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Challenging Assumptions
Looking In, Looking Out

The European Language Portfolio in Japan?

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European practitioners feel the European Language Portfolio (ELP) encourages autonomous lifelong learning of languages and makes the dynamic nature of the language curriculum visible to teachers, learners, and other stakeholders. The positive feedback on the learning process, learning outcomes, and learner motivation is encouraging. This paper explains about and outlines advantages of the ELP as a pedagogic tool before briefly examining if the ELP can be applied in Japanese universities. Factors to be considered if developing a portfolio in Japan and the possible challenges to be overcome are outlined before concluding with a discussion of future developments and possibilities of the ELP and related reference levels (CEFR) in Japan.

ヨーロッパの先駆者(開業者)は「European Language Portfolio」(ELP)は言語の自主的な生涯学習を奨励し、言語カリキュラムの力強い本質を、先生や学習者また第三者の人達に明確に示す手段として考えています。学習過程や学習結果、そして学習者への動機付けに対する積極的なフィードバックは良い励みとなります。この文書はELPが日本の大学で適用され、大学またはそのコースの種類によって使用されるかどうかの簡単な調査を行う前に教育手段として使うELPの長所を説明し、その概要を述べています。考慮される要因としては、もし日本でポートフォリオを発展し欠点を克服し概説するにあたってELPの将来の発展と可能性(CEFR)の使用は可能ですし大いに活用できるでしょう

The European Language Portfolio?

The European Language Portfolio (ELP) was conceived along with the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages (CEFR) in 1991. Pilot projects followed from 1998 to 2000; by June 2007 more than 90 ELPs had been validated from 26 Council of Europe (COE) members and 4 International nongovernmental organizations. The European Confederation of Language Centres in Higher Education (CERCLES) ELP designed for use in university language education is used in some 250 language centres from 21 European countries. Outside of Europe, language portfolios are being used worldwide; within

Asia language portfolios have come into common use in Hong Kong and Taiwan and are being used on a small scale in South Korea (Fouser, Matsuura, Nishio, & Takehisa, 2004). The main visions of the ELP are to develop the ability to communicate across linguistic, social, and cultural boundaries; to promote mutual understanding, respect, and tolerance; and to master the challenges of intensified international mobility and cooperation. Schärer (2007) goes on to outline the five guiding principles of the ELP: it is the property of the learner; it values competence in a positive way; it promotes learning inside and outside the classroom; it takes a lifelong perspective on learning of languages; and it is based on the CEFR (see Appendix and later discussion).

The Council of Europe (2001) states the ELP has three components:

1. A language passport, which summarizes the owner's linguistic identity, language learning achievement, and the owner's assessment of his/her own language competence.
2. A language biography, where intermediate learning goals are set, progress is reviewed, and significant language learning and intercultural experiences are recorded.
3. A dossier, which collects samples of his or her work and evidence of his or her achievements in language learning.

The ELP is designed, among other things:

1. To increase learner autonomy and encourage the lifelong learning of languages, to any level of proficiency;

2. To make the learning process more transparent;
3. To provide a clear profile of the owner's language skills;

The pedagogical functions of the ELP are to promote reflective learning and to clarify learning objectives. It recognizes competence and achievement in a positive way with a focus on learner self-assessment and resulting shift toward learner responsibility. The effective implementation of the ELP makes it clear to stakeholders the how, what, and why of the language learning curriculum.

The language passport has been developed to display the competence and achievements of the language learner. The language passport complements the Europass CV which outlines to possible employers, educational institutions, and other stakeholders the language proficiency of the user. This language-learning resume is increasingly being used in job applications and course enrolment. The language passport requires the owner to assess his or her own language skills according to the Council of Europe's common reference levels, which are elaborated in the CEFR.

