

Autonomous Learning and Self-Assessment through the European Language Portfolio (ELP): A Pilot Study on Primary Education

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Abstract

Autonomy and self-assessment are crucial elements in the process of foreign language learning as stated in the Council of Europe recommendations. The European Language Portfolio (ELP) is conceived as a tool that allows users to record their language learning achievements and their experience of learning and using languages. This paper presents the results of a study carried out on primary education level with the ELP as the working basis to engage students in their own learning process in Spain. The analysis of the results offers insights on learners' autonomy and self-assessment, plurilingualism, diversity awareness and usefulness of the ELP from both the teacher's and students' perspective. Motivation towards autonomy learning was clearly enhanced whereas self-assessment issues were unclear for students due to the novelty of the cognitive process.

Keywords: ELP-autonomy-self-assessment.

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1. Introduction

The definition of learner autonomy has been open to debate since its beginning. Holec, among other researchers (Canga Alonso, 2006; Little, 1991 and 2003; Thanasoulas, 2000), remarks that learner autonomy can be defined as developing an awareness to use the second language, establishing targets in relation to what is needed to be improved or learnt as well as to be able to choose the best method to do so and how to be self-assessed. Benson (1997), Little (1991, 1996, 1997 & 2000) and Nunan (1999) understand

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autonomy in foreign language learning as mutual collaboration among students to improve their linguistic competence in the target language. Students need to be involved in their work by participating actively. Learners' active participation and responsibility for their own learning process are essential in the field of foreign language learning (Dam, 1995). In this sense, learner autonomy seems to move the focus from teacher to student but as David Little wrote,

I believe that all truly effective learning entails the growth of autonomy in the learner as regards both the process and the content of learning; but I also believe that for most learners the growth of autonomy requires the stimulus, insight and guidance of a good teacher (Little, 2000).

To all purposes, the autonomous learner is willing to take a proactive role in the learning process, generating ideas and availing himself of learning opportunities, rather than simply reacting to various stimuli of the teacher (Boud, 1988; Kohonen, 1992; Knowles, 1975). The assumption is that the student should work towards autonomy with the guided help of a motivated teacher.

In 2000, the Council of Europe conceived the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages (CEFR) to provide a common basis for the explicit description of objectives, content and evaluation in second language education. The development of a European Language Portfolio (ELP) enabling an individual to record and present different aspects of his or her language biography represents a step in this direction. In the Intergovernmental Symposium held in Rüslikon, Switzerland November 1991, self-directed learning was considered to embody one of the most important uses of the CEF, including:

- raising the learner's awareness of his or her present state of knowledge;
- self-setting of feasible and worthwhile objectives;
- selection of materials;
- self-assessment (Council of Europe, 2001).

Over the last years, different versions of the ELP have been developed for learners' use in many different contexts and for different educational levels. From 2000 until 2010, the Committee validated 118 ELP models submitted by ministries of education, regional education authorities, international non-governmental educational associations and European projects in private schools. In 2000, the publication "European Language Portfolio: Guide for Developers" developed by Günther Schneider and Peter Lenz described the three components of the ELP as:

- Language Passport, which records language competences and provides an overview of the individual's proficiency in different languages at a given point in time.
- Language Biography, which allows the students' involvement and planning in their learning progress reflecting upon and assessing his or her learning process.
- Dossier, in which the students can show evidences of their learning to document and illustrate achievements or experiences recorded in the Language Biography or Language Passport.

The implementation of this methodological tool is focused on the development of learning autonomy on the students' part helping them to enhance their capacity for reflection and self-assessment. In Primary education, the ELP could work as a motivational resource for the EFL class and the first step to increase self-confidence in children on their language abilities. As Perclová points out:

ELP pedagogy in primary and lower-secondary schools could be seen as a thoughtful process of foreign language teaching and learning methodology facilitating the learner's individual and gradual achievement of widely recognized and internationally transparent objectives focusing on real-life language use. Being actively involved in this process, the learners feel a sense of achievement and their autonomy increases (2006, p. 45 [\[YUN1\]](#).[\[my2\]](#))

Taking into account Perclová's ideas about ELP implementation in Primary Education and the revised literature on autonomy, this study attempts to delve into 1) learner's autonomy issues, 2) students' self-assessment competence, 3) plurilingualism and diversity features and 4) the usefulness of the ELP in general for both students and teachers surveyed.

