

THE EUROPEAN PORTFOLIO OF LANGUAGES: ITS IMPACT AND DEVELOPMENT IN ALBANIA

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Abstract

Generally speaking, *teaching and learning could be better carried out through discussions and debates with others, and the results obtained in this way then turn into means of encouraging, helping, stimulating and informing thus making it possible for us to achieve an individual reflection.*

There might be people who try to link the word Portfolio with the world of Arts and Projects. This is true to some extent but there exist other components such as the Language Section and Language Biography, which in fact are closely connected with the world of learning and teaching and are part of the guidelines approved by the Council of Europe (Portofoli Evropian i Gjuhëve: Një Udhëzues për Mësuesit dhe Trajnuesit e Mësuesve, Ministria e Arsimit dhe Shkencës, Këshilli i Europës, 2005.)

As a result of the use of Portfolio of Languages the teaching aims became clearer, students started to see their progress with ease. It served as a motivation for all, quick and slow learners, it helped increase self-awareness, it developed critical thinking, etc. It improved teachers' motivation, their reflecting ability and encouraged them to undertake initiatives during the teaching process.

Key words: *activity, approach, assessment, curriculum, evaluation, function, integration, motivation pilot, portfolio, project, reflection.*

Introduction

Europe is rich in languages and cultures. People with different ethnic, religious and linguistic backgrounds depend on the communicative and intercultural competences to live together peacefully. Language education could build societies based on inclusion and participation, and support social and economic development.

Albania is part of many European structures which assist progress to reach European standards and membership. One of them is the Council of Europe. The Council of Europe is an intergovernmental organization which aims at protecting Human Rights and the rule of Law; promoting awareness and encouraging development of cultural identity and diversity; seeking solutions to problems facing the European society such as intolerance, discrimination against minorities, xenophobia, organized crime etc.; helping consolidate democratic stability by supporting legal, legislative and constitutional reforms.

Modern languages constitute an area which is of primary interest for the Council of Europe. In order to achieve its aims, all forms of communication, at a qualitative or a quantitative level should be improved. Mutual understanding among citizens of Europe should be further fostered despite their diversities in many aspects. It is of great importance to assist member states and non-member states in developing and implementing effective approaches to all aspects of language education in a multilingual Europe.

Outlining Theory

What is the European Language Portfolio?

European Language Portfolio (ELP) is an educative tool recently introduced in Albania. Together with the Common European Framework of References for languages compose the bases of the reform in foreign languages. In fact the work started in 2002 when the Ministry of Education and Science introduced the initiative in the National Conference for the Albanian language. Real work started in 2006 when a group of teachers was trained on how to design, develop and use the ELP. This group held three seminars in succession with 45 teachers presenting to them the ELP and some ideas of how to work with it in their classrooms. The Albanian version of ELP for students of 15+ was accredited by the CE in 2008. After accreditation the document was presented everywhere in the country. The designing group also trained other teachers to use ELP. More than 15000 students use the Albanian ELP in high schools.

The pilot project in Albania to implement the European Portfolio of Languages was greatly helped by the experiences gained by Radka Perclova, who had worked with secondary-education teachers of German, English, French and Czech for a long time, and David Little who had universities on his focus. There were seminars and workshops organized by Rolf Schärer, the general reporter for pilot-projects and the very person who provided us with examples of teachers and feedback from students. At the same time other people such as Carmen Argon-dizzo, Peter Broeder, Barbara Simpson, Kurt Stenberg and Brigitte Foster Vosicki provided illustrative materials. There were reports from the Czech Republic where two teachers said: “it is easier to work with the portfolio. Students like to work with it and it helps me more than the book. Students notice their progress easily”. Another one who at that time was working with 8-9 year olds expressed herself: “some of my students were surprised to notice how much they knew thanks to the Portfolio. They now know what they can do with the amount of knowledge on English or any other foreign language”. The enthusiasm expressed by a German teacher was embraced by others who participated in pilot projects in their country. He said: “My initial reserves were turned into pleasures after I found out that the Portfolio relied on some of my wide and global teaching objectives of a foreign language.” In a speech held in a workshop organized in Slovenia in 2000, Francis Goullier emphasized: “tests in France showed that in suitable circumstances ... the Portfolio makes language teachers conscious of the fact that language learning and teaching go beyond classroom-doors. The person who learns becomes the protagonist, undertakes initiatives, raises issues for discussions and asks questions which come across in the process of learning and teaching. A new vision of teaching and learning is being outlined.”

