ABSTRACT

The purpose of this workshop is to enable participants to become familiar with portfolio assessment, and inform them about an attempt to implement it in a school of languages in Buenos Aires.

The session will deal with the main features of authentic and portfolio assessment, a discussion of some of the problems of implementation and their possible solutions, the process of implementation under way at Asociación Ex-Alumnos del Profesorado en Lenguas Vivas, and the portfolio of a nine-year-old student.

PORTFOLIO ASSESSMENT: AN ATTEMPT AT IMPLEMENTATION

At present the word ‘portfolio’ is commonly associated with different English teaching contexts. Portfolio assessment is being implemented in countries such as the USA and the UK as an alternative to standardised and multiple choice tests. But what exactly is portfolio assessment and how can it be implemented in an Argentinian school of English? These are the questions this paper intends to answer.

Section One: Authentic Assessment

A discussion of portfolio assessment is not very meaningful without a previous consideration of what is meant by authentic assessment, one of the main features of portfolio assessment. As O’Malley and Valdez Pierce define it, assessment becomes authentic when it reflects ‘student learning, achievement, motivation and attitudes on instructionally-relevant classroom activities’ (1996: 4). In classes with authentic assessment students are assessed while they
engage in ordinary activities, and teachers can systematically monitor student progress in real classroom situations and not through artificial tasks such as those in traditional tests and exams. In this way, it is no longer necessary to 'train' students for exams, which puts an end to the well-known 'washback' effect of summative assessment. Assessment becomes formative, that is to say, an essential part of the learning process.

There are certain features that characterise this type of assessment. First and foremost, it must be carried out on a regular basis, not just once a month or once a fortnight. This means that assessment becomes an integral part of the learning process through which teachers collect plenty of information about their students' performance and progress.

Secondly, authentic assessment is generally based on scoring rubrics and/or checklists that must be known to the students. It is essential that students be told in advance when and how they are going to be assessed. The use of holistic and analytic scales, which can be designed by the teacher and the students working together, will give students a clear idea of what they are expected to do. Checklists are easier to write than scoring rubrics and are also useful when trying to focus attention on particular aspects of the language being assessed. These rubrics and checklists can also be used to encourage student self-assessment. This does not necessarily mean asking students to give themselves a mark. The main purpose of self-assessment is to encourage students to become aware of their strengths and weaknesses, reflect on what they can do to improve their performance, and set themselves goals for the future. None of this, however, can be achieved successfully unless teachers give students feedback after assessing them. Without feedback, students have no tools to direct their own learning and become autonomous.

Finally, the concepts of reliability and validity, so often discussed in connection with assessment, must be borne in mind as well. No assessment is worthwhile if scores vary significantly depending on the assessor. To ensure reliability, teachers can undergo training during which the rubrics and checklists
can be applied to different samples of student work. These meetings of teachers can be organised regularly to give practitioners plenty of opportunities to agree and disagree until, ideally, most of them acquire similar assessment standards. These meetings can also serve another purpose: the activities for assessment can be analysed in terms of their validity, another important feature of authentic assessment. As Harris and McCann point out, assessment is valid when it 'effectively measures what it intends to measure and not something different' (1994: 93).

Section Two: Portfolio Assessment

Now that authentic assessment has been defined, we can move onto the discussion of portfolios. In O’Malley and Valdez Pierce’s words,

A portfolio is a purposeful collection of student work that is intended to show progress over time. The portfolio may include samples of student work, usually selected by the student or by the student and teacher to represent learning based on instructional objectives. Although portfolios have become popular over the past decade, we know that most teachers are not using them to their best advantage: collecting information purposefully and systematically over time to reflect learning with regard to instructional objectives. Each portfolio entry may be scored using a scoring rubric or checklist. The overall portfolio can be scored as well, based on the extent to which instructional goals have been met.

(1996: 14)

In this definition of portfolio, we can clearly see several of the features of authentic assessment that have already been discussed. Above all, we must remember that portfolios are intended to reflect student achievement and improvement.

