

Piloting the European Language Portfolio in the Higher Education Sector: An ELC/CEL transnational project

[Table of contents](#)
[en français](#)

Brigitte Forster Vosicki

Université de Lausanne, CH

The European Language Portfolio (ELP) The European Language Portfolio, created with the support of the Council of Europe (CoE), is an instrument that facilitates the recording, planning and validation of lifelong language learning both within and beyond the educational context. It exists in several national versions and for diverse age groups.

However, each version of the ELP must be closely linked to the six levels of competence of the "Common European Framework of Reference". These are valid all over Europe and ensure that the evaluation of language achievement is easily comparable on a transnational level.

An ELP must consist of three parts:

1. A passport recording formal qualifications in a manner recognised throughout Europe
2. A language biography describing language knowledge and learning and cultural experiences
3. A dossier in which learners' own work can be included.

It has two functions:

1. Pedagogic: it is a productive and practical tool that gives the learner responsibility for structured self-assessment, fixing objectives and planning future learning. It can contribute to increasing motivation and to improving the quality of language learning and teaching.
2. Reporting: it enables other people (an employer, teacher, etc.) to be informed in a clear, transparent and comparable way of all the language knowledge and intercultural experiences of a learner. It also validates language learning.

The Council of Europe intends to launch the ELP in all sectors of the educational system in the year 2001, the European Year of Languages.

Transnational European Language Council project: history

In July 1997 the Council of Europe approached the European Language Council with a view to exploring possibilities for co-operation, particularly with regard to including the higher education sector in the pilot phase of the European Language Portfolio. It had in fact been established that certain aspects are specific to higher education, and differ from those relating to secondary education or to further education for adults. The ELC agreed to set up a transnational project within its framework in order to test the European Language Portfolio.

Dr. Wolfgang Mackiewicz, President of the ELC/CEL, initiated the project and set up the ELC working group "Piloting the European Language Portfolio in the Higher Education Sector in Europe".

The ELC project forms part of a wider project "A European Language Portfolio - Pilot Phase 1998-2000" which is co-ordinated by the Modern Languages Section of the CoE. In all it comprises 20 national and transnational pilot projects which have been carried out in 14 European countries and which concern all sectors of education - primary, secondary, higher, as well as further education for adults.

Within this framework the primary objective of the transnational ELC project was to establish whether the Portfolio is a valid tool for learning and teaching languages in the specific context of higher education.

Scope of the project

- *Total number of institutions involved:* 11 (Freie Universität Berlin/DE, Universität Bremen/DE, Universität Potsdam/DE, University of Ulster at Coleraine/UK, Universitetet i Oslo/NO, Université de Caen/FR, Université de Lausanne/CH, Université de Genève/CH, Aston University/UK, Universiteit Gent/BE, Copenhagen Business College/DK, Jyväskylän yliopisto/FI).
- *Types of study programmes involved:* language courses for students of other disciplines as well as degree courses and extra-curricular courses, philological language and teacher training courses.
- *Total number of learners involved:* during the academic year 1999-2000 approximately 1000 students were introduced to and worked with all or part of the ELP.
- *Total number of classes involved:* approximately 40, plus independent learners (age: 18 plus).
- *Total number of teachers involved:* approximately 40.
- *Target languages:* English, German, French, Spanish, Italian, Russian, Polish and Czech.
- *Models used:* The Swiss version of the Portfolio, in English, German and French, was used in almost all universities.

The ELC piloting started in October 1999 and lasted until early summer 2000.

Key objectives of the project

- A. To establish whether the ELP is a valid tool in higher education language studies from the point of view of clarity, comprehension, relevance and reliability as perceived by the students.
- B. To assess its effectiveness in:
 - raising students' level of reflection on language learning
 - developing sensitivity toward other cultures
 - enhancing multilingualism
 - increasing transparency and coherence concerning the whole learning process.
- C. To assess whether the ELPs used in the piloting are sufficiently complete to cover domains specific to higher education such as: LSP (languages for special purposes), LAP (languages for academic purposes), LPP (languages for professional purposes), as well as translation and interpretation.
- D. To evaluate the effect of the ELP on independent learning, guided autonomy or tandem learning: during the stage of initial self-assessment; as an aid in planning the learning process; as a source of motivation for the student.
- E. To test its value as a tool used during teacher training for raising awareness as to what is involved in language learning and teaching.
- F. To establish whether the existing documents (attestations, etc.) cover the needs of language learners and students working in a foreign language in the context of higher education.

Results and conclusions

The results of the pilot phase indicate that both teachers and students reacted positively to the ELP. As far as teachers are concerned, the whole of the ELP, especially its pedagogical role, was favourably received, whereas student reactions were much more mitigated, but the experience was on the whole an enriching one for most of the participants involved. The concept was perceived as being

innovative, useful and interesting, and there is little doubt that it is applicable to domains specific to higher education, such as specialised languages, languages for academic or professional purposes, language teaching in the context of philological studies, independent language learning, and in teacher training, even though improvement of the ELP prior to using it in higher education is necessary.

This new tool has great potential for encouraging a new approach to teaching and learning, for example, by emphasising the importance of independent learning, by taking account of invisible factors which influence language learning, by making use of formative evaluation during the whole study period, or by including Portfolio work as a complement to formal examination-based certification.

One of its most attractive features, in the context of higher education, is that the Portfolio provides a standardised description of language levels and skills, based on the Common European Framework of Reference, which is valid throughout all of Europe. It is precisely this type of global reference system which is at present lacking in institutions of higher education, where it is difficult to ascertain students' real language levels, since these are ill-defined in vague terms with no accurate description of the content of the courses followed or levels of examinations passed, all of which precludes any comparison from one country to another.

From this point of view, the ELP could assume the role of a quality assurance tool with respect to language teaching in higher education, precisely because it concentrates on greater transparency concerning the content of courses, objectives set, and teaching methods employed. It would thus constitute a common base for all those involved in the processes of learning, teaching and evaluation.

A further advantage of the ELP is that, for any language, it enables an evaluation to be carried out in terms that are clear, comprehensible, non-prescriptive and transnational, and that fully embrace the wide diversity of approaches to language teaching and learning as well as the multiplicity of evaluations which exist in Europe. In this sense it has much in common with the ECTS (European Credit Transfer System) which enables students, for example, to move from one system of evaluation to another, but which in no way supersedes local testing systems.

The "Reporting function" of the ELP also has an important role to play in the university context, particularly with regard to admission examinations, participation in mobility programmes, entry into postgraduate studies, recognition of studies carried out in foreign universities, or of other types of language experience including visits abroad or professional placements in foreign countries.

The entire report is available in French and English at the ELC homepage, <http://www.fu-berlin.de/elc>.