

Digital Portfolios for English Learner Reclassification in Missouri



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ABSTRACT: English Learners (ELs) in U.S. K–12 schools are assessed annually to demonstrate their language proficiency and determine eligibility for reclassification. A member of the WIDA Consortium, a major provider of K-12 EL assessments, Missouri requires an overall score of 4.7 out of 6.0 on the WIDA ACCESS for English Language Learners test for EL reclassification. Students whose scores fall slightly below the cut score may be suitable candidates for reclassification through a portfolio review process (Missouri Department of Elementary and Secondary Education, n.d.). While reclassification portfolio use is a school's or district's decision to undertake, portfolios, when rigorously implemented, can be an equitable option to reclassify Missouri ELs who may struggle to reach the cut score due to lower-performing domain(s). Based on a 2025 MIDTESOL Conference presentation and best practices gathered from implementing reclassification portfolio use, this paper outlines strategies for establishing district- or school-level processes for EL portfolio creation, finding physical and digital student work for portfolio inclusion, audio recording to collect speech samples, and advice for program success.

Keywords: portfolio, English learners, reclassification, digital, best practices

1. Introduction

1.1 U.S. English Learner Reclassification Policy

In the United States, each state is responsible for assessing English Learners (ELs) annually by administering an English language assessment, documenting progress and reclassifying students through state-established criteria (U.S. Department of Education, 2016). Many states accomplish this by becoming members of an EL consortium, which provides screener assessments for EL identification and summative assessments for annual progress monitoring and reclassification (Beck & Muhammad, 2021). A member of the WIDA Consortium since 2010, Missouri administers WIDA ACCESS, a summative assessment, annually to ELs (WIDA, n.d.).

Reclassification is an important educational milestone as it influences students' access to academic opportunities and their long-term educational trajectories (Umansky, 2016; Uysal, 2024). Because reclassification procedures are determined by individual states, assessment practices vary considerably (Bond & Sato, 2026). Some states rely solely on assessment cut scores, while others have flexibility in

ranges or multiple measures that allow additional evidence to inform reclassification decisions (Bond & Sato, 2026; Beck & Muhammad, 2021; Cimpian et al., 2017).

1.2 Portfolio-based Reclassification in Missouri

A portfolio is a “systematic collection of student work that represents student activities, accomplishments, and achievements over a specific period of time in one or more areas of the curriculum” and can be classified into several types, including *showcase portfolios* for a student’s best work, *developmental portfolios* for student growth or change over time (U. of Hawaii at Manoa, n.d.). In the field of language learning and teaching, *Language development* portfolios can be used to document a student’s language growth (Kray et al., 2022). Portfolios can be used for low- or high-stakes purposes. In Missouri, language development portfolios can be used to reclassify students whose overall ACCESS score falls slightly below the state’s 4.7 cut score (Missouri Department of Elementary and Secondary Education, n.d.-b, hereafter DESE). Reclassification portfolios may benefit students who perform at grade level but do not meet the cut score criteria because of lower performance in one or more domains (i.e., listening, reading, speaking, or writing).

DESE describes both EL program retention or reclassification as a high-stakes decision that should not rest on one test alone, with portfolios needing “compelling evidence” for the domain(s) in question. For an ACCESS score of 4.7–6.0 DESE states, “The student must be exited barring compelling evidence in the EL Portfolio suggesting the student should remain in the LIEP,” and for scores below 4.7, “The student must remain in the LIEP barring compelling evidence that the student is capable of fully participating in a classroom where English is the language of instruction.” (DESE, n.d.-b). The decision-making process is left to district- or school-level professionals, with DESE noting, “Districts have flexibility on how additional evidence is gathered, the extent to which it is gathered, who collects and stores it, and the final decision as to whether the evidence is sufficient to reclassify the student” (DESE, n.d.-b).

Districts and schools professionals should consider the high-stakes nature of alternative reclassification via portfolio, carefully weighing both the ethical considerations of exiting a student who may still require EL services (portfolio overutilization) and failing to create a portfolio for a student who no longer needs EL services (portfolio underutilization). Students should never be reclassified for a program’s convenience; they should only be reclassified if they demonstrate grade-level proficiency. Students should also not be kept in a system if a factor such as test anxiety prevents them from reclassifying. Another consideration is EL misidentification (Kim et al., 2023), as portfolios could provide an avenue to reclassify students who may not have been ELs but who had nonetheless been screened and were identified as such.

