Using a Portfolio as an Alternative and Authentic Tool of Assessment

Abstract

 Traditional methods of testing which still prevail in our system of education mean that there is very little time for conversational English in the tests-driven in classrooms, despite of the emergence of recent advances in language testing methodology. This paper suggests to examine and understand how and why a portfolio can be used as an alternative and authentic tool of oral assessment .We believe that through this testing technique and with the investment and commitment of the pedagogical team, we will be able to develop genuine oral communication in the learners and promote a new vision of measurement.

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1- What is a Portfolio?

Portfolio assessment is increasingly used in classrooms across the world. From its origins in the arts to its evolution through writing classes to foreign language classes, portfolio assessment is becoming nowadays a powerful tool for evaluating language skills.

A portfolio is a form of assessment that students do together with their teachers. According to Paulson and Meyer (1991:61), it is:

> *A purposeful collection of student work that exhibits the student's efforts, progress and achievements in one or more areas. The collection must include student participation in selecting contents, the criteria for selection, the criteria for judging merit and evidence of student self-reflection.*

ملخص

رغم التغيرات التي أحدثت في منهجية اختبار اللغة الإنجليزية إلا أن تخصيص مدة قصيرة للمحادثة أثناء الدرس لا زال يسود في الأقسام، وهذا يدل على استمرارية تطبيق المناهج القديمة للاختبار في اللغة الإنجليزية. يهدف هذا المقال إلى التعريف بالبورتوفوليو بصفته وسيلة أصيلة وبديلة للاختبار الشفوي باعتباره صالحا لقياس المهارات اللغوية من خلال قواعده الفنية وتطويرها أثناء الحصص الكتابية في أقسام اللغة الأجنبية.

In this way, a portfolio is a living, growing collection of a student's work - each addition is carefully selected by the student for a specific reason which he/she will explain. It is also a selection of the student's work which shows growth over time. By reflecting on their own learning, students begin to identify the strengths and weaknesses in their work. These weaknesses then become improvement goals. In this sense Portfolios and instruction are closely linked; the assessment is integrated in the instructional process.

The criteria for selecting and assessing the portfolio contents must be clear to the teacher and the students at the outset of the process. The entries in an English Foreign Language (EFL) portfolio can demonstrate learning and growth in all language domains/skills, or can focus on a specific skill such as the ability to communicate genuinely in the target language. Portfolio assessment takes time and a sincere commitment from the teacher and student in order for the portfolio process to be successful.

2-Why Use Portfolio Assessment?

Introducing a new form of assessment requires a rational acceptable to the educational institution, teachers, students and often parents. The overall purpose of the portfolio is to enable the student to demonstrate to others, learning and progress. The greatest value of portfolios is that, in building them, students become active participants in the learning process and its assessment.

The following is a summary of some of the main points which support the use of assessment portfolios in the foreign language classroom.

- Portfolios are a form of alternative/authentic assessment, in which a student's progress is measured over a period of time in various language learning contexts. This allows a far more accurate form of language learning assessment than traditional testing which measures specific, isolated skills and abilities at a specific time, does not offer a full assessment of language learning. Portfolios can include evidence of specific skills and other items at one particular time and language performance and progress over time, under different conditions, in all four modalities (reading, writing, listening, and speaking).

- Portfolio assessment is incorporated fully into instruction, which has three educational benefits. First, linking assessment to instruction ensures that we are measuring what we have taught. Second, planning for and evaluating portfolios reveals any weaknesses in instructional practices. For example, if the purpose of the portfolio is linked to making progress toward all areas of the National Standards, and, at the end of the marking period, there are no artifacts related to oral communication in the student portfolios, the teacher may decide to incorporate more oral communications work into the curriculum. Third, there is no time lost on assessment. **Assessment is then a true learning experience, and not external to the learning process.**

- Portfolio assessment promotes positive student involvement. As students create their portfolios, they are actively involved in their own learning. They reflect on their learning. This increased metacognition can have a positive impact on a student's self-confidence, facilitates use of learning strategies, and increases ability to assess and

revise work. These factors tend to foster student motivation to continue studying and succeeding in language learning.

