

Portfolio Assessment in the Japanese Classroom

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INTRODUCTION

The goals of this article are to discuss the implementation of an off-track portfolio assessment for my Freshman English (FE) classes, as well as the purposes for the implementation of this portfolio and its limitations.

TEACHING-LEARNING CONTEXT

My teaching context was teaching Japanese students whose majors were Law, Business, International Relations and Economics. There were approximately 20 students in each FE class. These students were at a functional level of English literacy, where they were able to encode and decode simple texts along with the ability to verbalise and perform beginner level activities (Lam, 2002a).

The course goals for the students were to be able to perform task and text-based activities using the Communicative Language Approach. The students must complete four homework assignments worth five points each, participate in four on-going assessments worth ten points each, given participation points for speaking English during class activities worth thirty points and have less than twelve absences in one semester (cf. Appendix 1).

Evaluation points were given on the basis of the student's ability to achieve the speaking tasks with minimal grammatical errors; however, the emphasis on grammar correctness was not the main focus for evaluation. The criteria used for assessment were pronunciation, vocabulary and listening comprehension. Students should try to speak slowly and clearly as well as to try to use the vocabulary that they learned in class correctly.

A standard textbook was used; however additional materials were included to reinforce the activities from the textbook. The students' purposes for learning English were to pass the required FE course or/and to go on an Asia University study abroad or exchange program.

THE PURPOSES FOR THE IMPLEMENTATION OF AN OFF-TRACK PORTFOLIO ASSESSMENT

According to Hewitt (1995), an off-track portfolio is a container of student work or assessments, without an attempt by the learner to verbalise reasons for their selection of work or to reflect on their choices. The learner's understanding of the task is minimal, and the portfolio is simply a collection of student work or tests based on the teacher's choice.

The reason why I chose this type of portfolio is due to the learners not being able to understand instructions in English beyond the functional level of literacy. It was very difficult for my students to verbalise reasons much less reflect upon their choices for portfolio building. However, for a higher level class, I believe that a student-driven portfolio would be more appropriate. Therefore, different types of portfolios may be used depending on the level of the classes.

As for the purposes in which this type of portfolio assessment serves are as follow:

1. It is an accountability of a student's work which is used for record keeping

- and issues that may arise in case of a mark dispute (Seger, 1992).
2. It is a systematic collection of a student's work which reflects accomplishments related to specific instructional goals or objectives
 3. Affective issues stretch the portfolio into being more than just a collection of a student's accomplishment, but rather a revelation of the student's motivations, aspirations and feelings about themselves and how those feelings affect their learning and behaviour in the language classroom (Seger, 1992).
 4. A plan of organising the portfolios by using colour-coded stickers for each class and by recycling the portfolios year after year result in efficient and simple management (Hewitt, 1995).

PORTFOLIO ASSESSMENT AS A RECORD KEEPER

In Appendix 1, a student profile sheet, was inserted into the portfolio as a record keeper of the student's identity, area of study, interests, age, commute time (a determinant of whether or not if the student's tardiness is excusable), marks for four homework assignments (H1, H2, H3, H4), tests (T1, T2, T3, T4), participation, absences, tardiness and criteria for evaluation. Students received their portfolios upon arrival to class. If they were absent or late fifteen minutes after class began, the teacher ticked absent or late on the profile sheet.

Throughout the semester, learners reviewed their portfolios or profile sheets periodically to check for excessive absences, tardiness, missing assignments or tests and lack of participation points. This caused the students to actively take charge of their own learning; it created a resultative motivation for students to actively participate in class; and it taught students to be responsible for their management of time in terms of going to class and being on time (Schipper, 1997). This periodic review of the portfolios by the learners takes the pressure off the teacher from having to give frequent reminders to potential failing students with excessive absences to turn in missing assignments or tests.

A SYSTEMATIC COLLECTION

A portfolio assessment is a systematic collection of a student's work which reflects his or her accomplishments related to specific instructional objectives given by the teacher. It "tells a story" of a learner's growth in proficiency in an academic area (Parkay, 2004).

Appendices 2 and 3 are examples of homework assignments "H1" and "H4" of Student A. The first assignment at the beginning of the semester was to write a self-introduction, with the instructional objective of using the simple present tense. Four months later, the final writing assignment was to write about a memorable childhood event, with the instructional objective of using the past tense.

The samples from Student A's writings lend evidence to a growth in his writing proficiency over a semester and proof of his accomplishment in an academic area. In Appendix 2, the first writing assignment (H1) of the semester was brief and written in short, simple sentences with enough lexical information to fulfill the objectives of the assignment. In Appendix 3, the last writing assignment (H4), demonstrates the writer's achievement of an organised flow to his story by creating cohesion and coherence of the text with the use of past tense verbs, lexical organisation, prepositional phrases, linking words and other grammatical features to engage the reader in feeling the emotions of the writer.

These writings are just a couple of examples from Student A's portfolio. It "told a story" of a learner's growth in proficiency as well as met the instructional and course goals set by the teacher.

A REVELATION OF A STUDENT'S THOUGHTS

Affective issues stretch the portfolio into being more than just a collection of a student's accomplishment, but rather a revelation of the student's motivations, aspirations and feelings about themselves and how those feelings affect their learning and behaviour in the language classroom (Seger, 1992). These affective issues are serious issues that teachers must be aware in regards to how low motivation and behavioural problems of learners could be disruptive. If it is not attended to in the early stages, it could spread discontentment to other learners in the language classroom.

