

# A Framework for Portfolio Assessment in the Foreign Language Classroom

Jennifer S. Delett  
*The George Washington University*

Sarah Barnhardt  
*Community College of Baltimore County*

Jennifer A. Kevorkian  
*Beltsville Academic Center*

**Abstract:** Although foreign language teachers are well-acquainted with the benefits of portfolio assessment, many teachers report difficulties implementing portfolios successfully in their classrooms (Barnhardt et al., 1998; Calfee & Perfumo, 1993; Herman et al., 1996; Padilla et al., 1996). This article outlines a framework for portfolio assessment. This framework offers foreign language teachers a model for systematically designing and implementing assessment portfolios and gives them a tool with which to conduct further research on the assessment technique. The framework guides teachers through important technical decisions, such as setting the purpose, identifying clear objectives, and establishing meaningful criteria for portfolio assessment. Other issues discussed include determining portfolio contents, organizing the portfolio, and monitoring and evaluating the process.

## Introduction

The recent emphasis in foreign language education on student performance has resulted in a reevaluation of instruction and assessment approaches. In the area of assessment, teachers have turned to techniques that underscore student participation and progress. Portfolios are one of the alternative assessment tools that teachers have adopted.

Teachers from many disciplines have embraced portfolios because of their potential benefits for learning. These benefits are well-known: Portfolios provide a portrait of what students know and what they can do, offer a multidimensional perspective of student progress over time, encourage student self-reflection and participation, and link instruction and assessment. (See O'Malley & Valdez Pierce, 1996, and Genesee & Upshur, 1996, for detailed descriptions of the advantages of portfolio assessment).

Less well known, but equally persuasive, are the benefits that satisfy the specific needs of foreign language education. First, language performance depends on purpose and context (Hancock, 1994). Portfolios are flexible tools that allow for frequent opportunities to practice and demonstrate authentic language use in relevant contexts and for specific purposes. Second, language development occurs at different rates through a series of trials and errors. Through well-designed portfolios, students can document the process of trial and error in an area of lan-

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Jennifer S. Delett (MEd, The George Washington University) is Assistant Director of The National Capital Language Resource Center at The George Washington University, Washington, DC. Sarah Barnhardt (MA, The George Washington University) is Assistant Professor at the Community College of Baltimore County, Maryland. Jennifer A. Kevorkian (EdD candidate, The George Washington University) is an ESOL Specialist at the Beltsville Academic Center, Beltsville, Maryland.

guage development, such as progress using a new language structure or inducing a rule. Third, language proficiency includes a complex set of thinking skills (National Standards, 1996). While reading in a second language, for example, students actively process the contents of the passage; selectively attend to interesting elements, relate new information to what they already know or understand from the text, infer the meaning of unknown words from the context, and reflect on the text relative to their original purposes in reading (Valencia & Pearson, 1987). These thinking processes can be documented through self-assessment, goal-setting, and the kind of reflective statements typical of portfolio assessments (Gomez et al., 1991, Keiffer & Faust, 1994). Finally, language proficiency is holistic and focuses on communicative and functional language abilities as well as the attainment of discrete skills (Moya & O'Malley, 1994). An assessment, such as the portfolio, that includes both tests and classroom tools can determine student strengths and weaknesses. Portfolio assessment responds to the multifaceted nature of language development.

Although foreign language educators are well acquainted with the virtues of portfolios, many teachers report difficulties designing and using them effectively (Barnhardt et al., 1998). Data gathered by the National Capital Language Resource Center (NCLRC)<sup>1</sup> indicate that teachers encounter technical and logistical obstacles when using portfolios, including managing their time, organizing and assessing the portfolios, and achieving reliability and validity. Data also indicate teachers' uncertainty about the function and value of portfolio assessment. Other researchers report similar findings (Calfee & Perfumo, 1993; Herman et al., 1996; Padilla et al., 1996).

Portfolios can assist teachers in monitoring and evaluating student performance; however, teachers need to understand the portfolio's primary role. Portfolio assessment is an ongoing, interactive assessment that actively involves both the teacher and the student in the process of learning. With the recent shift in foreign language education away from teacher-centered instruction, the focus now situates on learner capabilities. In this environment, both teachers and students find themselves in new roles with new responsibilities. Portfolios are one means of developing a learner-centered classroom. Well-designed portfolios offer students the opportunity to become actively involved in the learning process by contributing to instructional planning and assessment. Portfolios promote student responsibility for and ownership of learning (Genesee & Upshur, 1996). Portfolios are most useful as tools for assessing progress in language development by establishing a partnership between teachers and students in the language classroom.

