The *Common European Framework of Reference for Languages*, the European Language Portfolio, and language learning in higher education

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Abstract

This article explains the relevance of the *Common European Framework of Reference for Languages* (CEFR) and the European Language Portfolio (ELP) to language learning in higher education, especially as regards the definition of aims and learning outcomes and the promotion of students’ capacity to manage their own learning. After providing some historical background, the article expounds the CEFR’s action-oriented approach, explores it conceptualisation of progression in language learning and its implications for language teaching, and suggests how it can be applied to the design, implementation and assessment of language learning programmes in higher education. It then introduces the ELP, explains how it can be used in conjunction with the CEFR to support coherent programme delivery while promoting reflective learning and student autonomy, and concludes by considering the role of self-assessment in the university’s assessment framework. The article ends with a cautionary tale.

1 Introduction: some historical background

Twenty years ago, in 1991, an intergovernmental symposium recommended that the Council of Europe should develop ‘a Common European Framework of reference for language learning at all levels’ (Council of Europe 1992: 37) and a European Language Portfolio, which it described as ‘a common instrument allowing individuals who so desire to maintain a record of the different elements of their language learning achievement and experience, formal and informal’ (ibid.: 39). The recommendation proposed that the uses of the Framework would include the planning of language learning programmes, language certification, and self-directed learning (ibid.: 38), and that where appropriate entries in the Portfolio should be ‘situated within the Common Framework’ (ibid.: 40). In 1997 an intergovernmental conference considered the second draft of the Common European Framework (Council of Europe 1996) and a collection of preliminary studies that explored possible forms a European Language Portfolio might take in different educational contexts (Council of Europe 1997). From 1998 to 2000 pilot projects carried these explorations further, and the Framework was revised on the basis of feedback received from member states. In 2001, the European Year of Languages, the *Common European Framework of Reference for Languages* (CEFR) was published in official English and French versions (Council of Europe 2001a,
2001b), and the European Language Portfolio was launched at the first of a series of European seminars (Little 2001).

Since 2001 the CEFR has aroused a great deal of international interest. It now exists in more than thirty languages, not all of them European, and its six levels of language proficiency have been adopted as a common metric by the major language testing organisations in Europe. This was to be expected, since the widely felt need to bring greater transparency and comparability to language certification was one of the chief motivations for developing the CEFR in the first place. On the whole, however, the CEFR has not had the same impact on language examinations in European school systems. Similarly, whereas its descriptive apparatus has been brought to bear on the design of language learning programmes in the private sector, especially under the aegis of EAQUALS (European Association for Quality Language Services; see for example British Council/ EAQUALS 2010), here too its influence has been negligible in the school sector. Although many school curricula now associate intended learning outcomes with the CEFR’s proficiency levels, in most cases there is little evidence of serious engagement with the CEFR itself, far less with its implications for language teaching and learning. Like the CEFR, the European Language Portfolio (ELP) has aroused a great deal of interest in Europe and beyond. Between 2000 and the end of 2010, when validation was replaced by registration, the Council of Europe’s ELP Validation Committee accredited 118 models from 32 countries and 6 INGOs/international consortia. However, adoption and use of the ELP on a large scale has remained elusive and ELP projects have proved difficult to sustain once their first impetus has begun to wane (Stoicheva et al. 2009, Little et al. 2011).

What about the university sector? The European Association for Language Testing and Assessment (EALTA; www.ealta.eu.org), which draws most of its individual members from higher education, was founded partly in response to the challenge posed by the CEFR; and the UNICert scheme, established in 1992 to certify language courses provided by German university language centres, has linked its four levels to the CEFR. Individual researchers, moreover, have undertaken innovative pedagogical projects based on the CEFR’s descriptions of language proficiency (for example, Glover 2011). However, there has been no widespread exploration by universities themselves of the potential relevance of the CEFR to third-level language curricula, teaching, learning and assessment. Of the 118 ELPS validated between 2000 and 2010 only six came from the university sector – four from individual universities and two from international associations (CercleS and the European Language Council). In principle these latter models could be used across the continent, but in practice adoption has been limited to language centres in a relatively small number of universities.

Against this historical background I want to consider what the CEFR and the ELP offer to universities. There are two reasons for doing this. First, the great majority of those engaged in third-level language teaching, whether in language centres or language departments, remain untouched by both instruments. The inaugural issue of a journal
dedicated to language learning in higher education provides an opportunity to explain how the CEFR and the ELP can help universities to meet two key challenges, the specification of learning outcomes and the development of students’ skills of academic self-management. Secondly, because the CEFR has brought new clarity to the world of international language tests, it is here to stay. Third parties are increasingly likely to expect universities to express their students’ language learning achievements in terms of the CEFR levels; and if they do, it will not be enough to assert that graduates, whether language majors or language minors, achieve this or that CEFR level. In a world that attaches great importance to quality assurance, universities will be expected to be able to justify their claims.

