

# Classroom-based Research on Portfolio Assessment in Writing Classes

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## 1. Introduction

The author has long been interested in promoting autonomy among his students; instilling them with a sense of responsibility for their learning and encouraging self-reflection. He employs techniques, such as increasing grades if students submit corrections and vocabulary logs. In addition, he uses rubrics to provide students with a more detailed explanation of their grades. Although these measures have provided the more motivated students with opportunities to improve their language skills, the author recognizes the lack of self-reflection and self-assessment within these procedures. Therefore, after investigating the nature and use of portfolios to assess writing skills and to encourage self-reflection, the author incorporated portfolio use into his Writing and Discussion course at Eiwa University Junior College (EJC).

In this report, after reviewing the literature that outlines the characteristics and uses of portfolios, the author describes his own implementation of this assessment tool in a specific classroom setting. Based on a process of informed decision-making, resulting from thorough background research, the author hopes that this report will be of use to other educators who are considering the use of portfolios in their language courses.

## 2. What Are Portfolios? How Are They Used in Assessment?

Portfolios contrast with a more traditional norm-referenced style of assessment which gives a one-time quantitative evaluation of performance. Bailey & Curtis (2015) contrast standardized assessments such as summative or placement discrete-point tests with the systematic accumulation of student work in portfolios. Whereas the former treat learning as a passive process measured in a single sitting, portfolios represent a more dynamic approach to assessment in which the learner is actively involved in the selection of and reflection on the items for assessment. Paulson, Paulson & Meyer (1991) describe a portfolio as “a purposeful collection of student work that exhibits the student’s efforts, progress, and achievements in one or more areas” (p. 60).

With regard to assessing writing skills, a fair evaluation is hard to achieve through

summative, discrete-point testing or impromptu timed essays alone. Instead, portfolio assessment can demonstrate the gradual change in the students' performance and the process undergone as they add to and combine various types of second language knowledge.

Portfolios can be used in many different ways in accordance with the specific goals of a language course. For example, Bailey & Curtis (2015) refer to Belgrand's (2013) distinction between *showcase* portfolios in which students demonstrate what they have achieved by the end of a course and *development* portfolios in which students provide evidence of the growth they have achieved during the course.

### 3. Advantages and Disadvantages of Portfolio Use

Many authors attest to the advantages of using portfolios for improving second language skills. Gottlieb (2000), for example, celebrates the *empowering* qualities of portfolios, enabling students to show their achievements, creativity, and ability to think critically. In addition, they can assume responsibility for their learning through self-evaluation and by making choices about what is included in the portfolio.

However, Klenowski (2002) stresses the need for clear goals when using portfolios so that they do not end up as random collections of the students' work. Brown & Abeywickrama (2019) advise on transparency regarding the purpose, the type of content and the assessment criteria to guarantee meaningful results. Then Davis (2017) recommends clarifying the purpose and the timeline for portfolio completion (formative or summative assessment), selecting a variety of content (using different skills and media genres), and encouraging self- and peer-reflection about the portfolio contents (metacognition).

Brown and Abeywickrama (2019) admit that the intensive nature of feedback and conferencing, needed to ensure successful portfolio use, results in their low practicality as an assessment instrument. However, this is outweighed by the advantages that come during the process of producing tangible evidence of a student's work: fostering intrinsic motivation, promoting student-teacher interaction, individualized learning, and facilitating self-assessment (p. 322). Furthermore, in teaching environments such as the author's, in which class sizes are small, the time needed for individual feedback and discussion is reduced.

#### 4. The Importance of Encouraging Student Self-reflection

Manukyan (2012) and Fateri (2017) shared the view of Davis, seen above, that just asking students to collect examples of their work would not be enough to improve performance. Many of Manukyan's students said they were motivated to study as a result of recording their strengths and weaknesses in the portfolio. Fateri reported improved performance in the test results of students who reflected on and rewrote assignments, compared to those whose work was simply corrected by the teacher. The combination of portfolio use and self-reflection, therefore, would seem to be vital to improving performance.

