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The European Language Portfolio: where pedagogy and assessment meet

David Little

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1 A new relation between teaching, learning and assessment

The *Common European Framework of Reference for Languages* (CEFR) sets out to describe “in a comprehensive way what language learners have to learn to do in order to use a language for communication and what knowledge and skills they have to develop so as to be able to act effectively” (Council of Europe 2001: 1). As these words imply, the primary orientation of the description is behavioural: communicative proficiency is defined in terms of the activities learners can engage in and the tasks they can perform when they listen, speak, read and write in a second or foreign language (L2). This behavioural orientation is perhaps the CEFR’s most important innovation. The same “can do” descriptors can be used to define a curriculum, plan a programme of teaching and learning, and guide the assessment of learning outcomes; and in this way the CEFR offers to bring curriculum, pedagogy and assessment into a closer relation to one another than has traditionally been the case, challenging us to rethink each from the perspective of the other two.

In the CEFR’s sub-title learning is placed before teaching. This reflects the learner-centredness of its action-oriented approach, which describes language use in terms of the individual learner–user’s communicative capacity. It also corresponds to the authors’ understanding of the learner’s role, especially in a lifelong perspective:

Learners are the persons ultimately concerned with language acquisition and learning processes. It is they who have to develop the competences and strategies (in so far as they have not already done so) and carry out the tasks, activities and processes needed to participate effectively in communicative events. However, relatively few learn proactively, taking initiatives to plan, structure and execute their own learning processes. Most learn reactively, following the instructions and carrying out the activities prescribed for them by teachers and by textbooks. However, once teaching stops, further learning *has* to be autonomous. Autonomous learning can be promoted if “learning to learn” is regarded as an integral part of language learning, so that learners become increasingly aware of the way they learn, the options open to them and the options that best suit them. Even within the given institutional system they can then be brought increasingly to make choices in respect of objectives, materials and working methods in the light of their own needs, motivations, characteristics and resources. We hope that the Framework [...] will be of use [...] directly to learners in helping to make them, too, more aware of the options open to them and articulate concerning the choices they make. (Council of Europe 2001: 141–142)

Notwithstanding the authors’ insistence that “it is not the function of the Framework to promote one particular language teaching methodology” (Council of Europe 2001: 142), the CEFR’s communicative orientation and its characterization of language learning as a form of language use (*ibid.*: 9) point unmistakably towards a task-based approach to teaching and learning in which use of the target language plays a central role; while its understanding of the learner’s role suggests that the development of learner autonomy

(learning how to learn, assuming proactive responsibility for the learning process) should be a priority. The CEFR's companion piece, the European Language Portfolio (ELP), embodies this dual focus: it was conceived partly to foster learner autonomy (Council of Europe 2006), and its scaled checklists of "I can" descriptors imply learning by doing.

The CEFR and the ELP were first proposed at a symposium held in Rüschiikon, Switzerland, in 1991 (Council of Europe 1992). The first and second drafts of the CEFR were widely circulated in 1996, and the final version was published in 2001, the European Year of Languages. A collection of papers discussing forms the ELP might take was published in 1997, practical possibilities were explored in the pilot projects (1998–2000; see Schärer 2000), and the ELP was launched more widely in 2001. In other words, the CEFR and the ELP are no longer novelties. Since 2001 the impact of the CEFR has been very great. Most language testing agencies in Europe now relate their tests to the CEFR proficiency levels, sometimes on the basis of systematic and highly sophisticated analysis, and there is a growing tendency for the levels to be explicitly referred to in language curricula and the textbooks that support their implementation. At the same time, the ELP has brought the CEFR's action-oriented, learner-centred approach directly into language classrooms – in May 2009 the Council of Europe's ELP website listed 99 validated models. On the whole, however, the CEFR and the ELP have not been exploited as a single package, with the result that their impact on language learning outcomes has been a great deal less than it might have been.

Written at a time when the ELP Validation Committee and the Language Policy Division are working towards a new strategy for the future, the purpose of this discussion paper is to look again at the potential of the CEFR and the ELP to stimulate and guide the "further intensification of language learning and teaching in [Council of Europe] member countries" (Council of Europe 1992: 37), the need for which caused them to be developed in the first place. The paper is particularly concerned to explore the close relation between pedagogy and assessment that is implied by the CEFR's action-oriented ("can do") approach to the description of language use and L2 proficiency and the ELP's emphasis on self-assessment.

