Christine Coombe and Lisa Barlow
UNITED ARAB EMIRATES

THE REFLECTIVE PORTFOLIO
Two Case Studies from the United Arab Emirates

IN THE PAST DECADE, EDUCATORS HAVE COME TO REALIZE THAT ALTERNATIVE forms of assessment are an important means of gaining a dynamic picture of students' academic and linguistic development (Tannenbaum 1996). This comes about as there is growing recognition that a single measure is incapable of estimating the diversity of skills, knowledge, processes, and strategies that combine to determine student progress (Wiggins 1989). Portfolio assessment is in the forefront of alternative assessment approaches. Portfolios have been embraced in a variety of contexts and have become very common in language classes and college composition programs (Yancey 1992; Belanoff and Dickson 1991; Hamp-Lyons and Condon 2000).

This paper provides a rationale for using one type of alternative assessment, the portfolio, as a measure of writing ability.

Understanding alternative forms of assessment

Alternative assessment is defined as the ongoing process involving the student and teacher in making judgments about the student's progress in language using non-conventional strategies (Hancock 1994). Hamayan (1995, 213) describes alternative assessment procedures as those techniques that can be used within the context of instruction and can be easily incorporated into the daily activities of the school or classroom. The concept is particularly relevant to foreign language and second language instruction because it focuses attention on what students can do with the language rather than what they are able to produce or recall (Huerta-Macias 1995). According to Huerta-Macias (1995, 8) there is no single definition of "alternative assessment." Rather, she says, a "variety of labels has been used to distinguish it from traditional standardized testing." The main goal is to gather data about how students are processing and completing authentic tasks in the target language. In general, alternative assessments meet these common criteria:

- Focus is on documenting student growth over time, rather than on comparing students with one another (Tannenbaum 1996; Valdez-Pierce and O'Malley 1992; Stiggins 1987).
- Emphasis is on students' strengths (what they know and can do with the language), rather than on their weaknesses (Tannenbaum 1996).
- Consideration is given to the learning styles, language proficiencies, cultural and educational backgrounds, and grade levels of students (Tannenbaum, 1996).
- Assessment is authentic because it is based on activities that represent actual progress toward instructional goals and reflect tasks typical of classrooms and real-life settings (Baron 1992; Stiggins 1987; Tierney, Carter, and Desai 1991)

What is a portfolio?

According to Hamp-Lyons (1996), assessment tasks that are the same as or closely resemble the tasks to be carried out in actual language-in-use situations will provide a more accurate measure of the language learners' abilities. Portfolio assessment does just that. Portfolio-based assessment examines multiple pieces of writing written over time under different constraints rather than a single essay written under a specified time. Many programs are moving toward portfolio assessment as opposed to the traditional, holistic assessment as a response to the local needs of students and programs.

Definitions vary but the general consensus is that, in simple terms, a portfolio is a collection of student work. As far as portfolios are defined in writing assessment, a portfolio is a purposive collection of student writing over time that shows the stages in the writing process a text has gone through and the stages of the writer's growth. Increasingly, portfolios are being compiled in a way that allows the student to provide evidence of self-reflection. Portfolios reflect accomplishment relative to specific instructional goals or objectives. Key elements of portfolios are student reflection and self-monitoring.

Why use portfolios?

Since the 1970s considerable progress has been made in introducing the direct assessment of writing to colleges and universities. A frequent complaint about traditional measures of writing ability is that they undermine regular classroom instruction. These days writing teachers like to teach using a process approach in which students spend time selecting the subjects they will write about, deciding on a viewpoint, finding materials to include in their essays, drafting, and revising before submitting a finished essay (Hamp-Lyons and Condon 2000). Portfolios reflect the kinds of instruction valued in composition and therefore judgments made of portfolios are claimed to be inherently more meaningful.

Characteristics of a portfolio

Several well-known testers have put forth lists of characteristics that exemplify good portfolios. Paulson, Paulson, and Meyer (1991) state that portfolios must include student participation in four important areas: (1) the selection of portfolio contents, (2) the guidelines for selection, (3) the criteria for judging merit, and (4) evidence of student reflection.

Hamp-Lyons and Condon (2000) offer nine characteristics of good portfolios. They stress,

however, that these characteristics may or may not be found in all portfolio systems equally.

1. *Collection:* The portfolio judges more than a single performance.

2. *Range:* The writer is able to use different genres that show off different areas of expertise.

