



European Language Portfolio

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**Report by
David Little
Seminar Co-ordinator**

Thursday 17 October

Official opening

The official opening of the seminar was presided over by M. Jeannot Hansen, Luxembourg representative on the Council of Europe's Steering Committee for Education. Introducing the proceedings, M. Hansen emphasized the great importance that Luxembourg attaches to the work of the Council of Europe and to language teaching, and its great interest in the European Language Portfolio.

The seminar was opened by Mme Anne Brasseur, Minister of Education, who outlined Luxembourg's linguistic situation and the educational challenges to which it gives rise. She welcomed the contribution that the Common European Framework and the European Language Portfolio can make to the formulation of a response to these challenges and wished the seminar every success.

M. Gérard Phillips, Luxembourg's ambassador to the Council of Europe, welcomed the participants on behalf of the Foreign Minister. He explained that because it attaches great importance to language teaching, Luxembourg had decided to mark its presidency of the Council of Ministers of the Council of Europe by hosting a seminar on the European Language Portfolio.

On behalf of the Council of Europe Johanna Panthier thanked the Luxembourg authorities for offering to host the seminar and briefly looked forward to the important work to be done, especially in respect of (i) proposals to develop validated ELP content and templates and (ii) the elaboration of descriptors.

Introduction to the ELP and exhibition of ELP projects

In the first part of the programme Rolf Schärer introduced the ELP and presented some validated models to participants who were new to the ELP, while those who had already developed and/or implemented ELPs prepared an exhibition of their work. Participants were encouraged to analyse the exhibits according to the criteria laid down in the *Principles and Guidelines*.

The following countries/agencies contributed to the exhibition: ALTE/EAQUALS, Armenia, Austria, Azerbaijan, Belgium, CercleS, Czech Republic, European Language Council, France, Germany, Greece, Ireland, Italy, Netherlands, Poland, Portugal, Russian Federation, Slovakia, Slovenia, Sweden, Switzerland, Turkey, United Kingdom.

Making ELP templates available for use by new developers: some issues for discussion (David Little)

The ELP is both a European and a local phenomenon. On the one hand it is firmly tied to the Common European Framework and reflects the language policies of the Council of Europe; on the other it accommodates national, regional and sectoral educational traditions, values and curricula, respects the needs of various target groups, and should be open to flexible exploitation.

The ELP was first launched as a European concept in 1997, on the basis of *Proposals for development* [CC-LANG (97) 1]. By the end of the pilot projects, in 2000, a variety

of ELP models had been developed and trialled (an overview is provided in the *Guide for ELP developers* by Günther Schneider and Peter Lenz), the standard adult passport had been designed, and the *Principles and Guidelines* had been drawn up. Towards the end of 2000 the Validation Committee was established. By May 2002 there were 30 validated ELP models, which between them displayed great variety of design and content.

The *Principles and Guidelines* define the ELP's "common core" in abstract terms, essentially: an obligatory three-part structure; a concern with plurilingualism, intercultural learning and learner autonomy; and the use of the Common Reference Levels of the Common European Framework for self-assessment. Strictly speaking the standard adult passport is not part of the "common core" since it is not obligatory. However, as it is used by all validated ELPs aimed at learners of 15 years and over, it appears to be moving towards *de facto* "common core" status.

After two years of ELP validation it is possible to identify a number of potential and actual problems: increasing variety of design may gradually smother the European identity of the ELP; newcomers must design their ELP from the bottom up – the Council of Europe can give only very limited help; copyright difficulties may arise when ELP models are published commercially; the process of validating new ELPs is time-consuming and sometimes problematic, both for developers and for the Validation Committee; it is difficult to communicate developments to all member states; and it is sometimes difficult to obtain copies of validated ELPs.

Bearing these problems in mind, we now face three major challenges. First, how can we encourage further development, so that the ELP continues to make a difference? Second, how can we learn from one another, so that the ELP becomes an agent of European exchange? And third, how can we ensure that ELP achievements are freely available across Europe?

