

Portfolios in the ESL Classroom: A Critical Review of the Literature  
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Review of:

- Burt, Miriam & Keenan, Fran. (1995). Adult ESL Learner Assessment: Purposes and Tools. *ERIC Clearinghouse for ESL Literacy Education Washington DC*, ERIC Identifier ED386962, 1-5.
- Gottlieb, Margo. (1995). Nurturing Student Learning Through Portfolios. *TESOL Journal*, Autumn 1995, 12-14.
- Hamp-Lyons, Liz & Condon, William. (1999). *Assessing the Portfolio: Principles for Practice, Theory, and Research*. Cresskill, NJ. Hampton Press, 23-29, 60-62, 68-73.
- Moya, Sharon & O'Malley, Michael. (1994). A Portfolio Assessment Model for ESL. *The Journal of Educational Issues of Language Minority Students*, Spring 1994, 1-16.
- Tannenbaum, Jo Ellen. (1996). Practical Ideas on Alternative Assessment for ESL Students. *ERIC Clearinghouse on Languages and Linguistics Washington DC*, ERIC Identifier ED395500, 1-6.

### **Why Portfolios?**

Throughout elementary school, I had the horrible privilege of taking the Iowa Test of Basic Skills each April. We had to sit for hours and take long Reading, Math, and Social Studies tests. I always did OK on them, but knew that I could do better. I just got so nervous. While taking the tests, time just flew by and I would almost always run out of time before I finished taking the test-- and I am a native speaker of English!

While beginning my teaching career, I realized that many of the students that I would be teaching would still have to take the tests that are similar to the ones that I had to take as a child (and, in fact, through college), even though they do not have the same grasp of the

language or test-taking strategies that I had when I took those tests. I learned that there are alternative forms of assessment besides tests, and now strive to implement these forms of assessment in the classes that I teach. One such form of alternative assessment is the portfolio. For this critique, I decided to review the current literature concerning portfolios as they pertain to teaching English as a Second Language.

### **The Search**

The actual search for the literature was a learning experience in itself. Aside from collecting and reading articles and chapters from hard copy books etc., I was able to search the WEB for different articles pertaining to Portfolios. Many sites were un-refereed, if you will, and still others would provide the name of the article and an abstract, but I could not find the actual article in a publication. One such site/journal that I had problems with was *Computer Assisted Language Learning* (1999, Vol. 12, No. 3). I was given the abstract of an article by Saad Al Khatani, 1999, Indiana University of Pennsylvania, but could not access the actual article. I believe that, for me, more education on the topic of searching through the WEB is warranted!

The site that I had the most success with was the Educational Resources Information Center, or, ERIC. The sub-site from which I was able to find information is the ERIC Clearinghouse on Languages and Linguistics, Washington DC. I was able to access the information quickly, and easily. I was impressed with the fact that I was directed to articles on Alternative Assessment, which had just a small insert or paragraph on Portfolios. This Website is quite thorough and specific.

### **Review of the Literature**

I was able to review five articles/chapters concerning Portfolios as they pertain to the ESL classroom. Two texts, "Practical Ideas on Alternative Assessment," (Tannenbaum, 1996), and "Adult ESL Learner Assessment: Purposes and Tools," (Burt, Keenan, 1995), are from the ERIC site. The third text, "Nurturing Student Learning Through Portfolios," (Gottlieb, 1995) is from *TESOL Journal*. The fourth text is from *Assessing the Portfolio: Principles for Practice, Theory, and Research*, (Hamp-Lyons, 1999). This is a dual chapter text. The fifth text is "A Portfolio Assessment Model for ESL," (Moya, O'Malley, 1994) which is from the *Journal of Educational Issues on Minority Students*. A review of each text is below.

*"Practical Ideas on Alternative Assessment", (Tannenbaum, 1996)*

In this article, Jo-Ellen Tannenbaum discusses Alternative Assessment as a whole. She lists criteria that most forms of Alternative Assessment meet:

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- Focus is on documenting individual student growth over time.
  - Emphasis is on students' strengths (what they know), rather than weaknesses (what they don't know).
  - Consideration is given to the learning styles, language proficiencies, cultural and educational backgrounds, and grade levels of students.

(Tannenbaum, 1996, p.1)

Tannenbaum writes that Alternative Assessments are useful with English as a Second Language students because they, "employ strategies that ask students to show what they can do... in contrast to traditional testing." (Tannenbaum, p.1)

In her discussion of Portfolios, Tannenbaum describes the use of Portfolios in a classroom. She refers to three authors, Tierney, Carter, and Desai (1991) in their discussion of Portfolios. They suggest that:

Among other things, teachers [should] do the following: maintain anecdotal records from their reviews of portfolios and from regularly scheduled conferences with students about the work in their portfolios; keep checklists that link portfolio work with criteria that they consider integral to the type of work being collected; and devise continua of descriptors to plot student achievement.