As portfolios in Missouri can be used both to reclassify and retain students in an EL program, they represent a high-stakes use of portfolios that require time and thoughtful planning. If the school or district is new to creating portfolios, portfolio creators and evaluators will need to determine an acceptable amount of student work, or artifacts, to collect (e.g., 3–5 per low domain), how portfolios will be collected and stored, what factors determine that an artifact is on grade level and high quality, and how artifacts will be evaluated. Therefore, in the following sections we offer guidelines, best practices, and advice for EL professionals for creating portfolios for reclassification purposes.

2. Establishing a Portfolio-Creating Process

2.1 Selecting Portfolio Creators and Evaluators

When planning for EL portfolios, two main parties may be involved in portfolio creation and use: school- or district-level educators who create and maintain the portfolios (here called *portfolio creators*) and school- or district-level educators who evaluate the portfolios' content using a rubric or other processes (here called *portfolio evaluators*). Depending on district size and stakeholder preference, teachers may participate in either the creation process or evaluation, or both. Students are encouraged to assist in the portfolio creation process, which will be discussed in later sections.

2.2 Selecting Portfolio Candidates

As portfolio evaluators should demonstrate rigor in the portfolio scoring process, teachers and administrators should mindfully select portfolio candidates who demonstrate readiness to exit EL services based on past ACCESS scores, academics, and other factors. As EL teachers struggle with workload (Weinstein & Trickett, 2016), judiciously selecting students to create portfolios for is an important ethical consideration. This consideration is especially important because developing portfolios requires additional professional learning and documentation (Bond & Sato, 2026). While DESE suggests creating portfolios for students with scores of 3.5 or higher on the previous year's ACCESS test (DESE, n.d.-a), selecting students who received a 4.0–4.6 may be an effective score range, as these students may be more likely to exhibit grade-level proficiency. If a student has an Individualized Education Program (IEP) or 504 plan, we recommend convening with special education teachers and coordinators to determine an acceptable ACCESS score and evidence needed.

2.3 Determining Low-Scoring Domains

After portfolio creators and evaluators determine which portfolio candidate(s) to create portfolios for, the next step is to determine which domains (i.e., listening, speaking, reading, writing) to collect for each portfolio candidate. Portfolio data should consist of evidence addressing any low domain scores (less than 4.7) received during the previous school year and potential low domain scores that may be received during the current school year's ACCESS test. Low domains tend to be the productive domains of speaking and writing, though a student could have a lower score in a receptive skill (i.e., listening and reading). Good portfolio candidates typically have lower scores in only one or two domains; we suggest avoiding creating portfolios for students scoring low in three domains unless the student has a particularly strong academic record (e.g., high GPA, pre-AP class enrollment), as multiple low domain scores may indicate proper placement in the EL program.

For many school districts, ACCESS scores are received during the last few weeks of school, if not after the end of the school year. If a student received a domain score of 4.7 or less the previous school year, we recommend that data is collected for that domain, even if the score was near 4.7. It's also important to note that students in the youngest grade band in a WIDA test (i.e., second, fourth, sixth, and ninth grades) may be more likely to receive lower scores. Therefore, it's a good idea to collect artifacts for these students, even in domains that seem borderline. This may save portfolio creators from scrambling to find domain-related work later.

3. Finding Physical and Digital Student Work

3.1 Artifact Collection using Physical and Digital Work

Digital portfolios may consist of work, or artifacts, that were completed on physical paper or digitally. For physical work, take a picture or scan the work and return it to the student. For digital work, the student or their content teacher can email the work, or if possible, ask classroom or content teachers for access to the class's learning management system (e.g., Google Classroom).