2. Methodology

The purpose of this research derives into the analysis of the ELP implementation in accordance with the students' grade of autonomy and the capability to self-assess their progress in languages. The concept of autonomy seems relatively new for the Spanish educational system. Primary education students have not been familiar with this learning methodology contrastively with other European countries. Therefore, this study seeks to investigate the results of ELP's use when it is presented to students for the first time. The main aims were: a) to analyse the results of the students' ELP, b) to evaluate the reliability of students' self-assessment, c) to compare the usefulness of the ELP and the promotion of plurilingualism from the teacher's and the students' perspective. Can primary students reflect upon language progress in a reliable manner? Can the ELP promote autonomous learning in children? Is the ELP useful for the teacher and applicable to implement in the curriculum?

2.1. Data collection procedure and participants

This case study was developed in San Fernando Primary School (Almeria, Spain) from February to May 2012. The sample for this study consisted of 25 fifth-grade students, 14 girls and 11 boys aged between 10 and 11 years old. The students, Spanish-speaking EFL learners, have been learning English for four years. They belonged to a public school located in a village which adhered to the ELP project the previous year.

For this study, we chose the fifth grade since students were in an intermediate level, in which apprentices started to raise awareness of managing languages and their usefulness throughout the world. Although students have been crucial for the analysis, it is also important to mention the collaboration of the English teacher through questionnaires and interviews. One of the main objectives was to measure the implication of the teacher in the process and the difficulties that might arise due to time constrictions or alteration of the rhythm of the class. The participants worked with the ELP in class once a month but they should work at home too. The data collection and observation procedures were developed in four sessions. We can classify this study as non-interventionist quasi-experimental following the taxonomy of Loewen and Philp (2012). In general terms, the purpose of these studies was to investigate the effectiveness of classroom practices and offer some feedback about future pedagogical adaptations. However, the main drawback states that the researcher displays very little control over what happens in the classroom.

2.2. Research instruments

A mixed method model (qualitative and quantitative data) was applied to analyze learners' experience when introduced to ELP. Research data were collected from different sources: observation, field notes and video recording, open and close questionnaires to students and teacher, a structured interview to be answered by the teacher and finally a sample of four students' ELPs.

Bryman and Bell's (2003) findings (cited in Thorpe and Holt, 2008) establish "jotted or scratch" notebook field notes as those accomplished in the observation process of this study. Additionally, the video recording analysis method was also employed as evidence of the experience. After the observation stage, questionnaires were administered to all participants: students and teacher. The first questionnaire

(Q1)³ was specifically designed to survey the usefulness of this tool according to students' initial impressions and experiences and whether ELP really promotes interculturalism or awareness of plurilingualism in the world.

On the other hand, the second questionnaire (Q2)⁴, administered to the teacher, was designed to explore the pedagogical function of the ELP with regards to the autonomy degree transferred to students and their capacity of self-assessment. The questionnaires were organized in close and open structures. Therefore, some options of the surveys were answered in yes/no form while others could be qualitatively analyzed. Following Patton (1990), a standardized open-ended interview was conducted to explore the teacher's perception of its effectiveness with regards to this specific school. This interview lasting one hour was recorded and then transcribed as a compulsory part to interpret data. As the purpose of this research was primarily based on a qualitative approach, an established coding system to draw upon was not needed. To conclude with the research instruments, a selection of four students' European Language Portfolios (Language Biography, Passport and Dossier) were chosen at random, providing that one of the samples would belong to a foreign student. The analysis of these data is undoubtedly decisive to establish a comparison with the theoretical base considered. It is also required for this study to appreciate to what extent students benefit from this tool with respect to language learning.

The first observational session resulted in field notes about general details from the classroom and the European Language Portfolio. Additionally, the teacher's explanations about this tool, methodology, students' observations and behaviour with respect to the ELP were reflected from this warming-up session.

In the second session, a video recording was conducted in which students were filling the Language Biography section from ELP following the teacher's guidelines. Analyzing the samples of students' European Language Portfolios (Table 1), the results initially revealed similitude on the choice of the students' learning styles in language learning when listening, writing and speaking.

Table 1
Most common learning styles chosen by students in the Language Biography

LEARNING STYLES		%
	Listen the word several times and then repeat it	75
Listening	Guess the meaning	50
	Look at the word written or see a picture	75
	Read the word, try to write it without copying and then check if it is well	75
Writing	written	75
	Listen the word first, repeat it and then write it several times	100
Speaking	Think about all the words or sentences I need before talking	100
	Employment of gestures	25

³See Appendix 1.

⁴ See appendix 2.

