

## How can I use Irish language e-portfolios in the assessment for learning approach in my primary classroom?

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### Abstract

This paper investigates the process of assessment *for* learning (AfL) in the primary school Irish language classroom. Electronic portfolios (e-portfolios) are used as a tool in assessment *for* learning with eight of my second class pupils in an urban primary school in North Dublin. This research was carried out as part of the Master of Science in Education and Training Management (e-learning strand) at Dublin City University and was supervised by Dr. Margaret Farren. Some strategies from the literature served as a solid basis from which to develop a framework to organise my own investigation. My action research enquiry is strengthened by the values I hold for my pupils and for my own professional practice, which include the value of self-evaluation, freedom to create in language-learning using technology and the ability to 'share learning' with a peer. Several strategies emerge through the enquiry, which improve with reflection, planning and redrafting. My introduction to the practicalities of implementing electronic portfolios involve identifying appropriate software, dealing with technical difficulties and adapting the portfolios to meet the needs of my pupils. Through the process of critical questioning and action reflection cycles my own professional practice has developed. By seeking to create a living educational theory, I hope these changes have impacted positively on my pupils' learning and involved me in deeper reflection of my own teaching.

**Keywords:** Living theory; Action research; Irish Language; Primary Education; Assessment *for* Learning; Assessment *of* learning; Electronic Portfolio.

## 1. Introduction to assessment in the classroom

### a. What is assessment and why assess?

I will account for different types of assessment and how they are used in the Irish primary curriculum. After introducing the main elements of assessment I will clarify which methods I chose and how they relate to my own educational values.

The [National Council for Curriculum and Assessment](#) (NCCA) works on behalf of Irish primary schools. It defines assessment as ‘the process of gathering, recording, interpreting, using and reporting information about a child’s progress and achievement in developing knowledge, skills and attitudes’ (NCCA, 2007a, p. 7). Assessment is an integral part of teaching and learning, supporting the monitoring of both the process and products in each subject area. Assessment may support the child as an active agent in their own learning and in the social learning that occurs with peers, teachers and the wider community. It is used to ‘scaffold the next steps’ of the pupil’s learning (NCCA, 2004, p. 4). Learning can become more enjoyable, motivating and positive for both pupils and teachers as a result of using assessment effectively (NCCA, 2008).

The National Council for Curriculum and Assessment’s re-envisioning of assessment *for* learning incorporates similar principles and functions to formative assessment. The focus in formative assessment is on the learning process and not the final product as in summative assessment. Teachers are encouraged to balance formative and summative assessment (Black, Harrison, Lee, Marshall and William, 2003; Barrett, 2005a; NCCA, 2007a). I suggest that assessment *for* learning can turn into assessment *of* learning if learning becomes controlled and dictated by the teacher. This challenge is one I faced when implementing some of the methods of assessment *for* learning. I suggest that assessment *for* learning should, in practice, move away from deciding what is significant and what is not in an individual’s learning. There is a danger in assessment always occurring after the learning has taken place and making a tally of what is learned and what is not learned (Biesta, 2008, p. 2). The challenge for me is to move towards a type of continuous assessment in which the individual is allowed to show continuously their individuality and creativity in learning. I had the challenge of facilitating pupils to see for themselves what was significant about their learning.

### b. Summative Assessment and Assessment OF Learning (AoL)

Airaisian (2000) describes summative assessment as the grading and final judgement about the students’ learning at the end-point of instruction. Summative assessment usually entails assessing a pupil’s work at the end of a term or school year. In assessment *of* learning *what* has been learned is being assessed. Formal assessment such as diagnostic testing is an example of assessment *of* learning. It is used for many purposes, such as setting future objectives and situating the level of a pupil’s ability and achievements in relation to others’ (NCCA, 2007a). Pilot-studies have been conducted on the use of formal tests of the Irish language in several primary schools at various stages since 2008. It is intended to

standardize these tests in 2009 and 2010 (Educational Research Centre 2009). I suggest that this paper is an example of a less formal type of assessment for Irish which may be successfully implemented through the use of assessment *for* learning.

### **c. Formative Assessment and Assessment FOR Learning (AfL)**

Formative assessment is the term 'used to describe feedback intended to alter and improve students' learning while instruction is going on' (Airaisian, 2000, p.80). Information that teachers gather during formative assessment can facilitate pupils' needs (Black et. al., 1998b). This suggests that formative assessment helps teachers to differentiate instruction according to the pupil's academic needs. Although raising overall academic standards can be seen as the aim of formative assessment, I wish to explore the personal learning-achievements of my pupils as well their effect on affective learning. Barrett (2005a) suggests that the promotion of learning is the primary purpose of formative assessment. Learning is promoted when pupils are encouraged to take risks and experiment. Young (2005) defines the key element of active engagement in formative assessment. I wish to encourage active engagement and experimentation among my pupils. The introduction of formative assessment and assessment *for* learning will hopefully bring out these qualities, which I relate to my professional values.

The e-portfolio presents an ideal opportunity for pupils to assess a collection of their work over a period of time. Formative assessment plays an important role in the portfolio process (Klenowski, 2002). During portfolio-construction pupils' recognition of their achievements can raise overall achievement. This achievement is authenticated by the teacher as they observe the evidence of a significant achievement (ibid.). The practice of pupils recognising their own significant achievement would be the realisation of some of my living educational values. It would take courage and responsibility for pupils to comment on their own work in front of me and their peers.

### **d. What is assessment for learning?**

Assessment *for* learning forms part of a re-envisioning of traditional assessment (NCCA, 2007a). The NCCA '[Assessment in the Primary School Curriculum Guidelines for Schools](#)' (NCCA, 2007a) adopts two approaches in the re-envisioning of assessment. These two approaches include assessment *of* learning and assessment *for* learning.

Assessment *for* learning encourages the active engagement of the pupil. This active role of the pupil is further explored in the ideas of metacognition, constructionism and reflection in the primary language learning context. In my research study I attend to the neglected status of language-assessment skills by highlighting the use of electronic portfolios as a tool in assessment *for* learning (Hasselgren, 2003). I also considered the various software-possibilities. Although these terms are relatively new in Irish primary education, they are used commonly by the Department of Education and Skills in the United Kingdom ([Qualifications and Curriculum Authority](#)).

Assessment *for* learning becomes an extension of formative assessment when evidence from assessment activities is used in instruction to meet pupils learning needs (NCCA, 2007a; Black, Harrison, Lee, Marshall and William, 2004). It explores the role of the pupil as an active learner, taking into account where the pupils are in their learning (NCCA, 2007a). Rather than assessing the results of a class, assessment *for* learning asks how the results can be improved. Assessment *for* learning is explicit in its purpose to promote learning, 'the first priority in its design and practice is to serve the purpose of promoting students' learning' (Black et al, 2004).

I differentiate between learning and assessment of an academic subject and the learning and assessment of skills such as self and peer assessment. The view that assessment *for* learning can improve results is of course important. However, this investigation relays my individual experience as a teacher being introduced to assessment *for* learning herself for the first time as well as introducing it to her pupils. It is the explanation of how assessment *for* learning worked for me as an Irish language teacher and how the pupils reacted to new experiences such as self and peer assessment and constructing a collection of their own work using technology.

According to the NCCA (2007a) information attained from assessment for learning can help teachers evaluate plans, methodologies and organizational strategies. Black et.al. (1998a) suggest providing effective feedback to pupils, active involvement by the pupils, recognition of the influence on the motivation and self-esteem of pupils, making appropriate changes to teaching in response to assessment, the need for pupils to be able to assess themselves and understand how to improve. Montgomery and McDowell (2008) present four case studies of assessment *for* learning at third level. Evidence from these case studies show that learners construct learning experiences 'in an emotional way, investing a huge sense of self in their success or failure' (Montgomery et. al., 2008). This suggests that assessment for learning influences the affective learning dimension.

