

Undergraduate Achievement: Portfolio Assessment

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This paper details the use of portfolio assessment as an alternative to summative and formative testing in two English language courses at Khon Kaen University in Thailand as a part of a TESOL double degree program with Northern Arizona University. Portfolios for participant students were created over the course of one semester and used as a component in the students' final grades for two courses. After the final portfolios were submitted, but before final grades were made public, data was collected regarding student and instructor attitudes toward the use of portfolios as a component in the students' final grades. The data show that a majority of both students and teachers preferred portfolio assessment to traditional testing.

INTRODUCTION

Thailand, like other Asian countries, has a history of using tests to assess achievement at all levels of schooling and higher education. Testing has been the most common form of assessment. To some extent this was imposed on teachers by large class sizes and the need to have some defensible means of identifying students for higher education (Luanganggoon, 2001). There has also been a prevailing ethos in education that 'objective tests' are the best means of assessing achievement. They can be based on the body of taught knowledge or skill. Tests give scores that can be compared one against the other or a criterion. Over the past decade there has been some recognition that 'objective' tests are not always objective and even when they approach

objectivity they may not provide the best kind of data. It has been intended that such test data be used to diagnose teaching-learning difficulties, to help plan later teaching-learning sequences, and provide achievement scores. The author of this paper believes that these functions can be better fulfilled with portfolios rather than objective tests.

The purposes of this study were to

- (1) study student and staff perspectives on the use of portfolio assessment,
- (2) give students an opportunity to do their own assessment,
- (3) promote a non-threatening classroom environment with a native English speaking teacher, and
- (4) use the resultant data for the development of English courses in the following semester.

THE CONCEPTS OF PORTFOLIOS

Portfolios have had a reasonably long history in western schooling and higher education (Barton & Collins, 1993; Black, Deiker, Sommers, & Stygall, 1992; Shapley & Bush, 1999; Shapley & Pinto, 1997; Wolf, Lichenstein, & Stevenson, 1997). It has been relatively common, for example, for kindergarten and elementary school children to have portfolios of work to take home. In secondary schools, students taking art courses commonly keep their work in portfolios and these are later used in application for entry into higher education. In higher education, the art portfolio is commonplace. It is also common in 'writing' courses such as journalism and creative writing.

The concept of portfolios as an alternative means of assessment has had a shorter history in Thailand. References to portfolio assessment first appear in Ministry of Education documents in 1996 and mainly in relation to primary and secondary schools rather than universities. Luangangoon (2001), for example, noted that:

The Ministry was persuaded that portfolios could provide authentic

assessment in ways that tests could not. The multi-choice tests currently used in schools do not take very long to administer but they are very crude and certainly do not assess all the skills that the Ministry says its wants teachers to develop in students. (2001, p. 86)

Apart from Jamornmarn (1997) and Luanganggoon (2001), it seems that there has been little conceptual analysis of, or research into the use of portfolios in Thai schooling and higher education.

The use of portfolios for assessment of development and achievement is not automatic. However, some reasons for using them are suggested by Barnhardt, Kevorkian and Delett (1998).

- Portfolio assessment provides a more authentic perspective on student achievement.
- Portfolio assessment provides ongoing rather than one-shot data to inform instruction.
- Portfolio assessment reduces 'examination stress'
- Portfolio assessment enhances student motivation.
- Portfolio assessment provides authentic materials as a basis for diagnosis and for reflection.
- Portfolio assessment gives some control of assessment to the students.
- Portfolio assessment gives teachers an increased ability to identify special needs.
- Portfolio assessment provides a form of accountability.

There are, however, quite sound reasons why portfolios are not a preferred means of assessment. These include:

- A possible lack of clarity of ownership of content.
- One-shot assessment is an efficient means of testing achievement.
- Students must learn to survive in stressful situations.
- There is little evidence that portfolios enhance student motivation.
- Authentic materials are familiar and have no element of the unexpected.
- The high administrative load for academic staff.
- The possible appearance of portfolio assessment as a soft option.

