# The European Language Portfolio: structure, origins, implementation and challenges

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*This article describes the structure, functions and origins of the Council of Europe's European Language Portfolio (ELP); summarizes the scope and findings of the pilot projects (1998–2000) and the measures that have been taken to encourage large-scale implementation in 2001 and beyond; outlines the pedagogical challenge posed by the ELP; and suggests various possibilities for future work.*

## 1. What is the European Language Portfolio?

### 1.1 Description

The Council of Europe's European Language Portfolio (ELP) has three obligatory components:

- a *language passport*, which summarizes the owner's linguistic identity by briefly recording second/foreign languages learnt, formal language qualifications achieved, significant experiences of second/foreign language use, and the owner's assessment of his/her current proficiency in the second/foreign languages he/she knows;
- a *language biography*, which is used to set language learning targets, monitor progress, and record specially important language learning and intercultural experiences;
- a *dossier*, which contains a selection of work that in the owner's judgement best represents his/her second/foreign language proficiency.

### 1.2 Functions

The ELP has a *reporting* and a *pedagogical* function. In its *reporting function* it supplements the certificates and diplomas that are awarded on the basis of formal examinations by presenting additional information about the owner's language learning experience and concrete evidence of his/her second/foreign language proficiency and achievements. In addition, it allows the owner to document language learning that has taken place outside as well as inside formal education. In its *pedagogical function* the ELP is designed to promote plurilingualism, raise cultural awareness, make the language learning process more transparent to the owner, and foster the development of learner autonomy. The two functions merge in the ongoing process of self-assessment that is fundamental to effective ELP use.

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### 1.3 Origins

Although its essential shape was determined by the Council of Europe's modern languages project *Language learning for European citizenship* (1989–96), the ELP bears the unmistakable mark of earlier Council of Europe projects. Its reporting function arises from the same concerns that animated attempts in the 1970s to develop a European unit/credit system for second/foreign language learning by adults (e.g., Council for Cultural Cooperation, 1979); while its pedagogical function reflects the Council of Europe's commitment to cultural exchange and the ideals of lifelong learning and learner autonomy (see especially Holec, 1979).

The decisive impetus to develop the ELP came from the Rüschlikon Symposium of 1991 ('Transparency and coherence in language learning in Europe'), hosted by the Federal Swiss authorities in collaboration with the Swiss Conference of Cantonal Directors of Education. In its conclusions the symposium recommended that the Council for Cultural Cooperation should promote the development of a Common European Framework of reference for language learning and set up a working party to consider possible forms and functions of a European Language Portfolio. The purpose of the Common European Framework (CEF) would be to 'promote and facilitate cooperation among educational institutions in different countries; provide a sound basis for the mutual recognition of language qualifications; [and] assist learners, teachers, course designers, examining bodies and educational administrators to situate and coordinate their efforts' (Council for Cultural Cooperation, 1992: 37). The ELP 'should contain a section in which formal qualifications are related to a common European scale, another in which the learner him/herself keeps a personal record of language learning experiences and possibly a third which contains examples of work done. Where appropriate entries should be situated within the Common Framework' (ibid.: 40).

The terms of this latter recommendation clearly anticipate the ELP's tripartite structure and the rela-

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tion that has now been formalized between the ELP and the CEF. As we have seen, using the ELP necessarily engages the owner in self-assessment; and the basis for self-assessment is provided by the common reference levels of the CEF. These describe second/foreign language proficiency in relation to five communicative activities at six levels. The communicative activities are *listening*, *reading*, *spoken interaction*, *spoken production* and *writing*; the six levels are A1 (*Breakthrough*), A2 (*Waystage*), B1 (*Threshold*), B2 (*Vantage*), C1 (*Effective Operational Proficiency*), C2 (*Mastery*). The general and the more detailed descriptors that define the common reference levels were arrived at on the basis of empirical research funded by the Swiss National Science Foundation (see North, 2000; Schneider & North, 2000); they can be consulted in the latest version of the CEF (Council of Europe, 2001a, 2001b; see also Figure 1 below).

