

## Extended Portfolio Assessment for Academic ESL Classes

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Portfolios are nothing new. For many years photographers, designers, artists, models, and architects have used this method of displaying their work. For their purposes it is a reasonable way to present their best work for evaluation.

Unfortunately, when portfolio assessment was embraced by the educational community (especially for writing), the process of students selecting their best work for portfolio inclusion was incorporated as well. This was, and is, an error in judgement; if we believe that students should be evaluated over a period of time regarding their progress, development, improvement; then it stands to reason that the entirety of their work should be included in a portfolio. I use the term portfolio loosely, to include not only written work in a folder-like container, but all work accomplished by the students. All is a part of the assessment portfolio.

Connecting ESL assessment procedures with U.S. national trends makes sense. The whole language approach, i.e., language learning seen as a connected process; that is all language areas not dealt with independently, but together, is a reasonable adoption. A second national trend which dovetails with whole language learning provides the learning environment that is suitable for the outcomes for which we are looking; that is small group, cooperative, collaborative instruction. In non-intensive, academic ESL classes at the university level, I have found that these small groups provide a much better setting for a mixed group of international students. By mixed, I mean men and women, graduates and undergraduates, students of ages ranging from 19 to 45, students majoring in all fields of study. Add to this mix personality differences and general cultural differences, and you have sincere challenges. In large classes it is difficult to get students to participate as they must in foreign language classes. Time is a factor, numbers are a factor, and cultural differences are a factor. By organizing the students into small groups for most of the class time, there is time for everyone to partic-

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ipate; quiet, shy personalities are drawn out, and individual attention is maximized. Students are also encouraged to cooperate with one another, help one another, and collaborate on projects. It is a helping, learning environment.

The above national trends fit nicely into the contemporary approach to language learning: communicative competence. CC is defined by Brown (1994: 227) as “that aspect of our competence that enables us to convey and interpret messages and to negotiate meanings interpersonally within specific contexts”. The language emphasis is on speaking/listening, writing for specific purposes, and reading of authentic materials. (Brown: 226)

Logistics is always a problem when one attempts to provide the appropriate setting correlated with the best possible methods to allow students to learn foreign languages, to improve and develop over a term. Like all productive ways to assist students in learning, the best ways are almost always the most difficult. And portfolio assessment being the most obvious and efficient way to evaluate can be another logistical problem

I am fortunate to direct a graduate program in TESOL, with M. A. and Ph.D. students as well as graduate assistants available to join me in allowing this class to function. I have M. A. students doing *practica*, Ph.D. students in internships, and at least two graduate teaching assistants to work with me with the ESL classes. This provides a number of teachers to work with students in small groups, to provide more avenues for assessment, and provide more minds to evaluate the program.

Since we use whole language, communicative competence and small groups as our basic philosophy of language learning; since we concentrate on vocabulary, grammar, and discourse integrated into the four skills, the portfolio system of assessment is a natural. I believe that language learning is a developmental process, that improvement over time is sought after, and leads to the proficiency levels we look for.

At the beginning of the term we diagnose students’ abilities in speaking; a listening quiz; a writing sample and a reading quiz. Then as we progress throughout the term, we continue with the integrated, whole approach to language learning by working grammar, vocabulary, and American culture into the four skills. We also concentrate on grammatical, discourse, sociolinguistic, and strategic competencies. (Brown: 227)

All work accomplished by the students over the entire term is included in their portfolios. This includes required weekly written journals, required weekly oral cassette journals, all written work which includes a small research paper, summaries and reaction papers of all reading and all viewing of videotapes (this also affords good listening and reading comprehension checks), small group discussion evaluation, listening quizzes, a few problematic grammar exercises, a midterm and final oral interview grade; and a final ETS listening comprehension test. ALL of these are collected over the term, are checked and evaluated weekly on a master chart. Students receive constant and continuous feedback on their progress. By talking, reading and writing throughout the entire term, much of the time in the small groups, students' progress is remarkable. Attitudes and attendance are excellent.

In conclusion, portfolio assessment of all student work, not only their selections of their best, provides the best method of evaluation for integrated whole language learning with an emphasis on communicative competence.

I strongly believe in working toward mastery learning, in student progress over time, and that for them to improve to an acceptable proficiency level is the purpose of foreign language classes. I excuse students from further formal language classes if the desired proficiency level is reached.

By including everything students have accomplished over the term, we are able to assess their progress from beginning to end. Students selecting their best work for portfolios tells us nothing, and does not evaluate improvement over time. Cohen (1995) states that portfolio assessment is a logistical problem resulting in too much work for teachers to handle. It is true that organization and logistics can be a nightmare, but anything worth doing well is not easy. And evaluating student progress validly is essential. Searching for ways and means to accomplish this is a study in creativity.

### References

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- Cohen, A. D. *Assessing Language Ability in the Classroom*. Boston. Heinle & Heinle. 1995.