If referred to the word portfolio included in an English-English dictionary, the word carries the following meanings: it is a portable case for holding loose papers, photographs or drawings; the materials collected in such a case especially when representative of a person's work; the office or post of a cabinet member; an itemized list of investments, securities and commercial paper owned by a bank. The word is Latin, *folium*-leaf. The word portfolio brings to mind examples of work of artists and designers. It of course resembles the connection with the latter but at the same time it differs when connected to language education. The difference lies in its components. Thus, the European Language Portfolio is composed of three component parts determined by the principles and guidelines approved by the European Council. They are: 1. Section of Language Passport; 2. Biography of Languages; 3. The Dossier.

The Section of Language Passport provides an overview on the perfection of different languages by an individual for a certain period of time. This is determined by abilities and skills as well as levels of mutual references within the common European framework. This passport registers formal qualification, describes linguistic competence and important intercultural experiences. It includes the data on special and partial competences, allows self-assessment and teacher evaluation. The evaluation is also carried out by educational institutions and examining boards. The Passport requires that the information included in it shows the bases upon which it is set up. Furthermore, it requires when and who assess or evaluate. The Passport refers to the universal skills: comprehension (reading and listening), speaking (communication and re-

sults) and writing. Levels include: A1 (discovering the language), A2 (survival of language), B1 (threshold of language know-how), B2 (mastering the language), C1 (mastering the language well), C2 (complete mastering of the language). Self-assessment belongs to the individual and not to the responsible institutions.

The Biography of Languages facilitates the participation of students in planning. It reflects the evaluation of progress made by them; it encourages students to emphasize what they can do in each language and informs about the language experiences gained during and outside the official process of learning. It is made up in such a way that promotes the development of competences in many languages. From the pedagogical point of view the biography of languages concentrates on the reflective process which facilitates passport and the dossier.

The Dossier offers the possibility to select materials which document and illustrate the achievements and experiences recorded in the Biography of Languages or Passport. It is like a book which has been created gradually, where linguistic materials are collected to fill in the gaps draws attention to the process of the study of a foreign language.

What is the function of the European Language Portfolio?

There are two functions: reporting and pedagogical. The first function is related to the objectives of the European Council to facilitate the mobility of an individual and coordinate regional and national qualifications. This function changes with the age of the individuals. The other function is compiled aiming at making the process of language learning as transparent as possible in order to offer possibilities to take over more responsibilities in the process of learning. Here the focus is on strengthening and developing learners' autonomy and promoting learning.

It is widely known that this portfolio was compiled to support four political objectives of the EC: language and culture diversity, language and culture tolerance, multilingual aspect and democratic civil education

At the very beginning the Portfolio was piloted in 15 EU Member States. Pilot projects included all circles of education: primary, secondary and tertiary. Then it was applied in other countries of Eastern Europe. Albania was one of them.

There were cases when pilot projects were accompanied with special issues, e.g. including a foreign language in the first classes of primary education, integrating immigrant students in public schools, using the portfolio when compiling the curriculum and other problems.

Problems of the Research

This research aims at identifying the value that the introduction of European Language Portfolio in the education practice would have on teachers' and student's skills. The research also seeks to study some major problems like the influence of the Portfolio on the learning process of a foreign language, difficulties in identifying specific levels, the amount of knowledge needed at different levels, etc.

Methodology of Research

There were 50 teachers of different school educational levels who participated in the research. The teachers of English, German, French and Italian were part of the pilot-project which aimed at piloting versions of the European Portfolio of Languages in Albania. Pilot-projects covered Primary Education, Secondary Education and Universities and they were supported by a variety of pedagogical suppositions. In some cases these projects were associated with specific issues such as including a foreign language in the curriculum of preschool classes, using the Portfolio as a means to study a foreign language during the process of the curricula compilation. Besides the teachers participating in the pilot projects, there were set up five leading groups of

three members each, whose responsibility was to report to the Ministry of Education. The latter was at the head of the whole process of revising the existing national school curriculum on foreign languages under the new light of the European Language Portfolio. To serve this end there were used questionnaires, posters, interviews, face-to-face discussions and surveys. As a result, plenty of information was gathered in relation to the Portfolio.

Results of Research

The teachers and students were asked to prepare posters with their ideas on the use of Portfolio. One set of posters was focused on the teachers, and another one on the students. The teachers and students were asked to provide their opinions on both. The information gathered from the posters can be summarized as the following:

Table 1. Results of the activity No. 1 (with posters on teachers' work).

The Portfolio motivates more the teachers
The Portfolio helps the teachers know better their students' capacities in language learning
The Portfolio improves the relationship between teachers-students
The Portfolio increased the amount of work to be done within a limited time frame
Teachers discuss more among themselves
Teachers use the Portfolio to plan, monitor and evaluate learning

Table 2. Results of activity No.2 (with posters on students' progress).

