

2000

## Writing Portfolios in a Second Grade English as a Second Language Classroom

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## Writing Portfolios in a Second Grade English as a Second Language Classroom

### Abstract

Student reflection in collaboration with the teacher is an important element in the describing children's involvement in the writing process and their instructional needs. Such description, or qualitative assessment, is necessary as language is a process. Several qualitative assessment techniques that support each other can further children's self-reflection, or self-evaluation, such as journaling, conferencing, and portfolio construction. These techniques can closely relate instruction and assessment. This article describes the implementation of portfolios in a second grade classroom in which English is a second language. Two students, each with different English language abilities, were selected to focus in this implementation stage.

Writing Portfolios in a Second Grade English as a  
Second Language Classroom

A Graduate Journal Article

Submitted to the

Department of Curriculum and Instruction

In Partial Fulfillment

of the Requirements for the Degree

Master of Arts in Education

UNIVERSITY OF NORTHERN IOWA

by

Adriana Vargas

March 2000

This Graduate Journal Article by: Adriana Vargas

Entitled: Writing Portfolios in a Second Grade English as a  
Second Language Classroom

has been approved as meeting the research article requirement for the  
Degree of Master of Arts in Education.

3/21/2000  
Date Approved

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## Abstract

Student reflection in collaboration with the teacher is an important element in the describing children's involvement in the writing process and their instructional needs. Such description, or qualitative assessment, is necessary as language is a process. Several qualitative assessment techniques that support each other can further children's self-reflection, or self-evaluation, such as journaling, conferencing, and portfolio construction. These techniques can closely relate instruction and assessment.

This article describes the implementation of portfolios in a second grade classroom in which English is a second language. Two students, each with different English language abilities, were selected to focus in this implementation stage.

Many school districts are moving away from standardized tests as a means of assessment. This traditional assessment tests fragments of knowledge with little task application and often creates student anxiety. As process rather than product is being emphasized in the language arts, alternative assessment methods have been investigated. Thus, qualitative assessment techniques are recommended to describe each child's progress and instructional needs. By providing students with learning experiences that are closely related to their real-life situations, teachers can use these experiences to provide more authentic assessment. As a result, instruction and assessment are closely related. This type of assessment is empowering students and teachers to view assessment as an opportunity to reflect and celebrate progress in which students' strengths and instructional needs can be illuminated (Tierney, Carter and Desai, 1991).

### Value of Writing Portfolios

According to Vavrus (1990), "Portfolios are a systematic and organized collection of evidence that monitor growth of student's knowledge, skills and attitude over a period of time" (p. 48). Portfolio collection can promote students' self-reflection thus fostering ongoing growth and encouraging students to be responsible for their learning. Students can learn to develop an authentic collection of diverse writing that exhibits their individual personality, interests, and work styles (Herbert, 1998; Tierney et. al., 1991).

Portfolios can show collaboration with teachers and students. In the portfolio collection process throughout a school year, teachers can assess students' progress and develop appropriate lessons to meet their needs. This collection can then provide evidence of students' growth to parents, administrators, and other teachers (Bunce-Crim, 1992).

### Implementation of Writing Portfolios

Portfolios were first used by artists, architects, and interior decorators to showcase their work at different stages (Fiderer, 1995). To introduce portfolios in the classroom, the teacher and the children need to consider who the intended audience is and what the audience will learn about the writer. At this point, sample portfolios should be modeled to give a better understanding of the portfolio's purpose. From their writing folders that are kept all year, children can select exhibits for their portfolios with the support of the teacher (Tierney, Carter and Desai, 1991). These exhibits can represent individual interest, effort, strengths, and goals (Ford, Gillespie, Leavell, and Gillespie, 1996). The writing pieces can include many types of writing, for example, realistic and imaginative stories, poems, plays, and songs. At least one piece should be included that demonstrates the student's knowledge of the writing process from the first draft to the final draft at the beginning and end of the school year (Black, 1993).