METHODS

Participants

The student participants were thirteen first year students enrolled in the first semester of 2004. At the end of the semester, a structured oral interview and a questionnaire were used to collect perspectives on the use of portfolios. Data collection from the students involved participatory observation, unstructured interviews, a document study and personal and group reflection.

Six faculty staff members were involved in the planning, teaching and assessment of the courses. Data were collected from these staff using unstructured interviews and focus group discussion.

Descriptive and interpretative techniques were used to analyse and present the data. This was done in an attempt to convey the richness of the data. In view of the small numbers of students and staff, no attempt was made to perform a quantitative analysis of the data; however, frequency data regarding choices on the student questionnaire was collected.

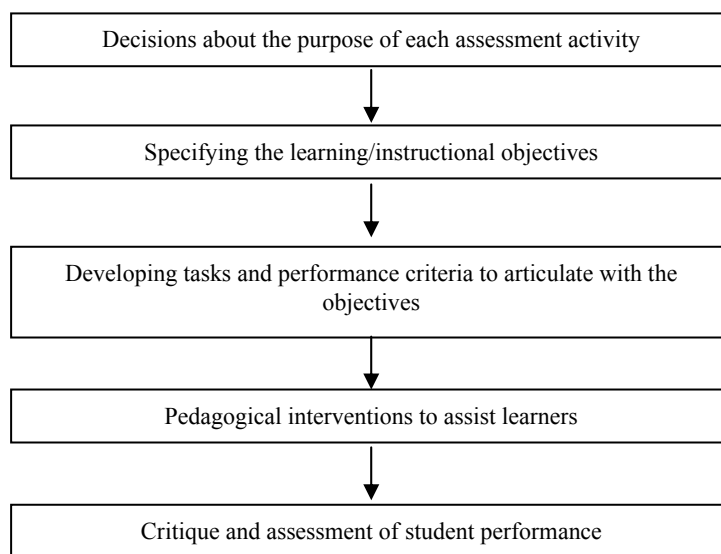
The students were taking two semester-length English language courses at Khon Kaen University in the north east region of Thailand as part of a teaching English to speakers of other languages (TESOL) dual degree program with Northern Arizona University in the United States. The TESOL program for undergraduate students began in the first semester of the 2004 academic year. Two courses; a skills oriented listening and speaking class, and a skills oriented reading and writing class were selected for the purposes of this study. The academic staff teaching the courses wanted to create a non-threatening environment and believed that portfolio assessment would be a useful contribution to such an environment.

In common with Black, Daiker, Sommers and Stygall (1992) the staff also had an intellectual leaning toward authentic assessment and the use of portfolios. However, neither staff nor students had had any significant experience with the use of portfolios for assessment purposes prior to the beginning of this study. The very small class size (13 students) made it ideal

for intensive study. The Education Faculty Board supported the use of portfolios as a means of improving teaching so there were no policy difficulties in the introduction of portfolios. This was all the more so because, at this time, it was only intended to use portfolios in the first two English courses of the dual degree program.

Portfolio Structure and Content

Although derived independently, the model underlying the use of portfolios in the two courses in this study is similar to that of Barnhardt, Kevorkian, and Delett (1998):



This simple linear diagram illustrates the logic but it does not capture the highly interactive nature of the portfolio process.

Physically, the portfolios consisted of separate A4 folders for each of the two courses. Students were required to keep these folders up to date and to

ensure that their work was not easily mislaid. The portfolios contained the students' responses to a number of tasks, and the instructor's comments and grades.

In the listening and speaking classes, for example, students were required to choose a topic for an interview with their instructor. They also had to explain why they chose this particular topic. Some sample topics were Christmas Day, sports, being a teacher, and so on. Then students wrote a few sentences explaining why they chose their particular topic. Some wrote a paragraph. For example, Pornpen (F19) chose Christmas Day:

This day seems to be celebrated around the world. Does it only for Christians? How do Americans celebrate? How do they prepare their houses or things? And what is the most popular present that they give to others?

