

# **ORAL PORTFOLIO ASSESSMENT**

## **What Does an Oral Portfolio Look Like? And How Does One Assess it?**

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As the presentation itself is in PowerPoint form, this paper attempts to communicate through fixed print what was originally delivered with moveable text. As the title suggests, there are many different forms of “portfolio,” and “assessment” is used in many different ways. So the presentation begins by defining these two parameters.

The word portfolio comes from a Latin word *port* meaning to move. The second syllable, *folio*, means paper or artifacts. Thus a portfolio is a moveable collection of papers and/or artifacts or samples. A portfolio is a collection in progress: which contains things related to training, work experience, contributions and special accomplishments. It helps to provide insight into life/work history, and is useful in planning for the future or gaining insights from past experiences. (Humber, 2007)

For the purpose of an English Language educational setting, these products should display a range of communicative ability that matches more-or-less a predetermined standard (if the course is a “standards-based” course), or they should display a temporal improvement in ability (if the course is “progress-based” where an individual’s performance is measured only against his /her own previous performances). For advanced learners this would most certainly include examples of “free speech” such as argumentation, explanation and technical instruction. Low level or beginner students’ products might include introductions, giving personal information, ordering food from a picture menu, describing elements of a picture, reading from a known passage, and perhaps, at the higher end of the range, giving directions to go from one place to another. While this paper is concerned with building and assessing a beginner level oral portfolio, the principles involved in building an oral portfolio at any level apply.

Assessment is another matter. Educators often argue semantics regarding the differences between evaluation and assessment. For clarity, I use evaluation for assigning a mark to a given product. Assessment takes place after the fact, in light of a number of products of different types, and taking into account the passage of time spent in the course. There are two main types of assessment:

- Summative assessment - Summative assessment is generally carried out at the end of a course or project. In an educational setting, summative assessments are typically used to assign students a course grade.
- Formative assessment - Formative assessment is generally carried out throughout a course or project. Formative assessment, also referred to as **educative assessment**, is used to aid learning. In an educational setting, formative assessment might be a teacher (or peer) or the learner, providing feedback on a student's work, and would not necessarily be used for grading purposes. (Wikipedia, Dec 8, 2007)

So evaluation might take place when the teacher first listens to a product. If the assignment has a narrow objective such as proper production of the sound contrast [ æ ε ], then evaluation is in order, but if the assignment has no particular objective such as reading a passage aloud, then perhaps a formative assessment might be given, or perhaps the product would just be added to the portfolio to serve as baseline material (near the beginning of a course) or as a sample to be used for comparison to other works to be produced later on in the course. Initially, in a progress-based course products form a baseline for the student, while in a standards-based course they form part of the ongoing record. There should be multiple opportunities for students to achieve each goal. Each goal should be clearly identified beforehand. These goals should cover a range of oral activities appropriate to the students and level of English involved.

### Phonetic Skills Example

Having described these two parameters, the presentation goes on to show examples of oral exercises which might form such an oral portfolio. The first is a “Phonetic Contrasts”

PowerPoint program involving short words with contrasting vowels, e.g. “bed-bad.” (Fig. 1)

PHONETIC CONTRASTS			
Short a		-	Short e
	[æ]		[ɛ]
كؤيس	bad		bed ورس
ضوم	fad		فين معطي fed
أطبي	lag		لجر leg
لجر	man		لاجر men
تبي	pat		لدم نايح pet
يبرغب			

Figure 1 – A PowerPoint Sound Contrasts page. Using a 15% delay between words causes the left word to appear before the right word in the pair. This helps Arabic students to know which word is associated with which sound (if they appeared together, the Arabic student is just as likely to make the opposite association due to L1 interference). The numbers link to the student voice files. They do not appear in the regular program.

The aural-visual input is complimented by a delay between the left-hand-word and the right-hand-word so that the student (who reads right to left in his/her L1) can see/hear each word separately and know which one is associated with which sound. As an additional aid, after the six sound contrasts are presented, with a click of the mouse button the Arabic translations appear – not for vocabulary purposes, but to show clearly how the vowel shift changes the meaning of the word. Proper production is important! Students need more than one set of contrasts, so each short vowel is presented in five contrasting pairs on a page. There are six pages to a program and six programs (each having one short vowel represented in the left column, while the right hand column runs through the other five contrasting vowels).

Workshop participants then had the opportunity to evaluate the products of four students and record them on a marking sheet. The aim was not so much to achieve perfect marking, as to show how simple the marking process can be once you have become accustomed to it. This product would have a mark assigned to it at first listening. Assessment comes later when a range of products can be listened to, possibly by more than one teacher.

