

# The Reflective Portfolio

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Portfolios can be introduced in most university English courses (e.g., content-based, writing, speaking, grammar, etc.). This paper focuses on the use of the reflective portfolio in the university EFL classroom, and specifically shows how it has been put into practice in the Japanese university system. The reflective portfolio is a compilation of student self-selected work with Project Reflections and a Self-Reflection, which make up the heart of this type of portfolio. This paper begins with a brief literature review, followed by step-by-step instructions on the implementation of the reflective portfolio, and concludes with a discussion of assessment.

大学のほぼ全ての英語の授業（内容中心型授業、ライティング、スピーキング、文法など）において、ポートフォリオ（portfolio）を活用することができる。この論文では、大学のEFL授業におけるリフレクティブ・ポートフォリオ（reflective portfolio）の活用について、特に日本の大学における実践に焦点を絞りながら論じる。リフレクティブ・ポートフォリオとは、学生自身が達成した課題の中からいくつかを選び、一つのファイルにまとめたもので、その中核を成すのは「プロジェクト・リフレクション（Project Reflection）」と「セルフ・リフレクション（Self-Reflection）」である。先行研究の紹介に続いて、リフレクティブ・ポートフォリオの活用法を順を追って説明し、最後に教員がどのようにリフレクティブ・ポートフォリオを評価したらよいかを議論する。

There are numerous definitions of portfolio use in the language classroom. The definition of portfolios that I follow when using portfolios in the EFL classroom is provided by Genesee and Upshur (1996) who

described a portfolio as “a purposeful collection of students’ work that demonstrates...their efforts, progress, and achievements in given areas” (p. 99).

Research on the benefits of portfolio use in the EFL classroom has been well-documented (Padilla, Aninao, & Sung, 1996; Hamp-Lyons & Condon, 2000; Delett, Barnhardt, & Kevorkian, 2001; Allen, 2004; Nunes, 2004); however, little research has been conducted on what I term, the reflective portfolio. O’Malley & Valdez Pierce (1996) define a portfolio as having samples of student work, student self-assessment, and clearly stated criteria; these are the basic requirements for the reflective portfolio. Student work is chosen by the student for inclusion in the portfolio. Ideally, students should choose work that shows learning growth over the course of the semester and/or academic year. Without the elements of self-assessment and reflection, a portfolio is simply not a portfolio, but merely a resource file (Santos, 1997). The reflective portfolio is called this for a reason. It is a space in which students reflect on their learning, and how the included student work is a mirrored reflection of such learning.

This paper describes the successful implementation of the reflective portfolio in the university classroom and provides well-defined steps for teachers to adapt and introduce such a portfolio in their own classrooms.

## **Step-by-Step Implementation of the Portfolio**

First, it is essential to describe the academic setting in the Japanese university system to better understand the challenges in implementing the reflective portfolio. Most university courses meet once a week for 90 minutes each session. Furthermore, most courses are two semesters per academic year (April-July and September-January), and each semester has approximately 15 weeks. The same students are enrolled in both the spring and fall semesters. The portfolio is a common element in

many of my classes, e.g., writing, speaking/listening, and content-based courses. This portfolio project has always been done independently of other English classes; however, students are encouraged to include projects from any of their English classes. More details about this are described below.

At the beginning of the school year in the first semester, portfolios are introduced in the course syllabus with an explanation that students will work on this final project which represents 20% of their final grade in the second semester. The key point at this juncture is to not discard any student work. During the last five weeks of the second semester, classroom time is allocated to work on portfolios. About half a class is spent (approximately 45 minutes, sometimes less time is needed) on portfolios for five consecutive weeks.

There are four main parts to the reflective portfolio. They consist of the Table of Contents, the General Introduction, the Project Reflections, and the Self-Reflection.

In the first class session, students are introduced to the concept of the reflective portfolio by viewing sample portfolios. Also, they learn to write the Table of Contents and the General Introduction. Providing samples of portfolios so that students can see that portfolio assessment is a powerful and rewarding assessment device is key. Then, the purpose of a portfolio, the parts of a portfolio, materials needed, and assessment are explained (Appendix A).

