



Strasbourg, June 1999

DECS/EDU/LANG (99) 30

**COUNCIL FOR CULTURAL COOPERATION (CDCC)**

**Education Committee**

*"Language Policies for a multilingual and multicultural Europe"*

**THE EUROPEAN LANGUAGE PORTFOLIO  
AND SELF-ASSESSMENT**

**by**

**David Little**

## 0 Introduction

This paper is based on the conviction that appropriate implementation of self-assessment is essential to the long-term success of the European Language Portfolio (ELP). More specifically, I believe that educational domains will adopt and use ELP in the longer term only to the extent that they possess, or are able to develop, a culture in which learner self-assessment (i) plays a central role in the learning process and (ii) interacts in an appropriate way with the assessment of learners' proficiency by others, whether teachers or external examining bodies.

I begin by referring briefly to the contribution that successive Council of Europe modern languages projects have made to the definition of learning goals and criteria for the assessment of foreign language proficiency. Then I consider the focus and functions of learner self-assessment as required by ELP. This leads me to a discussion of the role of self-assessment in reflective teaching/learning, which is the central part of my argument. Next I address the question of the appropriate relation between self-assessment and assessment by examinations. I then relate self-assessment to the Council of Europe's current concern with education for democratic citizenship, and I conclude by summarizing the implications of my argument for (i) ELP pilot projects and (ii) the large-scale dissemination of ELP after the pilot phase.

## 1 Assessing foreign language proficiency

From the first, the Council of Europe's modern languages projects have been preoccupied with the need to establish transparency in the specification of language learning objectives. In particular, they have been concerned to develop descriptions of foreign language proficiency that are directly related to communicative language use. The *Threshold Level* specifications, together with studies such as Jan van Ek's *Objectives for Foreign Language Learning* (1986), have played a central role in reorienting foreign language teaching to communicative goals. They have also helped to stimulate the development of new theoretical perspectives on the assessment of foreign language proficiency (see especially Oskarsson 1980); for logic demands that we assess learners according to the same criteria as we use to specify learning goals. This is the rationale for devising descriptors like those set out in the *Common European Framework* (CEF, Council of Europe 1996) and carried over into ELP.

The Council of Europe's work in this field has had an enormous impact on the definition of syllabuses, the elaboration of curricula, and the development of learning materials. Its impact on the practice of assessment, by contrast, has been much less complete. It is true that in the adult sector, especially the part of it that is served by private language teaching institutions, assessment is now frequently based on the use of behavioural descriptors. But it is also true that in schools and universities, forms of assessment have been much slower to change. One reason for this is that behavioural descriptors encourage an approach to assessment that is at odds with the competitive ethos characteristic of mainstream traditions in European educational culture. If we describe language learning objectives in behavioural terms, it follows that assessment should be a matter of determining the extent to which learners have mastered the behaviour in question. By contrast with this criterion-referenced approach to assessment, public examinations and the marking schemes they employ traditionally embody a norm-referenced approach, which is based on the belief that ability, and thus achievement, is distributed in societies with the statistical regularity of the bell-shaped curve.

It is sometimes thought that a criterion-referenced approach to assessment excludes the possibility of comparing learners with one another, but a moment's reflection should show that this is not the case. In a class of thirty learners, for example, twenty-five may meet the criterion in question, but at many different levels of proficiency; and it is not specially difficult to reflect this fact in the scoring of learners' performances. The chief difference between the two approaches to assessment has to do with their attitude to failure. The criterion-referenced approach encourages a generally positive attitude to learners: provided they meet the criterion they are deemed proficient (even though in some cases proficiency may be minimal). By contrast, the norm-referenced approach easily encourages a negative attitude. If the ideal distribution of performances in a norm-referenced test is a bell-shaped curve, the taint of failure attaches not only to those who do not achieve a pass mark, but to all those who fall below the mid-point in the distribution of marks – those, in other words, who are below average. The impact that this ethos of failure can have on learner motivation has often been discussed in the relevant literature.

