

Considerations on Educational
Issues



NEW VISTAS FOR THE EUROPEAN LANGUAGE PORTFOLIO

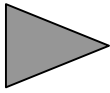
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Abstract

As language professionals, we are all familiar with the added value the European Language Portfolio (ELP) can bring to the language class and its potential for continuous language learning outside class. So which are the new vistas for the ELP? Which are its new roles and target audiences? Which is the transversal dimension of Portfolio-based self-assessment? These are some of the questions this article aims to address.

The focus will not be on language teaching and learning per se, but rather on the relevance of language learning and the importance of communication and co-operation in a wider context of European values, integration and transferability of multiple competencies. To illustrate the role European projects can play in bridging the gap between the field of language education and the world of work, reference will be made to the Lingua 1 project “EuroIntegrELP – Equal Chances to European Integration through the use of the European Language Portfolio”, which has recently been awarded the European Label for Innovation in Language Education.

Keywords: Self-assessment, European Language Portfolio (ELP), the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages (CEFR), transferable competences, ELP implementation



A wider 'geo-political' perspective - new stakeholders and contexts of use for language learning and "can-do" based (self-) assessment

Language learning and familiarisation with specific cultural aspects has become more and more of topical interest not just for ministries of education and language schools, or for EU institutions, but also for authorities such as ministries of foreign affairs, ministries of interior, ministries of labour, ministries of defence. The reasons for these new concerns may differ from one local or regional context to another, but there are a number of similarities discernible in the steps taken, together with an increased inter-institutional co-operation.

Thus, in addition to the well-known initial aims of the ELP, there are also more specific aims, relevant for certain new contexts of use. The comparative table below includes both categories of aims:

Main aims of the ELP, as initially formulated	Examples of specific aims, according to context of use
<p>⇒ Stimulating a culture of lifelong language learning, encouraging plurilingualism, while giving equal status to all languages, whether learned in school, at home or elsewhere outside the organized school environment;</p> <p>⇒ Shifting the focus from teaching to learning, empowering the learner by transferring the responsibility for language learning from the teacher to the learner / language user;</p> <p>⇒ Providing a basis for consistent (self-) assessment, with a view to ensuring international comparability</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Stimulating the learning of the language and culture of the host country • Facilitating the learning of the language and culture of a neighbouring country, to enhance mutual trust and understanding • Awareness-raising to assessment criteria in line with new requirements associated with language learning, e.g. <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ for living in another country (e.g. in Germany, in Ireland) ○ for mobility for study and work purposes ○ in preparation for exams prior to moving to another country (e.g. for family re-union)

<p>of communication competences in different languages.</p>	<p>purposes) – e.g. German language exams organised in Turkey</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ for mobility related to military operations, for security measures, etc. ● Awareness-raising to the <i>CEFR</i> approach for new audiences – e.g. teachers of the mother tongue or of the minority languages in a country context – e.g. to re-think curriculum design and the system of school-leaving assessment, a.s.o.
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We can notice that the target audiences are more diverse and that the initial contexts of use have been extended to include new roles for the ELP, new stakeholders – in terms of ELP-users, language professionals to mediate the understanding of the can-do approach to various categories of ELP-users and exam-candidates, including those who have only recently learned about unexpected language learning requirements and may be less equipped with language learning strategies.

In various country contexts – such as Germany, for instance – a number of institutions have joined their forces and expertise to enhance the language learning opportunities for new-comers and, at the same time, in order to produce relevant language tests for specific groups of people, who need to understand the culture and language of the host country. Out of the 95 validated ELPs listed on the Council of Europe Portfolio web site (www.coe.int/portfolio accessed on 20 July 2008), there are several ELPs intended for specific groups – e.g. in Ireland, there are ELPs for immigrant workers, for recently arrived immigrants, for their children; other Portfolios are accompanied by the teachers' guide for specific groups of adults, e.g. *Milestone*, the outcome of a multinational EU project aimed at integrating migrants through *modules of autonomous and intercultural learning*, combined with *national portfolios for migrants*, *teacher training* activities in the field of language and prevocational learning (accessible on-line <http://www.eu-milestone.de>)

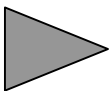
Other ELPs have been designed specifically for the facilitation of communication among neighbouring countries. Understanding and being able to speak several languages, including the neighbour's language(s), could be seen as part of *soft security*. In what way? Communication and a better understanding of other cultures can make a considerable contribution to regional and international security and peaceful co-operation. Improved communication and networking lead to the

creation of communities of professionals who get to speak the “same” language in areas of common professional interest. The ability to communicate internationally in professional contexts opens doors to international programmes and projects. These facilitate inter-country and cross-sectorial exchanges of experience and best practice and, at the same time, multiply training opportunities for the next generation of professionals.