Before students choose the projects they will include in their portfolios—which are listed in the Table of Contents—students brainstorm projects and assignments completed in all of their English courses. Students include all English courses as it provides educators with an opportunity to learn what other teachers are doing in the classroom, and for students to realize that all of their English courses are deemed important. From this vast list written on the blackboard, students then choose which projects to include and insert those project names into their Table of Contents.

Portfolio research often cites that the emphasis is on including the student's best work in portfolios (O'Malley & Valdez Pierce, 1996); however, students in my classes are told to choose any work which influenced them in their English studies. The key here is that students may include any English assignment ranging from something memorable or difficult to perhaps even a sample they feel proud of. Sample projects include oral presentations (e.g., video of their presentation with handouts accompanied by peer and teacher feedback), multi-draft essays, research papers, and vocabulary tests. With lower-level students (usually freshmen and sophomores) they choose two projects, and with higher-level students (usually juniors and seniors) they choose three projects to include in the portfolio. Students are placed in classes according to their year in university; therefore, I have always had same-year students in each class.

The General Introduction is a way for students to share some background information about themselves such as where they live, future goals, strengths and weaknesses in English, and feelings they have towards English. First, students are shown a sample of the General Introduction and identify what they see in it (e.g., name, city, project included in the portfolio, etc.). After that, students are given the General Introduction worksheet (Appendix B) on which there is a set of guided questions to answer in complete sentences in English. For homework, they then take those sentences and type them in a paragraph format using transitions and other cohesive devices to make their writing flow. Improving one's writing skills is not the goal of the portfolio; however, it is important for students to be aware of an academic writing style.

In the second class session, students exchange the General Introduction and complete a short peer feedback form. At this point, the importance of peer feedback is emphasized since the teacher will not be checking any of the portfolio drafts. This adds an element of surprise at the end of the course for the teacher. Furthermore, this kind of announcement and subsequent procedure generally make

the students take peer feedback sessions more seriously. These peer feedback sessions are not evaluated in any way. However, the main reason for peer feedback is that it enables students to view each other's work and to gain another perspective on the assignment. Students then have the opportunity to revise the General Introduction based on their classmate's advice. Only the final version of the General Introduction goes into the portfolio; no assignments are submitted to the teacher to evaluate in the five weeks of portfolio work.

The main parts of the portfolio are the Project Reflections. Students write two or three Project Reflections depending on the number of projects that are included in their portfolio. The Project Reflection is handled in the same way as the General Introduction in which students are given a set of guided questions that they must answer in complete sentences and type in a paragraph format. Their homework is to type all Project Reflections. After introducing the Project Reflection worksheet (Appendix C) in class and before they type their own Project Reflections, students are given both a good and bad sample of Project Reflections. In pairs, students are asked to distinguish between the sample that can be considered good and the one that can be deemed poor. In addition, they are required to state the reasons for their decision. This activity helps promote reflective writing.

In the third class session, students exchange Project Reflections and carry out non-structured peer feedback because there is no peer feedback form at this stage. Students do the following: (1) read the Project Reflections, (2) check that all questions on the worksheet have been addressed, (3) check grammar and spelling, and (4) mark any unclear areas in the writing. The final part of the portfolio, the Self-Reflection, is discussed in this third class session. The Self-Reflection demonstrates what students enjoyed or did not enjoy in the creation of the portfolio, what they have learned in the process of putting the portfolio together, how the portfolio is a reflection of their English abilities, and how their

feelings towards English have changed over the course of the year. Again, the Self-Reflection is handled in the same way as the General Introduction and Project Reflections in which students are given a set of guided questions that they must answer in complete sentences and type in a paragraph format (Appendix D).

In the fourth class session, students exchange the Self-Reflection and complete a short peer feedback form. Again, any changes students would like to make to any part of the portfolio can be done for homework for the final class. During all four sessions, sample portfolios are available for students to peruse.