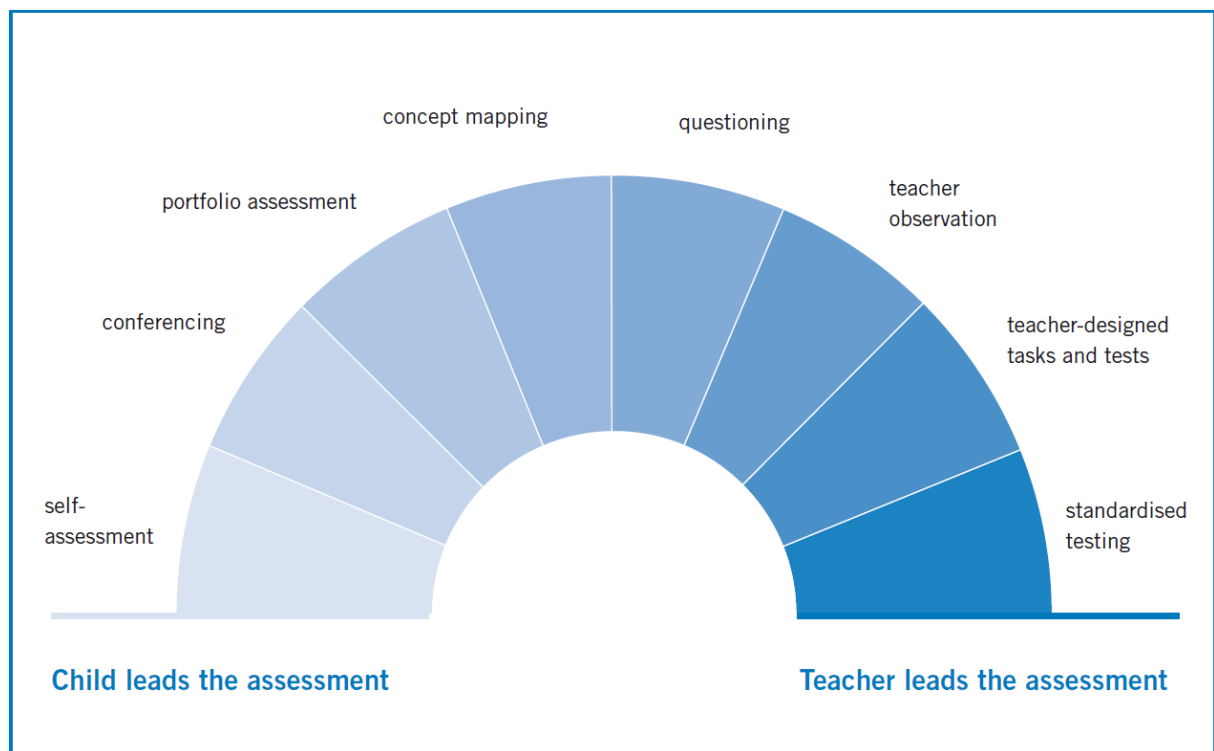
## 2. Methods in Assessment for Learning

I outline how I built a 'toolkit of strategies' (Young, 2005, p. 4) to help me deal with problems that arose in the implementation of assessment for learning. These strategies or methods of assessment are outlined by the NCCA (2007a) in a continuum of assessment methods (see Figure 1.). The methods towards the left of this continuum play a strong role in assessment *for* learning. Portfolio assessment is also included in the continuum of assessment methods described by the NCCA (2007a). I selected those methods which suited the needs and cognitive abilities of my pupils.

The literature that I reviewed showed a natural link between the elements such as self assessment, conferencing and questioning in electronic portfolio assessment and assessment *for* learning. This shows integration of assessment *for* learning and electronic portfolio assessment methods. Portfolios are simply a 'useful mechanism for providing formative feedback' (Irons, 2008, p. 81). I outline assessment *for* learning and electronic portfolio methods separately. I discuss how electronic portfolios evolved as the tool in assessment *for* learning rather than a method of assessment in this study.

The four processes of assessment *for* learning highlighted by Leitch et al (2006) include eliciting information, providing feedback, sharing criteria with students and promoting peer and self assessment. Black et al (2003) outline questioning, feedback, sharing criteria (or learning intentions) and self-assessment as the four actions which can transform formative assessment. Black et al (ibid.) suggest that questioning and feedback are 'pivotal in improving communication links' between pupil and teacher (Black et al, 2003, p. 31). As I see assessment *for* learning as a new vision for formative assessment I focused on these four actions. I chose to omit some methods including concept mapping, teacher-designed tasks and tests and standardised tests. Some of these methods such as the tests are of a more formative nature. Time did not allow me to explore the use of concept mapping and it seemed that the software's simple linear style suited my young pupils but did not suit concept mapping. However, I now feel in retrospect that perhaps concept mapping may have benefited the pupils' experience of portfolio-construction, planning and self-assessment.

This continuum does not include skills such as sharing learning-intentions, using a rubric, identifying success criteria. I felt that some pupils benefited from these and that they should be considered when using assessment *for* learning in conjunction with e-portfolios.



**Figure 1.** Continuum of assessment methods (NCCA, 2007a, p. 13)

### 3. How to use electronic portfolios: Raising a debate

Assessment *for* learning has been well established across the United Kingdom (Montgomery et al, 2008). In the Irish language context, assessment *for* learning raised many questions. Is assessment *for* learning an appropriate approach in assessing the Irish language? Can I show how assessment *for* learning can be implemented with second class (eight year olds) using electronic portfolios? How can electronic portfolios be developed using appropriate ICT to suit the needs of the pupils?

The influence of studies from the National Council for Curriculum Assessment (NCCA) is acknowledged (NCCA, 2007a, 2007b). In 2007 the NCCA presented feedback on the use of ICT from a selection of schools across the country (2007b). ICT appeared to be used more for lesson preparation than for pedagogical use. My study aimed to counteract this by using electronic portfolios for pedagogical use. Primary teachers reported active engagement of students with ICT and improved pupil behaviour as a result (NCCA, 2007b). The literature and findings from this research also support active engagement. Primary teachers requested support for open ended uses of ICT (ibid.). The software 'Photostory 3' used in this project is an example of open-ended use of ICT<sup>1</sup>.

Little is reported on the use of Information Communication Technology for Irish language support and assessment (ibid). The use of ICT in assessment *for* learning does not appear to have been thoroughly investigated in this recent National Council for Curriculum and Assessment report (NCCA, 2007b). The exclusion of the Irish language was noted. All these findings suggest that my investigation is an example of how the use of ICT can advance the assessment of Irish language in the primary classroom.

### 4. Context of the study

The eight pupils selected for this study range from seven to nine years old. The pupils used the computer room and my laptop on occasion. The child centred discovery approach and active learning objectives of the [revised curriculum](#) were acknowledged (DES, 1999a). Dewey's advocacy of authentic projects was recognised through the use of genuine situated learning (Dewey, 1916). His advocacy of reflection on experience is realised in the pupils' practice of keeping recorded learning-journals.

The appropriate level of Irish was ascertained through the objectives, strands and strand units of the revised curriculum. Content for the electronic portfolios was organised around the curriculum's four *strands* including reading, writing, listening and speaking. [Róisín's e-portfolio](#) shows how the four strands were integrated. It should be noted that 'scríbhneoireacht' or writing is in its introductory phases in second class. The integration of these four strands is promoted in the revised curriculum (DES, 1999b). The three strand units were implemented in this study. These strand units include:

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<sup>1</sup> 'Photostory 3' is freely downloadable from: [www.microsoft.com/downloads](http://www.microsoft.com/downloads).

1. creating interest
2. understanding language
3. using language (DES 1999b).

Collaboration and communication in the use of electronic portfolios supports the aims of the Irish language curriculum. These include:

1. building a social relationship,
2. communicating with another person
3. searching for, and illustrating, considerations and ideas
4. giving, and searching for, information (DES, 1999b).

I investigated how the e-portfolio (electronic portfolio) might provide an opportunity for the assessment of listening and speaking skills. To promote new ways of listening Cauldwell (2004) has recombined the four language skills of listening, speaking, reading and writing. Like Cauldwell, I see listening as an active skill rather than a passive skill. I question whether all skills are practiced in a meaningful way (Underwood, 1984) during the portfolio process.

## **5. Action Research Methodology**

The systematic, disciplined and self-evaluative reflection of action research convinces me that I will be able to answer the question 'How do I improve my practice?' (Whitehead 1989, 2008a).

When I was initially introduced to action research while completing a Master of Science in Education and Training Management (e-learning strand) at Dublin City University, I saw something appealing about the sincerity which is involved on the part of the researcher. I was going to have to be completely honest with myself and have confidence in the critique of others. The action research cycles allowed me simultaneously to work and research within my practice. I hoped to see the effects of the changes I had researched and initiated myself. There was excitement at the prospect of making positive changes in my classroom. However, I was also aware that a negative impact was possible and that this may help me gain even greater knowledge of my own practice.

