English majors' appraisal of the European language portfolio*: Insights from students' narratives*

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Abstract

The *European language portfolio* (ELP) has accompanied Polish learners and teachers for almost a decade but, despite arduous efforts of the Council of Europe Language Division as well as the Polish Centre for the Development of Education, its popularity and appeal remain much below the expectations of its originators. Many practitioners would attest that the idea has not entered the educational mainstream in spite of creating different versions to accommodate different groups of learners as well as prospective teachers of languages, organizing workshops and conferences, or keeping websites and blogs that offer information and practical advice on the application of the document in everyday teaching practice. In view of such realities, the study reported in the present paper sought to delve into the reasons behind the lack of appreciation for *ELP* through the analysis of narratives written by English majors who, having used the document for three months in one of the courses they attended, were asked to reflect on its strengths and weaknesses. The qualitative paradigm applied here allowed the present authors to gather inspiring opinions whose consideration might lead to introducing modifications into the *ELP* so that its undeniable contribution to the development of learner autonomy is more widely appreciated.

1. Introduction

Without much doubt, one of the best known and most readily recognized manifestations of the language policies promoted by the Council of Europe is the *Common European framework for languages: Learning, teaching assessment* (CEFR)*.* As Little (2006: 167) explains, the document "(...) is a descriptive scheme that can be used to analyze L2 learners' needs, specify L2 learning goals, guide the development of L2 learning materials, and provide orientation for the assessment of L2 learning outcomes". Although the publication touches upon a wide range of issues, it is not particularly reader-friendly, with the effect that its most crucial contribution is typically viewed in terms of introducing six levels of communicative proficiency, from A1 to C2, broken down for five language skills, namely listening, reading, spoken interaction, spoken production and writing. An instrument which was designed with an eye to mediating the principles outlined in the *CEFR* to language learners and making the implementation of its goals feasible is the *European language portfolio* (ELP), with well over one hundred different versions developed in the member states of the Council of Europe. This trend is also evident in Poland where five versions of the tool have been developed from scratch (i.e. *ELP* for children aged 3 to 6, *ELP* for children aged 6 to 10, *ELP* for learners aged 10 to 15 and *ELP for senior high school students and language learners in institutions of higher education*) as well as translated (i.e. *ELP* for adults and *ELP for student teachers of languages*). Despite the investment of time, effort and substantial funds, the *ELP* is far from being a success story in our country for reasons that are both external, such as the fact that no serious attempt has been made to introduce it into schools (e.g. after a relatively short time it was removed from the national core curriculum), and internal to it, such potential design flaws or the fact that it may no longer cater to the needs of the present-day language learner. It is considerations of this kind that have prompted the present authors to tap English majors' opinions about a version of the document that they were familiar with and had the opportunity to use on a regular basis, that is the *European language portfolio for senior high school students and language learners in institutions of higher education* (*ELP 16+*) (Bartczak et al. 2010). In the first part, this tool will briefly be characterized and previous research related to its implementation will succinctly be overviewed. This will be followed by the description of the research project, the presentation of its results as well as the lessons that can be taken from them with respect to the characteristics of the instrument.

2. *ELP 16+* - key features and previous research

Given the large number of publications about the *ELP* in general and *ELP 16+* in particular (e.g. Lenz 2004; Marciniak 2005; Pawlak 2006, 2007, 2008a, 2009; Krzemińska 2009) and the availability of such information on various websites, it would make little sense to provide a detailed description of the document at this juncture. Therefore, only the most crucial issues will be highlighted, specifically with respect to the version of the document used in the study to be reported below and a brief overview of previous research projects focusing on various aspects of using this document will be offered.