The project *Language learning for European citizenship* produced two drafts of the CEF (Council for Cultural Cooperation, 1996a, 1996b) and a set of proposals for the development of ELPs for different categories of language learners (Council for Cultural Cooperation, 1997a). The final report on the project included the recommendations that the CEF should be piloted and the ELP should be further developed and introduced 'at first on an experimental basis, to be followed by its evaluation and finalisation in time for large-scale launching in the European Year of Languages to be planned for 2001' (Council for Cultural Cooperation, 1997b: 73).

## 2. The pilot projects (1998–2000)

### 2.1 Scope

Between 1998 and 2000 versions of the ELP were developed and piloted in fifteen member states of the Council of Europe: Austria, the Czech Republic, Finland, France, Germany, Hungary, Ireland, Italy, the Netherlands, Portugal, Russia, Slovenia, Sweden, Switzerland, and the United Kingdom; also in private language schools under the auspices of EAQUALS (European Association for Quality Language Services) and in universities in various countries under the auspices of CERCLES (Confédération Européenne des Centres de Langues de l'Education Supérieure) and the European Language Council. Between them the pilot projects covered all educational levels – primary, lower secondary, upper secondary, vocational, university, adult. In some cases they focussed on particular issues, for example, the introduction of foreign languages into the lower grades of primary school, the need to integrate large numbers of immigrant pupils in mainstream schooling, the use of a portfolio approach to language learning as a tool for whole-school curriculum development, or the particular language problems and needs that arise in the border areas of nation states.

The pilot projects varied greatly in size and scope. Thanks to careful preparation and a very high level of official support, the Swiss project was by far the largest, involving perhaps as many as 10,000 of the estimated 30,000 learners who took part in pilot projects overall (these and other statistics reported in this paragraph are taken from Schärer, 2000). Between them the two French projects (primary/upper secondary/vocational) involved about 5,000 learners, as did the Dutch project (primary/lower secondary/upper secondary/vocational). Other projects were much smaller. For example, the Finnish project (lower secondary/upper secondary/vocational) involved 360 learners, the Russian project (primary/lower secondary/upper secondary/university/teacher education) 290 learners, and the Swedish project (vocational/adult) 135 learners.

There was similar variation in the design and scope of the ELPs used in the pilot projects. Much of the ELP-related work that preceded the Rüschlikon Symposium was carried out in Switzerland, and (as noted above) the parallel development of the CEF was supported by a Swiss research project. As a result the Swiss pilot project was based on a fully elaborated ELP that was very explicitly related to the CEF and included detailed self-assessment checklists for the five communicative activities at all six common reference levels (for an account of the development of the Swiss ELP, see Schneider, 2000). This model served as an indispensable reference for all the pilot projects. Other ELPs were much simpler, especially those designed for younger learners (for examples of different ELP designs used in the pilot projects, see Schneider & Lenz, 2001).

During the two and a half years of the pilot phase seven seminars were held (in Switzerland, Finland, Germany, the Netherlands, Hungary, Slovenia, and France) at which project co-ordinators came together to share experiences, discuss common problems, and plan future developments. It was no doubt inevitable that the seminars should focus more on the ELP's pedagogical than on its reporting function; for in order to be useful as a reporting instrument the ELP must first establish itself as an aid to language learning. The one pedagogical issue that stood out above all others was self-assessment, apparently for two reasons. First, the majority of ELPs developed for piloting lacked the detailed self-assessment checklists that were central to the Swiss model, and teachers as well as learners found it difficult to relate learning progress in the short and medium term to the general descriptors of the CEF's self-assessment grid (see Figure 1). Secondly, self-assessment proved difficult in pedagogical traditions that were strongly teacher-led and did not encourage learners to share in the setting of learning targets and the evaluation of learning progress. This remains perhaps the principal pedagogical challenge to the large-scale implementation of the ELP (see 4.1 below).



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The great variety of ELP designs reflected the Council of Europe's ideal of unity in diversity but threatened to reduce the ELP to a collection of local variations on a European theme. This prompted the development of a standard language passport for adults, which is now recommended for use with all learners of 15 years and over (for a rationale and description, see Flügel, 2000; the standard passport can be downloaded from the Council of Europe's ELP web site, http://culture.coe.int/portfolio).