One possible response to these challenges is to make validated ELP content (i.e., text only) and templates (i.e., text plus graphic design) available to developers via the Council of Europe website. We might also seek to benefit from one another's ELP experience by exchanging pages and support materials via national, regional and sectoral websites. And we might strengthen the European character of the ELP by gradually making the "common core" more concrete.

Validated ELP content and templates could take a number of forms, for instance: introductory texts to the ELP and its three parts; checklists for goal-setting and self-assessment; versions of the self-assessment grid for younger learners; covers for the ELP and its three parts; a passport summary for use in job applications; pages that focus on intercultural learning and experience; pages that focus on learning to learn. Validated content and templates would be made available bilingually in French and English and would be translatable into other languages. Copyright would be vested in the Council of Europe so that items could be freely used by all ELP developers.

By introducing validated ELP content and templates, the Council of Europe would make quality content and design freely available, speed up the development of new ELPs, reduce the cost of design and production, and simplify the validation process (which would allow the Validation Committee to spend more time on strategic planning and future development).

Group work on validated ELP content and templates

The issues raised by David Little were discussed in four groups. Group 1 was French-speaking (coordinator Marie-Anne Hansen-Pauly, rapporteur Dan Ion Nasta), Group 2 German-speaking (coordinator Dick Meijer, rapporteur Gareth Hughes), Group 3 English-speaking (coordinator Biljana Lajovic, rapporteur Gisela Langé), and Group 4 English-speaking (coordinator Stasé Skapiene, rapporteur Barbara Simpson). Discussion in each of the groups was guided by a questionnaire (see Table 2), which each participant completed and returned to David Little at the end of the session.

The reports from the groups were generally in favour of developing validated content and templates. On the whole the groups expressed more interest in checklists and pages dealing with intercultural learning and learning how to learn than in graphic design. However, all the groups argued that validated content and templates should be used to support the developmental process that is essential to successful ELP design and implementation; they should not be used to promote a “supermarket” approach to ELP design. The groups were also unanimous in the view that validated content and templates should be indicative rather than prescriptive and should be reviewed on a regular basis so as to avoid fossilization.

Results from the questionnaire on validated ELP content and templates

Fifty-nine participants completed the questionnaire on validated ELP content and templates. Table 1 shows the number of respondents concerned with different domains of language learning (sometimes more than one domain per participant).

TABLE 1 Number of respondents concerned with different domains of language learning	
Primary	16
Lower secondary	29
Upper secondary	28
Vocational	11
University	11
Adult	12
Migrant	5
No domain specified	7

Table 2 summarizes participants’ responses to the questionnaire by domain of language learning. On the five-point scale used in the questionnaire, average responses may be interpreted thus: 3.5–3.9 = *positive*, 4.0–4.4 = *strongly positive*, 4.5–5.0 = *very strongly positive*; for ease of interpretation, these three ranges of average response are distinguished by different weights of shading. The responses to the questionnaire confirm the reports from the groups. The majority of participants gave a *strongly positive* or *very strongly positive* response to the idea of developing validated ELP content and templates. There was a great deal of support for the development of checklists and pages on intercultural learning and learning how to learn, strong interest in the development of a passport summary, and some interest in providing a standard passport for primary and lower secondary and a standard cover design for the passport.

TABLE 2: “Should the Council of Europe make validated content and templates available to ELP developers?”

Average of participants’ responses by domain of learning:

(a) primary, (b) lower secondary, (c) upper secondary, (d) vocational, (e) university, (f) adult, (g) migrant, (h) no domain specified