In addition to grasping the value of a portfolio as an

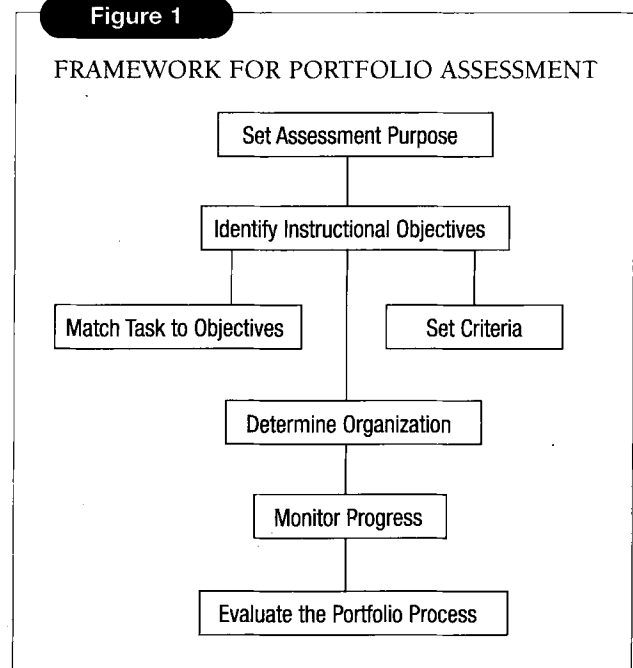
interactive assessment tool rather than a grading device, teachers must have a solid understanding of the portfolio process to achieve success. Attention must be given to technical decisions, such as determining the purpose of the portfolio, identifying the important outcomes, and establishing clear, fair, and meaningful criteria for assessment (Herman et al., 1996). Portfolios can only be an effective measure of progress if a systematic process is followed. By attending to these important issues, educators can create high-quality portfolio assessment that provides accurate information about students.

This article presents foreign language educators with a framework for the design and implementation of portfolio assessment. The purpose of the framework is to help teachers understand the portfolio process, overcome the associated technical challenges, and attain the benefits of portfolio assessment. The framework is the result of a three-year (1996–1999) project<sup>2</sup> conducted by the NCLRC.

## Framework Overview

The framework for portfolio assessment consists of seven steps: (1) planning the assessment purpose, (2) determining portfolio outcomes, (3) matching classroom tasks to outcomes, (4) establishing criteria for assessment, (5) determining organization, (6) monitoring the portfolio, and (7) evaluating the portfolio process (see Figure 1). This is a general sequence that can be modified to allow teachers to return to and reflect on each step as needed to refine the design. For example, a teacher begins by setting the assessment purpose; however, the purpose can be revised as outcomes and criteria are set. The framework

Figure 1



gives teachers enough control to create an assessment tool that is appropriate for their students and their instruction.

The framework is designed to meet the needs of a broad range of foreign language teachers and students. Elementary teachers as well as university instructors can use it. It is appropriate for students of Italian as well as students of Japanese, and it can be used for a class of beginners or the most advanced students. The flexibility of the framework means that it can be used in any instructional context.

Although the framework is flexible, it is designed to create a systematic assessment process. Making technical decisions about the portfolio leads to a methodical design (Herman & Winters, 1994). The emphasis that the model places on planning helps ensure that the portfolio is systematic. The first five steps of the framework (plan purpose, determine outcomes, match tasks to outcomes, determine criteria, plan organization) comprise the planning phase. Teachers and students should complete these steps before beginning to use portfolios. For teachers, this preparation will encourage organization, which will result in less work to maintain the portfolios during the semester and allow for more instructional time. For students, involvement will result in feelings of empowerment, motivation, and ownership. Most importantly, for both teachers and students, planning establishes the solid foundation necessary to produce a portfolio that yields useful information about teaching and learning.

## The Framework for Portfolio Assessment

### *Step 1: Plan the Assessment Purpose*

Regardless of the way that an assessment portfolio is used, a clearly stated purpose — one that explains what is being measured and why — is an essential element of implementation. The purpose guides the portfolio process; it helps students and teachers make purposeful decisions about what to include in the portfolio and how to assess it. A lucid purpose statement ensures that the process is a systematic undertaking and not an act of randomly throwing assignments into a folder (Padilla et al. 1996). Determining a clear purpose also helps teachers communicate their reasons for using portfolios to students, parents, and administrators. Finally, the assessment purpose establishes a link between the portfolio and instruction, which increases the likelihood that the assessment will inform instruction and therefore improve learning.