The instructor made no written comments in either case, there was no specific reflective episode, and the task was not given a grade. In another task, the students had to provide a written record of how they made the interview appointment. Suttiporn (M19) wrote:

I met Ms. Sally in her office so I asked her about the appointment date. We have finally ended up choosing August 12 at 1:00pm.

Fontip (F20) wrote:

I went to Miss Sally's room and asked her if I can have an appointment on August 12, 2004.

The instructor did not make any written comments but did correct the grammar with the student. There was a reflective episode in class in which language matters were discussed. No grade was given for this task.

In a third task, the students had to write questions for the interview. These questions were based on probe questions that the students had to reformulate. For example, Montaporn's (F18) original probe questions were:

Why do you want to be a teacher?
Where did you graduate?

Her reformulated questions were:

What is a reason why you want to be a teacher?
Where did you study?

In later tasks in the listening and speaking class, the students were required to tape and transcribe the interview. For this task, Fontip (F20) wrote:

Fontip: Good afternoon. How are you?
Teacher: I'm fine. How are you?
Fontip: I'm fine. Thank you. Today I'm going to interview you about
 ~~W~~what is it like to be a teacher?
Teacher: Okay.
Fontip: The first question is: Have you wanted to be a teacher since you
 were young?
Teacher: Actually the answer to that question is no. I didn't know I wanted
 to be a teacher until I was in collage. At first I thought I wanted to be a
 nurse, then I thought I wanted to be a psychologist and then one day I
 thought I think I want to be a teacher.
Fontip: Yeah, because to be a teacher you can be all...
Teacher: You are right!
Fontip: And why did you want to be a teacher?
Teacher: You know why - because I had this dream of helping people and
 education is one of the best ways. When I was in the class ...
Fontip: That's right. Where did you study?
Teacher: I started studying at Arizona State University and then transferred
 up to Northern Arizona University.

Her instructor's response to this was to write:

Good job! Notice what I circled and see a pattern.

Her response to another student:

Overall, Good job. Now listen once more and put this transcript into your portfolio.

There were similar tasks in the reading and writing class. For example, the first task regarded making predictions. This task used a cartoon, Dagwood's Story in an exercise in which students were to look at a series of six pictures and predict (in writing) what would logically come next. For this task Roth (M20) wrote:

The Title: Waiting

Frame 1. Mike is waiting for his wife. He is looking at the window many times.

Frame 2. He waits for a long time so then he plays cards.

Frame 3. He feels worry about his wife and starts walk around in the dining room.

Frame 4. Until 9 o'clock, his wife hasn't gotten back home yet. So he is worry and think his wife has gotten an accident, or missed the bus, or gone with the other guy etc.

Frame 5. He goes to the door with confused mood.

Frame 6. When he saw his wife, he feels good and happy because his wife is safe.

The student then had to imagine a final frame and draw a conclusion:

Final frame: Mike and his wife have a dinner happily.

His instructor's response to this was to correct some grammar (the underlined words).

In another task, students were required to read a narrative from an advice column in a newspaper and predict (in writing) what advice was given. Students read the following problem:

My boy friend and I have been dating for almost two years, long-distance. We visit whenever possible and plan to live together soon. The problem is he doesn't trust me. He continues to accuse me of seeing other guys. I am

afraid to answer the phone or have contact with people for fear that he will get jealous. suspect that he may have hacked into my computer. Is there any hope?

Yinglek (F20) wrote:

You should not be serious about it. If your boy friend is unfair and the problem is busy. You should stop your love with this guy and see other guy who is a good person, fair and understand you. The best way should trust together.

Her instructor's response to this was to write some grammar corrections on the student's work sheet.

