

The elp-DESK Project: Tools to promote and Disseminate the Europass Language Passport

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Abstract

The idea of a standard European document to indicate levels of linguistic competence in a universally recognised format was first developed in 1998 as part of the Council of Europe's European Language Portfolio. The document, known as the Language Passport, was subsequently integrated into the European Union's Europass initiative and is now known as the Europass Language Passport (ELP).

With the ELP, individuals can describe their language ability using a six-step scale based on the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages (levels A1-C2), and indicate not only formal, examination qualifications, but also experience and expertise gained through non-formal or informal learning (e.g. work and/or study abroad, self learning, social contacts).

The main aim of the Passport is, therefore, to ensure that language abilities are presented in the fullest and most effective way so that they can be easily understood by those responsible for assessing these skills. However, although an official EU document, the ELP has, unfortunately, achieved only limited application within teaching and employment communities.

Responding to a specific call within the 'Key Action Languages' section of European Commission Lifelong Learning Programme (LLP), the elp-DESK project (www.elp-desk.eu) is an international network seeking to raise awareness and recognition of the ELP and to identify means and tools to disseminate and promote the use of the document throughout Europe.

The project, which began in 2009 and is funded for 2 years, has so far undertaken work and delivered products in the following areas:

- *analysis of current awareness and use of the ELP among various user groups in the partner countries;*
- *provision of web-based support and guidance for those wishing to use and/or evaluate a Passport;*
- *assessment and implementation of the ELP in school language teaching and training;*
- *prototyping and pilot studies of the use of the Passport in business contexts (recruiting and language auditing);*
- *design and realisation of hardware and software resources and media to encourage and facilitate the adoption and recognition of the ELP;*

In particular, two highly innovative implementations of Information Technology to support the ELP have just been completed:

- *a USB-stick based application which adds typical Electronic Portfolio characteristics to the basic Passport, so allowing users to keep a concise record of their language learning and, most importantly, to prepare and save concrete evidence of their performance (in text, audio, video form, etc.);*
- *an Apple approved iPhone application with which users can complete and update a Europass Language Passport on the mobile device and e-mail the finished document to any address.*



Through the activities of the elp-DESK project, it is hoped that the Europass Language Passport may become a recognised benchmark to present linguistic competence in a modern electronic form, so enhancing the recognition of all forms of language learning, training and qualification.

1. Background

The idea of defining an innovative, transparent, and broadly recognised means by which individuals could indicate their linguistic competence began to develop in Europe in the early 1990s and was first formalised in 'Recommendation No. R (98) 6 of the Committee of Ministers to Member States concerning Modern Languages' [2], adopted by the Council of Europe Committee of Ministers on 17 March 1997. One of the first documents to recognise the importance of language learning, international mobility, and the preservation of cultural diversity in a multilingual and multicultural Europe, the Recommendation proposes the implementation of various measures regarding the teaching and learning of languages. In particular, one section is dedicated to the 'Specification of objectives and assessment' and includes the following indication:

27. Encourage the development and use by learners in all educational sectors of a personal document (European language portfolio) in which they can record their qualifications and other significant linguistic and cultural experiences in an internationally transparent manner, thus motivating learners and acknowledging their efforts to extend and diversify their language learning at all levels in a lifelong perspective.

Following this recommendation, various pilot projects were undertaken which ultimately led to the 'Resolution on the European Language Portfolio' [3] adopted by the Standing Conference of the Ministers of Education of the Council of Europe in October 2000 which specified the characteristics, format and objectives of a European Language Portfolio and recommended its implementation and use across the Member States of the European Union.

1.1 European Language Portfolio

The essential characteristics of the Portfolio are specified in the Resolution and summarised on the Council of Europe web site as 'a document in which those who are learning or have learned a language - whether at school or outside school - can record and reflect on their language learning and cultural experiences'. The aims of the document are, on the one hand, to motivate learners to enhance their skills and, on the other, to provide a record of the skills acquired. There is, therefore, both a pedagogic and a documenting/reporting function. (For further details, see the Council of Europe web site: <http://www.coe.int/T/DG4/Portfolio/>).

Specifically, the Portfolio is divided into three parts, a Passport, a Language Biography and a Dossier. The Passport provides a general, overall summary of the level of competence, qualifications and experience that an individual has gained in one or more second languages. It can include both official certification gained from recognised examination bodies, self-assessment, and reference to significant experiences, e.g. study or work abroad, that have played a role in gaining linguistic expertise. No distinction is made between formal, informal or non-formal learning contexts. The Language Biography allows the user to reflect on the process of language learning and express individually the skills mastered, how this competence has been obtained, and what further developments might be possible or required. Finally, the Dossier is a repository of relevant examples that effectively document and record in concrete terms the individual's ability.