Common European Framework of Reference for Languages (CEFR)

In the early 1990's a group of European language course providers worked together to find solutions to the following well-known problem: How can we communicate and how can we understand what kind and what degree of language knowledge is certified through a particular examination result, diploma, or certificate? On the one hand they were looking for an answer in a common reference system, on the

other hand looking for ways that examinations, diplomas, and so on could be described transparently. The results of a Council of Europe symposium were that an extensive, coherent, and transparent reference grid to describe communicative language competences was to be developed (Centre of Language Teaching and Research, 2002). This reference grid eventually became the CEFR which since its publication in 2001 has taken the world of language testing by storm, inspiring a thoroughgoing reform of language curricula for schools in a handful of countries with notable examples in Finland, Sweden, and the Czech Republic. There are six levels: A1- and A2-Basic User ; B1- and B2-Independent User; C1- and C2-Proficient User.

The self-assessment grid used in the language passport summarizes language proficiency at these six levels in relation to five skills: listening, reading, spoken interaction, spoken production, and writing. For example the spoken interaction descriptor for the A2 level is *I can communicate in simple and routine tasks requiring a simple and direct exchange of information on familiar topics and activities. I can handle very short social exchanges, even though I can't usually understand enough to keep the conversation going myself.* The CEFR provides us with a detailed scheme for describing language use. The *action-oriented* approach assigns a central role to language use in language learning comprised of six key dimensions: communicative acts, language activity, communicative language competence, context, sociolinguistic and pragmatic competence, strategies, and texts. These common reference levels can be used as a starting point for the elaboration of language syllabi and curriculum guidelines and the design of

assessment (Little, 2007). The use of the CEFR continues to spread. Syllabus designers, course book publishers, and language test providers worldwide (including the Cambridge ESOL and TOEIC and TOEFL tests within Europe) seek to align their exams to the CEFR for reasons of transparency and coherence. The government of Hong Kong has adopted the CEFR for language assessment and the whole education policy of New Zealand has been redeveloped and renamed in a way that closely follows the structure of the CEFR itself (National Development Initiatives Institute, 2007). The Osaka University of Foreign Studies, with support from the Ministry of Education, uses the CEFR for curriculum design and assessment on a class and language department level for all 25 languages studied there. The Ministry of Education is currently studying the CEFR and its application.


Relationship between the CEFR and ELP

In the language passport the ELP user periodically summarises his or her L2 proficiency using the self-assessment grid (CEFR). Each skill is further broken into checklists of *I can* statements or tasks for each level and skill (see Figure 1 for an example). These checklists of *I can* statements can be used when first-time users are unsure of their level during self-assessment and later to identify learning targets, select learning activities and materials, monitor learning progress, and evaluate learning outcomes (formative self-assessment). The CEFR is the basis for an action-oriented curriculum implemented through the reflective learning tool of the ELP.

Fostering autonomous lifelong learners of language

The goal of fostering autonomous lifelong learners of language can be achieved through use of the ELP by training in and proceduralizing of a learning cycle which involves the metacognitive language learning strategies of self-evaluating, setting goals and objectives, planning for a language task, self-monitoring, and return to self-evaluating and restart of cycle. In the language passport the learner summarises his or her proficiency for the five language skills. Resulting from this a general language goal can be set. In the example used in this paper, an EFL learner in a Japanese university has a general English language goal of going from level B1 to B2. In the language biography the learner can reference the *Goal-setting and Self-assessment Checklists* (see Figure 1) to break down the specific language skill to tasks so as evaluate his or her strengths and weakness (the learner would evaluate their language learning skills on a scale of 1 to 3 asterices with a tick in * indicating the ability to carry out specific tasks *with a lot of effort* or *with a lot of help*, ** *under normal circumstances* or *with a little help*, and *** *easily in any context* or *with no help*). The learner can then go on to use these checklists to formulate specific language goals.