Through reflection, action research encourages people to 'understand the power-constituted nature of their lives, and learn how to challenge' (Mc Niff and Whitehead, 2002 p. 33). Altrichter et al (1993) suggest that reflection produces options for action and is realised in action. Yet action research goes beyond critical theory in the sense that it is embodied in 'living practice' (Mc Niff et al, 2002, p.34). The belief that 'action research is a blend of practical and theoretical concerns' (Cohen, Manion and Morrison, 2000, p. 237) is the basis for many of the definitions and schools of thought on action research. On a grander scale, action researchers wish to improve their practice at a classroom level and add to the improvement of educational theory in society. Farren (2006) suggests that research cannot be removed from the social context. She advocates that educators and learners collaborate in knowledge-construction in a continuous and joint process – in a web of betweenness (O'Donoghue, 2003; Farren, 2005). However, the practitioner, acting in what Stenhouse



(1975) calls the role of 'teacher as researcher', prevents action research becoming overtaken by academic theorists (Cohen et al, 2000).

As I take on the role of 'teacher as researcher', I first propose and then attempt to solve problems in my practice. In order successfully to understand these problems, I will need to structure the process of my action research. I am not removed but rather acting as an 'instrument' in this research (Golafshani, 2003). Cohen et al (2000) suggest that participating in action research encourages the researcher to act as a facilitator and guide in the construction of knowledge. Farren (2006) suggests that we can improve education while contributing to knowledge. She shows, for example, how practitioners from various professions take on the living educational theory approach to explore new ways to use digital technology to improve their practice (Farren, 2008).

Living educational theory takes action research further by showing how the researcher claim their knowledge has influenced the learning of themselves and others. My research is unique to my practice situation because of my individual values and because of the historical and cultural context in which I work (Whitehead, 2008b, p103). I explore how my enquiry, my own 'educational journey' (Whitehead 1999, p. 38) may influence my pupils' learning. My living educational theory will not be speculative but rather lived out because my values are my core standards of judgement (Whitehead and McNiff, 2006).

As I am directly concerned with the practice in my classroom I am an integral part of the research. In this project both pupils and teacher were essentially on a journey together as we kept learning-journals throughout the process of this study. These challenges, successes and emotions which emerged were documented in learning-journals.

Whitehead's living theory is a form of 'real-life theorising' (Whitehead and McNiff, 2006 p. 31). The use of video helps to communicate the meanings of my educational values as I attempt to create a 'real-life' theory (Whitehead 2008b). Video and audio recordings help to support my findings as I show my classroom work to others (Black et al, 1998b).

Abrami and Barrett (2005) raise the issue of which methodology best suits e-portfolio research. I suggest that an action research approach is appropriate because of the researchers' ability to place themselves within the research process. Its rigour and validity is supported by the researcher's openness to evaluation from friends and colleagues (Whitehead 2008b). I recognise a similarity between the higher order thought processes involved in creating a living educational theory and the synthesis, analysis and evaluation that the pupils undertake when developing e-portfolios. In my learning-journal I wrote, 'Theory in practice: I have been using assessment *for* learning strategies in my teaching now for the last couple of days. I am beginning to see how it plays an essential role in creating opportunities for deeper learning' (Personal learning-journal, April 3, 2008).

Research carried out in the particular setting of the primary school may provide much needed 'real' evidence of the contribution of educational influences on portfolio research and assessment *for* learning. Student learning in classes where portfolios are being developed using various technologies is also advocated by Carney (2004).

Educational values form the foundation of educational practice. 'Education is a value-laden practical activity' (Whitehead, 1989, p. 4). Altrichter et al (1993) suggest that the teacher's voice defends the values which set standards for improvement. It is by these



values, these personal standards that I will decide whether I have improved my practice and generated knowledge. Bognar and Zovko (2008) highlight the necessity of values being chosen by the researchers themselves if these values are to be meaningful.

By watching myself teaching, I relived the emotion and ideas that occurred so spontaneously, with only a little time for 'reflection in action' during the session (Schön, 1991). The practice of recording the pupils' learning-journals gave them time to reflect on what Gilstrap and Dupree (2008) call 'critical incidents' in their own learning. This provided a new opportunity to reflect, describe and respond.

My focus was to encourage a sense of independence and responsibility through the use of assessment *for* learning and creativeness through the use of ICT. By encouraging pupils to self assess I hoped they would take on the responsibility of correcting and improving their own learning. I also hoped that learning to assess their peers would create an atmosphere where pupils would feel free to share their ideas. These values helped to ground my judgements. My values include:

- A belief that assessment *for* learning would provide an opportunity for my young pupils to become more self aware as language learners and conscious of their improvements. I also believe that I may become more conscious of my own assessment practices and improve my own educational experience by learning new techniques for assessment.
- A belief that integration of ICT in language learning and assessment (using electronic portfolios as a tool) might encourage creative and meaningful language practice. I believe that ICT will enable the pupil to be free to self-validate their own learning process and be the author of their own electronic language product.
- A belief that e-portfolios and assessment *for* learning together, allow for creative freedom to integrate the four language skills of reading, writing, listening and speaking.

Whitehead et al (2006) suggest that we can often be a 'living contradiction' if we do not experience the living-out of these values in our practice. I hoped to show how I have lived out my values in the implementation of the aims of this research. I remained open to emerging values during the research which may have given new direction to my action.

The action plan cycle provides a system for the investigative questions, which helps in judging the validity of the inquiry.

- What is my concern?
- Why am I concerned/why have I chosen this area of focus?
- What do I think I can do about it?
- What will I do about it?
- How will I gather evidence to show that I am influencing the situation?
- How can I ensure that any judgments I make are reasonably fair and accurate?
- What will I do then? (Mc Niff et al, 2002)

I hoped that the results of this cycle would provide positive evidence that my colleagues may then be able to adopt similar changes in their own classrooms.

## 6. Implementation and Evaluation

Questions from the action plan (Mc Niff et al, 2002) were used to help structure the findings of the study. The order and findings of my research will unfold as I deal with each question from the action plan.

### a. What is my concern?

My primary concern was the neglected use of assessment in my Irish language classroom. Although pupils were given opportunities to use language in class, communication was often one way from teacher to learner, teacher dominated or limited to 'brief and formulaic learner contributions' (Little, 2007, p. 21). I saw the potential of assessment *for* learning to move away from this didactic approach to assessment and learning. The pupils would hopefully be enabled through the strategies of assessment *for* learning to experience 'learning' as opposed to 'instruction'. I was interested in how pupil would learn to evaluate their own work with confidence and make plans for the future as well as the language learning that might occur.

I wanted to show how e-portfolios could be used as a suitable tool to implement assessment *for* learning. I searched for the most appropriate software to use over a relatively short period of time with my second class. I chose e-portfolios in the hope that they would allow pupils freedom to use the language they knew, the self-assessment skills they had learned and to see how the four language skills could be creatively integrated using text, audio and photographs.

### b. Why am I concerned/why have I chosen this area of focus?

I am concerned that I had not previously tried to develop new and creative forms of assessment in my classroom. Teacher-observation, teacher-designed tasks and tests were the only forms of assessment for the Irish language in my classroom. I felt that a deeper picture of the pupils' learning could be achieved and that assessment *for* learning was worth pursuing because it might enable pupils to engage more personally in their own assessment processes.

E-portfolios would provide a new opportunity for pupils to reflect on work achieved throughout the year. Oral achievements could be illustrated in a concrete way for peers, future teachers and parents. I was also investigating whether or not using e-portfolios in assessment *for* learning could serve a purpose for future planning.

The revised curriculum Irish language documents (DES, 1999b) place focus on oral work in a second class and integration of the reading, writing and listening strands. The development of the pupils' four language-skills was an area for concern.

### c. What do I think I can do about it?

Data was collected through the use of audio and video-recordings, discussions, observation and checklists, together with photographs and portfolios constructed by the pupils. [Semi-structured interviews](#) were recorded with individuals while introducing the pupils to Assessment *for* Learning. Evidence was analyzed from my written learning-journals and the pupils' audio learning-journals. Teacher/pupils' conferences and feedback-meetings were recorded.

The portfolios were presented to the staff and feedback was acknowledged. The reaction to portfolios when presented to other class pupils was also recognised.