Over the last ten years, many different versions of the Portfolio have been developed to respond to different pedagogic or national educational needs. Each of these versions had to respond to the



specifications laid down in the Resolution and gain the approval of the Council of Europe's validation body.

1.2 Europass Language Passport

Decision No 2241/2004/Ec of the European Parliament and of the Council of 15 December 2004 on a Single Community Framework for the Transparency of Qualifications and Competences (Europass) [1] introduced a suite of five documents which aimed to provide at European level a comparable and standardised means of presenting individual qualifications, experience and expertise. The best known of these documents is the Europass CV, a standard European format for curricula vitae. The suite also includes the Europass Language Passport, which is effectively an equivalent of the Passport section of the European Language Portfolio and is now generally compiled as an electronic document. As the Portfolio passport, the Europass Language Passport therefore allows users to describe and present their language skills and competence by reference to formal qualifications, informal and non-formal experience and self assessment. The elp-DESK project is specifically concerned with identifying means and tools to promote and disseminate the use and recognition of the Europass Language Passport. Before looking at the details of the project activities, there is one more element of terminology to clarify.

1.3 Common European Framework of Reference for Languages

Recommendation No. R (98) 6 cited above also makes reference to the use of a Common European Framework of Reference to ensure co-ordination and transparency in all aspects of language teaching and learning. The Framework was developed as part of the Council's 'Language learning for European Citizenship' project, which delivered its final report in 1996 [4]. The Framework provides a wealth of information and discussion on all the fundamental aspects of language teaching and learning, including teaching approaches and methods, learning strategies, categories to describe language use and competences, curriculum design and assessment systems. However, the framework is probably best known for the introduction of common reference levels (A1 – C2) which seek to describe and define linguistic expertise in a standardised format. These levels were subsequently also adopted for the Europass documents, and a grid illustrating the respective abilities in second language reading, writing, listening and speaking is appended to each Europass Language Passport.

2. The elp-DESK project

Responding to the 2008 call for projects published by the European Commission, DG Education and Culture, Lifelong Learning Programme (LLP), the Europass Language Passport Dissemination Tools NetworkK (elp-DESK) project was approved for funding under the 'Key Activity 2 Languages' action. The project group comprises eight organisations from across Europe either involved in education activities or offering specific competences: Fondazione Aldini Valeriani (Italy, project leader, VET), Auxilium (Austria, Project Quality), Crystal Presentations (GB, Design and Technology), e-Isotis (Greece, Dissemination), Fundatia Central Educational Soros (Romania, VET), IUT - Université Paris 13 (France, University), NSF Cyberall Access (Cyprus, Special Needs Groups and Technology), and Tempo Training and Consulting (Czech Republic, VET and Technology).

The principal objective of the elp-DESK project is to develop approaches and resources with which to promote and disseminate the Europass Language Passport as a standard, recognised and effective means of presenting and substantiating individual linguistic competence and experience. In particular, these activities are addressed to young people completing their education and seeking to enter the



world of work, as well as to adults and organisations needing to demonstrate or evaluate language expertise.

2.1 Activities

The elp-DESK project does not involve the invention or development of a new, physical artefact, but rather raising awareness of an existing resource which can and should be more extensively exploited. The Europass Language Passport has existed for over five years, and yet statistics from the EU's Centre for the Development of Vocational Training, Cedefop, reveal that in nearly all Member States only one Europass Language Passport is downloaded for every one hundred Europass Curricula Vitae.

The first project activity was, therefore, an initial analysis of the use and awareness of the Passport based on desk research in the various Member States of the network, interviews with interested parties, and a specific questionnaire completed either in presence or submitted on-line. The questionnaire was prepared in three versions aimed at the project's principal target populations: individuals, companies and teaching professionals.

The next stage of the project activities involved the design and prototyping of tools and services to support the wider dissemination and exploitation of the Passport. These tools now include a dedicated web-site (www.elp-desk.eu), which provides both information on project activities and serves as an orientation point on how to compile and use the Passport, the design of specific hardware to facilitate easier and more incisive application of the document, suggestions on how to improve the existing format and use of the document, and the investigation of how best to integrate the Europass Language Passport into language teaching and training practice.