Goal-setting and Self-assessment Checklist

Language: English Skill:  **SPOKEN PRODUCTION**



Evaluative criteria: * *With a lot of effort* ** *under normal circumstances* *** *easily in any context*

Level B1	My next goal	*	**	***
I can give a reasonably fluent description of a subject within my academic or professional field, presenting it as a linear sequence of points	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>			
I can narrate a story or relate the plot of a film or book				
I can describe personal experiences, reactions, dreams, hopes, ambitions, real, imagined or unexpected events	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>			
I can briefly give reasons and explanations for opinions, plans and actions	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>		
I can develop an argument well enough to be followed without difficulty most of the time	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>			
I can give a simple summary of short written texts				
I can give detailed accounts of problems and incidents (e.g., reporting a theft; traffic accident)	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>			
I can deliver short rehearsed announcements and statements on everyday matters within my field	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>			
I can give a short and straightforward prepared presentation on a chosen topic in my academic or professional field in a reasonably clear and precise manner	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>		
	NOV 5th		NOV 19th	

Figure 1. Checklist of spoken production for B1 level

If using a task-based language teaching approach like Benevides & Valvona's 2008 Widgets textbook in a class of 35-45 EFL Japanese university learners, the class, as a group with suggestions and feedback from the lecturer, could select an *I can* statement from the spoken interaction or spoken production checklist to make a goal for each stage of the six-stage course. The learner group and individual learner can then set and plan for learning targets using the *My next language learning target* sheet (Figure 2) in the language biography. The student in this example aims to go from giving a presentation *—*with a lot of effort* to **—*under normal circumstances* with the goal summed up *To give a short and straightforward prepared presentation in a*

reasonably clear and precise manner. This goal is based on the final *I can* statement in the checklist in Figure 1 above and tied into stage 5 of the Widgets course which involves planning and performing an infomercial.

My next language learning target

Language <i>English</i>	
Learning target (1) <i>(Use the self-assessment grid in the language passport and the checklists in the appendix to formulate your next learning target as precisely as possible.)</i> <i>To give a short prepared presentation in a clear and precise manner</i>	
How much time can I devote each day/week to achieving my target? (2) <i>2 hours a week</i>	
When shall I begin? (3) <i>Next week - Week 6 - November 5th</i>	When do I plan to finish? (3) <i>Week 8 - November 19th</i>
How do I intend to achieve my target? (4) <i>For example, can I work alone or do I need to work with other people?</i> <i>Complete stage 5 of the Widgets course with my group</i>	
What learning materials do I need? (4) - Widgets Student Book (Pages 72-81), Widgets DVD, •Presentation materials such as handouts, Computer (if using powerpoint) or blackboard magnets (if using posters)	
How shall I know whether or not I have achieved my target? (5) <i>(For example, can I take a test or set and correct a test for myself? Or shall I need to ask my teacher, another learner or a native speaker to assess me? Or can I depend entirely on my own judgement?)</i> <i>By reviewing the presentation and referring to the lecturer and peer evaluation</i>	
Review of learning progress on or near my target date: (6) <i>Have I achieved my target? In working towards my target have I learnt anything new about (i) the target language or (ii) language learning? What am I going to do with what I have learned?</i> <i>Presentations are difficult but I have more confidence now. I need to practice presenting more - I should speak slow and relax more. Stage 6 - the interview is a chance to experience a similar situation.</i>	

Figure 2 A completed My next language learning target sheet

This mechanism provides a clear map of a plan to set and work toward achieving a language goal with the *My next language learning target* sheet encouraging the students to (1) use the CEFR as a basis for setting new targets, (2) consider the influence of available time on the achievement of target, (3) decide dates for self-monitoring, (4) make decisions about working methods, (5) assess language learning, and (6) reflect on how well they have achieved the goal and what they have learned (Little and Simpson, 2003). Learners are encouraged to constantly think about learning and become accustomed to operating their language learning efforts in a manner that leads the learner to learn how to learn efficiently, a skill that is useful for the lifelong learning of languages.