Any *ELP*, irrespective of what target group it is intended for and what specific goals it is expected to attain, has to meet a number of requirements spelled out in the *Principles and guidelines* (Schneider and Lenz 2001). Among other things, it should foster the development of plurilingualism and pluriculturalism, make provisions for treating such development as a life-long process, take into account all of the users' experiences in getting to know languages and cultures, stimulate the growth of learner autonomy, and be the property of the learner. In doing all of these, it should simultaneously perform a *pedagogic function*, which is related to providing guidance and support for learners in their efforts to learn languages, and a *reporting function*, which allows learners to regularly record their proficiency in different languages and experiences they have in this regard. The document should be based on the common levels of competence described in the *CEFR*, providing learners with numerous opportunities for self-assessment and at the same time allowing the recoding of formal evaluation, whether it comes from teachers, educational authorities or examination bodies. Equally important is mandatory division of the instrument into three parts, that is: (1) the *Language passport*, where learners' proficiency and experiences can be recorded (2) the *Language biography*, which encourages users to reflect on the process of learning and engage in self-assessment, and (3) the *Dossier*, where specimen of learners' achievements and experiences can be included.

These guidelines notwithstanding, the designers of new versions of *ELP* enjoy a certain degree of freedom, which allows them to adjust it to the specificity of a particular group and the part that is most amenable to exercising this freedom is the *Language biography*. When it comes to *ELP 16+*, its developers were guided in their decisions by the conviction that senior high school learners and university students are likely to use the document independently a lot and that emphasis should be placed on fostering their independence in language learning. As a consequence of these stipulations, extensive instructions and explanations were included and the pedagogic function was given the most prominence, with the consequence that copious opportunities were provided for users

to think about the learning process, discover how they can become autonomous and find out what strategies they can use to make their learning more effective. In view of what was said above, it is not surprising that the most extensive part of the tool is the *Language biography*, not least because it is there that the pedagogic function can most fully be realized and the designers have the most leeway in deciding how it should be done. Thus, it contains numerous sections devoted to such issues as its users' experiences in using additional languages in Poland and abroad, various resources that can be drawn on for this purpose, strategies that can be employed in working on different target language skills and subsystems, beliefs about the process of language learning, the level of autonomy, goals, stronger and weaker points as regards the command of different languages, and refection on the process of language learning. What is important, in each case, learners are given a chance to indicate their choices or include comments at different points in time with reference to the whole range of languages they are familiar with so that potential changes can be traced in this respect.

Not surprisingly, *ELP 16+* has been subject to a number of empirical investigations which have primarily aimed at establishing the ways in which the instrument is perceived by its users, that is language teachers and their learners, the extent in which it can contribute to the development of autonomy and the degree to which it can promote self-assessment. In the first attempt to examine opinions about the utility of *ELP 16+*, Pawlak (2006, 2007) provided an overview of the insights emanating from the preliminary and final piloting stage of the document, the second of which involved the analysis of questionnaires and reports sent by 34 teachers as well as questionnaires filled out by 832 students and a sample of randomly chosen, completed copies of the tool. The results, most of which provided an impetus for introducing a number of modifications into the final version, indicated, among other things, that learners found it hard to self-evaluate their language skills, they were reluctant to manifest autonomy, and expressed doubts about the value of reflection and systematic documentation of the learning process. All of these may have led to the belief that working with the portfolio on a regular basis made little sense and an apparent gap between what the participants declared in the questionnaires how they in fact used the document. Beliefs about the role of *ELP 16+* were also investigated in another study conducted by Pawlak (2008a, 2010) among English majors in the first year of a BA program. Also in this case, it turned out that the participants were not very optimistic about the positive impact of the document and it was clear that they were unlikely to use it on a regular basis. The same study sought as well to determine the effect of the regular use of the tool in classes devoted to selected aspects of language acquisition and learning over the period of one academic year. The relevant data were collected by means of autonomy questionnaires

