Thoughts on Portfolio Assessment in TESOL

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Most of us involved in language teaching have a love/hate relationship with examinations and externally awarded assessment instruments. We look upon them as a necessary evil, but deep down we don't like them very much. We know that no one knows our students as well as we, their teachers do, and to force them to demonstrate their linguistic knowledge under examination conditions, does them no favors. We rail against the iniquities of a system that expects candidates to be able to demonstrate competence acquired over several years, via a formal test of just a few hours. We know all about examination nerves and the stress it engenders. We know about the negative effects of backwash, or 'teaching to the test.' Yet, for most of us, our English teaching careers have all been, to a great extent, dominated by the need for student certification. In my own case, I have taught CPE, CAE and First Certificate courses, I have been an IELTS examiner and examiner trainer; I have administered KET and PET orals, trained to be an examiner of Business English for the London Chamber of Commerce and Industry, and have frequently administered TOEFL, TOEIC and Michigan Tests. I have even, for my sins, been hired to develop exams for external bodies, as well as create rubrics and test specifications. In consequence, I feel I am well qualified to write about assessing language proficiency, and why I profoundly believe that the formal English Language examination – at lower levels especially – is a poor way of doing so.

Yet what is the alternative? People of my vintage, who started life in the state system in the UK in the 1970s, remember (not with a great deal of fondness!) the poor relation of 'O' Level examinations: the CSE (Certificate of Secondary Education). I mention this only because one of the varieties of CSE, Mode 3, allowed a teacher to write and assess his or her own course, and as a young and enthusiastic English

teacher, I attempted to do so in order to free my students from the horrors of formal examinations. My course was never adopted, however. Oh, it was accepted by the awarding body without a hitch, but they attached a damning caveat: anyone taking it could expect at best, a Grade 2. Grade 1 was an 'O' Level equivalent; anything else was short changing the kids. With regret, I dropped my plans and doggedly carried on teaching from a set syllabus. A few years later, I went abroad, and have been involved in TESOL ever since.

Let us consider the certification options facing an English Language learner. To start with, there's not much incentive at the lower end of the ability range. Probably, the first recognized test of any international validity is Cambridge KET, which targets Elementary learners. However, these examinations are only available at specific times of the year, and regularly get accused of being Euro-centric. While we may be prepared to accept that IELTS and TOEFL are reasonable indicators of what a higher level student can do (at least from about IELTS Band 5, or TOEFL 500) they are poor at showing lesser abilities: low scores dismissively show what students *can't* do, and are very demotivating.

Much of my work of the past ten years has been in the Arab world with vocational students who need a basic language competency in order to understand native speaker content teachers. The Council of Europe Framework of Reference (CEFR) has established level B2 as the *threshold* level for vocational training. In other words, students who obtain this standard (PET is an example) will be able to understand a British or American vocational trainer (for example, teaching a course in basic Electronics or IT) who teaches through the medium of English. But is that really the case? I have often shadowed content teachers after they have begun work with B2 level students, and found that their language is still insufficient to grasp the concepts of the training they're taking. In some cases, it may not be a language issue at all, but more a case of imperfectly acquired study skills and habits which prevent students making the progress required.

At the same time, it has been instructive to observe the competencies being assessed in these content areas and how they are measured. Looking at the UK's NVQ system, coupled with the whole idea of holism in teaching and training, I am increasingly persuaded that portfolio assessment provides a better way to assess language, too.

Another area of special interest personally is teacher training. I have taught CELTA and DELTA many times over the years, and was recently involved in a pilot study of Further Education teachers in the UK. Up to now, a teacher in a college of Further Education did not need to have the same level of teaching competency required at primary and secondary level. This is all changing with the introduction of three government-approved awards for Further Education certification: Preparing to Teach in the Lifelong Learning Sector (PTLLS), Certificate to Teach in the Lifelong Learning Sector (CTLLS) and a final level Diploma (DTLLS). All of these awards require submission of a portfolio of evidence before certification can be provided.

It seemed to me that here was an excellent model that could be applied to the early stages of English Language learning. Not only is there a recognized UK system in place for levels (via NQF and QCA) but this is shortly to become part of a wider European Framework (the European Language Passport). Portfolio assessment removes the need for a timed (and stressful) examination. It allows students to showcase their skills over time, and as far as English is concerned, via different skills and sub skills. Moreover, the technology readily exists today to allow E-Portfolios as a real option. Students can upload MP3 files containing dialogues or group discussions; pictures and videos can be taken straight from mobile phones, as well as the submission of more traditional items such as writing exercises, homework, or tasks set from a course textbook.

There are two serious considerations to be born in mind. The first is guaranteeing authenticity. Any institution registering students for portfolio assessment would need to sign off on students' work being

genuine. If we are prepared to trust schools to be honest in the conduct of external examinations, it's only a variation of the same condition. Secondly, any awarding body must be required to sample random portfolios throughout a given period, to check on how they are being internally assessed. There will also be a need to conduct annual audits and site visits to schools using the system. In the British NVQ set up, the moderation is performed by Internal Verifiers (IVs) and External Verifiers (EVs). There is no reason why the same system cannot be used to monitor English Language portfolio assessment.

Irrespective of external methods of assessment, the practice of using portfolios as a means of recording student progress inside the language classroom has much to commend it. To start with, it introduces an element of choice in the items a student wishes to include for consideration. This is empowering, and in establishments where autonomous learning is not common, provides an excellent introduction to independence and self-direction. In the early stages, it is better to keep things tight and simple. You may, for example, initially require a minimum of five items – one each for the four skill areas, plus an extra item chosen entirely by the student. As confidence and familiarity grows, the amount of teacher-led submissions will decline, and the whole enterprise becomes more learner-centered. This will tend to move in step with progress in the language *per se* and by the time students are approaching the B2 level, they should be largely deciding for themselves what to put in a portfolio. A widespread practice is to hold regular portfolio lessons, where students work on their portfolios alone and unsupervised. This enables the teacher to work with individuals and assess the content and submissions each student is providing. Some teachers encourage the use of group and pair work in portfolio submissions, but care must be taken to ensure each group member is contributing equally. An ideal situation is where a school has a computer room with enough internet-enabled workstations for each student. When this happens, e-portfolios are very straightforward. A learner management system such as Blackboard can be used, or simply a shared drive where individual folders can hold each student's work. The important issue is availability for scrutiny. In-house assessed portfolios will still need a two-tier system, equating

to IVs and EVs. In this localized context, the IV will probably be a class teacher, while the EV could be someone from management, or another teacher who has no direct contact with the group whose work is being assessed. It makes a lot of sense for a school to develop their own portfolio assessment strategies first, before embarking on any program of external assessment leading to certification.

In terms of this last point, it is clear that international awarding bodies are already looking at portfolio assessment as an alternative way of testing English Language. The system is flexible enough to allow assessment to be continuous and ongoing, while the nature of the assessed tasks can be tailored to the ability range of students who are taking a specific level of language course. If an international body is involved, this means certification is also possible (using the same assessment criteria as those currently in use in mainland UK). However, I think it is fair to say that at the high end of language assessment, IELTS and TOEFL reign supreme. TOEFL is the preferred standard for entry into most of the US universities, while IELTS has both Academic and General Training modes, which are individually suitable for measuring higher levels of English competency.

Nonetheless, if the only examination a language student has to face is one final test at the end of a long road, along which s/he has been able to submit meaningful and enjoyable evidence of progress, this is surely a big step forward for all of us involved in the teaching and assessing of English.

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