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# **The development of the Electronic European Language Portfolio**

## 1. INTRODUCTION

Developments in new technologies and their affordances require that educators rethink their fundamental assumptions about teaching and learning (Vrasidas & Glass, 2002a). Technology affordances played a major role in reshaping teaching and assessment and have revolutionized the use of portfolios as a pedagogical, reflective, and assessment tool (Mason, 2002; Vrasidas & Glass, 2004). International organizations such as the International Society for Technology in Education, UNESCO, and the European Commission (EC), have established guides, plans, and standards for the use of technology in education and training. In light of these developments brought about by rapid technology growth and use in education, the digital European Language Portfolio (e-ELP) was developed to examine the ways in which technology can support reflection and language learning. One of the main objectives of this project is to take advantage of the affordances of technology in serving the needs of language teachers and students alike.

## 2. A NEW STRUCTURE FOR THE E-ELP

We now discuss the new structure we studied for our e-ELP. As already said<sup>1</sup>, the *Language Passport* is a record of language skills, qualifications and experiences that provides an overview of the user's proficiency in all the languages he/she knows. It allows for a global self-assessment of the student language skills, summarises the owner's language and intercultural experiences, and records formal qualifications. This agile structure and layout is identical in all of the editions of the ELP.

The *Language Biography* reports the student's learning history in great detail, complementing the information presented in the *Passport*. It also facilitates the reflection on the past, current, and future language learning progress and enables the user to set goals for his/her future learning activities and cultural experiences. This section is considered a valuable tool for the teacher and for the student. Its structure is quite flexible, and different ELPs have interpreted it introducing different grids (following the needs of their target students). These grids are used as scaffolds to help user's think about their language learning in a deeper and more organized manner. The most common subsections of the *Biography* are:

- Description of the student's learning history (or language experiences)
- Description of the most significant linguistic and intercultural experiences (or language experiences)
- Definitions of future language priorities, aims and objectives (or Objectives and priorities)
- A self-assessment detailed checklists (or «Can do descriptors»)
- A section for self-awareness on how the student learns (the competence of «learning to learn»)
- A few ELPs also include pragmatic, sociolinguistic, and strategic self-assessment grids (inside the self-assessment checklists).

Finally, the *Dossier* offers the student the opportunity of selecting materials to illustrate the achievements and experiences re-

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<sup>1</sup> See Landone, *infra*, 11-23.

corded in the *Passport* or in the *Biography* (for example, any kind of text, audio and visual recordings, group works, digital projects, etc.).

From the opening screen of the e-ELP users can choose to modify their personal data, learn about the ELP, begin developing their own portfolio, and export the portfolio for sharing with others. The users can develop, update, and maintain their portfolio individually. Once the portfolio is updated, the user can choose to publish or share parts or the whole portfolio with others electronically, via the web, or after printing. Once the user chooses to «edit» the portfolio, a screen is presented prompting the user to select the language in which to complete the work. Once the language is selected, the user enters the portfolio that is divided in four parts:

- *Language competence*
- *Language experiences*
- *Learning competence*
- *Objectives and priorities*

Table 1 presents a comparison of the structure of the paper-based ELP with the e-ELP structure<sup>2</sup>.

The e-ELP starts with a section where the personal data of the learner is supplied (*Personal data*). A section called *Language competence*, follows where the student can assess his/her language and cultural competence, that is to say what he/she is able to do with the language in communicative contexts. The focus of this section is the linguistic and intercultural competence of the learner/user. It includes:

- *Profile of language skills and self-assessment grid*
- *Can do descriptors*
- *Strategic, pragmatic and sociolinguistic grids*
- *Language for specific purposes grid*
- *Intercultural competence grid.*

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<sup>2</sup> Note that all parts of the paper based coded (P1, P2, etc.) are matched with the appropriate sections of the e-ELP.

ELP PAPER-BASED STRUCTURE	E-ELP STRUCTURE
	<b>Personal data (P1)</b>
<b>Passport (P)</b>	
P1. Personal data	
P2. Profile of language skills	<b>Language competence:</b>
P3. Self-assessment grid	Profile of language skills and self-assessment grid (P2, P3)
P4. Summary of language learning and intercultural experiences	Can do descriptors (B5)
P5. Certificates and diplomas	Strategic, pragmatic and sociolinguistic grids (P3)
	Language for specific purposes grid (P3)
	Intercultural competence grid (P3)
<b>Biography (B)</b>	
B1. My language learning history/biography	
B2. My most significant linguistic and intercultural experiences	<b>Language experiences (P4, B1, B2)</b>
B3. My current language learning priorities and targets	
B4. My language learning aims (and goal-setting grid)	<b>Learning competence (B6)</b>
B5. Self-assessment checklists	
B6. Learning how to learn grid	<b>Objectives and priorities (B3, B4)</b>
<b>Dossier (D)</b>	<b>Dossier (D, P5)</b>

Table 1. The structure of the e-ELP versus the paper based ELP

In the *Language experiences* section the focus is on the linguistic experience and intercultural history of the learner. The subsequent sections are *Learning competence* and *Objectives and priorities*: in the first one the student can identify strengths and future needs in order to improve the way he/she learns languages; in the second one he/she can set goals and priorities for future language learning. Finally, the *Dossier* has the same structure as described above.