administered at the start and end of the course, diaries kept by the students, observations of the classes they attended, interviews with ten selected participants, and some of the filled out documents. It was found that the impact of the intervention was at best minimal, an outcome, however, that could not be entirely reflective of the value of *ELP 16+* but rather the ways in which it was used (e.g. not in the course of language classes as such). The role of *ELP 16+* in developing autonomy was also explored by Mystkowska-Wiertelak (2008), who decided to check whether the use of the tool with this purpose in mind enhances grammatical accuracy in the case of 29 English philology students. The analysis of the data gathered by means of questionnaires tapping the incidence of autonomous behaviors as well as the use of strategies for learning grammar demonstrated that there is indeed a positive relationship between higher levels of learner independence and achievement in learning grammatical structures. Finally, Krzemińska (2009) carried out an action research study in which she looked into the impact of *ELP 16+* on the development of self-assessment skills in the case of writing among German philology students, focusing upon such areas as changes in the perception of self-assessment, the influence of the document and evaluation of the development of writing skills, the role of *ELP 16+* in fostering self-assessment, and the extent to which it contributes to effective self-assessment of writing skills. She found that the role of the instrument in all of these areas was beneficial but cautioned at the same time that it has to be accompanied by systematic training in the use of different techniques of self-evaluation. While the results of all of these studies are insightful, it is interesting to look once again into the ways that *ELP 16+* is perceived by present-day English philology students who frequently represent considerably lower levels of language proficiency than in the past, are less concerned with accuracy than fluency, and for whom the use of modern technologies is an integral part of their lives.

3. The study

3.1. Purpose of the study

The main objective of the study undertaken by the present authors was to delve into the reasons behind a steadily growing lack of appreciation for the *ELP* among students majoring in English, as manifested in their opinions expressed in class and disappointing engagement in tasks and activities based on different parts of the tool. This emic perspective was chosen with a view to obtaining a finer-grained picture of the meanings that students, many of whom will become language teachers, ascribe to the document. As a result, the focus was shifted towards student interpretations of the *ELP*, attitudes towards it, opinions and motivations behind its use.

3.2. Participants

The participants were 60 (22 male and 38 female) first year students enrolled in a three-year BA program from two institutions of higher education. Both cohorts were following the same course of study, which, apart from extensive instruction in English as a foreign language, included classes on history, literature, culture and linguistics, all of which were conducted in English. Even though the proficiency level represented by the students could be described as ranging from B1 to B2, as specified in the levels laid out in the *CEFR*, the existence of conspicuous differences among individual students in this respect should be acknowledged.

3.3. Data collection and analysis

The data were collected following a three-month period during which the participants had regular access to the *ELP 16+* in the course of acquisition and learning classes that are included in the first-year curriculum with a view to equipping students with the necessary skills and knowledge that would enable them to reflect upon their own ways of learning and increase the effectiveness of this process. At the end of the winter semester, the students were requested to write a 200-word review of the *ELP*, having first been reminded of the distinctive characteristics of the genre. It was explained to the students that each should contain a general introduction containing a short description of the reviewed text, also accompanied by the discussion of both strong and weak points. The choice of this specific data-collection tool was dictated by the conviction on the part of the researchers that the task in the course of which information was to be gathered should not be exceedingly challenging for the participants in light of their overall proficiency level. The reviews were anonymous and the students were assured that their opinions would have no bearing on their final grade in the course. The analysis of the data collected in this way was qualitative in nature, and was conducted first separately and then jointly by the present authors. It involved carefully reading through the submitted narratives, identifying common themes and coding the recurrent ideas, with the codes being constantly revised and updated. The researchers used memos and annotations to record any immediate observations and the thematic categories identified in the data were mutually inspected, compared, and either merged or dropped.

3.4. Findings

Most (but not all) of the narratives followed the recommended pattern and comprised an introduction, a section consisting of positive remarks and a separate one comprising negative comments. In a number of reviews, however, only

negative opinions were expressed. The opening sentence in the overwhelming majority of the reviews started with a phrase: "The ELP is . . .", followed by the word "tool" or "document", and a whole host of individual interpretations, as exemplified in the following comment: "a useful tool for learning", "a document comprising hints and clues on language learning", or "a document whose aim is to encourage learning and support language learning".[1] Numerous definitions focused on the applications of the *ELP* and included infinitive phrases stating what purpose the ELP could serve. For example, one of the students wrote: "to document accomplishments, to make learners assess their level on their own, to help learners monitor progress, to make learning easier, to show what to learn, to get to know more about learning languages, to help understand ways in which we learn, show strategies, show new techniques of learning". Only one of the respondents seemed to grasp the wider political agenda behind the ELP, saying that it can be used "to promote unity in Europe". In some cases, the copula was followed by an adjective or an adjectival phrase, some on a positive, others on a negative note, as is evident in the comments as: "helpful", "completely unnecessary", or "useless for me personally". Some of the students admitted that they initially misinterpreted the purposes for which the tool could be applied, writing, for example, that: "it surprised me because it is about learning and not for learning".