Pupils began the process by choosing their best work from their copy books completed in the Irish class throughout the year. I was concerned when I noted that pupils had only their copies and workbooks as a concrete source of evidence of learning. Good copy-work was justified by a stamp from teacher, a nice picture or neat writing. This reflected some pupils' inexperience of self assessing language. Copy-work such as that below, was based on the content of the textbook and was written and read aloud during a whole-class lesson. However, for the e-portfolio pupils individually had to select and read the copy-work they wished to include. I believe this gave them more responsibility for the contents of the portfolio. In addition, listening is perhaps the least recognised and practised of the four language skills. It is also possibly the most difficult for pupils to master (Cauldwell, 2004). Pupils were now given the opportunity to listen to themselves reading their own writing.



**Figure2.** Scanned copy showing teacher's stamp and comment 'go maith' (good)

I was beginning to implement my own learning of the assessment *for* learning strategies. I was also learning how this might empower pupils in their own learning process. As a result of recording the work above, I discovered that this pupil found the

pronunciation difficult for some words. I was able to record this difficulty in the pupil's profile. 'She recognised the 'é' and 'í' sound with a little assistance<sup>2</sup>. She corrected herself when reading out one copy page' (Pupil profile, April 29, 2008).

Introducing pupils to self- and peer-assessment was a difficult task as suggested by Black et al (2003). After preparing prompt questions and using increased 'wait time' (Rowe, 2006), pupils began to engage more constructively in the assessment of their own work. Conferencing produced confident responses from peers when giving feedback about each others' work.

#### **d. What will I do about it?**

Similarities appeared in the literature on assessment *for* learning and the portfolio process. Portfolios were identified as a useful tool in formative assessment (Black et al, 2003; Irons, 2008). I introduced pupils to assessment *for* learning and portfolios through semi-structured interviews and a conference meeting. The initial task of getting pupils to assess themselves and identify the criteria for success was difficult. In order to introduce the pupils to these new skills we looked at what makes a good story. The following is a transcript of a recording showing one pupil's idea of the success criteria for a good story.

Teacher: What makes a good story?

Pupil: Maybe a good title, maybe a good story and well maybe if you thought it was really good and you asked your teacher you could do some book reports.

Teacher: Ok, right, you said a good story, but what actually is inside a good story that makes it a good story?

Pupil: The words, and maybe say if it was...a fairytale, say Cinderella and there was a happy ending; that would make it a good story.

Teacher: There now, that's something that you have pinpointed, an ending! Is a good ending important?

Pupil: Yeah because if there was a bad ending, people mightn't think the book was that good.

Pupils set about creating a plan for 'the story' element of the portfolio. This essentially comprised of four pictures/photos with sentences. I was still intending to use '[Create a Story](#)' at this stage. After being introduced to new software '[Photostory 3](#)', the selection of photos became easier. I was confident this was a more appropriate piece of software.

Photographs formed the main content for the portfolios. Photographs were organized into artefacts or pieces of work. These artefacts included:

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<sup>2</sup> Accent or 'fada' recognised.

- an introduction, recorded readings with added text over scans of pupils' copies;
- photographs of posters with oral recordings; and
- photographs taken by pupils, accompanied by text and audio recordings.

Pupils also included songs in the final stage of portfolio development. Here is an example an e-portfolio with a song used in the conclusion:



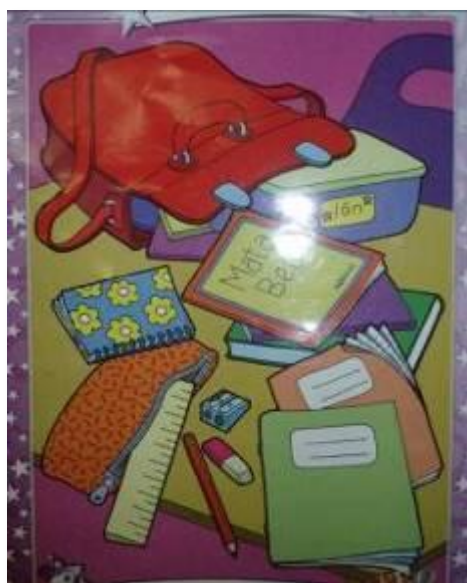
**Figure 3.** [Ciara's e-portfolio](#)

The posters scanned into the portfolio provided some pupils with the opportunity to develop a strategy for remembering all their vocabulary (see Figure 4.). For the recording that accompanied the poster below, some pupils simply recorded all they knew by making lists. After a few attempts they came up with a way of making a thorough recording by starting to talk about what was in one corner of the poster and moving to the other. This made a huge difference to the quality of the recording and made it easier for the pupils to remember what they had planned to say. This development meant that the pupils were accountable for their own language production. They were able to practise without interruption from me. This simple strategy that they had developed was encouraging because I was seeing how pupils were gradually taking more control of their own learning.

The following questions were taken from the recently-published NCCA assessment guidelines and used to structure pupil-profiles.

- Where are children now in their learning?
- Where are children going in their learning?
- How will children get to the next point in their learning? (NCCA, 2007a, p. 9)

Pupil-profiles began to develop as the portfolios developed and the pupils became comfortable with the software.



**Figure 4.** Photo of an oral language poster from the 'Treo Nua' series

**e. How will I gather evidence to show that I am influencing the situation?**

Pupils could relate to their Art portfolios which they have been keeping since junior-infants. We revisited their use of self-assessment skills in other subjects and discussed the possibilities for an e-portfolio.

Assessment *for* learning is currently being introduced on a national scale through the NCCA's re-envisioned assessment guidelines (2007a). Some pupils seemed distracted by all the talk 'about learning'. They were used to being told what they had to learn. Discussing what they had learned and identifying areas they might improve were new concepts. I found that once most pupils delved into the portfolio-construction and assessment *for* learning strategies they were much more comfortable. Leitch et al (2006) conclude that a 'delicate balance of control and participation in teacher/pupil interactions appears to be in place in successful AfL (assessment *for* learning) classrooms' (Leitch et al, 2006, p. 6). It was important to strike a balance between time spent on this type of preparatory talk and time on activities.

When I had found suitable software and developed the rubric then I could construct a model portfolio (Barrett, 2005a). The benefit in showing the model portfolio midway through the process was that pupils became more focused. The standards expected for the final presentation were made clear. The pupils were encouraged to refer to the parts of the rubric that they recognised in the model portfolio.





**Figure 5.** Photo of school garden which was opened by Diarmaid Gavin and used in an e-portfolio

Pupils planned simple sentences based on the photos we had taken around the school. Celebrity gardener Diarmaid Gavin had been to the school and one pupil incorporated this event into their portfolio <sup>3</sup>.

I discovered that using photographs encouraged more conversation in Irish and helped them to plan.

Pupil: That's a little bumble bee Diarmaid Gavin put in

Teacher: Oh right, so you could say something about Diarmaid Gavin

Pupil: He came to our garden, he actually cut a ribbon to open it!

Teacher: How would you say something about that using the Irish you know, girls? How do you say Diarmaid went...

Pupil: Tá Diarmaid... (Diarmaid is)

Teacher: Remember it's one of our words from our pink flashcards

Pupil: Tá gairdín... (The garden is)

Teacher: We had 'cheannaigh<sup>4</sup>'. We had 'chuaigh<sup>5</sup>'. We had 'Thug<sup>6</sup>'. Which one was it out of those?

<sup>3</sup> Parental permission not given to show complete portfolio online.

<sup>4</sup> Past participle of verb 'to buy'.

<sup>5</sup> Past participle of verb 'to go'.



Pupil: Chuaigh!

Teacher: Chuaigh, good girl!

Pupil: Tá chuaigh...

Teacher: Do you use 'tá' and 'chuaigh' together?

Pupil: I don't think so!

Teacher: O.K.

Pupil: 'Chuaigh Diarmaid Gavin sa ghairdín' I think! (Diarmaid went into the garden).

Teacher: 'Chuaigh Diarmaid' or even 'tháinig'<sup>7</sup> that's a new one!

Pupil: 'Tháinig an tíogar, is tháinig an béar!' ...You don't use the 't' you just use 'tháinig' .<sup>8</sup>

In this last comment the pupil refers to a poem she had learned during the year using the past participle of the verb 'to come'. She also remembered how to pronounce the word correctly. This was a valuable opportunity for the pupils to select language to accompany their photographs with the help of their peers. Working with a small group and in a safe environment allowed the pupils to experiment with the language they knew.

