The European Language Portfolio

ELT NEWS

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Introducing the European Language Portfolio

What is the European Language Portfolio?

Most of us probably associate the word "portfolio" with the world of art and design: it evokes the samples of work, sometimes presented in a large folder that artists and designers use to introduce their skills to potential patrons and clients.

Part of the European language Portfolio (ELP) is similar to this, but it has two other components that do not usually form part of an artist's portfolio.

The Principles and Guidelines approved by the Council of Europe define the three components of the ELP as follows:

The Language Passport section provides an overview of the individual's proficiency in different languages at a given point in time; the overview is defined in terms of skills and the common reference levels in the Common European Framework;

- it records formal qualifications and describes language competencies and significant language and intercultural learning experiences;
- it includes information on partial and specific competence;
- it allows for self-assessment, teacher assessment and assessment by educational institutions and examinations boards;
- it requires that information entered in the Passport states on what basis, when and by whom the assessment was carried out.

The Language Biography

- facilitates the learners involvement in planning, reflecting upon and assessing his or her learning process and progress;
- encourages the learner to state what he/she can do in each language and to include information on linguistic and cultural experiences gained in and outside formal educational contexts;

- is organized to promote plurilingualism, i.e. the development of competencies in a number of languages.

The Dossier offers the learner the opportunity to select materials to document and illustrate achievements or experiences recorded in the Language Biography or Passport.

The skills referred to in the language passport are: Understanding (listening and Reading), Speaking (Spoken Interaction and Spoken Production), and Writing; while the levels, derived from the Council of Europe's Common European Framework, are:

- Basic User (A1: Breakthrough and A2: Waystage),
- Independent User (B1: Threshold and B2: Vantage),
- Proficient User (C1: Effective Operational Proficiency and C2: Mastery).

Note that the inclusion of self-assessment in the passport emphasizes that the ELP belongs to the individual learner, not to the issuing body or institution.
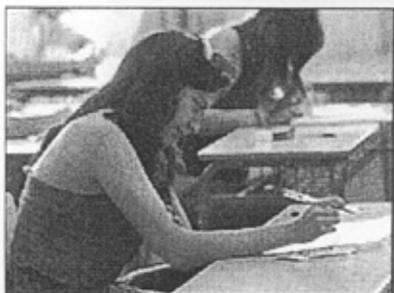

From a pedagogical point of view the language biography plays a pivotal role, providing a focus for the reflective processes that mediate between the language passport and the dossier. The dossier is the part of the ELP that most closely corresponds to the artist's portfolio.

For younger learners it may be rather like a scrap book in which target language materials are collected to complement or "decorate" the textbook and provide a focus for ownership of the foreign language learning process and the language itself.

Older school learners may fill their dossier with the outcomes of project work related more or less closely to the skills in which they will be tested in public exams.

Adult learners will probably want to present evidence of their ability to perform real life tasks in their target language(s), so their dossier is likely to contain sample letters, memoranda, brief reports and the like.

Of course, ELP owners may want to demonstrate their speaking as well as their writing skills, and they can do this by including an audio or videocassette in their dossier.
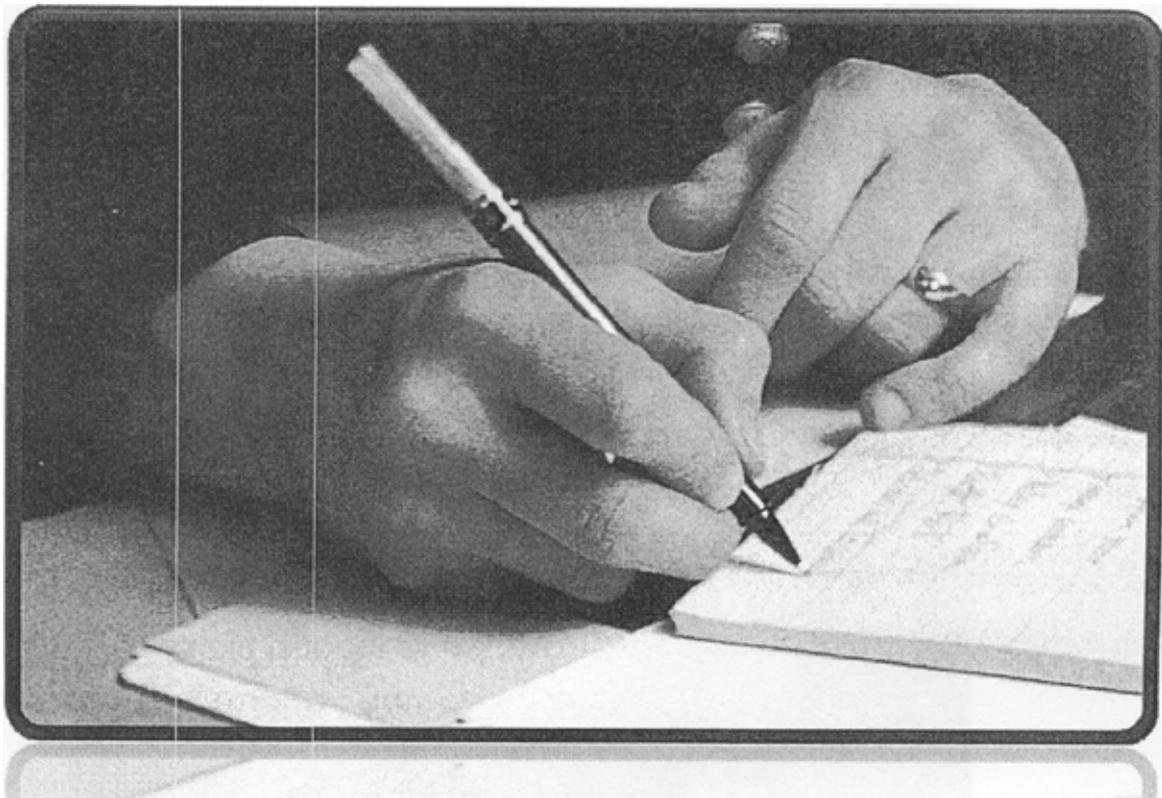
What is the ELP's function?