A thorough analysis of the core of the reviews, namely the positive and negative aspects mentioned, created at the request of the researchers, yielded the following thematic categories: *self-assessment*, *awareness*, *guidance*, *technical issues*, *anachronism* or *irrelevance*. In most cases, the respondents chose to refer to the opportunity for self-assessment offered by the *ELP*, stressing at the same time the ease with which such an appraisal could be conducted. For many of the students, the *ELP* is a simple and easy way to establish the proficiency level, as made clear in the comments: "you can establish your level (…) find weaknesses and strengths". The participants also appeared to have recognized the potential of the instrument for documenting target language development for the sake of both keeping track of one's own progress ("it helps you monitor, document your improvement (…) dates help you follow your development") and showing it to others as proof of describing your competences in a uniform and reliable way ("you can show your skills to other people or institutions").

The second most recurrent theme was the realization that the *ELP* fosters reflection on the nature of language and language learning. Many of the respondents admitted that, thanks to the portfolio, they realized the magnitude of the challenge that learning a foreign language represents and understood that it involves developing different skills that may not be equally prominent at

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[1] Original wording is preserved in all of the provided excerpts.

a particular moment and that frequent revisions are indispensable. Moreover, the use of the tool brought to their attention the existence of a number of issues that impact one's linguistic development such as the existence of English as a lingua franca, cultural differences, or the need for a life-long engagement in the learning process. Another feature of the portfolio that gained wide appreciation among participants was the abundant opportunities it offered for discovering one's own characteristics, identifying the strengths and weaknesses with respect to the target language, and becoming more aware of one's limitations and talents. As one of the students pointed out: "you can get to know yourself better, understand ways humans learn languages, and use that lesson in your learning".

Another important quality of the *ELP* which was recognized by the students was the fact that it provided practical guidance for, as many of them stressed, *individual* students. In the course of working with the instrument, a conviction was created that the advice and assistance offered is not directed at all students but, rather, respects individual needs and requirements allowing the learner to choose options that best match his or her individual profile. As was stressed by many of the participants, the portfolio acquainted the learners with a whole gamut of options, tips and clues on how to make the most of the time spent on language learning. An additional asset was that an abundant mass of information concerning styles, strategies as well as advice on effective ways of learning languages was crammed into a single, comparatively thin book. Particularly welcoming appeared to be the fact that the tool managed to direct the students' attention to metacognitive strategies, an area which, as they claimed, it typically largely neglected or underestimated. One of the students expressed regret about not having been introduced to many of the issues tackled by the *ELP* earlier in the course of his language education. This is evident in the comment "I wish I had seen it while at secondary school" as this might have apparently spared him numerous inconveniences and wasted opportunities.

Inconsistent opinions were expressed with reference to the layout and organization of the book, the category that was labeled *technical issues* by the present authors. Some of the participants praised the document for its easiness and clarity, while others complained about its size and weight or the fact that there was insufficient space to fill out the gaps. Negative opinions concerned, as the students put it, "dull, unattractive pages, without pictures or photographs". A slightly different line of criticism was leveled at the choice of tasks and activities since they were regarded as boring and monotonous, often requiring only one type of response.

The final category described as *anachronism* or *irrelevance* concerned two separate issues. The first was frequent mention of either outdated or traditional learning or teaching techniques and equipment or technology that is no longer used, and the second was related to specifying doubts concerning the reliability

of the *ELP* as a means of assessment. To be more specific, a number of respondents observed that the section on vocabulary learning strategies referred only to one aspect of vocabulary knowledge whereas others expressed either their disapproval of some of the learning techniques listed in the *Language biography* or concerns about their effectiveness. A grossly exaggerated opinion that the portfolio is "a collection of facts a normal human being discovers by the age of 5" should probably be excluded from analysis. However, it needs to be remembered that the reviews were written at the request of the students' regular teacher and because of this many of the students might have been disinclined and unwilling to disclose their genuine viewpoint. The extreme opinion testifies to a more general conviction that many of the ideas presented in the document were trivial and naïve. Much criticism concerned the portfolio's treatment of modern technology and it was often indicated that it includes references to equipment or software that is no longer available (e.g., floppy disks, tapes) and encourages performing activities with its use. On the other hand, some of the comments made it clear that *ELP 16+* does not mention widely available information and computer technologies, currently employed by learners and teachers on daily basis.