The two structures meet exactly the same functions: to collect personal data, to illustrate a profile of communicative language competence (in a concise and in a detailed way), to describe language and intercultural experiences (in a succinct and detailed way), to stimulate reflection on personal learning competence, to aid future planning, and to collect concrete samples of competence and experiences. Nevertheless, from a pedagogical perspective, the result of the e-ELP is a more compact format that allows the user to:

- have the *Profile of language skills* (and the *self-assessment grid*) adjacent to the *Checklists of Can do descriptors*
- have some grids on communicative competence (*strategic, pragmatic, sociolinguistic and intercultural*) along and integrated with more «linguistic» grids (*Can do descriptors*)
- treat experiences in a more holistic way
- underline the importance of the learning objectives and learning styles, and interpret them as autonomous sections
- consider certificates and diplomas (formal documents) as learning evidence, at the same level of other less formal documents.

In fact, the standard three-part ELP structure presents some overlapping sections. This stems from the fact that its organisation is based on the principle of having a *documentary section* followed by a *pedagogical detailed* section<sup>3</sup>. For this reason, we decided to try another approach, and we defined a section focused on *competence* and one focused on the *experience*: the former is more centred on the products and results, the latter, is more centred on the progress and

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<sup>3</sup> For example, the student makes a global profile of his/her language skills in the *Passport*, but the detailed grids to refine it are in the *Biography*. The same happens with the *Summary of language learning and intercultural experiences (Passport)* and the language history (*Biography*).

development of the language and intercultural learning. From a usability point of view, this avoids having the student to report the same (or similar) data two times in different sections and check their congruence «manually». This does not mean that we are questioning the *Passport-Biography-Dossier* structure (which is strictly maintained in the exported version), but rather that we are attempting to have a more student-centred tool and a less tool-centred student.

Having a language *competence* section followed by a language *experiences* section helps strengthen the usability of the e-ELP. This also means that a clear distinction between a documentary and a pedagogical function of the ELP is avoided. For example, if the student needs to prepare his/her ELP for a job application, he/she could be tempted to compile the *Passport* only, which would fulfil the function of offering the owner's brief profile to the receiver. *Biography* and *Dossier* risk to be postponed and *Passport* data (especially the global self-assessment) could not precisely mirror the owner's competence. On the contrary, if the student is using the ELP as pedagogical support to a language course, he/she will feel that the ELP as a demanding tool and will underestimate its international-recognised mobility function.

It must be underlined that this design choice does not sacrifice the ELP's substance, since the digital structure, when exported (printed or e-mailed), is recombined in an output conforming to the three typical parts (*Passport*, *Biography*, and *Dossier*). In other words, the e-ELP just changes its look in its interaction with the user; the interaction is not tailored after the ELP's functions (as in the paper-based structure), but is geared to better serve the users needs and tasks. The decision to follow this came after several meetings with real users, teachers and students, who often get frustrated with the duplication of information in the paper-based ELP.

### 3. BENEFITS FROM DIGITIZING THE ELP: ENHANCEMENT OF STUDENTS' REFLECTION

Portfolios are widely applied at every school level, both as tools to document the learning outcomes and as instruments to reflect on the learning process. They support assessment aiming at a dynamic concept of learning, where the evaluation of the learning process is the focus of the assessment. Furthermore, a portfolio is a self-assessment tool which helps learners reflect autonomously on their ways of learning. Portfolios shift the ownership and mastery of the learning from the teacher to the student, building learner autonomy that is a fundamental requirement for the transition to subsequent school levels, as well as for a wider perspective of life-long learning (Glottlieb, 1995; Ciel, 2000).

As a pedagogical and assessment tool, portfolios are being used in a variety of ways in education and training. Activities can be integrated in portfolios in order to encourage students to review their own work, reflect on their learning, analyze their learning strategies, strengths, and weaknesses, and assess their participation within a class context (Calfee & Perfumo, 1993; Glazer & Brown, 1993). With the growing use of the internet in education, electronic portfolios have been used extensively by educators. Portfolios, in simple terms, are the collection of selected pieces of work by students. In the context of the ELP, the portfolio includes students' work, documentation and certifications that illustrate the student's language proficiencies. A major focus of a portfolio is to encourage students to reflect on their own work, thus, a portfolio can serve as a record of student learning and growth.