## 7. Evidence of assessment for learning

I have chosen to use assessment *for* learning processes (NCCA, 2007a) as a framework to organise evidence of the implementation process. This framework organises evidence under the headings:

- self assessment
- peer assessment and pupil feedback
- teacher feedback
- using a rubric and
- sharing learning intentions
- questioning

The strategies involved will be explained and analysed to illustrate how assessment *for* learning was managed with my pupils.

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6 Past participle of verb 'to take'.

7 Past participle of verb 'to come'.

8 Pupil recognised the silent letter 't'.

### a. Self assessment

Self assessment emerged as an important feature of assessment *for* learning in the literature reviewed (for example NCCA, 2008; 2007a; Black et al, 2003; Clarke, 2003). I have acknowledged that formative strategies can be used to encourage self evaluation and increase pupils' confidence (Clarke, 2003). Strategies used included telling the pupils they are not alone in the process, giving them positive feedback and publicly acknowledging what they have done well. I also suggested strategies for 'next time' and encouraged the pupils to try again.

Self assessment allowed pupils to metacognitively engage with their own learning process (Klenowski, 2002). This took the form of higher order thinking skills. As suggested by Connacher et al (2004), encouraging self assessment facilitated my pupils to understand themselves as language learners, to voice concerns and to share viewpoints with peers and teacher. One pupil recognised mistakes when listening to her work the following day. Pupil: 'I think I said 'me féin' instead of 'mé féin''<sup>9</sup>.

Pupils were encouraged to assess their own work when redrafting. Questions used during pupils' final learning-journals helped them reflect and promoted self assessment. Airasian (2000) suggests the teacher asks the following questions to aid pupils' reflection:

- Which piece was most difficult and why?
- Which shows your best work and why?
- Which are you most proud of and why? (Airasian, 2000, p. 178)

I used similar prompt questions to encourage pupils to reflect. Although I was aware of the importance of good questioning through the literature (Black et al, 2003) it was only after using some of the NCCA's recommended questions that true self-assessment emerged. These questions include:

- Where did I get stuck?
- What did I do?
- What helped me best?
- Who did I ask?
- What new thing did I learn? (NCCA, 2007a, p. 16)

Recording journals allowed pupils to freely express themselves as they may have been limited by what they are able to write. One pupil showed the ability to assess how much she had achieved and how she would organise her work in the next lesson.

Teacher: Now... today is the 21<sup>st</sup>. How did you get on today?

Pupil: I think I got on pretty well!

Teacher: Alright, did you learn any new words?

Pupil: Mm

Teacher: Or did you learn anything new?

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<sup>9</sup> The accent was recognised in the pronunciation of latter: 'mé féin' pronounced mē incorrectly pronounced mě correctly (Sykes, 1978).

Pupil: I learned 'shamon...' (Pupil tried to pronounce new word). I was stuck!

Teacher: 'Oíche Shamhna' (Halloween)

Pupil: Yeah. I'm stuck on that word, 'cos I don't really know it.

Teacher: Ok, do you think is good to know what words you are stuck on?

Pupil: Yeah, because, say if you were stuck on it you could go over it again.

Teacher: Ok, and who would you ask for help if you knew what words you were stuck on?

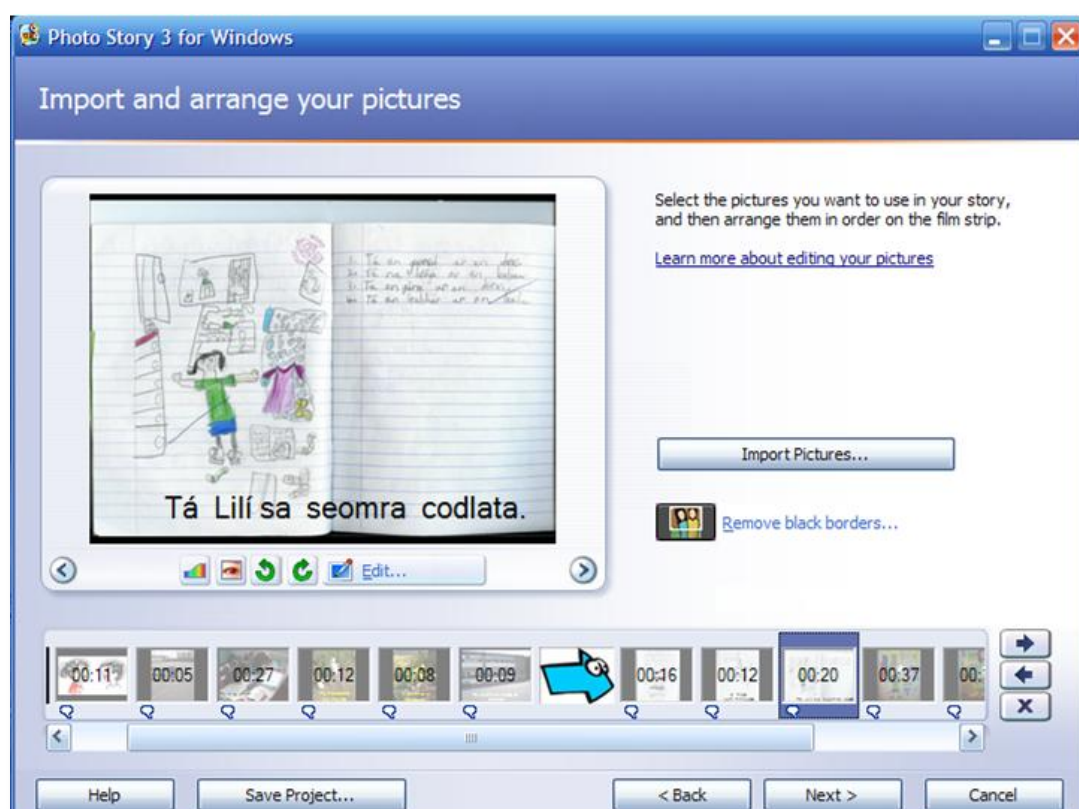
Pupil: My partner...

Teacher: Very good, and what will you work on for the next day?

Pupil: Mm, well I'll try and get all my recordings done because I got all the pictures done and see it was 'me féin'<sup>10</sup> then on my writing, then I put them in order first 'me féin', then I did the writing, then the posters that went with the writing.

Teacher: Super, an-mhaith (very good)! (Clerkin, data archives)

I believe this discussion shows how my educational values were being lived out because the pupil was free to self-evaluate and take control of her future learning.



**Figure 6.** Photostory 3 narration-page, showing a scanned page from a copy with accompanying text

<sup>10</sup>

Pupil referring to the curriculum theme of 'mé féin' or 'myself'.

Some pupils initially found it difficult to justify why particular pieces should be included. 'All pupils' selections ought to be accompanied by an explanation of why that pupil feels that piece belongs in his or her portfolio' (Airaian, 2000, p. 176). Although pupils selected artefacts it must also be noted that I had given a set structure for portfolio content and this may have influenced their decisions. One pupil Ciara, was a lot more confident about the reasons for including an artefact when her portfolio was near completion, and this was articulated in [Ciara's learning-journal](#).

I believe this pupil benefited from the opportunity to talk about her work after it was done, she felt happy with all the work she had put in. She also expressed a wish to improve on a piece and this shows that she wishes to be thorough. I concluded that this pupil had the potential to do more and that she was very capable. This is something I relayed to her parents and to the teacher that would have her the following year.

### **b. Peer assessment and pupil feedback**

Pupils work collaboratively when they share work and seek suggestions from peers and teacher (Abrami et al 2005). Collection and selection supported ownership of the portfolios (Ó Murchú, 2005). Ó Murchú (2005) suggests that pupils develop ownership of their work as they interact socially in teams. Collaboration took the form of help from a peer for pronunciation.

Pupils recognised that it was important that their audience understood them. They corrected each other, suggesting the best words to use, evaluating their own recordings and challenging each others' work. In my learning-journals I recorded some pupil's use of peer-assessment shortly after identifying the importance of the rubric and the intentions for learning.

