

Student Autonomy and the European Language Portfolio: Evaluating the Finnish Pilot Project (1998-2001)

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Abstract

The paper begins with a description of the design and development of the Finnish ELP pilot project as part of a large European ELP development project. The findings are discussed then with regard to five content categories arising from the qualitative data: (1) The pedagogical weight and significance of the ELP; (2) The language teacher's professional growth; (3) Motivation and tutoring of the ELP-oriented student work; (4) Integration of the ELP with the curricula – making it feasible; (5) Amount of labour – making it possible in the classroom. The results indicate that the ELP has pedagogical significance for several reasons and that it can be integrated in the foreign language curricula. The language teachers' professional support and inservice training are seen as a prerequisite for a successful use and development of the ELP in school.

Resumen

Nuestra contribución comienza con una descripción del diseño y del desarrollo del proyecto piloto del Portafolios Europeo de las Lenguas (PEL) en Finlandia, que forma parte del proyecto global para las lenguas europeas. A continuación comentamos los resultados en lo que concierne a cinco categorías de contenido que surgen de los datos cualitativos: 1) el peso pedagógico y la significación del PEL, 2) La evolución profesional del profesorado de lenguas, 3) la motivación y la tutorización del trabajo del alumnado, cuyos objetivos se orientan a los propuestos por el PEL, 4) la integración del PEL en los currícula (cómo hacerlo factible), y 5) la cantidad de trabajo necesaria (cómo llevarlo realmente a la clase). Los resultados indican que el PEL tiene una significación pedagógica por varias razones y que puede ser integrado en los currícula de lenguas extranjeras. El apoyo profesional al profesorado de lenguas y su formación permanente se valoran como prerequisites para usar y desarrollar de forma satisfactoria el PEL en la clase.

1. Developing the Finnish ELP project

1.1. A note on the European Language Portfolio. The European Language Portfolio (ELP) is connected with the *Common European Framework* (CEF 2001) as a pedagogical language learning and reporting instrument. It allows students to maintain a record of their language learning experience, both formal and informal. As part of the Framework, the general purpose of the ELP is to deepen mutual understanding among citizens in Europe, respecting the diversity of cultures and ways of life. It consists of the three complementary sections: (1) the language passport, (2) the language biography and (3) the dossier. The *pedagogic function* of

the ELP emphasises a reflective approach in language learning aimed at fostering student autonomy, learning to learn and plurilingualism and pluriculturalism. The *reporting function* of the ELP adds an important tool for documenting communicative proficiency with regard to the criterion-referenced level descriptors (at levels A, B and C, each having two sub-levels).

A consistent and regular use of the three parts in foreign language education provides a wide range of possibilities for promoting language learning towards learner autonomy. The ELP can offer significant possibilities for promoting language learning in terms of both the *learning processes* (pedagogic function) and the *learning outcomes* (reporting function). This distinction between the pedagogic and reporting functions of the European language portfolio is crucial for understanding the potential of the ELP for enhancing foreign language education.

To investigate the feasibility, potential and practicality of the European Language Portfolio, the Council of Europe launched and coordinated a pilot project which was conducted in 15 member states (1998-2000), involving a total of some 3000 teachers and 30,000 students at various levels and sectors of schooling, from primary to adult education. The national/ regional project coordinators had regular meetings (1-2 per year) hosted by the participating member states to monitor the work, support the national projects and review the progress of the ELP research and development work (final report, Schärer 2000).

1.2. Conducting the Finnish ELP project. As part of this large research and development project carried out under the auspices of the Council of Europe, Finland undertook a national pilot project (1998-2001) in the Tampere (Pirkanmaa) area. It was coordinated by the Department of Teacher Education in Tampere University under the joint leadership of Viljo Kohonen and Ulla Pajukanta. The project was carried out in 8 schools (4 lower secondary and 2 upper secondary schools and 2 vocational institutions), with a total of 360 students and 22 language teachers. We extended it over three school years because we wanted the participants to complete the whole cycle of schooling (lower/upper secondary/ vocational), including the final completion of the ELPs at the end of the three-year cycle.

The aims of the project evolved in the joint discussions at the project seminars during the first project year and comprised the following broad areas of focus:

1. To promote self-directed, socially responsible language learning
2. To develop reflective learning and self-assessment, emphasizing learning to learn in foreign language education
3. To develop the pedagogic and reporting functions of the language portfolio as an integrated approach
4. To promote language teachers' professional growth as an essential component of the language portfolio research and development work
5. To support negotiated learning and student commitment
6. To examine the practicality and usability of the language portfolio, both for the students, teachers and educational institutions

Based on our previous research on site-based curriculum development and collegial teacher collaboration (Kohonen and Kaikkonen 1996; 2001), we had a clear emphasis on fostering the participating teachers' professional growth in an

experiential, reflective learning framework (Kohonen 2001a). The decisions concerning the project implementation were discussed and negotiated together with the participants. For this purpose we established a project planning group consisting of the two coordinators and three teachers representing the schools. The group evaluated the ongoing pilot work regularly in monthly meetings and made the decisions about the programmes for the seminar days.