	(a)	(b)	(c)	(d)	(e)	(f)	(g)	(h)
1. On a scale of 1–5 (where 1 = <i>very unimportant</i> and 5 = <i>very important</i>), how important is it to introduce validated content and templates for your domain(s) of learning	3.4	4.0	4.1	4.3	4.5	4.8	4.5	3.8
2. On a scale of 1–5, how important do you rate the following reasons for making validated content and templates available to ELP developers?								
i. To maintain and strengthen the ELP’s European identity	4.1	4.2	4.3	4.0	4.5	4.1	4.2	4.0
ii. To make it easy for newcomers to create their own ELP	4.1	4.2	4.4	4.6	4.3	4.5	4.2	4.2
iii. To protect Council of Europe copyright in key elements of the ELP and thus ensure that they are freely available to everyone	3.7	3.9	4.0	3.8	3.7	4.0	4.0	4.3
iv. To ensure a uniformly high level of quality	4.0	4.0	4.0	4.3	4.3	3.8	4.2	4.1
v. To reduce the cost of ELP design and production	3.7	3.3	3.7	4.0	3.2	3.7	4.0	3.4
vi. To make the validation process more transparent	3.8	3.6	3.7	4.3	4.1	4.5	4.6	3.9
vii. To simplify and streamline the validation process	3.8	3.5	3.8	4.3	3.9	4.2	4.6	3.4
viii. To illustrate the <i>Principles and Guidelines</i>	3.9	3.9	4.1	4.5	4.5	4.5	4.2	4.1
ix. To share what we have done so far	4.2	4.2	4.2	4.4	4.5	4.0	4.2	4.1
3. On a scale of 1–5, how important do you rate the following possible validated content and templates?								
i. Cover design for the ELP	2.6	2.9	2.9	2.5	2.6	3.0	3.5	2.9
ii. Cover design for the language passport	4.0	3.9	4.0	3.9	3.6	3.5	4.2	3.9
iii. Cover design for the language biography	2.3	2.5	2.5	1.9	2.2	2.5	2.4	2.7
iv. Cover design for the dossier	2.4	2.4	2.4	2.1	2.2	2.6	2.0	2.7
v. Passport for primary and lower secondary to set beside the standard adult passport	3.4	3.7	3.7	3.4	3.7	3.6	3.3	4.0
vi. Goal-setting and self-assessment checklists	4.3	4.2	4.1	4.5	4.7	4.8	4.6	4.4
vii. Pages on intercultural learning and experiences	3.6	3.9	4.0	4.4	4.4	4.3	4.8	4.3
viii. Pages on learning how to learn	3.8	4.1	4.2	4.4	4.4	4.6	4.8	4.1
ix. A passport summary	3.7	3.7	4.0	4.2	3.4	4.1	4.6	3.7

Friday 18 October

Writing language proficiency descriptors (Günther Schneider and Peter Lenz)

Introducing the programme for the day, Günther Schneider pointed out that descriptors are important not only for self-assessment but also for the validity of ELP models. The *Guide for developers* raises basic questions about creating and adapting descriptors and relating them to the Common Reference Levels of the Common European Framework. The day was designed around three tasks: (i) exploring the characteristics of good proficiency descriptors, (ii) adapting descriptors, and (iii) considering descriptors that relate to aspects of language learning and use other than language proficiency.

Getting to know the Common Reference Levels – origins, development, characteristics

Peter Lenz summarized the main stages in the work that led to the CEF and the ELP, emphasizing that the guiding principles were transparency and coherence, and pointing out that the Common Reference Levels are fundamental to both the CEF and the ELP. The Swiss research project led by Günther Schneider and Brian North (1993–98) had involved 290 teachers and approximately 2,700 learners, from various language learning domains. The four steps in developing the Common Reference Levels were:

1. Collect and sort descriptions of language competence.
2. Qualitative validation of descriptors in teacher workshops.
3. Data collection: assessment of learners (using video recordings as well as learners in class).
4. Statistical analysis (Rasch model) and scale-building.

The process started with about 2,000 descriptors, of which only about 300 survived. The self-assessment grid contains the best descriptors in terms of statistical validation. The Swiss research project had worked with 10 proficiency levels: A1, A2, B1 and B2 were each divided into two.

The first workshop task (re)familiarized participants with the Common Reference Levels by having them reconstruct the self-assessment grid.