2 The ELP and self-assessment

As we have already noted, according to the *Principles and Guidelines* that define the ELP and lay down criteria for validation, the ELP is "a tool to promote learner autonomy" (Council of Europe 2006: 9). In other words, part of its function is to help learners manage their own learning, to support learning how to learn, and thus to foster the development of lifelong learning skills. Learner autonomy entails that learners are fully engaged as agents of their own learning, with individual and collective responsibility for planning, monitoring and evaluation (Holec 1979, Little 1991). If these activities are not

to be random and haphazard, they must be informed and guided by accurate self-assessment. In order to plan the next phase of my learning, for example, I must have a clear idea of what I already know and how well I know it. Thus self-assessment is the hinge on which reflective learning and the development of learner autonomy turn. In the ELP self-assessment is carried out with reference to the proficiency levels of the CEFR. Checklists of descriptors derived from its illustrative scales are used to identify learning targets, monitor progress and assess learning outcomes; and in the language passport overall L2 proficiency is periodically summarized against the self-assessment grid (Council of Europe 2001: 26–27) or an age- or context-appropriate variant of it. In the former mode self-assessment is formative, constantly feeding back into the learning process, as much a general habit of mind as a discrete activity; in the latter mode it is summary and summative, a matter of recording overall learning achievement at a particular point in time.

From the beginning of the pilot projects in 1998 the central role that self-assessment plays in ELP use has given rise to one general and three specific concerns. The general concern is that learners do not have the knowledge necessary to assess themselves. Those who express this concern may be influenced by the fact that L2 examinations have traditionally judged learners according to standards of linguistic correctness. From this perspective, learners are defined by their lack of the knowledge they need in order to assess themselves accurately. But this view misses the point that self-assessment of the kind we are concerned with in the ELP is referenced in the first instance to behavioural criteria. Especially in the early stages, learners may not be able to gauge with any accuracy the extent to which they control (say) the inflexional morphology of their target language; but they are likely to know what they can do communicatively and with what general level of proficiency they can do it.

The three specific concerns to which self-assessment gave rise during the pilot projects are: (i) learners do not know how to assess themselves; (ii) there is a danger that they will overestimate their proficiency; and (iii) they may be tempted to cheat by including in their ELPs material that is not their own. The first of these fears probably arises from the assumption that teaching and learning are one thing and assessment is another, so that ELP-based self-assessment should be something learners do on their own and apart from the learning process; while the second and third fears reflect the fact that in many educational contexts formal examinations determine learners' future options, which means that learners themselves should have no part in judging their own performance. But if we assign the ELP and its various reflective activities a central role in learning, we shall gradually teach our learners the skills of self-assessment; as they become familiar with the descriptors and levels they will find it easier to form an accurate view of their developed capacities; and they will include in their ELP only material that is the product of or directly relevant to their learning. In other words, if ELP-based self-assessment is

central to the language learning process, there is no reason why it should not be accurate, reliable and honest.

Self-assessment as the dynamic that drives reflective language learning is the main concern of this paper. But before we consider how it can be made to work in practice, it is necessary to locate the ELP in the broader context of “assessment for learning” and general pedagogical theory.

3 “Assessment for learning” and general pedagogical theory

The ELP is a special instance of a more general educational phenomenon. The concepts of portfolio learning and portfolio assessment first came to prominence in the United States, where they have been promoted as alternatives to assessment by standardized tests. The proponents of portfolios argue that standardized tests do little to support learning; on the contrary, they encourage the belief that teaching/learning and testing are essentially different activities. Portfolios, on the other hand, are a means of bringing learning and assessment into positive interaction with each other: assessment *of* learning can also be assessment *for* learning. The philosophy that they embody is a close relative of the “black box” discussion of formative assessment that was launched in the United Kingdom in the 1990s (Black & William 1998) and of the growing interest in “dialogic learning” in many European countries (e.g., Winter 2004, Alexander 2006, Ruf, Keller & Winter 2008).

“Assessment for learning” is based on the belief that the right kind of classroom assessment has a crucial role to play in effective teaching and learning. In 1999 the Assessment Reform Group (ARG) in the United Kingdom issued a pamphlet, *Assessment for learning: beyond the black box*, which draws support from a wide-ranging review of published research (Black & William 1998). The pamphlet argues that there is “no evidence that increasing the amount of testing will enhance learning. Instead the focus needs to be on helping teachers use assessment, as part of teaching and learning, in ways that will raise pupils’ achievement” (ARG 1999: 2). The authors summarize Black and William’s (1998) key finding thus: “initiatives designed to enhance effectiveness of the way assessment is used in the classroom to promote learning can raise pupil achievement” (ARG 1999: 4); and they argue (pp.4–5) that improving learning through assessment depends on “five, deceptively simple, key factors”:

- the provision of effective feedback to pupils;
- the active involvement of pupils in their own learning;
- adjusting teaching to take account of the results of assessment;
- a recognition of the profound influence assessment has on the motivation and self-esteem of pupils, both of which are crucial influences on learning;
- the need for pupils to be able to assess themselves and understand how to improve

The characteristics of assessment for learning are summarized as follows:

- it is embedded in a view of teaching and learning of which it is an essential part;
- it involves sharing learning goals with pupils;
- it aims to help pupils to know and to recognize the standards they are aiming for;
- it involves pupils in self-assessment;
- it provides feedback which leads to pupils recognizing their next steps and how to take them;
- it is underpinned by confidence that every student can improve;
- it involves both teacher and pupils reviewing and reflecting on assessment data. (p.7)

Each of these statements is true of the ELP when it is given a central role in language learning and teaching.