The seminars and the joint planning work created a spirit of professional sharing and negotiated learning in the project. The seminars had a central element of small group discussions which provided the teachers with opportunities for mutual, interactive learning. The interactive process also encouraged the teachers to experiment with similar techniques in their language classes based on their own experiences of reflective learning.

We developed the concept of bridging tasks involving professional reading and/ or classroom piloting on topics discussed and agreed during the seminar day. We invited the teachers to study a great deal of relevant ELP-related professional literature (in duplicated copies for each) and discuss their thoughts in their ELP school teams. The experiences from the schools fed into the group work during the next workshop day. The bridging tasks thus provided continuity between the workshops and gave teachers opportunities to explore their work in the light of the inputs from the seminars and the reading materials.

We also encouraged the teachers to record their experiences, thoughts and insights in personal diaries and collect their worksheet materials for the students, as well as samples of student work, in their project portfolios. Based on such qualitative research and development material, we asked the teachers to submit professional development essays at the end of each school year to report on important experiences and findings of their teaching during the past year. This qualitative material also provided an important source of data for the present project evaluation. In this way reflective, interactive teacher learning gradually became an essential element of our project work. It was aimed at supporting the teachers' professional growth and encouraging them to use reflective learning techniques with their students.

In the course of the project we developed a useful distinction between the pedagogic and reporting functions of the Dossier as well, in accordance with the dual function of the ELP. We introduced the Dossier as a regular *pedagogical tool* in classroom work and in homework. We encouraged the students to develop their awareness of themselves as language learners, of the language learning tasks, and of their individual and social learning processes. For this purpose we asked them to reflect on teacher-designed questions and semi-structured statements or to write down brief open-ended reflections in their learning diaries at suitable points. These reflections were often linked with the ongoing language learning tasks and work assignments and completed during the lessons or as homework.

The dossier thus had a *dual function* as a pedagogical and reporting tool. As a *pedagogical instrument*, we used for formative process reflection and evaluation. The teachers guided their students' learning processes by negotiating the tasks, deadlines and ways of working. During the process they gave on-line comments and

feedback as necessary. For the students, the dossier functioned as a practical tool to take increasing charge of their language learning by setting goals, making their action plans and monitoring the ongoing learning process. It also helped them to reflect on their learning, both independently and in small groups, and encouraged them to comment on each others' learning processes and assignments (Kohonen 2001b,d; 2002a).

At the end of the school year (or the intensive study periods used in the upper secondary and some lower secondary schools), we used the *reporting function* of the Dossier to facilitate the students reporting their language learning for summative evaluation. The teacher guided them to make a selection of their portfolio assignments by collecting authentic documents of their language learning outcomes, whether written or spoken records (audio tapes and videos). The students assessed these tasks according to either the national assessment scale or (towards the end of the project) by using the Council of Europe's self-assessment grid, or doing both. The teacher guided them first to present the assignments to each other in small groups for peer commenting and peer-assessment. After this process they submitted the dossiers to the teacher for summative evaluation. This dual function of the dossier provided an important *interface between language learning, teaching and assessment*.

In accordance with this emphasis on reflective work on the ELPs we realised that we needed to widen the original term "portfolio assessment" into a broader process-oriented concept. This is how we developed the concept "portfolio-oriented language learning" after about a year's project work. We needed this concept to refer to the negotiated teaching-learning process whereby the students gradually took increasing charge of their learning, within the pedagogical learning space and guidance provided by the teacher (Kohonen 2002a).

Based on our previous experience on reflective language learning in the project team, we set out to explore the pedagogic function of the ELP in order to integrate it with site-based language curricula and existing textbooks and other learning materials. Within the theoretical framework of experiential learning assumed in the pilot project, we saw student reflection and interaction as an inherent part of the learning process. Reflection is based on the students' self-understanding as language learners in the individual and social learning processes. Teachers taught the basic concepts of the ELP to the students and repeatedly guided them to reflect on how their understanding progressed over the project years. They also facilitated the students reflecting on their role as socially responsible learners, and how they could become more skilled language learners and language users.

As reflective learning was a new thing to most of the students, we aimed at teaching it as explicitly and as concretely as the familiar language skills, using reflection as a tool for learning reflection and becoming a more reflective student. In several of our initial teacher workshops, we spent a great deal of time putting together our understanding and experiences of teaching reflective learning. In small groups the teachers outlined concrete lesson plans for the initial motivation and orientation of the students for reflective learning. The findings were reviewed together and the resulting lesson plan outlines and the pedagogical guidelines were duplicated for all teachers. They used the plans in their classes with the necessary

modifications as appropriate to their students. In subsequent seminars the teachers again shared their experiences with each other, getting new perspectives and ideas to enrich their own experiences. We returned to the question of student motivation and guidance in many workshops during the project.

In the course of the project we consistently emphasised the students' understanding and awareness of their language learning as part of the portfolio-oriented work. Designing options, tutoring the work processes and providing encouragement and feedback to the students was pedagogically quite challenging for the teachers. Collegial on-site support and joint discussions at the project seminars proved very useful for sharing ideas and considering possible ways of dealing with emerging problems of student guidance, motivation and evaluation. We organised these seminars at regular intervals (monthly, with a total of 32 seminars during the three years' time). As these seminars took place during school days (with substitute teachers in the classes), the investment of the local municipalities on the ELP project was quite substantial.

