UC Berkeley
L2 Journal

Title
Integrating Portfolios into the L2 Arabic Classroom

Permalink
https://escholarship.org/uc/item/4cr0b1qh

Journal
L2 Journal, 4(2)

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Publication Date
2012

DOI
10.5070/L24213333

Copyright Information

Peer reviewed

Integrating Portfolios into the L2 Arabic Classroom

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This is an action research study that reports on using student portfolios in a second language (L2) Arabic class. The goal of this study was to examine the validity of using portfolios as an L2 assessment procedure and to ascertain the effectiveness of portfolios as an L2 learning tool. In this class, portfolios replaced weekly quizzes, which counted for 30% of the final grade. Portfolios were also used to supplement the course textbook, namely *Al-Kitaab* (Brustad, Al-Batal, & Al-Tonsi, 1995). Data sources for the study included traditional tests grades, oral interview grades, portfolio grades, a sixteen-item survey, and students' reflections at the end of the course. The findings indicate that there is a strong correlation between portfolio grades, on one hand, and written tests and oral interviews grades on the other hand. It was also found that students perceived using portfolios as an effective L2 learning tool.

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INTRODUCTION

The idea for this research project was born out of a discussion by teachers of Arabic at the large Arabic program at the University of Texas at Austin. The main concerns of these teachers was to get students more involved in their learning of L2 Arabic and to respond to complaints about the amount of quizzes they had to take during Arabic courses; they had to take a quiz each week. Given the risks and time involved in incorporating portfolios into traditional L2 Arabic classes, particularly those that follow an instructional format from a prescribed textbook and that rely on traditional tests and quizzes, other instructors chose not to proceed with the idea. However, I decided to implement portfolios in my own fourth semester L2 Arabic class.

Immediately, I was faced with many challenges such as explaining this approach to my students, defining the goals and rationale of this approach, giving feedback and grading, and devising an organizational structure for the whole project. After reviewing some literature, I began to understand how important all of these issues were to the success of this endeavor. I also realized that using portfolios in education in general has been demonstrated to benefit learners on many levels. Portfolios provide learners with some kind of control over what they learn and the pace of learning it. Portfolios also encourage learners to investigate and explore topics and content relevant to their own interests, making them powerful tools to motivate lifelong learning experiences. Portfolios are also used as an alternative assessment tool to traditional tests.

However, in the context of L2 learning and instruction, portfolios have not been explored fully. In particular, their validity as an L2 assessment tool has not been established. Furthermore, although there have been some studies on the nature of using portfolios in L2 instruction, there is little explanation of the direct impact that portfolios have in terms of

learning specific language skills. Therefore, I decided to collect data from this classroom experience to answer the following two research questions:

1) Are portfolios a reliable L2 assessment tool compared to traditional tests (written and spoken)?
2) How effective are portfolios as a learning tool for Arabic L2 learners?

In the following sections, I will review the literature on portfolios in education followed by a discussion of the steps and procedures undertaken in this research both to incorporate portfolio into an L2 Arabic class and to collect and analyze data for this paper. Then I will discuss the results in light of the two research questions mentioned above. In the last section, I will link findings from this research to portfolio pedagogical practices in future L2 classes.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Johnson, Mims-Cox, & Doyle-Nichols (2006) define the portfolio as a collection of work done over a period of time to measure progress and to encourage self-reflection. Portfolios as a such a measuring tool can be used either with students or with teachers in training (Banfi, 2003; Newman, Smolen, & Lee, 1995). In addition to their measuring capacity, portfolios offer learners concrete tools to manage their learning outcomes and to reflect on their own work in terms of both content and strategy; they provide a continuum to measure progress both as a product as well as a process. The nature of the portfolio offers learners the space and time to reflect on their ongoing learning, which helps them evaluate and improvise their approach to the task at hand over time (Rea, 2001). Effective portfolios also increase opportunities for teacher-student and student-student interaction through teacher feedback and students' presentations of their work on a regular basis (see the Portfolio Design section below) (McRobbie, 1992). Furthermore, portfolios are motivating because they give students more control over the content and pace of their learning (Little, 2002). Portfolios as an assessment tool are stress-free compared to traditional tests. Due to their flexibility, portfolios can be completed over an extended period of time rather than at a set point of time as is the case with tests, thus, they offer learners a developmental continuum of learning.