The benefits of portfolio assessment are plentiful and varied. While building up their portfolios, students can be assessed at regular intervals during the year. Therefore, their final mark will not depend on limited evidence. In this way, portfolios offer a more comprehensive view of our students’ skills and progress than traditional tests and exams. According to O’Malley and Valdez Pierce, ‘portfolios reveal much more about what students can do with what they...
know than do standardized tests’ (1996: 35). Moreover, students are encouraged to take an active role in both the learning and assessment processes. As classwork really matters, they will probably become more autonomous and responsible for their work. In *Action Research on the Use of Portfolio for Assessing Foreign Language Learners*, a paper presented at the 29th International IATEFL Conference held at the University of York in April 1995, Smith says,

> The teachers noted that pupils took on much more responsibility for their learning than in previous years. Their work became more organized as each assignment was dated and reflected upon completion. If a pupil missed an assignment, most made sure they obtained it from their peers, so their portfolio would meet requirements. The course material was carefully reviewed by students, on their own initiative. Even homework was viewed more positively. As one 12th-grader said: “I realized homework was logical and an important part of my learning.”

(page 7)

That is to say, there is a shift from the learner being passive to becoming proactive.

Although student participation is usually regarded as a key factor in collecting portfolios, some writers allow for portfolios to have tightly specified contents (Freeman and Lewis 1998: 271), or content determined by teachers (Cunningham 1998: 145; O’Malley and Valdez Pierce 1996: 35). One way of solving this issue is by dividing the samples of work into two categories: core or required and optional entries (Smith 1995: 3; Gottlieb 1995: 13). While students can still choose part of the content of their portfolios (optional entries), teachers or school administrators may decide to include instances of more formal assessment such as tests and particular kinds of exercises or activities as compulsory components (core entries). Two important issues have to be remembered, though. If tests are included, they cannot be considered the only evidence of achievement, and both the core and optional entries must show student progress. Teachers can agree to include, for example, a piece of writing...
every month and let students select the one they like best. In this way, both teacher and student participate in building the portfolio.

Giving students a final mark for their portfolios is not a requirement of this type of assessment. A final student profile specifying achievement and progress is more compatible with the goals and objectives underlying the scheme. On the other hand, we must admit that, no matter how unfair grades or marks may be, they are a necessary requirement at some educational institutions. This is mainly because ‘grades … are useful in communicating with parents, who often insist on knowing the grade their child received’ (O’Malley and Valdez Pierce 1996: 47). Moreover, marks are often necessary for certification purposes. The problem is how final marks can be assigned to portfolios.

Ideally, marks should be the result of student and teacher assessment of portfolios. With students’ growing awareness about their progress and learning process, and with the joint efforts of teachers and students in assessment, this need not be a problem. During the action research project on portfolio assessment carried out by a group of Israeli teachers, Smith discovered that when ‘the learners themselves were asked to assess their portfolios…most were realistic in their assessment’ (1995: 9). Taking into account that ‘evaluation of the portfolios ultimately involves multiple views’ (McLaughlin and Vogt 1996: 64), a third person’s opinion, such as a colleague’s, would be very useful indeed. Thus, an average of the three marks can lead to the final one. However, if this happens to be rather difficult to implement, an alternative way of assigning marks will have to be found.

In a more traditional style, teachers can become responsible for this task. I cannot think of anybody better qualified for it. Teachers have monitored their students through scoring rubrics and profiles; they have witnessed their progress, and can easily check whether or not their students have achieved their goals and objectives. In case of doubt, teachers can resort to the Head of Department or a colleague for another opinion on a particular portfolio which
they find difficult to mark. A marking scheme based on a set of descriptors can turn out to be useful. McLaughlin and Vogt suggest the following one:

- exceptional
- thorough
- adequate
- inadequate

(1996: 20)

while Cunningham proposes another one:

- outstanding
- satisfactory
- unsatisfactory

(1998: 133)

Once management and staff decide on the descriptors to be used, these will be matched to their more familiar numerical or alphabetical scores. As these rubrics can be used for each entry as well as for the whole portfolio, they can also be the basis of the scoring rubrics that teacher and students will have to define clearly at the beginning of each school year.

Groups of students brainstorm and formulate a specific description for each of these categories at the start of each course.

(McLaughlin and Vogt 1996: 20)

Because the students create the descriptors, they differ somewhat from semester to semester, yet they are remarkably similar and consistent.