In a third task, the students were required to practice identifying the clues to the meaning of a word using the context of the passage. Then students also created a 'strategy guide' with hints on how to predict the meaning of a word using the context. Nidda (F20) wrote: Strategy guide for reading comprehension:

Pre-reading strategies: Brainstorm what you know about the topic, relax, practice what the topic talk about, calming your mind, break down the topic, background knowledge, guess the details, pay attention reading.

Post- reading strategies: Brainstorm, think about the main words or main ideas, take note, discuss with your friends, ask me what I know, oral brief the story with your friends, make a quiz, make an outline, make a chart or visual aid, create a role play.

Her instructor's response to this was to write:

Lots of good ideas! Good job.

Chai (M20): wrote: Pre and post reading guide.

In pre-reading, you should:

- understand new word, idiom, and part of speech

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- understand the first sentence of each paragraph
- make prediction
- brainstorming
- survey all details.

In post-reading you should:

- make short note or summary
- make up questions
- discuss with your friends
- test
- brainstorming.

His instructor's response to this was to write:

Good strategies! Right!

In a reading for details task, students were required to research three different universities through each university's web site. Students had to answer five questions for each university. For this task, Sumon (F19) wrote:

Idaho State University: <http://www.isd.edu>

1. Where is it located?
921 South 8th Avenue, Pocatello, Idaho, USA.
2. How many students are enrolled at this university?
Enrollment now approaches 13,000 students.
3. How much does undergraduate tuition cost per year?
Resident: \$1,724 per semester
Non- resident: \$5,024 per semester
4. How many different degrees do they offer in their Education Department?
3 degrees: Doctor of Education (Ed.D), Special Education, Masters degree.
5. What is one reason why a student might choose to attend this university?
This university offers diverse, comprehensive and nationally accredited program.

The instructor commented:

Very well done! Good format. Be sure to use your own words

A fourth task, focusing on paragraph writing, was designed to prepare students for more extensive academic writing in the near future (i.e., essay writing). Students were asked to take a process approach to each writing assignment. There was an emphasis on proper paragraph formatting, and document formatting. For example in a descriptive paragraph, the students were required to write a well developed descriptive paragraph describing in detail some experience assigned to them. Students wrote three drafts on this theme. The students reflected individually on their work and then the work was put into the portfolio. For example, Penpun (F20): wrote

It's hard and spend a lot of times. But I know I improve my language while I go through many drafts.

Her instructor corrected spelling and grammar mistakes and wrote comments for the first and second drafts; then asked the students to complete their final draft and put it in the portfolio.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSIONS

After final portfolios had been submitted, but before the final grades were made public, the thirteen students each individually participated in structured interviews at the end of the semester. The protocol for the interviews can be found in Appendix A. The questions covered their understanding of portfolio assessment, their experiences with using portfolio assessment, and their feelings about using portfolio assessment. These interviews were administered in English and in Thai. As Thai student learning English as a foreign language, it is possible that some of the students did not have the English language ability to truly reflect their beliefs about a complex issue such as assessment.

The interviews were conducted by the lecturer and this also could have affected the students' willingness to be frank about their opinions. For example, Thai students might be very reluctant to be in any way critical of processes etc. determined by academic staff, particularly native English speaking staff. One has to hope that trusting relationships were built up over the course of the semester which moderated these effects.