Because they were of limited duration, and in most instances not lavishly funded, the pilot projects could do little to further the cause of plurilingualism: the great majority of learners encountered the ELP in one particular language class. Work on the language passport and also to some extent on the language biography was likely to raise their awareness of the possibility of plurilingualism. But the ELP will have a positive impact on the development of plurilingualism only when it is used by all language teachers in the school; and this is likely to happen on a large scale only when the ELP is thoroughly integrated with national, regional or local curricula.

### 2.2 Findings

Feedback from the pilot projects was positive overall, though it varied from project to project. According to the official report (Schärer, 2000), the ELP led teachers and learners to reflect on the reasons for learning languages, the language learning process, and the criteria by which learning might be evaluated. 68% of learners felt that the time they spent keeping an ELP was time well spent. 70% of teachers found that the ELP is a useful tool for learners, while 78% found that it is a useful tool for teachers. Learner self-assessment was considered an important innovation, and learners found it motivating to assess their own second/foreign language proficiency against the common reference levels of the CEF. 70% of learners found that the ELP helped them to assess their own proficiency, and 70% found it useful to compare their teacher's assessment with their own; 62% of teachers thought their learners were capable of assessing their own second/foreign language proficiency. At the same time, the concept and practice of self-assessment prompted considerable discussion and in some cases controversy.

As regards the ELP's reporting function, learners and teachers wanted the status of the ELP to be clarified. They wanted to know how self-assessment might be used in the final evaluation of language learning achievement, how the ELP would relate to traditional exams, and whether self-assessment would be accepted as valid by employers. They asked for professionally validated evaluation tools and transparent links between the ELP and national exams and diplomas. There was widespread agreement that both learner and teacher training are essential if the ELP is to be used effectively in both its functions and learners are to become more autonomous and develop a capacity for accurate self-assessment. In one way or another, these are all issues for the next phase of the Council of Europe's ELP project (2002–04).

### 2.3 Reference documents and guides

As the pilot phase neared its end, two key reference documents were drawn up, *Principles and Guidelines* governing the design and implementation of ELPs (Council for Cultural Cooperation, 2000a) and *Rules for the accreditation of ELP models* (Council for Cultural Cooperation, 2000b), and guides were written for ELP developers (Schneider & Lenz, 2001) and for teachers and teacher trainers (Little & Perclová, 2001). English and French versions of these documents and guides are available from the Council of Europe in printed form; they can also be downloaded from the Council of Europe's ELP web site (http://culture.coe.int/portfolio).

## 3. Beyond the pilot projects: validation and implementation

### 3.1 The European Validation Committee

In October 2000 the Standing Conference of the Ministers of Education of the Council of Europe adopted a resolution recommending large-scale implementation of the ELP. At the same time the Education Committee of the Council for Cultural Cooperation established a European Validation Committee with responsibility for accrediting ELP models. Only ELPs that have been accredited can be designated *European Language Portfolio* and use the Council of Europe's ELP logo. The Validation Committee meets twice a year; by the summer of 2002 it had accredited 30 ELP models from 13 countries (Switzerland, France, the Russian Federation, Germany [Nordrhein-Westphalen], the Czech Republic, the United Kingdom, Ireland, Hungary, the Netherlands, Sweden, Portugal, Austria, Italy [Umbria, Piedmont, Lombardy]) and three international non-governmental organizations, two of them acting jointly (EAQUALS [European Association for Quality Language Services] and ALTE [Association of Language Testers in Europe]), CERCLES [Conféderation Européenne des Centres de Langues de L'Education Supérieure]). Details of these ELPs and their availability can be obtained from the Council of Europe's ELP website (http://culture.coe.int/portfolio).

