

PORTFOLIO-BASED ASSESSMENT AS A STRATEGY FOR VOCABULARY DEVELOPMENT IN MIDDLE SCHOOL EFL LEARNERS

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Abstract. This study explores portfolio-based assessment as an effective strategy for enhancing vocabulary development among middle school EFL learners. It examines how systematically collected evidence of learning, ongoing reflection, and iterative feedback cycles contribute to the retention and productive use of lexical items. Drawing on both assessment theory and classroom practice, the study proposes a practical portfolio model along with clear evaluation criteria. The findings suggest that portfolio-based assessment not only improves vocabulary acquisition but also fosters learner autonomy and feedback literacy.

Keywords: portfolio-based assessment, vocabulary development, middle school learners, EFL, formative assessment, learner autonomy, feedback literacy

Аннотация: В данном исследовании рассматривается портфолио-ориентированное оценивание как эффективная стратегия развития словарного запаса у учащихся среднего звена, изучающих английский язык как иностранный. Анализируется, как систематически собранные учебные материалы, регулярная рефлексия и циклы обратной связи способствуют запоминанию и продуктивному использованию лексических единиц. На основе теории оценивания и практики преподавания предлагается модель портфолио и критерии его оценки. Результаты показывают, что данный подход способствует не только усвоению лексики, но и развитию автономности учащихся и культуры восприятия обратной связи.

Ключевые слова: портфолио-ориентированное оценивание, развитие словарного запаса, учащиеся среднего звена, английский как иностранный, формирующее оценивание, автономия учащихся, культура обратной связи

Annotatsiya: Ushbu tadqiqotda portfel asosidagi baholash o'rta maktab EFL o'quvchilarida lug'at boyligini rivojlantirishning samarali strategiyasi sifatida tahlil qilinadi. Unda tizimli ravishda to'plangan o'quv materiallari, muntazam refleksiya va qayta aloqa jarayonlari leksik birliklarni eslab qolish hamda ularni faol qo'llashga qanday ta'sir ko'rsatishi o'rganiladi. Tadqiqot baholash nazariyasi va amaliy tajribani uyg'unlashtirgan holda, amalda qo'llash mumkin bo'lgan portfel modeli va baholash mezonlarini taklif etadi. Natijalar ushbu yondashuv nafaqat lug'atni o'zlashtirishni yaxshilashini, balki o'quvchilarning mustaqilligini va qayta aloqa madaniyatini rivojlantirishini ko'rsatadi.

Kalit so'zlar: portfolio asosidagi baholash, lug'at boyligini rivojlantirish, o'rta maktab o'quvchilari, ingliz tili (EFL), formatif baholash, o'quvchi mustaqilligi, qayta aloqa savodxonligi

Introduction

The present thesis addresses a persistent methodological problem in middle school EFL instruction: vocabulary knowledge is often assessed as a short-term product, while lexical development is inherently gradual, cumulative, and sensitive to context. Conventional testing practices tend to privilege recognition over use and isolate words from meaningful communication, which can distort both teaching priorities and learners' strategies. Portfolio-based assessment is considered here not as a decorative collection of tasks, but as an assessment architecture that makes lexical growth observable over time through repeated performances, documented revisions, and reflective commentary. The central claim is that a well-designed portfolio system can align instructional aims, learning activities, and assessment criteria in ways that expand learners' depth of vocabulary knowledge, strengthen retrieval, and increase the probability of transfer to speaking and writing.

Conceptually, portfolio-based assessment fits the logic of formative assessment and learning-oriented assessment by treating evidence as something generated, interpreted, and acted upon within an ongoing cycle. When vocabulary learning is framed as the accumulation of experiences with words across varied contexts, assessment should register these experiences and support the learner in managing them. In the EFL middle school classroom, learners' lexical progress is typically uneven: students may know many words receptively but struggle to use them accurately; they may memorize definitions yet fail to collocate; they may recognize a word in a textbook unit but not retrieve it weeks later. Portfolios are proposed as a response to this unevenness because they allow repeated sampling of lexical performance across time and modalities, which improves the representativeness of evidence and reduces the distortion caused by single-occasion tests [2].

For middle school learners, motivation and identity as language users are inseparable from assessment practices. Adolescents are sensitive to judgment, and assessment that communicates only deficits can narrow participation. Portfolios can mitigate this by establishing a growth narrative: learners see early drafts alongside improved versions and can attribute progress to strategy and effort rather than fixed ability. However, this positive potential is not automatic. If portfolios are reduced to uncurated folders or are graded with vague impressions, they can increase workload without improving learning. Therefore, the thesis emphasizes design principles that preserve validity, reliability, and fairness within classroom constraints. Validity requires that the portfolio evidence meaningfully represents the construct of vocabulary development and that score interpretations are defensible [4]. Reliability requires stable criteria, calibration, and manageable scoring procedures so that outcomes do not depend on the assessor's mood or the attractiveness of presentation [2].

Methodology

This study employs a qualitative, classroom-based research design aimed at exploring the effectiveness of portfolio-based assessment in developing vocabulary among middle school EFL learners. The methodology integrates elements of action research and instructional design to ensure both practical relevance and theoretical grounding.

The participants of the study consist of middle school students learning English as a foreign language. The selection of participants is based on their similar proficiency

level and exposure to English instruction, which allows for a more consistent evaluation of vocabulary development outcomes.