These characteristics make portfolios appealing to L2 teachers and learners. Their inherent flexibility allows teachers to design different portfolios for diverse purposes. A portfolio may specifically focus on extensive reading, intensive listening, free writing, or even speaking. These focused portfolios may have additional benefits. For example, with a reading portfolio, some students may be more inclined to read literature while others may be more inclined to read online newspapers. Nunes (2004) pointed out the versatility of portfolios as an L2 teaching and learning tool that "facilitates the adoption of a more learner-centered practice as well as the integration of assessment, teaching and learning within the curriculum" (p. 334).

In addition to their flexibility and easy adaptability, portfolios are built on the idea of contextualized language learning that focuses on whole text and comprehension rather than isolated grammatical forms out of context, ultimately, enabling L2 learners to achieve higher proficiency levels in the L2. In fact, Yang (2003) found that students had positive language learning experiences due to the fact that portfolios required them to constantly be in touch

270

with the language as they used it to read and to listen, in contrast to learning only about the language and its grammar.

In order to ensure that portfolios become an effective learning tool, they have to be planned well. Teachers have to carefully consider the amount of time it takes to read and grade them (Newman, Smolen, & Lee, p. 95). They also have to ensure that students remain engaged and motivated to produce quality portfolios. Nunes (2004) proposed two principles to ensure active student involvement. First, portfolios have to be dialogic, and second, they have to give students space to reflect on their thinking during the process. Accommodating these two principles requires a considerable amount of planning and follow-up in order to keep students engaged throughout the whole process and to provide time and space for reflection. Hence, feedback, teacher-student interaction, and grading rubrics have to be clearly designed and explained to students from the beginning.

METHODS

Participants:

Twenty-three students participated in this study; there were 12 males and 11 females. All participants were students in the College of Humanities at a major university in the US. Each had completed 210 hours of Arabic instruction. The class met four times a week for one hour. In addition to class time, students met with the instructor in small groups of 4-5 once a week for one hour to complete speaking activities based on portfolio entries for that week. Arabic was the language used during weekly discussions.

Goals and Challenges:

One of the main goals of incorporating portfolios in this course was to offer learners more opportunities to work with authentic materials as they offer students rich linguistic and cultural context in which to anchor their learning. Although authentic texts (oral and written) can be linguistically and culturally challenging, they can be motivating to learners who start to see themselves as real users of the L2 and not mere decoders of artificial texts and scenarios.

Another goal was to train L2 Arabic learners to become autonomous learners who are able to search for and find suitable input to match their interests and levels. Part of this training involves giving them guidance on how to deal with complex texts or those that are beyond their current proficiency level. This goal was achieved through providing structured activity forms, which will be discussed in the next section.

One more goal of this experience was to offer learners an opportunity to opt out of weekly quizzes that focus on vocabulary and grammatical forms. Students had the option of completing the portfolio or taking weekly quizzes, both of which carried the same grade weight (30%). The rationale behind weekly quizzes was to make students review the material previously covered in class. However, students had taken these quizzes for the last three semesters in their other L2 Arabic courses. All students expressed a deep sense of quiz fatigue and a feeling of disconnect between what they studied for quizzes and their real goals of developing strong communicative abilities in Arabic. All twenty-three students that registered for the course opted for the portfolio option.

271

Once the decision to replace weekly quizzes with portfolios was made, I faced a number of practical challenges. The first challenge was deciding on whether portfolios should target all language skills, i.e. reading, speaking, listening, and writing, or if they should be limited to only one skill. In order to make this decision, I decided to elicit students' input in the first class meeting. Students expressed their need to improve in all four skill areas, therefore, I decided to target all skills with the activities I included.

Another challenge was deciding on the design of tasks and activities. I decided to include two broad types of activities: one type was "teacher-assigned" activities and the second type was "student-selected" activities. This two-pronged approach to activities was implemented to reduce the burden on students of finding all of the materials on their own. Content for teacher-assigned activities was selected by the teacher, while content for student-selected activities was selected by each student based on his or her interests.

Finally, the hardest challenge was designing a portfolio management system that fit naturally into the class without sacrificing teacher oversight of students' work. On one hand, it was important to encourage autonomous learning, risk taking, and learner initiative; but on the other hand, I wanted to provide students with a framework or a structure so that they would not become frustrated or complain that they were confused. I decided to use a structured portfolio format rather than a totally free format. The design of the portfolio will be explained in the following section.