Student Perspectives on the Use of Portfolios

The majority of the comments students made were strongly positive regarding the use of portfolio assessment, and strongly supportive of its use in other courses. Each student was able to give a basic definition of portfolio assessment and provide comments on their experience in the past with using portfolios as well as their use of portfolios during the first semester of the program. Comments reflecting a range of student responses include the following:

- (Portfolio assessment can) help me being an organized person.
- Portfolio can show if my work improve or not
- I think it [my portfolio] good. I saw my improvement.
- As a student teacher, I can use [my portfolio] in the future.
- Yes, I want to [use portfolio assessment in the future].
- I make assignments and improve little by little.
- I think portfolio focuses on progress and improvement. I have more individual contact with my teacher.
- I think it [portfolio] is good because I can perfect my skills for learning English.
- I can see my learning progress such as writings, drafts of workings and final products.
- I like portfolio, but I think the traditional test is also important.
- I want to use portfolio [next semester] but have a little test...like when we finish one unit to show how we understand.
- I think it [portfolio] is good, but sometimes have a test... or use a combination.
- I think it [portfolio] is very good. It made me improve. I can monitor my

own progress

- I think we should select the main, best work, not every work for the portfolio.

The student with perhaps the highest English language ability was the only student who indicated a preference for traditional tests over portfolio assessment. Each of the other twelve students reported that they preferred portfolio assessment over traditional tests. However, a majority of the students also indicated a desire to have some traditional testing in addition to portfolio assessment (presumably because they were used to testing). A few students pointed out that preparing several drafts was very time-consuming.

Suggestions from students included using portfolios for a portion of the grade rather than the entire course grade, and to use tests/quizzes after completing a unit of work in a course. Suggestions also included keeping only a small portion of the course work in the portfolio.

An eleven item questionnaire was also administered to the students, and students submitted their completed questionnaires anonymously. The questionnaire can be found in Appendix B. The questionnaire was completed by ten out of the thirteen students. It used a four point Likert scale. The eleventh item on the questionnaire asked the students to report on how well they understood the questionnaire. All students marked either 3 or 4 on this item, indicating a fairly strong degree of understanding of the questionnaire. Eight out of ten students indicated they strongly agreed that they understood how portfolio assessment is different than traditional tests, and all students chose either a 3 or a 4 when asked if portfolio assessment is a valuable way to test English ability. In general, students reported that they both enjoyed using portfolio assessment during the first semester of the program, and they were satisfied with the results of their portfolio. This questionnaire indicates only students' reported feelings regarding portfolio assessment, and it is important to remember that students may have felt pressured to report favorably. Frequency counts for students' responses to each item on the questionnaire can be found in Table 1.

TABLE 1
Frequency Data of Student Questionnaire Responses

Question	Rating			
	4	3	2	1
1	100% (10/10)	0% (0/10)	0% (0/10)	0% (0/10)
2	30% (3/10)	40% (4/10)	30% (3/10)	0% (0/10)
3	10% (1/10)	0% (0/10)	0% (0/10)	90% (9/10)
4	50% (5/10)	40% (4/10)	10% (1/10)	0% (0/10)
5	0% (0/10)	10% (1/10)	30% (3/10)	60% (6/10)
6	70% (7/10)	30% (3/10)	0% (0/10)	0% (0/10)
7	70% (7/10)	10% (1/10)	20% (2/10)	0% (0/10)
8	70% (7/10)	30% (3/10)	0% (0/10)	0% (0/10)
9	10% (1/10)	0% (0/10)	20% (2/10)	70% (7/10)
10	50% (5/10)	30% (3/10)	20% (2/10)	0% (0/10)
11	80% (8/10)	20% (2/10)	0% (0/10)	0% (0/10)

Staff Perspectives on the Use of Portfolio

The generally positive attitude of students toward the use of portfolios was mirrored by the academic staff. At the end of the semester, all of the instructors who offered courses to the students who participated in this study were asked to attend a meeting regarding portfolio assessment. During this meeting, instructors were shown the interview questions that were given to the students as well as the student responses, and asked to give their impressions of portfolio assessment. One staff member said that she appreciated the use of portfolios because they revealed the development in the students' language competency. She noted:

When I go through their portfolios, not only I see their gradual development but also see their process of thinking in each task and attitude toward the task. How they reacted to their speaking and writing helped me to better know them. I admire and believe in the use of portfolios, authentic assessments, even if we have more work and more preparation.