(page 65)

The marking scheme described above will ideally help combine the main features of portfolio assessment with the need to give students a grade or mark.

To make the assessment of portfolios more reliable, INSET sessions can be organised by the school management. Their main purpose will be the assessment of different entries so that ‘intrarater reliability can be established through colleagues’ reviewing and evaluating common pieces of evidence’ (McLaughlin and Vogt 1996: 70). I also find Gottlieb’s words highly relevant to this point.

Teachers … must have extensive professional development and
ongoing dialogue in order to reach acceptable levels of reliability for the entire portfolio.

(1995: 14)

Apart from this, the meetings will hopefully lessen teachers’ anxiety, and will enable members of staff to give each other support, get support from the school managers and share their experiences.

Student discussion of goals and objectives, an important feature of portfolio assessment, may be seen as having two serious drawbacks. It is time-consuming, and the outcome of that discussion may not agree with the school syllabus. To my mind, a discussion of the goals that the institution has for each group of students in the light of the students’ own objectives is very useful indeed. Students become aware of what is expected of them, and at the same time, select the objectives that are more meaningful to them, while adding others of their own. This talk can take place at the beginning of the school year as the students and their teacher are getting to know each other. In the conferences in which teacher and student discuss portfolios, those goals and objectives can be adjusted or renewed according to the particular needs of each student.

Portfolio conferences can be time-consuming activities. Can teachers afford to spend time on them within their classes of three or four hours a week, the usual class span in schools of English in Argentina? Genesee and Upshur suggest that teachers

set aside time … during which three or four conferences are conducted with individual students while other students in the class work on their own or in small groups.

(1996: 113)

Project work, lab work and reading workshops are useful activities that can be carried out alongside portfolio conferences. Each institution and teacher will probably find other activities that easily lend themselves to this purpose. The conferences are essential to raise students’ awareness about their progress, the work they have done so far, and what they can do in the future. They should lead to self-assessment and self-reflection, making the learning process more
meaningful to the student, and not just the pursuit of a final mark or test result. If teachers understand the relevance of the conferences, they will surely find plenty of opportunities to include them in their schedule of work.

As to the assessment of oral skills and their inclusion in students’ portfolios, the best suggestion is the use of audio and videotapes. However, if we are to be realistic, we must admit that many teachers and even managers may consider this hard to implement. What teachers can do is to complete continuous assessment sheets and, ideally, write student profiles that will be included in each student's portfolio.

Finally, we have come to the issue connected with decision-making. Some of the decisions involved in the implementation of portfolio assessment can be taken by both the school administrators and members of staff during INSET sessions and further meetings, such as what to include in the core and optional entries, in self-assessment sheets and scoring rubrics. School managers can also ask teachers to volunteer to pilot the new assessment scheme in their courses. This will give those members of staff who are enthusiastic about portfolio assessment the opportunity to try it out, and ideally it will encourage their colleagues to follow suit.

Section Three: Implementation of Portfolio Assessment at Asociación Ex-Alumnos del Profesorado en Lenguas Vivas 'J. R. Fernández'

'Asociación Ex-Alumnos del Profesorado en Lenguas Vivas' is a school of languages located in Buenos Aires and founded in 1916. In this institute, students have always been promoted or not according to the results of final written and oral exams. Another standardised test is given in the middle of the term, but it has no bearing on the final mark. This mark is expressed through a score out of ten, with the pass mark being five or six depending on the level of the student. The final written exams together with their corresponding marking schemes are prepared by the co-ordinators and the Head of Department with the help of the teachers, and are administered and marked by the practitioners,
who are assigned one of their colleagues’ courses. Afterwards, these exams are supervised by the school administrators. The teachers are also responsible for oral-examining the students of their colleagues, while two-member boards are set up for upper-intermediate and advanced students. It is in an educational setting of this kind that the school managers introduced portfolio assessment in the year 2000.

Implementation started in children’s courses. The four teachers concerned were told what portfolio assessment consists in, they were given some reading material on the innovation and were informed of the plan to pilot it in their courses. At this very early stage of the process, we did not insist on the use of rubrics or checklists or self-assessment sheets. The idea was to exert as little pressure on the teachers as possible and not to increase their workload too much. We also held a meeting with the children’s parents to explain the changes in assessment, which were welcomed as they were considered to be more appropriate than the system of assessment used until the year before.

