

Perspectives on the European Language Portfolio for the Comprehensive School in Finland

1. Three Finnish ELP models for compulsory education

The Finnish versions of the European Language Portfolio have been developed as a pedagogical resource for foreign language education in the comprehensive school in Finland (Grades 1–9, pupil ages 7–15 years). The work was completed in a cooperation project between four universities, funded by the National Board of Education (the KISA Project, 2011–12)¹: the University of Eastern Finland (Joensuu Campus), and the universities of Helsinki, Jyväskylä and Tampere (project leadership).

The Finnish versions of the ELP comply with the ELP Principles and Guidelines (2011) of the Council of Europe². They are based on the current national Framework Curriculum for foreign language education (POPS 2004), aimed at supporting pupils' intercultural communicative competence, learning skills and self-assessment in compulsory education.

As a result of intensive seminar discussions, the project team designed the Finnish versions of the ELP (FinELPs) for comprehensive education consisting of the following three models for the different classroom levels (pupil ages 7–15 years):

1. FinELP Grades 1–3 (lower primary)
2. FinELP Grades 4–6 (upper primary)
3. FinELP Grades 7–9 (lower secondary)

¹ The KISA project 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, and an action group of twelve language teachers (Merja Auvinen, Tuija Dalmo, Anne-Marie Grahn-Saari-
nen, 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 and developing the ELP in language education in the Finnish compulsory school. The ELP website was created by the Adsek company in Helsinki, in consultation with Ms Anna-Kaisa Mustaparta, counsellor of education, and other experts from the National Board of Education, and the KISA Project team. The work was based on the long-term ELP-related research and development work that has been conducted in Finland as part of the Council of Europe's ELP projects (1998–2008), and up to date. Encouraging reflective teacher professionalism and collegial collaboration has been an integral part in Finnish language teacher education since the 1990s.

² 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.

The models are digitally downloadable from the Finnish ELP website (www.edu.fi/kielisalkku) for work on the user's computer (or as paper versions), to be printed out as needed. They provide for the two domestic languages and English, with one set in Finnish and English and the other set in Swedish and English. The material includes the Self-assessment Lists (Checklists) to support pupils' self-assessment of their communicative abilities in the following languages: English, Finnish, French, German, Russian and Swedish. The purpose of the six parallel lists is to encourage the users to develop their plurilingual and pluricultural competences in the languages that they study (or wish to learn on their own), as proposed in the *Common European Framework of Reference* (CEFR 2001, 4–5) and the ELP Principles and Guidelines (2011). The Finnish lists are also useful for learning Finnish as a host language.

2. Organising ELP-oriented work in school

The Finnish ELPs consist of three parts in accordance with the Council of Europe's principles (www.coe.int/portfolio/): the Language Biography, the Dossier and the Language Passport. In line with the reflective learning-to-learn approach adopted in the Finnish ELP, however, the Dossier consists of two parts: a Learning Dossier (building up a personal learning history over years by collecting samples of work, with self and peer-assessments); and a Reporting Dossier (choosing certain work samples to report individual progress).

The pedagogical approach developed in the Finnish ELP projects (1998–2012) encourages learner-centred individualisation while fostering socially responsible learner autonomy. This involves a negotiation of individual action plans and guiding the pupils to do well and work constructively in the mixed-ability groups, with regard to their aims, language and learning abilities and life situations. The teacher teaches them to plan, carry out and evaluate their ELP-oriented learning outcomes as part of the site-based language syllabus. They are encouraged to use the target language as far as possible when working on their portfolio tasks, in order to gain meaningful practise in the target language use, right from the beginning.

While working on their individual ELP tasks, the pupils also work on their Language Biographies, guided by the teacher. They reflect on themselves as language learners, language users and intercultural actors, recording their observations of different languages and cultures, and their encounters with speakers of those languages. They set personal goals for their progress and record the observations and reflections in their Language Biographies.

Pupils are further asked to use the target language in reporting their FinELP tasks (both spoken and written), and make a consistent use of the self-assessment lists in the relevant target language. The work on the ELP tasks is supported by peer-assessment and facilitated by the teacher's individual guidance and evaluation over several school years. Pupils collect their written (or recorded oral) samples of work in the Learning Dossier, including their self-assessments of the work. Some of the reports are evaluated through peer and teacher assessments using the forms designed for the purpose, available on the website. For grading purposes, pupils choose some work samples and put these in the Reporting Dossier for final grading by the teacher (towards the end of the term and at the end of the given stage of schooling). They also use the Language Passport to summarize the languages that they know, their major intercultural encounters and to assess their proficiency in these languages.