Both Gottlieb (2000) and Djoub (2015) warn that many students may need help in becoming autonomous. Djoub suggests using questionnaires, interviews and continuous feedback to combat resistance or lack of motivation. This was of particular concern to the author, since Japanese students may not understand the concept of autonomous learning, having experienced a teacher-led passive accumulation of knowledge in the national education system.

Gottlieb (2000) points to the fact that students and teachers may have problems adjusting to the student-centered nature of portfolio assessment. The changes it brings regarding responsibility for learning may be overwhelming for some students if they are not given enough guidance in choosing what to include and how to self-assess their work. Time needs to be allotted both in and out of class for students to work on their portfolios and consult with teachers.

#### 5. How to Implement Portfolios in Writing Classes

Clarity of process is also a prerequisite for a meaningful outcome. Cong-Lem (2019) combines teacher and student concerns in a seven-stage procedure for the implementation of portfolios. The first stage involves clarifying the reasons for using portfolio assessment, and the procedure culminates in the submission of the final portfolio by the student.

After clarification of the reasons for using portfolios, the second stage involves setting the criteria for portfolio completion and drawing up a rubric for the final assessment. This is presented to the students along with clear explanations of the course assessment goals.

Stages three to six refer to the content of the course. First drafts are corrected by

the instructor or peers before revised versions are submitted for grading. Students are required to write self-reflection comments about each writing task. This includes keeping a log of the types of mistakes they make.

Instead of a final writing assessment, students select examples of each writing task for inclusion in the final portfolio. They include the first drafts and the rewrites along with their self-reflection notes and the mistake log. A final self-reflection about strengths, weaknesses and progress during the course is also required.

Nezakatgoo (2010) suggests a combined approach to assessing writing skills. He maintains that the essential dimensions of skill development (idea generation, drafting, redrafting and editing) are "not sufficiently assessed in a one-shot attempt of traditional testing" and that a process- (rather than product-) oriented approach is better reflected when "portfolio assessment (is) used as a complementary alternative along with traditional assessment." (p. 231).

## 6. How to Assess Portfolios

Marin & Camino (2010) adapted the European Language Portfolio (ELP) for use in their university writing course. They assessed the development of writing strategies as a complement to a final writing exam. Students knew that the portfolio counted towards the final course grade (10% to the final exam's 90%) but that the content was not evaluated for linguistic accuracy. Instead, it represented their day-to-day effort and their degree of self-reflection. End-of-course questionnaires revealed that although students thought the portfolio had helped them improve their writing skills, they felt it should carry more weight towards the final grade due to the effort they had needed to compile it.

Djoub (2015) suggests a scoring rubric with four main elements: artifact selection (their relevance and how well they meet the selection criteria); reflections (clarity and honesty regarding process and progress); portfolio creation (completion of sections, organization, meeting deadlines, creativity); and (unlike Marin & Camino) language form (grammar, spelling, punctuation).

## 7. Implementation of Portfolios in a Discussion & Writing Course at Eiwa University Junior College

### Teaching Context

The portfolio tool described here was designed to assess the writing skills

component of an intermediate level Writing and Discussion course at a Japanese vocational college. It is a fifteen-week course, consisting of one ninety-minute class per week. The course syllabus comprises two main skills components: writing skills, including the introduction of paragraph writing rules, and practice writing exercises; speaking skills, including expressing opinions, and tactics for holding discussions. After the course goals, portfolio and basic writing rules are introduced in the first two sessions, lesson contents alternate, each week, between the two skills components (Appendix A). The final lesson is set aside for guidance on what to include and how to submit the portfolio, as well as preparing for a final summative writing test.

### Target Group

The student population at EJC can be divided into three broad groups: Motivated students who wish to earn credentials and gain skills before starting their chosen careers; students who wish to enter higher education but whose academic level was not high enough to enter four-year undergraduate courses; unmotivated Japanese students of low academic ability who enter junior college because of parental pressure. Just as their reasons for entering EJC vary, so do students' attitudes towards studying English. Many just regard English courses as easy ways to increase their credits on route to graduation. This attitude directly influences the extent to which such students participate in lessons: They will try to pass the course with the least amount of effort.