The outcomes of the first year’s implementation were encouraging indeed. The teachers involved in it agreed that they liked the new method of assessment. They had noticed that their students were enthusiastic about building their portfolios and, except for one of the groups, students did not have the feeling that they were doing a ‘test’ when they engaged in an activity for their portfolio. These comments were very interesting to us since they reflected some of the reasons that had led us to embark on this innovation.

At the beginning of 2001, all the members of staff attended a workshop on portfolio assessment. This INSET session served several purposes. First of all, it enabled teachers to become better informed about this new type of assessment and the plans to implement it. Secondly, the teachers of children’s courses had the chance to share their experiences with their colleagues. Finally, the school managers took advantage of the opportunity to organise the next stages of the implementation process.
These stages consist in the introduction of portfolio assessment in pre-adolescents’ courses in 2001 and the setting up of teams of teachers who are regularly meeting, either once a week or once a fortnight, to work on the future implementation in the rest of the courses at the institute. Three teams of practitioners were organised, and each of them was assigned a group of courses to deal with. At present they are working on the design of scoring rubrics and the choice of core and optional entries. They are also doing all the necessary work that will make the process towards portfolio assessment easier to be carried out as from next year onwards.

Although our institution is in the middle of the implementation process, an evaluation is under way so that we can find the strengths and weaknesses of the new scheme, and plan the next steps to be taken. For the time being, this evaluation has only involved the students and the teachers of the courses where portfolio assessment has already been introduced. As regards the outcomes of the evaluation (see Appendix), it is clear that both the teachers and the students are satisfied with the new method of assessment since positive changes in the students’ attitudes to classwork and homework have already been noticed.

The next stage in the process of implementation will deal with the problems that have been foreseen and the introduction of the innovation in adolescents’ courses from first to fifth year. This new phase within implementation is expected to be slightly different from the previous stages. This is so mainly because the final exam probably will not be replaced by portfolio assessment in 2002. Both the old and the new systems of assessment are likely to co-exist for one year to give teachers time to try out the suggestions that will come from the teams of teachers at work at present. For a year, portfolios will be used just to decide whether the students can sit for the traditional final exams or not. As from 2003 onwards, we expect to embark on a full implementation of the innovation. Next year, an evaluation of the process of implementation itself will be carried out to weigh the pros and cons of the way portfolio assessment
has been introduced in our institution and to enable us to take better informed decisions in the future.

From the above discussion, it is clear that the final implementation of portfolio assessment has become an agreed plan of action between the management and the staff. Of course, there are other ways of implementing portfolio assessment. Setting up an action research group, as Smith did in Israel, is an interesting alternative that can be considered by those interested in trying out this type of assessment or any other innovation.

The idea underlying our method of implementation is that portfolio assessment will ideally adjust itself as time passes and more radical changes are introduced. Meanwhile, the first steps have been cautious and gradual. Boud’s reflection on autonomous learning fits portfolio assessment perfectly.

[It] is not an absolute standard to be met, but a goal to be pursued; what is important is the direction towards student responsibility for learning, and not the magnitude of the change in that direction.

(1981: 24)

Student responsibility for learning is the main goal behind portfolios. As long as this purpose is not neglected, portfolio assessment is worth adapting to the reality of each workplace.
REFERENCES


APPENDIX

EVALUATION OF PORTFOLIO ASSESSMENT
AT ASOCIACION EX-ALUMNOS DEL PROFESORADO EN LENGUAS
VIVAS
‘J. R. FERNANDEZ’

Implementation: children and pre-adolescents’ courses
Years: 2000-2001
Number of teachers interviewed: 8