To introduce the reflective work orientation to the students, we began with the *students themselves* as learners in general and as language learners in particular. Accordingly, the teachers worked first on a *basic reflective orientation* by facilitating their students to reflect on their language learning experiences and beliefs and assumptions of learning, and how they saw their role as language learners. Learning to be reflective about oneself as a human being and as a language student was an easier start for reflective work than using the self-assessment grid right away. The teachers used simple questions or semi-structured statements to facilitate student reflection. The examples below give an idea of the kind of questions that we developed for student guidance:

- What are your strengths as a student in school?
- What weaknesses (shortcomings) do you have as a student?
- How do you see your role as a language learner?
- What are your expectations for the language teacher?
- What aims do you wish to set for this course (week, etc)?
- What are you going to do to reach your aims?
- What aspects of language learning are easy (difficult) for you?
- How might you improve your work/ your working habits?
- What is a good group member like in our language class? Why?
- How might you improve your participation in your groups?
- How do you understand (intercultural) communication?
- What elements and skills does language learning include?
- What elements do you find easy (difficult) for you? Why?
- What skills are you good at in your language use?
- How can you improve in your language use skills?

As part of every work assignment, the teachers asked the students to reflect on different aspects of their learning processes and what they thought they learned from doing the task. In this way we facilitated them becoming more reflective about themselves and their language learning, acquire some basic understanding of their learning, and obtain concrete tools for reflective self-assessment (Kohonen 1999; 2000a; 2001b,d).

Negotiating (part of) the curriculum aims, contents and processes with the students helped them to gradually take more responsibility for their learning. Having options entailed personal choices about how to set the aims and make action plans. The plans specified the time frame for the work to be done: agreeing on the deadlines for consulting and returning the completed assignments, the contents to include in the report, and the expected outcomes, possibly with (minimum) requirements for acceptable work (e.g. in terms of the length of the report and the range of topics to be dealt with, the quality of the language and the length of the work).

To promote more independent work, teachers gave students curriculum-related assignments that were open enough to leave space for real choices, as appropriate with respect to the students' age, learning skills and the level of proficiency in the given language. Seeing options, making choices, reflecting on the processes and outcomes and making new action plans were essential components for developing increasingly autonomous learning in our portfolio-oriented approach. By the end of the project we characterised the approach by the following properties (Kohonen 2001b,c; 2002a):

1. Giving students opportunities to introduce themselves in their own personal ways
2. Giving versatile evidence of the quality of student learning and development as a learner
3. Including a collection of learning tasks, with an action plan negotiated with the teacher
4. Reflecting on the contents and processes of language learning
5. Involving peer assessments and teacher comments/ feedback
6. Showing what the student can do with his/ her language skills, in relation to the Council of Europe's proficiency level descriptors

Language learning necessarily involves a number of important affective, social and personal student properties that are educationally valuable learning goals in their own right, not just as means for promoting cognitive aspects of learning (cf. Arnold (ed.) 1999). Students inevitably bring their personal histories (autobiographies) to the language classes. They carry with them their personal beliefs and assumptions of language learning which they have acquired as part of their learning histories in their families and in school. These features evolve, one way or another, in connection with the affective, social and cognitive processes of language learning. They impinge indirectly on the student's observable language performance. Such invisible learning outcomes include a number of properties that are essential for the development of language competence and student autonomy (Kohonen 2000a; 2001b,d; 2002a):

1. Commitment to and ownership of one's language learning
2. Tolerance of ambiguity and uncertainty in communicative situations and learning in general
3. Willingness to take risks in order to cope with communicative tasks
4. Understanding of oneself as a language learner and a language user in terms of the beliefs about language use and one's role as a learner
5. Understanding of one's cultural identity and what it means to become an intercultural speaker

6. Skills and attitudes for socially responsible learning and language use
7. Plurilingualism, involving a reflective awareness and appreciation of languages and language learning, as well as assuming respect for and appreciation of cultural diversity and otherness
8. Learning skills and strategies necessary for continuous, independent language learning
9. A reflective basic orientation to language learning, with abilities for self-assessment of language skills

We discussed the questions of transparency and visibility of learning outcomes repeatedly in the project seminars. The teachers designed pedagogical ways of facilitating their students noticing such aspects of learning as part of their personal and social learning processes. This work was thus aimed at increasing students' awareness of the variety of outcomes connected with their language learning. We wanted to make such properties more concrete and observable learning outcomes, just as the familiar grammatical categories of language descriptions. Through increased awareness they gradually became more accessible for conscious goal-setting, planning, monitoring and evaluation. Making such invisible elements more visible and transparent was a considerable challenge to the participants, both teachers and students.