In the case of my teaching context, I had a law student who displayed an angry demeanor upon arrival to my class. He arrived late and disrupted the class in the middle of my lesson and tried to spread his discontentment to the other students. I decided to speak to him privately about his behaviour. However, his oral ability to communicate in English was limited; therefore, I decided that it was best to communicate with him by writing letters. Through our letter writing, he was able to express his feelings and thoughts, thus revealing problematic issues, which dealt with his family members as well as his personal relationship with his girlfriend (cf. Appendix 4). As a result, I was able to determine the type of motivational strategy that was most effective in encouraging him to attend class regularly. By showing empathy to this learner's personal issues, the learner was able to see that I was not a threat, but a concerned figure. This resulted in the learner to show a more positive inclination toward studying English as well as to make attempts to arrive to class on time (Lam, 2002b).

KEEPING IT SIMPLE

The plan of implementing portfolios in each class does not have to be costly nor complicated. It is a plan of organisation to use colour-coded stickers and to recycle the portfolios year after year, which results in efficient and simple management (Hewitt, 1995).

For my teaching context, I purchased eighty orange coloured portfolios for 100 Yen each. Each class of approximately twenty students received the same colour and type of portfolio in order to avoid problematic issues of favouritism by class or student, gender discrimination and so on. The method for keeping track of the classes was by putting small colour-coded stickers on a corner of the portfolio to identify each class. In the case of Law, the class was identified by the use of a purple sticker, Economics was yellow, Business was white and the remaining class, which was International Relations, did not need one.

At the end of each class, the teacher collected the portfolios for data entry of marks and absences after all FE classes are finished for the day. For the end of the semester or school year, all students' assignments and tests were taken out of the portfolios and stored into large envelopes organised by class. These documents are kept for a year in case of mark disputes or for other purposes, which may arise. As for the original eighty portfolios purchased in the first year, it may be used again for the next school year. In case of an increase or decrease in class size, the colour-coded stickers may be changed to ensure overall uniformity of portfolios for every class.

LIMITATIONS

Critics may argue against the implementation of an off-track portfolio in the language classroom. It may be argued that this portfolio is too focused on the teacher setting the agenda for the students while the students passively comply with the teacher's selections. In contrary to this argument, the off-track portfolio is a mere organised structure for students who feel unable to make such choices by themselves due to their limited proficiency in English. In addition, if the students were able to make such choices by themselves, there was simply not enough class time (length of each FE class was 45 minutes) for students to select, discuss and reflect on their choices.

Another limitation may be in regards to the reliability and validity issues of assessment using this portfolio system. Reliability refers to the degree in which an assessment yields similar results at different times and under different conditions, whilst validity refers to the extent to which assessments measure what they are supposed to measure (Parkay and Hardcastle Stanford, 2004).

While the issues of having reliable and valid assessments of students' test results are important concerns, however, my principle intentions for the implementation of a portfolio assessment in the classroom were not for the sole purposes of researching validity and reliability issues. The purposes for this project, as stated previously in this article, were for research on simple and effective management of student records as well as learning about the students' motivation in language learning and helping them to achieve goals and objectives in their academic area. However, future research in the areas of reliability and validity could be conducted if there are support and interest.

CONCLUSION

The off-track portfolio assessment in the language classroom performed the duties of a record keeper, a manager, a systematic collector and a motivator. However, as educators, we should not rely on the portfolio as the sole method of evaluating students' progress or to motivate them, but rather we should incorporate other teaching strategies and observation as a means to provide a well-rounded system of language instruction for our students.

References

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Appendix 1

Student Profile and Assessment

Name (first) _____ (last) _____

ID# _____ Class _____

Email _____ Phone # _____

City _____ Commute Time _____

Hobbies _____

Birthday _____

Week	Particip.	T1	T2	T3	T4	H1	H2	H3	H4	
1										
2										
3										
4										
5										
6										
7										
8										
9										
10										
11										
12										
13										
14										
15										
Total										

You will get a good Participation Grade if you:

Bring Materials to Class:

1. pen/pencil
2. textbook
3. paper
4. turn in homework on due date

Speak English:

1. You should speak only English with your classmates
2. Pay attention in class
3. Come to class on time

Assessment of English Conversation

1. Pronunciation – try to speak slowly and clearly
2. Vocabulary – try to use the vocabulary you’ve learned and use them correctly
3. Comprehension – try to listen carefully to your partner and respond to him/her appropriately

Attendance and Tardiness

1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	11
/	/	/	/	/	/	/	/	/	/	/
-0%	-0%	-2%	-4%	-6%	-8%	-10%	-12%	-14%	-16%	“D” (Repeat)

Late trains and busses

1	2	3	4

Appendix 2

I am from Chiba, Japan, and now I live there. I'm 19 years old. I'm a student of Asia University. In my free time I play Kendo and read a book. I want to go to many countries, so I study English. I hope to be a lawyer.

Appendix 3

The Saddest Story

The saddest thing that happened to me was the time when my friend's father passed away. He was kind in character. He always drank sake and didn't eat anything. He was a drunken person. He never called our names. He always smoked. He was very clever, and we were taught history, Japanese, girlfriend and life.

His name was (deleted) and was a legend to us. When we were 17 years old, we always made a visit to him, because his son lived in a dormitory, and his son didn't see him.

His son's name was (deleted) and he worried about his father's health because he had diabetes and cirrhosis. So we went to his house.

But on 4th March 2002 he died. He didn't remain on the earth yet. We loved him.

Appendix 4

Hi! Recently I am not good and I was late for this class., because I am very busy and tired because of something mental problem...

My girlfriend is go mad, and I take care of her now. And I am doing part-time job and belong to the Band Club. I practice sing a song and play the guitar every day.

My mother and father tell me (censored) every day, every day. I have no room... I am very nervous. I have no time for myself. Sad, sorrow, unhappy, angry and mad. Will you empty your schedule tomorrow? I will speak English with you. Sorry, I'm late for this class everyday. Endless rain falls on my heart.