### 3.2 Towards large-scale implementation

Perhaps not surprisingly, all ELP models validated to date arose directly or indirectly from the pilot projects. However, the ELP generated a high level of interest during the European Year of Languages



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| | | A1 | A2 | B1 | B2 | C1 | C2 |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| UNDERSTANDING | **Listening** | I can understand familiar words and very basic phrases concerning myself, my family and immediate concrete surroundings when people speak slowly and clearly. | I can understand phrases and the highest frequency vocabulary related to areas of most immediate personal relevance (e.g., very basic personal and family information, shopping, local area, employment). I can catch the main point in short, clear, simple messages and announcements. | I can understand the main points of clear standard speech on familiar matters regularly encountered in work, school, leisure, etc. I can understand the main point of many radio or TV programmes on current affairs or topics of personal or professional interest when the delivery is relatively slow and clear. | I can understand extended speech and lectures and follow even complex lines of argument provided the topic is reasonably familiar. I can understand most TV news and current affairs programmes. I can understand the majority of films in standard dialect. | I can understand extended speech even when it is not clearly structured and when relationships are only implied and not signalled explicitly. I can understand television programmes and films without too much effort. | I have no difficulty in understanding any kind of spoken language, whether live or broadcast, even when delivered at fast native speed, provided I have some time to get familiar with the accent. |
| | **Reading** | I can understand familiar names, words and very simple sentences, for example on notices and posters or in catalogues. | I can read very short, simple texts. I can find specific, predictable information in simple everyday material such as advertisements, prospectuses, menus and timetables and I can understand short simple personal letters. | I can understand texts that consist mainly of high frequency everyday or job-related language. I can understand the description of events, feelings and wishes in personal letters. | I can read articles and reports concerned with contemporary problems in which the writers adopt particular attitudes or viewpoints. I can understand contemporary literary prose. | I can understand long and complex factual and literary texts, appreciating distinctions of style. I can understand specialised articles and longer technical instructions, even when they do not relate to my field. | I can read with ease virtually all forms of the written language, including abstract, structurally or linguistically complex texts such as manuals, specialised articles and literary works. |
| SPEAKING | **Spoken Interaction** | I can interact in a simple way provided the other person is prepared to repeat or rephrase things at a slower rate of speech and help me formulate what I'm trying to say. I can ask and answer simple questions in areas of immediate need or on very familiar topics. | I can communicate in simple and routine tasks requiring a simple and direct exchange of information on familiar topics and activities. I can handle very short social exchanges, even though I can't usually understand enough to keep the conversation going myself. | I can deal with most situations likely to arise whilst travelling in an area where the language is spoken. I can enter unprepared into conversation on topics that are familiar, of personal interest or pertinent to everyday life (e.g., family, hobbies, work, travel and current events). | I can interact with a degree of fluency and spontaneity that makes regular interaction with native speakers quite possible. I can take an active part in discussion in familiar contexts, accounting for and sustaining my views. | I can express myself fluently and spontaneously without much obvious searching for expressions. I can use language flexibly and effectively for social and professional purposes. I can formulate ideas and opinions with precision and relate my contribution skilfully to those of other speakers. | I can take part effortlessly in any conversation or discussion and have a good familiarity with idiomatic expressions and colloquialisms. I can express myself fluently and convey finer shades of meaning precisely. If I do have a problem I can backtrack and restructure around the difficulty so smoothly that other people are hardly aware of it. |
| | **Spoken Production** | I can use simple phrases and sentences to describe where I live and people I know. | I can use a series of phrases and sentences to describe in simple terms my family and other people, living conditions, my educational background and my present or most recent job. | I can connect phrases in a simple way in order to describe experiences and events, my dreams, hopes and ambitions. I can briefly give reasons and explanations for opinions and plans. I can narrate a story or relate the plot of a book or film and describe my reactions. | I can present clear, detailed descriptions on a wide range of subjects related to my field of interest. I can explain a viewpoint on a topical issue giving the advantages and disadvantages of various options. | I can present clear, detailed descriptions of complex subjects integrating sub-themes, developing particular points and rounding off with an appropriate conclusion. | I can present a clear, smoothly-flowing description or argument in a style appropriate to the context and with an effective logical structure which helps the recipient to notice and remember significant points. |
| WRITING | **Writing** | I can write a short, simple postcard, for example sending holiday greetings. I can fill in forms with personal details, for example entering my name, nationality and address on a hotel registration form. | I can write short, simple notes and messages. I can write a very simple personal letter, for example thanking someone for something. | I can write simple connected text on topics which are familiar or of personal interest. I can write personal letters describing experiences and impressions. | I can write clear, detailed text on a wide range of subjects related to my interests. I can write an essay or report, passing on information or giving reasons in support of or against a particular point of view. I can write letters highlighting the personal significance of events and experiences. | I can express myself in clear, well-structured text, expressing points of view at some length. I can write about complex subjects in a letter, an essay or a report, underlining what I consider to be the salient issues. I can select a style appropriate to the reader in mind. | I can write clear, smoothly-flowing text in an appropriate style. I can write complex letters, reports or articles which present a case with an effective logical structure which helps the recipient to notice and remember significant points. I can write summaries and reviews of professional or literary works. |