For students with low domain scores in reading and writing, collect worksheets, short writing responses, or other artifacts connected with a grade-level reading text. Audio recordings can be made for students with low reading and speaking scores. In all cases, record the name of the book or reading material and how the student read the material (e.g., silently, with a peer, listening to the teacher read aloud in class, a mixture of the above) to ensure the artifact adequately demonstrates reading ability. If a student provides a work sample that does not include writing (e.g., math homework), we recommend saving it, as it could still become the topic of a speech sample (see the audio recording section). Student notes should be used with caution, however, as their content teacher may have provided explicit instruction on notetaking.

3.2 Collecting Quality and Appropriately Spaced-Out Work for Portfolio Artifact Validity

Artifacts should demonstrate that the student can perform at grade level in the domain in question. Artifacts should ideally be collected throughout the school year, or at minimum, throughout the second semester, to show grade-level achievement and growth. Collect artifacts from three or more subjects (minimum two) to show grade-level English ability across subjects. As students may not enjoy all subjects they take, playing to student interests, especially in the early portfolio development stages, can be an effective strategy. Artifacts from other subjects can be collected later. Note that artifacts should be minimally edited by the teacher; a rough draft of an essay is more valid than a final draft, as the final draft might have undergone teacher or peer editing and may not be representative of the student's true ability.

Throughout the school year, keep your ears open for projects that could demonstrate student abilities in one or multiple domains. For example, a high school where the first author worked had a Renaissance cereal box project where students researched a famous artist and provided information about them on each side of their cereal box. When completed, the cereal boxes demonstrated student's writing abilities and were tangible objects students could speak about during an audio recording session.

3.3 Leveraging Student Autonomy in Artifact Collection

Student autonomy is an important factor in the portfolio creation process as it can help with finding quality artifacts and may reduce portfolio creator workload. How autonomous a student is during the portfolio process may depend on their interests, age, or how strongly they desire to exit the EL program. A student who is highly autonomous is not necessarily one who would be a better portfolio candidate and vice versa. We recommend portfolio creators identify how autonomous students are early to determine what level of support is needed. Examples of high-, mid-, and low-autonomy student behavior are provided in Table 1.

Table 1. Type of Portfolio Support Based on level of Student Autonomy

Student autonomy	Typical student behavior	Portfolio creator support
High	Identifies strong work samples independently; may record and send audio independently	Monitor progress and provide guidance as needed
Mid-level	Participates once samples are identified; may need scheduled recording time	Identify suitable artifacts and facilitate technology/recording
Low	Relies heavily on teacher to identify artifacts and manage recording	Request work from teachers, schedule sessions, and conduct/prompt recordings

Each student and situation is different. Leverage autonomous students whenever possible so more time can be used for collecting artifacts with students who require more support. As the year progresses, students might become more autonomous as they begin to understand the importance of creating their portfolio, what kind of work is needed, and how to audio record on their devices.

3.4 Making Time for Collecting Artifacts with Students

Finding time to work with students in large part depends on their grade level and how they receive EL services (e.g., push-in, pull-out, or separate EL class). As students with high English proficiency, portfolio candidates may not attend an EL class or have regular EL services. If this is the case, we recommend consulting the student's class schedule and identifying when a portfolio collector could pull the student from their classroom or content teacher with minimal disruption. Ideal times may depend on the subject being taught, the classroom or content teacher, or the portfolio creator's availability. If pulling from a classroom or content teacher's class, we recommend explaining the high-stakes nature of reclassification, describing the needs of the student (e.g., autonomy level), and reassuring the content teacher that these visits will be infrequent and only during work time (as opposed to lecture or lab time).

4. Audio Recording

4.1 Why Collect Audio Recordings

Speaking tends to be a lower scoring domain among students approaching reclassification. For students with a lower speaking domain score, audio recordings may be a valid way to demonstrate student proficiency in spoken English, providing a permanent artifact that demonstrates their current abilities.

While the thought of audio recording may initially cause anxiety among some students, audio recording can reduce or eliminate the need for students to meet with portfolio evaluators in person and speak in front

of potential strangers. With practice, positive reinforcement, and support that matches the student's level of autonomy and how they receive EL services, audio recording can become a part of the school day. The following sections detail advice for audio recording with students.