To sum up this brief discussion, our ELP journey evolved during the project through the following steps (Kohonen 2002a):

1. Clarifying the participating teachers' educational orientation, their pedagogical beliefs and assumptions and conceptions of language learning, i.e., how the teachers saw their task and role in the classroom
2. Clarifying the students' views, beliefs, assumptions of themselves as language learners: how they saw their roles and responsibilities in the social classroom context
3. Working towards a supportive environment of negotiated language learning and respect of diversity
4. Working towards reflection on the individual and social learning processes and increasing awareness of different aspects entailed in foreign language learning
5. Guiding the students to undertake a number of portfolio assignments each school year, carried out in the target language, and discussed and evaluated both individually and in groups
6. Learning to use the Council of Europe's self-assessment grid for assessing their learning assignments. In addition to this task-specific assessment, the students also assessed their communicative skills in more generic terms, with the help of the checklists.

The data of the present study comes from several sources: (1) the teacher's developmental essays at the end of the project, (2) student questionnaires and interviews of a small number of students from five participating schools, (3) discussions and reporting at the intensive project evaluation seminars held in spring 2000 and 2001 (small group reports); (4) teachers' published action research papers in the two project publications (2000 and 2003, in Finnish); (5) student portfolios, and (6) my own field notes from the seminars during the 3-year project.

2. Major findings of the ELP project

I analysed the data to establish the content categories that emerged from the qualitative empirical data. I discuss the major project findings in this paper in terms of the following perspectives to the ELP-oriented foreign language learning:

1. The pedagogical weight and significance of the ELP
2. The language teacher's professional growth
3. Motivation and tutoring of the ELP-oriented student work
4. Integration of the ELP with the curricula – making it feasible
5. Amount of labour – making it possible in the classroom
6. Problems and Constraints

2.1. The pedagogical weight and significance of the ELP. The ELP was possible to use at all levels of communicative proficiency. Students with low proficiency could be guided to make small modifications to textbook inputs (e.g., making simple sentences/ short texts of their own). Through such modifications they could do something meaningful with the language. More proficient students could operate at linguistically more demanding levels and carry out modest communicative tasks on their own. More advanced users, on the other hand, could handle a variety of texts, produce their own discourses, interact fluently and use authentic texts for their communicative needs. In mixed-ability groups, the teacher could use this kind of flexibility for differentiation purposes, asking linguistically more talented students to undertake more demanding and ambitious tasks and expecting higher standards of language use from them. While the linguistically less able students took more modest tasks the teacher could still encourage them to work hard to do well within their language abilities.

The teachers noted that portfolio assignments gave them opportunities to get to know their students better as persons with their own home backgrounds, interests, hopes and expectations in life. Such knowledge helped them to motivate and guide the students better and comment on their specific individual progress on the basis of the concrete evidence at hand. Students found the personal tutoring moments and individual comments by the teacher very useful and important. The personal contacts with the students could be rewarding experiences for teachers as well ("pearls in the ELP-oriented work", as noted by a teacher). The teacher's personal enthusiasm and commitment to the ELP was very important to the students and supported their engagement in the work.

The descriptors and checklists helped students to gradually develop a meta-cognitive understanding of language in terms of the different skills, linguistic forms and communication strategies. The use of the checklists helped them to get a more detailed map of the language learning tasks they were working on. They began to see the aims of their language learning in more specific terms than just as the "mark" in the school report. They got new tools for understanding the big picture of language learning and saw more possibilities for improving their skills, based on the concrete evidence. They were thus learning the meta-language that was necessary for talking and negotiating about their learning.

At the end of the pilot project (during the spring term 2001) the teachers guided the students to complete all the three parts of the ELP: the language

passport, the language biography and the dossier. They were asked to select a few documents from their learning dossiers (1-2 documents from each of the three years) for the final reporting dossier and provide these with self-assessment and well as peer assessment. The teachers evaluated the ELPs and gave individual feedback to the students.

The process of doing all this was quite demanding, but it showed that the students were able to conduct self-assessment in the language passport and biography sections according to the criterion-referenced descriptors. Their assessments were in a satisfactory agreement with the teachers' assessments. The students could notice a great deal of progress in their language skills during the three-years' time in a concrete way, both quantitatively and qualitatively, when comparing their early dossier documents with the recent ones. Linguistically less talented students could also notice progress in their language skills. This observation seemed to have a positive influence on their views of themselves as language learners. The process was laborious and time-consuming, taking several hours, but it was well worth the time spent. In lower secondary schools the work was done during the lessons under teacher supervision, while older students did parts of it as homework.

Conclusion: the ELP has significant pedagogical weight for a number of reasons. It is clearly a challenging possibility and a good tool for promoting student autonomy – as long as the work is not tied with ready-made prescriptions, materials and tasks or self-repeating routines.

2.2. The teacher's professional growth. The language teacher had to discover the possibilities inherent to the ELP and put them into practice in his/ her classes through consistent goal-oriented work over a long time. This pedagogical work required a great deal of teacher enthusiasm and conviction of the significance of the ELP for the student learning. Such hope and persistence were needed in the beginning and at times when concrete learning results were not yet visible. Teachers needed to understand well the central concepts of the CEF and the ELP and use them in the contexts of their site-based school curricula.

