

David Little talks about the European Language Portfolio (ELP)



David Little is founding director (1978) of the Centre for Language and Communication Studies and Associate Professor of Applied Linguistics at Trinity College Dublin. He has made important contributions to international discussion of the theory and practice of learner autonomy and the use of new technologies in second language learning. He is currently a consultant to the Council of Europe's European Language Portfolio project and director of Integrate Ireland Language and Training, a government-funded unit that provides English language training for newcomers to Ireland. David Little has been nominated by the Department of Education and Science to liaise between Irish ELP projects and the Modern Languages Division of the Council of Europe in Strasbourg. He is co-author (with Radka Perclová, Faculty of Education, Charles University, Prague) of a guide to the ELP for teachers and teacher trainers. He is also consultant to the European Validation Committee and co-ordinator of a project in teacher training for the ELP of the European Centre for Modern Languages in Graz, Austria.

The European Language Portfolio (ELP)

The European Language Portfolio, devised by the Council of Europe's Modern Languages Division and piloted in 15 Council of Europe member states between 1998 and 2000, was launched throughout Europe during 2001, the European Year of Languages. The ELP has three obligatory components:

A language passport, which summarizes the owner's linguistic identity, language learning achievement, and intercultural experience, and includes the owner's assessment of his/her own language competence according to the Council of Europe's Common Reference Levels;

A language biography, which is used to set intermediate learning goals, review progress, and record significant language learning and intercultural experiences;

A dossier, in which the owner collects samples of his/her work and evidence of his/her achievements in second/foreign language learning.

The Council of Europe has established a European Validation Committee, which meets twice a year to accredit ELP models submitted by competent authorities in member states and by international non-governmental organizations. In order to be accredited, ELP models must comply with the Principles and Guidelines approved by the Council of Europe.

The purpose of the European Language Portfolio (ELP)

The ELP is designed to:

- Encourage the lifelong learning of languages, to any level of proficiency



- Make the learning process more transparent and to develop the learner's ability to assess his/her own competence
- Facilitate mobility within Europe by providing a clear profile of the owner's language skills
- Contribute to mutual understanding within Europe by promoting plurilingualism (the ability to communicate in two or more languages) and intercultural learning

How is the European Language Portfolio (ELP) to be used?

Owners of all ages can use the ELP to:

- Keep a record of all their language learning, whether it takes place inside or outside the educational system.
- Develop their capacity to plan, monitor and evaluate their own learning.
- Record significant intercultural experiences.
- Collect evidence of their language skills.
- Document their language learning achievements.

Educational institutions and individual teachers can use the ELP to:

- Describe their courses and certificates more clearly by relating them to the Council of Europe's common reference levels.
- Help learners to become self-managing.
- Make it easier for learners to show what they can do in languages when they move from one educational level or institution to another.

Employers can use the ELP to:

- Inform themselves about the language skills of actual or potential employees.
- Define the language skills that are required for a particular job.

The (ELP) and the Council of Europe's common reference levels

The language passport requires the owner to assess his or her own language skills according to the Council of Europe's common reference levels, which are elaborated in the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages.

There are six levels, as follows:

- A1 - Breakthrough
- A2 - Waystage
- B1 - Threshold
- B2 - Vantage
- C1 - Effective Operational Proficiency
- C2 - Mastery

The self-assessment grid in the language passport summarizes language proficiency at these six levels in relation to five skills: listening, reading, spoken interaction, spoken production, writing.



ELT NEWS met David Little at the 3rd ALTE International Conference, which was hosted by Cambridge ESOL, in Cambridge last April, and did not miss the chance to talk to the man. David Little was one of the keynote speakers presenting the use of ELP in the Irish context.

•In your presentation you said that there are 3 stages in the language learning process: learning, teaching and assessing. Most teachers think otherwise. They think that teaching comes first, learning comes second and assessing comes later. “When I talked about learning and then teaching and then assessment, I was referring to the subtitle of the Common European Framework for Languages -learning, teaching, assessment. One of the things we should emphasize is that learning a language needs teachers. Teachers have a role in facilitating learning. They have a role in creating a learning environment. But you can’t actually teach another person a language; you’ve got to create the conditions and the framework within which people can learn a language. So learning is always bigger than anything teachers can do. And that is one of the reasons why it’s put before teaching and of course by putting teaching before assessment the title of the framework is implying that learning is something always bigger than anything teachers can do, and that assessment is something that follows learning and teaching.”

•Do teachers want to take off that mantle of authority? Because, using the ELP means that we share decisions and learning objectives with our learners. So, automatically, we shift part of the authority we have as teachers. “Some teachers are very glad to do that, other teachers find it difficult and other teachers find it impossible. Again this relates, I think, to the particular concept of learning that the individual teacher has. What makes learning happen is related to a range of things s/he can actually do.”



• Using the ELP is a real challenge. How many teachers are eager to apply new teaching methods and practices in their classrooms? Do we have resistance?

“Yes, we do. If we want something like the ELP to be taken up and used in the kind of way that we know will help language learners a great deal, then we have to create the right conditions where teaching becomes not simply something teachers ought to do but something which actually facilitates learning and at the same time makes life easier for teachers.

We need to redesign curricula. If the curriculum goals are specified in functional ‘Can Do’ terms and if we use the ELP with the check lists of descriptors arranged by activity and by level, then I think, we’ve got a situation where the ELP actually helps teachers.”

• Some teachers say that using the ELP entails getting the students to produce more written work and they have to correct all those pieces of writing which is time consuming. They’d rather not do this.

“I don’t think it’s absolutely necessary for teachers to correct everything that students or pupils write. And I mean the idea that the ELP is an exercise book that is going to need correction, is wrong. The ELP is not intended to be used in that way.

It is true that error correction may make teachers feel good. But it doesn’t necessarily do anything at all to help learners. I discovered this very early in my career as a university teacher. What happened when I corrected student’s work? Nothing. When I gave corrected work back, learners would look at the mark and they would look at the amount of red covering the page and if it wasn’t any worse than last week, they would simply put it aside. They did nothing. I mean they never worked over the errors. The only way you could get rid of that is by doing what I’ve been talking about. In other words have a curriculum that’s constructed in such a way that the ELP is an obvious support for learning and teaching and then teachers will use it and they won’t worry that it requires extra time because it doesn’t require extra time.”

• The ELP is a very useful tool. Why has not it been successful? Why is it not so widely used?

“I think again it comes back to what I was talking about in my presentation earlier on. First of all, it has been very successful in certain environments. In Ireland, we use it for our English Language courses for adults as well as in the schools. It’s a very useful tool for framing learning. But to get the ELP taken up on a large scale it’s got to be embedded and it has to be embedded in terms of curriculum and in terms of external formal assessment.”

• Some people say that another 15 years will be needed for the portfolio to be implemented in schools.

“I don’t know whether in 15 years’ time we will still be using the portfolio. Maybe the ELP was ahead of its time. I think it would be much more widely used if its development in different contexts went hand in hand with the development of a new curriculum on the one side and a new approach to testing and assessment on the other.”

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