

# Using Portfolios as a Means of Assessment

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One problem with exams as a traditional means of assessment is that they do not allow students to have ownership of their learning. One way to overcome this problem is to use a language portfolio—a systematic collection of a student's work. By compiling portfolios, students can reflect on their learning, and language teachers can focus on each student's learning process and progress, as well as his or her final product. This paper will examine the portfolios that students compiled from three different educational levels: high school, junior college, and university. It will explain the manner in which the portfolio process was introduced and conducted, as well as summarize the feedback received from students and other teachers about this form of assessment. This paper will conclude with implications and recommendations for using portfolios.

定期考査等の従来の評価法では、学習者が学習を自分のものとして捉え、主体的に学習に取り組む姿勢を養いにくい。この問題を解決する方法の一つとして、ポートフォリオ評価が挙げられる。ポートフォリオとは学習者が自分達の課題や作品を系統的に収集し、綴じたものである。ポートフォリオを構築することにより、学習者には自らの学習を振り返る機会

が与えられる。教師側も学習者の最終的な学習成果のみならず、その結果に至るまでの学習プロセスや成長にも注目することが可能となる。本稿では、高等学校、短大、大学レベルでのポートフォリオ実践を考察し、その導入プロセスや実践方法について説明する。また、学習者と教師からのフィードバックを要約し、ポートフォリオ評価の可能性について述べ、実践への提言を行う。

In Japan, foreign language education is changing. Among other things, more emphasis is being put on communication, English education will be introduced to elementary schools, and more schools will send their students overseas to allow them to use English in real-life situations. However, when it comes to assessing a student's ability, traditional means of assessment, which focus heavily on rote memorization, are still commonly used. This paper examines the portfolios that students compiled from three different educational levels: high school, junior college, and university. It suggests ways to incorporate portfolios in a language class and discusses its merits and pitfalls.

The field of alternative assessment is an area that has not been fully explored on a practical level. For example, at the junior and high school levels, except for some subjects such as music and physical education, students' final grades are based mostly on their performance on mid and final term exams that are conducted within a formal setting such as during test weeks. Some universities do not allow teachers

to substitute one-shot tests with alternative means of assessment. For most Japanese students, therefore, the exam scores that their teachers give them are the only indication of their language abilities. Most of them are not systematically given any opportunity to learn how to think for themselves: they have few chances to reflect on and analyze their own learning process and progress. They study, but they usually cram for tests. Given these drawbacks, we have observed that Japanese students have not fully developed as autonomous language learners. Our challenge is to help them improve their English abilities, as well as to assist them in becoming more autonomous learners so that they can improve their English more effectively.

One means of addressing these issues is to analyze students' progress in a less restrictive, more informal setting. Typical classroom activities that allow for this type of analysis are student journals, presentations, discussions, and surveys, to name a few examples. One means to encompass all of these, as well as allow students more control and ownership of their language learning, is to introduce a language portfolio.

Nowadays, portfolio assessment is becoming popular at the elementary school level in Japan, but it is not commonly implemented in language classes at the high school and university levels. Suzuki (2000) advocates the use of portfolios in Japan, asserting that Japanese teachers should be aware that evaluation is something



not done strictly by teachers but something that students should actively participate in.

### What is a “Portfolio”?

O’Malley and Valdez Pierce (1996) define a portfolio as “a systematic collection of student work that is analyzed to show progress over time with regard to instructional objectives” (p. 5). A portfolio usually consists of several sections, and students will choose which of their work goes into each section. Self-assessment and reflection are also crucial features of the portfolio, for they allow students to be involved directly in their learning (Stowell and Tierney, 1995; Tierney, Carter and Desai, 1991). One way to have students exercise self-assessment and reflection in their portfolios is to let them write a cover note for each section. A cover note is a short description of the materials or items included in each section of the portfolio and the reasons for selecting them. An ideal cover note should include a description of the assignment, reflection on the student’s learning, and reflection on the significance of the work. Although a portfolio will vary according to the kind of class, most portfolios will cover, in some form or another, the following categories as shown in Table 1.

*Table 1: Types of Materials Included in the Portfolio*

Category	Types of Work
reflective work	personal reflection, portfolio introduction, cover notes
self-assessment document	personal profile, needs analysis
academic work	samples of projects, essays, quizzes, audio/video tapes
personal selections	scores, reports, creative work
portfolio evaluations	self, peer, and instructor evaluations

### Rationale for the Portfolio and the Portfolio Process

By its very nature, portfolio assessment is holistic, performance-based, process-oriented and student-centered. It also involves self-assessment and allows for greater learner autonomy. The interconnectedness and co-dependency of these characteristic features of portfolio assessment, which we find particularly important, underpin the portfolio process proposed in this paper (see Table 2).