Going through the transition process to the ELP-oriented work was at times hard and difficult but at the same time also rewarding professional learning. The significance of close collegial collaboration came up repeatedly in the teacher reports and discussions. In a partnership in which the two teachers were teaching the same class together (e.g., an English teacher and a Swedish teacher), it was natural to plan the work together, organise student guidance and decide who teaches what on the shared agenda of teaching the basic concepts of the ELP. The threshold for asking for a collegial opinion or advice was also easier to cross in a close collegial relationship.

The teachers found it very helpful to discuss the theoretical principles and practical ways of organising student work in relation to a given classroom context. When sharing experiences and uncertainties, significant professional learning could develop through mutual interaction, trust and respect. Under emotional stress (and at times anxiety) inherent in the change processes, teachers were able to get across and push ahead by doing the emotional work together. Similarly, sharing the

moments of insight and success in the classroom strengthened the spirit of community and professional growth.

Based on our previous experience (Kohonen 2000b; 2002b), we knew the importance of a sufficient amount of inservice training and material resources. This support was crucial for the ELP development to proceed successfully. In the process the teachers had to go back to the basics of their profession by considering their work in depth and finding ways of reorganising a number of their familiar practices. The head teacher's personal encouragement and public support in school were also of great importance to the language teachers.

Conclusion: the teacher is at the heart of educational change. If the language teachers know what they are doing with the ELP they can proceed successfully in their ELP-oriented work and come to terms with the difficulties inherent of the change processes. Experiences of success increase teacher motivation and commitment to promote the philosophy of the ELP and develop it in their teaching.

2.3. Student motivation and tutoring of the ELP-oriented work. The teachers soon discovered that they need to justify the benefits of reflection to the students and explain why they were asking the students to reflect on their learning and their communicative attitudes and skills. Once the students realised the purpose of reflection and self-assessment they seemed to cross the basic motivational threshold for reflective learning. However, developing reflection as a habit of mind was clearly a complex task and a question of time, motivation, effort, support and guidance. It was also a question of developing a supportive atmosphere of mutual trust and respect in the class, that is, an environment in which it was safe to explore new meanings and make mistakes.

The importance of teacher support, guidance and feedback for all students came up repeatedly during the project. The feedback sessions with the teacher were very welcome to the students and they appreciated the teacher's specific comments and suggestions. They also found the peer presentations and comments useful. Working in small groups became a common pedagogical arrangement in the schools. The students also found it very useful to give and receive comments on language improvement in each other's assignments. The importance of giving encouraging comments was discussed initially together and emphasised in the classroom ground rules for peer-assessment. Gradually the learning cultures were changing towards a more supportive orientation. The change was considerable for the students who were accustomed to working largely alone (and in pairs) and had little experience of self- and peer-assessment.

Making a schedule for the work and observing it was not an easy task for all students. Some students did not realise the process character of the work, leaving their assignments to the last moment and being absent from the lessons. In the lower secondary school, a number of students did not like the interactive peer work, preferring the traditional more teacher-directed work (in which they also felt they did not have to work so hard). The ELP-oriented work meant a big change in the learning culture for them.

As the students were working on two languages at the same time in their ELPs, the skills and attitudes acquired in one language supported the work in the second language. This helped the self-assessment of their language skills. The students could also notice different profiles of performance in their first and second foreign languages. The common ways of working in the two language classes promoted their learning and reflective skills and made the aims more concrete and accessible for them. They were thus developing their plurilingual skills. To avoid unnecessary overlapping the teachers noticed that they had to make plans together to divide teaching tasks between them. Such cooperation was also beneficial for the students, giving them opportunities for practising the reflective skills within a broad common orientation to language learning and assessment.

Conclusion: In order to be motivated to invest their time and effort on learning the new skills, students need to understand the aims and basic principles of the ELP-oriented work. They also need to understand the relevance and the benefits of the ELP for their language learning, in order to engage themselves in the ELP-oriented work and develop commitment to it.

2.4. Integration of the ELP with the curricula – making it feasible. We discovered that the question of integration needs to be considered at all levels of instructional design: setting goals and objectives, selecting curriculum contents, designing learning processes and carrying out evaluation. During the project we developed a number of ways of building bridges between the national/ local language curricula and the ELP.

2.4.1. Curriculum goals. At the level of the general goals, the new Framework curriculum for the lower secondary (comprehensive) education (2003) emphasises holistic student growth, personal and cultural identity within a Finnish and European identity, intercultural learning, entrepreneurship education (involving initiative-taking and intentional goal-setting); and cooperative and active citizenship education. In addition to these general goals, emphasis is laid on learning to learn, self-assessment and intercultural learning and skills. The goals of CEF/ ELP are clearly in harmony with these national curriculum goals.

The targeted performance levels specified for the different foreign languages in the Framework curriculum have an explicit link with the proficiency levels in the CEF. The national criteria are specified for the “good” performance in the foreign languages (mark 8, on a scale 4-10) at the end of the grade 6 and grade 9 (end of compulsory education), as well as at the end of the upper secondary school. These criteria are connected with the CEF levels in each language. In the first foreign language, for example, the “good” performance is linked with level A1 in grade 6, and with A2 (productive skills) and B1 (receptive skills) at the end of grade 9. Further, at the end of the upper secondary school, the goal is linked with B2 (productive skills) and C1 (receptive skills).