They are now showing signs of improving their recordings for quality as well as quantity! They are criticising and making decisions as they listen back to their recordings in pairs. They are totally focused with the activity in hand. (Clerkin, Learning-journal, April 29, 2008)

I allocated time for partners to give their opinion by using 'two stars and a wish'. Peer-feedback should be seen as 'learning points' (Keane, 2007, p. 54) and pupils may or may not implement these suggestions. Comments and suggestions for improvement were given in a supportive environment (Black et al, 2004). Pupils were also encouraged to share learning successes and difficulties (Leitch et al, 2006).

Pupils in this study were given time to act on feedback and make improvements as suggested by Clarke (2003). The feedback given intermittently during the process was perhaps more productive than that given in a separate session. This was because pupils could choose to act on their peer's advice there and then. However, it was useful to view each portfolio in full, to gauge the volume and timings of recordings. Pupils recognised the technical skill involved in producing a good recording. Pupil: 'sometimes don't go too close to the microphone'. Another said: 'maybe don't go too fast' (Clerkin, data archives). Peers had a dual purpose in this study because they were employed for evaluative purposes and as an audience for their partners (Connacher et al, 2004).

It was difficult for some pupils to assess the abilities in language of their friends. One pupil recognised the importance of both the language and the quality of recording: 'Her sentences were very good; her recording was also very good.' Another pupil recognised that both quality and quantity of content were important in the recordings: 'The recording was good 'cos she did lots of things in it...because she went through every picture and she did it very well' (Clerkin, data archives).

These simple comments show the beginnings of pupils' peer-assessment skills. In my own learning-journal I recorded evidence that self assessment is also part of the assessment *for* learning process: 'They are showing signs of recognising the value in work that is not just neat or a good picture. One pupil identified language as the important and then progresses to say that sentences were important too' (Personal learning-journal, April 18, 2008). This pupil appears to have recognised how oral language can be integrated with written language.

### **c. Teacher feedback**

It was helpful to keep some members of the group present when giving feedback to each individual pupil. This meant that pupils knew that others were perhaps facing similar problems, thus avoiding comparisons of pupils' work as Clarke (2003) suggests.

Feedback also took the form of 'conferences' (NCCA, 2007a, p. 24). These were informal and intuitive meetings that took place in the immediate context between teacher and pupil. Conferences and feedback sessions acted as an 'on-demand support' (Connacher et al, 2004, p. 25). These meetings were also used to check pupils' progress, and gave pupils 'a social space and sense of community they clearly appreciate and need' (ibid., p. 25). Some pupils may be prone to imitating each other's suggestions and one-to-one teacher/pupil-conferences were sometimes more beneficial for the individual pupil. One girl may have benefited more from a small group conference. This [pupil's early learning-journal](#) recording also reveals an opportunity which could have been developed into a teacher/pupil- conference.

Opportunities for pupils to learn new phrases emerged. I facilitated pupils by simply repeating the phrase correctly after their mispronunciation or incorrect selection of a word: "in aice leis mo chairde...in aice le mo chairde... My friends are... so you say 'is iad mo chairde'" (Clerkin, data archives).

Fitzpatrick (2004) recognised that once the teacher takes on a facilitative role, more collaboration may occur. After one pupil was becoming frustrated by trying to do the 'perfect recording', I realised it was better if I left that particular group to work alone. 'The teacher's role is most influential when it is imperceptible, when it does not hamper pupils' enthusiasm and creativity' (Bognar and Zovko, 2008, p. 38). As my learning-journal shows: 'There were times when I recognised I was a silent partner, a guide and there were times when it was better that I was absent and left them to it!' (Clerkin, learning-journal, April 26, 2008)

Initially I had to remind myself to let go and give the pupils more control of their own learning. I believe this reflects the challenge that is inherent for a teacher taking on

assessment *for* learning for the first time. I was learning to facilitate responsible learning by introducing pupils to the strategies of assessment *for* learning including self and peer assessment, recognising the criteria for success and sharing learning intentions. Indeed I was also facilitating responsible learning through the change in my own behaviour in selecting appropriate times for my feedback.

Keane (2007) recognised that pupils benefited from the teacher acting as 'co-learner'. This was evident as we faced technical difficulties and learned new skills together. As the pupils became more confident I simply made myself available for consultation. 'Teachers remain indispensable, both as pedagogues and as discipline experts' (Little, 2007, p. 20). I provided suggestions that sought to raise the level of achievement. I recognised my responsibility to intervene in order to facilitate pupils' decisions as suggested by Little (2007).

#### **d. Using a rubric**

During the development of the rubric I came to know the true meaning of reflection in the living theory approach to this study. The result of reflection was my ability to put a form on something that seemed to have no solution. By reflecting on my previous actions and retracing what I had done, I was able to make connections and links in my own personal learning. Essentially I faced a problem when the rubric I had designed was not suitable. This "impressionistic 'sense' of things" gave rise to the development of a new rubric (Rogers, 2002, p. 853). There was a sense of relief that reflection led me to identify and name the problem (ibid.). This in turn began the process of meaning making from the rubric problem. The solution had become achievable through reflection on my practice.

The pupils were not enthused by the first draft of the rubric. This led me to question the rubric's effectiveness in prose-form. Chau (2007) points to this issue and suggests that it may hinder successful portfolio-construction. Interpretation of the rubric in point form became easier for the pupils (see Appendix 1).

I also included visual images to represent the strand units of reading, writing, listening and speaking. This clarified which strand unit was being used at each level of the rubric (see Appendix 1). Using the visual images also had the added benefit of showing pupils how the four skills were integrated at the highest level of the rubric. It was more obvious for most pupils that they were trying to achieve some writing, some speaking and that listening and reading would follow as a result<sup>11</sup>.

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<sup>11</sup> Parental permission not permitted for all in group video.

### e. Sharing learning intentions

Identifying learning intentions and making them explicit for the pupil became a major part of implementing assessment *for* learning. 'Without the learning intention, children are merely victims of the teacher's whim' (Clarke, 2001, p. 19). I could not have made the same progress with the rubric and my questioning had I not shared learning intentions with the pupils. 'Defining goals during learning is an important cognitive strategy since it determines the content and direction of the learning activities' (Dillemans et al, 1998, p. 29).

Each lesson had a clear focus and the pupils were asked to identify the learning intention behind each activity. Dillemans et al (1998) suggest that the role of learning (and in turn assessment *for* learning) overtakes the role of instruction when the pupils begin to recognise when they have successfully achieved the learning intentions. I felt that some pupils recognised the clear purpose for an activity as they began to take control of their learning. I was also finding out how to relax into this new role and let the pupils take control of their own learning.

Pupils were informed of the success criteria for each learning intention. They considered how they would achieve the success criteria when making decisions about how their own work would proceed. They were asked to retell how they would know when they had successfully achieved learning intentions. I recognise a relationship between self-assessment, recognising success criteria and independent learning. An early entry into my learning-journal shows the challenges for both me and the pupils.

They find it hard to recognise exactly what they have learned, even though they may have come on leaps and bounds in that days lesson. It is frustrating for me as I want them to be able to recognise their good work.

I am also questioning my teaching skills all the time. Am I giving enough opportunity for constructionism? Am I giving enough 'wait time' after I ask a question? Are my questions too rhetorical? Are the children constructing their own sentences? (Clerkin, Personal learning-journal entry, April 22, 2008)

One pupil referred to the success criteria for recording and writing sentences when assessing her peer.

Teacher: Well, does anyone have something to say about that last one?

Pupil: Well you put in sentences that weren't in the writing (speaking to peer)<sup>12</sup>.

This was indeed an achievement for this pupil. However, I see now in retrospect that there is a possible living contradiction in that pupils were 'informed' of the success criteria. In one respect I did consult the pupils and teased the qualities from them about what makes good writing. I felt bound by the objectives of the curriculum. This reflects the argument that an e-portfolio's purpose is for learning curriculum content (Abrami et al 2005). It also shows

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<sup>12</sup> Parental permission not granted to provide audio clip. Pupil refers here to the oral sentences that were recorded by her peer that were not read from the text. This showed creativity and confidence with the spoken language.



a departure from my own educational values that I hoped assessment *for* learning would help me live out in practice. Perhaps some pupils would have recognised what exactly they had learned much sooner if they had designed their own personal success criteria.