According to Gipps’ (1995) definition, performance-based assessment models real classroom tasks, requires students to perform and respond in a range of modes, focuses on higher levels of cognitive complexity, and requires qualitative evaluation on the part of the teacher. Portfolios, being collections of students’ work accompanied by their reflections on its significance

uniquely satisfy, in our view, all of the above requirements. The great advantage of portfolios over one-shot tests, even if it is a performance-based test, is that they provide a holistic, multidimensional view of students' achievements.

Portfolios are assembled over extended periods of time, which can range from a school term to a whole year, and the final product contains a wide sampling of students' class work. What goes into a portfolio is by and large a result of what goes on in the classroom. Its content is determined by both the curricular goals set by the teacher as well as those set by the students themselves. By including a variety of tasks and activities representative of their skills in their portfolios, students demonstrate their effort and their growth as well as illustrate their own outlook on the learning process. Not only does this allow teachers to assess the students' progress at the end of the term, but offers a glimpse into the learning process itself with all its challenges, setbacks, and achievements. Thus, "unlike single test scores and multiple-choice tests, portfolios provide a multidimensional perspective on student growth over time" (O'Malley & Valdez Pierce, 1996, p. 35). With the emphasis placed not so much on the end result, but rather on the path leading to its attainment, the process of building a portfolio and all its stages is as important as the final product. It is quite obvious that portfolios cannot be produced overnight but involve

a gradual and systematic preparation over time. In the end, they document both effort and growth, which occurred within the specified time span, and provide an assessment instrument representative "of what students can do as opposed to what they know" (Dicks & Rehorick, 1995, p. 135).

Portfolio assessment is a collaborative process. From the moment the concept of portfolios is introduced to the students, both students and teachers begin to work together as partners negotiating every stage of the process. While the curricular goals, which are reflected in a portfolio, are usually decided by the teacher, students are encouraged to participate in making a decision on what goes into the portfolio. Therefore, the portfolio content is shaped by a combination of teachers' and students' preferences, and the final product is highly individualized. Moreover, students also have a say in how their work will be evaluated. The grading rubric for portfolio evaluation (see Appendix A) is made explicit even before the process of building portfolios begins and contributed to by the students. These two elements of portfolio assessment are what makes it student-centered: "the student has input on not only what goes into the portfolio but also on how the contents will be evaluated.... In portfolio assessment, students and teachers become partners who confer on portfolio contents and their interpretation" (O'Malley & Valdez Pierce, 1996, p. 34).



The meaning of “interpretation” here is two-fold. It includes both teachers’ assessment and students’ self-assessment. This principle is of particular importance, for “without self-assessment and reflection on the part of the student, a portfolio is not a portfolio” (O’Malley & Valdez Pierce, 1996, p.35)—it is just a folder containing samples of student work. Requiring students to reflect on what they do and analyze their work in relation to their personal goals serves a dual purpose. On one hand, it helps students to develop a perspective on their learning, on the other hand, makes them take responsibility for it. By providing reasons for their choices, sifting through and comparing samples of their work, setting goals and creating new challenges for themselves as well as assessing their progress, students take active part in their learning and gradually become more independent and responsible learners. Not only does this foster greater learner autonomy, but provides teachers with a broader spectrum for assessment. Furthermore, it allows teachers to see their own work through students’ eyes and better assess the effectiveness of their teaching methods.

There are several ways the portfolio can be implemented in a class, each reflecting the nature of the course as well as the goals of the teacher and students. For our purposes, we followed a portfolio process that would allow the student to gradually become familiar with the various aspects of this form of assessment.

Namely, we wanted the students to view completed models of a portfolio, to understand how they will be evaluated, to have an opportunity to change the grading rubric, to have a say as to what will be included in their portfolios, to evaluate the work of peers, and to have a chance to assess their own work and then rewrite any material. Table 2 lists the steps we followed in implementing the portfolio in our classes.