The research procedure is organized into several stages. First, a portfolio model is designed to guide students in collecting and organizing evidence of their vocabulary learning. The portfolio includes tasks such as vocabulary logs, sentence construction, contextual usage activities, reflective journals, and self-assessment checklists. These components are intended to encourage repeated exposure to lexical items and promote deeper cognitive processing.

Second, the implementation phase involves integrating portfolio activities into regular classroom instruction over a defined period. Students are required to update their portfolios regularly, while teachers provide ongoing formative feedback. This feedback focuses on accuracy, appropriateness, and the productive use of vocabulary in context. Peer feedback is also incorporated to enhance collaborative learning and feedback literacy.

Third, data collection is carried out through multiple sources to ensure reliability. These include students' portfolio entries, teacher feedback records, classroom observations, and reflective notes. In addition, pre- and post-assessment tasks are used to measure changes in vocabulary knowledge, particularly in terms of retention and productive use.

The data analysis process combines qualitative and descriptive approaches. Portfolio content is analyzed to identify patterns in vocabulary usage, improvement in lexical accuracy, and evidence of learner reflection. Comparisons between initial and final performance provide insight into vocabulary development over time. The study also evaluates the effectiveness of the portfolio model based on criteria such as learner engagement, autonomy, and responsiveness to feedback.

Discussion and Results

The proposed model is a hybrid portfolio combining process and product components. The process component includes weekly lexical entries selected from classroom input and independent reading, each entry containing (a) the word in context, (b) a learner-generated paraphrase, (c) at least two collocations or common patterns, (d) a self-created sentence connected to personal experience, and (e) a brief reflection on difficulty and planned reuse. The product component includes two monthly performance tasks: one writing task and one speaking task, both designed to require the use of a specified set of target lexical items while leaving room for creative expression. The performance tasks are revised at least once after feedback, and the portfolio must preserve both drafts to document change. This architecture operationalizes the idea that vocabulary development is evidenced through repeated, increasingly controlled use rather than initial exposure.

Feedback is central because portfolios without feedback become archives. The thesis adopts a feedback literacy perspective: learners need to understand criteria, interpret comments, and take action through revision. In the middle school context, teacher feedback must be selective and strategic to avoid overload. For lexical development, feedback priorities are proposed as (a) appropriacy of word choice to meaning and register, (b) collocational naturalness, (c) morphological accuracy and word form, and (d) clarity and comprehensibility. Correcting every minor error may signal that accuracy is the only valued outcome; instead, feedback can focus on a limited number of lexical targets per task, which supports attention and uptake. Peer feedback

can be included but requires scaffolding through checklists and exemplars to ensure it contributes to learning rather than social evaluation.

The assessment criteria proposed here follow an analytic rubric with four dimensions: lexical range, lexical accuracy, lexical depth, and evidence of learning over time. Lexical range is defined as the purposeful use of varied vocabulary appropriate to task demands rather than the indiscriminate use of rare words. Lexical accuracy covers form and grammatical compatibility, including correct word class and morphological endings. Lexical depth captures collocation, polysemy awareness, and contextual appropriacy, acknowledging that depth often distinguishes intermediate learners from those who rely on direct translation. Evidence of learning over time captures revision quality, reflective insight, and the ability to reuse items across tasks. The inclusion of the time dimension is the distinctive contribution of the portfolio logic: a learner who corrects collocation errors after feedback and later uses the same pattern accurately demonstrates development in a way a one-time test cannot reveal.

In implementing the model, the thesis recommends a phased approach aligned with the school term. In the initial phase, the teacher introduces exemplars of portfolio entries and co-constructs criteria with students through analysis of anonymized samples, a practice that increases transparency and reduces anxiety. In the second phase, portfolio routines are stabilized: a weekly lexical entry and brief reflective note become a habitual practice. In the third phase, emphasis shifts to transfer: performance tasks require students to integrate previously recorded items in new communicative contexts. This staged design is pedagogically justified because middle school learners often need routine before they can benefit from reflection. It also supports manageability: the teacher can sample and spot-check weekly entries while giving fuller feedback on monthly tasks.

Within the Uzbek EFL context, portfolio-based assessment also aligns with a broader shift toward competence-based education and continuous assessment practices. However, successful adoption depends on teacher assessment literacy and institutional support. Teachers need preparation in rubric design, moderation, and feedback strategies, while schools need reasonable policies for documentation and academic integrity. The thesis suggests that local methodological traditions emphasizing systematic skill formation can complement the portfolio approach if portfolios are treated as structured learning trajectories rather than as collections of creative products. Research in Uzbek methodology underscores the role of purposeful practice and learner independence, both of which can be operationalized through portfolio routines that make practice visible and accountable [6]. Russian assessment scholarship likewise provides frameworks for understanding evaluation as part of instruction and for maintaining transparency and fairness, which are essential for credible portfolio use in school settings [3].

Conclusion

In conclusion, portfolio-based assessment can function as a coherent strategy for vocabulary development in middle school EFL learning when it is designed around clear constructs, stable routines, and actionable feedback. Its main pedagogical value lies in making lexical growth visible through repeated evidence, revision, and reflection, thereby supporting depth of vocabulary knowledge and transfer to productive skills. The proposed hybrid model balances learner choice with standardization, improves the representativeness of assessment evidence, and strengthens students' responsibility for

their learning. While challenges related to workload, authenticity, and scoring reliability remain, they can be addressed through analytic rubrics, sampling procedures, in-class verification, and feedback prioritization. As a result, portfolios offer a viable pathway to align vocabulary instruction and assessment with the developmental nature of lexical competence in adolescence.

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