Using Portfolios for Writing Assessment
Their Application to English Teaching in Japan

Rebecca Ann MARCK : Foreign Language Education

"I'll just have my students put all their writing into folders. Then it'll all be organized and they'll be able to see their own progress and I'll be able to see if they've improved or not."

Often well-intentioned, motivated teachers swamped by paperwork have a brilliant idea like the one above and rush willy-nilly into action, having their students produce "writing portfolios." Little do they know that, at best, they are likely to generate so-called "pseudo-portfolios" and, at worst, doom the project to failure. Writing portfolios are more than a catch-phrase or a fleeting educational "fad." Although portfolios can be a useful teaching and evaluation tool, they should not be embarked upon casually. Careful planning and preparation on the teacher's part are imperative for success.

Overview of Portfolio Writing

What exactly is a writing portfolio? A popular, concise definition is this one provided by Paulson, Paulson and Meyer (1991). They suggest that a portfolio is:

> . . . a purposeful collection of student work that exhibits the student's efforts, progress, and achievements . . . .The collection must include student participation in selecting contents, and the criteria for selection (and) judging merit, and evidence of student self-reflection. . . . A portfolio. . . provide[s] a complex and comprehensive view of student performance in context. It provides a forum that encourages students to develop the abilities needed to become independent, self-directed learners (p. 63).

If they are well thought-out and carefully managed, writing portfolios can offer a myriad of positive results, ranging from the growth of a sense of community between students and teachers to student empowerment in their own learning process. Further-more, students can demonstrate their improvement for their teacher and observe it for themselves, while teachers can more accurately and confidently assess their students' overall progress in writing ability. Properly managed portfolios can also lead instructors to reflect on their own teaching methodology, and help them to produce feedback for students in a more organized way. The following are some comments on the efficacy of well-planned, efficiently managed writing portfolios drawn from various sources:

"Unlike single test scores and multiple choice tests, portfolios provide a multi-dimensional perspective on student growth over time." (O'Malley & Valdez Pierce, 1996, p. 36)

"Portfolio assessment, by its very nature, is performance-based evaluation; that is, an assessment of what students can do as opposed to what they know" (Dicks & Rehorick, 1995, p. 136).

So, we see that keeping writing portfolios, besides serving an organization and evaluation function for teachers, also provides an opportunity for students to assume responsibility for their own learning and to become more independent. If portfolios are maintained consistently and students are given access to them, they can give students the opportunity to reflect on the development, growth and progress of their writing ability over time. One very useful distillation of the benefits of portfolios is this developed by Genesee and Upshur (1996, p.100):

Table 1. Benefits of portfolios

Portfolios provide:
- A continuous, cumulative record of language development
- A holistic view of student learning
- Insights about progress of individual students
- Opportunities for collaborative assessment and goal-setting with students
- Tangible evidence of student learning to be shared with parents, other educators, and other students
- Opportunities to use metalanguage to talk about language

Portfolios promote:

- Student involvement in assessment
- Responsibility for self-assessment
- Interaction with teachers, parents, and students about learning
- Student ownership of and responsibility for their own learning
- Excitement about learning
- Students' ability to think critically about schoolwork
- Collaborative, sharing classrooms

Having considered some of the benefits of portfolio writing and assessment, let us now address some of the drawbacks. Problems can arise when theory is put into practice. For example, implementation of portfolio assessment requires a huge investment by the teacher of both time and energy. Gillespie, et al. (1996) state that:

> While portfolios offer students and teacher many advantages, many scholars assert that the greatest weakness of portfolios is the increased workload for the teacher.

In addition, some experts caution that excessive attention to management tasks actually can decrease instructional time (p. 483).

Instituting and maintaining a portfolio assessment system that works requires a great deal of commitment and good organizational skills on the part of the teacher. This simple overview just touches upon a few of the myriad of factors that must be addressed in the process:

The writing folder or portfolio is a way of keeping track of the changes in individual student writing, and contains all writing from the beginning of the class—scraps, notes, drawings, lists, drafts, revisions, final pieces, etc. . . .All should be dated so that you can have a clear sense of writing growth, and both student and teacher should have access to it—perhaps keeping it in a special "folder box." From time to time the teacher and student should go through the folder, with the student selecting "favorite" and least favorite pieces and talking about what worked and didn't work. (Wolf, cited by Hill on web page.)