4.2 Integrating Audio Recording into the School Day

If the EL teacher has a class with portfolio candidates, audio recording assignments can be integrated into instruction as a formative or summative assessment. For formative assessments, students can record responses to weekly topics by reading an article, watching an educational video (e.g., Ted-Ed), doing an activity, or reflecting on a project in a content class. Creating a rubric to evaluate the quality and length of audio recordings is suggested to help students understand the features of a good audio recording. Through these activities, recording will become more familiar, and ACCESS speaking scores may improve too. If students are interested in podcasting or other forms of media, the teacher may be able to integrate audio recording into a Project-Based Learning unit, which can benefit portfolio candidates as well as other ELs in the classroom (e.g., Beckett & Slater, 2020).

If a portfolio candidate is not in an EL class, audio recordings can be created via pull-out sessions with the student or, in the case of highly autonomous students, by the students themselves. While these recordings may not be for a grade, explaining the importance of audio recording as part of their reclassification portfolio and connecting audio recording to student interests may help.

4.3 Configuring Hardware and the Physical Space for Audio Recording

We recommend investing in quality audio recording hardware; needs may vary depending on student autonomy. For students with high autonomy or in an EL classroom setting, headsets like the ones used during ACCESS testing are ideal to isolate a student's voice. For students with low or mid-levels of autonomy, using a snowball mic to pick up the student's and teacher's voice may be effective, especially if the portfolio collector needs to ask questions to prompt the student to give an extended response. Funding and resources may be available via Title III, the district's technology coordinator, or other sources, e.g., the first author took part in WIDA field testing, which provided additional EL funding.

When preparing for audio recording consider both the space the recording will take place and how the recording area will be set up. Some students, especially high schoolers, might not be comfortable recording where peers, EL or non-EL alike, can see or hear them. Finding private spaces wherever possible, such as a library study room, can help.

Set up the recording area so the mic is close to the student, and the computer is close to the teacher. If the artifact is paper-based, put it between both teacher and student. If the artifact is digital, download it on your device and ask the student to look at it on theirs. We recommend splitting your screen with the student's work on one side and the audio recorder and some questions to ask the student on the other. If this setup seems cluttered, print the artifacts and questions as needed.

4.4 Interview Audio Recordings

To make the best use of recording time, a bit of preparation can go a long way, especially when students need prompting while recording. We recommend brainstorming academic questions for the student before recording, referencing Bloom's Taxonomy to arrange questions from factual to conceptual and procedural questions (CELT, n.d.). Questions can be previewed with the student; however, do not allow

them to take notes or prepare a script—their speech should be spontaneous. The prepared questions may also help keep the portfolio creator on track. Questions that could apply to many artifacts include:

- Which project or assignment is this?
- Which class is it for?
- What were you supposed to do?
- How did you do it?
- What did you learn?

More specific questions ask students to define key concepts and use grade-level vocabulary. Using these terms effectively provides evidence that a student is successful at accessing grade-level content. For writing projects, especially essays or longer works, asking “How much did your teacher or peers help you edit this?” during the interview can provide evidence to evaluators that the artifact was not heavily edited by the content teacher. You can also ask if or how they used generative AI or other tools. After recording, we recommend the portfolio collector listen to the audio file with the student. If the audio file is unclear or if the student notices a mistake they made, it is fine to re-record; sometimes students are nervous at first or think of a better way to explain their ideas upon reflection. Additionally, re-recording is an option on other summative assessments such as the ELPA21 consortium’s speaking test, especially if the student’s voice is too soft (Oregon Department of Education, n.d.); as such, we consider re-recording acceptable for creating portfolio artifacts.

When the audio session is over, ask students what went well and what they want to improve upon. We recommend brainstorming some ideas for next time, e.g., *“This was a great example of what you’re doing in math class. Next time, let’s find something from your English or social studies class.”* Let the student know approximately when to record again and promote student autonomy by encouraging the student to look for great artifacts.