The article is divided into two main sections, the first devoted to the CEFR and the second to the ELP. Both sections begin by describing the instrument under consideration before going on to explore its implications for course design, learning, teaching and assessment at university level. The article concludes with a cautionary tale.

2 The Common European Framework of Reference for Languages

2.1 An action-oriented approach

The Council of Europe’s educational projects have always sought to enhance the capacity of the individual citizen to contribute with maximum effectiveness to the democratic process, whether at local, regional, national or international level. The same concern with individual agency is characteristic of the organisation’s language education projects, which since the 1970s have been concerned with the learning and teaching of languages for purposes of communication and exchange: language learning is seen as having the potential to extend the individual’s social, cultural, political, intellectual/academic and vocational/professional range. That is why the CEFR adopts what it calls an ‘action-oriented approach’: ‘it views users and learners of a language primarily as “social agents”, i.e. members of society who have tasks (not exclusively language-related) to accomplish in a given set of circumstances, in a specific environment and within a particular field of action’ (Council of Europe 2001a: 9).

The action-oriented approach leads to a definition of second/foreign language (L2) proficiency in terms of language use:

Language use, embracing language learning, comprises the actions performed by persons who as individuals and as social agents develop a range of competences, both general and in particular communicative language competences. They draw on the competences at their disposal in various contexts under various conditions and under various constraints to engage in language activities involving language processes to produce and/or receive texts in relation to themes in specific domains, activating those strategies which seem most appropriate for carrying out the tasks to be accomplished. The monitoring of
these actions by the participants leads to the reinforcement or modification of their competences. (ibid.; emphasis in original)

In brief, language learning is a variety of language use, and language use entails that we draw on our competences (knowledge, skills and characteristics) in order to engage in communicative activities. Chapter 4 of the CEFR is concerned with dimensions of language use, while Chapter 5 focuses on competences; both chapters contain illustrative scales that between them characterise proficiency at the CEFR’s six levels – A1 and A2 (basic user), B1 and B2 (independent user), C1 and C2 (proficient user).

The next section considers the implications of the CEFR’s approach for the way in which we conceptualise progression in language learning. But first it may be useful to summarise the linguistic and behavioural range of the six levels (these paragraphs are derived from Council of Europe 2001a: 33–36; the phrases in italics are taken from the illustrative scales in Chapters 4 and 5):

- **A1** is the lowest level of generative language use: the point at which learners can interact in a simple way rather than relying purely on words and phrases. They can ask and answer simple questions about themselves, where they live, people they know, and things they have; and they can initiate and respond to simple statements in areas of immediate need or on very familiar topics.

- **A2** is the level at which learners can cope with a basic range of social interaction. They can greet people, ask how they are and react to news; handle very short social exchanges; ask and answer questions about what they do at work and in free time; and discuss what to do, where to go and make arrangements to meet. A2 also includes a simplified cut-down version of the transactional repertoire described in *The Threshold Level* (Council of Europe 1975) for adults living abroad. For example, learners can make simple transactions in shops, post offices or banks; get simple information about travel; ask for basic information, ask and give directions, and buy tickets; and ask for and provide everyday goods and services.

- **B1** is characterised by two features. First, learners are able to maintain interaction and get across what they want to in a range of contexts. For example, they can generally follow the main points of extended discussion around them, provided speech is clearly articulated in standard dialect; give or seek personal views and opinions in an informal discussion with friends; express the main point they want to make comprehensibly; keep going comprehensibly, even though pausing for grammatical and lexical planning and repair is very evident. Secondly, at B1 learners can cope flexibly with problems in everyday life. For example, they can cope with less routine situations on public transport; deal with most situations likely to arise when making travel arrangements through an agent or when actually travelling; and enter unprepared into conversations on familiar topics.
• B2 represents a significant break with the content so far. At the lower end of the band there is a focus on effective argument: account for and sustain opinions in discussion by providing relevant explanations, arguments and comments; explain a viewpoint on a topical issue giving the advantages and disadvantages of various options; construct a chain of reasoned argument. In addition, two new focuses run right through the level. The first is being able to more than hold your own in social discourse, for example: converse naturally, fluently and effectively; and interact with a degree of fluency and spontaneity that makes regular interaction with native speakers quite possible without imposing strain on either party. The second new focus is enhanced language awareness. For example, learners can correct mistakes if they have led to misunderstandings; make a note of ‘favourite mistakes’ and consciously monitor speech for them; and plan what is to be said and the means to say it, considering the effect on the recipient(s).