- Portfolios offer the teacher, student, and those who review the portfolios an in-depth knowledge of the student as a learner. This means that the teacher can individualize instruction for the student. Weak areas can be strengthened and areas of mastery built upon. Learners are involved in this process of tracking their learning and can take control of their learning.

- Portfolios can foster a relationship of mutual respect between teacher and student as they become partners in learning.

3-Stages in Implementing Portfolio Assessment

- **Identifying Teaching Goals to Assess through the Portfolio**

The very first and most important part of organizing portfolio assessment is to decide on the teaching goals. These goals will guide the selection and assessment of students' work for the portfolio. To do this, we have to ask ourselves "What do we want the students to learn?" and choose several goals to focus on; for example, general goals such as improvement in fluency of speech , and specific goals such as telling a story.

This stage is very important because teachers have to know what their goals are in terms of what the students will be able to do. Moreover, students have to know what they need to show evidence of in their portfolios.

It is even better if we do this fixing of goals together with the students, asking them, for example, what they need and want to achieve in the different language domains and skills. They will usually show good understanding of goals ("We need to understand the news." "We should be able to correct our pronunciation mistakes."), and hopefully these will then become common goals for teacher and class. Or, we can give a list of goals for the students to rank, and use the results for establishing the criteria for assessment.

- **Introducing the Idea of Portfolios to our Class**

We will need to present the idea of a portfolio to our class. We can start by explaining the word- from *portare* (carry) and *foglio* (sheet of paper). If possible, we ask a student of art, architecture or design to bring their portfolio; this will help convey the principle of a portfolio as a **selection of a student's work, showing progress in different areas or skills.**

It is also a good idea to show the students examples of English portfolios prepared by other classes, and, ideally, even a teacher's portfolio (showing, for example, the development of your work with the class).

It is worth directing students' attention, at this stage, to the main aspect of portfolios, which is their use as an assessment tool. We should try to ask our students how they feel about tests; whether they always feel the test truly represents what they know and can do with the language (they invariably bring up plenty of problems with

traditional tests). Then, we should tell them we are going to assess them in a fairer way, which will show the many different skills, knowledge and ideas they have acquired.

We have to inform the students about how much weight the portfolio will have in their final grade and what it is going to replace (one or more of their tests, quizzes and/or projects).

We do not have to take on more than we can handle; we have to start with one class, and then expand when we feel ready. Students should be encouraged to put the right items into the portfolio; it is quality that counts, not quantity, and the main point of portfolio assessment is the thoughtful selection of evidence of learning.

- **Giving Clear and Detailed Guidelines for Portfolio Presentation**

We have to explain the need for clear and attractive presentation and say   how the portfolio will be graded .We need to remember that unfamiliar ways of teaching and assessment are potentially threatening and confusing to students. It is important to present the portfolio guidelines clearly, and to go over the guidelines periodically. Although all the guidelines - goals, content, timetable, etc should be presented to the class orally, so that they can discuss the procedure and ask questions, there should also be written guidelines to backup the points discussed and for reference while preparing the portfolio. It is helpful to prepare these guidelines in question-and-answer form.

- **Preparation Period**

Support and encouragement are required by both teacher and students at this stage. The students will get it from the understanding teacher. Teachers will get it by doing portfolio assessment as teamwork in their staff or joining or initiating a support group to discuss questions with colleagues as they arise.

We have to devote class-time to student-teacher meetings, to practising reflection and self-assessment and to portfolio preparation, since these may be new skills for most students, if not all the students.

Reflection and self-assessment do not come naturally to people who have had little practice in it, and require learner training. For example, the teacher has to encourage students to ask themselves: What did I learn from that activity? Which is my best piece? How can I improve this? This can be done by class brainstorming (what are some possible reasons for including an item in your portfolio?) or in pairs - "portfolio partners" - who help each other select samples of their work (written comments on their work from a peer can also be included in the portfolio). Teachers should start with more structured forms of reflection and slowly proceed to more open reflective comments. This is training in a life-skill, and is well worth the time and effort spent in class.

