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EQUAL CHANCES TO EUROPEAN INTEGRATION THROUGH THE USE OF THE EUROPEAN LANGUAGE PORTFOLIO

In the past few decades learning, including language learning, has

items according to both the needs of the individual learner, and the requirements of the contexts in which knowledge needs to be used. Several factors have contributed to this change, including the very rapid rate of change in knowledge itself, due to scientific and technological advances, and the corresponding need for flexible uses of knowledge, both in the labour market and in society at large. Learning no longer belongs exclusively to an early stage in life, but includes the ability to adapt and change throughout one's lifespan. Lifelong education implies not just learning, but learning how to learn.

In a multicultural and multilingual Europe it is necessary that language learners should be encouraged to value their already existent partial competences in various languages and to develop new ones, to take responsibility for their own learning and to develop self-evaluation skills. Learning foreign languages increases the learners' chances of social integration in their own country and in an international (European) environment, as well as their opportunities for personal development. These chances can be increased through the usage of the European Language Portfolio (ELP). It is a document which is a practical realization of the language policies of the Council of Europe embodied in the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages (CEFR). In other words the ELP is a collection of instruments for documenting and assessing a person's language skills in a consistent manner, and comparable throughout Europe. In addition to permitting its owner to maintain a lifelong record of his or her language learning and practice — both language study and time spent in countries where the target language is spoken — the European Language Portfolio includes Self-Assessment Grids. These are used for evaluating a student's own listening, speaking, reading and writing skills and for setting personal learning goals.

The ELP performs both a pedagogic function of supporting learners in their efforts to master the target language and a reporting function of enabling them to record their proficiency in foreign languages. In order to implement these functions officially recognized versions must include three specific parts within Portfolio:

— *Language Passport:* this has a reporting function and is likely to be the part most used for external purposes. It shows at a glance the person's current level of language proficiency and intercultural experience.

— *Language Biography:* this helps learners to document and reflect on previous language learning, intercultural experience, and learning processes, to assess their own language skills, to set learning goals, and to plan and monitor future learning.

— *Dossier*: this contains samples of materials supporting the other two parts. This illustrates the development and current level of the learner's language proficiency and intercultural experience through examples of personal work.

The CEFR is intended to provide common terms for learners, teachers, publishers and language testers to communicate about language learning and levels of language ability across borders, target languages and educational sectors. The CEFR has been widely adopted around the world as a means of helping users to set targets for learning, teaching and assessment.

In chapter 5.1, the CEFR 2001 recognizes that the ability to learn (also referred to as «savoir-apprendre», or «knowing how to learn» is part of general competences of a language user or language learner. In its most general sense, «savoir-apprendre» is the ability to observe and participate in new experiences and to incorporate new knowledge into existing knowledge, modifying the latter where necessary (CEFR 2001:106). As such, the ability to learn is not part of the user's/learner's communicative language competences, because it is of more general relevance to all kinds of learning. However, the CEFR breaks it down into four areas which are of more direct interest for language learning:

1) language and communication awareness, or becoming aware of what languages are, how they work, how they are used, how they can be learnt and taught;

2) general phonetic awareness and skills, or being able to discriminate and articulate sounds (as a general skill, not with reference to a specific language);

3) study skills, or being able to use the learning opportunities offered by teaching context. This encompasses a very wide range of abilities, from cognitive, e.g. maintaining attention, grasping the intention of a task, developing a language repertoire by observing and participating in communicative events, to social e.g. co-operating in

class; to more general psychological features, e.g. becoming aware of one's strengths and weaknesses, identifying one's own goals, organizing one's strategies, also making use of independent or self-directed learning opportunities;

4) heuristic skills, or being able to use new experience by applying higher-order cognitive operations (like analyzing, inferencing, memorizing, etc.) and being able to find and use new information (including the use of information and communication technologies).

Thus the CEFR suggests that the ability to learn can be seen as a very general competence, mainly focused on the ability to face the challenge of the new, whether new languages, new people, or new cultural issues.

The ELP has three main aims:

— to encourage learners to have more language and intercultural contacts;

— to motivate learners for more and better language learning;

— to help learners to reflect on their language learning and intercultural experiences, plan effectively, and thereby move towards more self-direction, i.e. to become more autonomous learners.

As Benson (2001) rightly argues, autonomy is a multidimensional construct of capacity that will take different forms for different contexts and at different times. Autonomous learners are seen as those who are able to reflect on their own learning through knowledge about learning and who are willing to learn in collaboration with others (Holec, 1981).

Most students rely heavily on the teacher for their learning outcomes and place the burden of learning on the teacher. Students need to be aware of the classroom roles for teacher and student, that is what each person is responsible for in the classroom and the learning process. Many teachers have found the creation of a student/teacher contract to be beneficial in establishing class roles and responsibilities. After establishing student/teachers responsibilities, students need to know how to fulfill these responsibilities. Portfolio assessment encourages dialogue between the learner and teacher and is thus a part of the teaching/learning process:

— it provides a basis for a holistic framework for planning, assessing and giving direction to learner-driven programs.

— it allows learners to see growth or lack of progress in a particular area. It also draws attention to what they need to focus on or improve for a change of level.

It is important to keep in mind that for most students keeping a learning portfolio will be a new experience. There are likely to be growing pains — awkward times when problems develop or something does not work out as anticipated. Initially, learners may display some resistance because it is new to them and is unsettling.

Just as in language teaching, the introduction of new language skills requires a period of greater teacher direction and support. So too will portfolio work requires more teacher direction and support in the early stages of its implementation. Those students who are very teacher-directed may require encouragement to take more responsibility for assessing their own learning. As learners become more familiar with the procedure, they are usually able to take on more responsibility for their own portfolios. Teachers are likely to find that learner progress is facilitated by the portfolios and learners will have a clearer and deeper understanding of their own language development.

The ELP creates plenty of unique opportunities for practicing target languages, and this practice is in complete harmony with the view that language is not only a rule-governed system but a means of expressing oneself and getting things done. The time spent using the target language increases substantially when learners reflect on their performance and assess it with the help of the language that they are learning.

Introducing the ELP will make additional demands on the teacher's time in the short run. However, if the pedagogical function of the ELP takes root, it will quickly bring about a re-orientation in the learners' attitude that is beneficial for the teachers as well. The ELP aims at making the language learning process more transparent to learners, helping them to develop their capacity for reflection and self-assessment, and thus enabling them gradually to assume more and more responsibility for their own learning. When these things happen, teachers do not become less busy, but life becomes easier and teaching more enjoyable because their learners understand that they too are responsible for what goes in the classroom

I would suggest that international experience shows that we need to re-examine our curriculum and to investigate in more depth possibility to use the ELP and the CEFR in it.

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