• C1 is characterised by good access to a broad range of language, which allows fluent, spontaneous communication. The discourse skills characterising B2 continue to be evident, with an emphasis on more fluency. The learner can express him/herself fluently and spontaneously, almost effortlessly; there is little obvious searching for expressions or avoidance strategies; only a conceptually difficult subject can hinder a natural, smooth flow of language.

• C2: This level is not intended to imply native-speaker or near native-speaker competence but to characterise the degree of precision, appropriateness and ease with the target language that typifies the speech of those who have been highly successful learners. They can convey finer shades of meaning precisely by using, with reasonable accuracy, a wide range of modification devices; they have a good command of idiomatic expressions and colloquialisms; and they can backtrack and restructure around a difficulty so smoothly the interlocutor is hardly aware of it.

As this summary should make clear, each of the levels defines a coherent communicative repertoire. A1 may be the first significant milestone on a very long journey, for example, but it also enables the user/learner to perform tasks necessary to physical and social survival. The summary should also make clear that the levels are not fixed points situated at equal intervals on a linear scale, but increasingly broad bands of proficiency: it takes significantly longer to achieve each new level than the one immediately below it.

2.2 The CEFR’s description of progression in language learning

According to the CEFR, language learning is a variety of language use in the sense that proficiency develops from sustained interaction between the learner’s competences and the communicative tasks whose performance requires him or her to use the target language. Progression in learning thus entails the growth of the learner’s competences but also of his or her capacity for language use; in other words, it has a cognitive but also a behavioural dimension.
The CEFR begins its treatment of language use (Chapter 4) by considering the context of communication, which it divides into four domains: personal, public, occupational and educational. Within each domain communicative situations can be described in terms of

- the *locations* in which, and the *times* at which, they occur;
- the *institutions* or *organisations* – the structure and procedures of which control much of what can normally occur;
- the *persons* involved, especially in their relevant social roles in relation to the user/learner;
- the *objects* (animate and inanimate) in the environment;
- the *events* that take place;
- the *operations* performed by the persons involved;
- the *texts* encountered within the situation. (Council of Europe 2001a: 46)

The CEFR goes on to describe the conditions and constraints that shape communication, the user/learner’s mental context, the mental context of his/her interlocutor(s), communication themes, and communicative tasks and purposes. All of this prepares the way for the best-known part of Chapter 4: the treatment of communicative language activities and strategies. The CEFR identifies four modes of communication: production (speaking and writing), reception (listening and reading), interaction (spoken and written), and mediation (translating and interpreting). It provides 31 illustrative scales for different language activities and seven strategy scales. The chapter concludes with an extended discussion of communicative language processes and texts.

The CEFR defines competences as ‘the sum of knowledge, skills and characteristics that allow a person to perform actions’ (Council of Europe 2001a: 9). Chapter 5 distinguishes between general competences and communicative language competences. It identifies four general competences:

- ‘declarative knowledge’, which includes knowledge of the world, sociocultural knowledge and intercultural awareness;
- skills and know-how;
- ‘existential’ competence – ‘selfhood factors connected with [user/learners’] individual personalities, characterised by the attitudes, motivations, values, beliefs, cognitive styles and personality types which contribute to their personal identity’ (Council of Europe 2001a: 105);
- ability to learn, which includes language and communication awareness, general phonetic awareness and skills, study skills and heuristic skills.

Programmes of language learning expect learners to use the general competences that they bring with them, but they also seek to develop those competences further. For example, they usually aim to expand learners’ knowledge of the world specific to the countries or regions where the target language is spoken and to develop their inter-
cultural awareness. They may also set out to develop learners’ ability to manage their own learning.

The CEFR identifies three categories of communicative language competence, for each of which it provides further illustrative scales:

- linguistic competence, sub-divided into lexical, grammatical, semantic, phonological, orthographic, and orthoepic competences;
- sociolinguistic competence – the ability to handle linguistic markers of social relations, politeness conventions, expressions of folk wisdom, differences of register, dialect and accent;
- pragmatic competence, sub-divided into discourse and functional competences.

