



New Developments

The European Language Portfolio and learner autonomy by David Little

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What is the European Language Portfolio?

The European Language Portfolio (ELP) has three obligatory components: a language passport, a language biography, and a dossier. The language passport summarizes the owner's linguistic identity and his/her experience of learning and using second/foreign languages; it also provides space for the owner periodically to record his/her self-assessment of overall second/foreign language proficiency. The language biography accompanies the ongoing processes of learning and using second/foreign languages and engaging with the cultures associated with them. It supports goal setting and self-assessment in relation to specific learning objectives, and encourages reflection on learning styles, strategies and intercultural experience. Sometimes this reflection is a matter of filling in a form or recording one's thoughts under a series of headings; sometimes it is entirely open. The dossier is where the owner collects evidence of his/her second/foreign language proficiency and intercultural experience; in some implementations it is also used to store work in progress.

There is no single version of the ELP. In 1997 the Council of Europe published a collection of preliminary studies that suggested forms the ELP might take in order to meet the needs of language learners in various categories (Council of Europe 1997). From 1997 to 2000 pilot projects were implemented in 15 Council of Europe member countries and by three international non-governmental organizations (for a full report, see Schärer

2001). Each pilot project developed and trialled its own ELP, which resulted in considerable variation. However, project leaders came together twice a year in order not only to share experience but gradually to identify the ELP's common European core – those features that should be obligatory in all ELPs. Since 2000 these have been defined as a set of Principles and Guidelines (Council of Europe 2000; version with explanatory notes, Council of Europe 2004; www.coe.int/portfolio). Towards the end of the pilot projects a standard version of the language passport was developed for use by adults; it has been adopted by the great majority of ELPs designed for adolescent and adult learners.

In 2001 the Council of Europe established a Validation Committee whose function is to analyse ELPs and, if they are deemed to correspond to the Principles and Guidelines, award them an accreditation number. By June 2006 75 ELPs had been validated and several more were being revised prior to validation. According to reports from the Council of Europe's member countries, more than 1,250,000 language learners have received an ELP and have worked with it more or less intensively for a shorter or longer period.

What are the ELP's functions?

The Council of Europe developed the ELP in order to serve two complementary functions. The first is pedagogical: the ELP is designed to make the language learning process more transparent to learners and to foster the development of learner autonomy; that is why it assigns a central role to reflection and self-assessment. This function reflects the Council of Europe's long-established commitment to learner autonomy as an essential part of education for democratic citizenship and a prerequisite for lifelong learning. The second function is to provide concrete evidence of second/foreign language communicative proficiency and intercultural experience. This reflects the Council of

Europe's equally long-established interest in finding ways of reporting language learning achievement in an internationally transparent manner. In addition the ELP is intended to promote the development of plurilingualism, the ability to communicate in two or more languages besides one's first language.

How is the ELP meant to work?

The ELP's pedagogical and reporting functions both depend on the so-called common reference levels of the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages (Council of Europe 2001). These define second/foreign language communicative proficiency

- ❑ in behavioural terms, in the form of "can do" statements;
- ❑ at six levels arranged in three bands: basic user (A1, A2); independent user (B1, B2); proficient user (C1, C2);
- ❑ in relation to five communicative activities: listening, reading, spoken interaction, spoken production, writing.

The common reference levels are summarized in the so-called self-assessment grid (Council of Europe 2001, pp.26f.) and elaborated in fifty-three illustrative scales.

In the ELP the self-assessment grid provides the overall scale against which communicative proficiency is recorded in the language passport, while the illustrative scales yield checklists that support goal setting and self-assessment in the language biography. For example, in the self-assessment grid SPOKEN INTERACTION at A1 level is summarized like this:

I can interact in a simple way provided the other person is prepared to repeat or rephrase things at a slower rate of speech and help me formulate what I'm trying to say. I can ask and answer simple questions in areas of immediate need or on very familiar topics.