The results of a post-entrance placement test (a maximum score of 300) are used to guide students in choosing English courses appropriate to their level. Scores in the 190~240 range signify high-intermediate students and are recommended as an appropriate level for the Writing and Discussion course. Since it began in 2022, fifteen students (4 Japanese and 11 non-Japanese, of which 11 were female and 4 male), have taken the course. The average score of those that sat the placement test (13 students) was 172, the highest being 240 and the lowest 113. Eleven of the students' scores surpassed the average of the whole student body (139). This, along with other factors, such as the number of other English courses completed, led to the author's assessment that Writing and Discussion participants have belonged to the first group of *motivated* students, and were therefore suited to the goals and demands of the course.

### Portfolio Implementation

The author combined the two main uses of portfolios as part of a balanced approach to assessment. By compiling process (developmental) portfolios, the objective was

to give students ongoing, formative assessments about their writing from the author, their peers, and through self-assessment. In addition, students were required to select examples of their work to submit a final showcase (archival) portfolio, which constituted part of the summative assessment at the end of the course. It was thought that such an approach (assessment *as* and *for* learning) might increase student motivation and encourage more self-awareness of learning. Furthermore, this combined approach to portfolio use was complemented with a final, traditional writing assessment in which students had to write a paragraph under timed test conditions. In this way, students provided both evidence of their learning process by submitting the portfolio, and showed how they could use the knowledge gained during the course in a test-taking environment.

The author adapted Cong-Lem's (2019) procedure for implementing the portfolio in the Writing and Discussion course. In the first lesson, students wrote an unplanned paragraph to serve as a point of comparison at the end of the course. In the second lesson, students were given templates for all the pages in their portfolios. Each template was replaced by the students' own work as the course progressed. For example, after being corrected by the author, the impromptu paragraphs from the first lesson were placed at the beginning of the portfolio. This was followed by a page where the students' recorded initial reflections about their writing skills (Appendix B).

As the course progressed, students wrote first drafts for each paragraph. These were corrected by peers in class time. Based on peer correction, final drafts were written, and these were then graded by the author. First drafts, final drafts, peer correction papers and corrections made after final drafts had been graded, were all placed in the portfolio (Appendix C). Students were required to write self-reflection comments about the feedback they received from peers and reflect on the goals they had set before writing each paragraph.

The author adopted Wong's (2017) pre- and post-writing aims to help students focus on specific aspects of writing (Appendix C). Students selected their aims for each piece of work from a list of *I want to* suggestions, and then decided on the degree to which these were achieved by coloring in a 1-5-point scale. The suggested goals were both content-related, such as *I want to give more examples* or *I want to write a convincing ending*, and language-related, as in *I want to have better spelling* or *I want to use more conjunctions*. The author also followed Wong's example, having students keep logs of the frequency of the types of mistakes they made, as a means of tracking their progress through the course. This was kept at the beginning of the portfolio, for easy reference (Appendix B).

The author hoped that encouraging reflection in these ways would enable students



to summarize their achievements and set new goals for each paragraph, as well as help them select the three pieces of work that best represented their improvements before they submitted the final portfolio. In this way, the students used the portfolios to showcase their ability to write opinion, expository and persuasive paragraphs, and document the process that led to the production of the selected items. In addition, students were encouraged to keep vocabulary logs of new or interesting words that they encountered when writing each paragraph (Appendix D). Giving students control over the words and phrases they wanted to include in their logs, was another way in which the author promoted autonomy in learning.

In total, six paragraphs were written following the *first draft - peer correction - final draft - grading - reflection* procedure. Before submitting the final portfolio, students selected one of each paragraph type (opinion, expository and persuasive) and wrote the reasons for their selection (Appendix D). In addition, in the *Final Thoughts* section, students were encouraged to look back at what they had learned in the course, contrasting their *First Thoughts* and their first, impromptu paragraph with the self-perceived level they had achieved by the time they had completed the sixth paragraph.