The third and fourth session involved the questionnaire and open interview with the teacher, interpreted qualitatively. In this case, there was a focus on the educator’s beliefs, students’ autonomy and self-assessment considerations in the language learning process as well as the ELP’s usefulness. The items surveyed in the yes/no questionnaire were piloted earlier and agreed between researcher and teacher. In Table 2, we present some of the most relevant impressions:

Table 2
Answers to the teacher’s questionnaire (* means “in progress”)

	ITEMS	YES	NO
1	The ELP allows a better students’ involvement in their learning process, leading them to take a more active part	X	
2	The ELP helps me to clearly define my students’ learning objectives		X
3	The ELP helps me understand my students’ linguistic skills	X	
4	The ELP makes my students be more autonomous in language learning, becoming capable of self-assessment	X	
5	In general, I agreed with my students’ self-assessment		*
6	My students are able to use the ELP on their own		X
7	I found easy to explain to my students the purpose of the document	X	
8	Students have been able to become aware of other languages	X	
9	I found useful to work with the ELP		*

3. Results

3.1. Learner autonomy

From our observation, we first notice that both the teacher and students make use of the target language in the classroom. There is a tendency to assume responsibility in language learning. We should bear in mind that the concept of language learner autonomy stresses the view that the learner's agency is – as far as possible - channelled through the target language in the autonomous language learning environment (O’Rourke and Carson, 2010). The positive answers in most of the items surveyed address the increasing awareness of autonomy in learners. Item 2 shows that students like the idea of responsibility in their learning process, what confirms one of our most important research questions. Moreover, most students admit reflection about what there is no possibility to achieve or has not been learnt yet, and contemplate several goals to be reached (item 9).

Table 4

Students' compilation of answers referred to learner autonomy within the questionnaires

ITEMS		Students' answers
2.	I like to take responsibility for my language learning	96% YES 4% NO
6.	I spent time working on the ELP at home with my parents	16% YES 84% NO
9.	I am able to identify what I cannot do in other languages and set goals to achieve it	92% YES 8% NO

Similarly, the open responses to the questionnaire reveal that learners are in the process of acquiring some degree of autonomy. For example, to the question "What do you like most about your European Language Portfolio?", a selected range of answers were:

- "That thanks to it we learn so many languages that when we will become adults we can ask for Erasmus or even international scholarship to benefit our career".
- "That we can do it together with our classmates".

Table 5 discusses the teacher questionnaire through some statements related to autonomous learning with affirmative responses (items 1 and 4). Conversely, it is recognized at this point that students are not capable of using the ELP without the educator's help (item 6), but this is suggested as the result of having undertaken the European Language Portfolio for a short period of time. The teacher also recommended the increase in the hours of exposure to ELP in order to achieve better results on learners' autonomy.

Table 5

Teacher's compilation of answers referred to learner autonomy within the questionnaire

ITEMS		Teacher's answers
1.	The ELP fosters students' involvement in their learning process, leading them to take a more active part	YES
4.	The ELP makes my students be more autonomous in language learning, becoming capable of self-assessment	YES
6.	My students are able to use the ELP on their own	NO

The questions from the interview are similarly consistent with both the teacher's and the students' questionnaires. Eventually, it has been proven in the analysis of the samples of ELPs and the video recorded that at present the checklists for the rest of the skills (reading, speaking, oral interaction and writing) were not completed by students since guidance was not provided. Therefore, in this respect there is a lack of initiative or autonomy so learners must be instructed and helped. However, they have been capable of identifying how language learning is successfully acquired. Interestingly, learners could determine their learning styles without help.

Motivation was also clearly related to the use of ELP. It was the purpose of this research to delve into motivational issues as a relevant variable when learning a foreign language (Bernaus and Gardner, 2008; Dörnyei and Csizér, 2005; Yu and Watkins, 2008). Some of the responses as regards motivation can be observed below:

- "It (the ELP) helps me learn" (two students).
- "It (the ELP) is very funny and nice and you learn many things and answer many questions",

- "I am improving" (three students)
- "I like the fact that languages are divided into colours",

3.2. Students' self-assessment competence

According to Delmastro, "students' self-assessment is an arduous task given that it is accomplished through a long process which needs learners to become accustomed to, leaving more autonomy degree each time by the educator"(2005, p.10). The self-assessment process in language learning through the ELP is noticeably challenging and presents great difficulties and disadvantages to overcome (Hobbs and Dofs, 2013). First of all, the educator's summative evaluation considers several aspects such as oral and written tests, daily participation, written assignments, students' notebooks or projects. Interestingly, the analysis of the samples of ELPs concludes with some contradictions about self-assessment. For instance, in 100% of the cases the self-assessment presented in the Language Biography displays inconsistency when contrasted to the evaluation manifested in the Language Passport. This analysis can be found in Table 6:

Table 6.
Contradictions with students' self-assessment in the Biography and Passport