After much contemplation and reflection, I came to the conclusion that an effective portfolio management system had to take the following issues into consideration:

1) the time it takes students to prepare their portfolio each week,
2) the time it takes the teacher to read and to give feedback on each portfolio,
3) a grading scheme,
4) a mechanism for students to review and to reflect on their own work, and
5) a framework for students to interact with the teacher as well as with each other.

Portfolio Design and Data Collection

In the first part of this section, I will describe the design of the portfolio, and in the second part I will describe the data collection procedures used for this study. Each student collected his or her entries in a binder organized on a weekly basis. For a list of weekly activities see Table 1 below. Feedback and grading were provided on a weekly basis, as binders were collected from students at the end of the week and were returned to them at the beginning of the following week. In addition to preparing the activities for the portfolio, students were required to present their weekly entries in small groups of four or five students, which provided interaction and practice using Arabic to communicate orally. Small group meetings were supervised by the teacher and lasted one hour for each group. The meetings took place regularly on a weekly basis for the duration of the course. All discussions were in Arabic.

Each student was required to complete thirty entries over twelve weeks (see Table 1 below). An "activity log" listing the activities week by week was attached to the front of each binder to monitor completion of weekly entries. In order to earn a grade for a certain week, the student had to complete all of the required entries for that particular week.

Week	Task Types	Teacher-assigned/ Student-chosen	Task Graded
3	1. Reading 2. Listening to news 3. Journal entry 2	Teacher Student Teacher	Reading
4	4. Reading 5. Listening 6. Journal entry 3	Student Teacher Teacher	Reading
5	7. Writing 8. Listening to song 9. Journal entry 4	Teacher Student Teacher	Journal
6	10. Reading 11. Listening to news 12. Journal entry 5	Teacher Student Teacher	Listening -news
7	13. Writing 14. Reading 15. Journal entry 6	Teacher Teacher Teacher	Reading
8	16. Reading 17. Listening to news 18. Culture: food 19. Journal entry 7	Teacher Student Student Teacher	Listening–news
9	20. Reading 21. Listen to song 22. Listen to news 23. Journal entry 8	Teacher Student Student Teacher	Reading
10	24. Listening 25. Vocabulary 26. Journal entry 9	Teacher Teacher Teacher	Vocabulary
11	27. Journal entry 10	Teacher	Grammar quiz
12	28. Listening to news 29. Reading 30. Journal entry 11	Student Student Teacher	Grammar quiz

Table 1: Weekly tasks, task types, and the specific tasks selected for grading each week.

Another key structure of the portfolio was the inclusion of an "activity form," which was designed to make portfolios more structured and uniform for all students. Activity forms listed key tasks or questions that learners had to complete when doing a certain activity. As such there was a form for reading, a form for listening to the news, and a form for listening to songs (see Appendix, sections I, II, III respectively). For writing activities, I provided prompts. These forms provided students with the appropriate scaffolding in order to approach authentic and un-simplified materials in a structured way. Activity forms were also designed to implicitly teach good language learning strategies pertinent to the task at hand. They incrementally guided learners by breaking down the task into its basic elements. For example, reading forms (See Appendix I) required students to provide an alternate title for the reading, which would require them to understand the main idea of the text without necessarily having to know the meaning of each word. Reading forms also required learners to list key new words in the text in order to help them think about important ideas as well as to reinforce the acquisition of new vocabulary. Furthermore, the forms required learners to

273

write a simple summary of the text prompting them to focus more on details. Finally, they provided learners with a space to reflect on their reading strategies in English, helping them to make connections between how they read (strategy) and what they understand or learned (outcome).

Similarly, listening forms (see Appendix II) guided students to use 'top-down' listening strategies. First they listed five news items that they heard when listening to the news online. They were asked to compile the list without focusing on the meaning of every word. Instead they focused on meaning such as where events took place, who participated in them, and what happened. Then, students were also asked to focus more on 'bottom-up' strategies by focusing on detail. They wrote a summary of two important news items and listed key new vocabulary they learned from each listening.

