



ELPIPL Experiences

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Abstract

The ELPIPL (European Language Portfolio on Students' Journey to Professional Life) is a lifelong learning languages project developing and promoting the use of the European Language Portfolio (ELP). The target group are language learners, teachers and work life. The aim is to develop teaching methods and materials, transform teacher identities, enhance learner autonomy and promote learning of several foreign languages, plurilingualism and lifelong learning.

The project started in January 2009 with preparation, exchange of best practices and ideas, and material bank development. An enterprise survey on work life language requirements and usability of the ELP and Europass was conducted at ca. 70 organisations and followed by interviews in six European countries.

From August 2010 until April 2011 pilot courses were given in Russian, French, Polish, Czech, Finnish, Swedish, Spanish and German. Pilot 1 involved 650 youth and adult students and Pilot 2 1,300 students in secondary level general and vocationally oriented higher education in the Czech Republic, Finland, Lithuania, the Netherlands, Poland and Sweden. Pilot courses with ELP integration were also given in multinational groups with immigrant backgrounds. During the pilot the teachers kept diary blogs on NING, contributed to material development and met in face-to-face and online workshops. Throughout the project Moodle was used as discussions and for filing. The ELP and CEF were promoted in work life and at the partner institutions and teacher and student surveys on language learning and teaching were conducted. Students used a NING with blogs and work on display. Also, work life representatives and other interested parties were invited to the NING.

This paper will focus on presenting the teacher, student and enterprise experiences with the survey results. Also, the practical tools for ELP integration produced, ELPIPL online and teacher and student handbooks, will be presented.

1 Introduction

This paper discusses results of ELPIPL (European Language Portfolio on Students' Journey to Professional Life) [1], a lifelong learning project that develops the use of the European Language Portfolio (ELP) [2] and Europass Language Passport and Europass CV [3]. The project group comprises seven higher education institutions and an upper-secondary level school in six European countries. The project develops language teaching in collaboration with work life. This because the ELP and Europass Language Passport and CV are not yet fully integrated into language curricula despite them being well-known in many educational institutions together with the CEFR (Common European Framework of Reference for Languages) [4]. The project seeks recognition to the ELP and Europass Language Passport and CV in work life because they are not yet well adapted in European institutions and organisations.

Pilot courses with ELP integration were given in two phases. Pilot 1 took place in autumn 2009 involving 650 students in Finland and Sweden. In Pilot 2a courses were given from January to May 2010 and in Pilot 2b from October 2010 to March 2011. Pilot 2 involved 1,300 students in the Czech Republic, Finland, Lithuania, the Netherlands, Poland and Sweden. The target languages of the pilot courses were English, Swedish, French, German, Russian and Spanish as foreign languages, and Swedish, Finnish, Polish and Czech as second languages. The piloting included also teaching of second languages in multinational groups with immigrant backgrounds.



During the pilot the teachers kept diary blogs on NING, contributed to material development and met in face-to-face and online workshops. Throughout the project Moodle learning platform [4] was used for discussions and document filing. Students used a NING with blogs and work on display and work life representatives and other interested parties were invited to an Enterprise NING.

2 Teacher Experiences

The teachers collaborated by participating in online discussions locally and internationally when preparing the pilot courses. Experiences, best practices, ideas and information on institutional language curricula exchange took place. Materials were developed for ELP related and vocationally oriented class activities.

The first pilot courses started in August 2009 and the CEFR, ELP, Europass Language Passport and Europass CV were introduced to the students. Prior to the introductions a student survey on language learning practices, the ELP, CEFR and Europass was given. Also, a teacher survey on prior knowledge of the ELP, CEFR, Europass and language learning practices was conducted during the first months of the project. The surveys would be repeated at the end of the courses.

Moodle and NING were used for collaboration and all project work was documented in Moodle. The online tools were a novelty for most teachers and thus the level of activity varied. Some teachers hesitated to share their experiences, especially frustrations and disappointments, on the blog. This had an effect on how the teachers involved their students on Student NING. Workshops and seminars were arranged to cater for face-to-face contacts and they proved to be the most fruitful points of the collaboration.

The teacher group had varied experiences with CEFR and the ELP as well as with the Europass prior to the pilot courses. The Dutch partner had formerly been involved in a national portfolio project and one of the Finnish teachers. Individual teachers had implemented with the portfolio.

The teachers feel that the changes they see in their teacher roles are that they now give students more responsibility and alternatives, they arrange ELP, CEFR and Europass introductions, they involve students in self- and peer assessment and course syllabi are rewritten with ELP integration. Further, the teachers state that an institution should be committed on all levels when ELP implementations are planned. Teachers should be provided training and time for planning and the CEFR should be integrated in the syllabus. The ELP can be used as a tool for assessment and foremost as a tool for learning. Results and benefits of successful ELP implementation can be seen in longer periods of time e.g. during degree studies. Emphasis should be put on learner autonomy and thus reflection and self-assessment should be included.

3 Student Experiences

The students felt that compiling ELPs made their skills and goals visible, and enabled them to document their learning. The ELP work increased feelings of responsibility and autonomy gave positive learning experiences. Social and collaborative activities and linking the goals to work life needs motivated them to study. Negative feedback was given on the amount of reflection and the ELPs were not valued by all students.