Characteristics of good language proficiency descriptors

Günther Schneider explained that good descriptors refer to relevant aspects of learners' language proficiency and are interpreted in much the same way by virtually anyone who uses them. He also made clear that some descriptors may be used for various purposes while others are purpose-specific (for self-assessment, assessment by teachers/examiners, definition of objectives, etc.). The experience gained during the Swiss project showed that good descriptors have the following characteristics: they are positive, definite, clear, brief, and independent (i.e., their interpretation does not depend on other descriptors at same level). Problematic descriptors lack precision, may be too simple, and describe tasks that could be attributed to more than one Reference Level.

The second workshop task involved working with a selection of descriptors taken from ELPs. Working in groups of three, the participants had to come to a consensus on which level each descriptor belonged to. "Bad" descriptors often could not be attributed to a

particular level. Through this hands-on experience, many participants gained valuable insight into the various aspects that make up the quality (and usefulness) of a descriptor.

Adapting descriptors: reasons, methods; sources of descriptors

Günther Schneider began by distinguishing two types of descriptors, scaled and not (yet) scaled. He explained that there were various reasons for **adapting** descriptors: to suit a particular context, e.g. compatibility with curricula; to suit specific domains of use (work, study); to make descriptors more accessible to learners; to distinguish finer/narrower levels; to serve different purposes (e.g., self-assessment, goal-setting). There are various methods of adapting and creating descriptors: combining descriptors; dividing descriptors; specifying descriptors by indicating a context of use (e.g., “at my workplace”); supplementing a formulation by giving an example; simplifying wording (especially for children); combining scaled descriptors with formulations from other sources. Reasons for **developing** new descriptors include: the need to fill gaps in the illustrative scales and in existing checklists; the lack of subscales for some categories; the need to add certain tasks or aspects/components of tasks relevant to some curricula; the need for descriptors that define narrower levels so that learners can assess their progress more often; the need to provide for mediation (interpreting, translating), which has not been covered so far in the illustrative scales.

The third workshop task required participants to adapt/develop descriptors for specific target groups. The results were written on posters and displayed for the remainder of the seminar.

Describing learner competences other than language proficiency

Peter Lenz gave examples of non-scaled/non-scalable descriptors that focus on world knowledge, sociocultural knowledge, professional skills (of language teachers), and ability to learn; he summarized the CEF’s view of the competences other than language proficiency available to the language learner; in his documentation he provided pages from existing ELPs which were designed to facilitate the development of such competences.

The final discussion task of the day, for which participants returned to Thursday’s groups, was to consider for which of these competences descriptors and checklists are desirable in ELPs, and for what purpose.

Reports from the group work

In considering what types of descriptors and checklists are desirable, the groups engaged for a second time with some of the issues they had discussed on Thursday.

Group 2 addressed the question of the ELP as an instrument of lifelong learning and wondered whether we should think of an adult ELP as having a core component that is transnational and additional components that are designed to support particular learning programmes.

Focussing on upper secondary learners, Group 4 considered whether it is necessary to include thematic areas that are not strictly confined to language learning. There was a general consensus that learning to learn, intercultural competence and strategic competence must all be emphasized if the ELP is to promote lifelong learning. Group 4

also considered three possible relations between the ELP and the textbook: (i) entirely external, (ii) entirely embedded, (iii) the ELP extends language learning beyond the textbook. The group expressed the view that the appropriate use of checklists needs pedagogical scaffolding.

Group 1 agreed that language and intercultural learning must be integrated with each other; that intercultural competence has cognitive and socio-affective dimensions; and that the importance of strategic competence must not be overlooked. The group asked whether the intercultural dimension can be dealt with in the local situation or whether it requires an international effort. Finally, the group concluded that it is necessary to take a long-term view of ELP development: we are no longer pioneers, yet we may be working not for our present pupils but for their children.

Group 3 recognized the danger of overloading the ELP with material: it must not be too large or difficult for learners to handle. The group also recognized that learning strategies belong to all school subjects, not just to languages, though specific learning tools are important for the development of language awareness. Intercultural know-how should be developed in the form of activities, discussion among pupils, and interactive relations. For both of these dimensions the ELP requires not checklists but open forms.