### **Portfolio Assessment**

The author followed Marin and Camino's (2010) model, evaluating the portfolio as a learning tool. The scoring rubric mirrored Djoub's,(2015), except it did not have the language form component (Appendix D). Instead of using the portfolio as the sole assessment tool, the author employed it as a tool to increase student metacognitive thinking. The assessment rubric included criteria and descriptors for seven main components: presentation and organization; mistake log completion; paragraph completion (inclusion of first drafts, final drafts, goal setting and reflection, corrections and vocabulary logs); reflections about the selected items (goals, peer comments and the reasons for selection); course reflection. Remembering the concerns of Marin & Camino's students, the author set the weight of the final portfolio at 40% of the final Writing and Discussion course grade. 20% was awarded for the six paragraphs written during the course, 15% for the final writing test, with the remaining 25% reserved for the discussion element of the course and overall participation during lessons.

## 8. Review of the Use of Portfolios and Shortcomings of the Present Research

The author's experience with portfolios is a work in progress. Dörnyei (2019) describes such *action research* as grass-roots level research that is conducted by teachers themselves, to gain a better understanding of specific teaching environments and the effectiveness of particular teaching techniques. As such, the author is attempting to meet his students' needs and assess what works and does not work in the classroom environment on a daily basis.

The small class sizes of the Writing and Discussion course at EJC mean that to date, collection and analysis of reliable quantifiable data has not been possible. Furthermore, this was not the goal of this research from the outset. Rather, based on the literature and the results reported therein, the author set out to establish a means to assess his students fairly; not through the sole use of one-off summative writing assessments, but by using a procedure that encourages students to make cognitive effort towards improvement, and become more engaged in their own learning process.

With his portfolio assessment procedure now in its third implementation, the author intends to gather quantitative data of sorts, by comparing the scores of the students' initial impromptu paragraphs and the final summative test paragraphs. It would also be encouraging to produce numerical data that shows progressive improvement in student performance as the course progresses.

However, the author places more value on the descriptive, qualitative feedback from students in the reflective comments they write as part of their portfolios and in end-of-term questionnaires. These will show how well the students understood the goals of the assessment procedure, and will reflect how well they used the portfolio as a tool of progression.

To date, changes have been made to the content and layout of the portfolios in the Writing and Discussion course, based on the author's impressions of how well students used them and how detailed their reflections were. In successive implementations, attempts have been made to clarify goals and make the portfolios easier to complete. For example, giving students a complete set of templates, which they gradually replace with their own work, has proven valuable in helping them envisage the final product.

Many students have struggled with peer-correction and self-reflection. Both of these take time to get used to, especially for the Japanese students. Peer correction feels unnatural to them, and while students become efficient at recognizing mistakes in format and structure, many are unable to identify language mistakes. In an attempt to encourage



students with examples, and also to understand things from their point of view, the author writes his own versions of each assignment and produces his own portfolio during the course. He shows students examples of his draft paragraphs for them to correct, and examples of his reflective comments.

## 9. Conclusion

Nezakatgoo (2010) summarizes the value of portfolio assessment in composition classes by saying that “standardized teacher assessment administered at the end of term hardly constitutes an effective method for capturing the writing process” (p. 235). Through collecting the contents of writing skills portfolios, students gradually become aware of the process of writing, as they reflect on and internalize the feedback and instruction they receive. This process increases the validity of portfolios as a means of assessment.

For his Writing and Discussion course, the author wanted to exploit both the developmental, *formative* use of portfolios as well as their value for *summative* assessment when used alongside a traditional writing test. Participants were encouraged to set specific writing goals before each paragraph task and reflect on their progress in meeting these goals throughout the course. By giving grades for drafts, final drafts and reflections about each paragraph type, as well as for the completed portfolio, the author hoped to increase student motivation and encourage more autonomous learning. The procedure would be deemed a success, if students began to value the narrative feedback, received from their teacher and peers, as much as if not more than their numerical scores.