In the fifth and final class session, students bring their completed reflective portfolios to the last class of the year. After exchanging portfolios with a partner, students then complete a peer feedback form (Appendix E) that includes an extensive rubric and comments section. Upon completion of peer feedback, all portfolios are put on display on the desks similar to an art gallery showing and the portfolio viewing session commences. Students are given sufficient time to look through all classmates' portfolios. Portfolios are then collected and outside of class a teacher feedback form similar to the peer feedback form is completed. Table 1 shows an overview of each class session with a summary of work completed.

Table 1  
*Timetable for Reflective Portfolio Teaching*

<i>Class</i>	<i>Description</i>
First Class (of the last five classes in the second semester)	Students view sample portfolios, are introduced to the concept of the reflective portfolio, and learn how to write the Table of Contents and the General Introduction. Homework assignment is to type the Table of Contents and General Introduction.
Second Class	Students exchange the General Introduction and complete a short peer feedback form. Students are given two samples of Project Reflections and asked to identify which is good and which is bad. Homework assignment is to type the Project Reflections.
Third Class	Students exchange Project Reflections and complete non-structured peer feedback. The Self-Reflection is introduced. Homework assignment is to type the Self-Reflection.
Fourth Class	Students exchange the Self-Reflection and complete a short peer feedback form. Homework assignment is to complete all parts of the portfolio.
Fifth Class	Students bring their completed reflective portfolios, exchange them with a partner, and fill out a peer feedback form. All portfolios are put on display and the portfolio viewing session begins. Portfolios are collected for grading purposes.

## **Evaluation of Portfolios**

Evaluating the portfolios may seem like a hefty task; however, during the grading process, the teacher is mostly analyzing the student's level of thoughtfulness and reflection and not focusing on grammar correction. Moreover, the teacher has previously read and evaluated most of the projects included in the portfolio (other than those from other English classes in which there are a few of those included). Therefore, it takes approximately 7-10 minutes to evaluate the portfolio including time for writing comments.

Brown (2004) states that providing a letter grade or numerical score to a portfolio has both advantages and disadvantages, and further argues “that it is inappropriate to reduce the personalized and creative process of compiling a portfolio to a number or letter grade and that it is more appropriate to offer a qualitative evaluation for a work that is so open-ended” (p. 259). With my students, a numerical score that translates into a letter grade is provided as well as qualitative feedback in the form of written comments.

Students may pick up their graded portfolios a few weeks after the last class session. Many students collect their portfolios for different reasons (e.g., they would like to keep some of the included projects or they are interested in the portfolio’s final grade). However, there are, unfortunately, some students who do not collect their portfolios which are then discarded after a year.

## **Conclusion**

The reflective portfolio gives students the opportunity to self-select projects from various English classes and reflect on those assignments as well as write a Self-Reflection. The Self-Reflection helps students perceive their strengths, weaknesses, and language goals. From beginning to end, five weeks of classes (i.e., about 45 minutes per class) are required to work on the portfolio. Some teachers may see the evaluation of the portfolio as burdensome; however, it only takes 7-10 minutes of portfolio reading and writing comments per student. Students may appreciate the qualitative feedback. It is interesting to note that reading and commenting on a student research paper often takes much more time than reading a portfolio.

Lynch and Shaw (2005) summarize succinctly that once a portfolio is finished, “you have something in which you can see yourself, a reflection on which you can reflect further” (p. 292). It is hoped that both students and teachers see the benefits of the reflective portfolio,



and that teachers will endeavor to adapt and implement the reflective portfolio in their particular teaching situation.

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## **Appendix A**

### Reflective Portfolio

#### **Description**

A portfolio is a collection of your work that shows your ability to use English and your progress in learning it. For your portfolio, you will select two projects from your classes and reflect on them. When your teacher reads your portfolio, s/he should get a clear idea of what you feel you have learned and what you can do with English. The portfolio should emphasize your view of your English ability and progress.