The growth of L2 proficiency is sometimes represented visually by an inverted pyramid divided horizontally into bands; each band is deeper as well as wider than the band below it in order to reflect increasing linguistic complexity and the greater amount of time needed to master each successive level. The learner’s progress is a matter of gradual ascent through the bands. While such a representation may be appropriate to the CEFR’s competence dimension, it fails to do justice to the behavioural dimension, for two reasons. First, achieving proficiency at (say) level A2 is a matter of developing appropriate communicative language competences but also of mastering a range of communicative language activities. The interaction between these two dimensions might be represented by superimposing a flat and gradually widening spiral on our inverted pyramid. Secondly, however, our behavioural range does not expand in the same way as our communicative language competences. The CEFR’s six levels reflect the L2 learning trajectory characteristic of European educational cultures: language learning for general communicative purposes (A1–B1) provides a basis for the development of more advanced proficiency (B2–C2) that increasingly interacts with academic and vocational/professional use of the target language (descriptors for these latter levels often refer to the user/learner’s field of specialisation). At these higher levels the user/learner is able to scan quickly through long and complex texts, locating relevant details (B2; Council of Europe 2001a: 70), understand in detail a wide range of lengthy, complex texts likely to be encountered in social, professional or academic life (C1; ibid.), and understand and interpret critically virtually all forms of the written language (C2; ibid.: 69). The user/learner is also able to write clear, detailed descriptions on a variety of subjects related to his/her field of interest (B2; ibid.: 62), clear, well-structured expositions of complex subjects, underlining the relevant salient issues (C1; ibid.), and clear, smoothly flowing and fully engrossing stories and descriptions of experience in a style appropriate to the genre adopted (C2; ibid.). In other words, the behavioural dimension of proficiency at the higher CEFR levels is always limited by the individual learner’s academic and/or vocational/professional focus. These descriptors will mean quite different things for students of literary studies on the one hand and legal science on the other. In terms of our visual representation, beyond B1 there is usually a significant narrowing of the spiral; and although it expands again through B2, C1 and C2, the expansion has to do with
understanding more complex texts, engaging in more challenging debates, writing longer and more sophisticated essays, and so on.

The argument of this section may be summarised as follows. The learning trajectory described by the six levels of the CEFR starts with social and physical survival (A1) and moves through a repertoire of routine transactions and social interaction (A2) to the point where the learner can live as a free agent among native speakers of the target language (B1). From B2 onwards proficiency assigns an increasingly central role to reading, writing and more formal uses of language, and its development becomes increasingly difficult to separate from use of the target language for academic and/or vocational/professional purposes.

2.3 Implications of the CEFR for language teaching

It is not the function of the CEFR to ‘promote one particular language teaching methodology, but instead to present options’ (Council of Europe 2001a: 142). Among the options listed is teaching ‘by a combination of presentations, explanations, (drill) exercises and exploitation activities, but with the L1 as the language of classroom management, explanation, etc.’ (ibid.: 143). This approach is the one that characterises language teaching in the great majority of classrooms around the world, which helps to explain why language learning outcomes so often fall short of the aspirations of policy and curricula. There is no doubt that the tasks encapsulated in A1 descriptors can be taught through the learners’ L1 and on the basis of L1 equivalences: Can recognise familiar names, words and very basic phrases on simple notices in the most common everyday situations (ibid.: 70); Can ask and answer simple questions (ibid.: 74); Can indicate time by such phrases as next week, last Friday, in November, three o’clock (ibid.: 81). Similarly, the simple interactions and transactional routines that form the core of A2 can be taught as variable scripts, with the learners’ L1 as the medium of instruction, for example: Can ask for and provide personal information (ibid.: 81); Can ask about things and make simple transactions in shops, post offices or banks (ibid.: 81); Can write short, simple formulaic notes relating to matters in areas of immediate need (ibid.: 83). But B1 already embraces varieties of language activity that can be mastered only on the basis of sustained communicative use of the target language: Can recognise significant points in straightforward newspaper articles on familiar subjects (ibid.: 70); Can catch the main points in TV programmes on familiar topics when the delivery is relatively slow and clear (ibid.: 71); Can enter unprepared into conversation on familiar topics (ibid.: 76); Can write personal letters describing experiences, feelings and events in some detail (ibid.: 83). And as we move up through B2 and C1 to C2, language learning outcomes are increasingly the product of communicative engagement with the target language for academic and professional purposes. No one develops the capacity to interact with a degree of fluency and spontaneity that makes regular interaction, and sustained relations with native speakers quite possible (B2; ibid.: 74), easily follow and contribute to complex interactions between third parties in group discussion even on abstract, complex unfamiliar topics (C1; ibid.: 77), or produce clear, smoothly flowing, complex reports,
articles or essays (C2; ibid.: 62) by sitting in a classroom where the teacher uses the L1 as the language of classroom management and explanation.