The national Framework curriculum is normative, with the obligation for the teachers to comply with the norms concerning the goals, contents and evaluation. According to the Finnish tradition, however, no explicit norms are suggested for pedagogy, but the CEF links imply the use of the ELP to work towards the goals. This

gives a good basis for introducing the ELP nationwide in due course as the new curricula will be adopted.

2.4.2. Curriculum contents. In the Framework curriculum (2003), the central content areas specified for foreign languages in the lower secondary school include the following topics: (1) the student's living context (home, family, school, friends, living in the country/ town, spending leisure time, hobbies and interests); (2) public services, life in society, media; (3) study, work, careers, means of living; (4) sustainable development, environment; (5) health and well-being, human relations; and (6) basic knowledge of Finnish culture and target culture(s) and civilisation. The textbooks contain materials on these broad areas in a variety of ways.

In the ELP project, we developed ways of integrating the content areas with the assignments by linking the ELP with the textbook contents/ chapters and thereby using the textbook as a kind of springboard for more independent student work. In the ELP-oriented work the teachers guided their students to build bridges between the textbook topic(s) and the students' life experience. They facilitated the students doing something personally meaningful with the textbook input by considering it in their situation. The students could thus add a personal dimension in their work by going beyond the textbook chapters and getting space for their own ideas, thoughts and experiences in their ELP assignments.

In this way we could integrate the ELP assignments with the language curricula and textbooks, as an ordinary part of regular language lessons. The assignments were done partly during the lessons and partly as home work. The teachers also encouraged the students to use further sources to collect data and ideas for their assignments, such as mass media, entertainment, libraries, public information services, encyclopedias and the Internet. They could thus carry out small-scale "research" to locate and collect further relevant information, organise their findings into a coherent text and add graphics (digital photos, scanned pictures, clipart, internet materials) as they wanted. The ELP assignments could take a number forms: written texts, poems, songs; but the report could also be presented orally on audio/ video tape, as a live oral presentation or dramatisation and so on, as agreed with the teacher.

2.4.3. Learning processes. As discussed in the project description above, the ELP-oriented work supported negotiated learning in a number of ways and gradually gave more space for students' own ideas and modifications within the learning space provided by the teacher. The teachers designed specific self-reflection questions related to the topics and the pedagogical situation in the class. Through such questions the students were guided to reflect on themselves as language learners and users, on their aims, contents and work processes as well as their language learning concerns. They observed their personal learning and communication strategies and noted down their discoveries on learning to learn and their development as language users.

In addition to the classroom work, they also reflected on their visits abroad, international contacts and other important sources of intercultural learning, clarifying their roles and attitudes as intercultural learners. The aspects of learning to learn, self-assessment and intercultural learning were also practised as part of the

language biographies and summarised in the language passport. The ELP-oriented language learning was thus clearly in line with the emphasis on reflective learning and self-assessment in the new curricula.

2.4.4. Evaluation in the ELP. We discovered that self-assessment according to the CEF descriptors and the checklists needs to be practised in class regularly, as part of ordinary classroom work. This could be done in a natural way in connection with the ELP assignments. The process included self-assessment, peer-assessment and peer commenting in small groups, and, at suitable points, teacher commenting and assessment. As students gave comments to each other on the contents and language aspects of the assignments, they learned a great deal from each other's work by getting perspectives on their own work. The rich process of peer work in the groups also made the teacher's task of correcting language easier because the students could also improve the language in the process. Rather than correcting the errors directly, teachers developed various indirect symbols to indicate certain kinds of errors (such as verb forms, syntactic errors, choice of words etc.). The students went back to their texts and found out what they needed to correct and made the necessary changes.

We discovered that students need a great deal of explicit teaching to learn how to use the CEF descriptors. Teachers introduced the idea of the criterion-based descriptions in the first place by designing short criterion-related descriptions to the familiar Finnish grading system (marks 4-10). When the students learned to use these descriptions first and understood how to apply them to their language assessment, it was easier for them to understand the CEF descriptors. The checklists proved to be useful in the process even though they were quite laborious to use. An excellent source for personal learning was peer-assessment, and giving comments and feedback to the others in small groups. This interactive process gave students useful models and points of comparison. The concrete document-based discussions also helped them to agree on the criteria for a given mark or descriptor. At the same time the process integrated social skills with language learning tasks. The peer models and peer/ teacher feedback were essential for the individual learning processes.

Conclusion: The integration of the ELP with the national/ local language curricula is crucial for any wide-scale and sustained use of the ELP in language classes. If the work assignments and self-assessment of language skills are only done as extra-curricular work, outside the curriculum-based contents, the work load soon becomes impossible for the students to do. The work also needs to be done regularly, otherwise students get out of touch and lose their interest in it. Similarly, the teachers lose interest in the ELP if the work is done outside their curriculum-based teaching time and resources.

