



PERSPECTIVES
ON THE EUROPEAN
LANGUAGE
PORTFOLIO FOR
COMPREHENSIVE
SCHOOLS IN
FINLAND

Perspectives on the European Language Portfolio for Comprehensive Schools in Finland

Three ELP models for compulsory education

The Finnish versions of the European Language Portfolio (ELP) have been developed as a pedagogical resource for foreign language education at comprehensive school level (Finnish grades 1–9). The work was completed under the auspices of the National Board of Education (www.oph.fi/) in 2011–12 in a cooperation project between four universities (the KISA Project): the University of Tampere (project leadership), the universities of Helsinki and Jyväskylä, and the University of Eastern Finland (Joensuu Campus).ⁱ

The Finnish language portfolio is based on the ELP Principles and Guidelines (2011) of the Council of Europe.ⁱⁱ It complies with the national Framework Curriculum goals (POPS 2004) for foreign language education in Finland, fostering pupils' communicative, cultural and learning skills and self-assessment. The goals entail a reflective and collaborative educational approach aimed at supporting socially responsible learner autonomy.

As a result of intensive planning and seminar discussions, the work group de-

signed the Finnish language portfolio for compulsory education consisting of the following three models for different age groups (pupil ages 7–15):

1. Language Portfolio Grades 1–3
2. Language Portfolio Grades 4–6
3. Language Portfolio Grades 7–9

The models provide for the two domestic languages, with one set in Finnish and English and the other set in Swedish and English. The material also includes the Checklists to support pupils' self-assessment of their language skills, with parallel versions in six languages (Finnish, English, French, German, Russian and Swedish). This makes it possible for pupils to develop their plurilingualism and pluriculturalism in their language studies, as encouraged in the Common European Framework of Reference (CEFR 2001) and the ELP Principles and Guidelines.

Organising ELP-oriented work as formal and informal learning

The Finnish Language Portfolio consists of three parts in accordance with the Council of Europe's principles (www.

coe.int/portfolio/): Language Biography, Dossier, and Language Passport. The Dossier is, however, divided into two parts to better reflect the pedagogic and reporting functions of the ELP: Learning Dossier and Reporting Dossier. The teacher guides pupils to plan, carry out and evaluate their portfolio tasks as part of the site-based syllabus and current learning materials.

Pupils collect their oral and written samples of work in the Learning Dossier, including their self-assessments of the work process and outcomes. Some of the reports are also evaluated through peer-assessments and teacher feedback, using the forms designed for the purpose available in the given learning dossier on the ELP website. For grading, pupils choose some work samples and put these in the Reporting Dossier (towards the end of the school year and at the end of the given stage of schooling) for final grading by the teacher.

While working on their individual ELP tasks, pupils also work on their Language Biographies, guided by the teacher. They reflect on their personal learning experiences and observations of different languages and cultures, as well as their encounters with speakers of those languages. As schools are becoming increasingly multicultural pupils have ample opportunities for reflecting on cultural diversity within the school community. They are also guided to observe and reflect on their experiences of encountering otherness and foreignness through informal learning outside school (e.g. in the contexts of their

families, friends, hobbies, free time activities, the TV and social media on the internet). They record the reflections in their Language Biographies, sharing their observations with peers in small groups in order to get more perspectives for individual reflection and learning. They are also taught to evaluate their language skills with the help of the Checklists.

For the two primary ELPs (Grades 1–3 and Grades 4–6), pupils use simplified ‘can do’ descriptors contained in the Language Biographies. The lower secondary ELP (Grades 7–9) includes an extensive Checklist (up to Level C1) in six languages. To get more opportunities for meaningful language use, pupils are encouraged to use the target language checklist in their self-assessments. The work on the Checklists is supported by peer-assessment and facilitated by the teacher’s individual guidance and feedback comments over a period of several years.

The reflective work on the Language Biography, combined with the dual function of the Dossier, provides an important interface between language learning, teaching and assessment. The reflective approach involves assessment for learning (to enhance personal learning through reflection and peer-assessment) as well as assessment of learning (to report individual outcomes using criterion-referenced descriptors). The concepts of assessment and reflection are seen as supplementing and enhancing one other, being as it were two sides of the same pedagogical coin.

Through such reflective work over a period of years, conducted both individually and in peer groups, pupils gradually develop a procedural knowledge and understanding of criterion-referenced assessment and its meaning for enhancing their autonomy as language learners and intercultural actors. The goal is that they can use the Self-assessment Grid in the CEFR (2001) with a due grasp of the descriptors by the end of their compulsory education when they summarise their communicative skills and cultural experiences in the Language Passport.

Developing ELP-oriented pedagogy in Finlandⁱⁱⁱ

Finnish work on the ELP has consistently emphasized the pedagogical function of the ELP in language education, underscoring the necessity to teach pupils to use the ELP with an understanding of its potential for enhancing their learning. In the course of the research and development work, it was found that the criterion-referenced self-assessment, focusing as it does on the CEFR-based descriptors of language proficiency, was somewhat limited in its scope. As noted above, the notion of ELP-related assessment was consequently widened so as to include a broader element of reflection on individual and social learning processes, both in school and outside school contexts.