Surveys on students' language learning practices and opinions on the ELP, CEFR and Europass were given in the beginning of the project, after Pilot 1 and after Pilot 2a. The last survey had 262 respondents representing 22 % of the students in Pilot 2a with 50 % native speakers of Finnish, the second largest group were the Lithuanians and other native languages were Dutch, Swedish, English, German, and Polish. According to the results student autonomy had increased. 91 % of the students stated to be able to plan, evaluate and monitor their own learning. The percentage of survey I was less than 50 % and survey two 68%. Students based their self-evaluation on course goals, grades and natural situations where they had had to use the language. Goal setting differed and many students did not set goals but studied what they were expected to study. A number of students set their goals to be the same as the courses goals. The students who described their goal setting can be divided into three groups: 1) students with advanced goal setting abilities who reflect on earlier studies and abilities and set goals according to their own needs, 2) students who set goals according to the course contents and learn what they were expected to learn, and 3) students who set goals according to future needs.

In the end of Pilot 2a 48 % of the respondents claimed to know the CEFR and that the levels helped them assess and compare their skills and to describe language skills in job applications. 90 % liked to



work with the ELP, especially to collect their achievements into the dossier. 10 % did not like the ELP work mostly because it was time consuming. However, the students with positive comments also mentioned it being time consuming but rewarding. Some students had plans to update their portfolios and thought they could use them in future studies and in job search but some did not yet know how to use them. Most students were familiar with Europass CV and Language Passport and planned to use them in job search and Erasmus student mobility.

4 Work life experiences

One of the primary aims was to promote the ELP and Europass in work life and the project consortium included six associated enterprise partners. The group grew and in the end ca 80 organisations were involved. The organisations participated in a survey on the ELP, Europass, CEFR, work life language needs and recruitment practices and some representatives were interviewed.

Half of the respondents were familiar with the Europass and CEFR and rated their usability as good or very good, 30% were familiar with the Europass CV and 25% with the ELP. There were national differences but it can be stated that the tools are not widely used in any of the countries represented and thus promotion is needed. Moreover, the respondents felt that the tools are functional and mentioned that they are good standards, give an insight to competences, provide additional information on an applicant's personality, and can be used in-house training. Negative aspects mentioned were that the tools are not widely used, not all ELP dossier samples are authentic and dossiers are time consuming. Organizations would like to see language samples such as CVs, business letters, translations, audio-visual material on simulations of service situations and documentation such as certificates of studies and time spent abroad in the dossiers. The preferred length would be a maximum of 15 pages. The added value of the tools is concrete descriptions of language competence, possibility to demonstrate special skills and stand-out from the other applicants, and value at workplaces where languages are critical competences.

The organisations need foreign languages for written and oral communication. The most frequently mentioned need was email writing. Reading skills are needed for e.g. reports reading and in information search. Speaking skills are needed in face-to-face situations with clients, subcontractors and colleagues in meetings, negotiations, fairs and on the telephone. Language levels required range between B1 and C1 with requirements in English being slightly higher, B2 – C2. Skill level B2 was required in the local language from a non-native employer.

The foreign languages needed and their importances vary. The language needs of the Finnish respondents are English (100 %), Russian (85 %) and Swedish (70 %) and those of the Swedish are English (40 %) and Finnish (20 %). The Dutch organisations need German (80 %), English (50 %) and French (30 %) and the German English (80 %) with also French, Dutch and Chinese being mentioned. In Lithuania English (100%), Russian (85 %) and Polish (50 %) are needed. In the Czech Republic English (70 %), German (45 %) and Russian (25 %) are needed.

Recruitment channels mentioned were newspapers, company specific and public recruitment sites, head hunting and networks. Language skills are verified with certificates or applicants' own reports, in interviews and in tests. The respondents are open for different types of CVs but the length should be 1 – 4 pages. Inter- and multicultural skills needed in the companies are cultural knowledge, country specific knowledge and business etiquette.

The responses do not give an extensive representation of the labour world in Europe but they might give implications on general foreign language needs and how the CEFR, ELP and Europass are known. The respondents represent a small sample of organizations in different fields in different parts of the world and thus their language needs vary. The results give an insight into the practices and needs of these particular organizations and fields. The organizations operate in different cultural settings in different environments where the educational traditions vary. However, the results can be used to certain extent in the educational institutions participating in the project because most of them are long term partners. The language requirements depend on the location and the customer basis of each enterprise. English is the dominating foreign language requirement and skills and the national languages are also needed.

5 Conclusion

The project members have gained practical experience of the ELP and learned in collegial



collaboration. The teacher identities are being transformed and teachers have a deeper understanding of the ELP. Students involved have a better understanding of learner autonomy, self-evaluation, language learning, the ELP, Europass, language requirements of continued studies and work life which might enable them to plan their studies better. The partners, work life partners and the Europass centres have a deeper understanding of the implications of the ELP and each other's practices.

In the future, the results are exploited at two universities to integrate the ELP in the language curricula and the secondary level school implements ELP in their language syllabi. The project website is maintained and provides handbooks, material, reports, audio and audio-visual materials. The ELPiPL community continues on NING and the project members might pursue exploitation in new projects, provide teacher seminars and develop national and international tools for portfolio implementations.

The project documentation and results provide material for research on e.g. teacher development, student motivation and study of CEFR and ELP implementation nationally and internationally. The students could be researched on future development of language competences, use the ELP and Europass in work placement, work life, job application and application to post-graduate studies.

References

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