Students become more motivated and creative
Students become more self-confident
Students reflect more on what they do
Parents are well-informed about their children's progress
Students focus more on communication rather than unimportant grammatical mistakes
Students can develop their language abilities
Students notice that they can extend their knowledge outside their school walls
The Portfolio encourages students to become independent
The Portfolio provides results with slow and weak students
Students spend more time thinking critically
The Portfolio increases self-confidence in what the students are able to do

The information from teachers suggests that the Portfolio serves as an instrument to renovate not only languages but also educational systems. Teachers work under pressure. They are formed-teachers with a lot of responsibilities. Teaching objectives are different from one class into another. They must record absentees and achievements. They must test and evaluate. In addition, teachers have to participate in staff meetings to discuss problematic cases and talk with parents. At the same time teachers are often asked to write reports. So they do not have enough time to devote to any other kind of reflection, experimental or creative activity in class. Most of them said that the introduction of the Portfolio increased the amount of work within little time left.

1. How often should the Portfolio be used?

A very important question addressed to the teacher is: "How often should the Portfolio

be used?” There is not a simple answer to this question. Teachers expressed the idea that the above mentioned question can be understood in two ways. On one hand, this question means how often is the Portfolio used by the students, how often do they add materials in their dosiers. On the other hand, teachers can understand how often they should refer to the pedagogical function of the Portfolio. Despite the fact that the portfolio is considered as an object, the whole teaching and learning process depends on the realization of the pedagogical function. In each class teachers remind their students of the settled objectives and never forget to encourage their students. When the students take over more responsibilities and encouragement in the learning process, they develop their awareness of what goes on in their class.

Some examples can be given to show how objective the teachers were to treat the above questions. A teacher in a primary school asked her students to choose three objectives in the short run, summarized in these simple sentences: *I can do; I can describe my likes and dislikes and I can write short descriptions of past events and activities*. What happened? Working in groups and individually the piloted students assessed their progress and compared their assessment with that of the teacher's. The results were filed. Then they set new objectives. Another teacher of a secondary school asked his students to fill in the passport including the language ability profile. It was seen that teachers of different schools used the portfolio to plan, monitor and evaluate learning.

2. Does the portfolio ask teachers to overcome school curriculum?

The Albanian curriculum supports the development of mastering communication of language learners. This is in conformity with the aims of the portfolio as well. As it is mentioned above, the pedagogical function of the portfolio helps learning language process become transparent, assisting in the development of the abilities for reflection and self-assessment, thus providing more responsibilities to be taken over and emphasizing learning how to learn. At the same time no contradictions are created between the text and the portfolio. It means that the text should be used creatively through discussions and negotiations with students.

The piloted teachers studied the national curriculum. They studied the communicative objectives expressed there in order to make a comparison with those expressed by the portfolio. Some of the objectives were in line but some others were not. They tried to reformulate e.g. the objectives linked with speaking in line with the sentence ‘I can do’. What was done? One of the teachers of a high school in Tirana organized her class in this way. She asked the students to divide in four groups and practice a monologue. The teacher gave one minute at their disposal to carry out the task. One student was asked to recite; another had to play the role of the teacher thus measuring the time, listening attentively in order to give feedback. Then students swapped roles. Another useful exercise was practiced by another teacher in Durrës (a coastal city by the Adriatic). It was “I can provide you with useful information from news or simple newspaper articles”. After the news was read in the class, student exchanged materials. In this way they combined the four skills, speaking, listening, reading and writing with one another. Of importance was the fact that students could correct mistakes and advise in cases of doubt. Of great help was the interview organized with a foreigner, whose mother tongue was English. We saw this activity performed in a secondary school in Elbasan (a city in the central part of Albania). The teacher divided the class in groups and each group was responsible for making a list of questions. One group wrote questions about the foreigner's childhood; another group chose to ask about his work; another about the customs and traditions of the country he came from. This task was all inclusive and helped students use the language intensively (speaking, listening and writing). In the end students gathered the information and wrote a report which was later distributed.

Discussions

85% of the piloted teachers tried to solve the difficult problems, realizing that descriptors had to be enlarged in the language passport in conformity with the age, needs and interests of the students. 55% of them stated that descriptors are sometimes too general for the students to identify their progress within a short period of time. They were of the opinion that only a small percentage of students reach levels C1 and C2. Group leaders who had studied the portfolio before expressed the idea that descriptors and scales are not linear like a ruler. 30% of the participants in the research groped in the dark trying to settle the number of words a student should have in different levels in order to act appropriately. 100% decided that a student must have 850 words for level A2 and 1500 for level B1. But it is calculated that a student has to pass the first Certificate of Cambridge, which in fact is level B2, with a vocabulary of 4500 words and 8000 semantic values at least (Gaims & Redman, 1986). Levels and descriptors ask teachers to think positively about their students (the ability to reach objectives in a foreign language). It is a step backward to think negatively (lack of ability to reach perfection).