Figure 1. Self-assessment grid (© Council of Europe)

(2001), and new developments were stimulated by seminars held in Prague, Moscow, and Coimbra during that year. New models are currently being piloted in a number of countries, and it is informally estimated that as many as a million ELPs may now be in circulation.

To move from the limited scope of the pilot projects to large-scale implementation is no easy matter. In some countries the educational authorities have put their full weight behind the design, piloting and large-scale implementation of the ELP; but in other countries pilot projects had little or no official status and it is by no means obvious how the ELP is to be implemented on a larger scale. Many of the accredited ELPs have been commercially published, but it is not always clear how they are to be disseminated, especially in contexts where learners do not normally buy their own textbooks and supplementary learning materials. The solution to these and similar problems can only be found locally.

Support for teachers using the ELP, which was clearly identified as an urgent need by participants in the pilot projects, must likewise be provided locally, though this is an area in which the Council of Europe's European Centre for Modern Languages in Graz also plans to play a role. It is true that the ELP values all language learning, whether it takes place inside or outside formal education; and it is also true that the ELP is intended for language learners of all ages and at all levels of proficiency, including the least ambitious. Nevertheless, the long-term acceptance and viability of the ELP inevitably depend on its being taken up by school systems and becoming an integral part of pupils' language learning experience. This is another way of saying that the ELP is likely to fulfil its reporting function to the extent that it also fulfils its pedagogical function; and the ELP's pedagogical function, turning as it does on the issue of self-assessment, poses a significant challenge to mainstream pedagogical traditions.

## 4. The pedagogical challenge of the ELP

### *4.1 Self-assessment*

Self-assessment is fundamental to effective ELP use; as we have seen, it was also a cause of concern and controversy in the piloting phase. Some teachers doubted that their learners were capable of assessing their own proficiency accurately, and some suspected that learners might be tempted to overstate their achievements. There are three ways of responding to these worries (Little, 1999). First, as regards learners' ability to assess themselves, it should be pointed out that the basis for self-assessment in the ELP is provided by 'can do' statements that describe communicative behaviour – for example, 'I can use simple phrases and sentences to describe where I live and people I know' (A1 spoken production). On the whole learners are likely to know whether or not they can perform the tasks specified by such descriptors. Secondly, as regards learners' honesty, it should be easy to detect serious discrepancies between learners' self-assessment and either their examination grades (recorded in the language passport) or the materials collected in the dossier. Thirdly, worries about self-assessment tended to focus on its summative function, which is only part of the picture. It is true that whenever the ELP owner updates the language passport he/she must engage in a form of self-assessment that performs much the same function as an exam at the end of a phase of learning. But the self-assessment that comes into play when the ELP owner uses the language biography to set learning goals or monitor progress is formative rather than summative: it supports and guides learning as it takes place. Of course, whether its function is summative or formative, self-assessment draws on the same complex of knowledge, self-knowledge and skills, which means that the more the ELP owner engages in formative self-assessment, the better he/she should become at summative self-assessment. The implication of this argument is that effective use of the ELP must be rooted in reflective teaching and learning.