Proponents of assessment for learning insist that self-assessment is

essential to learning because students can only achieve a learning goal if they understand that goal and can assess what they need to do to reach it. Thus the criteria for evaluating any learning achievements must be made transparent to students to enable them to have a clear overview both of the aims of their work and of what it means to complete it successfully. Insofar as they do so they begin to develop an overview of that work so that they can manage and control it; in other words, they develop their capacity for meta-cognitive thinking. (Black & William 2006: 15)

As James and Pedder (2006: 28) argue, when assessment for learning is fully implemented, “it gives explicit roles to learners, not just to teachers, for instigating teaching and learning” and thus fosters the development of learner autonomy:

[S]tudents are not merely the objects of their teacher’s behaviour, they are animators of their own effective teaching and learning processes. This has its clearest embodiment in processes of peer and self-assessment when students (i) individually or collaboratively, develop the motivation to reflect on their previous learning and identify objectives for new learning; (ii) when they analyse and evaluate problems they or their peers are experiencing and structure a way forward; and (iii) when, through self-regulation, they act to bring about improvement. In other words, they become autonomous, independent and active learners. When this happens, teaching is no longer the sole preserve of the adult teacher; learners are brought into the heart of teaching and learning processes and decision making as they adopt pedagogical practices to further their own learning and that of their peers. It gives the old expression of being “self-taught” a new meaning. (ibid.)

These are precisely the effects that the ELP is intended to have in the L2 classroom.

At this point it is appropriate to quote what the CEFR has to say about formative assessment:

The strength of formative assessment is that it aims to improve learning. The weakness of formative assessment is inherent in the metaphor of feedback. Feedback only works if the

recipient is in a position (a) *to notice*, i.e. is attentive, motivated and familiar with the form in which the information is coming, (b) *to receive*, i.e. is not swamped with information, has a way of recording, organising and personalising it; (c) *to interpret*, i.e. has sufficient pre-knowledge and awareness to understand the point at issue, and not to take counterproductive action and (d) *to integrate* the information, i.e. has the time, orientation and relevant resources to reflect on, integrate and so remember the new information. This implies self-direction, which implies training towards self-direction, monitoring one's own learning, and developing ways of acting on feedback. (Council of Europe 2001: 186)

One way of describing the pedagogical function of the ELP is to say that it helps us to overcome the potential weakness of formative assessment. For the ELP helps L2 learners to *notice* the form in which they are receiving – and giving themselves – feedback, to *organize*, *personalize* and *interpret* it, and to *integrate* it into the ongoing business of planning and monitoring their learning.

The arguments in favour of assessment for learning imply forms of classroom discourse that are interpretative as well as transmissive (Barnes 1976), exploratory as well as presentational (Barnes 1976, 2008). As Barnes has explained (2008: 5), exploratory talk is “hesitant and incomplete because it enables the speaker to try out ideas, to hear how they sound, to see what others make of them, to arrange information and ideas into different patterns”. In presentational talk, on the other hand, “the speaker’s attention is primarily focused on adjusting the language, content and manner to the needs of an audience” (ibid.). Traditionally classroom practice has emphasized presentational talk to the exclusion of exploratory talk, whereas for proponents of dialogic learning exploratory talk is the means by which learners come to understand and internalize learning content, converting “school knowledge” into “action knowledge”, to use Barnes’s (1976: 81) terms:

School knowledge is the knowledge which someone else presents to us. We partly grasp it, enough to answer the teacher’s questions, to do exercises, or to answer examination questions, but it remains someone else’s knowledge, not ours. If we never use this knowledge we probably forget it. In so far as we use knowledge for our own purposes however we begin to incorporate it into our view of the world, and to use parts of it to cope with the exigencies of living. Once the knowledge becomes incorporated into that view of the world on which our actions are based I would say that it has become “action knowledge”.

The distinction between “action knowledge” and “school knowledge” encapsulates the challenge that dialogic pedagogies are designed to meet. Following in Barnes’s footsteps and stimulated by the insights of Vygotsky (1978, 1986), work in the English-speaking world has produced a number of different though closely related versions of dialogic pedagogy; for example, “the guided construction of knowledge” (Mercer 1995) and “thinking together” (Mercer 2000, Mercer & Littleton 2007), “dialogue of enquiry” (Wells 1999, Lindfors 1999), “dialogic teaching” (Alexander 2001, 2008).