## **2 The focus and functions of self-assessment**

Foreign language examinations have traditionally judged learners according to standards of linguistic correctness. From this perspective self-assessment may seem to be a hopeless undertaking. How, after all, can learners assess themselves with any degree of accuracy unless they already possess the same degree of linguistic knowledge as the person who set the examination paper or devised the assessment task? Such an attitude overlooks the fact that learners (like the rest of us) can often correct “off-line”, errors that they have made “on-line”. It also misses the point that self-assessment of the kind we are concerned with in ELP is referenced to behavioural criteria. Especially in the early stages, learners may not be able to assess with any accuracy the extent to which they control the inflexional morphology of their target language; but they are likely to know what they can do communicatively in the target language and the general level of proficiency with which they can do it. University-level students of French and German taking part in the Irish ELP pilot project have certainly had little difficulty in accurately profiling their own target language proficiency using the levels and descriptors printed in the passport component of our portfolio.

Assuming the general feasibility of self-assessment based on behavioural criteria, the question arises, what purpose does it serve? It is usual to distinguish between two kinds, and therefore functions, of assessment: summative and formative. Summative assessment is used at the end of a course or phase of learning to determine what has been achieved; school-leaving and degree examinations are obvious examples of this type. Formative assessment, on the other hand, is used during the course of learning as a means of providing learners with feedback on their progress and some indication of the areas they need to give particular attention to. Summative assessment is often the responsibility of independent examination boards, whereas formative assessment is usually a matter for the teacher in his or her particular classroom. In principle, these two functions of assessment may require very different instruments; in practice, of course, the washback effect of public examinations often ensures that formative assessment uses the same procedures as summative assessment.

The self-assessment that is central to ELP is likewise of two kinds. When learners assess themselves in the passport component, they are engaging in a form of summative assessment: a statement of their proficiency at a particular point in their lives. On the other hand, the self-assessment that runs through the biography component and keeps the contents of the dossier

under critical review has a formative function; and it is so thoroughly integrated with the pedagogical purpose of ELP that it is as much a habit of mind as an activity. These two kinds of self-assessment depend on the same complex of knowledge, self-knowledge and skills, which means that learners are likely to be more proficient in performing summative self-assessment if formative self-assessment – what one might call reflective self-evaluation – has been an integral part of their learning experience. This brings me to the question of reflective teaching/learning. This is the most important part of my argument, for it is here that ELP poses a serious pedagogical challenge to national educational cultures.

### **3 Self-assessment and reflective teaching/learning**

The Council of Europe's educational projects generally, and its modern languages projects in particular, have always emphasized the importance of learner autonomy. It is generally agreed that learners are autonomous when they (i) accept responsibility for their own learning and (ii) exercise that responsibility in a continuous effort to understand what, why and how they are learning, and with what degree of success (see, for example, Holec 1981, Boud 1988, Little 1991). In other words, the exercise and gradual development of learner autonomy depend crucially on reflection and self-assessment.

As my working definition implies, we do not make learners autonomous simply by telling them that they are in charge. We may want them to assume responsibility for their own learning and exercise that responsibility by taking control of more and more aspects of the learning process; but they can do this only if they acquire appropriate skills. They develop such skills by being involved in planning, monitoring and assessing their learning, which is the essence of reflective teaching/learning.

One of the best accounts of reflective teaching/learning is provided by Leni Dam (1995). She describes how she engaged Danish learners of English at lower secondary level in increasingly sophisticated reflection by repeatedly asking five questions: What are we learning? Why are we learning it? How are we learning? How successful is our learning? What are we going to learn next? These five questions reflect the cyclical fashion in which learning progresses: planning is followed by implementation, after which evaluation leads to further planning. Note that reflection plays a role in each of these phases; note also that formative self-assessment is integral to the planning and implementation phases as well as to the evaluation phase. For in order to be effective, learners' planning must be realistic, which means that they must constantly measure their intentions against their developed capacities; while successful implementation depends on efficient monitoring, which might be described as "on-line" self-assessment.