Sound Contrasts Marking Sheet			
[ æ ε ]	[ æ ]	[ ε ]	Student 1 Comments
bad - bed			
fad - fed			
lag - leg			
man - men			
pat - pet			

Figure 2 – The Sound Contrasts marks sheet records a tick or an “X” for each sound plus comments on other factors such as weak or wrong consonant production.

### Simple Sight Reading Skills Example

Further to vowel contrasts (which while necessary, are really quite limited) participants viewed a simple sight reading PowerPoint program (Fig. 3) based on the book, “Why Johnny Can’t Read” by Rudolph Flesch (1955) in which are seventy-two pages of words listed in phonemic groups. In the book, these words are fixed on the page, but in a PowerPoint presentation, these words can be made to move from the right leftward on the page (thus accommodating the leftward eye movement of Arabic readers) but they still must be read with short rightward eye movements. Five to seven words appear on each line with six lines per page. The reader receives both visual and aural input approximately as each word comes

Review of the vowel sounds

[ æ ] [ ɛ ] [ ɪ ] [ ʌ ] & [ ʊ ]

- dig pass men mass top tell
- big fuss dot ill Ned beg
- jam pod pun win gas yell
- wig mud rob Tim bet pan
- rip but mug pad fig got
- tip dog hum sod den nod

Figure 3 – Page 7 from the PowerPoint sight-reading practice series based on “Why Johnny Can’t Read.” The words move leftward across the page, but must be read rightwards. Students found this easy to follow. The words are heard so that the student has time to repeat them just before the next one comes along. This allows for better grapheme-phonics associations and provides self directed study material for the student.

to rest. Originally developed to help young grade fives and sixes who had not learned to read, this set of over seventy-two PowerPoint pages allows a teacher to select the grapheme or group of graphemes that a student is having difficulty with. Once students became aware of how to use these pages, they accessed them frequently during self-study periods. Flesch covers all forty-eight graphemes in the English language, and any one aspect can be expanded upon quite easily. Workshop participants again got to listen to three students reading samples while they evaluated the students’ basic discriminatory performance according to a simple “good – fair – poor” rating system (Fig.4). Extra space is provided on

St. # 1		Score : 1 = good ; 2 = fair ; 3 = poor									
	dig		pass		men		mass		top		tell
	big		fuss		dot		ill		Ned		beg
St.# 2											
	jam		pod		pun		win		gas		yell
	wig		mud		rob		Tim		bet		pan
St. #3											
	rip		but		mug		pad		fig		got
	tip		dog		hum		sod		den		nod

Figure 4 – A condensed marks sheet. The usual sheet has space for extra comments regarding production. This page contrasts the short vowel sounds, other pages focus on consonant clusters, blends, long vowels, etc.

individual student's marks sheets for comments on other aspects of production such as self-correcting efforts, confidence, word-attack skills, consonant cluster production, voice quality, etc. Teachers can perform spot checks simply by walking around the lab turning off the sound and asking for a quick read, or they can set a quiz by removing the sound from the file. They can project the page onto the wall and have class competitions, or they can have peer evaluation day. The point of it all is oral production practice.

### Vocabulary Building Skills Example

This simple elementary sight-reading program also lends itself nicely to teaching vocabulary at more advanced stages of learning English, such as with false beginners or intermediate level students. Words from a student textbook module were typed into the program (Cutting Edges – Starter) then presented in this format. Students with access to computer labs are able to review their immediate vocabulary for grapheme-sound associations on page 1 of the program, and a second page presents a picture-sound association which the student use to try their spelling on. These programs are simple to build and simple to replicate.