Regarding the promotion of security - in very concrete terms, efficient communication and networking may lead, for instance, to more efficient countering of organised crime (bearing in mind that, at the moment, international organised crime is well-known for being very efficient at communicating and networking). Therefore, foreign language training at a high operational level is key to the success of task-forces for peace-keeping purposes, as well as for combating specific aspects of organised crime (such as human trafficking, the smuggling of drugs and weapons, etc.)

Special language proficiency tests and requirements have been developed for the military and the special task forces preparing for international missions. Even if the “labels” used for the levels are slightly different as compared to the *CEFR*, the same positive approach to the evaluation of communication skills is reflected in the formulation of the “STANAG Language Proficiency Levels” (NATO Standardisation Agreement, STANAG 6001). On a scale from 0 to 5, the level descriptors as such are based on practice-oriented “can-do” statements (http://www.dlielc.org/bilc/Sta_Edit2_Eng.doc).

Mastery of foreign languages may also become a means of access to more diverse information, as well as a facilitator of more frequent and improved appearance in the media, which may influence the *positioning on the map*, including the *mental maps* of important actors on the international scene. It is true that communication is (or at least should be) a *two-way street*. But the question remains: where do partners meet? Practice shows that often one has to go a longer stretch to the meeting point. Thus, representatives of less widely used and spoken languages need to be prepared for this, in order to get to communicate important messages and shared values.



What new developments in this field are particularly relevant for a more confident implementation of the “can-do” approach and the ELP?

Most internationally recognised exams in Europe have been calibrated to correspond to the Council of Europe levels. Thus, for instance: the German exam at intermediate level – “Zertifikat Deutsch” - corresponds to B1; and so does the

Spanish exam at intermediate level “Certificado inicial de Espanol” (CIE); the Cambridge exam at upper-intermediate level “First Certificate in English” (FCE) corresponds to B2; and so does the Business English Cambridge Exam at upper-intermediate level (“BEC Vantage”); “Certificate in Advanced English “ (CAE) and “BEC Higher” correspond to C1; the “Certificate of Proficiency in English” (CPE) exam corresponds to C2, i.e. the highest level on the scale.

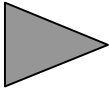
The EAQUALS-ALTE ELP includes a table with all the ALTE exams and their corresponding CEFR-levels. Through its complexity, the *Portfolio* can be seen as complementary to international examination systems, and at the same time, as a facilitator of language learning in preparation for exams, as shown in Dellevoet & Mureşan (2008).

In addition, in order to facilitate especially the teachers’ familiarisation with assessment based on “can-do” descriptors, support materials with calibrated samples, illustrating the CEFR levels in languages such as English, French, German, Italian have been developed by leading experts, within the framework of the Council of Europe, in co-operation with organisations such as Cambridge ESOL, Eurocentres (North and Hughes, 2003). Further related materials have been developed e.g. within the framework of EAQUALS – The European Association for Quality Language Services, the Goethe Institut, the Österreichisches Sprachenkompetenz-Zentrum in Graz, Austria, the European Centre for Modern Languages (ECML) – Little et al. (2007). Some of these materials are accessible on-line on the Council of Europe web site (www.coe.int/portfolio), others can be obtained on request from EAQUALS (www.eaquals.org), or from the ECML (www.ecml.at).

Feedback gathered over the last 3 - 4 years from participants in CEFR and ELP events, as well as small-scale surveys carried out among EAQUALS members and partners in the EuroIntegrELP project have re-iterated the practitioners’ interest in receiving more guidance on how to implement the ELP and the ‘can-do’ approach more effectively. In response to these interests and needs identified, a special interest project has been initiated in EAQUALS, as a forum for sharing ELP related experience, in order to facilitate its implementation in various local contexts. At the same time, special interest projects, co-ordinated by Brian North, have embarked on reviewing the ‘can-do’ descriptors, while continuing also work on further developing support materials in the form of *self-help guides* for members (North & Rossner, 2007).

Within the framework of the ECML in Graz, there are several teacher training projects focusing on the ELP and aiming at piloting training kits in various educational contexts – details on these projects can be accessed at <http://coordination.ecml.at/Projects/tabid/172/language/en-GB/Default.aspx>.

Further projects have developed tools for the self-assessment of student teachers (Newby et al., 2007), so that follow-up projects in the current medium-term programme – suggestively entitled “Empowering Language Professionals” – are meant to take further the implementation of portfolio-based self-assessment for teachers. In parallel, the new ECML project, “QualiTraining at Grassroots Level” will continue the piloting of the *QualiTraining Guide* produced in the previous ECML project focusing on quality assurance, while integrating individual self-assessment with institutional self-evaluation (Mureşan, Heyworth, Mateva and Rose, 2007).