Saturday 19 October

Issues in validating ELP models; difficulties that have arisen in the validation process (Johanna Panthier)

The Validation Committee was established by the Education Committee of the Council of Europe three years ago. It consists of nine member states: Hungary, Czech Republic, Portugal, France, Russian Federation, United Kingdom, Finland, Switzerland, Germany. Four non-voting consultants working in the field of adult or higher education assist the Committee. The committee has just been renewed with the same membership for two years, to the end of 2004. To date 37 ELPs have been validated.

The following are among the difficulties that have arisen in the validation process:

1. The *Principles and Guidelines* were drawn up before the validation process was started. Looking at the different ELP models submitted for accreditation, the Validation Committee realised that some rules are not very clear and could be interpreted in different ways. They do not make clear, for example, whether the language biography **must** always include checklists or whether self-assessment can be undertaken on some other basis.
2. The Validation Committee meets for two days twice each year, which means that it has long agendas and must work under great pressure of time.
3. ELP developers are often themselves working under constraints of time and budget, which can create dilemmas for the Validation Committee.
4. No single ELP can stand as the ideal realization of the *Principles and Guidelines*, which means that there is no concrete example to help interpret the *Principles and Guidelines*.
5. Checklists are difficult and time-consuming to develop and the Validation Committee is not in a position to validate descriptors.

6. Validation may be conditional and often includes recommendations. However, budgetary limitations make it difficult to give adequate feedback and guidance to developers, who must sometimes pay the travelling and subsistence expenses of visiting experts.

To ease the time pressure on ELP developers the original submission deadline of three months before each Validation Committee meeting has been reduced to six weeks. Originally developers were required to submit 15 copies of their ELP, but this number has been increased to 20 to ensure that sufficient copies are available for consultation during Validation Committee meetings. In order that ELPs are accessible to the Validation Committee they must be translated in their entirety into either English or French.

The next meeting of the Validation Committee will be held on 12–13 June 2003, which means that the next submission deadline is 1 May 2003.

Update on the implementation and dissemination of ELP models in member states; action plan for further monitoring and reporting of the projects (Rolf Schärer)

Rolf Schärer began by reminding participants that interest in the ELP is spreading fast. Successful implementation depends on clear goals, commitment, effective structures and support, and a sustained effort. While the development and piloting of new models continues, the range and speed of development remain a challenge. Rolf Schärer summarized progress in the development, validation and implementation of ELPs, and argued that an effective reporting process is essential in order to disseminate information, convince newcomers, maintain interest in the long term, show that we are doing good things, and influence the shape and direction of future Council of Europe projects. He concluded by encouraging those participants who had not yet completed the new reporting form to do so as soon as possible.

Round table on “Getting an agreement on ELP common core and templates”

Barbara Simpson (Ireland) explained that she has been involved in the development of six ELPs for migrant learners of all ages and in the Milestone ELP project (which is concerned with adult migrants in vocational education). The seminar had shown how much progress has been made but also how much we have to learn from one another. On Thursday some concern had been expressed at the possible loss of local, regional or national elements in the ELP; that would indeed be a serious matter, because then the ELP would lose its relevance to learners. Friday had shown that the development of descriptors can only be undertaken as a long-term project. Barbara Simpson concluded by suggesting that we should not resist a process that allows us to benefit from collaboration.

Viljo Kohonen (Finland) agreed with Barbara Simpson’s positive estimation of the seminar. The ELP confronts us with various creative tensions and challenges: European vs. national interests; the question of what should constitute the “common core” and the extent to which it should be standardized; the relation between the ELP and language curricula. Essentially, Viljo Kohonen saw two possible roles for the ELP: as the basis of a learning package or as a “pedagogical backbone”. Whichever role we choose, the ELP must not be seen as extra work. The issue of ELP ownership is complex: it involves

learner, teacher, national authorities, and the Council of Europe. Viljo Kohonen recommended that ELP design and implementation should favour a holistic rather than a narrowly linguistic approach, transaction rather than transmission, “bottom up” rather than “top down”; and he urged developers to invent their own ELPs, rejecting ready-made solutions and working in favour of integration and growth.