Each selection should have a form attached to it indicating the student's name, the date of selection, description of the piece, the reason for the selection, progress noted, instructional needs, and the establishment of further goals. The form should be completed during the student-teacher conference as the exhibit or exhibits are selected. As students in collaboration with their teacher develop information on the form, they can create a close relationship between instruction and assessment (Black, 1993).

Portfolios should be located in an accessible place so students and teachers can easily refer to them (Valencia, 1990). They can be stored in many ways, such as cardboard boxes, three-ring binders, file folders, hanging folders, or any other type of folder (Rabert, 1995).

Portfolios can serve an important role in helping teachers individualize their teaching and address their students' needs, interests, and background. Their usefulness can be supported by student journals, teacher logs of student observations, checklists and student-teacher conference records (Roe & Vukelich, 1998 & Bunce-Crim, 1992).

Since learning is worth celebrating, the children should be given the opportunity to share their work with their families (Herbert, 1998). At Portfolio Sharing Night, they can present in an informal setting their writing folders and portfolios so their completed work and also work in



progress can be reviewed. They can share with their families the selection process that led to their collection of writing exhibits (Johnson, 1996). As a result, the families can gain an appreciation for the children's progress and involvement in the writing process (Bunce-Crim, 1992).

By the end of the school year, each of the students should have a collection of writing pieces that reflect their progress. From these exhibits, the students, conferencing with the teacher, can select pieces representative of their involvement in the writing process and create a showcase portfolio. This collection can be passed on to the next school year as a part of the ongoing assessment. The remaining exhibits collected for the year can be bound or boxed and sent home as treasures (Tierney, Carter & Desai, 1991).

#### Implementation of Writing Portfolios in a Second Grade English as a Second Language Classroom

This year I implemented writing portfolios in my second grade classroom. It is a resource room for children with English as their second language. The collection of writing exhibits throughout the school year assisted the students in reflecting on their progress and instructional needs.

Many of the children had not had an opportunity to write in any language. Many of them did not have fluent English-speaking family members or friends that could model this process. Some students were

still developing listening and speaking abilities in the English language. Because of these factors, these children made little progress in writing during the first semester of the school year.

To support involvement in the writing process, the students made entries in their journals each morning. Sentence starters were provided to students who were struggling with ideas. As a student volunteered to orally dictate his/her entry, I modeled its transformation into writing form. These elements were addressed in the modeling: story structure - - beginning, middle, and ending; word spacing; letter formation; standard spelling; and capitalization and punctuation. As a whole group, we developed writing idea charts each month and word walls. Also dictionaries with picture-word relationships that focused on the theme of study were used as references.

Students had access to many kinds of writing supplies. Such items included writing paper, colored pencils, markers, crayons, staplers, tape, stickers, stamps, and magazines. All of which were located in an easily accessible location. The students were responsible for the organization of this area.

The writing process was modeled through mini-lessons in which I used my stories. The first mini-lesson focused on developing writing ideas. Each month the students and I developed a list of ideas to assist those

who were struggling with writing. These lists, on large sheets of chart paper, were posted for easy reference. I also modeled using magazine pictures, photographs, stickers, and stamps to find ideas for writing. These ways of finding writing topics were effective in helping children find ideas for their writing that were interesting to them. As the writing program progressed, I modeled each of the writing components; drafting, redrafting, revising, and publishing. Twice a month assigned peers helped each other edit their writings.

Reading aloud sessions were mainly for pleasure, but the story idea and language of the books served as models. I read aloud two to three picture books everyday on a specific genre. Stories from each genre were focused on for two weeks. The ideas of the stories and the elements of the specific genre were discussed.

Each child was given a writing folder with two pockets. One pocket was for work in progress; the other pocket was for work that was ready to be published. The folders were kept for easy access in their cubbie holes.

The writer's workshop sessions were scheduled each day. The sessions began with the teacher presenting a mini-lesson for ten minutes and then the children wrote. For two weeks at the beginning of the year, I wrote independently along with the students to model the importance of working independently without interruptions. Soon the students learned

to use effective strategies to solve their problems when working independently. While the children were writing independently, the paraprofessional and I worked with small groups of two to three or individual students. At the beginning of the year, the children were able to write independently from 10-15 minutes; at the end of the year, they wrote for 25 minutes. The students were given assistance on spelling words, using inventive spelling, punctuation and capitalization, and other spelling standards. During the first semester, some students needed much assistance with every part of their stories.

At the end of the writer's workshop period, the class regrouped for the sharing circle. The importance of being a good listener, responding positively, and respecting each other's ideas in the circle was introduced at the beginning of the year. A different student was chosen each day to share a piece that was in progress or had been completed. The class reacted to the pieces by offering positive feedback, such as providing additional ideas, pointing out the strengths and weaknesses of the piece, or just giving their classmate a pat on the back.

At the end of each quarter, the students selected two to three writing pieces to contribute to the collection in their writing portfolio. The exhibits could represent their best work, one that they enjoyed doing, had worked hard on, showed improvement, or fulfilled a specific goal.

The exhibits were labeled with these entries - - name of student, date of selection, type of selection, reason for selection, and goals for future writing. The students dictated the information for the labels to me for the first two quarters. By the third quarter, the student was able to write their reflections. Students soon learned to refer to their pieces as a way to monitor their growth and to set goals.

Parents were also involved in their children's writing experiences. At Open House in September, the children showed their parents their writing portfolios as I explained the purpose of them. Parents were also told that they would be viewing additional work during parent-teacher conferences and at Portfolio Sharing Night in May. Their children would be a part of parent-teacher conferences so they could explain their work in their portfolios. Also, parents were encouraged to come visit the classroom any time. The portfolios would be available for their review.

#### Assessment of Two Second Graders' Writing Progress Through Portfolio Collection

During this school year, I was impressed by the progress and involvement of two particular students. Both students were of Mexican descent and have been in the ESL (English as a Second Language) program for at least two years. Coming from the same background, I was able to provide cultural elements and understanding of my students'

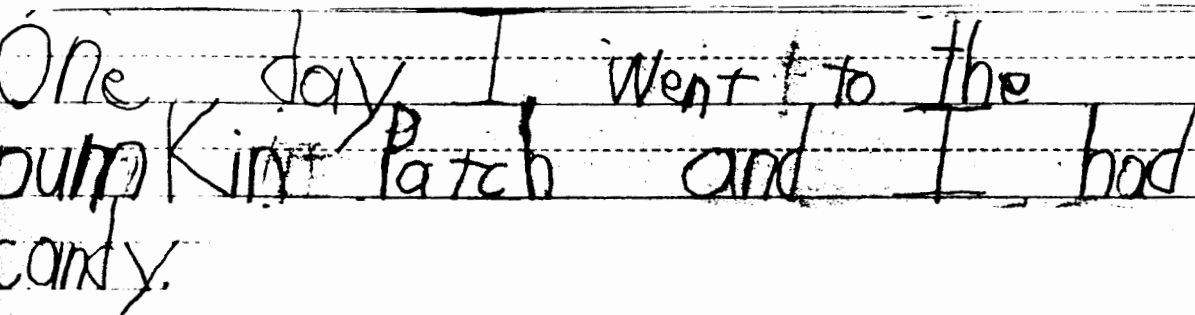
responses in the writing process. I found this cultural commodity especially beneficial with one particular student who by second quarter was particularly interested in writing stories that reflected his cultural background.

### Student A

This boy was very quiet and hesitated to participate in classroom activities. At the beginning of the school year, he soon learned classroom routines and became a role model for classroom citizenship and study habits. By the second quarter, he gained confidence in himself and his writing and became an independent writer, setting and meeting goals. Although this student comes from a large family of eleven children, he does a wonderful job of relating his family values of respect, hard work, and cooperation in his daily life. The reason I chose this student is because by second quarter his writing reflected many aspects of his rich cultural background.

First quarter. Student A chose a story about an experience in first grade: His class went on a field trip to a pumpkin patch (see Figure 1). He got his story idea from a chart of writing topics the class had generated.

Figure 1

First-Quarter Selection

One day I went to the  
pumpkin patch and I had  
candy.

Although this first contribution lacked the story organization of beginning, middle and ending, Student A was off to a good start. He used many visual aids in the room to correctly spell words. Words, such as “and,” “went,” “the,” “to,” “one,” and “day,” were located on classroom word walls. “Pumpkin patch” and “candy” were on our monthly chart of writing topics. He also had knowledge that “I” is a proper pronoun; thus it is always capitalized. He showed knowledge of beginning, middle and ending sounds, for example, “had” was spelled correctly. Student A had knowledge of sentence structure. The word “went” was used to show past tense; the conjunction “and” was used to connect two sentences.

During the first quarter portfolio conference, Students A reflected on

his writing piece. Since this student was only beginning to write, he dictated his reflection to the teacher (see Figure 2). He said that he chose the piece because he had so much fun visiting the pumpkin patch. He also decided that his future goal was to write longer pieces.

Figure 2

Self-reflection on First-Quarter Selection

What I Like About This Piece: "I like the  
Pumpkin Patch"

What I Learned: NA

What I Need to Work On: Write more



Second quarter. By second quarter, Student A had seen improvement in his writing. During the conference, Student A addressed some specific areas of improvement. He noticed that he was writing longer stories and that he was beginning sentences with capital letters and ending some sentences correctly with periods (see Figure 3).

Figure 3

Second-Quarter Selection

One day in <sup>Mexico</sup> mixco I saw a  
<sup>turtle</sup> trto I <sup>picked</sup> plet it up and put it in  
<sup>water</sup> the watr. ~~When~~ I went to bed. When  
 I wake up I went outside. The <sup>turtle</sup> trto  
 was <sup>not</sup> ent <sup>there</sup> der and I never find it.

In this selection, Student A recalled an incident that happened during his summer vacation in Mexico. His story had a logical sequence of ideas. Its plot had a beginning, middle and ending. He used correct punctuation.

Some areas that needed additional support was the spelling of “r” inflected words - - “trto” for “turtle” and “watr” for “water.” He made a spelling error common to many Spanish-speaking students: They hear and write “d” for “th” sounds, such as “der” for “there.” Also, the student used present tense for past tense words as in “wake” for “woke” and “find” for “found.”

After reflecting on this piece, Student A was pleased that he had met his goal of writing longer pieces. He concluded that his future goals were to add more detail to his stories so they would be longer and to write titles for his stories (see Figure 4).

Figure 4

Self-reflection on Second-Quarter Selection

What I Like About This Piece: I like  
turtles

What I Learned: to write more

What I Need to Work On: write more and  
write titles

Third quarter. This student has brought a new awareness to his writing: He includes his rich Mexican beliefs in his stories. In order to understand his story, the audience needs to be familiar with the culture's oral storytelling tradition. These stories have been passed down from generation to generation (see Figure 5).

Figure 5

Third-Quarter Selection

The falling Star

One day in The nite a star fall  
 from the Scie<sup>sky</sup> <sup>o</sup> my Sistr went  
 to get the Star den she<sup>then</sup> put the Star up in  
 the closet. Then ~~went~~ she took a nap <sup>o</sup> When she woke up  
 the star <sup>wasn't</sup> wasant der. She tried to find it <sup>and</sup> she  
 Never found it.

When I first read this story, it reminded me of a “cuento,” (a story passed on orally), that my grandmother told me about falling stars. It is believed that a falling star is really a guardian angel who is sent to watch over a new child or a sick child. When I asked Student A about this story, he was surprised that we shared the same “cuento.” He told me that his mother had recently had another baby and that his little brother was a little sick that day. He insisted that the events of the story were true and that his sister saved the day by picking up the star and making it a part of their home. This child also believed that the star saved his brother because the star disappeared once his brother was well. The story reflected one purpose of storytelling in an oral culture that is to interpret conflict. This boy’s story indicated his concern for family members.

The student wrote his reflection for the piece independently for the first time. In recalling his second quarter goal, he was succeeding in writing longer sentences and had added a title to the story. He had begun to use the correct tense as seen at the end of the piece. The story also followed a sequential order of events by using words, such as “one day” and “then” to make connections. He also self corrected a mistake by first writing “den” for “then” but later writes it correctly. The students self analysis is shown in Figure 6.

Figure 6

Self-reflection on Third-Quarter Selection

What I Like About This Piece: it rely

h apin

What I Learned: to rite titls

and check periods

What I Need to Work On: check for

capitls

It is obvious that this student has been successful in meeting his goal of adding titles to his stories and checking for periods. He also did a wonderful job on reflecting on his work and setting new goals.

Fourth quarter. By the end of the school year, Student A was very proud of his progress and was so impressed with the growth he had made from the beginning of the year to the end. He said he enjoyed writing and will continue to do so during the summer.

Student A had become highly interested in writing "cuentos" related to the events in his life. This final selection also showed the contribution of his culture (see Figure 7).

Figure 7

Fourth-Quarter Selection

The Witch  
One <sup>night</sup> that we were playing outside, and my sister looked by a tree and she saw a <sup>witch</sup> wesk. My sister <sup>told</sup> told my mom. ~~What~~ it is that and she thought that it was a plane. But it ~~didn't~~ <sup>have</sup> had lites. And my mom told ~~to~~ my dad and he saw it when it was far.

In the Mexican culture it is very common to hear cuentos about witches. After discussing the story with Student A, the witch in his story was called "La Llorana." Long, long ago a woman was out by the river and drowned her two children. It was not known why she drowned them, but it is believed that this woman went crazy and wandered around wailing and searching for her children. She was commonly seen where there were small children or newborns. La Llorona appeared in different forms, such as a flaming fire, a bright light, a beautiful woman, or an old lady.

La Llorona usually wears black and hides her face with a shawl. In the student's story, La Llorona was out trying to harm his little sister. Apparently, the family went outside to play, and the baby daughter was in her playpen not too far from the others. While the family was having fun, La Llorona appeared thinking no one was watching the baby. Once the sister in the story alarmed them, the family began to pray. Student A concluded that it was La Llorona and prayer is one of the ways to get rid of her. Although many may believe that this story is a fantasy and is related to traditional stories of Mexico, the true cultural element of storytelling is evident. Such is the rich Mexican culture that has been passed on from generation to generation.

The analysis of the student's writing revealed that he focused on an original topic and developed a complete linear plot with a beginning, middle and ending. The student wrote in complete sentences with correct punctuation. He understood the tenses of past and present. The student

made an attempt to use some complicated words even though he made some spelling errors. For example, he wrote “nithgt” for “night” and “wesh” for witch. It is important to reflect on this student’s language acquisition in which the “ch” sound is heard and written like “sh” as in the word witch. Overall, this student’s story organizational abilities, sentence structure, and writing mechanics have improved.

On his label, he shared the importance of including his family in his story writing. He wanted to share the love and joy he felt when he was with his family (see Figure 8). As noted in his previous label, he had once again successfully accomplished his goal of checking for capitals. His pride and awareness of his rich cultural beliefs influenced a future goal of writing more “cuentos.”



Figure 8

Self-reflection on Fourth-Quarter Selection

What I Like About This Piece: It has my  
family

What I Learned: to chage verds

What I Need to Work On: rite more  
Cuentos

Student B

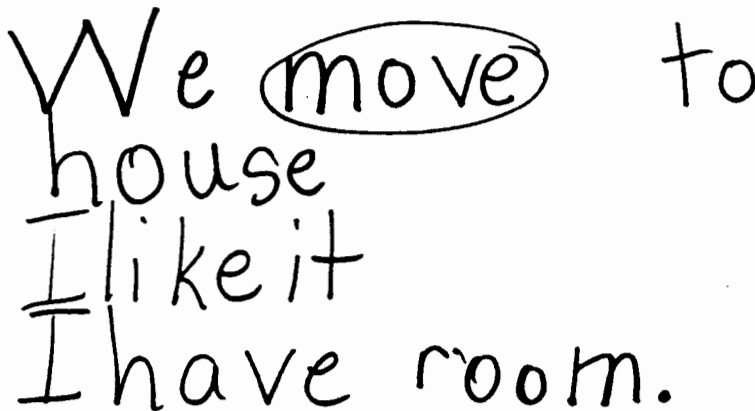
Student B has been in school for two years and was still limited in the English language. Although this student is predominately Spanish-speaking, he is a very eager and quick learner. He is the oldest of four children. Since written language was a problem for all family members, reading and writing was not reinforced in the home.

At the beginning of the school year, Student B could only identify a few basic sight words and approximately half of the letters and sounds in the English language. He was very hesitant to write independently. My paraprofessional and I gave him additional assistance to help him gain confidence and independence. He relied a great deal on the word wall, his personal list of writing topics, and the picture file in his writing attempts.

First Quarter. Student B's first contribution was about moving in to a new house (Figure 9). He was very excited about moving from an apartment to a house and getting his own room

Figure 9

First-Quarter Selection



We move to  
house  
I like it  
I have room.

In this selection it was obvious that this student had limited English writing abilities. His story had some sequential order. Although this

student had omitted articles, such as “the” and “a,” he did understand that “T” when in isolation is capitalized. He had also started his story with a capital and ended with a period, but he still needed to work on punctuation.

The conference was conducted mostly in Spanish; therefore, his comments were translated (see Figure 10). He was unable to set a goal, even when he was asked in Spanish.

Figure 10

Self-reflection on First-Quarter Selection

What I Like About This Piece: that we got  
to move and I like my house

What I Learned: N/A

What I Need to Work On: unable to respond

Second Quarter. Student B decided to submit a published piece as his second contribution to his portfolio (see Figure 11). Although his story had originality, he did receive additional support with punctuation and capitalization. He had written an imaginative story with an organized plot - - a beginning, middle and ending. He still needs to work on sentence structure to enhance the quality of his writing.

Figure 11

Second-Quarter Selection

### **The Turkey That Can Fly**

The turkey can not fly. he eat magic corn.  
Now he fly sometimes. The corn did work.  
He eat more to fly. He like to fly.

After selecting this piece as his second contribution to his portfolio, Student B was able to conduct most of the conference in English (see Figure 12). He was able to state that he chose to write this story because he got his idea after listening to a story I wrote about the turkey that could not gobble. He also noted that he needed lots of help with capitals and punctuation. Therefore, he concluded that his goal would be to work on capitals and periods.

Figure 12

Self-reflection on Second-Quarter Selection

What I Like About This Piece: "I like story  
you write"

What I Learned: about turkeys

What I Need to Work On: capitals and  
periods

Third Quarter. By the third quarter, Student B was writing independently. He had recently received a remote control car for his birthday, and he brought it for Show-N-Tell. He thought his car was "so cool" that he decided to write a story about it. He worked very hard on this story which took him nearly two weeks to write (see Figure 13). I was amazed to see the progress this child had made from the previous quarter. It was clear that Student B was quickly developing language abilities. His story had a beginning, middle and ending. In his story he used complete sentences, capital letters, and punctuation. He had

also used correct tenses which is a difficult concept for ESL students to grasp on. The title of his story was also clearly related to his story.