The portfolios themselves were also shown to all the academic staff who taught the students in first semester. Some comments from instructors include the following:

Students have done good jobs. These exactly showed their competency.
I have heard about portfolio assessment for a long time, but today I see the real ones.
It's very interesting. I have got an idea. I will try to do next semester.
It's not too complicated as I thought. I think I did something like this. I will keep on the track.

The instructor of the two courses using portfolio assessment expressed her satisfaction with portfolios as the means of assessment for the first semester, partly because students were able to experiment with an assessment tool they may wish to use with their own students in the future.

CONCLUSIONS

Overall, students showed a strongly positive reaction to the use of portfolio assessment during their first semester in the TESOL program at Khon Kaen University. The lecturer chose this type of assessment to give students a chance to become familiar with this form of classroom assessment and of participating in an English-only classroom environment with a native-speaking teacher. Most students showed a high degree of satisfaction with the outcome of their semester portfolios and were pleased to have tangible evidence of their work over the semester. Additionally, students were able to experience greater variety in their own assessment for their first semester courses, as all other first semester courses were assessed with traditional tests (mid-term and final examinations).

As one would expect, students are very concerned about their grades. Hopefully, they view portfolio assessment as a way for them to have greater control over the grades they achieve, rather than relying on the brief paper-

and pencil examinations. The lecturers' expectations for completion of the portfolio were articulated clearly to students and students had ample time to collect, revise, and re-check their work submitting their portfolio work. This allowed students to have greater control and involvement in the grading process. This greater control perhaps is the reason why students in general indicated a strong preference to use portfolio assessment in subsequent semesters.

In accord with two principles (research for improvement, and iteration) taken from action research (Carr & Kemmis, 1997; Kemmis & McTaggart, 1992) the students' suggestions have now been implemented in later courses in the program. Lecturers ask students to keep examples of what they think is their best work their second semester portfolios, and are using end-of-theme tests/quizzes to provide additional data for assessment.

THE AUTHOR

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APPENDIX A

The Probe Questions for Oral Interviews

1. What is portfolio assessment?
2. Have you ever been assessed using a portfolio before? When? How was it?
3. Do you prefer portfolio assessment to traditional tests? Why?
4. Would you like to use portfolio assessment during the next semester? Why?
5. What do you think about your portfolio this semester?
6. What are your suggestions for developing the portfolio assessment for next semester?

APPENDIX B
Attitudes Toward Portfolio Assessment

ENG 111/112 – First Semester, 2004

1. I understood how portfolio assessment is different than traditional tests.
DON'T AGREE 1 2 3 4 STRONGLY AGREE

2. I felt comfortable completing my portfolios this semester.
DON'T AGREE 1 2 3 4 STRONGLY AGREE

3. I do not understand what a portfolio assessment is.
DON'T AGREE 1 2 3 4 STRONGLY AGREE

4. I prefer portfolio assessment over paper-and-pencil tests.
DON'T AGREE 1 2 3 4 STRONGLY AGREE

5. I would *not* like to use portfolio assessment in future semesters in this program.
DON'T AGREE 1 2 3 4 STRONGLY AGREE

6. Portfolio assessment is a valuable way to test English ability.
DON'T AGREE 1 2 3 4 STRONGLY AGREE

7. I would like to use portfolio assessment during the next semester.
DON'T AGREE 1 2 3 4 STRONGLY AGREE

8. My portfolio shows my ability to use English for a variety of tasks.
DON'T AGREE 1 2 3 4 STRONGLY AGREE

9. I did not enjoy using portfolio assessment this semester.
DON'T AGREE 1 2 3 4 STRONGLY AGREE

10. I am satisfied with the result of my portfolio this semester.
DON'T AGREE 1 2 3 4 STRONGLY AGREE

11. I understand this questionnaire.
DON'T AGREE 1 2 3 4 STRONGLY AGREE