Finally, the project also involves the organisation of and/or participation in events to disseminate the Passport to all potential users, as well as the development of specific promotional resources and the necessary support materials with which to address different audiences.

2.2 Results

As expected, the desk research showed that all individuals (the first target population) continue to suffer from a lack of knowledge and information regarding the Passport. Unfortunately, informants also often felt that the document was frequently not taken seriously (above all, by potential employers) and therefore ensured very little added value. As a result, there was not enormous motivation to take the time to compile the Passport.

Teachers, on the other hand, pointed to the limited opportunities to integrate the Passport into curricula, meaning that there was little chance to promote the tool. They also pointed to a general preference for traditional language certificates (i.e. evidence of formal language qualification, rather than informal or non-formal learning).

Finally, companies were also diffident with regards the Passport, both because it is not that well known and as they generally preferred to use their own in-house assessment systems. Job agencies, in particular, showed significant resistance to changing proprietary systems. These companies are now often large, multi-national organisations and it seems difficult to introduce changes in practice at local level.

In response to this rather 'bad press', the elp-DESK project group has undertaken a number of initiatives. These have included developing opportunities to integrate the Passport into teaching practice (often by supporting students in the production of a 'portfolio' of work), collaborating with organisations involved in widening and intensifying employment opportunities (presenting and



supporting the use of the Passport), explaining to companies the value of the Passport both as a recruitment tool and as a means to audit existing linguistic competence within the organisation, and producing communication material to disseminate the Passport (promotional video, animated FAQ on the dedicated web-site, etc.).

However, of particular interest to today's audience are certainly the ways in which ICT have been harnessed to support the cause of the Europass Language Passport. Essentially, three solutions have been proposed:

- Two separate, on-line applications dedicated to specific target groups (young students and adults) which facilitate the computer-based completion of the Passport through effective, intuitive support;
- A USB-stick based application which allows users to save and subsequently update a repository of examples of their language abilities. In other words, given the greater ease of use and the much wider access to ICT that is now enjoyed, this is a proposal to re-integrate the Dossier part of the European Language Portfolio into the Europass Language Passport, so providing a concise record of language learning and, most importantly, concrete evidence of performance (in text, audio, video form, etc.);
- an Apple approved iPhone application with which users can complete and update a Europass Language Passport on the mobile device and e-mail the finished document to any address. The application therefore offers mobile access to the Passport, while maintaining the same structure and format as the standard document.

3. Discussion

As already stated, the most important issue and problem for the Europass Language Passport remains the fact that it is still not widely known and, consequently, not always understood and/or recognised. Hopefully, the activities of the elp-DESK project group will help to raise the profile of the Passport. If educational institutions and employers/recruiters can be convinced that the Passport offers a valid and reliable reflection of an individual's linguistic competence this will ultimately occur. Moreover, the exploitation of ICT will undoubtedly bring the document to the attention of a wider audience (in particular, through mobile, smartphone-based use) while, at the same time, enhancing the quality and detail of the information provided (with the integration of e-portfolio-like functionality).

Nevertheless, we feel that a number of problem areas remain and need to be addressed before the Europass Language Passport can enjoy the popularity and level of acceptance of its more successful stable-mate, the Europass Curriculum Vitae.

The first issue was already revealed by the initial project research: across all target groups there is a widespread lack of trust in the self-assessment model, accompanied by a feeling that any linguistic competence reporting system which uses, even in part, such a methodology is inherently unreliable (or considered to be so, even if it is not). As a consequence, the Europass Language Passport invariably runs the risk of being considered a poor reflection of actual linguistic expertise. Practitioners will need to invest considerable effort in future projects to convince diffident evaluators that self-assessment can be as valid a measure as any more 'formal' or 'official' mechanisms.

The second problem is linked to the first. Informal and non-formal learning processes continue to be held in less regard than the more traditional formal approaches. We believe that our proposal to re-integrate the Dossier section of the European Language Portfolio into the Passport, and so present concrete evidence of acquired skills which is often the result of non-formal or informal experience, may represent a useful step in overcoming this prejudice.



Finally, the Common Framework of Reference grid used to indicate levels of expertise remains extremely difficult to interpret and apply. Our iPhone application has certainly improved this usability by exploiting the device's typical swiping gesture to increase or decrease the selected level. Further work in this direction, together with a review of the standard descriptors to include context relevant indicators (for initial schooling, vocational education, profession development), are still required.

References

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