

Implementing the European Language Portfolio: Chances and challenges



ELT NEWS: July-August 2006
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As a developer and multiplier of the European Language Portfolio I always only get to know two groups of teachers: Those who are sceptical and critical of the ELP idea, in particular of self-assessment, and those who are enthusiastic about the potential of the ELP. I've never met anyone indifferent.

It's a relatively easy thing to develop a national (or regional) ELP model and get it validated by the CoE, but it's a great challenge to implement the ELP on a large scale. Rolf Schärer at a meeting in Meran last November said that he thought it would still take another 15 years before the ELP would be implemented in schools and in his "Draft Consolidated report" he wrote

"It is becoming clear that considerable lead time and support over a prolonged period of time is needed for wide implementation to succeed."

The ELP has now been under scrutiny since 1998 when the first models were piloted. By 2004 "over 1.250.000 learners have received and worked with a European Language Portfolio more or less intensively for a shorter or longer period." According to Eike Thürmann there were 76 validated models in 22 countries by November 2005: (18 primary, 22 lower secondary, 15 upper secondary, 8 vocational, 13 adults and tertiary sector).



ELP models have changed in design, content and format over the years from a few pages with checklists to course-book-like ELPs, which focus on the pedagogic function and contain pages with learning strategies and intercultural learning.

How do practitioners react to the ELP? Schärer reports: *“The feedback from practitioners involved in pilot projects is increasingly positive. Their view is supported by field studies conducted in a variety of educational contexts.”*

What difference does the ELP make and to whom? Rolf Schärer, in his final report, refers to Kohonen and the Finnish pilot project:

Kohonen in evaluating the Finnish pilot project 1998-2001 reports: *“The ELP does seem to provide an important interface between language learning, teaching and assessment. The consistent and regular use of the ELP does motivate and enable students to take gradually more responsibility for their learning. The descriptors and checklist help students to develop a meta-cognitive understanding of language in terms of the different skills, linguistic forms and communication strategies.”*

The ELP helps produce some “invisible learning outcomes” among them:

- commitment to and ownership of one’s language learning;
- tolerance of ambiguity and uncertainty in communicative situations and learning;
- willingness to take risks in order to cope with communicative tasks;
- skills and attitudes for socially responsible learning and language use;
- learning skills and strategies necessary for continuous, independent language learning;
- a reflective basic orientation to language learning, with abilities for self-assessment of language competence.

First results seem to confirm that the use of the ELP does make a difference to learning:

Reports from a great variety of teaching-learning contexts confirm a wide acceptance of the pedagogic functions of the ELP. Coherently used over a reasonable time span the ELP seems to produce desirable educational effects. It positively influences motivation, the learning process and the learning outcome. Besides making the learning process transparent to learners it seems to make the teaching process more transparent to teachers.

Furthermore, the initial feedback from major implementation programmes confirms the transferability of the positive effects observed in pilot projects to large-scale applications.

Schärer has said that the most important thing in using the ELP is not whether a learner can self-assess his/her language ability correctly and whether B1 is really B1, but that the quality of language teaching is improving and that the paradigm-shift from a teacher-centred to a learner-centred classroom takes place.

In his 2004 draft report Schärer also mentioned that employers still *“tend to remain in a waiting position”*, which will hopefully change in the near future. Schärer, however, also described the challenges he saw in 2004:

“There remain a number of challenges specific to the ELP:

A critical mass of ELPs in use is necessary for the ELP to be truly relevant in life-long learning and in institutional teaching contexts. The number so far in use is impressive and fast increasing, but penetration overall is still rather patchy.

Determined efforts will be needed to create favourable conditions for

implementation throughout and to motivate **large numbers of whole schools** to commit themselves to the use of the ELP.

Training very large numbers of teachers and in addition of ELP contact persons and project administrators will have to remain a top priority. An international platform to review and exchange experience on an ongoing basis might prove an effective supplementary support measure. The European Centre for Modern Languages (ECML) in Graz offers on the European level crucial support in these domains.

- **The promotion of the ELP needs to be extended to the world of employment to remain credible and relevant in a life-long perspective.** Learners and teachers at the transfer point from school to employment expect the ELP to have status and the competence reported to be taken account of.
- **Know-how and experience gained needs to be collected, analysed, consolidated and transferred.** A collection of **examples of good practice** has to be built up as a source of inspiration for the increasing number of follow-up projects.
- Growing interest in the ELP and in the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages has led to intensive discussion and scrutiny of the underlying concepts. There is wide agreement that **both these tools need further elaboration and continuous development.** Mandates and resources are necessary for this work to be undertaken.
- The promotion of language and intercultural competence is a concern the Council of Europe shares with others and the ELP seems to have attracted interest beyond the learning and teaching of foreign languages. **“Mother tongue” and other subjects need to be taken into account.** Consideration of and close coordination with interrelated projects, such as the **development of a Europass** by the European Union, are of vital interest.”

