On the pedagogical significance of the European Language Portfolio: findings of the Finnish pilot project

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The paper begins with a description of the development of the European Language Portfolio (ELP) pilot project in Finland as part of a large European ELP development project (1998-2000). The design of the project over the three years is an important process outcome of the project. The findings are then discussed from the perspective of the pedagogical possibilities of the ELP, in terms of a number of categories arising from the qualitative data. The results indicate that the ELP has pedagogical potential and significance for several reasons. The language teachers's professional support and inservice education are suggested as a prerequisite for a successful use and development of the ELP in school.

1. Developing the Finnish ELP project: finding a way

1.1. A note on the European research and development work.

The European Language Portfolio (ELP) is connected with the *Common European Framework* (CEF 2001; *Viitekehys* 2004) as a pedagogical language learning and reporting instrument. As part of the Framework, the general purpose of the ELP is to deepen mutual understanding among citizens in Europe, respecting the diversity of cultures and ways of life. The *pedagogic function* of the ELP emphasises a reflective approach in language learning aimed at fostering self-assessment, student autonomy, learning to learn and plurilingualism and pluriculturalism. The *reporting function* of the ELP adds an important tool for documenting communicative proficiency with regard to the criterion-referenced level descriptors (at levels A, B and C, each having two sub-levels).

To investigate the feasibility, potential and practicality of the European Language Portfolio, the Council of Europe launched and coordinated a pilot project which was conducted in 15 member states (1998-2000), involving a total of some 3000 teachers and 30,000 students at various levels and sectors of schooling, from primaly to adult education. The national/ regional project coordinators had regular meetings (1-2 per year) hosted by the participating member states to monitor the work, support the national projects and to review the progress of the ELP research and development work (Schärer 2000).

1.2. Conducting the Finnish ELP project (1998-2001)

As part of this large research and development project, Finland undertook a national pilot project (1998-2001) in three cities in southern Finland (Tampere, Nokia and Seinäjoki). It was coordinated by the Department of Teacher Education in Tampere University under the joint leadership of Viljo Kohonen and Ulla Pajukanta. The project was carried out in 8 schools (4 lower secondary and 2 upper secondary schools and 2 vocational institutions), with a total of 360 students and 22 language teachers. We decided to extend it over three school years because we wanted the participants to complete the whole cycle of schooling (lower/ upper secondary/ vocational), including the final completion of the ELPs at the end of the three-year cycle.

The aims of the project evolved in the joint discussions at the project seminars during the first project year and comprised the following broad areas of focus (Kohonen 2004):

1. To support self-directed, socially responsible language learning
2. To develop reflective learning and self-assessment and promote learning to learn in foreign language education
3. To develop the pedagogic and reporting functions of the language portfolio as an integrated approach in local school contexts
4. To support negotiated learning and student commitment
5. To examine the possibilities of integrating the language portfolio with the language curricula and learning cultures in school
6. To foster language teachers' professional growth as an essential component of the language portfolio research and development work.

Based on our previous research on site-based curriculum development and collegial teacher collaboration (Kohonen and Kaikkonen 1996; 2001), we emphasised the participating teachers' professional growth in an experiential, reflective learning framework (Kohonen 2001a). The decisions concerning the project implementation were discussed and negotiated together with the participants. For this purpose we established a project planning group consisting of the two coordinators and three teachers representing the schools. The group evaluated the ongoing pilot work regularly in monthly meetings and made the decisions about the programmes for the seminar days.

The seminars and the joint planning work created a spirit of professional sharing and negotiated learning in the project. The seminars had a central element of small group discussions which provided the teachers with opportunities for mutual, interactive learning. The interactive process also encouraged the teachers to experiment with similar techniques in their language classes based on their own experiences of reflective learning.

We developed the concept of *bridging tasks* involving professional reading and/ or class-room piloting on topics discussed and agreed during the seminar day. We invited the teachers to study a great deal of relevant ELP-related professional literature (in duplicated copies for each) and discuss their thoughts in their ELP school teams. The experiences from the schools fed into the group work during the next workshop day. The bridging tasks thus provided continuity between the workshops and gave teachers opportunities to explore their work in the light of the inputs from the seminars and the reading materials.

We also encouraged the teachers to record their experiences, thoughts and insights in personal diaries and collect their worksheet materials for the students, as well as samples of student work, in their project portfolios. Based on such qualitative research and development material, we asked the teachers to submit professional development essays at the end of each school year to report on important experiences and findings of their teaching during the past year. This qualitative material also provided an important source of data for the present project evaluation. In this way reflective, interactive teacher learning gradually became an essential element of our project work. It was aimed at supporting the teachers' professional growth and encouraging them to use reflective learning techniques with their students.