(Tannenbaum, p.4)

Tannenbaum suggests that the following materials be put in a portfolio:

1. Audio- and videotaped recordings of readings or oral presentations.
2. Writing samples such as dialogue journal entries, book reports, writing assignments (drafts of final copies), reading log entries, or other writing projects.
3. Art work such as pictures or drawings, and graphs and charts.
4. Conference or interview notes and anecdotal records.
5. Checklists (by teacher, peers, or student).
6. Tests and quizzes.

Tannenbaum stresses that it is important to include more than one entry of a particular type of portfolio content in order to gain "multiple perspectives on students' academic development.

This particular article is presented in an academic manner, and is informative and practical. It provides theory as well as lists everyday ideas for implementing the process of portfolio development and assessment in the classroom. It seems that this proposal can be used not just for ESL students, but for all learners.

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*“Adult ESL Learner Assessment: Purposes and Tools”, (Burt, Keenan, 1995)*

In their article, “Adult ESL Learner Assessment: Purposes and Tools”, Miriam Burt and Fran Keenan discuss what learner assessment is in terms of its use for placement, progress, enrollment purposes, verification of program effectiveness, and justification of further funding. Burt and Keenan describe commercially available tests (multiple choice tests) and provide reasons why these commercially available tests have limitations. They suggest that evaluators may not know whether an ESL student is having trouble with selected test items because of “difficulties with reading, with the vocabulary, or with the cultural notions underlying the test items.” (Burt, Keenan, 1995, p. 2)

Burt and Keenan state that, “Many adult (and K-12) educators promote the use of alternative assessment tools that incorporate learner goals and relate more closely to instruction. They provide alternatives to commercially available tests. One such alternative is the Portfolio. They refer to Fingeret, 1993 and Wrigley, 1992 in their assertion that:

Learner portfolios, collections of individual work, are common examples of alternative assessment. Portfolios can include such items as reports on books read, notes from learner/teacher interviews, learners’ reflections on their progress, writing samples, data from performance-based assessments, and scores on commercially available tests.

(Burt, Keenan, p.3)

This article, although quite informative, left me wanting more practical ideas concerning what should go into a portfolio, and how a teacher should plan and implement the use of portfolios. The conclusion was short and basic, but stated the overall assertion of the article, that, “current practice and theory seem to recommend using a combination of commercially available and program-developed alternative assessment instruments.” (Burt, Keenan, p.3) This article would be helpful to a new teacher who needs ideas as to how to alternatively assess his or her students.

*Nurturing Student Learning Through Portfolios, (Gottlieb, 1995)*

In her article, “Nurturing Student Learning Through Portfolios,” Margo Gottlieb discusses the fact that there has been a rise of instructional and assessment practices that are “holistic, student centered, performance based, process oriented, integrated, and multidimensional.” (Gottlieb, 1995, p.12) She writes that portfolios are a means of alternative assessment and that they “facilitate articulation between teachers and individual students, other teachers, parents, and administrators.” (Gottlieb, p.12) She describes a “CRADLE” approach to portfolio development. CRADLE stands for developing Collections, encouraging Reflective practices, Assessing the portfolio, Documenting achievement, ensuring Linkages, and Evaluating portfolios. She asserts that teachers must have professional development and training in order to “reach acceptable levels of reliability for the entire portfolio.” (Gottlieb, p.14)

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This article was extremely informative. It gave me a template to follow in developing my own portfolio system. This article would be appropriate for teachers of ESL students as well as teachers of native English speaking students.

*Assessing the Portfolio: Principles for Practice, Theory, & Research, (Hamp-Lyons, 1999)*

Liz Hamp-Lyons, in her chapters concerning portfolios, writes of the existence of portfolios as tools for “gathering performances of widely varying kinds.” (Hamp-Lyons, 1999, p.22) She states that portfolio assessments provide useful information that educators, students, and the public can trust. Hamp-Lyons discusses portfolios in the K-12 classroom. She asserts that norm-referenced tests and other standardized tests have no particular relation to what teachers are teaching in their classrooms. These tests are incomplete and unfair. Performance assessments (portfolios) “provide richer information about what students can do, and [they] leave[s] room for students to show more than the test asks.” (Hamp-Lyons, p.26)

Hamp-Lyons writes that although many individual teachers may use portfolios in their classrooms, college level portfolio based writing assessment is less “robust” than in K-12 classes. Hamp-Lyons continues her discussion about portfolios in referring to nonnative writers. She asserts that nonnative writers struggle with timed writing tests, and that writing tests do not show the breadth of the students’ capabilities. The use of portfolios enables ESL students to show their best work.