Classroom discourse that embodies these theoretical models may still be relatively rare, but it is by no means limited to the English-speaking world or Anglophone educational cultures. Towards the end of a large-scale comparative study of primary and elementary schooling in England, France, India, Russia and the United States, Alexander notes that “it is the character of the talk as *talk*, rather than its organizational framing, which determines the kind of learning to which it leads” (Alexander 2001: 558). For him teaching that is dialogic rather than transmissive is

1. *collective*: teachers and children address learning tasks together, whether as a group or a class;
2. *reciprocal*: teachers and children listen to each other, share ideas and consider alternative viewpoints;
3. *supportive*: children articulate their ideas freely, without fear of embarrassment over “wrong” answers; and they help each other to reach common understandings;
4. *cumulative*: teachers and children build on their own and each others’ ideas and chain them into coherent lines of thinking and enquiry;
5. *purposeful*: teachers plan and steer classroom talk with specific educational goals in view. (Alexander 2008: 112–113)

The general aim of dialogic pedagogies can be illustrated by reference to the teaching and learning of science. If teaching proceeds in an exclusively transmissive mode – between them the teacher and the textbook present scientific facts and procedures, and it is the learners’ task to memorize and in due course reproduce them – it is a matter of chance whether or not individual learners relate those facts and procedures to what they already know of the world, giving a scientific dimension to their “action knowledge”. If, on the other hand, teaching proceeds in a way that combines transmission with exploration and interpretation, the “school knowledge” that is science is brought into explicit interaction with the learners’ existing “action knowledge”, which greatly increases the possibility that it will gradually be incorporated into it. There is by now a wealth of empirical evidence to support this view, some of it presented in sources I have already cited (Mercer 1995, 2000, Mercer & Littleton 2007, Wells 1999, Alexander 2001) – though they do not use Barnes’s terminology.

If we switch our focus to L2 teaching and learning, the situation is more challenging. Now “school knowledge” is the target language, which offers to expand learners’ “action knowledge” by gradually allowing it to be expressed in a language and in relation to a culture other than the learner’s first language and culture. As we have seen, the CEFR describes language learning as a variety of language use (Council of Europe 2001: 9), which implies that communicative use of the target language plays an indispensable role in the development of communicative proficiency: something on which both nativist and connectionist theories of L2 acquisition agree (see, e.g., Gass 2003, White 2003, Ellis 2003). And because it describes language use in terms of the activities learner–users

can engage in and the tasks they can perform, the action-oriented approach encourages task-based teaching and learning. According to this understanding, the target language should be the medium of classroom activity, whether it involves the performance of communicative tasks (e.g., role plays, discussions, individual or collaborative writing) or analytic learning (e.g., a focus on vocabulary or morpho-syntax). And from this it follows that exploratory, interpretative talk should take place in the target language, so that even beginners encounter the target language in its metalinguistic function, as an alternative language of education that can be used to “express stance” and “invite counter-stance and in the process leave place for reflection, for metacognition” (Bruner 1986: 129). Only in this way can we hope to do justice to the fact that we use language to perform communicative acts that are private and internal (communicating with ourselves) as well as social and external (communicating with others). (For theoretical discussion of an L2 pedagogy oriented to the development of learner autonomy, see Little 2007; for descriptions of practice, see Dam 1995, 2000, Aase et al. 2000, Thomsen 2000, 2003; for empirical validation, see Dam & Legenhausen 1996, 1997, Legenhausen 1999, 2001, 2003.)

It is worth pursuing the “school knowledge”/“action knowledge” idea a little further with reference to the proficiency levels of the CEFRL. At A1, defined as “the lowest level of generative language use” (Council of Europe 2001: 33), learner–users are able minimally to express their identity and indicate their needs; at A2 the focus is still very much on individual identity and needs, though with a significantly expanded capacity for social interaction; and at B1 learner–users’ capacity has further expanded to the point where they can “maintain interaction and get across what [they] want to” and “cope flexibly with problems in everyday life” (ibid.: 34). Learners are unlikely to achieve B1 in the productive skills – “I can enter unprepared into conversation on topics that are familiar, of personal interest or pertinent to everyday life”, “I can write personal letters describing experiences and expressions” (ibid.: 26) – unless their classroom experience consists overwhelmingly of target language use. What is more, B1 is probably as far as general language teaching/learning can go: once learners can perform the tasks specified for B1, they are ready to expand their capacity further by using the target language in some version of content-and-language-integrated learning. Indeed, it is only through CLIL that learners are likely to master tasks specified for B2, for example:

- *I can understand extended speech and lectures and follow even complex lines of argument provided the topic is reasonably familiar.*
- *I can read articles and reports [...] in which the writers adopt particular attitudes or viewpoints.*
- *I can present clear, detailed descriptions on a wide range of subjects related to my field of interest.*
- *I can write clear, detailed text on a wide range of subjects related to my interests.*

(Council of Europe 2001: 27)

To sum up this section: The ELP embodies a special version of portfolio learning, and its pedagogical function is underpinned by the same philosophy as “assessment for learning”, which assigns a key role to learner self-assessment. “Assessment for learning” also implies the varieties of classroom talk – exploratory and interpretative – that are fundamental to dialogic pedagogies, whose aim is to bring “school knowledge” into interaction with learners’ “action knowledge”. In order to apply the principles of such pedagogies to L2 teaching and learning, we must commit ourselves to using the target language not only for communicative and analytic learning tasks but for exploratory, interpretative talk. Such talk in any case provides a necessary basis and frame for self-assessment, to which I now turn.