All teachers who piloted the project shared the same opinion: CE helped a great deal to reflect deeply to understand what learning a foreign language is. They used the descriptors to set their objectives and select activities.

100% of the teachers present discussed another problem which was and continues to be critical in Albania, motivation. Students lack motivation. Teachers try to solve this problem by making the lesson more interesting, vivid; stimulating learning activities and teaching materials. But this approach is too short. The alternative depends on challenge and whose the responsibility is. Reflection helps students think of the language they are learning; the process which engages students in the three forms of reflection: planning, monitoring and assessing. During one of the training sessions teachers used the following activity: they wrote two short texts in English. One asked the question 'what student am I?' The second 'what teacher am I?' They thought of three adjectives which describe a good student and three others which describe a good teacher. Then they provided three adjectives for a bad student and three others for a bad teacher. This activity was fruitful. The portfolio helped students and teachers stimulate reflective learning and critical thinking. Finally the participants made a list with motivating activities:

- Class discussions
- Group discussions
- Interviews with students of other classes who are using the portfolio
- Discussion of criteria to select materials to be filed
- Posters with descriptors of the levels and scales
- Discussion of difficulties
- Individual objectives
- Self-assessment
- Day-to-day, course, term and annual objectives based on the scales of CE
- Student awareness

Another point of discussion was related to assessment. It is common to distinguish between two kinds of assessments: summative and formative. The first is done at the end of each semester, course or academic year. Tests and exams are examples of such an assessment. The second is used during the learning process as a means of achieving feedback for students' progress. Self-assessment, which is at the basis of the Portfolio, is used as the two kinds of assessment mentioned above. Students assess themselves in the passport component, which is closely linked with their abilities in learning. On the other hand self-assessment in the biography component has a forming function. The research results showed that self-assessment is composed of: the process of learning where students are able to assess their progress; communication abilities determined by the scales of descriptors of the European Council; abilities to master the language. Teachers and students who piloted the projected stated that self-assessment is gradual.

Table 3. Activities to integrate learning, assess pair -work and self-assess.

Process (what do you do?)	Structures (how are they organized?)
Resources (enough time and space?)	Participants (do you contribute? Is it valuable?)
Effect (do you like the result?)	Impact (how can this activity help in your day-to-day life?)

Table 4. Language.

	Phonology	Fluency	Grammar
Level 1	Discourse: Generally understood	Discourse: Very slow and insecure	Incomprehensible due to mistakes
Level 2	Strong accent of mother tongue	Too many pauses	Too many mistakes, but comprehensible
Level 3	Good accent of the second language	Fluent discourse but with pauses	Good grammatical bases, mistakes in structure
Level 4	Good stress and intonation	A good selection of words	Difficult structures with just a few mistakes

Table 5. Overall assessment.

	Phonology	Fluency	Grammar
Self-assessment	Level	Level	Level
Teacher's assessment	Level	Level	Level

Naturally the pilot-project did not go on smoothly in Albania. The teachers faced many difficulties which were mostly practical issues, such as:

- How can I include the Portfolio in my teaching?
- What is the connection between the Portfolio and the school curriculum?
- How often should I use it?
- How can I find ample space to fit the Portfolio in my busy schedule?
- Can I use the descriptions taken from the common framework of the EC in my class?

- Why should students assess themselves?
- How can I help them develop the capacity of self-assessment?

Conclusions

The political function of the portfolio has contributed in preserving the cultural and linguistic diversity of the users. It has promoted cultural and linguistic tolerance and education for democratic citizenship. These functions come over the walls of existing classes and open new ways to general educational policies and application. The portfolio aims at coordination at school, college, university, city, district, municipality, state, region and international community.

The portfolio is piloted by teachers of different languages. It is treated as a personal object where users describe individual experiences in teaching and learning. The portfolio is studied by teachers and students. This task is accomplished through an institutional policy towards political and pedagogical issues present in this portfolio. The result is that the Albanian national school curriculum is reviewed under its orientations. Teachers are included in this process otherwise the whole process would have been unrealistic. Now Albanian teachers meet on regular basis to discuss in order to change their school, college and university in a community where people learn foreign languages. The teachers of English and other languages have set up their associations where interest groups work hard to use the portfolio successfully even in the remote corners of the country. There are teachers who discuss issues with their students and teach them to work independently. Many have changed their teaching techniques and have started thinking of goals in the long run. Some other teachers classify subject matter differently by dividing it into smaller units related to one another.

The Portfolio supports students' initiative. It is collaboration between students and teachers. It's not a burden if the students are given more responsibilities. It's a way for students and teachers meet and discuss with each other.

Issues like how the teachers organize teaching, how they prepare teaching, how they use books and how they assess students have become everyday talk among teachers. Anyway there is much to do in the future. The process is complicated and needs time.

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