An equally serious line of criticism was directed at the portfolio as a means of self-assessment, because, as the respondents observed, "people lie, overestimate or underestimate their skills (...) it is only for those who are honest and aware". Many of the participants found it difficult to choose between 'yes' or 'no' options when asked to self-assess, given the degree of complexity of the language skills under scrutiny. Moreover, they maintained that, despite the premises underling its creation, the *ELP* it is not a widely accepted tool for documenting one's language knowledge, neither in Poland nor abroad, since only official certificates are required if a job or university application is submitted. An important observation was made as well with reference to the descriptions of the levels of assessment of particular skills. First, the students thought that these were too general or even vague; secondly, they were not believed to correspond to course requirements, neither did they reflect the syllabi implemented at the institutions of higher education that the students attended.

4. Discussion and conclusions

The picture that emerges from the analysis of the narratives produced by the students after a three-month period in which they regularly worked with *ELP 16+* is for the most of its part positive. This is because the beneficial impact of the material included in the document was acknowledged by the majority of the participants. Its positive contribution to target language development was

mainly associated with providing learners with guidelines concerning the techniques that can be used to increase the effectiveness of learning and enhance enjoyment and satisfaction that can be related to it, on the one hand, and raising self-awareness of different aspects of the learning process, on the other. Despite a generally favorable appraisal of *ELP 16+*, a wide range of critical comments were offered, especially those connected with using this tool to assess one's proficiency level. Many of these negative voices seem to have resulted from the fact that, in the Polish educational context, formal examinations determine learners' prospects for the future. Therefore, students typically have little or no experience in assessing the mastery of target language skills and subsystems and, as a result, they hardly trust their own judgments in this respect, considering activities aimed to enhance it a waste of time. Some of the participants suggested supplementing the *ELP* with tests and quizzes that could serve as objective measures of their proficiency level. It seems warranted to say that the students' attitude could be modified if teachers took into account the outcomes of assessment performed by means of the portfolio and adjusted their teaching to the results of such self-evaluation by offering assistance or remedial teaching in areas that are in need of intervention. Another line of criticism concerned the divergence between the descriptors included in *ELP 16+* and the requirements specified by the syllabi they followed. General as they clearly need to be, descriptions of skills representing particular proficiency levels are not always perceived as helpful in assessing one's own level. They are viewed as either too vague, providing a very sketchy summary or unnecessarily detailed, referring to, for example, a particular writing genre, disregarding others.

It appears that in many cases the participants' experience in language learning and their target language knowledge outgrew the scope of information included in *ELP 16+*. Thus, a much better-suited target group for this version of the portfolio would be teenagers who have not yet reached the B2 level. The reception of the tool might also have been more positive had it taken into account rapid changes in information and computer technology. In fact, in order to meet today's students' expectations, there is an urgent need to supplement this and perhaps other versions of *ELT* with practices incorporating blended learning, e-learning, learning based on the use of multimedia or the use of corpora. For example, technology-based assessment might provide an answer to students' appeals for including more objective measures of determining their proficiency level. Moreover, monotony and boredom about which some of the students complained, could be overcome by incorporating tasks that make use of mobile technology, games and social media. All of these adjustments and modifications, which, in the light of the speed of technological development will undeniably be inevitable anyway in the foreseeable future, would clearly be feasible

in an online, interactive version of the instrument. All things considered, no matter what improvements are ultimately introduced into the *ELP*, both *ELP 16+* and the other available versions, Polish students' attitudes to it will not change for the better unless the underlying educational philosophy that defines students as passive recipients of instruction is subject to modification. While full autonomy in language learning is neither possible nor perhaps desirable in a school context, it is seems obvious that students should be equipped with skills necessary to set their goals, select the most appropriate ways of learning, opt for the use of the most useful learning aids and engage in effective self-assessment.

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