Therefore activity forms stood as road maps that trained learners to use effective language learning strategies to complete challenging tasks on their own. These forms proved to be very helpful during the small group discussions as they allowed students to easily recall the previous week's work and share it with their group. Activity forms were also helpful to the instructor in a number of ways; they provided a uniform framework for grading, and they also allowed the instructor a simple way to monitor task completion on a regular basis.

Data sources for this study included students' grades on written tests and oral interviews, students' responses to a sixteen item survey, and students' reflection essays submitted at the end of the semester. In order to answer the first research question, portfolio grades were correlated with written tests grades and oral interviews grades. Students' responses to each item in the survey were categorized as either 'agree,' 'disagree' or 'neutral.' Only the 'agree' percentages are reported here because they most clearly indicated the trend of opinion in each case. Finally, students' reflection essays were analyzed using qualitative analysis that yielded some common themes, which are reported below.

DATA ANALYSIS AND RESULTS

Portfolios as an Assessment Tool

The portfolio experience lasted twelve weeks. All portfolios were graded on a weekly basis to provide feedback and to encourage active participation in the small group meetings on an ongoing basis. The weekly grade was based on two complementary factors: first to earn a grade a student needed to have completed all assigned entries for that week, usually three entries (see Table 1 above). Second, the teacher selected one entry for that week to read closely and grade, using a holistic approach focusing on comprehension. To ensure consistency the same entry was graded for all students. For example, to earn a grade for Week 3 (the first week using the portfolio) a student would have finished and submitted a reading activity form, a listening to the news form, and a journal entry (see Table 1). Then the teacher read and holistically graded the reading entry for that week. A student who answered all of the questions on the form and elaborated on them would get a full grade (10/10). A student who answered all of the questions but demonstrated some gaps in comprehension would get (8/10). A student whose reading form was sketchy and not detailed would earn (6/10). A student would earn a zero if he/she had either not completed the activity that was chosen to be closely read and graded by the instructor or if he or she had completed the graded activity but failed to complete the other two activities for that week.

274

The final grade for this course was calculated as a composite of the following components: three written tests accounted for 30% of the final grade, the portfolio grade accounted for 30%, four oral interviews (oral tests) accounted for 30%, and the homework grade accounted for 10% of the final grade. The written tests were the same ones used in another section of the same level at the same university and they covered reading, writing, grammar, and vocabulary. The only difference between the portfolio section (my class) and the non-portfolio section (another instructor) was that the grade on the weekly quizzes used in the other section was replaced by the portfolio grade in my section.

Two-tailed Pearson correlation tests were run to find out if there are any significant correlations between portfolio grades and traditional written test grades on one hand, and portfolio grades and oral interview grades on the other. The test results show that portfolio grades significantly correlated with written test grades ($r = 0.86$, $p < 0.001$). Similarly, portfolios grades significantly correlated with oral interview grades ($r = 0.86$, $p < 0.001$). These results indicate that portfolios are a reliable assessment tool in L2 instruction. This finding is significant in validating using portfolios for L2 assessment.

Portfolios as an L2 Learning Tool

In order to ascertain how effective the portfolio was in helping learners learn Arabic, students were asked at the end of the semester to give two types of feedback. The first type of feedback was elicited through a sixteen-item survey administered during class. Each item on the survey had five possible responses: strongly disagree, disagree, neutral, agree, or strongly agree. Seventeen students who were present on that day participated in the survey. The second form of feedback came through reflection essays submitted by students electronically at the end of the semester. Twelve students submitted their reflections via email.

The results of the survey are shown in Table 2 below. In general, the findings indicate that there was a consensus among students that the portfolio helped them learn Arabic effectively. Seventy-seven percent of the respondents thought that the activities in the portfolio were more valuable than the routine weekly quizzes. Eighty-two percent thought that performing the activities in the portfolio helped them to achieve their goals for the course. And eighty-three percent expressed their intention to continue to learn Arabic on their own.