The ELP has two functions:

• Reporting

Like the artist's portfolio, the ELP displays the owners capabilities, but in relation to foreign languages. Its purpose is **not** to replace the certificates and diplomas that are awarded on the basis of formal examinations, but to supplement them by presenting additional information about the owner's experience and concrete evidence of his 01 her foreign language achievements. This function coincides with the Council of Europe's interest in:

    (i)   facilitating individual mobility and

    (ii)   relating regional and national qualifications to internationally agreed standards

Clearly, the importance of the ELP's reporting function will vary according to the age of the owner. It will usually be much less important for learners in the earlier stage' of schooling than for those approaching the end of formal education or already ir employment.

That explains why the Council of Europe has introduced a standard passport for adults only.

It is particularly important to adult learners that the ELP should be accepted internationally, and this is more likely to happen if the first of its components is the same everywhere.

• Pedagogical

The ELP is also intended to be used as a means of making the language learning process more transparent to learners, helping them to develop their capacity for reflection and self-assessment, and thus enabling them gradually to assume more and more responsibility for their own learning.

This function coincides with the Council of Europe's interest in fostering the development of

learner autonomy and promoting lifelong learning.

In its reporting and pedagogical functions, the ELP is designed to support four of the Council of Europe's key political aims:

- the preservation of linguistic and cultural diversity,
- the promotion of linguistic and cultural tolerance,
- the promotion of plurilingualism, and education for democratic citizenship.

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.

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Proficient User	C2	Can understand with ease virtually everything heard or read. Can summarise information from different spoken and written sources, reconstructing arguments and accounts in a coherent presentation. Can express him/herself spontaneously, very fluently and precisely, differentiating finer shades of meaning even in more complex situations.
	C1	Can understand a wide range of demanding, longer texts, and recognise implicit meaning. Can express him/herself fluently and spontaneously without much obvious searching for expressions. Can use language flexibly and effectively for social, academic and professional purposes. Can produce clear, well-structured, detailed text on complex subjects, showing controlled use of organisational patterns, connectors and cohesive devices.

Independent User	B2	Can understand the main ideas of complex text on both concrete and abstract topics, including technical discussions in his/her field of specialisation. Can interact with a degree of fluency and spontaneity that makes regular interaction with native speakers quite possible without strain for either party. Can produce clear, detailed text on a wide range of subjects and explain a viewpoint on a topical issue giving the advantages and disadvantages of various options.
	B1	Can understand the main points of clear standard input on familiar matters regularly encountered in work, school, leisure, etc. Can deal with most situations likely to arise whilst travelling in an area where the language is spoken. Can produce simple connected text on topics which are familiar or of personal interest. Can describe experiences and events, dreams, hopes and ambitions and briefly give reasons and explanations for opinions and plans.
Basic User	A2	Can understand sentences and frequently used expressions related to areas of most immediate relevance (e.g. very basic personal and family information, shopping, local geography, employment). Can communicate in simple and routine tasks requiring a simple and direct exchange of information on familiar and routine matters. Can describe in simple terms aspects of his/her background, immediate environment and matters in areas of immediate need.
	A1	Can understand and use familiar everyday expressions and very basic phrases aimed at the satisfaction of needs of a concrete type. Can introduce him/herself and others and can ask and answer questions about personal details such as where he/she lives, people he/she knows and things he/she has. Can interact in a simple way provided the other person talks slowly and clearly and is prepared to help.

