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Portfolio Assessment: A Showcase for Growth and Learning in the Foreign Language Classroom

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Keeping track is a matter of reflective review and summarizing, in which there is both discrimination and record of the significant features of a developing experience. . . . It is the heart of intellectual organization and of the disciplined mind.

(Dewey 1938: 87)

Assessment: A Time for Reevaluation?

There has been an explosion of studies and research attempts to find viable alternatives to the practice of assigning students a single letter grade in each subject in school (Jongsma 1989; McLean 1990; Stiggins 1991; Wolf 1988, 1989). It is argued that aspects such as effort, progress, and achievement are often ignored in the single grade and that letter grades indicate neither what students know and can do in a subject area nor the student's strengths and weaknesses. Innovations in curriculum and instruction such as whole language, cooperative learning, and outcome-based education call for a more flexible approach to reporting achievement (O'Neil 1993). Developing abilities should be measured frequently with a multidimensional variety of tasks. Students are encouraged to take risks in the new teaching practices to help them build confidence and encourage creativity. To assign a grade defeats the purpose of the class and can undermine new teaching practices. Because of the limitations that a single grade imposes, several educators have examined the value of using portfolio assessment as an alternative form of evaluation in classrooms (Cambourne and Turbill 1990; Paulson et al. 1991; Valencia 1990; Wolf 1989).

According to educational research, the purpose of an assessment tool is (1) to improve learning and (2) to reveal a range of student skills and concepts that coincide with instructional goals. Arter and Spandel (1992: 36) summarized the desired results and accomplishments for assessments other than letter grades:

1. To go beyond assessing knowledge of facts and include such lifelong skills as ability to learn new information and think independently, and dispositions to learn such as persistence, flexibility, motivation, and self-confidence
2. To portray the process by which students produce work and reveal strategies used for solving problems in addition to the correct solution to the problem
3. To make the assessment congruent with what we consider important outcomes for students (e.g., higher-order thinking skills)
4. To assess within realistic contexts that emulate real-life productions of work
5. To chronicle student development and encourage self-observation of this development
6. To integrate assessment with instruction that encourages active student engagement in learning and student responsibility for and control of learning

Using portfolios of student work for assessment might be one way to accomplish these tasks. Current widespread enthusiasm for assessment through portfolios is a product of unique historical and social conditions.

Historical and Social Contexts of Portfolio Assessment

Alternative forms of assessment—multifariously called authentic assessment (Wiggins 1989), performance assessment (Stiggins and Bridgeford 1985), and dynamic assessment (Cioffi and Carney 1983)—have emerged in the past two decades as a result of (1) calls for rethinking the general purposes, policies, and procedures of standardized testing in the 1980s and (2) a series of conceptual shifts within the field of English language arts. The Reagan years brought a call for accountability that shifted the purpose of testing to comparisons of students' performance (Gomez et al. 1991). According to Linn et al. (1990) this resulted in rising test scores that reflected factors other than increases in achievement and a narrowing of instruction to match the domain of items on a single achievement test (Shepard 1990). Consequently it was recommended that assessment be modified to match classroom experiences more closely. New assessment practices not grounded in

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standards of the cultural knowledge of one group—white, middle-class, native English speakers—were sought (Haney 1984).

The reform of standardized assessments evolved parallel to a rethinking within the field of English language arts in favor of a more holistic evaluation over discrete analysis (Sulzby 1990; Valencia 1990; White 1984, 1985). Whole-language teaching in reading education, process writing theory and practice, and poststructural literary criticism evolved as products of this development. These developments have underscored the problems in assessment that measure students' learning and achievement from comparisons.