### *4.2 Reflective teaching and learning*

The Council of Europe's educational projects generally, and its modern languages projects in particular, have always emphasized the importance of learner autonomy. Learners may be said to be autonomous when they (i) explicitly accept responsibility for their own learning and (ii) exercise that responsibility in a continuous effort to understand what, why and how they are learning, and with what degree of success (see, for example, Holec 1979; Boud 1988; Little 1991). As this working definition implies, learner autonomy depends crucially on reflection and self-assessment. We do not make learners autonomous at a stroke by telling them that they are in charge of their learning; they gradually become autonomous by developing and exercising the reflective skills of planning, monitoring and evaluating their learning. That is the essence of reflective teaching/learning.

One of the best accounts of reflective language teaching/learning is provided by Leni Dam (1995). She describes how she engaged Danish learners of English at lower secondary level in increasingly sophisticated reflection by repeatedly asking five questions: What are we learning? Why are we learning it? How are we learning? How successful is our learning? What are we going to learn next? These five questions capture the cyclical fashion in which learning progresses: planning is followed by implementation, after which evaluation leads to further planning. Note that reflection plays a role in each of these phases; note also that formative self-assessment is integral to the planning and implementation phases as well as to the evaluation phase. For in order to be effective, learners' planning must be realistic, which means that



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they must constantly measure their intentions against their developed capacities; while successful implementation depends on efficient monitoring, which might be described as 'on-line' self-assessment.

The ELP's emphasis on self-assessment and the reflective processes that gather around it invites the question: Will learning how to learn languages get in the way of language learning? After all, the time learners spend reflecting on what they can do in their target language(s) is time that they cannot spend learning to do more. But this is a valid objection only if the processes of reflection and self-assessment are carried out in the mother tongue. If they are carried out in the target language (as in the example of Dam, 1995), they are an integral and very important part of language learning; for if learners do not gradually develop the capacity to engage in reflection and evaluation in their second/foreign languages, we cannot expect them to progress to the more advanced levels of proficiency, which presuppose such a capacity. It is worth noting that this argument has implications for ELP design: in order to facilitate the use of the target language for reflection and self-assessment, self-assessment checklists should ideally be available in each of the ELP owner's second/foreign languages.

### 4.3 Teacher development

As we have seen, whereas 70% of teachers participating in the pilot projects found that the ELP is a useful tool for learners, 78% found that it is a useful tool for teachers (Schärer, 2000). This corresponds to anecdotal reports from some pilot projects to the effect that the ELP stimulates teacher development, partly because it facilitates planning, not just lesson by lesson, but term by term and year by year, and partly because it helps to make the language learning process visible in all its diversity. There seems to be a symbiotic relation between learner reflection and teacher reflection. On the one hand, a tool designed to promote learner reflection necessarily prompts teacher reflection; on the other hand, projects that set out to develop teacher reflection typically lead to greater learner autonomy (see, for example, the reports contained in Gierlinger, 1999).

### 4.4 The need for a whole-school policy

As noted above, limitations of time and scope meant that the pilot projects could do little to promote plurilingualism. But it is central to the pedagogical challenge posed by the ELP that it should be used for *all* language learning that goes on within a particular institutional context. If one teacher of French in an Irish secondary school makes effective use of the ELP in her classroom, the evidence of the pilot projects suggests that learners will benefit significantly. But they will surely benefit much more significantly if the ELP is used not only by the other teachers of French, but also by the teachers of Irish, German and Spanish. For in this way learners will come to appreciate more fully the range and cultural diversity of their second/foreign language proficiency.

One of the reasons why the ELP has aroused such widespread interest is that it is closely related to a more general educational phenomenon that has been gaining ground in recent years: the portfolio approach to learning and assessment (see, e.g., Kohonen, 1999). Some pilot projects reported that the ELP had generated interest in applying portfolio learning and the principles of reflection and self-assessment to subjects other than languages; while the Finnish pilot project embedded the ELP in processes of whole-school development that were committed to reflection and self-assessment across the curriculum (see Kohonen & Kaikkonen, 1997).