Pupil and teacher comments on a particular portfolio were verified once they referred to the criteria. At the time, I believed that 'By giving children feedback about how they have done *against the criteria of the task*, children are released from these comparisons and given breathing space to move forward' (Clarke, 2003, p. 51). In truth, by holding to my own set of criteria, I stifled the potential for pupils to learn how to learn for themselves. I had set the boundaries for pupils' learning and contradicted my own value of encouraging freedom to self-evaluate.

Learning intentions were made explicit when pupils had to define how to construct a 'good sentence' or a 'good recording' to accompany their photographs. I used this joint discussion to assess pupils' prior knowledge and to instruct and encourage pupils to think about the performance characteristics of good sentences (Airaisian, 2000). 'When a student enters an item into the portfolio, he or she needs to know what outcomes are being demonstrated' (Niguidula, 1993, p. 5). It appeared that pupils' recognition of the learning intention for a lesson related directly to their understanding of the rubric. One pupil recognised that language was the most important product from the rubric (Clerkin, data archives).

Teacher: What two parts did we take? (I was referring to all the different parts of the rubric).

Pupil: Content and language.

Teacher: And do you remember what you said about language earlier? Which one was the most important? Do you remember?

Pupil: Language

Teacher: Yeah, you said language was the most important.<sup>13</sup>

I believe this conversation was the beginning of this pupil's realisation that it was her own production of language that was vital. After this, I felt she realised that how she wrote her sentences, how she pronounced her words and how much vocabulary she used was more important than how many pictures she used. I realise now that there was also an opportunity for me to assist this pupil towards self-evaluating the quality of her language. Perhaps if I had acknowledged my own role in facilitating self-evaluation and creative thinking sooner I could have encouraged this pupil to expand on her own learning and understanding.

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<sup>13</sup>

Parental permission was not given to show video content online.

## f. Questioning skills

The most valuable questioning came after identifying the importance of learning intentions (Clarke, 2001, 2003). Clarke (2001) suggests that sharing learning intentions is the first step in process of formative assessment. Once I began to layout the learning intentions at the start of each lesson, both my planned and 'ad hoc' questions became more focused. Some ad hoc questions included:

- Have you a question for your partner?
- Are you happy with all your pronunciation? How might you improve your recording?
- Did you use old and new words there? (This helped me discover what the pupil thought were new words)

Increasing wait time is encouraged and should be about five seconds (Black et al, 2003; Clarke 2003). Too much time puts pressure on the pupil if they do not know the answer and too little does not give ample time to piece an answer together. Presenting pupils with multiple choice answers to questions made it easier for pupils to be rewarded. It also presented a teaching situation where I could use and compare vocabulary. Teacher: 'Is it 'cheannaigh'<sup>14</sup>, 'chuaigh'<sup>15</sup> or 'thug?'<sup>16</sup> ... 'Dó chrann or dhá chrann?'<sup>17</sup>.

I recognise a danger in assessment *for* learning strategies in that pupils may not learn to think creatively, how to learn about their learning or how to cope with failure. By placing focus on the product or the e-portfolio the teacher may be reverting to didactic teaching and taking away from the potential for assessment *for* learning to create a responsible learner. This is the contradiction that I faced when defining the criteria for success for the pupils.

I have now presented my findings of the assessment *for* learning process. In the next section I will show how the e-portfolio acted as a tool throughout this process and allowed for the integration of the four language curriculum strands and learning in the affective domain.

## 8. Electronic portfolios as a tool

I believe e-portfolios allowed pupils the opportunity to become autonomous learners and facilitated independent language learning. Pupils constructed sentences either orally or through written text for their portfolio. 'Learner autonomy and the growth of target language proficiency are not only mutually supported but fully integrated with each other' (Little, 2007, p. 15). [One pupils' confidence grew as she used words and phrases](#). The act of

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<sup>14</sup> Cheannaigh: to buy (past participle).

<sup>15</sup> Chuaigh: to go (past participle).

<sup>16</sup> Thug: to give (past participle) .

<sup>17</sup> 'Dhá chrann' or 'two trees'. 'Dhá' is the correct numerical adjective , 'dó' is used as simple numeral 'two'.

recording allowed most pupils to focus on the quality of their work (Clerkin, data archives). I observed some pupils becoming more proficient with the technological skills such as 'drag and drop', saving work and importing pictures.

Some pupils assumed 'discourse-roles' (Little, 2007, p. 20) as they discussed the implications of their work. They sought the help of their partner to construct sentences before consulting me for guidance (Clerkin, data archives). The emphasis was on 'learners doing things not necessarily on their own but for themselves' (ibid., p. 14). I felt that that some pupils were gradually taking more responsibility for their learning with the help of their peers.

The e-portfolio provided an opportunity to construct their own electronic language-product. [One pupil, Ciara grew confident that she could write.](#) Ciara also refers to the rubric and we refer to this as the 'goals'. She also recognises her own input in constructing sentences.

Choosing the correct software played an important role as suggested by Underwood (1984). Viewing the photographs and scanned posters made it easier for one pupil, Jessica, to create her own sentences in her [e-portfolio](#). Previously, the pupils were engrossed in imagining what pictures they could draw. This took away from the language-tasks at hand.

It would be interesting to see if pupils could be given even more personal freedom during further portfolio-constructions. The possible living contradiction is again apparent as I am torn between providing the pupils with support, and enabling the freedom to explore. It is possible that independent learners may sometimes feel forced to learn by themselves (Little, 2007). I was aware that this new sense of freedom might bring with it a daunting challenge for us all. Pupils were free to edit their portfolios independently if they wished when the portfolios were near completion. Time was taken to engage in the 'self-conscious distancing from the object' (Little, 2007, p. 20).

Pupils had a degree of control over what was included in the portfolio (Niguidula, 1993). Pieces of work were collected and 'assembled by the child' (NCCA, 2007a, p. 30). There was little time to show improvements in any one area. Airasian (2000) suggests that if portfolios are to show improvements, artefacts should be gathered periodically and should perhaps concentrate on one area such as writing or oral reading.

#### **a. Using electronic portfolios to aid the integration of the four language skills**

The possibility of including multimedia in the electronic portfolios allowed for the integration of the four strands in the revised curriculum (DES, 1999b).

We focused on oral-poster pieces, as all other language strands emerge from a strong oral-base built up over time (DES, 1999b). The speaking strand or 'labhairt' occurred during oral-poster work. These activities prepared pupils for more 'spontaneous talk' (Little, 2007, p. 21). Some pupils recognised that the four skills of reading, writing, listening and

speaking were integrated in the e-portfolio<sup>18</sup>. Clarke (2001) advocates using visual images and my pupils placed symbols for each strand on the rubric themselves.

Some pupils' ability to construct sentences in correct syntax revealed an improvement in their grammatical skills (Clerkin, data archives). These skills became evident in the normal classroom setting. Some mistakes were ignored in order to promote 'ag usáid teanga' or the use of language (DES, 1999b).

Most pupils gained independence in the process of writing or 'scríbhneoireacht'. 'Writing' took place when constructing sentences for the photographs they had taken. Reading scanned copy-work supported the 'léitheoireacht' strand. Listening or 'éisteacht' occurred continuously as pupils listened to perfect their own pieces. The production of language was easily stored and revisited on Compact Disc (CD). They took the CD's home to their parents and played their portfolios on the home-computer. They can reflect on how to improve pronunciation, intonation and perhaps use new phrases. 'Its strength is its ability to present authentic performance' (Niguidula, 1993, p. 3).



**Figure 7.** The School Yard, Garden and Classroom<sup>19</sup>

<sup>18</sup> Parental permission not received for all members in the group and therefore group video cannot be shown.

Pupils were given some choice in selecting curriculum themes which included ‘an scoil’ or school; ‘mé féin’ or myself; ‘bia’ or food; ‘spórt’ or sport; ‘aimsir’ or weather; and ‘ocáidí speisialta’ or special occasions. I took the pupils’ abilities, multiple intelligences and interests into account. Some pupils included photographs of their local sports club. Situating learning in the school environment, such as the classroom, garden and school yard attends to the revised curriculum objective that the child should be enabled to ‘explore and develop ideas through language’ (DES, 1999a, p. 35).