Authentic Assessment: A Demonstration of Learning

The distinguishing features of the new curriculum developments promote (1) demonstrating competence rather than selecting an answer, (2) emphasizing depth over breadth in that projects rather than items are produced, and (3) replacing mechanical scoring by informed judgment (Calfee and Perfumo 1993). Much of whole language in literacy instruction and proficiency-oriented instruction in foreign languages is student-centered in nature, encouraging a demonstration of all skills: reading, writing, listening, speaking (Froese 1991; Omaggio-Hadley 1993). Since students are at the core of these instructional methods, the student should also be an integral part of the assessment procedure. Students should be encouraged to make choices of reading materials and also the methods of assessment used. Process-oriented as well as product-oriented assessment must be considered in the evaluation process. How students develop ideas, organize them, and revise them can give greater insight into gains made in learning than can a single end product. Involving the student in assessment also lends greater insight into the individual student and the progress made. Student-centered diagnostic assessment personalizes the instruction and allows for a gathering of materials over a period of time (Moeller 1993). A variety of holistic assessment techniques that represent real communication situations are offered by whole-language researchers and educators (Froese 1991), and many of these ideas can easily be incorporated into the foreign language classroom (Moeller 1993: 51). Teachers are reclaiming control of the assessment policy requiring students to *demonstrate* what they have learned "bottom up" rather than through standardized or "top down" assessment tools. Alternative assessment represents a paradigm shift, a fundamental change from earlier reliance on standardized testing techniques (Wolf et al. 1991).

Authentic assessment is based on a set of evidence that best shows progress toward goals. The kinds of evidence that reflect desired instructional objectives and communicate what students know therefore consist of a set of artifacts of learning. The portfolio has been successfully used as one way

of accomplishing these goals. This assessment tool more closely matches the new curricular goals by revealing what students are doing and the processes they are using to arrive at solutions, as well as documenting student improvement and ability ranges. Through portfolios, teachers and other school professionals have hoped to locate the means to tie together more closely curriculum, instruction, and assessment for all children.

What Is a Portfolio?

Arter and Paulson (1990) have offered a definition that is adapted from one developed by a consortium of educators under the auspices of the Northwest Evaluation Association (NWEA): "a purposeful collection of student work that tells the story of the student's efforts, progress, or achievement in a given area. This collection must include student participation in selection of portfolio content; the guidelines for selection; the criteria for judging merit; and evidence of student self-reflection" (p. 36). This definition supports the goals that assessment be continuous, capture a variety of what students know, involve realistic contexts, communicate to students and others what is valued, portray the processes by which work was accomplished, and be integrated with instruction. Such an assessment tool should allow for input and reflection by both student and teacher and should document the development of student understanding and progress over a period of time.

Students who know clearly what is expected of them can take more responsibility for setting their own academic goals and for assessing their own progress. The assessment process brings about a shift in focus from what teachers "want" of students to what students want for themselves, encouraging a sense of empowerment in students (Lewis 1991). The guiding idea is that portfolios provide an opportunity for richer, more authentic, and more valid assessment of student achievement (Rogers and Stevenson 1988).

Student Involvement

The portfolio movement promises one of the best opportunities for students to learn how to examine their own work and participate in the entire learning process. Students are accustomed to being told what is good and not good in their work. If students are to improve their own judgment about their work, and if their work is to show improvement because of their own struggle with quality, a different use of class and teacher time is required. Students must be helped to make judgments about their work (Graves 1992). Students must constantly write statements in which they evaluate their work throughout the year. Some educators recommend including drafts of written work in order to let students see the development of their writing skills

as well as growth over time. The process of writing and growth becomes clear as they examine the evolution of the written work. Readers and writers know more about their own abilities and progress than outsiders do. Thus they can be the prime evaluators of themselves and their work.

To ensure a connection between their lives and their literacy, students put into their portfolios all kinds of work that they see as important to them as learners and that demonstrate they have learned something important. Students are asked to write a short note explaining why they think it belongs in the portfolio. The portfolio thus becomes a history of learning.

Questions arise about the contents to be included in the portfolio. What processes should be used to evaluate the student's work? What standards should be used on the adequacy of student work? How will they be used?

Models of Student Portfolios

Valencia and Calfee (1991) describe three distinctive models in present practice: showcase, documentation, and evaluation. *The showcase portfolio* (Tierney et al. 1991) is a collection of the student's best or favorite work. Most of the entries are selected by the student over time. As a result, the portfolio emerges as a unique portrait of the individual. Self-reflection, self-evaluation, and self-selection take priority over standardization.

The documentation portfolio centers on systematic, continuous evidence of student progress (Goodman et al. 1989). Included are observations, checklists, anecdotal records, interviews, and classroom tests, as well as performance-based assessments. Some of the entries are selected by the teacher, others by the student; some entries are the same for all students, others are different; some are accompanied by student self-reflections, others are judged by external raters. Documentation portfolios do not judge the quality of the activities, but rather provide evidence of documentation.