*Table 2: Procedure for Implementing the Portfolio*

1. Hand out a general description of what a portfolio is and show some example portfolios.
2. Brainstorming what students will include in their portfolio
3. Distribute portfolio checklists (preliminary)
4. Practice writing
  - Cover notes, personal profiles, essays, compositions
  - Create drafts and have peer evaluations
5. Students give input on grading / scoring criteria by evaluating samples
6. Distribute a detailed checklist that students submit with their portfolio (a review of the required elements)
7. Portfolio sharing (works in progress)
  - One item done for each section at this point
  - Practice giving and getting feedback

- Start collecting peer and teacher feedback
8. Students work independently outside of class to complete their portfolio
    - Final grading/scoring criteria will be given beforehand
  9. Final sharing
    - Collect peer feedback to include in the portfolio
  10. Teacher evaluation
  11. Students and teachers give their feedback on the portfolio process as a whole by responding to a portfolio questionnaire.

## Impressions of the Portfolio Process

### *Students' Points of View*

To understand how the students feel about the portfolio process as a whole, a questionnaire (see Appendix B) was distributed. Their responses were largely positive towards the portfolio, yet there were also some concerns raised. Due to the limitations of space on this paper, there will be only a brief discussion of the students' responses to the questionnaire. Table 3 lists the main advantages and disadvantages given by the students.

*Table 3: Students' Comments on the Portfolio and the Portfolio Process*

Advantages	Disadvantages
1. realized that we should make a constant effort to master a foreign language	1. had my own idea but was difficult to express in English
2. I learned different (new) expressions from reading my classmates' portfolios and I could write a lot. Also, as I revised it, I could come up with more ideas	2. could not find any materials that showed my progress. It was not clear what I was supposed to do.
3. a good chance to reflect on my learning. Would not have done it if I had not taken this class.	3. I did but it was difficult because I had not had a clear goal before.
4. could think about what I had learned. Could see my progress, strengths and weaknesses.	4. time consuming
5. I can get a high test score if I am lucky but a portfolio can clearly show my achievement by using what I have learned.	5. depends too much on the class content
6. fair way to assess our skills	6. if the class content is not good, a student cannot make a good portfolio.
7. can have a sense of achievement	7. found it difficult to compare my learning skill
8. can show my learning process precisely	8. cheating (we can ask someone to write)
9. can express what I learned in my own ways	9. not sure of the level of my English
10. can become more motivated	10. hard to be strict to myself
11. not just trying to answer the questions and get them right or wrong	
12. take a look at it when I lose my confidence in my English	
13. can be aware of ourselves: what we are writing now, what is our goal, etc.	
14. since I knew I had to make a portfolio at the end, I tried my best throughout the semester	
15. take it with me when I study abroad and show it to my friends and children in the future	



As for some of the advantages the students remarked upon, comment #2 exemplifies how students can learn from each other and to some extent, be able to evaluate themselves. Comment #5 reveals the differences between regular one-shot tests (e.g., final exams) and the portfolio. As teachers are aware, there are many factors that may influence a student's performance on a test—health, weather, testing conditions, knowledge of the subject, etc. At the very least, a test acts as a snapshot of a student at a particular time. Portfolios, in contrast, allow students to show how much they have learned over time and, equally as important, what they can do. Comments #12 and #15 reflect how students can use portfolios after the course is over. After we have been away from studies, we sometimes forget how far we have come in our quest for knowledge. Students can take stock of what they were able to accomplish with a portfolio because its very nature is reader-friendly. This not only allows students to have confidence in their studies, but also allows others (peers, friends, and family) to have a sense of what the learner has done.

There is always a downside to any form of assessment. Several students found portfolios to be too time consuming (comment #4). Because the portfolio is a systematic collection of work, some time is needed to collect, reflect, and organize the contents. For most students, the portfolio process is a new experience, especially when compared to studying a few days before

a big exam. This lack of familiarity is also reflected in comments #2 and #3. Students are not often asked to be responsible for showing their learning progress or to set learning goals. With this in mind, it is no wonder that students found certain aspects of the portfolio to be challenging.

How do students feel about portfolios as compared to tests? On the questionnaire, students were asked if they could choose between portfolios and exams, which they would prefer. The majority stated that they would choose the portfolio. Most of their reasons for choosing the portfolio are similar to the comments made as advantages of the portfolio.

### *Teachers' Points of View*

The portfolio itself provides a rich environment for the teacher to view the student's knowledge and ability as well as to see the impact of particular activities and assignments through the student's eyes. Additionally, the portfolio gives both the teacher and the student an opportunity to work collaboratively. Traditionally, teachers decide what will be tested and how that reflects what the student has learned. In the case of portfolios, both the teacher and students work together and decide what will be included and how that work represents what the students know and can do. These are key advantages of the portfolio.