STUDENTS' SELF-ASSESSMENT OF LANGUAGE SKILLS						
	Listening	Reading	Speaking	Oral interactio n	Writing	
	LEVELS					
P1	Language Biography	Spanish: A2	Spanish: A1	-	-	-
		English: A2	English: A1			
	Language Passport	Spanish: A2	-	-	-	-
		English: A1				
P2	Language Biography	Spanish: A2	-	-	-	-
		English: A1				
	Language Passport	Spanish: A2	Spanish: A2	Spanish: A2	Spanish: A2	Spanish: A2
		English: A2	English: A2	English: A1	English: A1	English: A2
P3	Language Biography	Spanish: A2	Spanish: A1	-	-	-
		English: A2	English: A1			
	Language Passport	Spanish: A2	-	-	-	-
		English: A1				

P4	Language Biography	Spanish: A2	Spanish: A2	-	-	-
		English: A1	English: A2			
	Language Passport	Spanish: A2	Spanish: A1	-	-	-

Likewise, the assessment from the Passport where learners can finally identify their level was wrongly fulfilled. As a result, the educator as well as the twenty-five students did not answer properly to the questions regarding self-assessment within the questionnaires. However, their perception about self-assessment through ELP was positive. Illustrative enough is the percentage of 72% of students who agreed to be able to self-assess what can be done in languages observing the improvement achieved. At the same time, the English educator asserts that the European Language Portfolio is a useful tool for enhancing her students' autonomy and self-assessment in languages (Table 7 and 8). Considering these findings, it appears that most of the strategies used to enhance self-assessment were not effective. For this reason, there is a need for primary education students to become more aware of their self-evaluation skills.

Table 7 & 8.

Teacher and students' answers referred to self-assessment within the questionnaires in accordance with their beliefs

ITEMS		Students' answers
3.	I am able to self-assess my progress in languages	72% YES 28% NO

ITEMS		Teacher's answer
4.	The ELP makes my students be more autonomous in language learning, becoming capable of self-assessment	YES

Contrastively, the Dossier parts were correctly completed and they were consistent with the knowledge of the students. Learners include in this part the evidences of their level of competence perfectly aware of their importance for self-assessment. From this analysis, we can conclude that the contradictions present between the Passport and the Biography could result from the higher cognitive process implied in these documents. The teacher conducting the experience argued that her students need more time to fully empower the process of self-assessment, as it is a concept relatively new in the Spanish educational system. Under the light of these contradictions, the reliability of the ELP in self-assessment terms seems difficult to measure. However, we should bear in mind that this is not the main aim of its application in the classroom.

3.3. Promotion of plurilingualism and diversity awareness

The term plurilingualism has been considered central for the Council of Europe providing a document about its promotion. In this text, the role of English was discussed in relation to plurilingualism: "It is essential that plurilingualism be valued at the level of the individual and that their responsibility in this matter be assumed by all the education institutions concerned" (Breidbach, 2003, p.5). The design of the ELP clearly corresponds to this challenge as it specifically includes reflection on

different languages. The use and development of an individual's plurilingual competence is possible because different languages are not learned in isolation and can influence each other both in the learning process and communicative use.

Considering the importance of this aspect, this study introduced plurilingualism considerations as a variable to take into account. In general terms, the analysis of the results conclude that fifth-grade students from San Fernando school display a great awareness of the variety of languages in the world. They show a remarkable interest in recognizing terms from unfamiliar languages.

Evaluating the field notes and the video recording, we can perceive a clear recognition of the importance of plurilingualism among the students. From the analysis of the questionnaires, it results that the majority of learners considered the importance of knowing at least two languages in order to be able to communicate with different people all over the world.

Table 9.

Students' answers referred to promotion of plurilingualism within the questionnaires

	ITEMS	Students' answers
8.	It is important for all Europeans to learn at least two languages besides their mother tongue	72% YES 28% NO

In relation to plurilingual matters, we have selected the following open responses from students:

- "I can include things from other countries" (five students).
- "I have learnt / It helps me learn many words from other languages" (five students).
- "The Dossier has been very easy" (two students).

Analyzing the teacher's questionnaire, we can conclude that close responses reveal that there is an appreciation of the promotion of plurilingualism and awareness of languages in all learners. The teacher admits flexibility when completing, for instance, the section of the languages known or the part named "what I can learn in languages" within the Language Biography. The relation between plurilingualism and intercultural awareness is also present in the ELP and learners manifest a clear interest in thinking and writing about examples of songs, games or rhymes in all the languages they knew.