In the course of the project we developed a useful distinction between the *pedagogic and reporting functions of the Dossier* as well, in accordance with the dual function of the ELP. We introduced the Dossier as a regular *pedagogical tool* in classroom work and in homework. We encouraged the students to develop their awareness of themselves as language learners, of the language learning tasks, and of their individual and social learning processes. For this purpose we asked them to reflect on teacher-designed questions and semi-structured statements or to write down brief open-ended reflections in their learning diaries at suitable points. These reflections were often linked with the ongoing language learning tasks and work assignments. The reflections were carried out partly during the lessons and partly as homework. The assignments provided a natural context for reflection on learning and using the language, based on the concrete piece of work at hand, with the process of working on the task still in fresh memory.

The dossier thus had a dual function as a pedagogical and reporting tool. As a *pedagogical instrument*, we used it for task-based language learning involving formative process reflection and evaluation as an essential component. The teachers guided their students' learning processes by negotiating the tasks, deadlines and ways of working. During the process they gave on-line comments and support as necessary. For the students, the dossier functioned as a practical tool to take increasing charge of their language learning by setting aims for their projects, making the action plans and monitoring the ongoing learning process. It also helped them to reflect on their learning, both on their own and in small groups. Further, it encouraged them to comment on each others' learning processes and completed assignments (Kohonen 2001b,d; 2002a; 2004).

At the end of the school year (or the intensive 6-week study periods used in the upper secondary and some lower secondary schools), we used the *reporting function* of the Dossier to facilitate the students to report their language learning for summative evaluation. The teacher guided them to make a selection of their portfolio assignments by collecting

authentic documents of their language learning outcomes, whether written or spoken records (audio tapes and videos). The students evaluated the assignments using the self-assessment sheets designed by the teacher and discussed together in the class.

In this way the teachers guided the students to reflect on the content and the language of the document as well as on their work processes. They could also be asked to suggest a mark for themselves (using the Finnish scale of school evaluation, with criterion-referenced descriptions for the marks) and set further aims for their work. The teacher asked them first to present the assignments to each other in small cooperative groups for peer commenting and peer-assessment. After this process they submitted the dossiers to the teacher for summative evaluation. This dual function of the dossier provided an important *interface between language learning, teaching and assessment.*

In accordance with this emphasis on reflective work on the ELPs we realised that we needed to widen the original term "portfolio assessment" into a broader process-oriented concept. This is how we developed the concept *portfolio-oriented pedagogy* after about a year's project work. We needed this concept to refer to the *negotiated teaching-learning process* whereby the students gradually took increasing charge of their language learning, within the pedagogical learning space and guidance provided by the teacher (Kohonen 2002).

Based on our previous experience on reflective language learning in the project team, we set out to explore the pedagogic function of the ELP in order to integrate it with the site-based language curricula and existing textbooks and other learning materials. Within the theoretical framework of experiential learning assumed in the pilot project, we saw student reflection and interaction as an inherent part of the learning process. Reflection was based on the students' self-understanding as language learners in the individual and social learning processes. Teachers taught the basic concepts of the ELP to the students and repeatedly guided them to reflect on how their understanding progressed over the project years. They also facilitated the students to reflect on their role as socially responsible learners, and how they could become more skilled language learners and language users.

As reflective learning was a new thing to most of the students, we made an effort to teach it as explicitly and as concretely as the familiar language categories and skills. We used student reflection as a tool for learning reflection and becoming a more reflective student. In several of our initial teacher workshops, we spent a great deal of time putting together our understanding and experiences of teaching reflective learning. In small groups the teachers outlined concrete lesson plans for the initial motivation and orientation of the students for reflective learning. The findings were reviewed together and the resulting lesson plan outlines and the pedagogical guidelines were duplicated for all the teachers.

The teachers used the plans in their classes with the necessary modifications as appropriate to their students. In subsequent seminars they shared their experiences with each other, getting new perspectives and ideas to enrich their own experiences. We returned to the question of student motivation and guidance in many workshops during the project.

In the course of the project we consistently emphasised the students' understanding and awareness of their language learning as part of the portfolio-oriented work. Designing options, tutoring the work processes and giving encouragement and explicit comments to

the students was pedagogically quite challenging for the teachers. Collegial on-site support and joint discussions at the project seminars proved very useful for sharing ideas and considering possible ways of dealing with emerging problems of student guidance, motivation and evaluation. We organised these seminars at regular intervals (monthly, with a total of 32 seminars during the three years' time).

As these seminars took place during school days, the local municipalities (Tampere, Nokia and Seinäjoki) undertook the costs of the substitute teachers in the classes. They also gave financial support to the University of Tampere for the costs of the inservice teacher education, contributing also to the expenses of the research and development work. The investment of the municipalities on the ELP project was thus quite substantial.