Just how much can be achieved by this reflective approach to teaching/learning is illustrated by examples of summative self-assessment provided by two of Leni Dam's learners at the end of their fourth year of learning English (quoted from Dam and Little 1998). They were asked to assess themselves not according to the kind of communicative criteria that are the basis for self-assessment in the passport component of ELP, but in terms of their general learning progress. The first example reflects positively on the exercise and further development of learner autonomy, while the second shows the benefits that reflective teaching/learning can bring to life outside the classroom. Both examples are quoted as they were written, in the learners' target language, and confirm that much is to be gained by using the target language itself as the medium of reflection and self-assessment.

### **Example 1**

Most important is probably the way we have worked. That we were expected to and given the chance to decide ourselves what to do. That we worked independently ... And we have learned much more because we have worked with different things. In this way we could help each other because some of us had learned something and others had learned something else. It doesn't mean that we haven't had a teacher to help us. Because we have, and she has helped us. But the day she didn't have the time, we could manage on our own.

### **Example 2**

I already make use of the fixed procedures from our diaries when trying to get something done at home. Then I make a list of what to do or remember the following day. That makes things much easier. I have also via English learned to start a conversation with a stranger and ask good questions. And I think that our "together" session has helped me to become better at listening to other people and to be interested in them. I feel that I have learned to believe in myself and to be independent.

The sophistication of these summative self-assessments is due entirely to the fact that formative self-assessment has played a central role in these students' learning experience; for them, self-assessment has become a habit of mind.

## **4. The relation between self-assessment and assessment by traditional forms of examination**

Examples of effective learner self-assessment like those I have just quoted prompt two questions. The first is a matter of general principle: What should be the relation between self-assessment and assessment by teachers and examination boards? The second moves from general principle to the particular case of ELP: Given that in both its documentary and its pedagogical function ELP assigns a central role to self-assessment, what should be its relation to the public examination systems of the different Council of Europe member states?

One answer to both questions is to maintain a clear distinction between the two forms of assessment, so that they complement rather than merge with one another. This is the route followed by the National Records of Achievement (NRA) scheme that was launched in the UK in 1991: designed to promote individual planning on the basis of self-assessment, it is quite separate from the system of public examinations. At least to begin with, this seems likely to be the way in which ELP will be implemented in the school sector.

The official guide to the scheme makes clear that as a physical object the NRA has much in common with ELP:

The NRA consists of a number of standard sheets stored in a burgundy folder. Each sheet has space on the front for recording, and on the reverse side are details about what should be recorded. The folder also contains plastic pockets to store evidence that supports the recorded statements, such as certificates, testimonials and arrangements for quality assurance. (NCVQ/SCOTVEC 1993)

The guide summarizes the function and process of the scheme thus:

Through these sheets the NRA provides a full picture of the individual's achievement and indicates areas for personal development. The NRA is developed by the individual through guidance, reviewing, action planning, assessment and recording.

One component of the NRA is the action plan, which individuals draw up, ideally with support from their teachers, by answering the following four questions: Where am I now? Where am I going? What are my next steps? How will I get there? These questions require pupils to (i) review their progress, (ii) define their goals, (iii) specify the targets they need to meet in order to achieve their goals, and (iv) outline the learning arrangements that must be put in place if they are to meet their targets. Individual action plans can reveal a self-awareness no less developed than the self-awareness of the two Danish learners of English quoted above. It is important to recognize, however, that whereas the Danish learners' self-assessment was related to a single curriculum subject, the NRA embraces the individual's achievements as a whole. The processes of self-assessment on which it depends will be continuous with the processes that shape learning in the different curriculum subjects only if the NRA is administered within a culture of reflective teaching/learning. The same is true of ELP in relation to foreign languages: its pedagogical function will achieve its full impact only if ELP is used to shape a reflective approach to foreign language teaching/learning throughout the school. This is likely to require an effort of whole-school development similar to the one reported by Kohonen and Kaikkonen (1997).