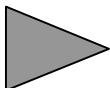
The multicultural dimension

In a multilingual and multicultural Europe, everybody is encouraged to include **all** the relevant language and intercultural experiences as valid dimensions of their language learning, to reflect on language learning preferences, so as to identify personal strategies developed in one language learning context that can then be applied when learning another language. Some of these skills are transferable also to other domains, beyond language education; they could be seen in the wider context of intercultural *Euro-competences*, necessary for international mobility and adaptability to various contexts of study or work.

Through regional or European lifelong learning projects, additional components with a focus on intercultural aspects of communication have been produced or are still work in progress. Examples of such projects include: “CROMO” – a regional project re-uniting Austrian, Italian and Slovenian partners (details on www.oesz.at); a European project, “LOLIPOP - Language On Line Portfolio Project”), aiming to supplement the ELP with an electronic, intercultural component (<http://lolipop-portfolio.eu/>) – Bruen (2008).

The interest in addressing this component of communication and the preoccupation for capturing and describing intercultural competences is reflected also by a whole strand of ECML projects in the previous medium-term programme, entitled “Communication in a multicultural society: the development of intercultural communicative competence”, having teacher training kits as outcomes (Lazăr et al., 2007; Bernaus et al., 2007; Glaser et al., 2007)

All these endeavours come to confirm the convergence of interests in a more comprehensive understanding of *communication competences*, on the one hand, and the language educators’ on-going interest in personal improvement, on the other. They also confirm the continued fascination of language professionals with the intercultural dimension of communication.

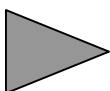


The ELP and Europass – where do they meet?

As we all know, the EU has introduced *Europass*, as a unique European scheme for the transparency of qualifications and competences (<http://europass.cedefop.eu.int>). Following a decision by the European Parliament, the *Language Passport* has been included as one of the *Europass* documents. Thus, the *European Language Portfolio*, developed within the Council of Europe, is promoted also by *Europass*, as they both share a key document: the *Language Passport*.

What is interesting to note in this context is that students seem to be first of all aware of the *EUROPASS Language Passport*, often not knowing about the *ELP* and the link between the two. This also means that they do not benefit from the formative potential of the other two *ELP* components, the *Language Biography* and the *Dossier*, with the short-coming that relying only on the “can-do” descriptors available in the *Language Passport*, without going through the more detailed checklists in the *Language Biography*, may result in a less rigorous self-assessment.

A small-scale survey among 20 language professionals at the Department of Germanic Languages and Business Communication at the Academy of Economic Studies Bucharest, has revealed that *Europass* is better known among students. Possible reasons for this are that it can be easily accessed from the internet and the need to fill it in is often linked to the filling in of the European CV.



By way of a conclusion: the ELP's relevance beyond the language teaching profession

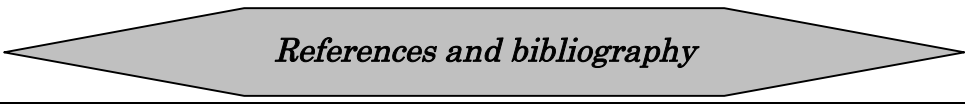
Although intended first of all for learners, the *European Language Portfolio* is also meant for teachers, evaluators, managers, employers etc. Evidence of the importance attached to it for domains beyond the field of education are also EU funded projects meant to help promoting this innovative approach to language learning and self-assessment.

The Lingua 1 Project “EuroIntegrELP - Equal Chances to European Integration through the Use of the European Language Portfolio” is such an example. Its main aims consisted in disseminating information on the role of the *ELP*, awareness raising to the usefulness of the *ELP* for mobility and employability and for better social cohesion in the EU. The main target audiences addressed included

authorities, decision makers in Ministries of Education and Labour, employers/human resources managers, employees and the unemployed, Chambers of Commerce and Industry, the media, language professionals and their learners / students, providers of language and vocational training, in general, teacher educators, language teachers' associations, parents, raising their awareness to the relevance of ELP based self-assessment for employability and mobility purposes, as well as for professional development, in general.

ELP implementation practice has shown that comprehensive induction and professional development of trainers and multipliers are absolutely necessary in order to be able to implement standardised self-assessment on a large scale. Therefore, though a dissemination project initially, "EuroIntegrELP" has become a lot more, involving complex professional development activities and events, materials writing, the development of professional partnerships with university departments – with the strategic partnership of the Department of Germanic Languages and Business Communication at the Academy of Economic Studies Bucharest - and Ministries of Education, cascading in various forms.

As a result of EuroIntegrELP's high potential for transferring ELP-related expertise, concepts and approaches also to other fields of education and activity in general. EuroIntegrELP representatives, the ELP and related approaches have already been included in new networks and projects, e.g. a Grundtvig Learning Partnerships project – "Parents / Adults as Language Learning Partners – PALLPS"; a Leonardo Transfer of Innovation project "ELSTP"; EAQUALS and ECML projects. Thus, there is scope for new synergies with projects and networks, to build on the ELP's increased relevance for employability and international mobility.



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