It is hoped that by reading this report, with its references to background literature and its specific examples, educators who are considering the implementation of portfolios, may find encouragement, and use the author’s experience as a stepping stone to creating assessment procedures that meet the specific needs of their own teaching environments.

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Appendix A

Writing and Discussion Course Contents

# Writing & Discussion - Syllabus

No.	Content
1	Introduction - What is a portfolio? - Write a self-introduction!
2	Paragraph Basics: Topic - Support - Conclusion
3	<b>Discussion</b> - Opinions: I think / In my opinion / I believe... because...
4	Opinion Paragraph ① - Dogs are the best pets - Brainstorm & Write
5	<b>Discussion</b> - I think so, too / I don't agree... <b>Pair Check</b> ① Rewrite
6	Opinion Paragraph ② - The best time to visit...- Brainstorm & Write
7	<b>Discussion</b> - Such as? / For example ... <b>Pair Check</b> ② Rewrite
8	Illustration Paragraph ① The value of English - Brainstorm & Write
9	<b>Discussion</b> -The advantages are.../ However, ... <b>Pair Check</b> ③ Rewrite
10	Illustration Paragraph ② Part-time jobs... - Brainstorm & Write
11	<b>Discussion</b> - Tell me why.../ This is a result of... <b>Pair Check</b> ④ Rewrite
12	Cause & Effect Para' ① A healthier lifestyle...- Brainstorm & Write
13	<b>Discussion</b> - ...is caused by.../...has led to... <b>Pair Check</b> ⑤ Rewrite
14	Cause & Effect Para' ② Let's be more eco... - Brainstorm & Write
15	<b>Portfolio Preparation / Writing &amp; Discussion Test Preparation</b>

There is a paragraph writing test and a discussion test!  
You will give me your Portfolio at the discussion test.

## Appendix B

Portfolio Template Pages: Mistake Log, First Paragraph Attempt, Initial Self-Reflection

## Mistake Log

Count the number and type of mistakes you make in each paragraph.

LANGUAGE		Number of Mistakes						
		1st Try!	Para' 1	Para' 2	Para' 3	Para' 4	Para' 5	Para' 6
1	Spelling (Sp)							
2	Vocabulary (V)							
3	Capitals (CAP)							
4	Article (A)							
5	Plural (Pl)							
6	Omission (O)							
7	Conjunction (Con)							
8	Subject-Verb agreement (S-V)							
9	Tense (T)							
10	Verb structures (VS)							
11	Word Type (WT) (adj, adv, noun, vb)							
12	Grammar Construction (Gr)							
13	Word Order (WO)							

Use this information to make goals  
BEFORE  
you write your next paragraph.

1

FORMAT		○△×						
		1st Try!	Para' 1	Para' 2	Para' 3	Para' 4	Para' 5	Para' 6
1	Name & Number							
2	Title (center / capitals)							
3	Start on 3 <sup>rd</sup> line							
4	1-1.5cm margins							
5	Write <u>on</u> the lines							
6	Indent first word							
7	Neat & spaced							
8	Continue to the end of each line							
9	Do not split words							
10	Word count							

  

STRUCTURE		○△×						
		1st Try!	Para' 1	Para' 2	Para' 3	Para' 4	Para' 5	Para' 6
1	Title & Topic							
2	Signal Words							
3	Support							
4	Conclusion							
5	Content							

2

Name: \_\_\_\_\_ ID Number: \_\_\_\_\_

### 1<sup>st</sup> Paragraph Challenge!

Write a paragraph about yourself. Try to write more than 100 words.

1. Include the following topics: Your character / Your interests / Your experiences.
2. Try to organize what you write: title, beginning, middle, ending.
3. Write neatly - Write ON the lines.
4. You can use a dictionary/device. Give yourself time to check your grammar/spelling.