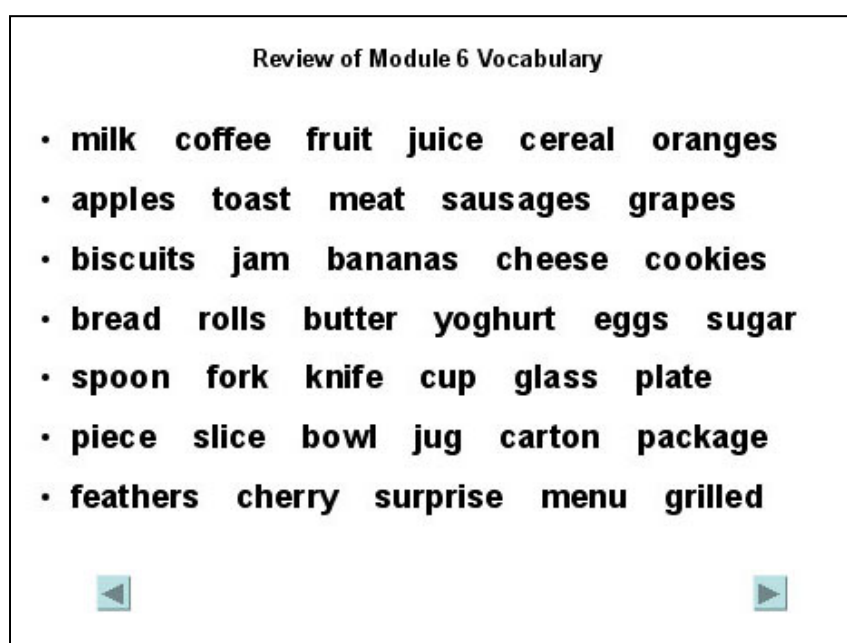


Figure 5 – The same PowerPoint program can be adapted for presenting the weekly vocabulary words, as grapheme-phoneme pairs,. The student can practice oral production with the first page and can practice spelling with page 2 (Fig. 6) (Cunningham, 2002)

They provide excellent sound-grapheme input or sound-visual (picture) meaningful input, which books alone cannot provide. The pictorial page without the sound, makes a great quiz. The student introduces him / herself, then begins the picture sequence, saying the proper vocabulary word at lower levels, or creating a statement involving that picture and perhaps



Figure 6 – A PowerPoint vocabulary page using pictures combined with audio. Each picture appears together with its proper pronunciation. Without the sound it becomes a quick quiz. Recordings of student performances on quizzes (and practices) can form part of an “Oral Portfolio”

the simple past tense (if that is the focus of the quiz). The speed of the sequence can be adjusted appropriately for different abilities as well.

### Grammar Skills Example

The presentation next took participants through two pages of an eight page PowerPoint presentation explaining the rule for the sound of “-ed” when it follows a verb. The Past tense

**The Sounds of “VERB-ed”**

**“-ed” has 3 sounds: [ t ] [ d ] & [ ə d ]**

- **“-ed” says [ t ]  
when it follows a voiceless sound**
- **“-ed” says [ d ]  
when it follows a voiced sound**
- **“-ed” says [ ə d ]  
when it follows a “t” or a “d”**

Figure 7 – The rule for the sound of “ed” when it follows a verb.  
regular verb suffix suffers horribly here in the UAE as most students have only learned that “ed” says [ ə d ] – as in the word “wanted.” So other words like “ram” become [ra məd].

PowerPoint allows text to appear as the words are spoken, so there is less chance of misunderstanding than there is with fixed text. The rule that “ed” “agrees in voice” with the

The Sounds of “VERB-ed”		
“-ed” says [ t ]		
walk → walked	talk → talked	ask → asked
cuff → cuffed	laugh → laughed	gaff → gaffed
sip → sipped	wipe → wiped	rope → roped
hiss → hissed	dress → dressed	gas → gassed
march → marched	itch → itched	watch → watched
wish → wished	wash → washed	gush → gushed

Figure 8 – A PowerPoint practice page for when “ed” says [ t ]. The student hears “[wak] (pause) becomes [wakt]” as the first words appear.

preceding sound, except for [t] and [d] is explained and then practice exercises are provided (as shown in Figure 8 below). The presentation is suitable for classroom and lab viewing. In fact both should occur with lots of group work, individual work both with and without the

**QUIZ for The Sounds of “VERB-ed”**  
 Say the words before they disappear.  
 Just “click” to begin.

jumped      excused      scarred      landed      pulled  
 cased      tested      fixed  
 cooked      raided      rammed      coated      ceased  
 exceeded      faded      died      taxied      played  
 raved      raced      cuffed      cooled  
 cobbled      cycled      paced      iced  
 walked      mashed      laced      worried

End of the quiz – stop recording

Figure 9 – An oral quiz where students must read and say each word as it appears and then after 1.5 seconds, disappears. Correct pronunciation of the “ed” sound is the skill being tested.

The presentation finishes up with a PowerPoint Quiz using “appear” and “fade” special effects. Students only get 1.5 seconds (the speed can be adjusted appropriately for any level) to read a past tense regular verb and record their production of it. The objective is correct

pronunciation of “ed” as one of the three sounds it makes: [ t ], [ d ], or [ əd ] depending on the quality of the preceding sound. It is a simple matter, once the first quiz is in hand, to create alternate versions. Lab testing is then possible without worry that students are listening for the answers from their nearby friends.

Marking is accomplished with a score sheet on which each word is listed with “Correct,” “Wrong,” and “Missed” columns beside them. A “Comments” column allows for additional information to be recorded while marking the quiz. It takes practice and no one is perfect.