Christine Tagliante (France) remarked that the exhibition at the beginning of the seminar had shown how much work has been done in a very short time. She suggested, however, that the great variety of ELP models may lower the ELP’s visibility. She felt that agreement in principle to the developmental proposals outlined on Thursday should recentre the ELP, though she thought that validated ELP content and templates should not be mandatory. Learners at primary school were perhaps the most specific public for the ELP: we shall see real gains when children start using the ELP at a very early age and end up becoming language teachers. She argued that a ludic orientation is essential to the success of the ELP at primary level. The French primary ELP uses specially developed checklists, and much thought was given to the design of the language biography. This model also includes a letter to parents and a guide that is addressed directly to children. The French-speaking group had considered whether a language passport should be developed for young learners as evidence of their membership of the plurilingual population of Europe.

Gunther Abuja (Austria) began with a quotation: “Everything has already been seen, but not by everybody.” He explained that he is involved in piloting a lower secondary ELP throughout Austria. Development at this level will create options for further development downwards to primary and upwards to upper secondary. The Austrian lower secondary ELP has a strong pedagogical aspect, focussing particularly on learning how to learn. This creates a need for pedagogically supportive material which can be met internationally by fostering a spirit of “ELP shareware”. The Austrian lower secondary ELP has a teacher’s guide that includes a model letter to parents. Gunther Abuja concluded by noting one point of concern: the development of language learning standards alongside the ELP movement in Europe. In Austria these standards have been designed on the basis of the CEF, but they go into schools as checklists and may conflict with the ELP.

Radka Perclová (Czech Republic) felt that the seminar had given participants an excellent opportunity to improve their intercultural experience. We began with an Irish/British day, then we had a Swiss day: we should put these two things together so that we have validated content for strategies etc. but also for descriptors. Why should ELP developers spend sleepless nights at home when they can work together? Valid and user-friendly descriptors for younger learners are a particularly acute need, and the Czech Republic is happy to offer what it has developed in the way of descriptors for learners from 11 to 15. When Czech teachers were asked to consider how far the descriptors coincided with their teaching aims and the textbook, they said that they taught in a way that was mostly in harmony with the descriptors, but they evaluated the same textbook in a variety of ways. The same thing is likely to happen with the ELP: each teacher has her own beliefs, which serve as a filter for pedagogical decision making.

In response to questions from the audience, Johanna Panthier said that the Council of Europe has launched a project to produce a manual for developers of language tests and examinations; in due course there will also be a manual that provides guidance for

teachers in assessing their learners. Viljo Kohonen said that the greater part of ELP work will always have to be done by teachers in their own context, so there is no conflict between inventing your own wheel and using pre-validated content and templates. Barbara Simpson reported that in Ireland versions of the ELP have been designed to help non-English-speaking pupils to gain access to the mainstream curriculum. Rolf Schärer noted that researchers at Sofia University have studied what learners need for bilingual schooling; also that migrants can record their mother tongue in the ELP, yet for the majority of learners the ELP excludes the mother tongue. Christine Tagliante reported that children in the south of France had been very inventive in designing their own ELPs.

Summing up (David Little)

David Little reviewed the programme of the past two and a half days: the exhibition of ELPs and ELP projects; the discussion of the proposal to develop validated ELP content and templates; the intensive work with descriptors; Johanna Panthier's report on the work of the Validation Committee; Rolf Schärer's reminder of the importance of appropriate and adequate reporting; and the concluding reflections of the round table. It was now for the Council of Europe to decide how to proceed with the development of validated content and templates.

Closing of the seminar

On behalf of the Council of Europe Johanna Panthier thanked the Luxembourg authorities for sponsoring the seminar, Mme Gaby Kunsch and her team for their excellent organization, and the participants for their contribution. Mme Kunsch thanked the members of her team and the staff of Parc Hotel, Mondorf-les-Bains, for all their efforts on behalf of the seminar.

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