

Title of example of practice: The ELP (European Language Portfolio) in HE language courses and programmes

Author

(i.e. details of LanQua partner submitting example of practice):

Name: Alessandra Corda, Vintra Puke
 LanQua sub project: Learning languages
 Institution: Leiden University (Holland), Public Service Language Centre (PSLC) & Liepaja University(Latvia)
 Tel: +31-71-5272139; +371 27212251
 Email: acorda@iclon.leidenuniv.nl; vintravmcl@apollo.lv

Contact details for example of practice:

Name: Vintra Puke
 Tel: +371 29153782
 Email: vintravmcl@apollo.lv
 Website: www.vmc.lv

Institution and initiating department/faculty

(i.e. where example of practice takes/took place):

Hanze Hogeschool Groningen (Netherlands); PSLC and Liepaja University (Latvia)

Departments/faculties in which initiative implemented/to be implemented:

International Business and Languages Department (IBL) at Hanze Hogeschool Groningen, Netherlands;
 Tourism Management, Business Management and Environmental Studies Department at Liepaja University, Latvia

Abstract

(QA question: What are/were you trying to do?)

In this case study we describe the implementation of the ELP in the curriculum of two HE institutions, in the Netherlands and in Latvia. The disciplines involved are Business, Tourism and Environmental Studies.

The ELP is related to important developments in the area of education and training: the development of competence-based systems, the definition of common (nation-wide) curricular and academic standards, the move towards portfolio-based approaches to learning and assessment, the internationalisation of higher education.

In the institutions involved, the curriculum is competence-based and students are required to spend a period abroad, in which they improve their language competence together with professional skills.

Therefore, there was a need for a tool that could

- Help students monitoring the development of their language competence;
- Reflect students' achievements in language learning and their progress.

In both institutions, the CEFR had previously been adopted as quality instrument: the curriculum objectives and final qualifications had been linked the CEFR-levels. There was therefore also a need for instruments that could help ensure quality in relating tasks and students products to the CEFR-levels of competence.

Background – contextual issues giving rise to the initiative

(QA questions: Why are/were you trying to do it? / What are/were the aims and objectives?)

The common objective of the two initiatives was making the language curricula more competence oriented and offer students a tool for reflection and self-assessment, so that they could become more autonomous language learners. With the ELP, students are stimulated to monitor the development of all language skills; they also realize that language skills development does not necessarily happen at the same pace for all language skills (a quote from a student – “I even couldn’t imagine that my writing skills are so bad, for I thought they were more or less the same as my speaking skills”). Depending on the curriculum objectives, it becomes clearer which skills students need to focus on.

A secondary aim – and at the same time a requirement for the success of the initiative – was familiarizing teaching staff with CEFR and ELP.

In both institutions, a validated version of the ELP was introduced in the language curriculum. Developing an ELP version was therefore not an aim of these projects: however, the teachers involved had previously played a role in the development of the ELP. In NL, an electronic web-based version (result of a national project, funded by the Ministry of Education) was implemented. In LV only a paper version is being used, which is more expensive financially due to photocopying.

IBL in Groningen (NL) and Liepāja University (LV) have a competence-based educational philosophy. Students have to reach different competence levels for professional (marketing, business) and languages skills. These competence levels have been defined and described, so that students know what they are expected to know and be able to do at the end of the year. The CEFR and the ELP easily fit in this educational concept and can help enhance quality.

Description of activity or initiative

(QA question: How is/was the activity/initiative implemented?)

In both institutions, first a small group of language teachers was trained in the use of the CEFR and ELP, and then a long piloting phase followed. The CEFR and ELP were introduced very gradually. In NL the pilot started in 2004: first the CEFR was introduced, then the ELP (but only in one year). All IBL studies in the Netherlands agreed in 2007 about exit levels (related to the CEFR). Since 2009-2010, the ELP is used in all years of the programme.

In LV at Liepāja University the ELP was introduced in 2005 as a piloting project only in the Tourism Department. A year later it was also introduced in the Business and Environment Departments due to the participation in the European projects ELPNet and ActiveELP. The hardest work was to convince the teachers about the ELP benefits, for their argument is that we have regular progress tests which show the level of the language competence. However, the local progress tests do not show the “global” assessment. Currently there are about 5 teachers who carry on the work with the ELP, but others are doing their own thing.