Edrule Quiz Marks					
DATE		v	X	-	Comments
ed	tested	v			tay sted
d	cycled	v			
t	cuffed			-	
t	paced			-	
t	raced		X		ray – sed
ed	faded	v			
d	rammed			-	
t	iced		X		l sed
d	pulled	v			
t	cooked	v			
t	laced		X		lay ced
d	played	v			
d	cooled	v			
ed	landed	v			
d	scorred	v			scared
d	excused		X		exist
ed	exceeded	v			existed
					MARK - 10 / 17 v ; 3/17 Missed ; 4/17 X

Figure 10. The Edrule Quiz Marks Sheet can be a Word document, or an Excel spreadsheet, allowing for Access database acquisition. With this exercise both a test mark (immediate) and an assessment mark (later) can be ascribed

audio portion. To enhance the repetition of exercises, the vocabulary can also be taught, but this is not the focus of this exercise, so care must be taken not to emphasize this aspect, just to occasionally include meaning in the exercises. That is why the later assessment is so important. It is at this stage that teachers get to check their work against each other’s. With an oral activity like this, where there is a very narrow focus, testing can take place with marks assigned, then later on the product can become part of an overall assessment of student progress, effort or ability.

Participants then got to try out marking one student’s efforts to pass the quiz (Appendix 3). They then got to compare their marks with each other as well as with my own.

### Advanced Reading Skills Example

The next oral portfolio sample is a PowerPoint reading program which presents a short story with the words appearing at a moderate speed across the page from left to right. The eye

guidance and the audio-visual connection give a beginner level student considerable support in “reading” this crazy backwards language (to them it is!). The student can first listen and

**Nick was bored with life. Every day was exactly the same. He got up at exactly the same time; he caught the same bus to work; he did the same things in the office; he talked to the same people; he came home at the same time; he watched the same programmes on television - and he went to bed at the same time!**

**'What I need is a little adventure!' Nick thought as he waited at the bus stop one morning. Nick's 'little adventure' happened sooner than he expected!**

Figure 11 – The simple reading page provides students with rightward reading support, audio support and repetitive practice support. The student cannot get lost while reading this page, unlike fixed print with audio programs. The numbers link to student production files. (Byrne, 1996)

read, then inquire into unknown vocabulary, then listen and read again, finally reading and speaking as the words appear practicing until ready to make their own short recording (two minutes max) of one or two pages. Participants were asked to comment in a more general fashion on the students’ reading skills. Phrasing, intonation, linking confidence, self-correction and many more aspects of reading skills can all come into play here.

### **Portfolio Assessment**

In planning my first attempt at oral portfolio creation, I allowed the first 5 sessions simply for students to learn the software-computer aspect of things. Files were collected, but only for baseline purposes. The next step was to review student sessions briefly with them to build their confidence levels. Only after twenty or more sessions can Assessment begin in earnest. As my first attempt was a solo initiative, I was not able to bring other teachers into the assessment aspect of the project, but it was easy to select ten of the students best works representing eight different types of oral work: sound contrasts, sight reading, spelling from listening, picture description, grammar rule application, interview, reading, and speaking freely on a prepared topic. There are many more possibilities than this. Weighting and balancing are just a matter of knowing the work that went in to preparing the various tasks. From a two semester year progress should be readily evident in a student’s performance. The

best of the best can be selected for final assessment and the student can take away an oral portfolio that they have built over the past year – something to be kept, for future reference.

## **Conclusion**

So “What is an Oral Portfolio?” It is simply a gathering, over time, of a variety of samples of a student’s oral work. The gathering of oral products for an “Oral Portfolio is not a difficult task. Computer labs are becoming more and more common even in the Middle East.

Through the use of PowerPoint proper support can be provided to students in that lessons which used to be delivered in the classroom by way of a fixed text page with the teacher reading aloud, can now be delivered using PowerPoint presentations which provide special additional support in the form of eye guidance for rightward reading, concurrence of audio-visual input such that getting lost is no longer a problem. Repetitive practice opportunities exist that do not require the teacher to read the same passage over and over. A great variety of “oral tasks” can be gathered providing a range of products available for both immediate mark assignment and long term assessment. Assessment can be done at the teachers’ convenience, rather than having to take place in a classroom with the student present. (today, students sometimes sit in class for forty-five minutes waiting to take a five minute speaking test – what a waste of time). We could be testing fifteen to twenty students at a time, thus releasing as much as two classes for more teaching activities or review.

Given support, in the form of frequent computer labs, with practice that prepares the student for the test, students can become confident enough to perform the various tasks required of them. They can even manage to sing in English and record themselves doing it. I know, because this presentation ended with participants listening to three students singing, “Oh what a Wonderful World” by Louis Armstrong ( And they do a great job. Let’s give our students the support they need through gathering and assessing “Oral Portfolios.”

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