The *evaluation portfolio* is generally standardized, with considerable direction from the teacher, administrator, or district (Au et al. 1990). Criteria and entries are predetermined for scoring and evaluating performance. A substantial core of required activities dominates the portfolio. Outside personnel may administer some of the assessments to ensure standardization or consistency.

Developing a Portfolio Plan for Student Assessment

The different models involve distinct methods, criteria, purposes, and audiences. Vavrus (1990) has formulated a portfolio plan that serves as a guide for teachers, departments, and school districts in determining which type of portfolio best meets the needs of their students, school, and community. By responding to the following questions posed in this guide,

foreign language teachers can create a conceptual framework and formulate the documentation plan:

1. What kinds of assessment are currently used to assess student growth and performance in foreign languages? What do these assessments tell about student learning?
2. What are important aspects of student learning and performance that are not satisfactorily assessed with current practices?
3. What are the buildingwide/districtwide goals that teachers expect students to know and be able to do when they leave?
4. What are the grade-level curricular goals in relation to school-system goals?

Once the conceptual plan has been constructed, the next step is to develop a portfolio documentation plan. Vavrus (1990) suggests building the framework by answering the following questions:

1. What will be the purpose of the portfolio?
2. What documents (work samples, formal and informal tests, observation records, interviews, surveys, journal entries, creative writing) might be included relative to each goal?
3. What are the expectations for students to demonstrate successful growth and learning in relation to each goal?
4. What initial assessment information is presently available for a student's portfolio and how will this information be incorporated into instruction?
5. What kind of student growth documentation for each goal can be generated as part of ongoing instructional activities during the year and how often will these documents be selected for the portfolio? Who will make the selections, the teacher? student? both? Who will prepare reflective captions about what a particular document shows in relation to each goal?

Portfolios in the Foreign Language Classroom

The goal of foreign and second language studies is to prepare students to communicate in natural, real-life situations. "It makes more sense to address the skills necessary, for example, to negotiate a purchase in a drugstore, than to memorize in a vacuum verb paradigms and lists of vocabulary" (Warriner-Burke 1989: 62). Students in a proficiency-oriented curriculum learn to "perform" essential tasks in the target language ranging from simple requests or negotiating a sale to defending a philosophical point of view. Assessment of language in a proficiency-oriented curriculum is necessarily performance-based, "requiring the examinee to apply acquired knowledge

to perform designated communication tasks" (Larson and Jones 1984: 116). Assessment should measure a student's ability to perform authentic communication tasks.

Grammar, vocabulary, and pronunciation are also integral parts of the proficiency-oriented classroom, but only insofar as they develop the ability to use the target language for communication (Savignon 1983). Knowledge of linguistic and sociolinguistic rules of usage "should be measured in ways consistent with the proficiency construct underlying that goal. That is to say, *achievement tests should reflect the nature of the proficiency or competence toward which learners are supposed to be advancing*" (Savignon 1983: 246; emphasis added).

According to Carroll (1985: 75), tests should be a "wholesome influence on the program directions and on teaching strategies." They should allow teachers to (1) diagnose students' strengths and weaknesses, (2) determine student progress, (3) assist in evaluating student achievement and proficiency, and (4) evaluate the effectiveness of and suggest improvement for different teaching approaches (Bachman 1990; Shohamy 1991). Assessment in foreign language programs should reflect and support learning and instructional goals. Shohamy (1991) argues for a "portfolio-type" assessment that documents language competence. Samples of evidence of language competence might include writing samples (both draft forms and final forms), interviews, reflective observations, and self-assessments; further evidence might include homework assignments, letters, recorded samples of conversations, skits, and small-group work. It is important to include a variety of language samples "that are more representative of the true language [ability] of the learner" (Shohamy 1991: 165).

Both criterion- and norm-referenced evaluation could be included in the portfolio when they take on new meaning within the context of the other documents found there. For example, if a student's writing samples reflect the same grammatical errors repeatedly, a computerized test on that particular grammar point might be included as evidence of practice and eventually mastery of this grammar point. The emphasis is on including evidence and documents that illustrate growth. Writing samples from levels one to four clearly demonstrate growth in writing skills. It is even more important for the students to analyze their own writing to establish this growth. In other words, a portfolio of writing samples offers the student an opportunity to reflect on learning, thereby engaging in self-reflection. The selection and evaluation of the documents in the portfolio is done *by* the student, not *to* the student. Students learn to value their own work and value themselves as learners. The student is a participant in, rather than the object of, assessment.

