

# Advantages of implementing a portfolio in the areas of grammar and phonetics

Area: Foreign Language Teaching

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## Abstract

Research shows that students at all levels see assessment as something that is done to them on their classwork by somebody else. Likewise, more and more teachers are getting dissatisfied and frustrated with the use of standardized tests as the only method to assess their students, since they consider assessment a true learning experience, and not external to the learning process. In this paper, we analyse the benefits of implementing the portfolio system as a means of evaluating students' progress in the fields of grammar and phonetics at tertiary and university level.

**Keywords:** assessment – summative evaluation – formative evaluation - portfolio system -

## Introduction

Research shows that students at all levels see assessment as something that is done to them on their classwork by somebody else. Likewise, more and more teachers are getting dissatisfied and frustrated with the use of standardized tests as the only method to assess their students, since they consider assessment a true learning experience, and not external to the learning process. In contrast, there are some teachers who keep a conservative attitude towards assessment.

We are aware of the fact that the current assessment system implies, more particularly at tertiary and university level, certain formal or legal requirements to be met (summative assessment). However, there is nothing that prevents us from carrying out a *formative* assessment system to complement the *summative* one.

In this context, the recent emphasis on foreign language education concerning student performance has resulted in a reevaluation of instruction and assessment approaches. Current trends in the assessment of student learning recommend that alternative forms of assessment, rather than standardized tests alone, be used to assess students' progress in school achievement (Barberá, 2007; Martín, 1997). Thus, it is essential that teachers often assess the students' academic performance not only quantitatively but also qualitatively.

In this regard, the implementation of a portfolio is considered to be one of the most popular procedures within alternative assessment (Barberá, 2007; Barnhardt, Kevorkian & Delett, 1997; Delmastro, 2005; Martín, 1997), as it provides evidence of the students' knowledge, skills and even their decision to take action in different ways. Furthermore, this tool — regarded as a sample of the work of the student that is comprehensive enough to generate a representation of his/her performance throughout time — enables EFL teachers to have a global and comprehensive sample of

the student's learning process and thus avoid judging the process only by means of a fragmented or non-continuous assessment.

Summing up, the portfolio enables teachers to integrate the learning process tasks with evaluation, as its implementation can result in a good opportunity to make changes concerning the traditional assessment methodology applied in the EFL classroom. It can also provide the teacher with more information on students' knowledge and skills and their compliance with all the tasks assigned. Following these lines, in this paper, we propose implementing the portfolio system, as we consider it an interesting and innovating complementary alternative to traditional assessment in the areas of grammar and phonetics.

### The process portfolio: definition and objectives

Process portfolios are ideal because they contain work that shows the student's progression throughout the course; in other words, they document stages that students go through as they learn and progress (Ven, 2009, p. 33). Hence, in recent years, a number of EFL teachers and researchers have noticed the importance of helping students to become effective and autonomous learners. In practical terms, a student portfolio for assessment purposes can be said to be a "library" of reports, papers, and other materials, together with the reflection of his/her learning and on strengths and weaknesses. As a purposeful collection of student work, portfolios show effort, progress, achievement, and self-reflection in one or more areas (Paulson & Paulson, 1991).

In this regard, Varvus (1990) explains that a student portfolio is a systematic, organized collection of student work and related material that depicts a student's activities, accomplishments, and achievements in one or more school subjects. This body of evidence is used by the teacher and the student to measure growth of knowledge, skills and attitudes. Barnhardt et al. (1997) define portfolio assessment as "[...] the evaluation of a collected, organised, annotated body of work, produced over time by a learner, which demonstrates a progressive record of student growth towards specific objectives" (p. 3). Javanmard and Farahani (2012) define portfolio as as a purposeful collection of any aspect of the student's work which is kept in a file folder, box, or any durable and expandable container that tells the student's improvement, progress and achievement. Neiman (cited in Serhani, 2007) defines portfolio assessment as a selected collection of work that shows not only the best work but also the development of the individual's work over a period of time.

A process portfolio is the systematic collection and evaluation of student work measured against predetermined scoring criteria, such as scoring guides, rubrics, checklists, or rating scales (O'Malley & Valdez Pierce, 1996). In other words, process portfolios can provide a continuous picture of student progress rather than the snapshot of student achievement that single-occasion tests usually provide.