There are many purposes for using portfolio assessment in the foreign language classroom. The following examples illustrate an array of possibilities:

- A language department has begun to focus on oral communication skills, and teachers in the department begin to use a portfolio system to assess students'

growth in this area.

- Meeting state standards is an important focus in a school district. One teacher decides to implement portfolios to help students learn about the standards and monitor their progress toward the standards.
- A teacher wants students to take more responsibility for learning the target language, so he or she decides to use portfolios as a way to increase students' involvement in the learning process.

These are some sample purposes. In practice, however, teachers usually have multiple purposes for portfolios. One teacher who used portfolios with a class of university-level students learning Spanish, for example, had three goals: to assess students' progress in oral communication, to increase student involvement in learning, and to help students monitor their use of learning strategies. Because a portfolio is an interactive assessment tool, teachers should involve students in articulating the purpose for the portfolio. Discussing the purpose with students of any age or language level is essential to establish ownership and create a valid assessment.

Although each teacher may have unique goals when setting the assessment purposes, the following guiding questions can help a teacher in any context manage the task:

1. Who will be the audience for the portfolio? That is, who will use the portfolio? The students and their teacher are always part of the audience. Parents, administrators, and other stakeholders may also be included. By identifying an audience, teachers can plan contents and criteria so that those who view the portfolio can interpret and use the information appropriately. In some cases, the teacher will want to involve the audience in planning the portfolio or developing rubrics. For example, if another teacher in the department will evaluate the portfolios, that teacher might help determine the criteria.
2. What are the important learning goals of the school or in the classroom? Can a portfolio be used to measure one of these goals? For example, is the focus of the course on improving oral communication skills or strengthening academic writing? Does the curriculum emphasize the target culture? Does the teacher need to work toward state or national standards? In other words, the teacher identifies an aspect of instruction or student learning that can be assessed by using a portfolio.
3. What is the teacher's individual instructional focus? The teacher may recognize specific student needs that are not addressed by the curriculum, but that can be measured by a portfolio, such as improving self-assessment, motivation, or use of learning strategies. These are some of the areas of learning that are

not usually assessed or monitored through other means. The teacher can use portfolios to help students monitor their progress in one of these areas.

### Step 2: Determine Portfolio Outcomes

Once the purpose is agreed upon, teachers and students break down the purpose into important and relevant outcomes. These outcomes provide focus for the portfolio by describing what knowledge or skills learners should be able to demonstrate. For example, one portfolio's purpose is to assess students' progress in oral communication skills and increase use of communication strategies. Outcomes for this portfolio might include the abilities to: (1) express personal preferences and exchange personal information in conversations, (2) create a presentation for classmates, and (3) use a variety of learning strategies to communicate orally. Other outcomes will depend on the teacher's instructional focus and the needs of the students. For example, if the students need to improve their vocabulary use, the portfolio might include this as an outcome. The outcomes of the portfolio, like the purpose, should reflect the curriculum for the assessment to be valid. At the same time, however, the outcomes should be limited and specific so as to make the portfolio process manageable and more likely to succeed.

### Step 3: Match Classroom Tasks to Outcomes

In tandem with identification of portfolio outcomes is an examination of classroom tasks and the curriculum. Classroom activities generate products that become the entries in students' portfolios. Students need to create enough products during the semester so that they have control over selecting entries and so that their portfolios show progress by containing several samples for each outcome. For example, for the outcome of communicating

orally to express personal preferences and exchange information, one student, Maria, may include audiocassettes of a biographical interview, a dialog about favorite foods, and a dialog about sports. Another student, James, may choose to include a different set of entries, such as audiocassettes of a weather dialog, a biographical interview, and a favorite personality interview. When planning portfolios, teachers need to take an inventory of tasks in their curriculum to ensure that there are enough tasks to provide choice and show progress toward each outcome. If there are not, either the outcomes need to be modified or the classroom activities need to be reevaluated (see Figure 2).

