

## LEARNER DEVELOPMENT

# A frame for learning 3

In her final article on the European Language Portfolio, **Annie McDonald** examines the Passport and looks to the future.

In the previous two issues of *ETp* we saw how the Biography and the Dossier, two of the three documents which comprise a European Language Portfolio (ELP), help language learning. The Biography gets learners more involved in the learning process through activities which provide the opportunity for reflection on learning and intercultural experiences, and the holder can self-assess and chart progress in relation to learning objectives. The Dossier, essentially a file, is the place to document and make visible learning experiences noted in the Biography. It offers the holder the opportunity to store materials which illustrate achievements and experiences.

In this article, we'll take a look at the third section of an ELP, the Passport, showing how it draws on the information contained in the Biography and Dossier to present a comprehensive, formal and permanent summary of language learning achievements. The utility of a language passport is more evident when used by learners aged 16+ because they will want to inform others about language proficiency and experiences in a detailed and internationally comparable manner when they are moving to a higher learning level or seeking employment at home or abroad. For this reason I will refer mainly to versions for older users. Finally, we'll consider very briefly the challenges ahead.

## Reviewing the context

The ELP stems from the work of the Council of Europe (CoE) and the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages: Learning, Teaching, Assessment, or CEF for

short. It was developed and piloted by the CoE over three years and officially recognised (or validated) ELPs are authorised to use the CoE symbol and given numerical codes. The CoE is a pan-European organisation, founded in 1949. It generally promotes languages as part of its political aims based on democracy, human rights, social cohesion and cultural diversity. The CEF is a descriptive and comprehensive framework for looking at language learning, teaching and assessment possibilities. It divides learner language levels into six, namely A1 and A2 (basic), B1 and B2 (intermediate) and C1 and C2 (advanced), and these can be used for all languages.

## Describing the Passport

As with the other components of the ELP, all versions of a Passport are age-appropriate in design. Younger learners might have little more than a title page to decorate and maybe space for a photograph. Passports for older learners will contain increasingly detailed and cross-referenced language learning records. As with the Biography and Dossier, information is accumulated and transferred from one ELP version to another. Although the Passport is to be updated regularly, it is unlikely to be used as frequently as the Biography or Dossier. The holder will transfer information from the other documents, either at regular intervals or as and when significant progress has been made.

Like normal passports, the language learners' passports identify who and what they are as they move from place to place, between institutions and across borders. A CoE-validated Passport for adult language learners generally takes the form of a small booklet, usually in the mother tongue of the holder and one other of the official European languages. It includes a brief description of the Council of Europe, various formatted pages, and information on how more versions of the pages can be accessed. The formatted pages are designed for information to be recorded incrementally and there are guidelines to help the user.

There are sections for self-assessment, teacher assessment and assessment by educational institutions and examining boards. The Passport is intended to be a reliable and

transparent document. All language skills, certificates and diplomas are to be described in terms of the six CEF levels, the common criteria by which holders describe attainment. Assessment is supported by statements providing information on what basis, when and by whom any assessment was carried out.

There are three main parts of the Passport:

- A profile of language skills. There are a total of six grids, each for a different language and reflecting the aims of the CoE in relation to competent pluri-lingual citizens.
- A resumé of language learning and intercultural experiences, again with charts to be completed for different languages. This also profiles intercultural competence, an expressed concern of the CoE.
- A record of certificates and diplomas.

## The three main sections

### 1 Profile of language skills

The grids have five rows and six columns (one for each CEF level) and boxes are to be shaded as progress is made. There is a Self-assessment Grid, which provides a short description of CEF levels for each skill. The language skills are divided into listening, reading, spoken interaction, spoken production and writing. The division of the speaking skill into spoken production and spoken interaction mirrors the division of the skill running through the CEF and followed through in the 'Can do' checklists for use with the Biography.

Holders use the summary descriptions of levels and skills in the Self-assessment Grid, and are advised to use the checklists in the Biography for guidance. The description of levels in the Self-assessment Grid is of a very general nature, whereas the Biography 'Can do' statements (or checklists) are more concrete descriptions which could also have been used by learners to tick off what has been learnt while following a course.

With a row of six boxes for each sub-skill, the design of the grid facilitates the recording of what is referred to as 'partial competence'. Holders can record competence at one level, say, in listening and another in reading. Such an option demonstrates the general flexibility of the ELP in

relation to the needs of the holder, and its adaptability especially for learners in an LSP context. A trainee air traffic controller, for example, rarely (if ever) has to produce complex written texts, so, if the ELP is being used to record ability in professionally appropriate skills, holders can simply omit irrelevant skill sections of the profile if they choose to do so.

Although the profile of language skills is based on self-assessment, when coupled with the other sections of the Passport we can see how it provides a reliable summary of language competence. Information provided in the profile can be complemented by a record of certificates and diplomas in the third part of the Passport. Customary certificates can be stored, along with selected work, in the Dossier.

*Assessment is supported by statements providing information on what basis any assessment was carried out*

### 2 Resumé of language learning and intercultural experiences

There are two sub-sections, summarising information of a more detailed nature previously recorded in the Biography. They are updated in the Passport as the holder adds significantly to their experiences and include space for extra relevant information. The first section concerns language learning and use in the country or region where the language being learnt is *not* spoken. The kinds of experiences to be recorded are:

- In primary, secondary/vocational education
- In higher education
- In adult courses
- In other courses
- Regular use in the work place
- Regular contact with speakers of the language

There are six columns, again each for a different language, and learners record their experiences in terms of duration: up to one year, up to three years, up to five years and over five years.