How to introduce the ELP's components

You may introduce the dossier first encouraging the learners to keep the best examples of their work. At somewhat later stage you introduce the biography component and help your learners to start setting their own learning targets and reviewing their learning progress. Later you introduce the passport and show your learners how to come to terms with their developing linguistic identity by engaging in self-assessment based on the Council of Europe's common reference levels.

Dossier → Biography → Passport
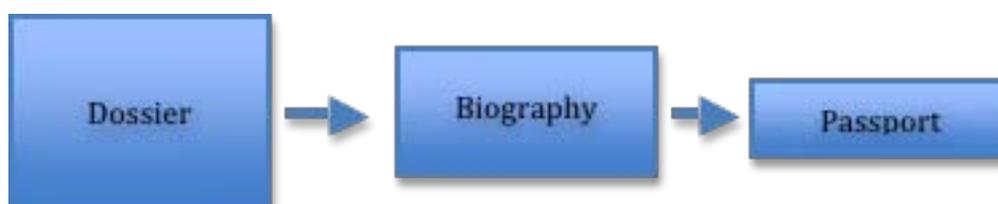
You may reverse the process if you wish. The language passport is introduced at the beginning as a means of challenging learners to reflect on their linguistic identity and the degree of proficiency they have already achieved in their target language(s). From there they proceed to the biography and the setting of individual learning targets. Learning outcomes are collected in the dossier and evaluated in the biography, and this provides the basis for setting new goals. The process is repeated until the end of the course, when learners return to the passport and update their self-assessment.

Passport Biography Dossier
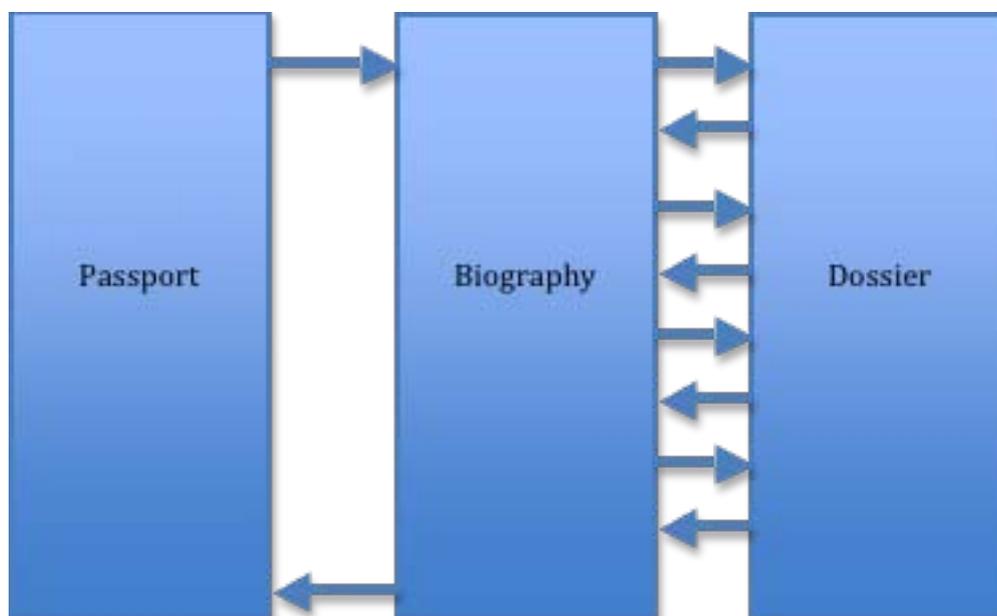
Feedback from individual teachers confirms that the ELP can exert a strong positive influence on language learning. Teachers report that the ELP has made their jot easier.

- Motivation of all tile learners, even the slower ones
- Increases their self-confidence when they have a list of their actual abilities
- Learners spend more time thinking about their language abilities and knowledge
- Voluntary work makes them more active
- Improved relations between learners and between learners and teacher

- Learners are more motivated and more creative
- Learners become more self-confident
- Learners reflect more on what they do
- Teachers can be more creative
- Keeps parents inforn1ed about their child's progress
- Focused on communication rather than on minor grammar mistakes
- Learners can develop their own language abilities
- Learners realize that they can extend their English language out of school as well

Some classroom activities to introduce work with the ELP

Raising your learners' self-esteem

Initiate a discussion with your learners about I can do statements. Emphasize the need to think positively.

- Ask your learners to imagine that they are among native speakers of the target language. Help them to recognize what they are able to do in the target language. Elicit from them as many "I can do" statements as possible (e.g. I can introduce myself; I can ask people how they are and react to their response; I can understand simple directions; I can understand short, simple messages on postcards).
- Provide them with the target language expressions they need in order to perform this task; alternatively, allow them to use their mother tongue.

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What are the qualities of a good dossier?