An alternative response to the two questions with which I began this section is to look for ways of including self-assessment in the final grades awarded to learners. There are two reasons for wanting to do this, one practical and the other theoretical. The practical reason is that learners are likely to take the business of self-assessment all the more seriously if it is an integral part of the overall assessment process. The theoretical reason has to do with the relation between learning and assessment, ownership of the learning process, and the questionable validity of assessment procedures that take no account of subjective experience. According to the traditional view, it is the function of teachers to teach and of learners to learn. Teachers control the learning process because they control the knowledge that it is their role to impart; learners learn by listening to teachers and doing what teachers tell them to do. As soon as reflection is brought into the picture, the stability of this control structure is threatened; for reflection entails learner initiative, and learner initiative implies at least the beginning of learner control. It is worth noting in this regard that projects aimed at developing teacher reflectivity typically lead to greater learner autonomy, even though this may not have been a stated project goal (see, for example, the reports contained in Gierlinger 1999). As we have seen, reflection necessarily entails self-assessment, and as soon as the knowledge and skills developed in formal learning contexts are carried into the wider world, the individual's assessment of his or her capacities is arguably at least as important as any assessment carried out by some authority remote from the learning process. Cowan (1998, p.84) makes this point in relation to his engineering students:

In our negotiations, my students had been clear that they were keen to take responsibility for their learning objectives, for the methods by which they would achieve their objectives, and for the pace of their studies. But they still wanted me to undertake the assessment. I had agreed – but [...] my conscience began to nag me. In less than 24 months' time, I told myself, these students would be engaged in professional work and, to a great extent, would be responsible for their ongoing professional development. This would mean that, if they were to continue to develop, they would have to formatively assess their capabilities, their needs and their achievements. But was it right, I wondered, that the development of the critical ability to be self-assessing people should be postponed until after these students had graduated?

With similar considerations in mind, we have decided that self-assessment must be an integral part of the overall assessment process for the university students who are participating in the Irish ELP pilot project. These students take one or two year-long modules in French or German that do not count towards their final degree result. At the beginning of each module we ask them to assess themselves using the levels and descriptors elaborated in CEF; this enables them to complete the self-assessment grid in the passport component of ELP. We also ask them to set individual learning goals for the year on the basis of their self-assessment. Our French and German modules are organized in a series of project cycles. For each project students are required to produce personal glossaries, written text, and bibliographies; these form the basis for the dossier component of their portfolio. Students use the biography component for ongoing self-assessment in relation to the learning goals they set at the beginning of the year. The biography and dossier together are used as the basis for individual tutorial sessions, and students negotiate a self-assessment mark with their teachers towards the end of their module.

## **5 Self-assessment and education for democratic citizenship**

We must not lose sight of the fact that ELP, like other products of the Council of Europe's modern languages projects, is part of a larger political and educational agenda. Self-assessment may be, as I have argued, an essential tool in the development of reflective foreign language teaching/learning; but the capacity for self-assessment is also central to these larger concerns.

The Council of Europe's current focus on education for democratic citizenship emphasizes the importance of developing the individual's capacity for participation in the democratic process. In principle this is a matter for educational institutions at all levels serving learners of all ages. The underlying aspiration was already present in a paper on adult education prepared for the Council of Europe more than twenty years ago and cited by Henri Holec in his report *Autonomy and Foreign Language Learning*. It described adult education as

an instrument for arousing an increasing sense of awareness and liberation in man, and, in some cases, an instrument for changing the environment itself. From the idea of man "product of his society", one moves to the idea of man "producer of his society". (Janne 1977, cit. Holec 1981, p.1)

The documents issued in connection with the current "Education for Democratic Citizenship" project emphasize that it is not enough merely to teach about the various modes of democratic participation: students at all levels must also have first-hand experience of the participatory process. This is often elaborated to mean that students must share in the government of their institution. For example, Resolution No. 2 in *Education 2000* expresses the conviction "that educational co-operation in Europe can play a determining role in meeting the challenges of respecting common basic values [...] by [...] education for democratic citizenship, not only in the curricula but also through participation in the procedures of everyday school life [...]" (Council of Europe 1997, p.24).