4 The ELP in use: self-assessment in action

The argument so far has three implications for the design of ELPs. First, if the ELP is to provide a basis and constant point of reference for the reflective processes that characterize dialogic pedagogy, it must be firmly and explicitly embedded in the curriculum. Ideally, the communicative component of the curriculum should be expressed (or re-expressed) in “can do” descriptors that yield the “I can” descriptors of the ELP checklists. Further, if the curriculum follows the CEFR in seeking to promote the development of intercultural awareness and plurilingual competence, the language biography should contain pages that reflect the specific emphases of the curriculum in this regard. Secondly, the checklists should be presented in the various target languages of the curriculum so that they can support the use of those languages for the exploratory and interpretative talk that embraces planning, monitoring and evaluation. Thirdly, because self-assessment has a role to play in each of these three activities, the checklists need to be presented in such a way that they allow learners not only to identify a learning target and record a successful learning outcome, but also to mark their progress along the way. One way of doing this is to provide four columns to the right of the descriptors. The learner can write the date in the first column when she identifies a particular descriptor as a learning target. She can then write the date in the second column when she can perform the task(s) to which the descriptor refers “with a lot of help”, in the third when she can do so “with a little help”, and in the fourth when she can do so “without help”.

A1 and A2 checklist descriptors refer to discrete tasks or clusters of tasks, but as we move upwards through the CEFR levels, the descriptors necessarily refer to increasingly complex communicative activities. This is illustrated by the following selection of descriptors for spoken interaction and writing, taken from the Swiss ELP for adolescent and adult learners (2000.1; bmlv 2000):

Spoken interaction

A1: *I can introduce somebody and use basic greeting and leave-taking expressions*

A2: *I can make simple transactions in shops, post offices or banks*

B1: *I can start, maintain and close simple face-to-face conversation on topics that are familiar or of personal interest*

B2: *I can initiate, maintain and end discourse naturally with effective turn-taking*

C1: *I can use the language fluently, accurately and effectively on a wide range of general, professional or academic topics*

C2: *I can take part effortlessly in all conversations and discussions with native speakers*

Writing

A1: *I can write a simple postcard (for example with holiday greetings)*

A2: *I can describe an event in simple sentences and report what happened when and where (for example a party or an accident)*

B1: *I can write simple connected texts on a range of topics within my field of interest and can express personal views and opinions*

B2: *I can write clear and detailed texts (compositions, reports or texts of presentations) on various topics related to my field of interest*

C1: *I can present a complex topic in a clear and well-structured way, highlighting the most important points, for example in a composition or a report*

C2: *In a report or an essay I can give a complete account of a topic based on research I have carried out, make a summary of the opinions of others, and give and evaluate detailed information and facts*

Greeting and leave-taking expressions and making introductions (A1) can be mastered over the course of a few lessons, as can the resources needed to *write a simple postcard* (also A1). Learning how to *make simple transactions* or use *simple sentences* to write a brief report (A2) takes quite a lot longer: it might provide one of the main focuses of classroom activity for a school year. Most learners will confidently *start, maintain and close simple face-to-face conversations* (B1) only after several years of learning rooted in communicative use of the target language. And by the time we get to C1 and C2 we understand the full significance of the CEFR's view of language learning as a form of language use. For example, I can *give a complete account of a topic based on research I have carried out* (C2) only if I have undertaken the research in question using resources in the target language.

Just how much more learning each CEFR level requires than the level immediately below it, is further illustrated by two additional dimensions of the Swiss checklists, descriptors for strategies and, from A2 upwards, language quality (such descriptors are not included in the majority of validated ELPs). The following examples help to clarify the gradually expanding scope of the learner's strategic range and underlying communicative competence as she moves up the levels:

Strategies

A1: *I can say when I don't understand*

A2: *I can ask for attention*

B1: *I can repeat back part of what someone has said and confirm that we understand each other*

B2: *I can use standard phrases like "That's a difficult question to answer" to gain time and keep the turn while formulating what to say*

C1: *I can use fluently a variety of appropriate expressions to preface my remarks in order to get the floor, or to gain time and keep the floor while thinking*

C2: *I can backtrack and restructure around a difficulty so smoothly the interlocutor is hardly aware of it*

Language quality

A2: *I can make myself understood using memorised phrases and single expressions*

B1: *I can keep a conversation going comprehensibly, but have to pause to plan and correct what I am saying – especially when I talk freely for longer periods*