## 5. Future challenges

### 5.1 Refining the model

The pilot projects seem to have confirmed the general usefulness of the ELP's tripartite structure. Nevertheless, two issues are worth considering in future work. The first has to do with the ELP's reporting function. Employers may be impressed by a fully elaborated ELP if they have time to look at it, but when they are recruiting staff they tend to want summary information. Thus it might be worth developing a one-page résumé of the standard adult passport to be used in support of job and other applications. The second issue has to do with the relation between the language biography and the dossier. In the pilot projects this was articulated in several different ways, which raises the question whether greater flexibility should be allowed in the design of these two components.

The pilot projects showed that self-assessment in all its guises, including planning and monitoring learning, becomes much easier if learners (and their teachers) have access to detailed descriptors like those contained in the Swiss self-assessment checklists. The pilot projects also revealed a need for descriptors/checklists that are harmonious with the common reference levels of the CEF but refer directly to quite specific communicative purposes or interests. Accordingly, future work might include the establishment of a bank of descriptors on which ELP developers could draw. Consideration might also be given to making sample language biography pages available to developers in downloadable form. Support of this kind would have the advantage of encouraging greater convergence in ELP design, which can only strengthen the ELP's international reporting function.

### 5.2 Using the ELP as a focus for classroom research

From a pedagogical point of view the ELP is a tool that can be used well or badly, which means that



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empirical methods of evaluation cannot prove that the ELP is a good or a bad thing in itself. Evaluation can only focus on the effectiveness of implementation, though this may draw attention to problems in the design of particular ELP models. In its pedagogical function the ELP (i) values plurilingualism, partial competences and intercultural learning and (ii) encourages an approach to language learning in which goal-setting, reflection and self-assessment play a central role. Each aspect of this pedagogical function can be explored using empirical techniques and procedures, and the ELP's standing among educational planners and teacher trainers will be greatly enhanced if it begins to provide a focus for research on such topics as learner attitudes and motivation, the development of reflective practice, and the impact of reflective practice on target language proficiency.

The question naturally arises, who should undertake such empirical research and how should it be funded? There is no simple answer to this question, partly because ELP implementation varies from country to country, and partly because research provision and research structures also vary. However, three kinds of research are likely to be possible, at least in principle, in most contexts:

- research projects that explore one or more aspects of ELP implementation with a view to producing a research report (the Centre for Language and Communication Studies, Trinity College Dublin, is currently conducting such a project focussed on the implementation of the Irish ELP for learners at lower and upper secondary levels; CERCLES intends to launch an international project of a similar kind at its international conference in September 2002);
- an individual research project undertaken by a postgraduate student, either for a thesis leading to a higher degree or for the dissertation component of a partly taught master's degree programme;
- action research undertaken by an individual teacher or by a group of teachers who are collaborating on ELP implementation (Integrate Ireland Language and Training, which is responsible for the Irish ELPs for immigrant learners, is exploring the possibility of facilitating research of this kind as a vehicle for teacher development).

Inevitably it will be some time before the results of such research are available for dissemination. In the meantime, the Council of Europe has commissioned a collection of brief case studies that will provide a comprehensive overview of ELP projects to date, examples of the ways in which learners in different domains have used their ELP, and some pointers towards good practice.

## 6. Conclusion

The ELP reflects all of the major concerns of Council of Europe modern languages projects since the 1970s. It is based on the belief that language learning should have a communicative purpose; it provides a means of reporting second/foreign language proficiency that transcends the limitations of national systems of grading; it encourages learners and authorities of all kinds to value partial competences; it emphasizes the importance of plurilingualism and cultural exchange; and it supports the development of learner autonomy, partly out of a commitment to democracy in education and partly because learner autonomy is the most likely guarantee of lifelong learning. The ELP thus carries within it an ambitious agenda of educational reform and development. The experience of the pilot projects has been encouraging, as has the level of interest aroused by the ELP at many of the events organized to celebrate the European Year of Languages. But much remains to be done on many fronts if the ELP is to establish itself in the longer term, not just as a useful pedagogical tool but as the preferred means of reporting proficiency in second/foreign languages across the member states of the Council of Europe.

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