This conclusion should be unsurprising: as we have seen, the CEFR’s action-oriented approach defines language learning as a variety of language use. In view of the Council of Europe’s interest in lifelong language learning and its concern to promote the agency of the individual citizen, it is also unsurprising that the authors of the CEFR are in favour of learner autonomy. Noting that learners themselves are ‘the persons ultimately concerned with language acquisition and learning processes’ (Council of Europe 2001a: 141), they point out that ‘relatively few learn proactively, taking initiatives to plan, structure and execute their own learning processes’: most learn ‘reactively, following the instructions and carrying out the activities prescribed for them by teachers and by textbooks’ (ibid.). They also point out that ‘once teaching stops, further learning has to be autonomous’ and argue that autonomous learning ‘can be promoted if “learning to learn” is regarded as an integral part of language learning, so that learners become increasingly aware of the way they learn, the options open to them and the options that best suit them’ (ibid.): ‘Even within the given institutional system they can then be brought increasingly to make choices in respect of objectives, materials and working methods in the light of their own needs, motivations, characteristics and resources’ (ibid.).

The CEFR’s implications for language teaching can be summarised in two propositions: the target language itself should be the main channel of teaching and learning; and the method used should give learners the opportunity to gradually take control of their learning. In this regard it is worth quoting again the last sentence of the CEFR’s summary of its action-oriented approach: ‘The monitoring of these actions by the participants leads to the reinforcement or modification of their competences’ (Council of Europe 2001a: 9). If the target language is the principal channel of proactive learning, this monitoring will be partly involuntary and implicit, partly intentional and explicit. In the former dimension it will help learners to develop a metacognitive capacity in their target language; in the latter dimension it will help them to develop their skills of self-management in learning.

2.4 Implications for the design of university courses and assessment

In some educational traditions degree programmes in foreign languages distinguish between language teaching and the rest of the programme, which is delivered partly or wholly in the students’ L1. Language learning objectives are defined by whatever comprehension, production or translation tasks are used for purposes of assessment. Similarly, language courses for students who are specialising in some other discipline have often been designed and taught with scant regard for communicative needs associated with that discipline. The CEFR presents a clear challenge to such traditions. If more advanced levels of proficiency can be achieved only through sustained target language use, it is clear that a degree programme in a foreign language must be taught
through that language, which in turn means that the gulf between language teaching and other course components must disappear. The same consideration applies to language courses for students of other disciplines.

Applying the CEFR to the design of university language courses and their assessment procedures is essentially a matter of answering five questions. Note, however, that this is a recursive rather than a unidirectional process: each step after the first may raise issues that necessitate a return to previous steps. The five questions are as follows:

1. *What forms of language use does the course in question concern itself with?* In other words, what are the domains in which students must perform, what situations must they be able to cope with, and under what kinds of contextual constraint? Put another way, how should we describe our students as users of the target language? Because the development of proficiency depends on sustained target language use, we must answer this question in terms of the present as well as the future. Presumably we want students taking foreign language degree programmes to become increasingly adept members of the academic community that is defined by whatever their focus of study happens to be. This is a matter of developing skills in the target language that are simultaneously skills, for example, of literary or linguistic, legal or economic analysis. By the same token, we want students of other disciplines to gain access to their discipline in the target language and develop the capacity to apply their language skills to the exercise of their profession once their studies have come to an end.

2. *What level of proficiency in the target language do students bring with them?* It will almost certainly be impossible to answer this question in a simple and straightforward way. Bearing in mind the widespread failure to use the target language itself as the main channel of learning and teaching, many students with school-leaving qualifications in a foreign language will nevertheless struggle to perform A2 tasks with confidence. On the other hand, those who have been more fortunate in their classroom experience and have also been able to spend time interacting spontaneously with native speakers of the target language, may already have achieved B2 in speaking and writing. This variation is likely to apply equally to specialist and non-specialist students. The problem is, of course, that they will mostly have taken the same examination, which is almost certainly not systematically linked to the levels of the CEFR. One way of overcoming this is to require new entrants to perform a series of tasks – listening, reading, speaking and writing – that reflect levels A2, B1 and B2. The results should be sufficiently indicative for our present purposes. Responding to variation in the proficiency levels of freshman students may entail making extra provision for those who have ground to make up (easier in degree programmes than in courses for students of other disciplines). The existence of such variation will necessarily impact on the answer to Question 3.
3. In terms of tasks and CEFR level(s), what is the minimum level of proficiency to be achieved? This question should be answered in relation to course content: What kinds of spoken texts do we want students to understand? What do we want them to be able to read? And what kinds of speaking and writing tasks do we want them to be able to perform? Needless to say, our answer to each of these sub-questions must take account not only of our answer to Question 2 but also of the length of the programme or course in question. If we are designing a curriculum for a three- or four-year degree programme, we shall probably want to allow for progression year by year/semester by semester and module by module. It should be noted that the CEFR allows us to specify different levels for different activities. If we are responsible for a foreign language degree programme, we may want our graduates to be (minimally) C1 in listening and reading; but we may also recognise that B2 in spoken interaction, spoken production and writing constitutes a firm basis for postgraduate study and/or use of the target language for professional purposes. After all, the more our students use the target language, the more proficient they will become. Above all it is essential that minimum targets are achievable. If students of (say) business studies are allowed to take a two-semester module in a language that is new to them, it is unreasonable to expect them to progress beyond A2 in speaking and writing. Indeed, in those circumstances A2 represents a significant achievement.