3.4. Usefulness of the European Language Portfolio

One of the main conclusions of this experience is that the ELP makes possible to include different languages and its learning process in an increasing autonomous and motivated atmosphere (Pérclova, 2006). Although the reliability of the self-assessment part may not have been fulfilled, it seems outstanding that the ELP has functioned as an interesting methodological resource both for students and teacher. Some open responses of students also support this idea:

- "The ELP is useful to review languages and learn more".

Therefore, we may question the students' capacity for self-assessment but the European Language Portfolio stands as a valuable methodological device to make students aware of it and set their own objectives in this respect.

4. Conclusions

Pedagogy, autonomy and plurilingual competence are key components of the actual English teaching trends. However, we have to assume that training in the use of ELP requires time. The need to become autonomous learners capable to assess themselves has shown to be a long learning process. The result of this research has demonstrated that there is an indication of students' motivation but still have a great deal of work to do.

As regards teachers' beliefs, the questionnaire reveals confidence in the correct completion of the task on students' part. She believes in the usefulness of the ELP as well as the effort and time needed on the teacher's side. Cooperation and collaboration among teachers working with new methodological devices in pilot implementation seem also crucial. However, this experience was conducted with the implication of only one teacher. The partial success of the results could have been probably overcome with the collaboration and commitment from teachers' teamwork. A consistent whole-school approach may well provide the correct basis for future work.

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APPENDIX 1

(Q1): Questionnaire to student

1. El Portfolio me ayuda a mostrar lo que sé hacer en otras lenguas.
2. Me gusta hacerme responsable de mi aprendizaje de lenguas.
3. Soy capaz de autoevaluar mi progreso en las lenguas.
4. Mi profesora estuvo de acuerdo con mi autoevaluación.
5. El tiempo dedicado al Portfolio en clase ha sido provechoso.
6. He dedicado tiempo al Portfolio en casa, trabajándolo con mis padres.
7. Se debe animar a todos los alumnos a tener su Portfolio.
8. Es importante que todos los europeos aprendan al menos dos lenguas aparte de la propia.
9. Soy capaz de identificar lo que no sé hacer en otras lenguas y ponerme metas para conseguirlo.
10. ¿Qué es lo que más te gusta de tu Portfolio Europeo de las Lenguas?
11. ¿Qué es lo que menos te gusta de tu Portfolio Europeo de las Lenguas?

APPENDIX 2

(Q2): Questionnaire to teacher

1. El PEL consigue implicar más a mis alumnos en el proceso de aprendizaje, a tomar parte más activa.
2. El PEL me ayuda a definir con claridad los objetivos de aprendizaje de mis alumnos.
3. El PEL me ayuda a comprender las capacidades lingüísticas de mis alumnos.
4. El PEL hace a mis alumnos más autónomos en el aprendizaje de idiomas, llegando a ser capaces de autoevaluarse.
5. En general, estuve de acuerdo con la autoevaluación de los alumnos.
6. Mis alumnos son capaces de utilizar solos el PEL.
7. Me ha resultado fácil explicar a los alumnos el propósito del documento.
8. Los alumnos han sido capaces de tomar conciencia de otras lenguas.
9. Me ha parecido útil trabajar con el PEL.
10. ¿Utilizan el PEL otros profesores de tu centro? ¿Cuántos? En caso negativo, ¿crees que deberían usarlo conjuntamente contigo? ¿Por qué?
11. ¿Qué es lo que más te gusta del Portfolio Europeo de las Lenguas?
12. ¿Qué es lo que menos te gusta del Portfolio Europeo de las Lenguas?
13. ¿Qué criterio se ha utilizado para evaluar las actividades realizadas por los alumnos dentro del PEL?
- 14.
15. De acuerdo con la era en la que estamos, ¿no se ha planteado utilizar el PEL electrónico (ePEL) en sus clases? ¿de qué manera lo introduciría?

Observaciones Generales:

(*) Based in Council of Europe (2006).Cuestionario de evaluación del alumnado. In *Experiencia Piloto de Aplicación del Portfolio Europeo de las Lenguas (PEL) en diferentes centros educativos de España*.

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APPENDIX 3
Samples of ELP

MI DOSSIER MY DOSSIER

HE DECIDIDO GUARDAR / I HAVE DECIDED TO KEEP

HAZO UNA LISTA DE LAS COSAS QUE QUIERO GUARDAR: DIBUJOS, POSTERS, AVANSES, CINTAS DE AUDIO Y VIDEO, OBRERES, PROYECTOS.

QUÉ ES AÑO
WHAT IS IT? YEAR

CURSO
SCHOOL YEAR

DE DÓNDE VIENE
WHERE IS IT FROM?

EN QUÉ LENGUAJES
IN WHICH LANGUAGES?

4