Martinez Lirola (2008) states that assessment is not considered an end in itself but a means to improve the teaching-learning process in such a way that students and teachers benefit. Following

Colen, Giné and Imbernon (2006), a portfolio assessment system is very reliable if it seeks the following objectives:

- (i) it helps students assume the responsibility for their own learning, since they have to be involved in the evaluation process;
- (ii) it gives teachers detailed information about students' work and progress;
- (iii) it integrates evaluation into the learning process;
- (iv) it encourages teachers and students to introduce changes in the way of teaching and learning;
- (v) it organises and gives coherence to the information the students have prepared.

### **Main differences between portfolio assessment and traditional assessment**

First, portfolios measure students' abilities over time, while in traditional assessment it is measured at one time. Second, whereas portfolio assessment is done by teacher and student and the latter is aware of the criteria, traditional assessment is done by the teacher alone and the student is often unaware of the guidelines used. Third, portfolio assessment is embedded in instruction, while traditional assessment is conducted outside instruction. Fourth, portfolio assessment captures many facets of language learning performance, whereas traditional assessment does not capture the range of students' abilities. Fifth, portfolio assessment highlights improvement, effort and achievement, while traditional assessment focuses only on results. In other words, portfolio assessment is process-oriented, whereas the traditional approach is product-oriented. Finally, portfolios connect learning, assessment and instruction, while these aspects are separated in traditional assessment.

### **Steps to follow when implementing the portfolio**

As has already been stated, the portfolio is a work and assessment strategy during the teaching-learning processes, accompanying and helping the teacher in the instruction planning and design activities (Delmastro, 2005, p. 196). Even if each teacher can decide how to implement this system according to his/her classroom activity, most authors agree on describing three phases or stages in its implementation: a previous stage of information and preparation for the experience (preparation stage), a development and follow up stage, and a last stage of final presentation, closing and assessment of the experience.

During the preparation stage, the teacher will inform the students about the characteristics of the portfolio, the general guidelines, contents to include and the criteria for assessment of the contents. Then, the teacher will explain the second stage: development and follow up. At this point, students will be informed about the methodology they will work with and what role the portfolio will play in it. In addition, the teacher will present a schedule with activities; s/he will also explain how such activities will be carried out as well as how participation in class will be assessed; besides, students will be guided as to the way in which the different materials will be used and their correction; it is at this stage when the process starts to receive feedback, guiding those students that have more

difficulties and following up on all the students in their learning process. At the end of the course, they will be able to present their portfolios with all the activities done during the course; each portfolio will work as proof of the learning process that each individual has gone through during the academic year.

### **Advantages of implementing the portfolio system**

There are a number of reasons why portfolios are considered an excellent tool to enhance the teaching-learning process. Implementing the portfolio class system allows teachers to:

- assess students' progress in their academic achievement;
- focus not only on quantitative aspects (the grade students obtain in mid-term tests and final exams) but also on qualitative ones;
- collect a sample of the student's work that is comprehensive enough to generate a representation of his/her performance over an extended period of time;
- change the old assessment habit where first drafts were considered final products; this requires giving the students an opportunity to take a second look and think about how they could improve future work;
- assess the development of the teaching-learning process throughout time so that they can make adjustments and reorganise the actions taken by both teachers and students on the basis of the results obtained;
- promote student independence, self-evaluation, reflection, and critical thinking;
- measure performance based on genuine samples of student work;
- provide flexibility in measuring how students accomplish their learning goals;
- enable teacher and students to share the responsibility for setting learning goals and for evaluating progress towards meeting these goals;
- give the students the opportunity to have extensive input into the learning process;
- facilitate cooperative learning activities, including peer evaluation and tutoring, cooperative learning groups, and peer conferencing;
- serve as a vehicle for enhancing students' awareness of the key role played by learning strategies in and beyond the classroom;
- offer the teacher and the student in-depth knowledge of the student as a learner, which means that the teacher can individualize instruction for the student. In this way, weak areas can be strengthened and areas of mastery built upon;
- standardize tests and all problems found with such testing.