B2: *I can produce stretches of language with a fairly even tempo; although I can be hesitant as I search for expressions, there are few noticeably long pauses*

C1: *I can express myself fluently and spontaneously, almost effortlessly. Only a conceptually difficult subject can hinder a natural, smooth flow of language*

C2: *I can express myself naturally and effortlessly: I only need to pause occasionally in order to select precisely the right words*

At this point it is necessary to consider in what sense, precisely, the checklists can be used to plan, monitor and evaluate learning. As noted above, A1 and A2 descriptors refer to discrete tasks, or clusters of closely similar tasks, which means that it is possible to adopt them as short-term learning goals, ticking off each goal as it is achieved. At B2, by contrast, the descriptor *I can write clear and detailed texts (compositions, reports or texts of presentations) on various topics related to my field of interest* represents a complex aim that I am likely to achieve only after a sustained period of communicative and analytic learning. In other words, at the higher CEFR levels the checklist descriptors do not constitute short-term learning goals; rather, they represent different dimensions of an increasingly complex and wide-ranging communicative repertoire. Accordingly, they are better used as a basis for *framing* the reflective processes of planning, monitoring and evaluating than as an inventory of targets. In this way descriptors can be discussed and interpreted not in isolation but in relation to one another, and learners come to appreciate how the development of their proficiency in writing interacts with the development of their proficiency in (say) reading and spoken interaction.

At the beginning of a cycle of learning descriptors provide a way of recapitulating *in the target language* what learners have achieved so far; in the middle of the cycle they can be used to monitor progress; and at the end of the cycle they help learners to understand the progress they have made in expanding their communicative repertoire.

This way of using the checklists is harmonious with the dialogic approaches to teaching and learning discussed in the previous section. It was also the method adopted by a Czech primary teacher of English during the pilot projects. What she did is worth quoting at length (from Little & Perclová 2001: 38–39) because it provides a model that can be adapted for learners of any age or proficiency level:

The teacher (Jana Hindlsová) began by talking about the descriptors with the whole class. She wrote all the A1 descriptors on five posters, one for each skill, and displayed them on the classroom wall. She encouraged the class to consider which descriptors were difficult and why, and to discuss what they would need to do in their lessons in order to achieve them. When her learners thought they had achieved a particular descriptor they wrote their name next to it on the poster. Jana then required them to show that their self-assessment was accurate, for example by engaging in appropriate pair work.

After some time the whole class attained the objectives in listening, spoken interaction and spoken production, but reading and writing seemed to be very difficult for some learners. Jana made the class aware of this problem and asked what should be done. Some learners decided to prepare additional practice activities to help their friends. One girl devised an exercise in reading comprehension that took the form of a treasure hunt. These are her (uncorrected) instructions for the task:

1. Open the door and go out from classroom.
2. Go to the left to the table with ceramics.
3. Find the glass and write on your paper what is in the glass.
4. Turn and go down. Stop under the steps. Turn right and find the glass. Write what is in the glass.
5. Go to the box with the schools magazin and take the paper with colour of grass.
6. Come quickly to your classroom.

Members of the class took turns to perform this task, each of them being timed by the girl who had devised it. (When they were not performing the task, learners were kept busy working on replies to letters they had received from another class.)

Reflecting on her experience, Jana said that she realized her learners would need help in understanding how to work with the ELP. The posters in particular helped them to orient themselves. She estimated that it took six months for them to become really independent. As time went on Jana pinned additional texts and learning activities to the various descriptors on the posters and encouraged her learners to take whatever they thought they needed in order to practise at home. Sometimes two classes, fourth and fifth grades, were brought together so that the learners from fifth grade could work with learners from fourth grade on a one-to-one basis. Sometimes the fifth-grade learners prepared materials for the fourth-grade learners to work with, e.g., crosswords and riddles. Jana explained:

“We wanted the pupils to achieve A1 before leaving the school, and that’s why we brought the two classes together. Learners of unequal ability were paired, and the more proficient learners gave leading questions to the less proficient. This seemed to benefit both parties. The children chose words and questions that were simpler

than the teacher would use, which made the dialogue task easier. When designing such tasks I encouraged the learners to consider what their classmates needed to be helped with. Frankly, I myself wasn't quite sure how to use the Portfolio without interfering with what I am supposed to teach. But then I found that the easiest way is to give the responsibility to the children. A prestige atmosphere was created in the classroom. We didn't assign particular lessons to work with the Portfolio. We used it whenever the learners themselves said they needed to work on something. The Portfolio certainly motivated them to do things they wouldn't have done otherwise. For example, some boys translated the computer keyboard and computer games into Czech. For me the Portfolio is more than just the dossier: we need the other components to help us set learning objectives."