<p>| Is portfolio assessment a better, fairer way of evaluating students than the old system? |
|-----------------------------------|-----------------------------------|-----------------------------------|-----------------------------------|
| Yes | Why? | No | 8 |
| 'It enables teachers to monitor students’ progress over time' |
| 'It helps students to become autonomous learners' |
| 'It emphasises the acquisition of learning strategies' |
| 'It trains students to become more responsible for and aware of their own progress' |
| 'It makes the classroom become more learner-centred' |</p>
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Have the teachers noticed any changes in their students’ attitudes towards classwork and homework?</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Yes (6)</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>➢ ‘Students' attitude seems to have undergone a positive change’</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>➢ ‘Students seem to be more enthusiastic and highly motivated’</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>➢ ‘They pay more attention to the mistakes they make’</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>➢ ‘They take pride in keeping a portfolio’</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>➢ ‘They have developed the ability to organise their work’</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>➢ ‘They do not feel the pressure of having a test’</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>➢ 'Homework and classwork activities seem to have taken on new meaning’</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>It is too early to say, but ... (1)</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>➢ ‘Students like compiling their work and engaging in self and peer-assessment activities’</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>No, because... (1)</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>➢ Students do not know they are doing an activity for their portfolios</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Has the new system affected the teachers’ work?

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Yes</th>
<th>No</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>7</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

- Planning and organisation have changed
- Attitudes have also changed: one of the teachers tends to praise students more often so as to boost their self-confidence
- The way to assess students' oral performance has changed: recording students helps teachers become better aware of students' pronunciation and fluency
- Teachers should pay lots of attention to their students' needs
- Both teacher and students need to be trained properly

Possible future problems

- Implementation of portfolio assessment to large groups
- Implementation of portfolio assessment to adult courses
- Increase in teacher's workload
- Dealing with students who are often absent
STUDENTS’ OPINIONS

- I learn more because I reflect on my own work
- I can see my progress clearly
- Assessment is not disconnected from everyday activities
- I feel I have to study regularly

Word count (including references and appendix): 3847

Biographical note
- Graduate of INES en Lenguas Vivas (1982)
- Co-ordinator at Asociación Ex-Alumnos del Lenguas Vivas
- Teacher of Cambridge exam-oriented courses at AACI
- Oral examiner for UCLES
- Lecturer in History of England and co-ordinator of the area of History at UCA
- Presenter at LABCI (1993)
- MA candidate at University of East Anglia, UK
SUMMARY

The purpose of this ninety-minute workshop is to enable teachers and co-ordinators to become familiar with portfolio assessment, and to inform them about an attempt to implement it that is being carried out in a school of languages in Buenos Aires. Both authentic and portfolio assessment are being used in several English-speaking countries at present. However, in my opinion, not all my colleagues in Argentina really know what this type of assessment consists in, and how it can be put into practice in our country.

I will start off the workshop with an introduction to the main features of authentic assessment, namely the use of typical classroom activities for the sake of assessment, the use of scoring rubrics (which must be known to the students), the encouragement of student self-assessment, the importance of feedback, and so on. Once this picture has been clearly drawn, I will talk about what we understand by portfolios and the decisions that have to be made before implementation. These include the purpose of the portfolio, its contents (with both core and optional entries), the design of the scoring rubrics and self-assessment sheets, and finally the people who are responsible for taking the decisions. Afterwards, I will encourage participants to think about the possible problems that are likely to crop up during the process of implementation. In this way, I will get useful information about the different working contexts of the participants, which will enable me to close the workshop with ideas and suggestions about how to adapt portfolio assessment to different realities.

As an example of implementation in our country, I am planning to talk about my own experience as a co-ordinator at Asociación Ex-Alumnos de Profesorado en Lenguas Vivas "J. R. Fernandez", where we have introduced portfolio assessment in children and pre-adolescents' courses. At present, we are training teachers who are working on the future implementation of this new type of assessment in teenagers' courses. At the end of the session, I will show participants the portfolio that belongs to a nine-year-old student who started...
learning English the year previous to its collection. The portfolio includes a tape, parts of which I am planning to play so that we can analyse the progress the student made during the year.

The workshop will consist of different types of interaction, including whole-group discussion, pair and groupwork activities, as well as reading and reflection. I will make use of handouts with passages from the book entitled *Authentic Assessment for English Language Learners - Practical Approaches for Teachers*, written by J. Michael O'Malley and Lorraine Valdez Pierce, which I will recommend to anybody who wants to know more about the subject. I will summarise the main points under discussion on transparencies. Finally, as the workshop requires active participation and discussion, I would like to work with a small group of no more than 20 people.

From what has been described above, I believe this workshop will be of interest to several of the participants that are expected at the conference.