### **Disadvantages of implementing the portfolio system**

Among the disadvantages of implementing the portfolio system to assess the students, we can mention the following:

- it can be very time consuming, as it requires extra time for planning an assessment system and constructing the assessment: reviewing and commenting on student work, especially if portfolios are done in addition to traditional grading. We should highlight that the portfolio system involves the extensive use of subjective evaluation procedures such as rating scales and professional judgement; in other words, teachers need to spend a great deal of energy on portfolio management. They need to get involved in developing strategies and materials, conferencing with individual students or small groups, reviewing portfolio contents, and providing feedback;
- scheduling individual portfolio conferences is difficult and the length of each conference may interfere with other institutional activities;
- problems in scoring may emerge, as the portfolio contains a variety of work samples for different purposes which are collected over time. The challenge is that portfolio assessment may produce unacceptably low inter-rater reliability, especially if the assessment rubrics are not properly prepared or are used by untrained assessors.

### **The portfolio system as a new way of assessing the students' performance in the fields of grammar and phonetics**

It is high time we started exploring new ways of assessing our students; such approaches should eventually lead us to mirror the students' learning, understanding, achievements, motivation and attitude in a comprehensive way, which will allow us to assess the development of the teaching-learning processes with the ultimate goal of making necessary adjustments and reorganizing the actions taken both by teachers and students.

In this regard, the typical written exam as the only method for measuring student progress is widely criticized by authors like Barberá (2007), who argues that assessment should not be a mere data gathering process but

a process that facilitates group analysis and the reconstruction of learning through shared interpretation of the data gathered by the teacher and the students. In these terms, the assessment process will be completed with a series of actions that are the main responsibility of the teacher and that will be ignored if assessment is understood as a diagnosis of students' knowledge (p. 123).

Barberá (2007) describes these actions as:

- a) decision-making regarding learning on the basis of the results obtained (what to do, how to continue) in the midterm tests or final exam;
- b) the actual realization of these decisions — many a time taken for granted just because it was indicated or because its scope is not considered real; and
- c) a follow up of the development of the decisions made, which will result in assured and true progressive learning.

Thus, we propose the portfolio system, also known as the *work portfolio* or *work dossier*, as an interesting and innovating complementary alternative to traditional assessment. In the educational

field, the portfolio system was at first nothing but a folder with a series of achievements and certifications of the students with promotional purposes. As time went by, this assessment procedure was developed including curriculum data of the student. The turning point was its use with instructional purposes.

Although interest in portfolios as assessment devices first emerged in the field of composition instruction, it has recently evolved in other disciplines in the language arts, such as reading and oral language development (Fair & Tone, 1994; Hewitt, 1994). Since then, portfolios have proved a quite meaningful source for providing information that can be most useful for teaching and learning. This information becomes the evidence of the students' language proficiency based on a broader representation of agents and materials, which together engage in a process of contextualization by obtaining evidence from a different source other than the final examinations.

An advantage of this instrument is that it can provide evidence of growth in a number of different dimensions of learning. In other words, the portfolio entails a useful tool in the fields of grammar and phonetics, since it features materials that show the students' progress, the level of understanding of the contents, and their ability to develop new skills.

Through constructive, interpretive and dialogical sessions, each participant collects language data and demonstrates them in an interpretive and contextualized manner. Although this practice may turn out somewhat time-consuming, it may prove quite useful, since each student will be able to maintain a collection that will include his/her personal goals and objectives, self-assessments, teacher assessments, and all practice activities carried out during the course.

The implementation of the portfolio also highlights the importance of providing high quality feedback on performance to learners. Without it, they may think they have mastered something when they have not, fossilize in errors, become discouraged, or resent the effort they have put in. For this reason, we intend to encourage learners to monitor and record significant moments in their experience of the course. This aim is in line with the goals of autonomous learning, in that it encourages students to take an active role in formulating their learning objectives and assessing to what extent these have been met.

An important dimension in language learning is students' development of appropriate learning strategies. However, traditional tests do not capture these mental processes. Because learning strategies are most often not observable phenomena, teachers need to rely on students' own reports about the strategies they have used. By implementing the use of the portfolio in the grammar class as an alternative form of assessment, students record a summary of the strategies they have used when accomplishing a particular practice activity.