The reliability of a portfolio may be strengthened by including evidence from various sources, including the teacher, parents, and peers, as well as the student. To increase reliability, teachers can divide portfolio entries into two categories: *artifacts and attestations* (Johnson, 1996). Artifacts are works produced by the student, such as videotapes of oral presentations, compositions, self-assessments, journal entries, tests, and projects. Artifacts show the student's progress based on his or her perceptions and performance. Attestations come from sources other than the student, such as teachers, peers, or parents, and are supporting evidence of a student's progress. Examples of attestations include peer assessment forms, teacher checklists and observations, and parent comments on the portfolio. The audiotapes included in James' and Maria's portfolios are artifacts. Other artifacts might be note cards, transcripts, self-assessments, and reflective statements. The students might also include attestations, such as teacher assessments of their performances, teacher observation notes, peer assessments, or parent responses in their portfolios (see Figure 3). Incorporating both artifacts and attestations as evidence provides multiple perspectives on students' learning. For

Figure 2

#### MATCHING EVIDENCE TO OUTCOMES

Outcome: Communicate orally to express personal preferences and exchange information

Student	Evidence Toward Outcome
Maria	1. Audiocassette of a biographical interview 2. Audiocassette of dialog about favorite foods 3. Audiocassette of dialog about sports
James	1. Audiocassette of a weather dialog 2. Audiocassette of biographical interview 3. Audiocassette of favorite personality interview

(Students can use different entries to show progress toward the same outcome.)

this reason, many teachers require students to use both artifacts and attestations to document their progress toward outcomes.

#### *Step 4: Determine Organization of the Portfolio*

There are three main tasks related to organization of the portfolio: (1) assessing the materials and resources available, (2) determining how and where to store portfolios, and (3) planning for the systematic collection of the portfolio entries.

First, the teacher must consider what types of materials will be used for portfolio products and whether these materials are available, either from the school or the students. For instance, the teacher may want to include videotapes in a portfolio on oral communication. However, if video equipment is not available on a regular basis, then portfolio entries may be limited to audiocassettes; observation notes; or self-, peer-, or teacher-evaluations instead. Teachers need to have alternative plans if materials are not readily available.

The teacher also needs to determine how students will store their portfolio materials. Each student will need two containers during the process: One will hold possible works for the portfolio, and the other, the actual portfolio, will hold and organize the selected pieces. The type of portfolio and preportfolio containers will depend on the type of student work that is being collected. For example, if students will include videocassettes, a box or other durable container is necessary. If oversized paintings or posters will be selected, students might consider an artist's portfolio case. A small binder would be sufficient for a portfolio that will consist of writing samples only. Decisions about containers and contents are best made at the same time and in collaboration with students.

Thought must also be given to storage of the portfolio containers. Some teachers require that students store and transport their portfolios. This approach fosters student responsibility for the portfolio; nonetheless, it also increas-

es the risk of loss or damage. As a result, many teachers prefer to keep students' portfolios in the classroom. If a teacher has a large classroom, a special space can be designated for organizing portfolios. Keeping portfolios in a common, easily accessible space maintains the connection between the portfolio and instruction; it also facilitates management. If space is limited; though, a teacher must seek out alternative storage space, such as a closet.

Whether the portfolio process will continue for many years or end after one semester, teachers and students must address decisions about what to do with the portfolio at the end of the process. Will students take portfolios home or pass them along to their next teachers? Will teachers keep portfolios for benchmark samples or professional development purposes? The decision, in most cases, will depend on the original purpose. If the purpose of the portfolio is for an entire department to track students' progress in oral communication skills, for example, then portfolios would be passed from one teacher to the next. If a teacher embarks on a portfolio project for a semester, she may keep the portfolios as a way to reflect on and improve her instruction and assessment techniques. Students can also be consulted in this decision. Some students may want to keep their portfolios to continue self-monitoring of progress or to share with their families.

Once materials and resources are determined, the teacher can make decisions regarding organization of artifacts and attestations in the portfolio. Although the criteria for submitting entries will vary among classes, several issues are relevant to all teachers when they are planning this organization.

1. Portfolio entries need to be dated and set in context. Having students complete and attach an annotation form to each work guarantees that the piece will be meaningful (see Appendix A for a sample annotation form). Annotation requires that the student indicate the date of the work (so that progress can be documented) and reflect on the work by relating his or her performance to the instructional context.
2. Portfolios should be organized systematically so that their audience understands why individual pieces were chosen and can evaluate the portfolio as a whole. One way to provide organization, yet still allow for student choice, is through a uniform, preestablished table of contents. Appendix B illustrates how a table of contents determines portfolio organization. The table of contents, which may be divided into mandatory and optional categories as well as artifacts and attestations, gives students responsibility for choosing how they want to represent their progress. Providing a visual structure, such as headings, dividers, and labels, also aids organization and assessment.
3. Teachers need to schedule time for students to select