In a holistic experiential learning orientation developed in the ELP-oriented work, pupils are taught to reflect on their language learning in terms of three areas of competence: (1) autonomy and

agency as a person: seeing oneself as a responsible social actor; (2) autonomy as a language learner/user: learning to plan, monitor and evaluate learning tasks; and (3) intercultural communicative competence: the linguistic/communicative competences, and being open to cultural diversity. The approach entails a purposeful integration of school learning with informal learning outside school, as also recommended in the ELP Guidelines. Learning to be reflective about oneself as a human being and as a language student (areas 1 and 2) was found to be a more natural way of introducing the pupils to the reflective work than immediately using the self-assessment descriptors. To teach pupils to reflect on their learning processes, teachers give them simple open-ended questions, directing their attention on the process of language learning.^{iv}

To integrate formal and informal learning, pupils undertake each year a number of syllabus-based ELP tasks that are sufficiently open-ended so as to leave space for real choice depending on their age, learning skills and level of proficiency in the target language. Teachers guide them to plan small projects and to carry out the work as home work, helping them to monitor and reflect on the process. Pupils bring the results to school by writing (or presenting orally) a report in the target language (as far as possible). They evaluate the learning outcomes in terms of contents and processes, sharing their observations with peers.

The notion of ELP-oriented language

pedagogy developed in the Finnish ELP projects refers to this kind of negotiated teaching-learning process whereby pupils are explicitly taught to take increasing charge of their individual learning through collaboration, involving self and peer-assessment. They are also guided to reflect on their informal learning experiences outside school with a view to improving their learning efforts and developing as language users.

Using the ELP for learner-centred individualisation

The ELP has proved a flexible pedagogical resource in Finnish comprehensive language education involving mixed-ability groups. While pupils with low proficiency can do simple tasks by modifying the textbook activities, intermediate pupils are able to perform more demanding communicative tasks on their own. Advanced language users can undertake bigger projects utilising effectively a variety of resources including the internet, to make longer and well-articulated reports. The teacher uses this kind of built-in flexibility for learner-centred individualization when negotiating the individual action plans and guiding individual pupils to do well in mixed-ability groups, with regard to their personal aims, language and learning resources and life situations.

Rather than the teacher preparing sets of different tasks for the different levels of proficiency, s/he guides pupils to make individual plans that are realistic at their current levels of proficiency. S/he also helps them to see what

progress they have made and what they need to do to develop as language learners and users and as intercultural actors. Further, s/he can encourage (and expect) pupils to work not just to the limit of their current target language proficiency, but to go beyond.

Having real options entails personal choices about how to set personal aims and make action plans. The plans provide the pedagogical framework for action: agreeing on what to include in the reports, with (minimum) requirements for acceptable work (e.g. in terms of length of report and the focus and range of topics to be dealt with, and ways of presenting work, whether written or spoken); and agreeing on deadlines for consulting and submitting completed work, and ways of evaluating the outcomes of learning. Assuming responsibility for such decisions supports their identities as social actors.

The negotiated process thus makes individual learning more concrete and visible to participants. The pupil's progress becomes transparent through the two functions of the ELP: (1) as a pedagogical instrument, it helps pupils organise, monitor and reflect on their language learning processes; (2) as a reporting instrument, it provides explicit ways for assessing and reporting language proficiency and intercultural experience to relevant stakeholders. Reviewing their learning outcomes helps pupils to perceive their personal progress as language users over the course of years, based on concrete evidence in the reports, and on the reflections and

evaluations contained in their ELPs. The process supports pupils' personal feelings of ownership of their learning, as also emphasized in the ELP principles.

The work on the Language Biography helps pupils clarify their understanding of their autobiographies as language learners, language users and intercultural actors. However, to derive full peda-

gogical benefits from the ELP it is crucial to integrate the ELP with site-based language syllabuses and learning materials for any wide-scale and sustainable use over time. It needs to be used as a regular learning resource, including all three sections: Biography, Passport, and Dossier.

- i. The team in charge of the design work consisted of a coordination group in Tampere University, School of Education (Pauli Kaikkonen, Riitta Jaatinen and Viljo Kohonen), an advising group of eight researchers (Riikka Alanen, Raili Hildén, Riitta Jaatinen, Pauli Kaikkonen, Kati Kajander, Ritva Kantelinen, Viljo Kohonen and Pirkko Pollari) from the four participating universities (University of Eastern Finland, University of Helsinki, University of Jyväskylä and University of Tampere), and an action group of twelve language teachers (Merja Auvinen, Tuija Dalmo, Anne-Marie Grahn-Saarinen, Mari Kalaja, Hannele Kara, Arja Kujansivu, Eila Kuokkanen, Kaija Kähkönen, Kaija Perho, Eeva Regan, Olli-Pekka Salo and Ursula Viita-Leskelä) from the four cities with an extensive experience of using the ELP in language education. The ELP website was created by the Adsek company in Helsinki, in consultation with the experts of the National Board of Education and the ELP Project group. ELP-related research and development work has been conducted in Finland since the Council of Europe's ELP projects (1998–2004), and ELP-oriented pedagogy has also been an integral part of Finnish language teacher education since the late 1990s.
- ii. See (www.coe.int/t/dg4/education/elp/elp-reg/Source/Templates/ELP_Annotated_PrinciplesGuidelines_EN.pdf/). The Finnish ELP design team wishes to acknowledge the help gained from the accredited Swiss and Swedish ELPs (Models No. 1/2000, 60.2004 and 61/2004), for the design work of the Finnish ELPs for compulsory language education.
- iii. The European research and development work related to the ELP is discussed at some length (in Finnish) in the Teacher's Guide (Opettajan opas) on this website. The Checklists are given in six languages in Checklists. A number of actual pedagogical ELP materials (classroom tasks, teachers' reflections and observations of their work) is provided in Esimerkkejä opettajien ajattelusta (in Finnish). The website also contains a lengthy Bibliography (Bibliography) for further information.
- iv. Some examples of such reflective questions: What are your strengths as a pupil in school? What skills are you good at in your language use? How do you see your role as a language learner? What is a good group member like in our language class? How might you improve your participation in your groups? What aims do you wish to set for this course (week, etc)? What are you going to do to reach your aims? In what ways do your experiences of language use outside school develop your language and cultural skills?