Teachers also experienced some difficulties with using

portfolios. Like the students, teachers felt that a great deal of time was necessary for this type of assessment, not only in terms of implementation, but also for student training. For some teachers, implementation involved the cooperation of fellow teachers. Since many teachers were not familiar or comfortable with this type of assessment, some conflicts arose among colleagues. In this situation, portfolio training was something that needed to be presented to students and teachers alike.

### Implications

In general, teachers and students felt that portfolios are a worthwhile project. Yet, there are some situations that are better suited for portfolio assessment. The content of the class should be one in which process-oriented learning occurs. In turn, the class should produce materials that show the students' learning processes and thus, can be used in the portfolio. So, classes such as writing are ideal for this format; however, test preparation classes are not. Other factors that have an impact on the effectiveness of portfolios are an insufficient amount of time for implementation, a lack of support from other teachers (especially in the case of a part-time teacher proposing the use of portfolios), and

a conflict with the established curriculum (e.g., testing used for placement).

### Conclusions

The portfolio is a good alternative for assessment. It allows for other perspectives on learning as well as other configurations of the teacher-student dynamic. It is a shift away from traditional forms of assessment (i.e., "something done *to* the student, rather, than done *with* the student" Stowell & Tierney, 1995, p. 91) toward the one firmly rooted in the classroom activities and conducted in collaboration with the students. If the teaching environment is open to this form of assessment, it is worth the effort, energy, and time to implement.

It is recommended that those who are interested in alternative forms of assessment try portfolios in their teaching situations. However, if the pragmatic constraints are such that a traditional form of assessment, for example standardized tests, cannot be substituted, some form of the portfolio can be introduced such that both portfolios and exams work in tandem giving a different perspective on the student and serving a different assessment purpose.



## References

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## Appendix A

### *Portfolio Grading Rubric*

All the required elements\*:

- major element (cover note, essay, etc.) 2 points
- minor element (title page, open section, supporting item) 1 point

#### *Point value of percentage of work present*

100 - 96%	95 - 90%	89 - 80%	79 - 70%	69 - 60%	59 - 0%
5	4	3	2	1	0

\* This section is weighted differently than the other categories because a required element must be present before any evaluation of it can be made. All the categories below will be applied to materials that exist in the portfolio.

#### *Organization and presentation*

3	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Logical presentation</li> <li>• Easy to follow organization</li> <li>• Handwriting or font type is easy to read</li> <li>• If artwork is present, it enhances or supports the overall presentation</li> </ul>
2	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Logical presentation</li> <li>• Some sections/parts are not easy to follow because some elements are not described well or not placed where described</li> <li>• Some unclear handwriting or font types</li> <li>• If artwork is present, it sometimes interferes with the overall presentation</li> </ul>
1	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Many sections lack clear presentation</li> <li>• It is not easy to follow because some elements are not described or placed in the portfolio</li> <li>• Unclear writing or font types</li> <li>• If artwork is present, it interferes with the overall presentation</li> </ul>



*Content*

3	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Clearly describes what is included</li> <li>• Clearly illustrates why items were included (with complete supporting details)</li> <li>• Clearly explains what was learned by doing this project/assignment</li> </ul>
2	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• (Partially) describes what is included</li> <li>• Gives general reasons why items were included (with little or no supporting details)</li> <li>• Mentions what was learned by doing this project/assignment</li> </ul>
1	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Mentions some of what is included</li> <li>• Gives few to no reasons why items were included (with no supporting details)</li> <li>• Does not mention what was learned by doing this project/assignment</li> </ul>

*Command of English*

3	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Conveys meaning clearly and effectively</li> <li>• Has few grammatical/mechanical errors that interfere with meaning</li> <li>• Logical multi-paragraph organization with clearly appropriate details to support an idea</li> <li>• Writes with smooth transitions</li> </ul>
2	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Expresses ideas coherently most of the time</li> <li>• Writes with some grammatical/mechanical errors that sometimes interfere with meaning</li> <li>• Has logical paragraphs but may have inappropriate or insufficient details to support an idea</li> <li>• Writes with limited use of transitions</li> </ul>
1	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Uses single word or simple phrases</li> <li>• Writes with grammatical/mechanical errors that often interfere with meaning</li> <li>• Uses limited or repetitious vocabulary</li> </ul>

*Evidence of learning awareness and reflective learning*

3	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Consistently shows an ability to               <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- describe explicitly what the learner did</li> <li>- reflect by analyzing the results of an activity or assignment</li> <li>- assess one's learning and skills</li> </ul> </li> </ul>
2	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Sometimes shows an ability to               <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- describe explicitly what the learner did</li> <li>- reflect by analyzing the results of an activity or assignment</li> <li>- assess one's learning and skills</li> </ul> </li> </ul>
1	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Rarely shows an ability to               <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- describe explicitly what the learner did</li> <li>- reflect by analyzing the results of an activity or assignment</li> <li>- assess one's learning and skills</li> </ul> </li> </ul>