After working toward, evaluating, and reflecting upon each goal the learner—equipped with the explicit and metacognitive knowledge of languages garnered from previous goal setting and achievement—returns to self-evaluating and setting new goals. If using a task-based curriculum like the above example, the learner could note in the post-stage useful language and language elements he or she needs to work on and practice before concentrating on the next goal (the next task of the course related to an *I can* statement). Individual goals and learning outside the classroom are also encouraged. This can involve learners independently working through all or some of the checklist tasks until they perceive themselves to have reached the next level and then work on the tasks of the next CEFR level. There is of course room to involve individual, situation-specific tasks as well as peer and teacher assessment.

Advantages of the ELP

The ELP embodies the dynamic nature of the L2 curriculum, making it visible to teachers, learners, class teachers, parents, and other stakeholders. The ELP makes clear to these stakeholders an approach to learning that emphasizes learner involvement, learner reflection, and communicative use of the target language. It captures the evolving features of autonomous learner-users of English L2 (Little, 2007). As learners move along stages of language learning they can constantly realise their developing skills and what needs to be worked upon in order to progress. A student conclusion while working with the ELP sums this up succinctly: “Now I also think about what I already know, about what I’m going to learn, or about what I want to learn. After these classes I know my skills, what I do well, and what I have to improve” (Henderson, Luelmo, & Garcia, 2007).

It can be argued that students in Japanese universities view English as a means of gaining entrance into university. Now that that goal has been achieved, on the whole there is a lack of motivation and explicit tangible goals. The use of a language portfolio (LP) in Japanese university general English classes can give a purpose to language learning by equipping the learner with tools and procedures to independently set and achieve language goals, ultimately leading to them become autonomous lifelong learners of language.

ELP in Japan?

The use of a language portfolio can be applied in Japan as the pedagogy is universal. Schärer (2007) sees learners’

reactions vary from enthusiasm to rejection. Learner groups of different origin or cultural background do not seem to differ in their perception of the ELP. An LP can be applied in a class concentrating on one, several, or all of the language skills. It should provide space for the learning of several languages simultaneously with use in university of foreign languages an obvious option. The ELP is also equally applicable for learners of only one language.

It must be considered that the formulation of an effective LP will take time. Ten years passed between the birth of an idea for a Language Passport, Learning Passport, or later Language Portfolio and the publication of the first Swiss printed version of a Language Portfolio (Centre of Language Teaching and Research, 2002). Now that process is done, there are many templates and resources available online (see <www.coe.int/lang> for the CEFR and <www.coe.int/portfolio> for the ELP). The CEFR are available in Japanese translation. Naoko Aoki from Osaka University has developed a Japanese Language Portfolio for learners of Japanese as a second language (see <www.let.osaka-u.ac.jp/~naoko/jlp/index.html>). Fouser et al. (2004) hoped to make a pilot version of a portfolio with the tentative title Japan Language Portfolio available for review and pilot use on the web.

The theme of the 2007 Japan Association of College English Teachers (JACET) conference was *In Search of a Consistent Curriculum from Elementary School through University*. When developing an LP for use in Japan such a goal is too ambitious. What should be aimed for is the combination of action-oriented L2 curriculum, based around the CEFR, and a reflective implementation tool

(LP). This can be easily replicated for learners of any age and proficiency level, but to date Irish primary English as a Second Language (ESL) example has no imitations.

This ELP and another example from Ireland offer hints to effective LP design and implementation: an LP should be linked to the CEFR levels and facilitate frequent and meaningful use. One reason for the Irish primary ESL ELP success is that there is a social and political need for it to work. The opening up of the EU and the resulting sudden influx of immigrants to Ireland meant there were huge numbers of children in the primary education stage whose first language was not English or Irish. The design process is another main reason for its success as the CEFR was incorporated in all stages from planning to language testing. Furthermore the design with units of work facilitates frequent use, not just a form-filling exercise but the use of the ELP in class activities. On the other hand the Ireland secondary schools LP shows a less than successful usage. This ELP was worked around an existing curriculum which meant there was little relation to the CEFR. This situation led to working with the ELP then dropping it when students needed to concentrate on the central exam (Little, 2007). Hence European practitioners feel it is important that the ELP and CEFR are tied into the curriculum. In many cases university lecturers decide the curriculum so they can design the units of work. If a university has a predetermined curriculum then the LP can be tied into this and the CEFR reference levels. The LP should then be used in a useful way throughout the learning course.