4. How should we design and deliver our modules? It is now a more or less universal requirement, at least in the English-speaking world, that course modules are based on clearly defined aims and learning outcomes and a detailed description of teaching/learning methods and assessment procedures. If modules are to be associated with one or more CEFR proficiency levels, they should specify (i) the minimum proficiency in listening, reading, spoken interaction, spoken production and writing that students need in order to take the module; (ii) the learning outcomes in terms of CEFR activities and levels; and (iii) the kinds of language use that the module will entail, again in terms of CEFR activities and levels. The module may, of course, involve more than one kind of academic encounter. For example, core content may be delivered in one or more weekly lectures; that content may be explored in regular seminars or tutorials; and additional tutorials may focus on the linguistic challenges posed by the source material and/or the productive tasks that students are required to perform.

5. On the basis of our answers to the previous questions, how are students to be assessed? This implies two further questions: What tasks do we expect students to perform in order to demonstrate both their proficiency in the target language and their mastery of course content? And under what conditions do we expect them to perform those tasks – within a framework of continuous assessment, in an examination, or both? If we wish to associate student success with the CEFR’s proficiency levels, we must take steps to ensure that the assessment tasks sample the full range of the activity and level in question. We must not fall into the trap of
supposing that the ability to perform a single task at a particular level is necessarily evidence of the ability to perform other tasks at the same level. It is worth noting here that the scales of language competence in Chapter 5 of the CEFR can be used to identify rating criteria and design scoring grids for speaking and writing tasks. The design and validation of assessment instruments lies beyond the scope of this article. Readers who wish to explore these issues further are referred to two guides, one on linking exams to the CEFR (Council of Europe 2009) and the other on the design of testing instruments (Council of Europe 2011).

In answering these five questions we have begun to explore the implications of the CEFR’s action-oriented approach for the design and delivery of language programmes and courses in higher education. So far, however, we have not taken account of the CEFR’s concern for the agency of the individual learner. The European Language Portfolio allows us to do just that.
3 The European Language Portfolio

3.1 The ideal of the autonomous learner

The Council of Europe’s earliest modern languages projects were carried out under the aegis of the Committee for Out-of-School Education, which was strongly committed to the principles of learner-centredness and learner autonomy and opposed to formal assessment. This explains two features of the work towards the end of the 1970s: on the one hand the publication of studies on self-assessment (Oskarsson 1978) and learner autonomy (Holec 1979), and on the other the decision not to proceed with the implementation of a unit/credit scheme based on The Threshold Level (Council of Europe 1975; see Trim 1992: 24). The European Language Portfolio (ELP) stands in direct line of descent from this ideology, which is encapsulated in Janne’s (1977: 15) argument that adult education should become ‘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”’. Commitment to individual agency and autonomy is responsible for the idea that learners should be in control of their learning, which in turn explains why self-assessment is the central dynamic that drives ELP use.

The Rüschlikon Symposium’s recommendations envisaged that individuals would use a European Language Portfolio to ‘record their cumulative experience and qualifications in modern languages’ (Council of Europe 1992: 40). However, the ELP Principles and Guidelines indicate that it has a pedagogical as well as a reporting function: the ELP reflects the Council of Europe’s concern with ‘the development of the language learner’ and ‘the development of the capacity for independent learning’ (Council of Europe 2000/2011: 2). And it seems obvious enough that unless the ELP plays a central role in the learning process, learners will have little to report beyond a list of languages learnt, exams taken and qualifications obtained. In any case, if self-assessment is to be reliable it must be firmly embedded in processes of reflective learning. In higher education the pedagogical function of the ELP comes to meet a steadily growing interest in portfolio learning.