The following are just some of the many tasks and responsibilities a teacher takes on when launching a portfolio writing project:

1) Determining what type of portfolios should be created (showcase, collections, assessment, etc.)
2) Explaining it all to students and, if appropriate, to their parents.
3) Setting assessment standards/criteria and producing rubrics to facilitate evaluation.
4) Deciding what role students will play in the process and informing them about it.
5) Making time for student-teacher conferencing, peer evaluation (if appropriate), etc.
6) Developing and facilitating the showcasing of progress, if desired (such as setting up a class web page.)
7) Determining which writing samples will be put into the portfolios and how to keep track of them.

Those who have actually done portfolio management and assessment could no doubt add many others to this list. Since a goodly amount of portfolio work is actually done by students outside the classroom, teachers must be willing to supervise, coax, encourage and extract writing samples from students in ways far beyond what they may have done in the past. A writing portfolio could be considered an ongoing, almost organic process as opposed to traditional, cut-and-dried writing homework assignments. As portfolios become part of the class routine and their benefits become apparent, implementation becomes easier.

Portfolio assessment requires certain adjustments on the part of the teacher long before the students enter into the picture. A positive attitude and commitment are paramount to the success of this approach. Some teachers "do not yet feel comfortable with . . . giving up this much control to students whom they do not believe to be capable of self-assessment"

(O'Malley & Valdez Pierce, p. 36). Others consider that precious class time can be better spent in direct writing instruction. Additionally, teachers must invest a certain amount of time and energy to acquaint themselves with the process—its benefits, demands, methodology, assessment techniques and so on. If this training is done as a part of staff development with enthusiastic teachers, it can be very successful. However, if a teacher tackles it in isolation, it can become an overwhelming task that eventually dies of neglect and mismanagement. Poor preparation and lack of training may lead to situations in which teachers initiate portfolio writing assessment, but sooner or later let it die out. All in all, it could certainly be said that the approach, while demonstrably beneficial, is not a methodology to be undertaken lightly.

The Applicability of Portfolio Writing in Japan

Is portfolio writing a suitable approach for those teaching English in Japan? Is it theoretically and/or practically possible to implement it here?

First, let us consider whether or not the educational climate in Japan is favorable for this approach. In the most recent version of the central government's course of study, the Ministry of Education, Science and Technology promulgated a new outlook that emphasizes fostering students' interest, zeal and positive attitude toward learning, rather than just the attainment of knowledge. The general provisions of the high school course of study refer to the role of the teacher in the following way:

The teacher is required to think positively about the students' good points and the progress they have made. At the same time s/he assesses her/his own teaching process and its outcomes, improves her/his instruction, and makes the most of it to facilitate students' incentives for learning (p. 12).

It would seem that portfolio writing assessment is ideally suited to meeting virtu-ally all of these goals. Therefore, in theory at least, the Japanese educational cli- mate is right for an approach such as this. But is it a methodology that is practical for the actual Japanese classroom?

First, it must be said that the method is certainly not well-known here in Japan. At a recent conference, my colleague and former student, Ms Emi Furuhata, who has implemented the approach with her own students, reported her surprise that so few people in attendance knew anything about the approach. They were, according to Furuhata, greatly interested in the process and enthusiastic about trying it, but not very knowledgeable about it. In fact, the number of studies on the subject in Japan can probably be counted on the fingers of both hands. At a regional conference of JALT (Japan Association of Language Teaching) held in 2001, a presentation by Satoko Crum-Endo, Leon Pinsky and Mary Chang addressed the use of portfolios at the high school and junior college level (for Japanese learners

of English). However, the concept itself is apparently gaining recognition more for its applicability to other disciplines such as mathematics, science and Japanese language than for English instruction (Furuhata,, p.8).

Secondly, this technique is highly impractical for Japanese junior high students because they have just begun learning English, and don't write well or often enough to justify its adoption at that level.

As for adopting the procedure for use with high school students, the obstacles are many and varied. Firstly, there is the extreme focus on the learning of English mainly for the purpose of passing university entrance exams. As long as students are not required to produce on-the-spot samples of their writing as a part of those exams, there is little motivation or incentive to teach writing on any level except as an exercise in using grammatical structures that will actually appear on the exams.