This approach to language teaching embodies the characteristics of "assessment for learning" identified by the Assessment Reform Group, already quoted in section 3 but worth repeating here:

- it is embedded in a view of teaching and learning of which it is an essential part;
- it involves sharing learning goals with pupils;
- it aims to help pupils to know and to recognize the standards they are aiming for;
- it involves pupils in self-assessment;
- it provides feedback which leads to pupils recognizing their next steps and how to take them;
- it is underpinned by confidence that every student can improve;
- it involves both teacher and pupils reviewing and reflecting on assessment data. (ARG 1999: 7)

Jana Hindlsová's approach also entails forms of classroom discourse that are *collective, reciprocal, supportive, cumulative, and purposeful*; in other words, that meet Alexander's criteria for dialogic teaching (2008: 112–113; see p.7 above). Four features of her practice are particularly worthy of note. First, she takes A1 very seriously as a coherent communicative repertoire: "As time went on Jana pinned additional texts and learning activities to the various descriptors on the posters and encouraged her learners to take whatever they thought they needed in order to practise at home." She clearly recognizes that it is necessary to fully master and internalize A1 in order to provide a firm basis for progression to A2. Secondly, when it comes to self-assessment, learners are not allowed simply to claim that they have achieved a learning target; they are expected to support their claim by demonstrating to the teacher or their peers that they can indeed perform the task in question. Thus self-assessment interacts with peer assessment, which becomes peer support, even peer teaching, when learners undertake activities designed to help one another. Thirdly, although it seems likely that at least some reflective activities are carried out in Czech – "She encouraged the class to consider which descriptors were difficult and why, and to discuss what they would need to do in their lessons in order to achieve them" – the reading comprehension task devised by one of

her pupils confirms the centrality of target language use to Jana's pedagogical approach. Fourthly, the same task implicitly recognizes a fundamental feature of communicative language testing: whereas we can test speaking and writing by giving learners tasks to perform and judging the language they produce, we have no direct access to the receptive tasks of listening and reading. In our example, the pupil who volunteers to help her peers improve their reading comprehension adopts a classic solution to this problem: she gives them a set of instructions to read and judges their comprehension by the speed and efficiency with which they carry out the instructions.

Another example of self-assessment in action is provided by the Primary Section of Ankara University Development Foundation Schools, which has implemented a whole-school approach to the use of peer and self-assessment in its English language teaching (Bartan & Özek 2009).¹ Its purpose in doing so was to create an assessment culture that would arise from and respond to pupils' learning needs and would help to develop their capacity to talk about language and learning. In this instance the practice of self- and peer-assessment involves three kinds of activity: direct assessment of task performance; more general assessment of overall competence; and test tasks developed by the pupils themselves. Direct assessment of task performance takes different forms depending on the age of the pupils. In 2nd grade the teacher made video recordings of individual pupil presentations, and these provided a basis for peer and self-assessment. In 4th grade one pupil's presentation at the end of a unit on food involved listing the ingredients of flaky pastry, then actually making flaky pastry in the classroom, explaining each successive step as it was carried out; at the end of the presentation the pupil handed out assessment sheets to the rest of the class. In 6th grade pupils worked in pairs to prepare advertisements which were video-recorded, the recordings again providing the basis for self-assessment followed by peer assessment. And in 8th grade three pupils dressed up as a rap group and gave a mock press conference, the rest of the class acting as fans and asking personal questions of the "rappers". In each case the pupils were responsible, either individually or working in groups, for determining assessment criteria. More general self- and peer-assessment of overall competence focuses on learning over a longer period of time: a module, a unit, a term or a year; for this learning journals and checklists are used. Test tasks devised by the pupils themselves typically take the form of content questions on reading passages. The school has used such tasks in a project called "E-classroom", the aim of which is to foster intercultural dialogue with learners of English in Poland and Croatia (www.eu-dialogue.com).

¹ I am grateful to Özgür Şen Bartan and Simge Özek of the Primary Section, Ankara University Development Foundation Schools, Turkey for making their presentation and video examples available to me.

As in our Czech example, self- and peer-assessment are framed by the levels and descriptors of the CEFR and the ELP and entail that the pupils perform tasks of their own choosing and rate their own and one another's performance according to criteria they have defined with the help of their teachers. And these procedures too can be adapted for older learners at higher levels of proficiency. For example, learners working to master B2 writing – *I can write clear, detailed text on a wide range of subjects related to my interests* (Council of Europe 2001: 27) – may undertake six writing projects in the course of an academic year, each project being subject to self- and peer-assessment. The preparation and execution of the projects should include detailed discussion of what precisely constitutes *clear, detailed text*, perhaps referring to the CEFR's scales of linguistic competence/language quality, for example vocabulary range: *Has a good range of vocabulary for matters connected to his/her field and most general topics* (Council of Europe 2001: 112); and analysis of what this descriptor implies might yield criteria for rating the projects. In general, as learners progress upwards through the CEFR levels, the "metalinguistic function" can be brought increasingly into play. Philip Glover (Akdeniz University, Turkey) has shown that when advanced learners of English are required to submit written reports on their progress in spoken interaction with explicit reference to Table 3 of the CEFR (*Qualitative aspects of spoken language use*; Council of Europe 2001: 28–29), they gradually appropriate and internalize the CEFR's terminology, making it part of their own metacognitive/metalinguistic repertoire (Glover 2009). A project to convert the scales of linguistic competence/language quality into a toolkit for learners would be a challenging but worthwhile undertaking.