Discuss with your learners what a good dossier should look like. Ask them what evidence of their language proficiency they can show (e.g., postcards they have written, letters, essays, projects, audio or video recordings, lists of books they have read, certificates, diplomas, etc.). What are the learners going to put into their dossier? Encourage them to suggest guidelines for selecting material.

# Introducing one of the functions of the ELP's biography component

Discuss with your learners ways in which they can improve their foreign language proficiency.

- What intercultural learning experiences have they had?
- Where could they encounter the foreign language outside the classroom?
- How could they learn from such encounters?

Explain that they can record the encounters in the biography component of the ELP, where they can also record events that they find especially important for their language learning.

A homework task: thinking about learning with the ELP

Ask your learners to go through the ELP at home and think of ways in which they can use it to support their language learning. Encourage an exchange of ideas in class. Be open to learners' suggestions. Take a poster displaying good suggestions.
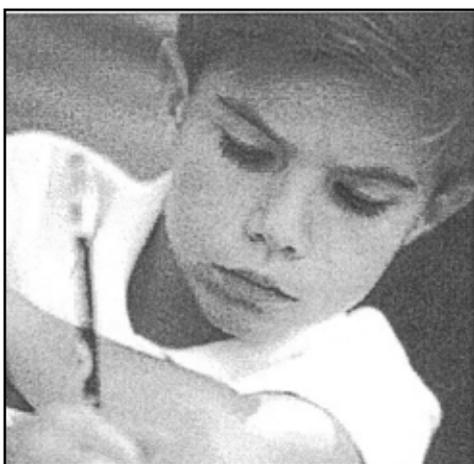
Making space: the curriculum, the textbook and the ELP

Teachers often wonder how to make space for the ELP in their teaching. Their concern is usually expressed in two questions:

- "Does the ELP require me to go beyond the curriculum?" and
- "How can I work with the ELP and also get through the textbook?"

The answer to the first of these questions is that the ELP **supports** any foreign language curriculum that aims to develop learners' communicative proficiency. As a matter of principle the aims of all communicative curricula can be restated in terms of the "can do" statements that provide the basis for learner self-assessment in the passport.

P hat is more the pedagogical function of the ELP is that it makes the language learning process more **transparent to learners, helping them to develop their capacity for reflection and self-assessment, and thus enabling them gradually to assume more and more responsibility for their own learning.**
It also coincides with the emphasis on learning how to learn and develops critical thinking skills that are found in more and more national and regional curricula.

There is likewise no contradiction between the ELP and the textbo0'li though the ELP's pedagogical function has unmistakable implications for the way in which we use the textbook. If we are to engage our learners in reflection and self-assessment and thus enable them to assume responsibility for their own learning we cannot use the textbook as a series of lesson scripts. For to do so would be to impose on our learners the textbook author's learning targets and implied learning process.

By working with the ELP we commit ourselves to an ongoing process of discussion and negotiation with our learners to which the textbook must always remain subordinate.
This means that we must use the textbook flexibly and imaginatively. Sometimes it may be appropriate to allow our learners to choose which parts of the textbook they want to work with.

References

The Council of Europe supports CEF users with several documents which can be downloaded free of charge from their website;

- **a CEF users guide**

http://culture2.coe.int/portfolio/documents/Guide-for·Users-April02.doc,

- **a testing guide**

http:// culture2.coe.int/portfolio/documents/Guide%20october%202002 _ %20revised%20versionl. doc,

- **and a manual for relating examinations to the CEF**

http://culture2.coe.int/portfolio/inc.asp?L=E&M=$t/208-1-0- l/mainyages/../documents_intro/ Manual.html.

The Council of Europe supports ELP users with:

- **principles and guidelines**

http://culture2.coe.int/portfolio/inc.asp?L=E&M=$t/208-1-0-l/main_pages/../documents_intro/ principles~uidelines.htmI,

- **a guide for teachers and teacher trainers**

http://culture2.coe.int/portfolio//documents/ELPguide_teacherstrainers.pdf

- **a guide for developers**

http://culture2.coe.int/portfolio/incoasp?L=E&M=$t/208-1-0-1/main_pages/../documents_intro/ developers.html,

- **an example of a portfolio**

- **and links to validated portfolios**

http://culture2.coe.int/portfolio/inc.asp?l=E&M=$t/208-1-0-1/main_pages/.'/&L=E&M=$t/208-1-0·1/ main_pages/portfolios.html.

ELP Implementation Studies

The ELP was trial led by over 30,000 students and 1,800 teachers in 16 countries. These experiences are described:

- **in a Council of Europe report**

http://culture2.coe.int/portfolio//documents/DGIV_EDU_LANG_2000_31Erev.doc (Scharer 2000)

- **and in a collection of articles**

http://culture2.coe.intiportfolio//documents/ELP%20in%20use.pdf(Little 2001).