The declared aim of the project "Education for Democratic Citizenship" is "actively to seek new forms of democratic culture and means by which each individual might take part creatively in their reproduction, maintenance and renewal" (Ostini 1998, p.9). The same document recognizes that the success of this enterprise depends on a "switch from the situation of knowing how to do something to that of knowing how to say what we are doing"

(ibid., p.10). In other words, if we make the development of individual autonomy a central aim of the educational process, we must also insist on the central importance of reflection. This in turn carries an implication that, as far as I have been able to discover, is nowhere spelt out in the “Education for Democratic Citizenship” documentation: learners must participate fully in every aspect of the pedagogical process, and not just those parts of the curriculum that are directly concerned with citizenship. It is not necessary to labour the relevance of ELP in its self-assessment dimension to the achievement of this goal.

## 6 Conclusion

The arguments that I have developed in this paper, necessarily in a rather compressed form, carry implications for (i) ELP pilot projects and (ii) the large-scale dissemination of ELP after the pilot phase. As regards (i), we must ask ourselves whether the implementation of self-assessment in our various pilot projects is embedded in an adequately reflective approach to teaching/learning; we must share whatever experience we have of preparing teachers to implement learner self-assessment; and we must ensure that the issue of self-assessment figures centrally in project evaluation. As regards (ii), we need to ask ourselves what measures of teacher preparation will be necessary if ELP is to be adopted on a large scale in the various domains of our respective educational systems; and we need to consider how ELP, with its emphasis on self-assessment, can best be accommodated to assessment by examination in each of those domains. These are questions that should preoccupy us for some time to come; for as I suggested in my introduction, the long-term success of ELP will depend crucially on our answers to them.

## References

Boud, D. (ed.), 1988: *Developing Student Autonomy in Learning*. (Second edition.) London: Kogan Page.

Council of Europe, 1996: *Modern Languages: Learning, Teaching, Assessment. A Common European Framework of Reference*. Draft 2 of a Framework Proposal. Strasbourg (CC-LANG (95) 5 rev. IV).

Council of Europe 1997: *Education 2000: Trends, Common Issues and Priorities for Pan-European Co-operation*. 19<sup>th</sup> Session of the Standing Conference of the European Ministers for Education, Kristiansand (Norway), 22–24 June 1997.

Cowan, J., 1998: *On Becoming an Innovative University Teacher: Reflection in Action*. Buckingham: Society for Research in Higher Education and Open University Press.

Dam, L., 1995: *Learner Autonomy 3: From Theory to Classroom Practice*. Dublin: Authentik.

Dam, L., and D. Little, 1998: Autonomy in foreign language learning: from classroom practice to generalizable theory. Plenary paper given at the annual conference of the Japan Association for Language Teaching, Omiya, 21–23 November.

van Ek, J. A., 1986: *Objectives for Foreign Language Learning. Volume 1: Scope*. Strasbourg: Council of Europe.



Gierlinger, E. (ed.), 1999: *Sharing the European Language Classroom: A Project in International Classroom Action Research*. Linz: Universitätsverlag Rudolf Trauner. (Schriften der Pädagogischen Akademie des Bundes in Oberösterreich 3.)

Holec, H., 1981: *Autonomy and Foreign Language Learning*. Oxford: Pergamon. (First published 1979, Strasbourg: Council of Europe.)

Janne, H., 1977: *Organization, Content and Methods of Adult Education*. Report CCC/EES (77) 3. Strasbourg: Council of Europe.

Kohonen, V., and P. Kaikkonen, 1997: Exploring new ways of inservice teacher education: an action research project. *European Journal of Intercultural Studies* 7.3, pp.42–59.

Little, D., 1991: *Learner Autonomy 1: Definitions, Issues and Problems*. Dublin: Authentik.

NCVQ/SCOTVEC, 1993: *Guide to the National Record of Achievement*. London: NCVQ and Glasgow: SCOTVEC.

Oskarsson, M., 1980: *Approaches to Self-Assessment in Foreign Language Learning*. Oxford: Pergamon. (First published 1978, Strasbourg: Council of Europe.)

Ostini, M., 1998: Education for Democratic Citizenship. General report on the Council of Europe Seminar on “The Basic Concepts and Core Competences”, held in conjunction with the European Union, Strasbourg, 11–12 December 1997 (DECS/CIT (98) 7 def.).