## 9. The affective domain

The new experience of listening to their mistakes needed to be introduced in a safe environment as pupils invest more of themselves in self- and peer-assessment (Montgomery et al, 2008). Some pupils showed frustration when listening to themselves but not to others<sup>20</sup> (Clerkin, data archive). Pupils may be overwhelmed by the fact that they made a mistake in front of their peers. I was aware of how assessment for various approaches to learning can ‘expose the fragile sense of self’ (Montgomery et al, 2008, p. 10). This pupil showed frustration in working with others but also a determination in knowing how she wanted to present her work:

One pupil recognised the most difficult piece. She found it difficult to remember all the words. She also said that others were telling her different ways to do the recording to the way she wanted to do it (Personal learning-journal, May 13, 2008).



**Figure 8.** Photograph of the third ‘Green Schools’ flag awarded to the school which this pupil wished to include in her e-portfolio

<sup>19</sup> Pupils wrote text and recorded over photographs of the school garden, and the school yard. The puppet was positioned to show the use of the preposition and verb ‘ina shuí ar’ or ‘sitting on’. This pupil wished to include a piece on her local sports club and her favourite flowers.

<sup>20</sup> Parental permission not granted to show audio/video.



Underwood (1984) suggests that language-teachers should be aware that 'drilling is not talking' (Underwood, 1984, p. 25). Pupils participated in 'meaningful practice' rather than in drilling. Meaningful practice has to have both affective and cognitive meaning for the pupil. 'Each sentence should be a true, sensible statement, and somehow related to the sentence around it' (Underwood, 1984, p. 24). Cognitive meaning was considered in the criteria for success for recording the posters. The recording of these criteria entailed 'making sense', 'matching the poster' and building one sentence onto another. I paid attention to the children's feelings as well by preparing sentences for the photographs the pupils liked. Pupils also communicated a message through the story of their portfolio by including photographs that meant a lot to them.

## 10. Products of assessment *for* learning

Pupil-profiles emerged as the product of this informal assessment. The use of questions, teacher designed checklists and an assessment *for* learning checklist helped me develop these profiles. The following questions prevailed in my mind:

1. Why am I using the portfolio?
2. What kind of learning will I assess?
3. How will the portfolio contribute to my assessment of the child's progress and achievements? (NCCA, 2007a, p. 30)

The question of how the portfolio might contribute to my assessment of the pupil's achievements led me to ask my own question 'how can I build up a 'deeper picture' of each child's learning that will inform future planning?' Pupils' profiles emerged as a result. Here is a short abstract from one profile:

April 21 2008. Pupil recognised 'ar an ríomhaire/on the computer', she made progress with the plan after initial difficulty and is developing self confidence.

April 23 2008. She recognised the phrase 'ag léim / reading' when another girl was trying to make sentences about a photograph. I gave her positive feedback. She is quite good at coming up with words 'on the spot' and surprises us all! She had difficulty remembering the order of the words when recording for the poster. She used 'Tá Rónó geansaí bán / Jumper Rónó is white' instead of 'Tá geansaí Rónó bán / Rónó's jumper is white'. She was able to recognise her mistake when her partner pointed it out to her and changed the recording. She did not stop when she was stuck on one word when recording. This is a great skill to have when using language. She took her time and tried to work her way around any problems she had while recording. I recognised this when I gave her feedback.

This profile shows how one pupil has taken the comments of a peer on board, proving that peer assessment and peer tutoring has resulted in learning both for the pupil and her partner. Affective learning is evident as the pupil recognises a phrase and grows in confidence. Teacher feedback and conferencing has encouraged the pupil to solve problems.

A checklist for language themes, verbs, prepositions and phrases was also developed (NCCA, 2007a). This checklist provided evidence of learning for each individual pupil-profile.

## 11. How can I ensure that any judgments I make are reasonably fair and accurate?

Final conferences with pupils verified my assertions about the success of the assessment *for learning* approach<sup>21</sup>. The impact of the portfolios was observed as pupils presented and introduced their e-portfolios to other class peers, parents and teachers. Findings were presented to colleagues during a staff meeting in the school. The processes involved in both constructing the e-portfolios and the strategies of assessment *for learning* were explained before showing one e-portfolio on the projector. Teachers commended my work and stopped me in the corridor later to quiz me on my work. I believe that some of my colleagues were interested but also daunted. However, they all seemed to agree that both the process of assessment *for learning* and the final product of the e-portfolio was impressive and worthwhile.

My findings were also presented at a validation meeting before my supervisor Dr. Margaret Farren and a group of peers in Dublin City University on 24 May, 2008. The research was acknowledged among a peer-community of action researchers. Rogers highlights the importance of validating personal research in the public arena: The community also serves as a testing ground for an individual's understanding as it moves from the realm of the personal to the public (Rogers, 2002, p. 857).

The rigour in this action research has been addressed by the cycle of question and answers in the various drafts of my action plan. My constant use of learning-journals illustrates dedication to the improvement of my practice. The use of video and audio recordings adds to the triangulation of methods for data collection.

## 12. What will I do then?

Time allowed for only one cycle of action steps to be implemented. It must be noted that portfolios were not being used for diagnostic or summative purposes and so were not scored. The purpose of the e-portfolios could extend beyond their use in assessment *for learning* and be used for summative purposes. Artefacts could be gathered over the whole school year to create a wider collection from which pupils can select their best work.

## 13. Conclusion

My attempts to change my practice of assessing my pupils have been presented. Working with second class primary school pupils, I set about implementing assessment *for learning*. E- portfolios served as the tool by which the pupils demonstrated their learning. I claim to have generated knowledge of the assessment *for learning* processes for myself and my pupils (Whitehead 2008b). Through my learning-journals, I believe I have begun to

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<sup>21</sup> Parental permission not granted to show audio clip.



improve my practice through questioning, reflecting, planning and implementing what I have learned. My claims include:

- I have added to my set of assessment skills through the use of assessment *for* learning methods. Pupils' learned to self and peer assessment, receive teacher and peer feedback, use a rubric, recognise success criteria and learning intentions. Although pupils have been introduced to the idea of identifying success criteria as a result of assessment *for* learning, a living contradiction is inherent in that success criteria were defined for the pupils.
- The use of electronic portfolios has been successfully incorporated into assessment *for* learning processes. Choosing suitable software and structuring e-portfolio content were necessary preparations. E-portfolios provided valuable opportunities for affective learning.
- Integration of the four language skills was successfully recognised by the pupils in the use of electronic portfolios.

#### **a. Pupil and teacher learning**

This study afforded me with the opportunity to develop professionally as suggested by Rogers (2002), when I reflected on three educational values of my practice. These values centred on the changes I wished to make with my practice of assessment, my use of technology and the opportunities for the integration of the four Irish language skills.

Pupils needed to be taught the skills of self-assessment. I asked questions to help pupils assess themselves during the construction of their learning-journals. Peer-assessment demanded a safe environment in which pupils could make helpful comments. They also recognised that the quality of language was as important as the quantity.

My feedback took the form of help during lessons and specific time in conference with them. I facilitated the pupils to act on the feedback I gave them. I revised the rubric in point form to meet the needs of my pupils and used these as a reference. Visual aids helped to share the curriculum-based intentions in the learning with the pupils.

I used open-ended multimedia software for the integration of reading, writing, speaking and listening. The practice of recording provided rich listening and speaking practice for the pupils. New language was introduced during portfolio-construction.

#### **b. Recommendations**

I make the following recommendations and suggest educational values should play a central role in any further investigation.

- Attention may need to be placed on the informal assessment of Irish language in primary schools.
- Portfolios may be used as a tool to link formal and informal assessment (DES 1999a).

- Teachers may wish to explore various options for software. The possibilities for developing electronic portfolios within each subject also need to be explored in the Irish primary school context.
- Use of the Irish language as the language of instruction might lead to meta-cognition in the target language and autonomy for the language-learner.

Although this study provides limited results, valuable questions have arisen that could direct further study. I have adopted innovative approaches to teaching in recognition of changes and developments in educational theory and practice (DES, 1999a). In conclusion, by attempting to create an educational living theory I have demonstrated my commitment to professional development in my teaching. I have attempted to embed my educational values of freedom for self-evaluation and the courage to be creative in my living practice. The evolution of change documented throughout this study will continue as I reflect, develop and renew my own teaching practices.

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## Appendix 1

		 	  
Contents	Photographs Sound	Photographs Sound Words	Photographs Sound Words Sentences
Language	Words Lists Poster	Words List Poster Poem/ Song	Words List Poster Poem / Song Sentences
Story	Title Beginning Middle End	Title Beginning Middle End Contents	Title Beginning Middle End Contents Links
(Images for each strand used)			  



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