To introduce the reflective work orientation to the students, we began with the *students themselves* as learners in general and as language learners in particular. Accordingly, the teachers worked first on a *basic reflective orientation* by facilitating their students to reflect on their language learning experiences and beliefs and assumptions of learning, and how they saw their role as language learners. The teachers used simple questions or semi-structured statements to facilitate student reflection. The examples below give an idea of the kind of questions that we developed for student guidance:

- What are your strengths as a student in school?
- What weaknesses (shortcomings) do you have as a student?
- How do you see your role as a language learner?
- What are your expectations for the language teacher?
- What aims do you wish to set for this course (week, etc)?
- What are you going to do to reach your aims?
- What aspects of language learning are easy (difficult) for you?
- How might you improve your work/ your working habits?
- What is a good group member like in our language class? Why?
- How might you improve your participation in your groups?
- How do you understand (intercultural) communication?
- What elements and skills does language learning include?
- What elements do you find easy (difficult) for you? Why?
- What skills are you good at in your language use?
- How can you improve in your language use skills?

As part of the work assignments, the teachers asked the students to reflect on different aspects of their learning processes and what they thought they learned from doing the task. In this way we facilitated the students to become more reflective about themselves and their language learning. During the process they acquired an understanding of their learning and obtained concrete tools for the self-assessment of their language skills as well. Becoming more reflective about oneself as a human being and as a language student gave an easier start for learning to assess the language skills than using the self-assessment grid right away. (Kohonen 1999; 2000a; 2001b,d; 2002a).

Negotiating (part of) the curriculum aims, contents and processes with the students helped them to gradually take more responsibility for their learning. Having options entailed personal choices about how to set the aims and make action plans. The plans specified the frame for the work to be done: agreeing on the deadlines for consulting and returning the

completed assignments, the contents to include in the report, and the expected outcomes, possibly with (minimum) requirements for acceptable work (e.g. in terms of the kind of topics to be dealt with, the quality of the language and the length of the work).

By the end of the project we characterised the ELP-oriented pedagogy by the following properties (Kohonen 2001b,c; 2002a; 2004):

1. Giving students opportunities to introduce themselves in their own personal ways
2. Giving students versatile evidence of the quality of learning and development as learners
3. Doing a number of learning tasks, with an action plan negotiated with the teacher
4. Reflecting on the contents and processes of language learning
5. Involving peer assessments and teacher comments
6. Showing what the student can do with his/ her language skills, in relation to the Council of Europe's proficiency level descriptors

Language learning necessarily involves a number of important affective, social and personal student properties that are educationally valuable learning goals in their own right, not just as means for promoting cognitive aspects of learning (cf. Arnold (ed.) 1999). Students inevitably bring their personal histories (autobiographies) to the language classes. They carry with them their personal beliefs and assumptions of language learning which they have acquired as part of their learning histories in their families and in school. These features evolve, one way or another, in connection with the affective, social and cognitive processes of language learning. They impinge indirectly on the student's observable language performance. Such *invisible learning outcomes* include a number of properties that are essential for the development of language competence and student autonomy (Kohonen 2000a; 2001b,d; 2002a; 2004):

1. Commitment to and ownership of one's language learning
2. Tolerance of ambiguity and uncertainty in communicative situations and learning in general
3. Willingness to take risks in order to cope with communicative tasks
4. Understanding of oneself as a language learner and a language user in terms of the beliefs about language use and one's role as a learner
5. Understanding of one's cultural identity and what it means to become an intercultural person and language user
6. Skills and attitudes for socially responsible learning and language use
7. Plurilingualism, involving a reflective awareness and appreciation of languages and language learning, as well as assuming respect for and appreciation of cultural diversity and otherness
8. Learning skills and strategies necessary for continuous, independent language learning
9. A reflective basic orientation to language learning, with abilities for self-assessment of language skills

The teachers designed pedagogical ways of facilitating their students to notice such aspects of learning as part of their personal and social learning processes. This work was thus aimed at increasing students' awareness of the variety of outcomes connected with their language learning.

To sum up this brief discussion, our ELP journey evolved during the project through the following steps (Kohonen 2002a; 2004):

1. Clarifying the participating teachers' educational orientation, their pedagogical beliefs and assumptions and conceptions of language learning, i.e., how the teachers saw their task and role in the classroom
2. Clarifying the students' views, beliefs and assumptions of themselves as language learners: how they saw their roles and responsibilities in the social classroom context
3. Working towards a supportive environment of negotiated language learning and respect of diversity
4. Working towards reflection on the individual and social learning processes and increasing awareness of different aspects entailed in foreign language learning
5. Guiding the students to undertake a number of portfolio assignments each school year, carried out in the target language, and discussed and evaluated both individually and in groups
6. Learning to use the Council of Europe's self-assessment grid for assessing their language learning. In addition to the task-specific assessment, the students also assessed their communicative skills in more generic terms, with the help of the checklists.