Also, time-honored attitudes about the roles of teachers and students make genuinely successful cooperative learning between the two difficult at best. Traditionally, in the Japanese educational setting, the teacher delivers knowledge and students somewhat passively receive it. The large number of traditionally-minded teachers in Japan, who often tend to teach the way they were taught and the way society expects them to teach, coupled with students who accept and perhaps even like the "reception only" method of learning, makes it unlikely that student-centered learning would be well-received by teachers, students or their parents, at least at present.

Finally, probably the most profound reason why portfolio writing is unlikely to take root in Japan for years to come is the lack of time. Quite frankly, nobody has the time to do it. Students' contact time with their English teachers is not nearly as extensive as in the United States since most classes generally don't meet every day. And when they do meet, the primary focus is on getting through the textbook and thereby preparing for entrance exams. Students are busy and teachers are absurdly overworked. It would be a rare school, indeed, that would implement portfolio writing on a school-wide basis, and, practically speaking, that is the only way it could be done. Teachers are not allowed to deviate much from the standard curriculum nor from the textbooks. O'Malley and Valdez Pierce state that:

> *Our experience in working with ESL teachers using portfolios indicates that even when teachers have identified a focus for portfolios and guided students in engaging in self-assessment, they may still be grading samples of student work without having clearly stated criteria for each sample. . .(p. 37).*

Therefore, my conclusion is that it would require nothing short of a nationwide English teaching revolution to get Japanese teachers of English (all of whom are basically EFL teachers) do portfolio assessment and do it consistently enough for it to be effective. It is not likely that teachers in a

regular course for college-bound students would choose to deviate from the approved curriculum to experiment with portfolios without a mandate in the official High School Course of Study.

That said, let me report on a reasonably successful foray into this very methodology conducted by a teacher in the weekend/correspondence course operated by a highly touted academic high school in Nagano City, Japan. The instructor, Ms Emi Furuhata, was able to implement the system precisely because she <u>was</u> working in an alternative educational setting. Her students were few in number, compared to the 40-student classes typical in regular Japanese high schools. Students enrolled in a high school correspondence/night course are often those who do "think out of the box" and may not as motivated by traditional college entrance exam concerns. Therefore, they might well have been more suited to a rather experimental approach to writing than the average student in the same school. The students involved in the portfolio writing assessment project eventually responded quite positively to the experience, though they had serious misgivings, reservations and crises of confidence at first. After only two months of portfolio writing, some of Furuhata's students made self-reflective comments such as these: (Translated from Japanese by Furuhata.)

- *Teacher advised me to be careful about indenting. But I am still poor at doing that.*

- *It became natural to read and rewrite my sentences again and again because I felt uneasy in the middle. Would you tell me what I should pay attention to when I write a paragraph?*

- *I want to write at least one sentence without looking up something. I will put my thoughts together before writing. I want to write naturally, using various expressions and grammar.*

- *I will try using new words, even if it is little by little. I want to use relative pronouns better.*

After an extended period of pair writing, those same students made these comments in the course of their reflections on goal-setting:

- *I will pay attention to paragraph organization. I will write my opinions more clearly. I will learn grammar and use it correctly.*

- *I will expand my vocabulary. I will try writing longer passages! I want to expand the content and write <u>without relying on a dictionary</u>.* (Underlining by present writer.)

Oddly enough, this student's peer wrote roughly the opposite, illustrating the individuality allowed by this approach:

- *I will understand the content of the text and think about it more deeply. I will use a dictionary more often and write longer sentences. I want to use the words I have never used before.* (Underlining by present writer.)

It would be simplistic to assume that all went swimmingly during this bold new experiment in portfolio writing here in Japan. Some students dropped out along the way, while others had reservations about their ability to teach themselves, at least at the outset, since it was a teaching methodology with which they were utterly unfamiliar. But, overall, the following positive assessment was made by the person in the best position to assess the results and improvement. Furuhata, assessed the overall outcome, saying, "Though introducing portfolio assessment. . .might seem time-consuming and painstaking to some teachers, the fruitfulness of the attempt is immeasurable" (p. 41).