Survey question	Agree
1. Activities on the portfolio helped me to achieve my goals.	82%
2. I feel that I learned more doing the portfolio, than I would have by taking weekly quizzes.	77%
3. The journal helped me to incorporate and use what I learned.	88%
4. The portfolio helped me learn new vocabulary and reinforce old ones.	88%
5. The portfolio helped me to read better and faster.	77%
6. The portfolio helped improve my listening significantly.	82%
7. The portfolio activities exposed me more to Arab culture.	82%
8. I spent more than 6 hours a week doing my portfolio.	82%
9. Presenting my portfolio enhanced my learning of Arabic.	82%
10. I always read the feedback on my portfolio.	100%
11. There should be more feedback on all portfolio entries.	65%
12. I did not learn more or better, I did it for grade only.	6%
13. I will definitely continue to read and listen on my own.	83%
14. The workload for the portfolio was excessive.	65%
15. Grading was fair.	100%
16. I liked the topics that we studied for the portfolio.	77%

Table 2: Favorable student response percentages to survey

More specifically, the survey results indicate that the activities in the portfolio improved the learning of reading, writing, listening, speaking, and reading skills, vocabulary, and culture. Eighty-eight percent of the respondents felt that the activities in the portfolio helped them to learn new vocabulary and to reinforce previously learned words. Eighty-eight percent felt that their writing had improved because they wrote to communicate their ideas. Seventy-seven percent thought that the portfolio made them better readers of Arabic, and eighty-two percent felt that the portfolio improved their listening. The same percentage felt that the portfolio exposed them to Arab culture. Eighty-two percent also agreed that weekly discussions based on portfolio entries enhanced their learning of Arabic. Thus, overall students felt that portfolios helped them to achieve their language goal in all areas and skills.

276

A number of themes emerged from the qualitative analysis of students' end of semester reflections. Students thought of the portfolio as a positive learning experience due to its flexibility, authenticity, and meaningful tasks and activities. For example, John[1] praised the portfolio for its adaptability to his needs and interests. He felt that the portfolio gave him "some flexibility with regard to the specific focus of language acquisition and practice." Another student, Pat, praised the portfolio because it provided him an effective organizational tool allowing him to "structure what I learn in class and practice it in a more authentic environment." Students also praised their portfolio experience because it engaged them in meaningful, real-world tasks such as reading authentic short stories, listening to news bulletins, or reading about a topic that interested them. Alex liked this experience because she thought "it required more meaningful work, study, and helpful application than just memorizing a list of words for a quiz."

Another major theme that emerged from the qualitative analysis of the students' reflection was the effectiveness of the portfolio as a language learning tool. Learners believed that the portfolio made them faster readers and better listeners. For example, it trained students to use top-down approaches as they moved away from word for word processing. The journal entries, which were an integral part of the portfolio, gave students an opportunity to recycle previously learned vocabulary and grammar. Tally complained how tied she was to "bottom-up" processing or decoding strategies in her previous Arabic classes. She wrote "I have a tendency to read carefully and not move forward in a text until I understand every word of the sentence." At the end of the semester Tally credited the portfolio for having "loosened my approach and improved my vocabulary so I've started to feel more confident when I look at a text and do not feel I have to double check every word. The same applies to my writing". Pat wrote "I have developed my reading skills where I can read faster and have to find fewer words in the dictionary."

Finally, another major theme that emerged from this analysis was the amount of time it took students to complete their portfolios. All participants complained about the many hours they spent on performing the portfolio tasks and wished that the time could be reduced in the future.

DISCUSSION

The findings for the first research question regarding the reliability of the portfolio as a language assessment tool compared to written language tests and oral interviews indicate a strong correlation between students' grades on the portfolio and students' grades on other forms of assessment, $r = .86$, respectively. This finding suggests that the portfolio can be a viable assessment tool, which can be integrated into L2 assessment. However, there is one caveat for using portfolios for assessment; teachers considering using portfolios in this manner should also consider the time requirements for grading a portfolio as reading and grading a portfolio significantly exceeds the time it takes to read and grade a quiz or a test.

With regard to the second research question concerning the effectiveness of the portfolio as an L2 learning tool, the results clearly point out that the portfolio had a positive and lasting impact on L2 learning. Keeping a portfolio helped learners develop effective reading and listening strategies by focusing on 'top-down' language processing. Learners also improved their acquisition of vocabulary and grammar as a result of repeated contextualized

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[1] All names in this paper are pseudonyms.

exposure and usage. Portfolios also helped students achieve their language goals as well as develop self-confidence in their ability to learn (Little, 2002, 2009). Furthermore, students noticed how adaptable the portfolios can be as a L2 learning tool, giving them control over their learning in terms of content, level, and pace confirming results reported in Nunes (2004).