The second section, which takes the same format, is related to learning and intercultural experiences where the language being learnt *is* spoken. The following information is recorded, this time in terms of months:

- Stays in a region where the language is spoken
- Attending a language school
- Using the language for study and training
- Using the language at work

For both sections, there are Attestation Sheets in some versions of the Passport. These require official stamps and signatures, thus providing verification for some of the experiences listed in this part of the Passport. In the ALTE/EAQUALS version (model 6.2000), holders can also chart language courses at language schools which are members of EAQUALS (the European Association for Quality Language Services).

### 3 Record of certificates and diplomas

This is a chart on which the holder lists language qualifications, records the level (again on the CEF scale) and notes the awarding examination body and the date the qualification was obtained. It can be used for all language certificates and diplomas, including school examinations and diplomas.

In the ALTE/EAQUALS version (6.2000), there is a separate chart for holders to record language qualifications referred to in the ALTE Framework (the Association of Language Testers in Europe). These are examinations which have been placed on the ALTE Framework, itself calibrated directly against the CEF scale. For example, language examinations of English which have been recognised by ALTE are those administered by Cambridge ESOL:

- Starters and Movers (young learners examinations) at A1
- Flyers (for young learners) and the Key English Test (KET) at A2
- the Preliminary English Test (PET) at B1

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- First Certificate in English (FCE) at B2
- Certificate in Advanced English (CAE) at C1
- Certificate of Proficiency in English (CPE) at C2.

At the time of writing, there are more than 60 examinations in 15 languages placed on the ALTE Framework. There are also various examinations in eight other languages in the course of being placed.

The 1.2000 version of the Passport provides an Examination Description Form. For example, if a university has a language component in a degree subject, it can provide a fuller and official description of that component. In some versions there are forms which give institutions awarding certificates the opportunity to provide information on test-specification, design, administration, marking and so on, along with how further information on the tests might be accessed. This facilitates national and international transparency of in-house qualifications, for example, of school or language academy examinations. Examination providers can refer to the CoE guidelines for language examining and test development, accessible through the CoE website.

## Future challenges

In these three articles, I have skimmed the surface of the European Language Portfolio, aiming to give a brief summary of the key elements of the Passport, Biography and Dossier, and to show how they dovetail to make a document to aid foreign language learning and teaching. Moreover, I have also attempted to highlight how the ELP is a tool for the realisation of the aims of the CoE.

In keeping with the non-dogmatic nature of the CoE, implementation of the ELP is purely voluntary. The growing number of officially validated portfolios (mainly developed by ministries of education to suit

particular national systems), highlights the perceived value of the ELP and suggest that it likely to become a part of our language teaching environments in the future, if it hasn't already done so.


The challenges are certainly daunting, and with the pressures of work, overcrowded syllabuses and maybe large classes, it's just possible that we might be tempted to reject the ELP. It is, perhaps, difficult to imagine how a learner new to this way of describing competence might be able to use such documentation. However, over time and with general portfolio work incorporated into learning programmes, with teacher-supervised use of the 'Can dos' and with 'CEF-friendly' coursebook materials which are starting to emerge, learners will become tuned in to using this documentation.

My own experiences suggest that university students can indeed see the multiple benefits of keeping a Language Portfolio. It is becoming clear from tutorial conversations that over 80 per cent of my group see that having and maintaining a record of learning:

- provides them with the opportunity to have something which they can show to others to demonstrate their language competence
- gives them a place to add work and further language experiences either in official courses or pursued of their own accord
- gives them something to refer to if they plan to learn another language in the future, in a class or when they go off to a different language environment, either on holiday or as part of an official exchange programme
- generates greater interest in cultural diversity
- gives them a feel for what it is to be a responsible citizen in an ever-expanding global community which is placing increasing demands on individuals to be able to communicate successfully across cultures
- makes them feel good about what they've achieved so far

to name just a few benefits. As the end of the course approaches, it looks as if the 20 per cent who haven't shown much interest are starting to look over their shoulders, and don't want to miss out on what the others have got.



The Council of Europe has placed foreign language teaching and learning at the heart of educational programmes by highlighting how language skills are necessary for responsible and global citizenship. Our challenge, as teachers, is to find out about existing ELPs. We need to consider the benefits of what the European Language Portfolio has to offer and decide whether or not to embrace it. 

**ALTE:** The Association of Language Testers in Europe – an association of providers of European foreign language examinations [www.alte.org](http://www.alte.org)

**EQUALS:** The European Association for Quality Language Services – a pan-European association of institutions providing language courses [www.equals.org](http://www.equals.org)

The Common European Framework of Reference for Languages: learning, teaching, assessment, The Council of Europe, 2001, Cambridge University Press [www.cambridge.org](http://www.cambridge.org)

The Council of Europe – Supporting documents [www.coe.int](http://www.coe.int) for:

- Manual for relating language examinations to the Common European Framework of References for Languages
- Language examining and test development

The Council of Europe – Portfolios [www.culture2.coe.int/portfolio](http://www.culture2.coe.int/portfolio) for:

- European Language Portfolio: Guide for Developers by Günther Schneider and Peter Lenz
- The European Language Portfolio: A guide for teachers and teacher trainers by David Little and Radka Perčlová
- Principles and Guidelines/Rules on accreditation of ELP models
- The European Language Portfolio in Use: Nine examples Ed. David Little
- Final Report – A European Language Portfolio: Pilot Project Phase 1998–2000 by Rolf Schärer



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