An important aspect of portfolios is reflection. Reflection has been identified as a fundamental process that facilitates meaningful learning (Dewey, 1910; Schön, 1983; 1987). Dewey (1910) in his seminal work *How We Think* defined reflection as «*active, persistent, and careful consideration of any belief or supposed form of knowledge in the light of the grounds that support it, and the further conclusions to which it tends*» (p. 6). Dewey also promoted reflective thinking as an educational aim and supported that it contributes to the intellectual and moral de-

velopment of the person because it results in changes in one's perspectives.

The concept of reflection can be transferred to the context of language learners and the goals of the e-ELP. When learners reflect on their language learning and proficiencies they engage in those processes essential for deep meaningful learning. Here, portfolios can play an important role. By constructing, rearranging, and evaluating their own digital language portfolio, students reflect on what they know and have achieved thus far, identify strengths and weaknesses and establish clear goals for improving their language expertise.

The student's reflection is a key characteristic of the active learner. The ELP has the fundamental pedagogical function to encourage students to reflect on their language learning and to set their own learning goals. In a portfolio, learners are asked to make their language competencies explicit, and illustrate their growth over time, thus making that submerged competence that normally learners are not used to recognizing evident and capitalizing in their own learning process (Kohonen & Westhoff, 2003; Kohonen, 2000a).

For this reason, one of the goals of digitizing the ELP is to take advantage of what technology can do to support language learning. An initial idea in designing it was to create a net of digital links among the three parts of the ELP (*Passport*, *Biography*, and *Dossier*) according to the documental-and-pedagogical interconnected double nature of the ELP. A good system of crossed references would make it easy for the student to fill or update the digital ELP in an integrated way. For example, linking the *Dossier* section to the *Passport* and the *Biography* would give a higher pedagogical relevance to the *Dossier*, which is sometimes considered just as an appendix of representative artifacts (Kohonen & Westhoff, 2003). This first idea of making informative/formative links to allow for a transversal sailing in the ELP has lately been improved.

After some preliminary pilots with real users, we decided to free the student from the rigid three-section structure and we opted for restructuring the e-ELP's interface in a way that the learner is



required to deal with the three parts contextually. For example, first the student would insert his/her cultural and linguistic experience in a unique format, instead of writing it in a summarized form for the *Passport*; then, he/she would rewrite it in a narrative form for the *Biography*, and, finally, he/she would select documents to attest it again for the *Dossier*. It is apparent that the restructuring of the three parts implies a less repetitive interface for the student, which is supported by a modular digital structure that, at any time, is able to visualize and export the ELP in its three standard sections. In the paper format of the ELP there is a partial overlap of the data. The electronic version offers a less redundant and tighter contiguity among its digital sections, thus avoiding a certain degree of dispersion found in the paper ELP. In this way the e-ELP becomes a more powerful tool of evidence, since the student should document his/her learning in a coherent and explicit way.

#### 4. FINAL THOUGHTS

The ELP is in the core of a vast renewal European movement in the field of language teaching and we hope that the adoption of the e-ELP on a regular basis by various institutions will stimulate an improvement in the quality of language teaching. However, we expect that the e-ELP will not be easily adopted in those educational contexts where a «portfolio culture» is not habitual (Guard, Ritcher & Waller, 2002; Bilotto, 2000; Clark, 2002). Student's autonomy, reflection and self-evaluation may come into conflict with those contexts where traditional forms of evaluation are highly valued.

There are several factors which influence the adoption of technology in education settings. A commonly cited obstacle to the use of technology in teaching and learning is the lack of teachers' content, technology, and pedagogical knowledge. Because of a lack of pedagogical knowledge, teachers often fail to take advantage of what technology affords and instead use technology to teach in traditional ways. Most of the pressure of preparing teachers to use

technology in their teaching lies on schools of education. Teachers are ill-prepared to integrate technology in education (CEO Forum on Educational Technology, 2000; Means, 2004; Moursund & Bielefeldt, 1999; Strudler, Archambault, Bendixen, Anderson, & Weiss, 2003). According to a recent report by McMillan Culp, Honey, and Mandinach (2003), *A Retrospective on Twenty Years of Education Technology Policy*,

Teacher professional development has been one of the enduring themes across the past twenty years and is often highlighted [...] as the single most important step toward the infusion of technology into education (p. 12)

focusing teacher training on simple technology skills is not enough. Teachers need to be given opportunities to experience technology in everyday practice, and then to try various approaches in the context of their own practice. If we want the e-ELP to be adopted, teachers need to be offered the training and support necessary. Furthermore, strong political will is essential for such innovative approaches to succeed and be adopted.