**Figure 3**

#### SAMPLE ARTIFACTS AND ATTESTATIONS FROM JAMES' AND MARIA'S PORTFOLIOS

Artifacts	Attestations
Audiocassettes	Teacher assessments
Note cards	Teacher observation notes
Transcripts	Peer assessments
Self-assessments	Parent responses
Reflective statements	

and organize entries throughout the semester. For instance, teachers must decide if students will place works in the portfolio every two weeks or once a month. A time line, created before classes begin, can be established for this purpose; the schedule can be written into the syllabus. Regular opportunities for students to contribute to their portfolios ensure that there is ample evidence of student progress.

4. Students should understand that the purpose of the portfolio is to show progress toward an outcome, not necessarily mastery of that outcome. Therefore, every piece does not need to be perfect. Drafts and critical reflections can provide greater insight into progress than a series of perfectly corrected works and should be included when appropriate.

### Step 5: Establish Criteria for Assessment

The portfolio measures progress toward goals by using a consistent system of assessment. Rubrics, which are detailed criteria combined with rating scales, provide this consistency. Before the portfolio process begins, teachers, along with students or others involved in the process, should develop criteria that will be used to assess portfolio entries. Teachers and students should also develop criteria to evaluate the portfolio as a whole.

In the second step of the framework, teachers set outcomes as a way to plan for instruction. At the same time, teachers should develop criteria to assess students' progress towards the outcomes. Teachers establish criteria by determining the dimensions of language learning that will be assessed for each outcome. For example, one outcome for the oral communication portfolio is that students develop the ability to express personal preferences and exchange personal information in conversations. Criteria for assessing progress toward this outcome might focus on organization of ideas, mechanics, or conveyance of meaning. The criteria should be clear and detailed so that the students and the teacher know what the learning goal is and how progress toward the goal will be assessed. Clear and meaningful criteria provide an instructional map for teachers and students and strengthen the reliability of the assessment.

Once the criteria are established, the teacher chooses a rating scale to measure the extent to which a learner has met the criteria. Rating scales use descriptors such as *rarely/sometimes/often/always* or numerical sequences such as *1 to 5* to distinguish degrees of performance. To choose the scale, the teacher determines how many levels of performance are appropriate for the task. Does the task lend itself to a two-level scale such as *yes/no*; a three-level scale such as *excellent/average/poor*; or a five-level scale such as *1 to 5*? Numbers and descriptive words are often used in combination so that the words define the meaning of the

number. For example, the number 1 may be *excellent* on one scale and *poor* on another. It is easier to reach agreement when there are fewer points because it is easier to agree that something is *excellent, good, or fair* than to agree whether it is *excellent, very good, fair, poor, marginal, or unacceptable*. However, fewer points may fail to capture differences in levels of student work and progress over time (Herman et al., 1996).

Benchmark examples of students' work corresponding to each level on the scale help to define the meaning of the scores. Such benchmark examples can also be useful for students before they begin work (see Appendix C for a sample rubric). Teachers should involve students in the process of developing rubrics. Students who help create rubrics have a better understanding of what is expected and are more invested in the task. Students should also use the rubrics. Rating their own or others' performances helps students focus on their goals and monitor their learning.

### Step 6: Monitor the Portfolio Process

Just as students monitor their own progress toward learning goals that have been established in the portfolio, the teacher continually monitors instruction and assessment as portfolios are implemented in the classroom. For example, the teacher must ensure that classroom activities give students an opportunity to produce contents that illustrate their progress toward the outcomes. The teacher also needs to ensure that students have included a sufficient number of samples for raters to accurately evaluate progress.

Monitoring the portfolio is an ongoing part of the portfolio process. If the teacher finds that aspects of the portfolio are not working appropriately, he or she makes adjustments to the portfolio or to instruction. To increase student involvement, students can also monitor the portfolio and suggest changes.

### Step 7: Evaluate the Portfolio Process

In addition to monitoring the process and making adjustments during the portfolio semester, the teacher should also reflect on the assessment process at the end of each semester. To do this, the teacher determines whether the portfolios served the assessment goal and whether the evaluations were accurate and consistent. For instance, if the teacher's purpose was to document progress in speaking and the portfolios do not show progress, then the teacher needs to determine the reason. Perhaps there were not sufficient samples of student work, the rubric was not accurate, or the raters' scoring was subjective. The teacher will want to identify weaknesses in the assessment and/or the instruction and address them before the next semester. Taking time to reflect at semester's end leads to more efficient planning, more informed instruction, and more successful results for the next portfolio project.