3. *Context richness:* Writers bring their experiences with them into the assessment.

4. *Delayed evaluation:* Students can go back and revise their work.

5. *Selection:* Students participate in the selection process.

6. *Student-centered control:* The learner is responsible for his/her success.

7. *Reflection and self-assessment:* The learner self assesses and/or reflects on what he/she has learned.

8. *Growth along specific parameters:* Portfolios allow evaluators to ask specific questions such as "Has the writer developed over time/become a better speller?"

9. *Development over time:* Readers can trace the development of each piece.

Moya and O'Malley (1994) state that five characteristics typify a model portfolio. They maintain that portfolios must display comprehensiveness and be predetermined, systematic, informative, tailored, and authentic. A brief description of these qualities follows.

1. *Comprehensiveness:* The potential for determining the depth and breath of a student's capabilities can be realized through comprehensive data collection and analysis.

2. *Predetermined and systematic:* A sound portfolio is planned prior to implementation. This includes information such as the purpose, contents, data collection schedule, and student grading criteria.

3. *Informative:* The information in the portfolio must be meaningful to all stakeholders in the process (i.e., teachers, students, staff, and parents).

4. *Tailored:* An exemplary portfolio is tailored to the purpose for which it will be used, classroom goals and objectives, and individual student assessment needs.

5. *Authentic:* A good portfolio provides student information based on assessment tasks that reflect authentic activities used during classroom instruction.

In each of the cases mentioned above, the element of reflection figures prominently in the portfolio assessment experience.

The importance of a reflective element in portfolios

It is generally recognized that one of the main benefits of portfolio assessment is the promotion of learner reflection (Gottlieb 1995; O'Malley and Valdez-Pierce 1996). By having reflection as part of the portfolio process, students are asked to think about their needs, goals, weakness, and strengths in language learning. They are also asked to select their best work and to explain why that work was beneficial to them. By having a reflective element in a portfolio, the process is more personalized. Learner reflection allows students to contribute their own insights about their learning to the assessment process. It enhances feelings of learner ownership of their work and increases opportunities for dialogs between students and teachers about curricular goals and learner progress.

In our view, Santos (1997, 10) says it best, "[W]ithout reflection, the portfolio remains 'a folder of all my papers.'"

Two portfolio assessment case studies in the United Arab Emirates (UAE)

This section documents the planning and implementation of two portfolio assessment initiatives at two of the three government tertiary institutions in the UAE: Dubai Men's College (DMC) and the United Arab Emirates University (UAEU).

Portfolios at Dubai Men's College

Faculty at DMC decided to allocate a percentage of the 70 percent course work grade to a writing portfolio during the fall 2000 semester. After careful consideration, faculty allocated 10 percent of the 70 percent course grade to a five-entry portfolio that was to be completed during the 18-week semester. A review of the literature indicated the need to include a reflective element into the process.

The portfolio at DMC had five entries with the possibility of two or three drafts for each entry, depending on the quality of the draft submitted for review. It was further

decided prior to implementation that the first draft of any entry was to be produced in class. Subsequent drafts could be written in class or at home.

A description of the portfolio we decided to implement follows.

Entry 1 required students to write a letter of introduction to their teacher. During the first week of classes, I wrote a letter to my students. This letter served a dual purpose both as an ice breaker activity and as a model for students (see appendix). Suggestions were given to students on what types of information they could include in their letters of introduction, such as details about their family, their personal interests, a physical description of themselves, a description of their personality, and their future goals.

Entries 2 and 3 were prompts that represented benchmarks in the curriculum. Entry 2 asked students to use the past tense effectively to write about an important past event in their lives. Entry 3 required students to produce a formal complaint letter linked to their content area.

The fourth entry was an attempt to incorporate student participation in the content selection of the portfolio. For this entry the classes decided together what topic they would write on. To do this, a list of potential topics was generated, and students voted on the topic that would be Entry 4. My class decided to explore problems or challenges facing the UAE and possible solutions. The class further narrowed this topic to the problem of *wasta,* or the use of connections to get what you want in society.

The final entry was our attempt to incorporate reflection into the portfolio. Students were asked to write a letter about their portfolio to the teacher. They were instructed to provide information on the overall quality of their portfolio, what they found difficult about the experience, and what they liked about the process. They were also asked to detail areas where they felt they improved and areas where they felt they needed further work.