And in the ELP designed for use in Irish secondary schools the A1 checklist for SPOKEN INTERACTION (developed by drawing on the illustrative

scales to restate the communicative goals of the official curriculum in the form of "can do" statements) looks like this:

- ❑ I can say basic greetings and phrases (e.g., please, thank you), ask how someone is and say how I am
- ❑ I can say who I am, ask someone's name and introduce someone
- ❑ I can say I don't understand, ask people to repeat what they say or speak more slowly, attract attention and ask for help
- ❑ I can ask how to say something in the language or what a word means
- ❑ I can ask and answer simple direct questions on very familiar topics (e.g., family, school) with help from the person I am talking to
- ❑ I can ask people for things and give people things
- ❑ I can handle numbers, quantities, cost and time
- ❑ I can make simple purchases, using pointing and gestures to support what I say

The ELP and learner autonomy

In formal educational contexts learners become autonomous to the extent that they develop and exercise the capacity to plan, monitor and evaluate their own learning. In the case of second/foreign languages, learner autonomy also embraces target language use because of the central role that language use plays in the development of communicative proficiency. When an Austrian teenager starts to learn (say) English, there are various things she can do to support her learning. For example, she can memorize those chunks of language that occur in almost every interaction, like greetings, leave-takings and conversational fillers; and she can compile lists of basic vocabulary – numbers, colours, days of the week, months and seasons of the year, and so on. But she will become proficient in understanding English only by listening to English and proficient in speaking English only by speaking English. The same is true of reading and writing.

Language teachers who want to promote the



development of learner autonomy must do three things. First, they must involve their learners in their own learning, giving them ownership of learning objectives and the learning process. Secondly, they must get their learners to reflect about learning and about the target language. Self-assessment plays a central role here, for unless we can make reasonably accurate judgements about our knowledge and capacities against stated criteria, our planning, monitoring and evaluation are bound to be haphazard and uncertain. Reflection is made much easier when we write things down – learning plans, lists of vocabulary, drafts of work in progress, reminders of things we need to look into; for in this way we make our thoughts and our learning available for inspection and analysis. Thirdly, teachers must engage their learners in appropriate target language use, which includes the language of reflection and self-assessment. This entails that they model and scaffold the different kinds of discourse in which their learners need to become proficient.

These three things that teachers must do can be summarized as the pedagogical principles of learner involvement, learner reflection and appropriate target language use. Note that the order in which I have listed them does not imply a hierarchy. On the contrary, the three principles encapsulate three perspectives on the same complex phenomenon, and each principle implies the other two. For example, we cannot engage learners in reflection unless we also involve them in their own learning and draw them into particular modes of target language use (reflection is, after all, a kind of discourse).

The ELP can help teachers to implement each of these three principles. When checklists correspond to the demands of the official curricula, they provide learners with an inventory of learning tasks that they can use to plan, monitor and evaluate their learning over a school year, a term, a month or a week. The language biography is explicitly designed to associate goal setting and self-assessment with reflection on learning styles and strategies and the cultural dimension of second/foreign language learning and use. And when the ELP is presented

(partly) in the learners' target language, it can help to promote the use of the target language as medium of learning. This is especially true when checklists are available in the target language.

It is important to stress that the ELP is intended to be an "open" document – this is reflected in the fact that most models are presented in a loose-leaf binder. So if language biography pages that invite reflection on learning strategies seem to leave out things that are important to a particular learner, he can easily make good the omission. And a teacher who has previously used open-form learning diaries can adapt the dossier section to serve the same purpose. In other words, the ELP helps learners to manage their learning and teachers to manage their teaching, but it is not a straitjacket.

Finding out more

If you want to find out more about the ELP, the first place to go is the Council of Europe's ELP website (www.coe.int/portfolio). Here you will find all the key documents concerning the ELP, including the Principles and Guidelines, guides for ELP developers and teachers/teacher trainers, and a collection of examples of the ELP in use. The list of accredited ELPs includes links to a number of national ELP websites, including that of the Österreichisches Sprachen-Kompetenz-Zentrum (www.sprachen.ac.at), which provides information about the Austrian national ELP project.

The website of the Centre for Language and Communication Studies, Trinity College Dublin (www.tcd.ie/clcs – select PROJECTS on the home page) gives an overview of Irish ELP projects and a wealth of information about classrooms that are using the ELP for secondary schools, including many examples of students' work.

Integrate Ireland Language and Training (www.iilt.ie) provides full-time English language courses for adult immigrants with refugee status and supports the teaching and learning of English as a second language in primary and secondary schools. Its courses for adults are based not on a textbook but on the Milestone ELP, developed by the Milestone



Project, which has partners in Ireland, Germany, Finland, The Netherlands and Sweden. The different versions of the Milestone ELP can be downloaded from www.eu-milestone.de. For primary and secondary schools IILT has used the Common European Framework to define English language proficiency benchmarks (the curriculum) and created versions of the ELP with checklists based on the benchmarks (the basic tool of learning and teaching). Benchmarks and ELPs can be downloaded from the IILT website.

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Professional profile:



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