The data of the present study comes from several sources: (1) the teacher's developmental essays at the end of the project, (2) student questionnaires and interviews of a small number of students from five participating schools, (3) discussions and reporting at the intensive project evaluation seminars held in spring 2000 and 2001 (small group reports); (4) teachers' published action research papers in the two project publications (Kohonen and Pajukanta (eds) 2000; 2003); (5) student portfolios, and (6) my own field notes from the seminars during the 3-year project.

I analysed the data to establish the content categories in the qualitative empirical data. The following six categories emerged: (1) the pedagogical weight and significance of the ELP; (2) the language teacher's professional growth; (3) motivation and tutoring of the ELP-oriented student work; (4) integration of the ELP with the curricula; (5) amount of labour; and (6) problems and constraints. I have discussed these categories elsewhere in some detail (Kohonen 2004). In this paper, however, I limit the discussion to the first category of these findings: the *pedagogical weight and significance of the ELP.*

2. On the pedagogical weight and significance of the ELP

The qualitative analysis of the findings showed that the ELP is a potentially powerful tool for promoting student autonomy in foreign language education. This central finding was due to a variety of reasons:

(1) the flexibility of the ELP with regard to language skills;

(2) expanding students' views of language and communication;

(3) increasing students' self-understanding and ownership of learning;

(4) helping students to see the progress of their learning over time;

(5) giving teachers new ways of fostering student learning.

However, there were also clear problems and constraints on these positive findings, posing challenges for the further research and development work of the ELP. I will discuss these findings in the following.

2.1. Flexibility of the ELP with regard to language skills

In our ELP-oriented pedagogy we used a variety of learning tasks and assignments as an important way of engaging students in self-directed learning and fostering their responsibility and learning skills. The teachers found repeatedly that the assignments were usable at all levels of communicative proficiency, from elementary to advanced skills. Students with low proficiency could be guided to make modest modifications to textbook inputs, using the familiar lesson as a basis for more independent ways of using the language. Such tasks included making crossword puzzles to each other, using familiar words and phrases to make simple sentences and come up with small stories of their own, and designing short dramatisations and performing them for the class. Through such modifications they could do something meaningful with their limited language resources.

More proficient students, on the other hand, could operate at linguistically more demanding levels and carry out more extensive communicative tasks on their own, going beyond the textbook lessons. Advanced language users could undertake more comprehensive projects utilising a variety of tools and sources (such as the Internet), making longer and well-articulated reports. They could handle a variety of texts, produce their own discourses, interact more fluently and use authentic texts for their communicative purposes. The students could see that they can do different things with their language depending on the level of their skills, accepting the necessity to be satisfied with modest tasks in their second and third languages while aiming at increasingly better proficiency in their first language.

In mixed-ability groups, the teacher could use this kind of flexibility for differentiation purposes, asking linguistically talented students to tackle more demanding and ambitious tasks and take communicative risks to extend their skills and reach higher standards of language use. They could also provide help to their less able peers in the class. While the linguistically less able students took more modest tasks the teacher could still encourage them to work hard within their language abilities. Taking smaller tasks and working well to achieve the limited aims helped them to get satisfaction and a sense of accomplishment from their work. Rather than the teacher differentiating the tasks for the students, then, she guided them to work at their levels of proficiency and go beyond by taking risks that were realistic for them to cope with.

2.2. Expanding students' views of language and communication

The descriptors and checklists helped students to gradually develop a meta-cognitive understanding of language in terms of the different skills, linguistic forms and strategies of learning and communication. The use of the checklists helped them to get a more detailed map of the language learning tasks. They got new tools for understanding their language learning and saw more possibilities for improving their skills, based on the concrete evidence at hand in their project assignments. In this way they could see the aims of

their language learning in more specific terms than just as the "mark" in the school report. The criterion-referenced descriptions developed by the teachers for the different marks on the Finnish scale (4-10, for lower and upper secondary school) helped them to understand what the marks consist of, in terms of both the language skills and the social and learning skills and strategies.

The students were thus learning the meta-language that was necessary for talking about their learning. This helped them to observe and monitor their work. Learning became more visible to the participants, something that could be reflected upon and talked about in more concrete terms. Gaining a better understanding of the learning task helped students set their aims and evaluate the learning outcomes.

Teaching learning and self-assessment skills means that the teachers were delegating (at least some of) their pedagogical expertise to the students as a long-term process of clarifying what it means to become a more independent language learner and user. Such an understanding also increased student engagement in their learning. However, there was a variety of student opinion at this point, with a number of students considering that reflection was a waste of time. Developing a reflective understanding of language learning was clearly a complex task and a question of time, effort and encouragement. It was also a question of developing a supportive learning atmosphere in the class.

