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## A Special Talk with David Nunan Chair Professor of Applied Linguistics and Director of the English Centre, University of Hong Kong

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**Interview: A Special Talk with  
David Nunan  
Chair Professor of Applied Linguistics and  
Director of the English Centre,  
University of Hong Kong**

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**As program developers and language instructors are trying to find alternative methods to assess learners' learning progress and language achievement, could you briefly share with our readers your experience with portfolio assessments in your work in Hong Kong?**


 All right, what we are doing with all the students now is not just paper-and-pencil portfolios. Instead, they have to do an electronic portfolio in which they have to put in samples of spoken and written language. When we first started using electronic portfolios, we had a quite complicated time, but now we've got a very simple system: a much more straightforward system where students can use a video camera. What they need to do is to just record directly onto the webcam and then the video just automatically uploads onto their website. Simply said, they can just click and record. All students are required to compile their electronic portfolio once in every English course they are taking. There are guidelines for them of what they're expected to put onto the portfolio.

**What's your reason for using portfolios then?**


 Well, probably the most important reason is that we believe this is a better form of assessment. We commit to direct assessment rather than giving, say, indirect tests like grammar

tests and so on. We assess directly the outcome from the courses. The big problem is how you grade it all. You've got the written essays, you've got all the presentations, but how do you give some an A, B, C, D, or F grade?


**Is there any drawback of using portfolios instead of traditional paper-and-pencil tests?**

 We have band descriptors for this, of course, but one of the problems is, even though people in general are quite happy with the system, grading portfolios can be very time-consuming, especially when you have a large number of students in your class. You have to ask yourself whether the teachers really have enough time to do the assessment.


**In your opinion, what would be the ideal class size for the use of portfolios? Do you believe portfolio assessment works in large classes?**

 The class size in Hong Kong is 20. We used to have 15 students in one class, and when we increased the number to 20 due to administrative reasons, the teachers complained that the class size was getting too large. They believed that nobody could teach language in a class of 20 students. Anyway, I don't think portfolios work in a class with 30 or 40 students. I think it is very unrealistic to have that number of pieces of work to grade. I've only done this with one or two pieces of work for each student. One of the things that I ask students to put in their portfolios is evidence of progress. Maybe teachers can assign a rehearsal in front of the class and then feedback from the other students and a final presentation. Another suggestion is to have students submit ten pieces of work but then you only assess one of them, the one they select as their best piece of work. Actually, it's up to the teacher. You can do it two ways. You either decide with the students, letting them nominate which piece they want to be graded, or you just make it up to the teacher.


**What about standardization?**

 We have moderated grading, meaning before we do an assessment we've got videotapes of students' presentations of A, B, C, D, and F quality and we take a selection of those. Then, we show them and all teachers grade them. Where one teacher's grading doesn't align with the others, we look at that and see why. I don't have experience using portfolio assessment in such large classes. But, I think the main point is the system has to be straightforward and simple.


**What are the advantages of online portfolios?**

 The students can re-record their stuff. They can put up different drafts of their presentations and their written work, and it's also convenient for the teachers who can get online and do the assessment anywhere they like.


**Are there any possible disadvantages in putting portfolios online?**

 You have got to have a good security system. There's a possibility that the people can get access to students' work which will be a problem, but again you can solve that with a password and so on. Another disadvantage is the students themselves may have trouble. That's why it has to be kept simple. Some students are not very good at technology.


**What about plagiarism, such as when students copy other students' work? How do you deal with plagiarism?**

 Making students aware of it and catching them from time to time.


**In addition to online portfolios, computer and technology now play a very significant role in English language teaching and learning. What do you think about the use of computer in language classes?**

 I think computers are excellent for teaching the receptive skills, listening and reading, and of course, grammar and vocabulary development, and to a certain extent, pronunciation. Class meetings should be devoted to interactions. What we're doing at Hong Kong University is we're not doing reading and listening instruction in class. Students do that independently and work on that in their own time. And then we have more classroom time for oral interaction. One of the things you can do instead of having 30 or 40 students in a class for two hours is that you can have 30 students in the class for one hour and the other hour have them working on the computers. So, you still have two hours, but each hour is devoted to face-to-face interaction with only 30 students, rather than two hours with 60 students all at once.

**When you let students work on reading and writing on their own, is there any supervision or guidance from the teachers?**

 There is no direct supervision from the teacher, but there's guidance and feedback given in class.

**Do you have any suggestions about what we should do to deal with the increasing number of students in classes?**

 One possibility that is the focus of an experiment in Hong Kong is to put some students in large classes and others in small tutorial groups. We have got a mixed result though. The students really like the small groups. Sometimes we get negative evaluations from the students that we moved into the large groups. It depends. I think what you can do is to carry out an analysis of your program. You can identify the parts of language instruction that can be more effectively delivered through self-directed study and those that are better delivered through explicit

instruction like listening, reading, grammar, and vocabulary. At the same time, students need face-to-face interactions with the teacher to develop other skills such as speaking and oral communication. Students also need feedback on their written assignments, which can take a huge amount of time in large classes. More importantly, we have students who think that the class needs a teacher, and without the presence of the teacher, there is no learning. So, you need to identify your goals of what you want to do and what you want your students to achieve, and work from that.