The teacher should give guiding feedback. The finished portfolio may be due only at the end of the semester, but it is a good idea to set regular dates at which time several portfolio-ready items (i.e. with drafts and reflections) will be handed in, so that students know whether they are on the right track. Alternatively, we can have a portfolio project on a single unit of material so that both teacher and students will acquire experience in this kind of assessment over a shorter period of time.

To ensure that the portfolio represents the student's own work, some items can be done completely in class. We might also decide to have a test (preferably with corrected version) included as a core item together with reflection on what the student learned from doing the test and revising it. Furthermore, we may ask the students to explain in their reflections who helped them to improve their work (a peer, a parent, a spell-checker) and what they learned from revising their work.

Student-Teacher Meetings

An important element of the portfolio philosophy of shared and active assessment is that the teacher should have short individual meetings (tutoring sessions) with each student, in which progress is discussed and goals are set for a future meeting. Students and teachers should document these meetings and keep the goals in mind when choosing topics for future meetings. In this way, student-teacher meetings play an important role in the formative evaluation of a student's progress. They can also be used for summative evaluation purposes when the students present their final portfolios product and together with the teacher decide on a final grade. Notes from these meetings can be included in the portfolio as they contain joint decisions about the individual's strengths and weaknesses. These meeting sessions can be prepared for in pairs where students practise presenting their portfolios.

4-Advantages and Disadvantages of Using Portfolio Assessment

Portfolio Assessment:

- allows the evaluators to see the student, group, or community as individual, each unique with its own characteristics, needs, and strengths;
- serves as a cross-section lens, providing a basis for future analysis and planning; by viewing the total pattern of the community or of individual participants, one can identify areas of strengths and weaknesses, and barriers to success;
- promotes a shift in ownership, communities, and participants can take an active role in examining where they have been and where they want to go;
- offers the possibility of addressing shortcomings of traditional assessment and the possibility of assessing the more complex and important aspects of an area or topic;

However Portfolio Assessment:

- can be difficult or unfamiliar at first when we have to develop our own individualized criteria,
- can be difficult to analyze or aggregate to show change, like any other form of qualitative data,
- can be very time consuming for teachers or program staff to organize and evaluate the contents, especially if portfolios have to be done in addition to traditional testing and grading.

Fear of time management issues is often the first reaction many teachers may have to the concept of portfolio use in the classroom, and with good reason: introducing anything new in the classroom takes time to plan and introduce to the learners. Portfolio assessment seems to require more time initially than other assessment instruments. However, one will probably find that the organization that we need to

introduce with portfolio assessment will reduce on-going classroom planning and preparation because much of this work has been done in advance.

Further more we have to bear in mind that the time students spend developing their portfolios is not time lost to instruction and learning. It is through portfolio development that students use the skills and knowledge that are part of the curriculum. Additionally, while the class is working on portfolios, the teacher can offer mini-lessons to students in areas in which they need assistance; this maximizes teaching/learning time in class.

Changes in instruction can be difficult and time-consuming in the short term. In the long term, however, the benefits of portfolio use to teaching and learning are tangible and outweigh, in many teachers' minds, the initial challenges of implementing this new assessment tool.

In sum, this Alternative or New Vision to assessment can be exemplified as follows:

Old Vision	**New Vision**
• Tests that test.	● Tests that also teach.
• One answer, one way correctness.	● Open-ended, multiple solutions.
• Focus on language.	● Focus on communication.
• Teacher-centered.	● Learner-centered.
• Isolated skills.	● Integrated skills.

Conclusion

It is our belief that through a portfolio the learners will be stimulated to demonstrate their ability to present an impromptu talk, to converse, to discuss, to verbally reproduce the substance of a story heard or read. Teachers can succeed to apply and adopt this alternative tool of assessment by advocating authenticity of materials, relevance of situations in which the learner is provided with an appropriate activities, that can make the learning environment as conducive to expression and language acquisition as possible. This new vision of assessment will lead our learners to become gradually independent and autonomous in their learning. The implementation and success of such innovation requires a good management of time and an adequate training of both teachers and students

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