2.3. Increasing self-understanding and ownership of learning

Some assignments engaged the students in thinking about their personal identities in their families and present themselves as persons with their individual histories, views, hobbies, favourites, interests, hopes, plans etc. Sharing such personal aspects of their lives with their peers and the teacher gave them experiences of mutual trust and respect. Some tasks involved topics of local or national culture and history, inviting the students to reflect on themselves as part of the local community and national culture. Reflecting on cultural properties in their national contexts and other countries also helped them to develop intercultural awareness.

To promote more independent work and student engagement in learning, teachers gave their students curriculum-related assignments that were open enough to leave space for real choices, as appropriate with respect to the students' age, learning skills and the level of proficiency in the given language. Seeing options, making choices, reflecting on the processes and outcomes and making new action plans became important components for developing increasingly autonomous learning in our portfolio-oriented pedagogy. Having options and making real choices of their own fostered the students' feelings of ownership of their learning: they were doing their own tasks, rather than those of the textbook.

As noted above, the teachers took up questions concerning the visibility of learning outcomes repeatedly in the classes, facilitating the students to develop a better awareness and understanding of the different perspectives to their language learning processes. Through increased awareness language learning gradually became more transparent and accessible for conscious goal-setting, planning, monitoring and evaluation. Making such invisible elements more concrete was a considerable challenge to the participants, both teachers and students.

Students made their assignments in the target language. Presenting them to the others in small groups created opportunities for communicatively authentic language use: conveying personal meanings (at least to some extent) through the foreign language. The students were also asked to give comments to each other in the groups with respect to both the contents and the language of the assignments. They found it useful to give and receive suggestions and comments on how to improve their work. Seeing different ways of working on the common topics gave students a broader picture of how to carry out the assignments and how to organise and present materials in personal ways. Learning from peers and being responsible their learning promoted feelings of sharing and community.

Peer commenting also raised ethical aspects of what to say and how to say it to the other person, emphasising social responsibility-taking and the respect for diversity. The importance of giving supportive and realistic comments was discussed together in the class as a ground rule for peer-assessment. Working in cooperative groups became gradually an accepted pedagogical arrangement in the classes. The change was considerable for students accustomed to working largely alone (and in pairs) and had little experience of self-assessment and peer-assessment.

2.4. Helping students to see progress of learning over time

As noted above, the teachers guided the students to reflect on their assignments and on their work processes at the end of each school year (or the six-week intensive study periods). Seeing what the others had done helped them to get a broader view of their learning in comparison with their peers' work. This helped them to review their own work and improve it with the help of the peer comments before submitting it to the teacher for evaluation. In the process they could see what progress they had made, both linguistically and in terms of their study skills, and what shortcomings they had in their learning. Based on such observations they could set more explicit short-term aims for their further work with the help of the teacher.

At the end of the pilot project (during the spring term 2001) the teachers guided the students to complete all the *three parts of their ELPs*: the language passport, the language biography and the dossier. They were asked to select a few documents from their learning dossiers (1-2 documents from each of the three years) for the *final reporting dossier*, including their notes on self-assessment. The teachers evaluated the ELPs and gave individual comments to the students.

The process of doing all this was quite time-consuming at the end of the school year, both for the teachers and the students. It showed, however, that the students were able to conduct self-assessment in the language passport and biography sections according to the Council of Europe's self-assessment grid. Their assessments were also in a satisfactory agreement with the teachers' assessments.

The students could notice a great deal of progress in their language skills over the three-years' time in a concrete way, both quantitatively and qualitatively, when comparing their early dossier documents with the recent ones. Linguistically less talented students could also notice progress in their language skills. This observation seemed to have a positive influence on their views of themselves as language learners.

The process was laborious and time-consuming, taking several hours. In lower secondary schools the work was done mainly during the lessons under teacher supervision, while older students did parts of it as homework. Student opinion was again divided. A common opinion among the older students was that while the process was quite demanding it helped them to realise how much they had learned during the three-year cycle of schooling. However, a number of students were frustrated and said that it was tedious and unnecessary work, particularly in the lower secondary school.

2.5. Giving teachers new ways of fostering student learning

The teachers found that portfolio assignments gave them opportunities to get to know their students better as persons with their own home backgrounds, interests, hopes and expectations in life. Such knowledge helped them to motivate and guide the students better and comment on their individual progress on the basis of the concrete evidence. They could thus make their pedagogical decisions of when and how to intervene with regard to the students' individual needs as they perceived them.

The importance of the teacher's support, guidance and concrete feedback for all students came up repeatedly during the project. The students found the consultation moments with the teacher very welcome and appreciated the teacher's specific comments and suggestions. The personal contacts with the students were frequently rewarding experiences for teachers as well ("pearls in the ELP-oriented work", as noted by a teacher). Looking at the assignments over a long period of time gave the teachers positive evidence of the impact of their teaching on student learning. The teacher's personal interest and engagement in the ELP was very important to the students and supported their motivation for the work.

