

Training teachers to use the European Language Portfolio

Language in the ELP

Language(s) of presentation and process; plurilingualism

Some notes on the PowerPoint presentation

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This presentation considers two basic questions:

1. What language(s) should be used in the ELP? That is, in what languages should the ELP be presented?
2. What language(s) should be used when working with the ELP? That is, what language(s) should learners use when they plan their learning, reflect on and assess their achievement, and make entries in their ELP.

The presentation concludes by touching on plurilingualism, one of the key concepts that underlie both the Common European Framework (Council of Europe 2001) and the ELP.

When deciding on language(s) of presentation and language(s) of process, contextual factors play a vital role. Thus this presentation cannot offer universal solutions; its aim is rather to raise awareness of the issues.

The Council of Europe's language policy is clear. In a recommendation to member states that dates from 1982 the objectives were defined as follows: "it is only through a better knowledge of European modern languages that it will be possible to facilitate communication and interaction among Europeans of different mother tongues in order to promote European mobility, mutual understanding and co-operation, and overcome prejudice and discrimination" (Recommendation no. R (82) 18 of the Committee of Ministers to Member States concerning modern languages, cit. Council of Europe 2001, p. 2). The importance of learning foreign languages is nowadays widely recognized, and it is generally accepted that language teaching and learning should aim to develop proficiency in the communicative use of the target language.

The ELP has great potential to promote target language use, but how far this potential can be exploited depends on the level of the learners' command of the language. They may lack the ability to use the target language effectively for reception (e.g., to understand the ELP descriptors of communicative activities) and production (e.g., to reflect on their achievements and future plans). In addition, with young learners there may be a need to develop their use of the mother tongue, which could thus be the

preferred medium for reflection and self-assessment. A dilemma can thus arise between using the target language and encouraging deeper reflection, and its resolution is situation-specific.

The ELP Principles and Guidelines (2000; with added explanatory notes, 2004) require that ELPs “adhere to terminological conventions, standard headings and rubrics as specified by the Council of Europe in at least one of the official languages of the Council of Europe (English or French) in addition to any other languages” (paragraph 3.3). This has been interpreted to mean (i) that all ELPs must use the titles European Language Portfolio/Portfolio Européen des Langues, Language passport/Passeport de langues, Language biography/Biographie langagière and Dossier; and (ii) that the whole of the language passport and key headings in the language biography and dossier should be in English and/or French in addition to any other languages. These requirements are designed to establish the European character of the ELP and to make all versions accessible outside their home territory.

In order to encourage target language use in the classroom, some ELPs include, e.g., goal-setting and self-assessment checklists in the various languages of the official curriculum. To give a concrete example, the Irish ELP for secondary learners contains checklists in Irish, French, German, Spanish and Italian, which allows teachers and learners of French to use French descriptors when planning and evaluating learning. Similarly, the Czech ELP for lower-secondary schools uses Czech, English, German and French and it also provides free spaces for any other language (either the learner’s mother tongue or another language acquired outside school).

Extensive use of the target language not only for communication but for reflection and self-assessment is obviously beneficial. Swain’s Comprehensible Output Hypothesis (1985) predicts that situations in which learners have to seek alternative means of expression and try out new ways of getting their message across strongly promote accurate production. Undoubtedly, such situations are integral to ELP use. Skehan (1998, 16) confirms Swain’s view: language use is habitual behaviour, like playing a musical instrument, and therefore “to learn to speak we have to actually speak!”. He emphasizes (ibid., 18-19) that “one must have, during language learning, the opportunity [...] to find ways of expressing individual meanings”. Clearly, our progress and achievements in language learning entail the expression of individual meanings.

The ELP creates plenty of unique opportunities for practising target languages, and this practice is in complete harmony with the view that language is not only a rule-governed system but a means of expressing oneself and getting things done (Tudor 2001). The time spent using the target language increases substantially when learners reflect on their performance and assess it with the help of the language that they are learning.

Even seven-year old learners can use the target language to assess their work. As suggested in the textbook *Story Magic 1* (House and Scott 2003), they can decide whether their work was OK, good, very good or excellent and colour in the appropriate picture. The textbook *Cambridge English for Schools* (Littlejohn and Hicks 1996), for eleven-year-olds, encourages reflection and assessment as group activities. Learners are asked to look at a specific unit in the textbook and talk about

it. Then they report on the unit to the class and say, e.g., if it was interesting, if they want to learn more about the topic, how they can work better next time, what they need to practise, and what they want to do in future lessons.

Although there are various ways of practising reflection and self-assessment in the target language, even with beginners, reasons for using the mother tongue should not be neglected. There is no doubt that reflection in the mother tongue can achieve a significantly higher level of sophistication, may be considered more natural than reflection in the target language, and when given proper thought, may develop learners' reflective ability more effectively. While use of the target language increases the amount of exposure to the language and helps learners to become more efficient in their use of it, use of the mother tongue seems justifiable on broader educational grounds.

Use of the target language supports the Council of Europe concept of plurilingualism, according to which the competences we acquire in different languages are not separate from one another but combine to form "a communicative competence to which all knowledge and experience of language contributes and in which languages interrelate and interact" (Council of Europe 2001, 4).

Plurilingualism presents a challenge to language teachers, who inevitably and necessarily focus on the language in which they are qualified, but it could also help to solve the problem of language use. Needless to say, the development of plurilingualism should be undertaken as a whole-school project.

References

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