The reflective work on the Language Biography, combined with the dual function of the Dossier (learning and reporting dossier), provides an important interface between language learning, teaching and assessment. The approach involves both the assessment *for* learning (to clarify and strengthen individual learning through reflection, self and peer-assessment and teacher feedback as part of teaching), and the assessment *of* learning (to report individual learning outcomes using the criterion-referenced descriptors, accompanied by teacher evaluation). The reflective work helps pupils understand their progress as learners and users of the target language, increasing their awareness of what they are able to do, how well they can do it in the target language, and how they can improve their study skills. The concepts of assessment and reflection are thus seen as supplementing one other, being as it were two sides of the same pedagogical coin.

Through such reflective work over years, conducted both individually and in peer groups, pupils gradually develop an understanding of the meaning of reflection and self-assessment for assuming socially responsible autonomy in the classroom community, and beyond. Learning to evaluate their communicative progress using the Self-assessment Lists helps them use the criterion-referenced descriptors in the Language Passport whereby they assess their communicative proficiency based on the CEFR (2001, 26–27). It is aimed that they can use the self-assessment grid with a due understanding of the descriptors by the end of their compulsory language education when they conduct a summative assessment of their proficiency in the languages they know, recording the results in the Language Passport.

3. Using the FinELP for learner-centred individualisation

The Finnish ELP provides a flexible pedagogical resource in the comprehensive language education involving mixed-ability groups. While pupils with low proficiency can do simple tasks e.g. by modifying the textbook lessons and writing short expressions of their own, intermediate pupils are able to perform more demanding communicative tasks. Advanced language users can undertake bigger projects utilising 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 each pupil to do well in mixed-ability groups, with regard to his/her personal aims, and language and learning resources.

Rather than the teacher preparing sets of tasks for the different levels of proficiency, s/he guides pupils to make individual plans that are realistic with regard to their current levels of proficiency. S/he also helps them understand what they can do to develop as language learners and users, and as social actors in the classroom community. Further, s/he can encourage and also expect pupils to work not just to the limit of their current target language proficiency, but to go beyond. To guide the pupils' progress towards socially responsible autonomy, the teacher needs to assume a firm professional stance in setting the tone of the work, negotiating the action plans and expecting that pupils comply with the agreements and deadlines for completing the work.

Having real options enables pupils to make personal choices about how to set their aims and make action plans accordingly. The plans provide the pedagogical

framework for action: agreeing on what to include in the report, with (minimum) requirements for acceptable work (e.g. in terms of length of report and focus and range of topics to be dealt with, and ways of presenting work, whether written or spoken); deciding on deadlines for consulting and submitting completed work, and evaluating the processes and outcomes of learning, including peer-assessment. Assuming responsibility for such decisions supports their feelings of ownership of their learning, as well as their identities as responsible social actors.

The interactive process makes individual learning more concrete and visible to the participants. The pupil's progress becomes transparent through the two functions of the FinELP: (1) as a *pedagogical* instrument, it helps pupils organize, 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 annually as summative assessments helps the pupils perceive their progress as language users over years, based on the concrete evidence in their Self-assessment Lists, their Dossiers and Language Passports, and in the reflections and evaluations contained in their Language Biographies.

The process supports the pupils' ownership of their learning, as emphasized in the ELP principles. The work on the Language Biography helps them clarify their understanding of their autobiographies as language learners, language users and intercultural actors. To attain these goals, however, the ELP needs to be used as a regular learning resource, including all the three sections: the Language Biography, the Dossier, and the Language Passport. Further, to derive full pedagogical benefits from the FinELP, it is necessary to integrate ELP-oriented work with the site-based language syllabuses, learning materials and classroom practices for sustainable use over time. If the ELP remains extra work, an occasional add-on to the textbooks, it will soon get marginalized.

4. Developing ELP-oriented pedagogy in Finland³

The Finnish ELPs reflect a long-term research and development work (since the 1990s) on enhancing reflective professionalism in teacher education. They were developed in several collaborative university-school projects with the teaching practice schools and local schools, involving both pre-service and in-service teacher education, and resulting in a number of publications.