2.6. Problems and constraints

While the students were very positive about the teacher's comments on their individual assignments, the teachers had a persistent problem of the lack of time for thoughtful reading and commenting of students' texts and conducting individual tutoring sessions, particularly in the large classes of the upper secondary school. Tutoring students' portfolios required a great deal of time for designing and guiding the work, negotiating the ground rules and deadlines, answering questions, reading the student documents and giving comments on their work. It also required a new kind of firmness in setting the tone of the work, negotiating the processes and expecting that the students also observed the agreed deadlines. Encountering the students on a more personal basis in an open negotiation was a new experience for many teachers. Teachers also commented on the lack of time in teaching the use of the self-assessment grid and the checklists properly and using them repeatedly in their classes.

The question of time and labour also came up in student comments. While a large number of students found the assignments interesting and challenging, some complained about them being too laborious and time-consuming. Similarly, the amount of reflective work divided their opinions: what was useful for some was stupid for others. Negotiated learning and reflective work were obviously a new culture in the language classes, posing pedagogical challenges for the teachers.

In the lower secondary school, the teachers were facing problems of how to communicate the abstract meta-linguistic concepts in a simple enough "pupil language" and how to motivate pupils who resisted the ELP-oriented work. A number of students did not seem to understand the potential of the ELP for their learning, finding the work "stupid, futile and unnecessary". They were satisfied with their (relatively) dependent and easy role as passive learners, doing what they were told to do. The familiar teacher-directed work seemed better structured and more effective learning for them.

Upper secondary school students had doubts about the ELP-oriented work due to the fear that they would not learn enough accuracy in their language use to pass the matriculation exams successfully in languages. This exam is typically a high-stakes examination since the students' entrance to the universities depends considerably on their grades in the matriculation tests. However, such doubts seemed to be unnecessary as our findings indicated that the portfolio students did, in fact, pass their matriculation exams as well as the students in other groups (with a tendency to do slightly better on the written essay test). However, until such findings were available the teachers had to face their students' doubts, on top of their own feelings of discomfort in the change processes.

In the vocational sector, the small number of teaching hours for languages were felt problematic because of the conflicting demands between the use of the ELP and teaching the necessary vocationally oriented language. Some students also expressed doubts about not learning enough of vocabulary because everything was not controlled by the familiar tests. What seems to be involved in such doubts was again the question of a new learning culture of developing more autonomous language learning.

3. Discussion of the findings

As the above findings indicate, the ELP had significant pedagogical weight for a number of reasons. The teachers found it to be a challenging possibility and a long-awaited tool for promoting more independent student learning – as long as the work is not tied with ready-made recipes, materials and tasks or self-repeating routines. The ELP-oriented approach developed in the project was clearly a *major pedagogical re-orientation* both for the teachers and the students, entailing a shift to negotiated learning supporting student autonomy.

3.1. The ELP as a tool to promote student autonomy

Learning to be reflective about one's language learning is a complex task for anyone who has little experience about learning and little knowledge about language as a linguistic phenomenon. Students faced even greater difficulties in assessing their communicative skills by means of the self-assessment grid, particularly in the lower secondary school. Without the expert knowledge of the teacher, it was only natural for them to be at a loss for the self-assessment of their foreign language skills. For one thing, the descriptors are written in an abstract, fairly technical language which is quite difficult for them to understand. Secondly, they have obvious difficulties in realising what the communicative learning goals mean in practice. It was therefore very difficult for them to assess the degree of their language skills – degree of what? What is the targeted level of language proficiency?

As David Little (1999,3) points out, students have seemingly a hopeless task when asked to assess their linguistic correctness: "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?" How can they understand and evaluate something when they do not know what it is? In view of such problems, student frustration is quite an understandable reaction to the overwhelming task. As teachers we thus need to understand the *paradoxical nature of the task* that we ask our students to undertake. Students need a great deal of specific help, guidance and support to cope with the task gradually.

At early stages of their language learning they have very understandable difficulties in assessing the extent to which they can control the accuracy dimensions (phonology, morphology, syntax) of the target language. However, even young (or beginning) learners are more likely to know what they can *do in the target language.* They are also aware of the general level of proficiency at which they can do it, as David Little points out (1999). The functional "can do" *checklists* (originally developed by the Swiss ELP project) seem therefore a more natural thing to start with. Our experiences show that students found the checklists useful for their understanding of the descriptors in more concrete terms.

Our experience indicates, however, that it is even more advisable to begin with the *students themselves* as learners in general and as language learners in particular. In other words, students can learn a basic reflective orientation in the first place by working on their own experiences, beliefs and assumptions of language and language learning.