In NL, the ELP is used from time to time, usually at the begin and at the end of the year. For instance, third year students go abroad for six months and are asked to use the ELP for self-assessment before and after this period abroad. The web-based version of the ELP allows the students to make the language portfolio (both products and self-assessment through can-do statements) available to the teacher, who can add feedback. In this way, students who over- or underestimate their language skills get feedback and may correct their self-assessment.

Evaluative comments

(QA questions: What are/were the outcomes? What is/was the impact? Is/was the activity/initiative successful? How do you know whether or not it works/worked?)

At IBL (NL), the intended outcomes were achieved. All students use now the ELP for self assessment and know about the required CEFR levels at the end of IBL Courses; all teachers have been trained. A success factor was linking the curriculum with the ELP through expressing curricular aims in terms of “can do” statements. In this way, teachers recognise the ELP as a valuable instrument for mediating the curriculum to their learners.

In LV the intended outcomes were also achieved, in terms of the completed work; very hard work brings some fruit, especially when the teachers work together in team, but students were more pleased with the outcome, for with the ELP they see better themselves what they are good at and what they are missing. As the students say themselves - in the comprehensive progress tests, the outcomes are more for the teachers. Our priority is to make students satisfied. Evaluations show that students’ appreciation of the ELP is higher if they plan to go abroad to study or work, because then they are stimulated to assess at which CEFR level they master foreign languages. If the ELP is only presented as a diagnostic instrument, this does not increase the motivation. From the evaluation, ELP also appears to help students when they apply for work (a quote from a student “I just showed the employer my portfolio with all the languages I have been studying and I got the job immediately”), for it reflects clearly the level of all foreign languages with clear examples and it encourages the students to continue their language studies.

In both institutions, the first stages of the implementation were hard, it took extra work and extra time. Teachers at IBL were facilitated in the very beginning, at LV everything was only in the teachers’ hands; it depended on their enthusiasm, openness. But, of course, they got a moral support for working in an innovative, creative way.

In both cases, factors with an inhibiting effect on the impact of the ELP were:

- the time required for the realisation of the fact that the ELP enhances a paradigmatic change, from teaching to learning (and learner autonomy).
- the attachment of traditional teaching to the textbook: the shift to more learner-orientation is the real challenge for teachers. Training and guidelines are needed both for the teachers and students.
- the fact that there are no extra hours for self-reflection, feedback and self-assessment. A pragmatical solution is: limit the use of the ELP to key moments in the curriculum.

Advice to others

Management support, external funding for teacher training, cooperation with external experts are essential for the successful implementation of the ELP.

Implementing the ELP is more likely to be successful if the management sets long term objectives. The real satisfaction comes in two-three years’ time, it needs strong patience and belief that the outcome will be rewarding. An advice from a teacher “Once you start working with the ELP, keep doing it, the result will be satisfactory, you cannot lose anything”.

Lack of relation between curricular aims and the checklists in the ELP leads to the perception of the ELP as an optional or project-based activity. It is advisable to start with linking the curricular aims to the CEFR.

Reflection/any other comments

QA question: Is/was that the best way to do it? Why/why not? What improvements or adjustments are needed?

It is hard to do if you are alone, you need a team and colleagues' support of the work you are doing, then also students will accept it, for everybody is doing that.

The ELP is based on self-assessment. Many institutions use student portfolio's not based on self-assessment, but broadly on teacher assessment. It is important to realize that implementing the ELP may lead to conflict with the existing portfolio concept.

The ELP can be said to be having the most impact in situations where it plays a central role in shaping the curriculum, assessing learning and so on. In situations where there is, for example, formal assessment through an examination at the end of the course, and this exam is not linked to the CEFR levels, the role of the ELP might be perceived as unclear. The ELP might be considered as an 'overload'. On the other hand, examinations that have been calibrated to the CEFR levels can serve a helpful role in familiarising teachers with those levels.

The ELP with its emphasis on learner autonomy, self-assessment and lifelong learning helps reinforcing some of the basic implications of the CEFR approach – those elements which constitute the underlying concerns behind its conception. By engaging in the ELP implementation, stakeholders (educator, examiners, management) achieve a better understanding of these underlying principles of the CEFR.

Further details

e.g. web links; relevant references/publications; alternative contact names

www.coe.int/portfolio

Dutch ELP: www.europeestaalportfolio.nl (both in Dutch and in English: everyone can create an account and choose a profile: primary, secondary or higher education).

D. Little, 2009: The European Language Portfolio: where pedagogy and assessment meet (documentation for the ELP Seminar, Graz, 2009)