For the most part, my students produced comments like the following:

"I think the portfolio is very important to improve our writing. And now I'm very comfortable in writing, it take time but after that

you will be faster and better than before. For me I got problem in grammar and spelling, but with portfolio and by the time I correct my mistakes. What is the disadvantage for portfolio sometime its boring. Any way I agree that portfolio is the best way to improve our writing"

(a DMC Student)

Portfolios at UAE University

From the experience at DMC, teachers at UAE University decided to pilot a portfolio initiative in two level-3 classes during the spring 2000 semester. A similar five-entry portfolio was used with an expanded reflective element. For each completed portfolio entry, students were asked to complete a reflection survey and a cover letter.

In the reflection survey document, students were asked to read a list of statements and circle the extent to which they agreed or disagreed with each on a modified Likert scale. Statements included, "I worked hard on this portfolio entry" and "I asked for help on this paper." The reflection survey also asked students to give themselves marks on various aspects of their writing like content, grammar, mechanics, and final draft and to report on the amount of time spent on each draft.

Finally, a reflective cover letter similar to the one described in the DMC case study was included for each of the five entries.

Lessons learned

Although inclusion of a reflective element in the portfolio strengthened students' writing, we were taken aback by the amount of time it took to train students to assess themselves and to reflect. Ideally, for the process to go more smoothly, training of this nature should take place early on, using a variety of language skills.

In both instances, even though we tried to be conservative in our estimation, timing was an issue. At DMC, the five-entry portfolio was scaled back to four entries and the percentage was increased to 15 percent of the students' coursework grade as it was felt that the old system was too much work for a mere 10 percent of the final course grade.

There is no single right way to design a portfolio. Each classroom or institution will require a unique approach to authentic assessment and, in this sense, each portfolio will differ somewhat. Implemented appropriately,

portfolio assessment with a reflective element is a type of assessment that is continuous, collaborative, multidimensional, grounded in knowledge, and authentic.

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CHRISTINE COOMBE is a faculty member of Dubai Men's College and Assessment Leader for the Higher Colleges of Technology. She is past president of TESOL Arabia and chairs its Testing Special Interest Group.

LISA BARLOW is a faculty member at United Arab Emirates University. She is currently working on her doctorate with the University of Exeter, UK. She is a member of the TESOL Arabia Executive Council.

Dear Students:

Hi! How are you? I'm happy to be your English teacher this semester. My name is Christine Coombe and I'm a member of the English faculty at Dubai Men's College. I'm just beginning my fourth year at DMC but I've been in the UAE for 10 years (5 years at UAE University and 1 year at Zayed University). Prior to coming to the UAE, I spent two years teaching at Sultan Qaboos University in Oman.

I am originally from New York, USA, but my mother is Scottish so I guess I'm half-Scottish/half-American. By Emirati standards, I come from a small family. In addition to my parents who live in the USA, I have one younger sister named Cindy. We are a small but very close family.

Throughout my life I have lived and/or studied in four different countries and visited 64 others! As you have probably already guessed, travel is one of my main hobbies in life. Life in Dubai is ideal for that because the UAE is at the crossroads for global travel. My other hobbies include scuba diving, swimming, shopping, reading, going to the movies, and walking.

Although I have lived and visited many different countries, I was educated primarily in the U.S. and France. I received my Ph.D. from The Ohio State University in 1992 with a specialization in language testing. All in all, I've completed 11 years of university education throughout my life. You'd think that all this schooling would make me tired of the educational environment but it hasn't. I thoroughly enjoy coming to college every day and interacting with other teachers and my students.

I am especially happy to be starting the new academic year having just come back from a wonderful summer holiday with my family and friends. The first two weeks of my holiday were spent in Siberia and the Russian Far East where I did some training courses for Russian teachers with the U.S. State Department. After that I taught in a two-week summer institute for teachers in Rabat, Morocco. In late July, I flew home to the States and took my family on a one-week holiday to the Bahamas where we spent our time relaxing on the beach and eating seafood. The highlights of my summer were snorkeling with sharks in the Bahamas and a visit to Ben Haddou (in Ouarzazate, Morocco). This is a famous area because the movie *Gladiator* was filmed there.

If you need to see me for anything outside of class, my office is on the second floor of the main building. My desk is right next to the photocopier so you can't miss me! Please feel free to stop by.

Well, that's all about me. Welcome to my class! I look forward to hearing about you and how you spent the past few weeks of your summer holiday.

Regards,
Miss Christine