Feedback why teachers don't want to use the ELP has been that it is time-consuming, not perceived as useful,

and teachers are not sure how to use it (Dalziel, 2007). Developers need to bear this in mind during the design process, while aiming to make an easily accessible LP that facilitates frequent and meaningful use. There needs to be a straightforward teacher guide which guides teachers through the basics of the LP in a clear, straightforward way. The LP needs to be robust enough to be used by as many learning and teaching styles as possible with task-based learning being a theoretical fit. Schärer (2007) reflects that a challenge in implementing the ELP for instructors is that it can be difficult to adapt to the new role of a facilitator and to find the flexibility to involve students in planning, progress, and assessment. The underlying goal of increasing learner autonomy should always be emphasized.

Where to go from here?

The time and resources needed for successful LP implementation should not be underestimated. There is significant work required by both lecturers and students but the increased autonomy of learners makes this work worthwhile. Smaller scale LP use by enthusiastic practitioners seems more likely to lead to success than large scale introduction into programmes (Glover, Mirici, & Aksu, 2005). With this in mind and with the realization that there is not a significant political will for the success of an LP, the author suggests that focus should not be on department or university-wide adoption but the development of a LP that can be used by such enthusiastic educators. This is the immediate goal as the writer develops and implements a language portfolio for use in the spring semester of April 2008. As discussed in the JALT 2007 Bilingualism Forum,

it seems that there are people interested in the CEFR and ELP in Japan but there is little willingness to discuss it openly; it is like a private, clandestine secret. A solution to this problem is to gather the people who are interested in using and talking about these initiatives to come together in a working group in order to garner ideas, discuss developments, and coordinate efforts. It is hoped that steps toward this goal will have been taken by the publication of this proceedings. Glover, Mirici, and Aksu (2005) feel that thorough preparation of staff, students, and programmes is needed when an innovative tool such as the ELP is introduced. The basis for thorough preparation could involve detailed familiarisation with the CEFR reference levels. If teachers and students feel comfortable using the CEFR, then introducing an innovation such as the ELP may become easier. Learning to use the CEFR levels is useful for teachers even if they do not move on to using an LP. With the Osaka University of Foreign Studies use of the CEFR the natural progression is for other institutions to follow suit which, if this were realized, would make the use of a language portfolio in Japan more manageable.






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Appendix Common European Framework of Referenced for Language (CEFR)