Hamp-Lyons makes a point in saying that while portfolios show the progress and aptitude of students, they also show the effectiveness of the particular pedagogical program the portfolio has been developed for.

This was an appropriate piece for ESL teachers. Hamp-Lyons discusses portfolios from many teaching levels (K-12, College etc.). Her assertion that portfolios are a reflection on the program for which the portfolio is developed is something to consider.

*A Portfolio Assessment Model for ESL, (Moya, O’Malley, 1994)*

In their discussion of portfolios in the article “A Portfolio Assessment Model for ESL”, Sharon S. Moya and J. Michael O’Malley provide examples of school districts that have programs with portfolio development and assessment. They explain the use of portfolios and stress that “A portfolio used for educational assessment must offer more than a showcase for student products; it must be the product of a complete assessment procedure that has been systematically planned, implemented, and evaluated (Moya, O’Malley, 1994, p.1). They list five features of a model portfolio procedure: comprehensiveness, predetermined and systematic, informative, tailored (meaningful to teachers, students, staff, and parents), and authentic.

Moya and O’Malley propose the rationale for using portfolios in the ESL classroom, stating:

Language proficiency must be viewed as a composite of many levels of knowledge, skills, and capabilities. A varied approach to measurement, including both

test and nontest methods, is, therefore, needed to ascertain student strengths and weaknesses in all critical areas. Portfolio assessment encourages the use of multiple measures.

(Moya, O'Malley, p. 4)

Moya and O'Malley discuss the Portfolio Assessment Model, which has six interrelated levels of assessment: 1.) Identify purpose and focus of portfolio; 2.) Plan portfolio contents; 3.) Design portfolio analysis; 4.) Prepare for instruction; 5.) Plan verification of procedures; and 6.) Implement the model. (Moya, O'Malley, p.5)

This article provides both theory and practical suggestions for implementing the use of portfolios in the classroom. The steps in the model are easy to follow and can be adapted and utilized in all grade levels (K-12, university, adult etc.).

#### *A Summary of the Arguments*

There is a common thread that runs throughout the articles above. This thread is that the use of portfolios in the ESL classroom is an important addition to the assessment procedures of the class. With a rise in the number of ESL and EFL students in our schools today, portfolios are an effective way to assess the whole student, not just pick apart the students' weaknesses. Portfolios give students many opportunities to present their best work, and, in so doing, are encouraged to do their best.

Portfolios are a means of assessing the students' strengths and weaknesses, not only in test-taking abilities, but in a variety of skills such as planning, revising, and presenting a sample of writing. Portfolios provide opportunities for students to reflect upon who they are as learners, writers, and people. This is especially important in the development of ESL students' confidence, and attitudes towards their growth in learning English as a second language.

The articles all assert that portfolios produce a better student and better teaching programs. This view is clearly presented in Hamp-Lyon's discussion. She writes that portfolios actually point out the weaknesses of the program addressed. We can assume that this can be quite threatening for teachers who have been teaching in the traditional structure, where teachers teach, but the students are tested on things that do not directly reflect the specific programs that the teacher presents.

The articles suggest the use of many different forms of work provided by the student. These are clearly listed in Tannenbaum's, Burt's and Keenan's, and Moya's and O'Malley's discussions.

Two articles are very effective in presenting a model or a plan in implementing a program of portfolio use in the classroom. Gottlieb discusses the CRADLE approach, and Moya and O'Malley discuss the portfolio assessment model for ESL. There is a contrast between the two approaches, though. Gottlieb's CRADLE Approach is more student-centered, where students are asked to collect their own pieces of work, and reflect upon the process through

which these pieces of text were developed. In Moya and O'Malley's argument, the teacher or "committee" is the guiding factor in the development of portfolios in the classroom. This argument provides explicit instructions for teachers to follow in developing the portfolio program.

Burt and Keenan are the only authors who pointed out the downfalls of the use of portfolios in the classroom. Like all strategies of assessment, the use of Portfolios is not completely thorough in the assessment of students. They state that portfolio development and implementation, as well as evaluation, is time consuming for both students and teachers. They assert that many ESL students are resistant to alternative forms of assessment like portfolios. They also make a point of saying that funders, (from the state, or program etc.) require hard evidence as to the progress of students. They do not want to read millions of students' portfolios, but they will look at lists and data which show how a particular program is running.