Learning to be reflective about oneself as a human being and as a language student seems to be something that many students find a natural thing to do (while again for some students it seems to be quite a difficult orientation). It is helpful to start with simple questions or semi-structured statements designed by the teacher. Once the students realise the purpose of reflection and self-assessment they have crossed the basic motivational threshold for reflective work. In any case, learning a reflective work orientation well is a complex task and always a question of time, motivation, support and explicit guidance. It is also a question of developing a supportive atmosphere of mutual trust and respect in the class. Moreover, it is also a question of the general *culture of learning in school* (Kohonen 2002a).

The ELP combines the quantity and quality of student learning into a pedagogical approach that promotes student autonomy. David Little (1991,4) defines student autonomy essentially as a *"capacity - for detachment, critical reflection, decision-making and independent action".* For autonomy to increase, the student needs to develop a particular kind of psychological relation to the process and the content of learning. Little et al (2002, 9; Little, this volume) suggest three basic principles for developing student autonomy in language classes.

(1) The principle of *learner empowerment* entails that students are brought to an explicit acceptance that they are responsible for their own learning. This means that they need to be taught how to plan, monitor and evaluate their learning. (2) The principle of *learner reflection* suggests that behind such processing abilities is the student's capacity for detachment and reflection on one's own learning processes. This capacity needs to be practiced through reflective work. (3) The principle of *appropriate target language use*

entails that all learning is conducted in and through the target language. Through meaningful target language use students will develop the genuine language user's proficiency in spontaneous communication. The development of autonomy is not just the question of an individual learning process. In an important sense it is also the product of interactive group processes characterised by *learner interdependence*.

It is interesting to note that the present findings are well in line with these three principles of student autonomy. The findings indicate that the ELP-oriented work gave students plenty of opportunities to assume responsibility for their work assignments by setting their aims, making choices about the contents, monitoring the work and evaluating the outcomes. An important part of this process was constituted by their reflection on themselves as language learners, group members and language users in terms of their self-assessment of the learning outcomes. The findings indicate that a large number of students were gradually progressing in taking more responsibility for their learning. Their experiences of assuming responsibility were important insights for them. However, some students clearly preferred more teacher-directed teaching rejecting the whole idea of autonomy.

The variety of student opinion and attitudes to learning is evident in the research findings of a group of researchers at the University of Turku, who distinguish between *three general orientations* to learning (Mäki 2000). They discovered that young learners relate differently to learning tasks and situations which are demanding for them. They propose three basic types of learning orientations: (1) a *task orientation,* (2) an *ego-defensive orientation* and (3) a *socially dependent orientation.* These orientations refer to different ways experiencing difficult learning situations and adopting certain preferences for coping with them. Such means of reacting evolve gradually and can also change in different situations and in the course of time. The orientations thus do not mean that the learner acts in the same way in all the learning situations.

(1) A *task-oriented learner* wants to complete the task or solve the problem and concentrates on the learning task at hand. He or she perceives failures as challenges and is not distracted too much by external circumstances or events. (2) An *ego-defensive learner* is frequently very stressed in learning situations and aims at reducing the feelings of anxiety. He may justify failures in advance (e.g. by telling that he was not able to prepare for an exam because of a headache). He may even refuse to try a task in order to avoid feelings of failure. The psychological stress can also manifest in bodily symptoms such as sweating, heart palpitations, dizziness or ache in the stomach. (3) A *socially dependent learner* is oriented to maintaining the interaction with the teacher or the peers by attempting to please them. He is unable to act independently in task situations and looks for help and acceptance by the teacher (or the peers) to a greater extent than he would actually need.

In terms of these three learning orientations*,* student autonomy refers to the *task-oriented learner.* An autonomous learner is able to concentrate on his or her learning task. The socially dependent orientation becomes an obstacle for thinking independently and assuming responsibility for learning. If the learner is concerned with avoiding the threat of failure or pleasing the teacher, his mind is occupied by the distracting thoughts and sensations. Learning remains less successful than it could be under more favourable inner

conditions. The ego-defensive orientation can restrict learning severely. In the worst case the child can think of nothing but his or her own threats and fears of rejection. (Mäki 2000, 12-13; Kohonen 2001c.)

Fostering student autonomy is thus a question of encouraging the socially responsible and independent task-orientation and providing opportunities for the students to exercise their own decision-making. However, in addition to independent work, the working processes also need to involve a strong element of *interactive work in a group* whereby the students can learn from each other. Autonomy is thus also a phenomenon of social interaction.

In the ELP pilot project social learning was evident when the students presented their individual assignments to the peers in groups and gave and received comments. To involve the students in interactive learning it was necessary to aim at a supportive atmosphere, as noted above. Students found interactive shared learning motivating and helpful.