2.5. Amount of labour – making it possible in the classroom. We realised that the kind of ELP-oriented work we developed in the course of the ELP project was quite "labour-intensive" for the language teacher, for a number of reasons. What was involved in the approach was nothing less than a new learning culture of collegial collaboration and reflective, negotiated learning. Teachers had to learn the new professional attitudes and skills of guiding and supervising student learning, negotiating the processes and giving comments and feedback to the students. In the

middle of their own professional learning process they had to teach the new ideas and skills to their students, to whom the culture was frequently quite new. Doing all this on top of the regular teaching duties was an arduous task.

Based on our previous experience with educational change (Kohonen 2000a 2002b), we knew that we need to proceed in small steps. Rather than rushing ahead for quick solutions, we took a slower course of action in the introduction of the ELP, realising that it was going to be a long journey in any case. We discovered ways of beginning from where the participants were, from their current images, beliefs and assumptions of language teaching/ learning. We took a cautious start with a more general reflective approach, as described briefly in section 1. This is how we gradually introduced the concepts of reflection, interactive, negotiated learning, collaborative work and self-/ peer-assessment to the students. We developed the familiar work routines into more participatory and reflective procedures. In other words, we started by integrating the ELP-oriented learning processes with the existing (and usually more teacher-centred) classroom routines.

By starting from the familiar and working gradually toward the new practices, the innovation load of the participants became more easily manageable. Providing collaborative support to the teachers as well as the students was a way of facilitating mutual interactive learning and building a learning community. Teachers were also advised in the beginning to take just one class for the experimental ELP work, to reduce the work load due to the new approach. By introducing the students gradually to the reflective work and using it as a regular part of the ELP-oriented work we aimed at strengthening their understanding of the new concepts and the meta-language of self-assessment. The findings indicate that this approach was both feasible and possible in our context.

Conclusion: The ELP needs to be developed into an integral part of the national/ local language curricula, in terms of the goals, contents, learning processes and evaluation procedures. This seems to be one way of keeping the amount of labour, both for the teachers and the students, within reasonable limits. In the introduction of the ELP into foreign language instruction it is advisable to aim at a gradual evolution over a sufficient period of time (some 2-3 years), rather than rushing into a quick technical implementation.

2.6. Problems and constraints. The project was able to identify and suggest possible solutions to a number of problems, but a great deal of work still remains to be done. While the students were very positive about the teacher's comments on their assignments, the teachers had the persistent problem of the lack of time for thoughtful reading and commenting of students' texts and conducting individual tutoring sessions, particularly in large classes. Teachers also commented on the lack of time in teaching the use of the descriptors and checklists properly and using them repeatedly in their classes. In the vocational sector, the small number of teaching hours for languages was felt to be problematic because of the conflicting demands between the use of the ELP and teaching the necessary vocationally oriented language. Some students also expressed doubts about not learning enough of vocabulary because everything was not controlled by the tests.

In the lower secondary school, teachers were facing problems of how to communicate the abstract meta-linguistic concepts in a simple enough “pupil language” and how to motivate pupils who resisted the ELP-oriented work. A number of students did not understand the potential of the ELP for their learning and they consequently found the work “stupid, futile and unnecessary”. They were satisfied with their (relatively) dependent role as “pupils”, and the familiar teacher-directed work seemed better structured and more effective learning for them.

Upper secondary school teachers, in turn, faced student doubts and resistance due to the fear that they would not learn enough accuracy in their language use to successfully pass the matriculation exams in languages. This exam is typically a high-stakes examination since the students’ entrance to the universities depends considerably on their grades on the matriculation tests. These doubts seemed to be unnecessary as our findings indicated that the portfolio students did, in fact, pass their matriculation exams as well as the students in other groups (with a tendency to do slightly better on the written essay test), but until such research findings were available teachers had their share of their students’ doubts and resistance, on top of their own feelings of discomfort in the change processes.

3. Discussion on ELP development work

3.1. Encountering educational change. Behind such doubts is the well-known phenomenon of change resistance to major changes in life and work. Change resistance is quite understandable because of the conflicting tensions and the uncomfortable feelings associated with it. Educational changes pose feelings of threat to personal security as they imply that some knowledge and skills are becoming obsolete and need to be replaced by something new. The transitional period of change processes often involves feelings of discomfort (and sometimes even anxiety and chaos) because of the uncertainties involved, while some people seem to experience change rather as a positive and energising challenge. On the other hand, the feelings of progress and increased understanding and professional growth are generally very rewarding and even “empowering” experiences. Changes thus seem to trigger a broad spectrum of feelings.

Change processes do, however, require emotional work that consumes mental energy and resources. This is why support and (where possible) a reduced work load are advisable in change processes, to avoid the so-called innovation overload in work (Fullan 1997; Kohonen 2000c; 2002b). Moving from a (relatively) teacher-oriented classroom organisation towards a clearly student-centred teaching promoting student autonomy and negotiated learning is a major educational change. The ELP-oriented work is a paradigmatic shift from the knowledge transmission model of teaching towards a transactional, negotiated learning model. The change is not a simple one; it requires a complex set of new skills and attitudes. It also entails the development of a new kind of professional identity, seeing oneself as a facilitator of student learning and as a language educator (Kohonen 2000c; 2002b; Ushioda and Ridley 2002).