#### **Portfolio Sections**

- (1) Cover Art/Name on Binder
- (2) Table of Contents
- (3) General Introduction
- (4) Project Reflection #1
- (5) Project #1
- (6) Project Reflection #2
- (7) Project #2
- (8) Self-Reflection

## **Materials**

- Binder
- Section dividers
- Cover art

## **Grading**

20% of your final grade. You will be evaluated on how well you reflect on your work and the care with which you put your portfolio together.

Portfolios are due on: The last day of class.

## **Appendix B**

### General Introduction

Directions: Answer the following questions in complete sentences in order to help you write your General Introduction. Then, type your answers to the questions in a paragraph format adding information such as transitions. Be sure to join your ideas so that they flow smoothly.

1. What is your name?
  
2. What city and prefecture are you from?
  
3. What year are you at (university name)? (e.g. first year, second year, third year, etc.)

4. Why did you decide to study English? (e.g., what are your learning goals?)

5. Which projects did you choose to include in your portfolio? (e.g., persuasive essay, saga, presentation, reading charts, etc.)

6. What are your strengths and weaknesses in English?

7. Describe how your feelings about English have changed over this past year.

## **Appendix C**

### Project Reflection

#### **Description**

A Project Reflection introduces the reader to your project and explains your feelings about your work. By reading the Project Reflection, the reader will have a clear idea of your project and your reasons for choosing that project. A Project Reflection should be at least one paragraph.

Directions: Answer the following questions in complete sentences when writing each of your Project Reflections. Then, type your answers to the questions in a paragraph format adding information such as transitions. Be sure to join your ideas so that they flow smoothly.

1. Why did you choose this project?
  
2. What was the context of the work? (e.g., what was the class, what was the assignment, when or where or how did you present it to the teacher or other students)
  
3. What did you learn by doing it?
  
4. How do you feel about it? What was difficult about this project? Why was it difficult?
  
5. What would you do differently next time?
  
6. How does this project connect to your future? (e.g., In the future, I want to be a salesperson and so this presentation taught me valuable skills such as eye contact.)

## **Appendix D**

### Self-Reflection

#### **Description**

A Self-Reflection informs the reader of what you have discovered about language learning in general and how you have changed (or not!) through the creation of your portfolio. The Self-Reflection gives

you the opportunity to reflect on what you have learned and done over the course of the year.

Directions: Answer the following questions in complete sentences when writing your Self-Reflection. Then, type your answers to the questions in a paragraph format adding information such as transitions. Be sure to join your ideas so that they flow smoothly.

1. What part of creating the portfolio did you enjoy, or not enjoy?
2. What areas of your English have improved?
3. What areas of English do you need to keep working on?
4. How does your portfolio reflect your English ability?
5. What have you learned in the process of putting your portfolio together?
6. What have you learned about language learning in general?
7. How do you feel after this year of studying English at (university name)?

# Appendix E

## Reflective Portfolios – Peer Feedback

Portfolio Author: \_\_\_\_\_

Name of Peer Reviewer: \_\_\_\_\_ Date: \_\_\_\_\_

Directions: Circle the appropriate number for each part of the portfolio. If the person did not do a part, give him/her a 0 (zero) for that section. Add all of the points at the end. You must also include some advice to your classmate.

Assignment Parts	0 = didn't do	1 = beginning	2 = developing	3 = good	4 = very good	5 = excellent
Completeness (all parts)	0	1	2	3	4	5
Cover Art/Name on Binder	0	1	2	3	4	5
Table of Contents	0	1	2	3	4	5
Section Dividers	0	1	2	3	4	5
General Introduction	0	1	2	3	4	5
Focus of Project Reflection #1	0	1	2	3	4	5
Focus of Project Reflection #2	0	1	2	3	4	5
Focus of Self-Reflection	0	1	2	3	4	5
Overall Thoughtfulness	0	1	2	3	4	5
Overall Language Use (grammar, spelling, word choice, transition words, etc.)	0	1	2	3	4	5

(Shaded columns 3 & 4 show the average.)

TOTAL: \_\_\_\_/50

Advice and/or Comments: