

# Turning a New Light on Assessment with LinguaFolio

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## Introduction

This article aims to reshape the prevailing negative perception of assessment into one of a positive and powerful tool to guide learning, teaching and advocacy. Emphasis is placed on the importance of becoming assessment-literate, developing a balanced assessment system, using assessment results to motivate learners and mold instruction, and sharing data to inform stakeholders and advocate for language learning. Key to this new perspective is the recognition that daily classroom activities can be formative assessments in and of themselves. They have the potential, through systematic feedback and the use of reflective learning tools, like LinguaFolio, for guiding students to monitor and map their own learning.

## Changed Perceptions of Assessment

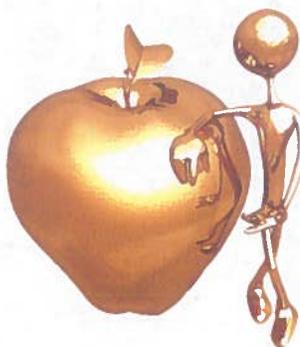
Teachers, parents, and students frequently bristle when they hear the word assessment. So negative are some of the reactions to state and federally mandated testing that we have all but forgotten the positive impact assessment can have on teaching, learning and promoting language programs. Current research suggests that when they view assessment as a learning tool, teachers are more likely to integrate authentic assessments into their lessons and alter how they organize learning experiences (Williams, 2006). The negative attitude toward testing may be a result of testing used by government as an instrument for accountability and not as a learning tool. Fifteen years ago, states such as Kentucky and Vermont were on a different course with statewide assessments taking the form of portfolios in writing and mathematics and performance events in science, math, social studies and the arts. Early results showed teachers spent more time training students to think critically and solve complex problems than previously (What the research, 1996).

Today many of those alternative open-ended, large-scale assessments have been abandoned and testing has become standardized. The No Child Left Behind (NCLB) Act has driven teachers toward designing instruction to help students "pass the test", rather than engineering creative and critical thinking learning environments. Many world language teachers have felt a trickle down effect

from NCLB: some are asked to contribute to students' test readiness by incorporating general statewide testing practices in their own assessments, others feel the need to fight to maintain their programs when funding is diverted to tested content areas. Without significant assessment data to make a strong case, many more programs could be in jeopardy when resources tighten (Keatley, 2006).

Throughout this period of test-driven teaching, leaders in the world language profession have responded to the need to demonstrate student progress and proficiency by choosing to view assessment as a learning tool. This stance focuses attention on integrated performance tasks, oral interviews, portfolios, collaborative projects and other alternative assessments. Assessments such as these can be particularly beneficial for young learners (McKay, 2006; Shohamy, 1998). Integrated assessments, which are activities that blend content and language in real world tasks, make learning meaningful to students and provide comfortable, and at times, playful, opportunities for contextual language output. They bring a more balanced approach to assessment and have a positive effect on achievement, because students perceive them as activities rather than tests, and consequently, they perform in a more relaxed, stress-free manner, self-correcting. Implementing such assessment experiences often has the effect of increasing teachers' use of the target language in class and improving student motivation. Instruction becomes more student-centered and sparks student-initiated activities.

Current trends in education emphasize the importance of this type of formative assessment that offers a snapshot of what students know in order to make responsive changes in teaching and learning (Wiggins, 2004; Pellegrino, Chudowsky, & Glaser, 2006). Formative assessment provides a



balance to assessment systems and turns attention to a type of teaching that looks more like managing learning than teaching. Reframing how we think about assessment can positively affect how teachers shape curriculum, plan lessons and guide students' learning. Dylan Williams (2006) purports that improvement in student achievement will be result from what happens in these newly constructed learning environments.

To gain greater ground we need compelling data. Dr. Carolyn Taylor's study shows that foreign language students significantly outperformed their non-foreign language counterparts on every subtest of the Louisiana state assessment and the language portion of the fifth-grade Iowa Basic Skills Test (2003). Preliminary data from Dr. Adeidine Moeller's longitudinal study of the effects of LinguaFolio on student achievement suggest a positive effect on achievement from self-assessment and goal setting (personal conversation, September 26, 2006). A balanced assessment system is vital for generating the necessary scientific data to maintain current programs, make systemic program improvements and advocate for new world language programs.

Therefore assessment can be an essential tool to: diagnose key areas for improvement, describe achievement and progress, manage and assist learning, improve curriculum and instruction, validate program design, facilitate articulation, and advocate for language learning.

## Assessment Literacy

Acknowledging the need to reframe our perceptions of assessment signifies half of the challenge; applying this new perspective to practice is the other crucial aspect. To build a successful balanced assessment program, teachers need to be assessment literate, that is to know what assessment tools are available and to understand which particular types of instruments should be used for what purposes. A variety of assessments is fundamental to providing a comprehensive overview of a student competence and making learning transparent to students, parents and other stakeholders. Different assessments address different needs and purposes. Many of the simple, daily, classroom activities can serve as assessments to inform planning and motivate learners. After assessment instruments are selected and implemented, the next step is to analyze the results and interpret the findings to inform instructional decision-making. Adopting this new assessment perspective does not imply more time for teachers, rather a redirection of teacher energy to adapt instruction based on the results of assessment.

Leaders in the field (O'Malley & Valdez Pierce, 1996; Donato, 1998; Tollefson, 2005; McKay, 2006) agree that teachers need to use a suite of assessments in order to provide

a comprehensive view of students' knowledge and performance. Generally, assessments can be categorized in the following manner:

**Diagnostic** assessments identify problem areas, such as reading, language and cognitive skills. Information gained from diagnostic tests provides guidance for student placement or strategic intervention.

**Achievement** tests examine students' mastery over what was taught. Not limited to paper-pencil tests, this type of assessment often focuses on discrete points, covers specific content and allows for a perfect score. Norm referenced, achievement tests compare students' performance. In the past, achievement tests were principal determining factors in the assignment of grades. Achievement tests may be considered formative if conducted on an ongoing basis and used to inform teaching and learning.

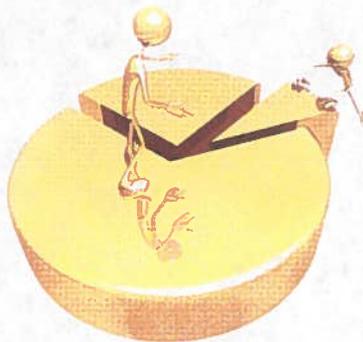
**Proficiency** tests identify, globally, what students know and can do with the language. The content on a proficiency test is not limited to what was taught in the classroom. Criterion-referenced, proficiency tests compare students' overall language competence to a standard, such as the ACTFL K-12 Performance Guidelines or state or district standards.

**Prochievement** assessments, a performance-based hybrid of proficiency and achievement tests, measure students' progress toward identified proficiency goals. More than the ordinary tool, they provide a meaningful context and real-life simulation.

**Summative** assessment is a comprehensive check of what students have learned at the end of a lesson, unit, or course. Based on a cumulative learning experience, summative assessment is testing for achievement and, depending on age and level, can take the form of performance tasks, oral interviews, written reports, projects or role-plays.

**Formative** assessment encompasses of many of the ordinary learning tasks students do on a routine basis. Formative assessment provides on-going, continuous snapshots of knowledge used to monitor progress, give student feedback, modify curriculum and adjust learning experiences. Examples of formative assessment include anecdotal records, observations, interviews, performance tasks, written work, worded graphics, and journals.

**Peer-Assessment** encourages students to think deeply about the various elements of language competency when they rate other students' performances and products against specific criteria. With well-designed rubrics, students can analyze and discuss language use and provide feedback to one another. Peer-Assessment helps student understand as-





assessment criteria, increase their evaluation skills, and develop autonomy.

**Self-Assessment** provides structure for students to reflect on their own performance, competencies and learning. Well-designed rubrics, checklists, guided discussions and examples of self-assessments enhance students' awareness of criteria for evaluation and quality of work. Students learn how to talk about language, set goals and take responsibility for their own learning. A new tool designed for developing learning awareness and self-assessment skills in early language learners is *LinguaFolio Junior*.

## Self-Assessment through LinguaFolio

Research has shown that self-assessment increases student motivation, builds learning awareness in students, sustains their engagement in deep learning, and demystifies language learning (McKay, 2006; Little, 2002). *LinguaFolio Junior* is a self-assessment tool that starts early language learners on the course of reflective learning. Older FLES students or young students at a high language proficiency level through immersion instruction, may benefit from the secondary school version of *LinguaFolio*.

A project sponsored by the National Council of State Supervisors (NCSSFL), *LinguaFolio* is an instrument that allows learners to record and reflect on their language and cultural competencies. Based on the European Language Portfolio, *LinguaFolio* provides an excellent vehicle for developing self-assessment and reflective learning skills and strategies. It has been proven effective for use with English and foreign language learners in FLES and immersion programs (Little & Perclovà, 2001; Little & Ushioda, 2002).

*LinguaFolio* is composed of three parts: the language biography, the dossier and the passport.

The **Language Biography** is a record of the child's language learning history and cultural interaction, a personal examination of learning strategies, and a reflection on learning goals. It includes two approaches to self-assessment, one with *Can-Do* statements that very young learners can circle (e.g., I can sing a song, I can understand if you tell me how old you are, I can write labels on things), the other with *Can-Do* statements that can be checked off and dated (e.g., I can talk about things I like and dislike, I can understand everyday public signs). The *Can-Do* self-assessment demystifies language learning by clearly defining what students can do in simple terms and allowing learners to pinpoint their competencies on the language-learning continuum.

Besides assessing their language competence, learners also assess and reflect upon their interculturality. This is a term used by the Council of Europe to describe meaningful interaction with individuals from target language countries. It implies an understanding of culture, one's own and the

foreign culture, and a use of the proper cultural behaviors with or without language. Early language learners build their interculturality skills first through awareness, by beginning to recognize cultural products, practices and perspectives in their own homes and communities.

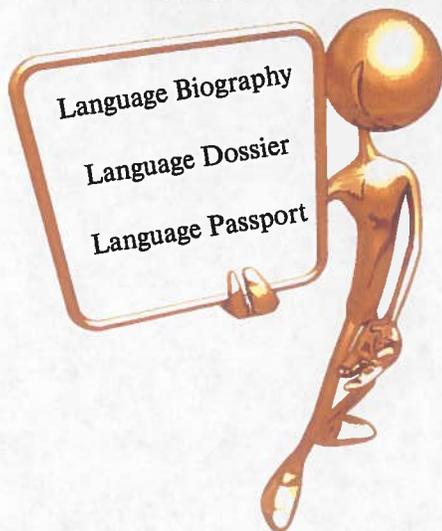
To develop self-assessment skills students require guidance through an intentional step-by-step process. Self-assessment has to be learned through on-going direct instruction. Self-assessment does not have to be a lengthy process, but the more frequently students self-assess the better they become.

Reflective learning is a vital component of the Language Biography. Students begin to think about their learning strategies and process by answering questions like:

"What helps me understand when I read words in another language?" or "What activities help me pronounce words like my teacher says them?" Teachers are able to incorporate what they learn into planning differentiated instructional methods that address the needs of all their students. Subsequent questions in the Language Biography deal with goal setting that encourages autonomy in learners by forcing them to think about what they will have to do to meet their goals. Using the target language for reflective questions builds capacity for self-directed, negotiated language learning (Kohonen & Westhoff, 2001; Little & Perclovà, 2001). Like self-assessment, reflective learning is not intuitive and must be taught daily.

The **Language Dossier** is a collection of pieces of work and award or participation certificates chosen by the child to document and illustrate language skills, experiences, and achievements that demonstrate their language abilities to others. *LinguaFolio* belongs to the learner, so children make their own choices as to which works comprise the dossier. This establishes a feeling of ownership and strengthens their sense of responsibility for their own learning. Possible items in the dossier include: drawings, songs, rhymes, dialogues, illustrated stories, self-made picture books, e-mail messages, postcards and letters from pals or partner schools, a hand-made dictionary, or video and audio recordings.

The **Language Passport** is an official document that records a summary of experiences and achievements, and reports competency levels based on a scale reflective of the *ACTFL K-12 Performance Guidelines*, the SOPA rating scale, and the *Common European Framework of Reference* (ACTFL, 1998; Council of Europe, 2001). Information in the Passport can be updated frequently by the learner. The Passport can be shown when students transfer from school to school, level to level or teacher to teacher. In this way it facilitates articulation and makes language learning transparent to a wider audience of stakeholders.



## How to Use LinguaFolio

The web site of the National Council of State Supervisors for Languages - [www.ncssfl.org](http://www.ncssfl.org) provides links to two LinguaFolio pilot projects from which all pages of the Biography, Passport and Dossier

can be downloaded for student use. Teachers may choose to participate in the research study of the five-state (Virginia, Kentucky, South Carolina, North Carolina, Georgia) pilot or the Nebraska pilot, or use the documents on their own. Additional links are included for information about the European Language Portfolio (ELP) and LinguaFolio-related professional development activities. A downloadable Power Point presentation is also available on the web site.

European research has shown that both teachers and learners need time and training to experience success with portfolio self-assessment (Little, 2001). Taking a cue from the LinguaFolio's "Can-Do" statements and reflective learning surveys, teachers can begin by integrating into their lessons short activities that heighten students' awareness of their competencies and learning. In the following example students use a checklist to identify what they are capable of doing with language after a lesson on numbers.

What can I do with numbers?

I can count to 100.	Easily	With Help
I can understand when someone tells me their phone number.	Easily	With Help
I can use numbers to tell someone how much something costs.	Easily	With Help
I can call the numbers in a Bingo game.	Easily	With Help

Teachers can help students develop insight into their individual learning styles and strategies by asking probing questions, such as:

1. Which activities did you like the most in this lesson? Why?
2. What did you do to learn/remember the new vocabulary?

3. What do you do when you can't remember the exact word you want to say?

The same strategies also help learners grasp the concept of interculturality. For example, when a native speaker visits the class, students can share their reactions:

1. What did you learn about the speaker's interests? Are they the same as yours, as those of other people you know? Why or why not?
2. How do you react when you hear someone with an accent in the target language different from your teacher's accent?

When teachers consistently encourage inquiry into cultural attitudes, learning process and language competencies, they help students build the skills that allow them to accurately self-assess and ultimately become autonomous learners. Learner autonomy is the goal of LinguaFolio, as well as an underlying motive for changing the perception of assessment.

## Conclusion

Facing the challenges of a high stakes, assessment-driven, educational environment that threatens to cut programs and impede learning, many world language teachers struggle with professional realities. At the same time, teachers have the opportunity to control their plight and, in fact, turn it to their advantage by reframing the perception of assessment. A powerful tool, assessment can foster enormous change in teaching, learning and program design and growth. Well-constructed assessment systems that balance instrument types and examine learning with the intent to improve empowers independent learning.

In order to embrace this notion of assessment and apply it consistently means that teachers must be willing to become assessment-literate, develop the ability to recognize assessment opportunities in real life classroom-based tasks, create engaging formative assessments with rubrics that clearly define expectations, and guide learners through self-exploration experiences that lead to autonomous learning. As a result, we may discover assessment to be our most powerful advocacy tool.

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## Positions of the National Network for Early Language Learning

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The National Network for Early Language Learning (NNELL) is an educational community providing leadership in support of successful early language learning and teaching. Since its inception in 1987, NNELL continues to be an invaluable resource for educators, parents and policy makers in advocating K-8 programs of excellence in second language education.

### Language Aptitude Testing for Early Language (P-8) Learners (2006)

All children are capable of learning other languages in the early grades when provided opportunities for quality instruction by teachers with high expectations for all students, including those with diverse needs. The belief of teachers, administrators and parents that there is a broad spectrum of talent and potential in the world language classroom and that students can and will succeed in learning a world language often makes it possible for students to succeed. This is further supported by second language acquisition research that justifies the inclusion of all students as language learners. As such, the need for aptitude testing of early language learners is not warranted within the context of these core beliefs. Equity of access to early language learning can no longer be denied to students solely based on the results of aptitude tests if we are to provide learners with the long sequences of instruction necessary to successfully interact with peoples of other cultures in the diverse communities in which we live and work.