Figure 13

Third-Quarter Selection

A Cool Car  
 I was riding a Cool Car.  
 Then I crashed my car. My car was  
 not cool. Then <sup>a</sup>law truck took it  
 to the junk yard.

Although Student B wrote his third-quarter reflection, he still needed some guidance with his analysis (see Figure 14). He believed that he should continue working on capital letters and punctuation. He also said he wanted to write longer stories.

Figure 14

Self-reflection on Third-Quarter Selection

What I Like About This Piece: The Cool  
car

What I Learned: sum periods

What I Need to Work On: capitals and  
periods

his writing and speaking abilities. I was impressed with this child's determination to overcome his language barrier. He was successfully able to carry on a conversation in English with both his peers and his teacher. I noticed that Student B's success in incorporating the feedback he received from the Sharing Circle into his oral language and writing. He reacted positively towards the feedback.

Student B's final portfolio contribution was a story about his uncle's new pony in Mexico. He had written this story shortly after completing a fairy tale unit in which the elements were discussed. He took a creative twist to his story by starting it with "Once upon a time" (see Figure 15). I was amazed to see how much new information this child was relating to his writing. By looking at this final portfolio contribution,

it was even difficult to identify this student as a second language learner. His story clearly had a beginning, middle and ending to it. Although he wrote simple sentences, they are clearly written. He has few spelling errors, and several punctuation omissions.

Figure 15

Fourth-Quarter Selection

A Papa Horse And A Little Horse

One supunu time there was a big horse and a little horse. Papa said to go to sleep but the little horse said I do not want to sleep then it ~~wa~~ started to rain. The little horse said ok ~~he said~~. Then he went to sleep.

Student B filled out his self-reflection without assistance. By the time it was his turn to conference, he had already completed his statements. By the end of second grade, he was writing goals that reflected his learning and achievement (see Figure 16).



Figure 16

Self-reflection on Fourth-Quarter Selection

What I Like About This Piece: The new  
little horse

What I Learned: to put capitals  
and periods

What I Need to Work On: rite  
more and taking mark

## Conclusions

Using writing portfolios for the first time was truly a positive experience. Not only were writing portfolios beneficial for me but also for my students. The students and I were able to use the portfolios as an assessment tool to set goals, monitor progress, and meet instructional needs. In using writing portfolios, it is essential to include several supportive techniques: journaling, mini-lessons, read alouds and conferences to facilitate this assessment process.

As I reflect on the writing of Student A and Student B throughout the school year, not only did they make progress in writing but in their linguistic ability as well. It was amazing to see the progress these two

students made as the year progressed. Both students learned to be risk-takers: They proved to themselves that a language barrier cannot stop them from becoming wonderful speakers and writers. They developed stories that had a structured plot - - beginning, middle and ending. These students quickly learned English writing conventions; at the end of the school year they used capital letters and punctuation appropriately. They also learned to use references to assist in spelling.

The parents responded positively to their children's writing portfolios. On Portfolio Sharing Night in May, the students had an opportunity to share their portfolio with family and friends. Students took responsibility for the night's activities by providing an inviting atmosphere for their guests. The parents were impressed with the evening. They commented on their children's growth as speakers and writers. Many parents expressed the belief that the portfolio collection was a better assessment tool than report cards.

The students led the conferences at the end of the school year. Within this experience, the parents also saw how proud their children were of their growth. Many students had to serve as interpreters which extended the learning experience. At the end of the conference, the parents were asked to respond to their children's portfolios. Examples of comments were: "I was very proud of your work," and "You are doing a very good job." Other comments were "You are learning a lot," and "I can't believe you wrote all that."

I truly believe that writing portfolios should be used by all teachers as part of their assessment techniques. I plan to share my learning experience in using writing portfolios with co-workers. I look forward to using portfolios in the future.

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