3.2 Configuring the ELP for higher education

The ELP has three obligatory components. The language passport allows users to compile a linguistic profile of themselves, record their own assessment of their proficiency in languages other than their mother tongue (against the CEFR’s co-called self-assessment grid; Council of Europe 2001a: 26–27), document their experience of learning and using those languages, and list formal qualifications. The dossier serves two functions like any other learning portfolio: during the course of learning it is a means of organising work in progress, and at the end it is where users collect those pieces of work that best illustrate what they have achieved. The language biography is intended to provide a reflective accompaniment to language learning and thus to
mediate between the language passport and the dossier. It contains pages that encourage users to reflect on various dimensions of language learning and language use and checklists of ‘I can’ descriptors arranged according to the CEFR’s language activities and proficiency levels. The checklists provide a basis for goal setting and self-assessment, and enable users to associate their learning and its outcomes with the CEFR.

Besides supporting the development of learner autonomy the ELP is intended to promote intercultural awareness and plurilingualism, and users are expected to record their proficiency in all the languages they know, whether they learnt them formally, as part of their education, or informally. These requirements remind us of the concern with lifelong learning that underpinned the work of the Committee for Out-of-School Education. The ideal that seems to lie behind the Principles and Guidelines is that of the mature learner whose ELP reflects a lifetime of engagement with languages and cultures other than those he or she was born into. In order to meet the criteria for validation (2000–2010) and registration (from 2011 onwards), every ELP must conform to the Principles and Guidelines, whether it is designed for use in primary schools or universities. It seems a matter of common sense, however, that each ELP should be designed to suit the specific needs of its intended users, whether or not it then qualifies for registration.

In higher education the language passport can serve as a useful supplement to any student’s transcript; indeed, the European Language Passport, which is part of the European Union’s Europass, is an abbreviated version of the ELP’s language passport. The dossier can be configured to suit each course or programme, the essential building bricks being course descriptions (with their reference to CEFR activities and levels), lecture notes, drafts of essays and other exercises, and finished texts. Students following a foreign language degree programme may need to maintain separate dossiers for different aspects of the programme. The language biography should always include ‘I can’ checklists; and following the argument in section 2.3 above, descriptors should be presented in the students’ target language(s). From B1 upwards descriptors refer to increasingly general forms of language activity, which makes it difficult to generate large numbers of descriptors for the higher proficiency levels. Consider the following examples:

- **B2 listening** – *Can follow the essentials of lectures, talks and reports and other forms of academic/professional presentation which are propositionally and linguistically complex* (Council of Europe 2001a: 67)
- **C1 spoken interaction** – *Can argue a formal position convincingly, responding to questions and comments and answering complex lines of counter argument fluently, spontaneously and appropriately* (ibid.: 78)
- **C2 writing** – *Can produce clear, smoothly flowing, complex reports, article or essays which present a case* (ibid.: 62)
In terms of goal setting, module descriptions that include reference to CEFR activities and levels provide a basis for exploring each of these descriptors. For example, in a degree programme that combines a foreign language with business studies, such a procedure provides answers to questions like: What are the predictable features of academic presentations in my discipline, and in what ways are they likely to be propositionally and linguistically complex (B2 listening)? What kinds of formal position should I be able to argue, using what range of linguistic resources, when I am debating with colleagues (C1 spoken interaction)? And what kinds of case should I be able to present in writing, and in what senses should my texts be complex (C2 writing)? This kind of analysis should help students to break the large chunks of learning represented by ‘I can’ descriptors into more manageable tasks and sub-tasks associated with particular modules of learning. Proceeding in this way also facilitates the process of self-assessment, making it possible to track one’s progress towards a major learning goal.

In addition to checklists the language biography should also contain pages that stimulate and structure reflection on the language learning process, especially the general growth of proficiency on the basis of specific, discipline-related language use. Other pages may be designed to encourage reflection on cultural similarities and differences; and it may be worth introducing a simple ‘learning journal’ page that students can use many times over to keep a reflective chronological record of their learning – in the target language.

Higher education’s growing interest in portfolio learning has been further stimulated by the introduction of electronic portfolios and the growing tendency to deliver information about courses and receive students’ written work via the university’s intranet. Three of the six validated ELPs submitted by universities are electronic models and several more have been implemented without validation. However, converting an instrument that was conceived for pencil-and-paper use into an equivalent digital form is by no means easy or straightforward. In any case, it may be self-defeating to move the ELP process in its entirety to a digital platform because even if they learn about course requirements, receive module outlines and submit their written work electronically, it is unlikely that students will stop using pens and paper. For this reason it seems sensible to experiment with mixed forms of the ELP, partly electronic and partly pencil-and-paper.