Self-assessment grid						
	A1	A2	B1	B2	C1	C2
 Listening	I can understand familiar words and very basic phrases concerning myself, my family and immediate concrete surroundings when people speak slowly and clearly.	I can understand phrases and the highest frequency vocabulary related to areas of most immediate personal relevance (e.g. very basic personal and family information, shopping, local area, employment). I can catch the main point in short, clear, simple messages and announcements.	I can understand the main points of clear standard speech on familiar matters regularly encountered in work, school, leisure, etc. I can understand the main point of many radio or TV programmes on current affairs or topics of personal or professional interest when the delivery is relatively slow and clear.	I can understand extended speech and lectures and follow even complex lines of argument provided the topic is reasonably familiar. I can understand most TV news and current affairs programmes. I can understand the majority of films in standard dialect.	I can understand extended speech even when it is not clearly structured and when relationships are only implied and not signalled explicitly. I can understand television programmes and films without too much effort.	I have no difficulty in understanding any kind of spoken language, whether live or broadcast, even when delivered at fast native speed, provided I have some time to get familiar with the accent.
 Reading	I can understand familiar names, words and very simple sentences, for example on notices and posters or in catalogues.	I can read very short, simple texts. I can find specific, predictable information in simple everyday material such as advertisements, prospectuses, menus and timetables and I can understand short simple personal letters.	I can understand texts that consist mainly of high frequency everyday or job-related language. I can understand the description of events, feelings and wishes in personal letters.	I can read articles and reports concerned with contemporary problems in which the writers adopt particular attitudes or viewpoints. I can understand contemporary literary prose.	I can understand long and complex factual and literary texts, appreciating distinctions of style. I can understand specialised articles and longer technical instructions, even when they do not relate to my field.	I can read with ease virtually all forms of the written language, including abstract, structurally or linguistically complex texts such as manuals, specialised articles and literary works.
 Spoken interaction	I can interact in a simple way provided the other person is prepared to repeat or rephrase things at a slower rate of speech and help me formulate what I'm trying to say. I can ask and answer simple questions in areas of immediate need or on very familiar topics.	I can communicate in simple and routine tasks requiring a simple and direct exchange of information on familiar topics and activities. I can handle very short social exchanges, even though I can't usually understand enough to keep the conversation going myself.	I can deal with most situations likely to arise whilst travelling in an area where the language is spoken. I can enter unprepared into conversation on topics that are familiar, of personal interest or pertinent to everyday life (e.g. family, hobbies, work, travel and current events).	I can interact with a degree of fluency and spontaneity that makes regular interaction with native speakers quite possible. I can take an active part in discussion in familiar contexts, accounting for and sustaining my views.	I can express myself fluently and spontaneously without much obvious searching for expressions. I can use language flexibly and effectively for social and professional purposes. I can formulate ideas and opinions with precision and relate my contribution skillfully to those of other speakers.	I can take part effortlessly in any conversation or discussion and have a good familiarity with idiomatic expressions and colloquialisms. I can express myself fluently and convey finer shades of meaning precisely. If I do have a problem I can backtrack and restructure around the difficulty so smoothly that other people are hardly aware of it.
 Spoken production	I can use simple phrases and sentences to describe where I live and people I know.	I can use a series of phrases and sentences to describe in simple terms my family and other people, living conditions, my educational background and my present or most recent job.	I can connect phrases in a simple way in order to describe experiences and events, my dreams, hopes and ambitions. I can briefly give reasons and explanations for opinions and plans. I can narrate a story or relate the plot of a book or film and describe my reactions.	I can present clear, detailed descriptions on a wide range of subjects related to my field of interest. I can explain a viewpoint on a topical issue giving the advantages and disadvantages of various options.	I can present clear, detailed descriptions of complex subjects integrating sub-topics, developing particular points and rounding off with an appropriate conclusion.	I can present a clear, smoothly-flowing description or argument in a style appropriate to the context and with an effective logical structure which helps the recipient to notice and remember significant points.
 Writing	I can write a short, simple postcard, for example sending holiday greetings. I can fill in forms with personal details, for example entering my name, nationality and address on a hotel registration form.	I can write short, simple notes and messages. I can write a very simple personal letter, for example thanking someone for something.	I can write simple connected text on topics which are familiar or of personal interest. I can write personal letters describing experiences and impressions.	I can write clear, detailed text on a wide range of subjects related to my interests. I can write an essay or report, passing on information or giving reasons in support of or against a particular point of view. I can write letters highlighting the personal significance of events and experiences.	I can express myself in clear, well-structured text, expressing points of view at some length. I can write about complex subjects in a letter, an essay or a report, underlining what I consider to be the salient issues. I can select a style appropriate to the reader in mind.	I can write clear, smoothly-flowing text in an appropriate style. I can write complex letters, reports or articles which present a case with an effective logical structure which helps the recipient to notice and remember significant points. I can write summaries and reviews of professional or literary works.