However, it must be noted that Furuhata taught these students only two days a week and therefore had more time than most high school teachers to implement a quality portfolio assessment approach. She went on to note:

.. . .*(I) saw that the students recognized themselves as learners while working on portfolios, which empowered them to develop realistic self-assessment. . . . clearly stated criteria with the use of portfolios help student to improve their own work. Actually, the findings showed that the students oriented themselves to produce better products by utilizing the standards for evaluation.* (p. 60)

The following are "success story" quotations from who produced the following self-assessments after their year of experimentation with English writing portfolios:

- *At first I felt uneasy about . . .this course. However, as I visited Teacher and asked her questions every week, my anxiety turned into perseverance.*

- *. . . as I carried on, I found pleasure in writing in English. I was happy having conferences with Teacher because I was encouraged a lot.*

- *I will take my portfolio with me and show it in the interview test for entering a junior college, because it represents my performance. (pp. 60-61).*

The anecdotal reports gleaned from this experiment in a Japanese high school portfolio writing assessment suggest that the process was well-received and that it produced positive outcomes for both the students and the teacher who implemented the technique. This was in spite of the fact that the teacher was a self-taught novice attempting to launch the program single-handedly and for the first time in a relatively non-supportive setting.

Realistically speaking, however, the most likely level at which to attempt to portfolio assessment would be at junior college or university. However, it would undoubtedly be far more successful in a teaching situation in

which the teacher and students met more often than once a week for 90 minutes, as is the case in most institutions of higher learning in Japan at present.

There is little doubt that the outcomes would be positive and that the students, given a yearlong course instead of all-too-short semesters, would learn a great deal and improve their writing substantially. College and university instructors have, in theory at least, sufficient preparation time and even private offices in which to do all the tasks and conferencing necessary for good portfolio instruction. However, in the present educational setting in Japan, the norm is still "the-professor-at-the-helm-and-students-passively-receiving-his/her-lectures." Furthermore, in typical colleges and universities, the handicaps of limited instructional time and minimal teacher-student contact could make it very difficult to implement. The results, however, would probably be worth the effort.

Clearly, portfolio learning, if properly established and supported, can be a very effective approach for improving students' writing, empowering them to participate in their own educational process. Despite all the afore-mentioned obstacles, portfolio writing assessment would be a positive addition to the educational arsenal of English teachers here in Japan.

References

Furuhata, Emi. (2003). The Use of Portfolio Assessment for Facilitating Autonomous

Learning. Unpublished master's thesis,Shinshu University Faculty of Education,

Nagano, Japan.

Gillespie, C.S., Ford, K.L., Gillespie, R.D., & Leavell, A.G. (1996). "Portfolio Assessment:

Some Questions, Some Answers, Some Recommendations." *Journal of Adolescent &*

Adult Literacy, 36, 480-491.

Genesse, F. & Upshur, J. A. (1996). *Classroom-based Evaluation in Second Language*

Education. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 100.

Hill, Sarah. Alternative Assessment Strategies: Some Suggestions for Teachers. I-CANS

Integrated Curriculum for Achieving Necessary Skills. Northwest Regional Educa-

tional Laboratory. Eds. Judith A. Arter & Vickie Spandel. Retrieved Sept. 15, 2004,

from http://www.literacynet.org/icans/chapter02/porfolios.html

Ministry of Education, Science and Technology. (1999) High School Course of Study, Article 10, Subsection 5, Chapter 1. Tokyo, Japan. Translation from Japanese by Emi Furuhata.

O'Malley, J.M. & Pierce, L.V. (1996).*Authentic Assessment for English Language Learners: Practical Approaches for Teachers*. Chicago: Addison-Wesley, 34-36.

Paulson, Paulson and Meyer (1991) As cited on World Wide Web at Montgomery County Public Schools, Rockville, MD. Sept. 15, 2004. Retrieved from http://www.mcpsK12:md.us/curriculum/secenglish

Dicks, J.E. & Rehorick, S. (1995).*Evaluation: Oral communication assessment and the portfolio concept*. In *Second Language Practice: Classroom Strategies for Developing Communicative Competence*. Clevedon, England: Multilingual Matters Ltd. 134-148.