intrinsically motivated.

The departmental and the scientific bodies need to create supportive environments that foster a good understanding of how students perceive and use e-portfolios. In this regard, the shared obstacle reported through the interview was the summative nature of assessment that is programmed by the administration which does not give teachers a favorable situation to promote e-portfolios in deliberate way.

7. Conclusion

The improvement of e-portfolio implementation hinges upon a supportive pedagogical environment. As assessment tool, it is seen as one of the alternatives that overcomes inadequacies of traditional pen and paper assessment modes, more specifically the traditional standardized tests. Pedagogically speaking, it is highly difficult to introduce this tool for double-fold reasons: firstly, for the technological requirements on the part of learners. Secondly, it is not considered

among the departmental priorities in some universities. It can be said that these difficulties maintained the traditional testing as the dominant form of assessment despite some deficiencies proved over time. Although it is stepping with a low pace in Algerian EFL contexts, e-portfolio assessment is posing a daunting challenge, and it still receives different views. The evidence generated from this study demonstrated that the e-portfolio assessment cannot be successful with little knowledge or understanding about its technological and pedagogical underpinnings. Although this study was not of a sufficient scale to be generalizable, we conclude that the success of the portfolio pedagogy needs pioneering efforts from the teachers, the learners, and the administrative staffs. Under the aforesaid contextual difficulties, the use of e-portfolios remains a far big challenge. Anyhow, this study may bring into play for other studies that can add further improvements to the workability of e-portfolio as e-assessment tool.

Conflict of Interest

I declare that I have no conflict of interest.

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