Much like the paradigm shift that occurred in the 1970s when the instructional focus in foreign language studies changed from "achievement" to "proficiency," portfolio assessment constitutes a fundamental change from

reliance on standardized testing techniques (Wolf et al. 1991) to requiring students to demonstrate what they have learned through production rather than recognition, and through projects rather than items. Reading, writing, speaking, and listening skills are viewed on a continuum requiring ongoing assessment and self-assessment.

The State University of New York conducted an assessment project in foreign languages in order to "develop assessment strategies and instruments that would be compatible with the curricular aims of each department" (Lewis 1991: 35). The organizing principle became the ACTFL-ETS proficiency scale for assessing speaking skills. The university adopted, adapted, or created comparable scales for entry- and exit-level assessments of each of the other skill areas—listening, reading, and writing. The university further sought creative ways to address the issue of literature and culture. After several semesters of work, the result was a substantial shift in departmental thinking away from considering the foreign language major "as a set of courses to be 'covered' or a number of credits to be earned" (Lewis 1991: 37), to one of seeing the learning process as a continuum, one of continual growth. A model of an ascending, expanding, open-ended scale, much like the inverted pyramid, replaced the list of the courses that determined "completion" of the language-learning process. Like Vavrus (1990), Lewis (1991) recommends that each group embarking on alternative assessment plans define its own objectives, identify desired results, and measure its own progress according to local circumstances.

Foreign language teachers and educators have sought to improve the assessment of language learned in the classroom (Larson and Jones 1984; Magnan 1985). One of the greatest classroom discrepancies there are in the foreign language classroom often occurs between the course goals, usually stated in proficiency terms, and the grammar tests that are utilized to measure student achievement (Omaggio-Hadley 1993). If assessment is still grammar-oriented in nature, the effects of curricular innovations are quickly counteracted and the proficiency goals explicitly stated in the course goals are invalidated.

Bartz (1976) pointed out the need to design assessment tools that assess students' ability to communicate authentic meaning. Portfolio assessment offers the foreign language teacher an opportunity to individualize instruction and assessment by measuring growth over time in all skill areas. Audiotapes containing readings and dialogues on the novice level can evolve into spontaneous interviews and role-plays on the intermediate and advanced levels. Journals containing creative writing, letters, summaries, and personal reflection can document development in grammar skills and writing for meaning. Computer E-mail correspondence with another foreign language class or with students in the target culture can be printed and presented as evidence of written communication skills. A variety of video projects

created by a group of students such as a skit, a cultural simulation, a play, and commercials can encourage collaboration and foster a sense of community in the classroom.

Shultz and Stark (1992), foreign language teachers at the Illinois Mathematics and Science Academy, use the video as a visual portfolio by which student growth and development in oral proficiency is measured from the beginning of language instruction to its conclusion. Both the teacher and the student are able to assess the students' progress and determine corrective measures to optimize language learning. The imagination is the only limitation to what can be included in a portfolio as evidence of growth toward higher levels of second language proficiency.

As students experience firsthand the development and progress up the proficiency ladder, motivation to continue foreign language study will be greatly enhanced and self-confidence will increase.

Portfolio: An Alliance between Assessment and Instruction

Portfolio assessment is a holistic assessment that allows students to demonstrate what they can do through high-quality, performance-based, meaningful, authentic tasks. Portfolios can also be a powerful force for improving classroom instruction. Authenticity implies a close alignment between assessment and instruction. The shift from teaching discrete grammar skills to an emphasis on processes, application, and reading and writing responses has the potential to generate authentic portfolio entries in context, yielding a fusion between assessment and instruction (Linn et al. 1991). Language learning is conceptualized more as an emerging process than as a set of skills to acquire. The teacher is able to observe students in a broader context: taking risks, developing creative solutions, and learning to evaluate their own work (Paulson et al. 1991). As students become active participants in assessment and develop the ability to become independent, self-directed learners, instruction and assessment are woven together—a key value and rationale for using portfolios.

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