Teachers who use the self-assessment function of the ELP in the way described here will be well informed about the progress of individual learners and the class as a whole. If they are required to design and administer their own tests, for example at the end of the school year, they will no doubt use tasks that are fully harmonious with the levels and descriptors of the ELP checklists. They may even be able to involve their learners in the design of rating criteria and scoring grids, perhaps following one of the outline examples provided in Chapter 9 of the CEFR (Council of Europe 2001: 194–195). In this way assessment by the teacher complements and is fully harmonious with self- and peer-assessment.

5 Implications of the CEFR and the ELP for language tests and exams: towards a new assessment culture

A reflective learning culture in which self-assessment plays a central role is calculated to ensure that "learners become increasingly aware of the way they learn, the options open to them and the options that best suit them" (Council of Europe 2001: 141). The development of such a culture is no easy task. It poses a major challenge to language teacher

education, and it requires forms of external assessment that support rather than undermine it.

The intended functions of the CEFR in relation to assessment may be summarized as follows: (i) to specify what is assessed – using the levels and descriptors to define test content; (ii) to interpret performance – using the levels and descriptors to state the criteria by which to determine whether or not a learning objective has been attained; and (iii) to compare different language tests – using the levels and descriptors to analyse test content (cf. Council of Europe 200: 178). It is increasingly common for language tests and exams, especially those developed and administered by independent language testing agencies, to be related to the common reference levels of the CEFR – function (iii). Indeed, the Council of Europe has provided language testers and examination boards with a manual for this purpose (Council of Europe 2009), together with calibrated examples of task performance that can be used to train examiners.² However, functions (i) and (ii) have been much less often realized, especially within national education systems, where the CEFR has had relatively little direct impact on the design of exams and rating scales.

In most educational systems assessment has traditionally been written rather than oral. This easily encourages the belief that written exams are the “real thing”, whereas oral exams are an “extra”, which in turn may cause reading and writing to be given greater emphasis in language classrooms than listening and speaking. Also, most exams focus exclusively on the individual learner, yet this is at odds with those parts of communicative reality that involve the interactive use of language. Language education systems that are serious about implementing the CEFR’s action-oriented approach will wish to consider carefully what forms of assessment are most likely to support such implementation. In doing so they will also wish to consider what the relation should be between CEFR-based external assessment and ELP-based self-assessment.

This is what the CEFR itself has to say about the reliability of self-assessment (Council of Europe 2001: 191):

Research suggests that provided “high stakes” (e.g. whether or not you will be accepted for a course) are not involved, self-assessment can be an effective complement to tests and teacher assessment. Accuracy in self-assessment is increased (a) when assessment is in relation to clear descriptors defining standards of proficiency and/or (b) when assessment is related to a specific experience. This experience may itself even be a test activity. It is also probably made more accurate when learners receive some training. Such structured self-assessment can achieve correlations to teachers’ assessments and tests equal to the

² For details, see the Council of Europe’s ELP website (www.coe.int/portfolio), MATERIAL ILLUSTRATING THE CEFR LEVELS.

correlation (level of concurrent validation) commonly reported between teachers themselves, between tests and between teacher assessment and tests.

These words were written, of course, before the CEFR's levels and descriptors had been disseminated to language educators and the ELP had been developed as a tool to support reflective language learning driven by self-assessment. They nevertheless point to the possibility of accommodating self-assessment alongside teacher assessment and external tests, each form of assessment being explicitly and systematically related to the levels and descriptors of the CEFR.

I began this paper by proposing that to date the combined impact of the CEFR and the ELP on language learning outcomes has been a great deal less than it might have been. My primary concerns have been twofold: to discuss the ELP as a special case of portfolio learning that is closely related to the philosophies and practice of "assessment for learning" and dialogic pedagogies; and to explore the central role of self-assessment in effective ELP use with frequent reference back to the CEFR. My argument raises the large questions about formal assessment that I have briefly summarized in this concluding section.

How exactly a new assessment culture should be articulated is a matter for Council of Europe member states. But if they accept the combined challenge of the CEFR and the ELP as I have discussed it in this paper, they will commit themselves to realizing what the CEFR's sub-title implies: the full integration of learning, teaching and assessment. This will never be an easy task, and it is likely to take a long time to achieve. An obvious first step is to encourage the fullest possible implementation of learner self-assessment based on regular use of the ELP.

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