The knowledge of change processes in general is also beneficial. It is helpful to know that skill learning often involves feelings of decrease of work skills, doing less well than before, and even a loss of control, until the new emerging skills take

over and provide positive experiences (Fullan 1997; Kohonen 2000c). This is what seems to happen in the ELP-oriented pedagogy when the teacher begins to shift pedagogical power and responsibility to the students. Students frequently misuse their increased liberties quite happily until their understanding of the purpose of the change is facilitated and they can assume a more responsible stance and develop self-regulation. For these reasons it is mandatory that teachers get support over the crucial transition in their professional growth so as not to give up and revert to their former safe practices.

3.2. Importance of teacher support for student learning. The project findings repeatedly brought up the necessity for the teachers to understand the goals of the ELP and how it can be integrated with national/local curricula and their daily work. When teachers understood the goals of the ELP and were able to translate these into relevant pedagogical practices in their language classes they found new motivation from their students' positive progress and interest. A similar finding about the importance of teacher learning in connection with student learning came up also in the Irish ELP project evaluation (Ushioda and Ridley 2002). The researchers note that teachers' professional confidence in the ELP was increased when they saw their students enjoying their reflection on their own learning and developing their autonomy in the process.

Our findings also indicate the importance of students' understanding of the ELP for their continued motivation to invest their effort on portfolio-oriented work. When students understand its benefits for their language learning they are more motivated to engage in it. There is thus a cyclic interplay between teacher and student engagement: the teacher's professional conviction and confidence increase student interest and motivation, and this response promotes teacher enthusiasm. Ushioda and Ridley (2002, 51) make this point succinctly by noting that common understanding came about only "when there was a mutual agreement (negotiation) about the priorities regarding what was to be tackled, when and in what manner".

Sufficient teacher support is therefore nothing less than a precondition for utilising and developing the potential educational benefits of the ELP in school. The support structures need to extend over a long period of time for the new negotiated learning culture to be integrated in the teachers' (as well as the students') pedagogical repertoire. At the level of curriculum development, there is a similar long-term process of integrating the ELP with the local curriculum goals, contents, processes and evaluation practices, as part of site-based learning cultures. If the question of integration cannot be solved in satisfactory ways by making space for the ELP-oriented language learning on a regular basis, the ELP loses its attraction and feasibility, and is marginalised in language learning. This process of local curriculum development is thus a matter of re-constructing the practices, rather than a technical implementation of ready-made solutions and materials.

These considerations raise the question of what it is that we *can pass on* to teachers from such an intensive pilot project as the present one. Experiences cannot as such be transferred to others, but they can be described in a sufficient enough detail for the teacher to get perspectives and inputs for his or her professional thinking. Every teacher has to go through her own process to develop her pedagogical thinking and practices in the classroom, preferably in a collegial

interaction. The teacher thus has to invent her own “pedagogical wheel” over and over again in the context of her work. This process can, however, be enriched by the colleagues’ reported experiences. Such a collegial learning process can be rewarding professional learning for all the participants.

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Questions addressed to Viljo Kohonen

- 1 Do you think that ELP has had a significant impact on teachers' views on the relationship between teaching and learning?
- 2 How do we avoid portfolio fatigue if the paradigm shift is adopted in other school subjects?
- 3 How can a teacher change his enthusiasm?
- 4 Why do many teachers feel uneasy about European exams and portfolios? Aren't we somehow betraying the very concept of autonomy in language learning?
- 5 Do a big group of teachers agree with this document? Why or why not?
- 6 Can you give one example of how you in Finland made learning outcomes 'visible'?
- 7 How many countries have validated the ELP up until now?
- 8 What are the dangers (possible negative outcomes) in the bureaucratization of autonomy you have described? (e.g. Won't it increase paperwork for teachers, reduce time and space for teaching? As a basically top-down intervention, won't it produce a reaction among teachers *against* ideas of learner autonomy and result in students learning how to *appear* autonomous on the surface and preventing teachers from getting to know the pupils true selves?)
- 9 Have you worked on a possible relation between the portfolio as an (individual) tool and social, collaborative (unpredictable) work in the classroom?
- 10 Can you see any pitfalls or disadvantages of ELP?

The following were the key concerns in relation to the European Language Portfolio:

- impact on teachers' views
- 'portfolio fatigue'
- teacher enthusiasm
- betraying autonomy
- consensus on ELP
- dangers of bureaucratization
- pitfalls
- groups and individuals

There are now 38 validated ELPs in 15 countries.

Evidence of the visibility of the ELPs i.e. outcomes in learning settings were, for example, the expressed aim that 'risk-taking' as a strategy should be discussed at some appropriate point during a language class and that this should lead to awareness-raising.

The group commented that the ELP project is still at the research and development stage in Europe and in individual contexts and that there is a need to discuss and debate the possibilities rather than attempting to provide monolithic single answers.