The students' work samples collected on a regular basis throughout the school year will allow teachers to gain an opportunity to truly understand what their students are learning. As products of significant instructional activity, portfolios reflect contextualized learning and complex thinking skills, not simple routine, low-level cognitive activity. Portfolios should aim at making sense of students' work, communicating about it, and relating the tasks to a larger context.

It is well known that language development occurs at different rates through a series of trials and errors. It is precisely through well-designed portfolios that students can document the process of

trial and error in the fields of grammar and phonetics, for example when using a new structure, introducing a rule, producing the English sounds. This thinking process can be documented through self-assessment, goal-setting, and the kind of reflective statements typical of portfolio assessments (Gómez, Graue & Bloch, 1991; Keiffer & Faust, 1994).

Language proficiency is holistic and focuses on communicative and functional language abilities as well as the attainment of discrete skills (Moya & O'Malley, 1994). In this sense, work portfolios show the whole learning process and also demonstrate how, when, where, and to what extent the concepts, skills, and competencies have been acquired by the students. As Martin (1997) puts it, the information included in the portfolio generates a whole assessment picture about the skills, competencies, knowledge, readiness to act, and the actual willingness of the students.

Martínez Lirola and Crespo Fernández (2007) make it clear that the portfolio is a useful tool in higher education, since it is composed of materials which show students' progress, the degree of assimilation of the contents and the ability to develop certain competencies previously established by the teachers. In this sense, the portfolio is an authentic form of evaluation because it establishes a link between theory and practice.

The portfolio is not simply a qualitative and comprehensive assessment strategy; concerning grammar, this tool may serve the purpose of filing documents: practical assignments; the exercises asked for and corrected by the teacher; the term tests, among others. It may work as a portfolio of the whole process or a collection of all the papers completed on a specific topic. Celce-Murcia and Olshtain (2000) state that "the portfolio . . . has become an important concept in developing writing skills and in giving teachers a fairer and more perceptive way to evaluate" (p.159). Following Brown (2003), in the area of phonetics, "the portfolio can include video or tape recordings, and any other activities that teachers want to include" (p. 148). Among such activities, we can mention several transcriptions of one text, dictations of the same passage done on different days so that comparisons of multiple productions may allow for tracking improvement. Stress and intonation marking can also be conducted with working explanations of the choices made. This may facilitate understanding of the communicative value of intonation and its significance for oral communication.

### **Concluding remarks**

It is said that a picture can be worth a thousand words; thus, we can think of a portfolio as a kind of scrapbook or photo album that records the student's academic progress throughout the academic year. In this sense, a portfolio is often seen as a highly valid instrument for assessment, as it can provide a rich view of the learning process; however, the data in a portfolio, being often descriptive, context-bound and personal, ask for much interpretation before they can be scored. Lyons and Condon (as cited in Fahed Al-Serhani, 2007) claim that there are three basic principles, namely *collection*, *selection*, and *reflection*, which serve as the requirements of the success of the portfolio assessment implementation. The advantages of using portfolios include offering the students a concrete way to value their work, reflect on their performance, enhance their learning and autonomy, alter their view of the teacher's and their own role, encourage themselves to take responsibility for their learning, and get involved in the assessment process.

Portfolios work as a means of empowering students to become active learners and decision-makers in their own learning. As Gottlieb (1995) puts it, portfolios “serve as a guide for students in making choices and in understanding how they reason, create, strategize, and reflect” (p. 12).

Portfolio assessment makes for more authentic feedback, but it needs to be continued; otherwise, it becomes just another type of summative assessment. By applying the portfolio assessment system, teachers can obtain clear insights into their teaching. Consequently, teaching plans can be modified to improve the instructional process in the classroom. In this regard, the portfolio assessment strategy is found not to alter the traditional forms of assessment; on the contrary, portfolio assessment and standardized testing can intertwine and complement each other.

To sum up, we strongly support the implementation of the portfolio assessment system in the fields of grammar and phonetics, as it fosters student self-evaluation, reflection and critical thinking. In addition, it measures performance based on genuine samples of student work; it provides flexibility in measuring how learning goals are accomplished and facilitates cooperative learning activities. Finally, it provides opportunities for teachers and students to discuss learning goals and progress toward those goals in structured and unstructured conferences.

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