*Voice*

- |  |                           |
|--|---------------------------|
| • Interest (does more than expected on required items) | 1 point                   |
| • Personal opinion                                     | 1 point                   |
| • Creativity / original expression                     | 1 point                   |
| • Copied / plagiarized                                 | 0 points for this section |

**Total Points Possible****20 points**



## Appendix B

### Portfolio Questionnaire

- High School 高校 / Junior College 短大 / University 大学
  - Name of the class クラス名:
  - Sex: Male (男) \_\_\_\_\_ Female (女) \_\_\_\_\_
  - Please let us know your English level if you do not mind. TOEFL ( ) TOEIC ( ) STEP英検 ( ) 級
  - Is it the first time to make a portfolio? portfolioを作成するのは初めてですか。 YES / NO
- If NO, please briefly explain what kind of portfolio you have made? (When / Subject / Sections, etc.)  
 他の授業でPortfolioを作成したことがある人は、その授業名、内容、どのようなPortfolioを作ったか等を具体的に書いてください。

strongly agree	somewhat agree	somewhat disagree	strongly disagree
1	2	3	4

- Portfolio helped improve the following skills:  
 Portfolioを作成することによって、
 

英語を書く力 (writing) を伸ばすことができた。	1	2	3	4
英語を読む力 (reading) を伸ばすことができた。	1	2	3	4
英語を話す力 (speaking) を伸ばすことができた。	1	2	3	4
英語を聞く力 (listening) を伸ばすことができた。	1	2	3	4
- My ability has been improved in English vocabulary. 1 2 3 4  
 Portfolio作成を通して、語彙力をつけることができた。  
 My ability has been improved in English grammar and sentence structure. 1 2 3 4  
 Portfolio作成を通して、文法や構文を正しく使えるようになった。
- I was able to express my own opinion and interests in my portfolio. YES / NO  
 If yes, why? If no, why not?  
 Portfolioの中で、自分の意見、関心事を表現することができた。  
 (表現できた理由、できなかった理由を書いてください。)

I was able to express my own future goals in my portfolio. If yes, why?

If no, why not?

YES / NO

Portfolioの中で、将来の目標を表現することができた。

(表現できた理由、できなかった理由を書いてください。)

4. I was able to reflect on my own learning through making a portfolio and consequently I learn more about myself as a language learner.  
Portfolioを作成を通して、自分の学習を振り返り、評価／反省し、「語学学習者としての自分」をより深く知ることができた。  
(できた理由、できなかった理由を書いてください。)
- YES / NO
5. Peer feedback was useful.  
クラスメートからのコメント(peer feedback)は役に立った。
- 1      2      3      4
6. Portfolio helped increase confidence in the use of English  
Portfolioを作成することにより、英語を使うことに自信が深まった。
- 1      2      3      4
7. A portfolio minimizes the test anxiety factor.  
定期考査と比べると、あせりや不安／緊張を感じることはなかった。
- 1      2      3      4
8. I can have a sense of achievement by making a portfolio.  
Portfolioを作成することにより、達成感を得ることができた。
- 1      2      3      4
9. My portfolio reflects the progress/achievement I made more accurately than a would be one-shot test covering the same material  
この授業で、定期考査が実施された場合の成績とPortfolioの内容と比べると、Portfolioの方がより正確に私の進歩／達成度が反映されている。
- 1      2      3      4



10. Compared with a one-shot test, what are the advantages and disadvantages of portfolio assessment?  
定期テストと比較した場合のPortfolioの長所／短所を書いてください。

・ Advantages:

・ Disadvantages:

11. What kind of difficulties did you have while making a portfolio?  
Portfolioを作成する上で難しいと感じた点を書いてください。

12. Do you see your portfolio having any practical use for you outside of this class?  
If so, describe how you can use it.  
この授業で作成したポートフォリオを今後どうしますか。授業以外で活用できると思いますか。  
もし活用できるとすれば、どのような場面で役に立つと思いますか。

13. If you had a choice, which would you choose, a portfolio or a one-shot test?  
もし自分で選ぶことができるなら、Portfolioと定期考査どちらの評価方法を選びますか。  
(○で囲んでください。)  
Portfolio ポートフォリオ / One-shot test 定期考査

理由：

Thank you very much!