5. Advice and Best Practices

5.1 Start Early

Starting the portfolio collection process at the beginning of the school year helps establish routines with the students and data collection practices with portfolio collectors. Artifacts collected over two semesters may provide strong evidence of both growth and grade-level performance. Moreover, collecting data throughout the year addresses the potential ethical issue of not acting on near cut scores. It reduces the *“Oh well, maybe next year”* reaction for students who receive a score a few tenths below the reclassification cut score when summative score reports are received and may potentially reduce the *“Oh no, why didn’t they reclassify them back then!”* comments when viewing historical EL data.

5.2 Seek Student Buy-In

Willingness to engage, or “Buy-in,” from the student is an important part of the portfolio creation process, especially for high school students. Buy-in is best sought both before the portfolio creation process begins and with reminders throughout the year. Framing portfolios as *insurance* seems an effective way to communicate the importance of this process to both students and other content teachers, e.g.,

We hope students pass the ACCESS test this year and we're going to try our best, but since we don't receive test scores until the end of the school year, collecting a few things now will save us from scrambling at the end of the year or having to wait to reclassify until next year.

If students complain about making a portfolio, investigate the reason why. If it's a matter of effort, talk with the student about the benefits of reclassification and how they are the best person to find quality work samples in their classes. If the student is worried about losing a source of support, however, discuss these concerns further with the student and other educators.

5.3 Data Storage

For digital data storage, we recommend creating a school year folder with subfolders for each school, and subfolders within them for each portfolio candidate at each school. The first author found it helpful to include a domain abbreviation and number of artifacts collected (e.g., S2, W3; S for speaking and W for writing) to the student's folder name to easily track progress. A clear and consistent file naming system may help portfolio evaluators with adding any rubrics or notes used during the decision-making process to the portfolio and would also help if the school's or district's reclassification portfolios were audited.

Further folders could be made within a student's portfolio folder for each domain or subject, although a consistent file naming pattern may alleviate the need for this. A file naming convention could include:

- date
- file type (audio or writing)
- student's name or initials
- brief assignment description

A file name of 1-30-2026-audio-JB-history-renaissance-project, for example, provides at-a-glance information about the file's contents.

5.4 Hold Preemptive Portfolio Check-Ins as Needed

If a portfolio creator notices that a student might not pass the portfolio during the data collection process, we recommend setting up a meeting with a portfolio evaluator or a team of educators. Analyze what the student has produced so far, discuss any notes the portfolio collector has made, and decide whether to pursue the portfolio further or not. Considering the portfolio collector's workload, especially if multiple portfolios are being gathered that year, and the student, who might be expecting to pass via portfolio because one is being made, a mid-year decision can save time and help everyone reflect on what to do the rest of this school year and the next.

5.5 Prepare for Contingencies in Portfolio Artifact Collection

During the school year, we recommend portfolio creators gather more artifacts than minimally needed, as some may later be deemed as inadequate. Common issues may include an artifact not being on grade level, not amply demonstrating the student's ability, or there may be an image quality or audio recording quality issue. For that reason, if the school or district has determined that four artifacts are needed per low domain, for example, we recommend collecting at least two additional samples.

If a portfolio lacks an ample number of grade-level artifacts, it may be hard to locate replacements, especially at the end of a school year. If this is the case for the writing domain, the first author found it acceptable to grab a blank piece of paper and have the student respond to a content-related writing prompt for ten or more minutes. The writing prompt, which could come from a textbook or a teacher website, should provide the student with an opportunity to demonstrate grade-level vocabulary, grammar, and writing. If an audio recording is also needed, the student could discuss what they wrote.

6. Discussion and Conclusion

Portfolios are a valuable way to provide insurance for Missouri students who are close to meeting the state cut score, providing an alternative method of reclassification. Used alongside standardized assessment results, carefully developed portfolios can support more equitable reclassification decisions by allowing educators to consider multiple measures of student performance and apply professional judgment to individual students' language and academic contexts. In some cases, students with portfolios receive an overall score of 4.7+ that school year and their district is able to reclassify using standard procedures. However, for those that fall slightly short of the cut score (e.g., a score of 4.4 or 4.6), the portfolio, when rigorously created and evaluated, is an ethical reclassification option.

We hope this paper provides a guide for districts hoping to begin or revitalize their EL portfolio processes, as well as start a bigger conversation among EL professionals in Missouri and elsewhere on reclassification policy and procedures.

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