Diversity also seems to be an issue in many countries such as Italy, Germany or Austria, where there are several ELP-models: Schärer lists arguments for and against diversity:

Pro diversity:

- *The models reflect the linguistic and cultural diversity of Europe, and are essential*
- *The models have to reflect a given learning context as closely as possible*
- *A clear sense of ownership is essential; it enhances motivation*
- *Standardised models restrict innovation and development*
- *Over-regulation has a negative effect on the dynamic of the implementation processes*

Against proliferation:

- *The ELP supports a common European effort, thus a clear European identity is essential*
- *Quality of the product and of the implementation process must be guaranteed. This is only possible by concentrating efforts on a restricted number of standard models*
- *The validation process needs to reflect the limited resources available”*

Eike Thürmann at the ELP-conference in Meran last November also declared that he saw pros and cons of diversity: Among the pros he counts the fact that developers usually identify with their product and show a lot of involvement, which is important to the implementation process. In general he sees diversity as negative for the



documenting function, whereas -in his opinion- it may be seen as positive for the pedagogical aspects of the ELP.

In chapter IV of the “Consolidated report” Schärer lists the following patterns of implementation and strategies:

The ELP is used to set educational standards

The ELP is used to assess learning outcomes

The ELP is used to cope with diversity.

Linguistic and cultural diversity is a key feature of Europe, yet English is the first foreign language in most educational systems. The promotion of other languages requires a major educational effort. Synergies between learning different languages and personal learning competence need to be developed during formal education. Schools and teachers are increasingly confronted with a pupil population with different cultural backgrounds and mother tongues. The ELP is used **to value diversity but also to manage differences in language competence.**

*The ELP is used as an **agent for change***

*The ELP is used for **quality development and quality assurance***

The following are some of the strategies used (often in combination):

Central – decentralised approaches

Structures of projects seem to reflect both legal aspects and traditions. Germany, Italy, Spain and Switzerland all have decentralised school authorities yet project organisation differs considerably. It seems that coordinated strategies take longer at the outset. In contrast, decentralised projects tend to produce a need for coordination as they spread...

Bottom-up strategies – top-down strategies

Successful widespread implementation needs both official status and goodwill from teachers and learners. Hence, a good mix of bottom-up and top-down strategies seems crucial. There is, however, an important proviso to be added: voluntary implementation seems more likely to succeed than forced compulsory implementation.

Counting on the snow-ball effect

Preparing the ground through teacher education

Using electronic delivery

There are a number of ELP models which are mainly or exclusively delivered through the web. There are a number of reasons stated in favour of this strategy:

Printing and distribution costs are avoided

The documents are easily made available as and when needed

On-line support for the use of the documents can be provided

Personal accounts with their own database can be made available on request

Data can be exchanged electronically between learners and teachers

Using interactive electronic ELP model

The motives for such high-tech solutions seem to include:

To ensure free access for all as and when needed

Perceived advantages of a permanent availability of personalised user guidance

Networking, access for group activities and work in class

Positioning of the ELP in the global educational context



Systematic reduction of paper to be delivered and stored

Making ends meet

Five different strategies for the financing of larger projects seem to have been used:

Financing through general educational budgets

Selling the product to educational institutions or to the learner

Financing through publishers

Financing through EU project funds

Using funds available to individual educational institutions

Coherence and continuity seem to play an important role for wide implementation:

“The ELP needs to be spread further to develop its full pedagogic and reporting potential. To guarantee the credibility beyond narrow educational contexts a critical mass in use is needed.”

What does the ELP mean for the stake-holders according to Schärer?

“For the individual citizen, the ELP is meant as a tool in support of life-long language learning. It is a tool to help build new learning on old learning.

For the teacher, the ELP is a tool to promote language learning in effective, transparent and coherent ways.

For teaching institutions, the ELP is a tool to define and communicate the purposes and values of language education. It is a tool to produce benefits beyond formal education.

For the Council of Europe, the ELP is a tool to help maintain and foster linguistic and cultural diversity, to promote plurilingualism, mutual respect and understanding”.

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This project has been funded with support from the European Commission.
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