3

## First Thoughts

What are your thoughts about your *English Paragraph Writing*, NOW, at the beginning of the course?

1. What can you do? What do you know? What do you need to practice more?
2. Write comments about **FORMAT / STRUCTURE+CONTENT / LANGUAGE**.

At the end of the course, you will look back at these comments to see your progress!

### Format

### Structure + Content

### Language

4



## Appendix D

Portfolio Template Pages: Vocabulary Log, Choice Reflection, Final Reflections, Assessment Rubric

**Paragraph/Topic – Vocabulary Log**

Original Sentence	Translation	Word
		1
		2
		3
		4
		5
		6
		7
		8
		9
		10

9

**I chose this paragraph for my portfolio because....**

(Think about the topic/content/writing skills)

**I didn't choose the other one because...**

(Think about the topic/content/writing skills)

10

**Final Thoughts**

What are your thoughts about your *English Paragraph Writing*, NOW, at the end of the course? Look back at your comments from the beginning of the course and your 3 paragraphs.

1. What can you do, now, that you couldn't do at the beginning of the course?
2. What have you learned about **FORMAT / STRUCTURE+CONTENT / LANGUAGE**?
3. What are your **STRONG/WEAK** points? What, if anything, do you still want to improve?

**Format**

**Structure + Content**

**Language**

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**Portfolio Completion**

Name: \_\_\_\_\_ No: \_\_\_\_\_

	8	6	4	2
<b>ORGANIZATION:</b> Original Cover Correct Order of Contents Page numbers Care/Effort	<b>ALL 4 EVIDENT</b> Original, in order, correctly numbered, done with care	<b>ANY 3 EVIDENT</b>	<b>ANY 2 EVIDENT</b>	<b>MANY ISSUES</b> Just used my examples many missing items, out of order, no No.s, etc.
<b>MISTAKE LOG</b>	3 Entries for 5 paragraphs	2 Entries for 3-4 paragraphs	1 Entries for 1-2 paragraphs	0 NONE
<b>OPINION PARAGRAPH:</b> 1 <sup>st</sup> draft Final Draft Before/After Corrections Vocab' Log	6 <b>ALL 5 Complete</b> Made BIG effort	5 <b>ALL 5 Complete BUT</b> ONLY Basic effort	4 <b>NOT ALL there BUT</b> GOOD effort	3 <b>NOT ALL there AND</b> ONLY Basic effort
<b>ILLUSTRATIVE PARAGRAPH:</b> 1 <sup>st</sup> draft Final Draft Before/After Corrections Vocab' Log	6 <b>ALL 5 Complete</b> Made BIG effort	5 <b>ALL 5 Complete BUT</b> ONLY Basic effort	4 <b>NOT ALL there BUT</b> GOOD effort	3 <b>NOT ALL there AND</b> ONLY Basic effort
<b>CAUSE/EFFECT PARAGRAPH:</b> 1 <sup>st</sup> draft Final Draft Before/After Corrections Vocab' Log	6 <b>ALL 5 Complete</b> Made BIG effort	5 <b>ALL 5 Complete BUT</b> ONLY Basic effort	4 <b>NOT ALL there BUT</b> GOOD effort	3 <b>NOT ALL there AND</b> ONLY Basic effort
<b>REFLECTIONS:</b> Before/After Peer Check Why Chose	8 <b>ALL 3 Complete</b> Well thought out	6 <b>ALL 3 Complete</b> Basic thoughts	4 <b>NOT ALL there BUT</b> Well thought out	2 <b>NOT ALL there AND ONLY</b> Basic thoughts
<b>PORTFOLIO START &amp; FINISH:</b> 1 <sup>st</sup> Paragraph First Thoughts Final Thoughts	8 <b>ALL 3 Complete</b> Well thought out	6 <b>ALL 3 Complete</b> Basic thoughts	4 <b>NOT ALL there BUT</b> Well thought out	2 <b>NOT ALL there AND ONLY</b> Basic thoughts

Comments

45