The interplay of socially mediated intrinsic motivation and the development of student autonomy is emphasised by Ushioda (2003) in her theory of *motivation as a socially mediated process*. She argues that motivation must basically come from within the student and be self-regulated rather than regulated by others. Social-interactive group processes play a crucial role in encouraging the growth of motivation from within. Motivation and autonomy development need to be related to the quality of the interaction between the individual and the social learning setting. Belonging to a group creates a sense of social relatedness that promotes student autonomy. The findings of the ELP project provide evidence of the importance of involving the students as responsible partners in the social learning process.

What needs to be developed more is the role of the target language use in the processes of self-reflection and group discussions as well as in the overall use of the target language in teaching and student guidance. Presenting the assignments in the target language to the peers created opportunities of authentic language use, but more needs to be done to increase the use of the target language as part of the ELP-oriented pedagogy. Clearly the ELP continues to pose important possibilities as well as challenges for developing foreign language education.

3.2. Encountering educational change

Teachers found that working on the ELP with their students changed their views and images of teaching in a fundamental way. Many teachers were asking themselves how they could behave in their classes in a confident way while having inner doubts about the new pedagogy and their professional skills. How to give an impression of being a competent and encouraging teacher while feeling uncertain and at times lost? This *paradox of being an innovative teacher* was causing stress to many teachers. They found it emotionally heavy to work on changing their professional beliefs and assumptions in the middle of the full work load in school. In addition to working on their own processes, innovative teachers also had to face the suspicions and doubts from a number of their colleagues and the students.

Behind such problems is the well-known phenomenon of *change resistance* to major changes in life and work. Changes generally trigger a broad spectrum of feelings. Change resistance is quite understandable because of the conflicting tensions and the uncomfortable feelings associated with it. Educational changes pose feelings of threat to personal security as they imply that some knowledge and skills are becoming obsolete and need to be replaced by something new. The transitional period of change processes often involves feelings of discomfort (and sometimes even anxiety and chaos) because of the uncertainties involved. However, people relate differently to such tensions. What is an anxiety situation for some may be experienced as an energising challenge by some others.

On the other hand, the feelings of progress and increased understanding and professional growth are generally very rewarding and even empowering experiences. An important source of teacher motivation and development was provided by observations and experiences of student progress. There seems to be a cyclic interplay between teacher and student engagement: the teacher's professional conviction and confidence increase student interest and motivation, and a positive student response promotes teacher enthusiasm. Essential in the process is the common understanding between teachers and students based on shared ground rules and negotiated learning. Ushioda and Ridley (2002, 51) make this point succinctly by noting that common understanding came about only "when there was a mutual agreement (negotiation) about the priorities regarding what was to be tackled, when and in what manner".

Change processes require emotional work that consumes mental resources. This is why support and (where possible) a reduced work load are advisable in change processes, to avoid the so-called *innovation overload* in work (Fullan 1997). Moving from a (relatively) teacher-oriented classroom organisation towards a clearly student-centred teaching promoting student autonomy is a major educational change. The ELP-oriented pedagogy is a *paradigmatic shift* from the knowledge transmission model of teaching towards *a transactional, negotiated learning model*. The change requires a complex set of new skills and attitudes. It also entails the development of *a new kind of professional identity*, seeing oneself as a facilitator of student learning and as an intercultural language educator.

The knowledge of change processes in general is also beneficial. It is helpful to know that skill learning often involves feelings of decrease of work skills, doing less well than before, and even a loss of control, until the new emerging skills take over and provide positive experiences. This is what seems to happen in the ELP-oriented pedagogy when the teacher begins to shift pedagogical power and responsibility to the students. Students often misuse their increased liberties quite happily until they are facilitated to understand the purpose of the change, and assume a more responsible stance and self-regulation. For these reasons it is essential that teachers get support over the crucial transition in their professional growth so as not to give up and revert to their former safe practices. Creating pressures without sufficient support is likely to lead to the loss of interest and withdrawal (Kohonen 2000b).

Our experiences indicate strongly that language teachers should not be left alone with the portfolio work. The support needs to be made explicit at the different levels of school administration: the national central administration, the local/ regional educational authori-

ties and the head teacher of the school. Rather than restricting to the foreign languages alone, it is also desirable to link the portfolio work with a *school-wide approach* for promoting socially responsible student learning as a public pedagogical orientation, as far as possible.

Another conclusion from the pilot project is that *major changes should not be rushed through* in the interest of efficient management. The ELP, like any major pedagogical innovation, will take time and require commitment and sustained support*,* both material and professional. Students, teachers and schools need to take their time to *understand the philosophy of student autonomy* and how it can be practised in language classes (Kohonen 2003).

The significance of *collegial collaboration* came up repeatedly in the teacher reports and discussions. The teachers found it very helpful to discuss the theoretical principles and practical ways of organising student work in relation to a given classroom context. When sharing experiences and uncertainties, significant professional learning could develop through mutual interaction, trust and respect. Similarly, sharing the moments of insight and success in the classroom strengthened the spirit of community and professional growth.

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