Additionally, students described the activities in their portfolios as meaningful, challenging, flexible, and individualized and they provided them with a sense of satisfaction and empowerment in the attainment of their goals. Alex described her portfolio experience saying "I have almost never worked as hard as I did when I was reading the short stories, but the sense of self-satisfaction when I finished reading and actually understood the plot and the moral was great." Such positive attitudes toward the portfolio helped keep students motivated and actively involved in their learning despite the fact that it took them a lot more time to prepare a portfolio.

Despite all of the positive feedback from students, they complained about the enormous amount of time it took them to complete their portfolio entries each week. The same thing can be said about the time it took the teacher to read and grade portfolios each week too. Newman, Smolen, and Lee (1995) cautioned about this drawback in using portfolios in language classes.

PEDAGOGICAL IMPLICATIONS

The results of this study clearly indicate the advantages and positive impact of integrating portfolios into Arabic L2. All of the goals that led to the adoption of the portfolio were successfully fulfilled. Students became better readers and listeners on their own. They were able to find authentic materials and use them to advance their learning of Arabic. Students also became more motivated to spend extra time learning the language, because they felt that what they were doing for the portfolio was helping them to meet their language goals. Thus, introducing the portfolio in an L2 course can make learning more contextualized and learners more involved.

Similarly the portfolio proved to be a reliable tool for assessing language learning. L2 classes using portfolios as an assessment tool will advance both the goal of learning and the goal of having a reliable assessment measure.

Despite the above-mentioned pedagogical benefits of L2 portfolios, careful portfolio planning and management is paramount to ensure effective and successful portfolio adaptation in language classes. When considering adopting portfolios, teachers should be aware of key issues that will make this procedure meaningful and the learning experience enjoyable. The following steps as proposed by Yang (2003) are worth considering in order to make portfolios effective language teaching and learning tools:

(1) introduce the concept of autonomous learning to students; (2) develop mini-lessons and provide guidelines to help students develop their portfolios; (3) implement frequent portfolio sharing and checking; (4) allocate adequate class time for assembling the portfolios; (5) encourage students to include more than one type of material in the portfolio; and (6) consider other media instead of paper for portfolios. (p. 312)

278

Another pedagogical lesson learned from this study is that scaling down the amount of work by restricting the portfolio to one entry per week accompanied by some reflective writing will achieve most of the benefits discussed above. The strength of the portfolio lies in its effectiveness to build confidence and autonomy and train students to use good language learning strategies. I believe that all of the benefits can be achieved by maintaining a regular portfolio but without burdening students with too many activities each week.

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APPENDIX: Forms used to aid and train learners to complete their portfolio entries.

I.   Reading report form

1.   عنوان القراءة ؟ (بالعربية)   What is the headline or topic?

....

2.   كلمات جديدة ومهمة بالنسبة لك تعلمتها من هذا النشاط: (بالعربية)
New words I learned from this activity:

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3.   ملخص بسيط للنشاط: (بالعربية)
Simple summary of the activity in Arabic:

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What strategies did you use while doing this activity? (In English)   4.

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تعليق وتوقيع الأستاذ : Teacher's signature and comments

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....

II.   Listening to news report form

First listening: list the stories you heard 1.

1. الخبر الأول عن
2. الخبر الثاني عن
3. الخبر الثالث عن
4. الخبر الرابع عن
5. الخبر الخامس عن

2. أكتب ملخص بسيط لخبرين مهمين من الشرق الأوسط : (بالعربية)
Write a summery of two stories from the Middle East.

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3. كلمات جديدة ومهمة بالنسبة لك تعلمتها من هذا النشاط: (بالعربية)
New words I learned from this activity:

………………………………………………………………………
………………………………………………………………………

تعليق وتوقيع الأستاذ: Teacher's signature and comments

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III.   Listening to songs form

1.   إسم الأغية واسم المغني/ة ؟ (بالعربية)
Song and singer names

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2.   من أي بلد الأغنية؟ بأي لهجة ؟
The Arab country of the singers and their dialect:

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3.   كلمات من العامية قريبة من الفصحى سمعتها من الأغنية.
Colloquial words used in the song that are close to "standard Arabic":

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4.   عن ماذا الأغنية ؟ وماذا فهمت منها ؟
What is the song about? What did you understand from it?

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تعليق وتوقيع الأستاذ:
Teacher's signature and comment

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