The work on the Finnish versions of the ELP has laid a consistent emphasis on the pedagogical function of the ELP in language education, underscoring the necessity to teach pupils to work on their ELPs with an understanding of its potential for enhancing their learning. In the course of the research and development work, it was

³ The long-term European research and development work related to the ELP and reflective teacher education is discussed at some length (in Finnish) in the Teacher's Guide (Opettajien opas) on this website. The Self-assessment Lists are provided in six languages. Samples of pedagogical FinELP materials (classroom tasks, teachers' reflections and observations of their work) are provided in Esimerkkejä opettajien (in Finnish). The website also contains a Bibliography for further information.

found that the criterion-referenced self-assessment of language proficiency was quite difficult for young learners. Self-assessment was consequently embedded in a broader notion of reflection on both individual and social learning processes and outcomes in school and outside school contexts.

In a holistic experiential learning orientation 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: planning and monitoring the learning tasks, and evaluating the outcomes; and (3) autonomy as a language user and an intercultural actor, being open to cultural diversity.

Becoming reflective about oneself as a person and as a language learner seems to be a more natural way of introducing the pupils to the reflective work than beginning with the proficiency descriptors. Pupils are guided to reflect on themselves as learners and group members in school using simple open-ended questions on their language learning and language use both in and outside school⁴. They also carry out a number of syllabus-based ELP tasks that are sufficiently open-ended to leave space for real choice depending on their age, learning skills and levels of proficiency. They monitor and reflect on the process, sharing their thoughts, feelings and 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 reflection, self and peer-assessment and cooperation in small groups. The process may initially mean a considerable pedagogical change for pupils who are accustomed to more teacher-directed ways of teaching. They can take charge of their learning only to the extent that they understand and accept the goals of learner autonomy and also learn the practical skills of organising their work. It poses a challenge for the teacher to bring them to such an understanding of the meaning of autonomy, guiding them to assume a more responsible stance as social actors in the classroom community. The pedagogy for autonomy is thus far more than a mechanical teaching method; it provides a great deal of flexibility for the participants to make choices on their ways of being and working in the language classrooms

The educational change inherent in the pedagogy for autonomy entails that teachers develop a culture of collegial collaboration, seeing themselves as language educators, as mediators of their pupils' learning and as professional social actors, in collaboration with other educators and stakeholders of the school. This gives them new personal meanings related to learner autonomy involving a new kind of identity as reflective professionals.

5. Developing teacher reflection through a teacher portfolio

⁴ 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?

To be able to teach the reflective abilities with confidence, it is helpful for the teachers to gain personal experiences of practising reflection as part of their teacher education. They are consequently guided to work on their reflective and interactive abilities as language educators, enhancing their professional growth through collegial collaboration. They record and reflect on their observations and insights in their professional autobiographies, collecting also samples of their teaching materials in their *teacher portfolios*. The portfolios help them share their pedagogical discoveries in organising their pupils' work, considering together possible ways for teaching the essential concepts (such as autonomy, cooperation, reflection and self-assessment) in their classrooms, based on their collective experience.

The notions of reflective teacher professionalism, collegial collaboration and self-assessment are incorporated in the Finnish teacher portfolio, which is now adopted nationally as a resource for pre-service teacher education at the departments of teacher education. It provides a powerful pedagogical tool in pre-service teacher education, including two supplementary parts: (1) the process portfolio (the pedagogic function of the portfolio), with a focus on advancing professional learning processes through goal-oriented reflection, narrating and interaction; and (2) the product portfolio (the reporting function of the portfolio), presenting the outcomes of the work for a given purpose, such as summative assessment (e.g. obtaining the grade at the end of the student teaching year), and subsequently when applying for a teacher's job (the presentation portfolio).

The two functions of the teacher portfolio are thus parallel with the pupils' portfolio work in foreign language learning. Guiding ELP-oriented student work entails a language teacher identity as a reflective professional having the interactive skills and attitudes that are needed in ELP-oriented pedagogy. Working together and sharing their ideas in an open dialogue, they can go beyond the limits of their current pedagogical knowledge and skills, surpassing themselves in the collective effort for creating new understandings. Collegial interaction, in an atmosphere of mutual trust and respect, is an essential element in the process.

As a result the long-term research and development work, about one-third of currently employed Finnish language teachers are familiar with the reflective learning approach in the CEFR and the ELP through their experience as student teachers and as practising teachers in schools. Various ELP-related exercises have also been a common practise in the textbooks for foreign language teaching in the comprehensive education for several years by now. An increasing number of Finnish language teachers are thus able to include the FinELP as part of their regular teaching. This prospect makes it possible for ELP-oriented pedagogy to gain further prominence in the ongoing national framework curriculum development for language education in the Finnish comprehensive school.