### 3.3 Using the ELP: portfolio learning

The pedagogical exploitation of the ELP is a matter of process rather than product. If a language degree programme or subsidiary language course is structured and taught in the way described in section 2, we must assume that all staff are committed to the CEFR’s ideological implications, which include learner autonomy, reflective learning, self-assessment – and the ELP. And if the ELP is to be the learning tool that binds together different modules and gives them collective coherence, it follows that those using it should share the same approach. Suppose that modules are typically structured
in the way outlined in section 2.4: core content is delivered in one or more weekly lectures; that content is explored in a weekly seminar; and a weekly tutorial focuses on the linguistic challenges posed by the source material and/or the productive tasks that students are required to perform. The module outline and programme will form the basis for each student’s dossier, which will also contain lecture notes, hand-outs, drafts of seminar tasks, drafts of module requirements (for example, an essay to be handed in at the end of the semester). The language biography can then serve as the basis for the weekly tutorial, where issues in language learning can be explored in relation to the material students have in their dossiers on the one hand and the language biography on the other.

3.4 A new assessment culture?

As we have seen, the self-assessment that plays a central role in the ELP derives from the learner-centred ideology that underpinned the Council of Europe’s work in adult education in the 1970s. According to that ideology learners should have a say in what they learn, how they learn it, and how learning outcomes are assessed (cf. Richterich 1992). Learners participating in the ELP pilot projects (1998–2000) enjoyed assessing themselves, but they soon began to ask what use would be made of their self-assessment and what relation it would bear to official exams (Schärer 2000: 10). Between them the CEFR and the ELP imply that we need a new assessment culture: one in which self-assessment and the evidence that supports it are accommodated within the same framework as continuous assessment and terminal exams. This seems especially true of higher education. John Cowan, a professor of engineering, has described in detail how he taught university students according to principles of reflection and self-management closely similar to those implied by the present argument. His students were keen to take responsibility for their learning objectives and the method by which they sought to achieve them, but they still expected him to assess them. He continues:

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? (Cowan 1998: 84)

In other words, the ability to assess oneself is an important educational goal in its own right. If the proposal to include evidence-based self-assessment in the larger framework of university assessment seems revolutionary, that may simply reflect the extent to which universities have traditionally failed to promote reflective learning in which students’ individual goal setting and self-assessment play a central role.
4 Conclusion: a cautionary tale

The UK’s Quality Assurance Agency for Higher Education exists to assure standards and improve quality. In 2007 the Agency published a ‘subject benchmark statement’ for languages and related studies. Benchmark statements are intended ‘to make explicit, to the subject community and other stakeholders, the academic qualities and competences that could be expected of graduates’ (QAA 2007: iv); among their functions is to inform ‘prospective students and employers, seeking information about the nature and standards of awards in a given subject or subject area’ (QAA 2007: ii). The benchmarks statement for languages and related studies explains that ‘undergraduate study of languages is concerned with the acquisition and development of competence in one or more foreign languages and the analysis and understanding of another culture, or cultures, in the broadest sense possible through the medium of the target language(s) concerned’ (ibid.: 2). It immediately adds, however: ‘This does not imply that all instruction is necessarily delivered in the target language’ (ibid.).

The document defines standards of achievement ‘intended to apply principally to those degree programmes in which the study of one or more languages comprises at least one-third of the total study load; is undertaken consecutively in all years of the programme; [and] is recognised in the name of the award’ (ibid.: 14). In the QAA’s terminology ‘threshold standards’ are the standards of achievement expected for the award of a degree with honours, while ‘typical standards’ are those ‘normally achieved by the majority of students’ (ibid.: 15). The benchmarks statement for languages and related studies defines the threshold standard as C1 and the typical standard as C2. In other words, it claims that all graduates of degree programmes in which one or more foreign languages constitute at least a third of the programme content, achieve C1 in their target language(s) and most graduates of such programmes achieve C2. This is a dangerous claim. Bearing in mind that instruction is not necessarily delivered in the target language(s), the claim lacks face validity in terms of the argument developed in section 2 of this article; and it is a matter of general assertion rather than empirical exploration.

These considerations prompt two final thoughts. First, what happens if a prospective student reads this claim, enrolls for one of the degree programmes to which it applies, is awarded a degree, is subsequently required to take an independent test in his target language to confirm his C2 proficiency, and fails? Would he not be entitled to sue his university? Secondly, to inflate the status of a programme of study by setting impossibly high requirements, but then to conceal that fact by passing large numbers of students who fail to meet those requirements is a form of corruption.

References


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