## Conclusion

The framework for portfolio assessment described in this article serves two purposes: It gives foreign language teachers a model for systematically designing and implementing assessment portfolios and it provides them with a tool for conducting further research on the assessment technique. The framework provides an assessment system that emphasizes validity and reliability so that the assessment is fair and appropriate for students. The system embeds portfolios in the instructional process so that the purpose, outcomes, and criteria are interrelated. The resulting portfolios create an interactive assessment involving both teachers and learners that forges a partnership in the learning process.

With the shifting emphasis in foreign language education to student performance, the framework for portfolio assessment offers educators an important alternative assessment tool. Portfolios provide evidence of what students know how to do in the target language and how their abilities change over time. As with all assessment tools, however, the portfolio process is one of continual evolution. Teachers need to adapt portfolios to their own situations and document the process so that systematic classroom research on the successes and challenges of portfolios in various educational settings can be conducted.

## Notes

1. The National Capital Language Resource Center is a consortium of Georgetown University, The George Washington University, and the Center for Applied Linguistics. The NCRLC is one of nine Language Resource Centers funded by the U.S. Department of Education to improve and strengthen the nation's capacity to teach and learn foreign languages. The views, opinions, and findings reported are those of the authors and should not be construed as official Department of Education position, policy, or decision unless so designated by other official documentation.

2. The Portfolio Assessment Project was a collaboration between researchers at the NCLRC and a team of foreign language teachers from across the nation. Over a period of two years, the teachers reported on their experiences with portfolio assessment. Their input was used to develop the framework for portfolio assessment and to write the teacher resource manual, *Portfolio Assessment in the Foreign Language Classroom*.

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**Appendix A***Student's Annotation for Artifacts*

Name: \_\_\_\_\_ Today's Date: \_\_\_\_\_

Date(s) Completed: \_\_\_\_\_

1. Please write about the context (unit, lesson) in which you did this work.

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2. What did you learn from doing this work?

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3. Why did you include this piece?

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4. What objective(s) were you working toward when you did this work? Did you meet the objective(s)?

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5. What learning strategies did you use when you were doing this work? Did they help you?

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## Appendix B

### *Portfolio Table of Contents*

Purpose: Assessing student progress in interactive and presentational speaking.		
Student's Name:	Teacher's Name:	
<b>Mandatory Contents: Artifacts</b>	<b>Fall Semester</b>	<b>Spring Semester</b>
1. Reflective statement on self as a language learner		
2. Two samples of an interactive speaking task (video or audio) with annotation		
3. Two samples of a presentational speaking task (video or audio) with annotation		
4. Two self-assessments on speaking tasks		
5. Taped reading aloud (focus on pronunciation) with annotation		
<b>Mandatory Contents: Attestations</b>		
6. Teacher pronunciation assessment checklist		
7. Teacher observation checklist of interactive/presentational speaking tasks		
8. Two peer-assessments of interactive/presentational speaking tasks		
<b>Optional Contents: Artifacts</b>		
1. An additional interactive or presentational speaking task		
2. Taped reading aloud (focus on pronunciation)		
<b>Optional Contents: Attestations</b>		
3. Parent reaction to video or audio sample		
<b>Other:</b>		

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**Appendix C***Cooperative Group Work: Self-Assessment*

Name: \_\_\_\_\_ Date: \_\_\_\_\_

Activity: \_\_\_\_\_

*How often did you do the following things in your group? Circle the word that best describes your level of participation and cooperation.*

- |    |   |       |        |           |       |
|----|---|-------|--------|-----------|-------|
| 1. | I asked questions for information or clarification.                   | never | rarely | sometimes | often |
| 2. | I offered my opinion.   | never | rarely | sometimes | often |
| 3. | I listened to the other group members.                                | never | rarely | sometimes | often |
| 4. | I commented on the ideas of other group members.                      | never | rarely | sometimes | often |
| 5. | I encouraged others to participate.                                   | never | rarely | sometimes | often |
| 6. | I spoke in the target language.                                       | never | rarely | sometimes | often |
| 7. | I fulfilled my role in the group as assigned by the teacher or group. | never | rarely | sometimes | often |

8.	What I liked best about working with this group:
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9.	What was most difficult about working with this group:
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10.	My goal for the next group activity is:
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