THE MOST FREQUENT ERRORS

TO BE AVOIDED WHEN DEVELOPING A NEW ELP MODEL

European Language Portfolio Templates and Resources
Language Biography

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In its examination of the many European Language Portfolio models submitted between 2000 and 2009, the European Validation Committee has been able to see at first hand the capacity for innovation, personal commitment and the efforts and energy deployed by the teams developing ELPs. As a result, the Validation Committee has been able to improve the initial concept and update the available documentation, to enable as many developers as possible to benefit from the progress made in member states.

This examination of the models submitted also provided an opportunity to note weaknesses, infelicities and, on occasion, misunderstandings about the purpose or content of ELPs. Although many of these could no doubt have been avoided by a more careful reading of the Principles and Guidelines and more faithful use of the submission form headings, some of these difficulties are unavoidable and understandable. It was therefore deemed worthwhile to draw them to the attention of future ELP model developers – not at all with the intention of compiling a collection of "howlers" but rather as a means of helping them avoid such errors.

Following the examination of each ELP model, the Secretariat of the Language Policy Division wrote to the developers, enclosing the Validation Committee's opinion and comments.

93 of these letters, written between 2001 and June 2009, provided details of the points to be improved or changes to be made in order to bring the model fully into line with the Principles and Guidelines, and were expressed in the form of conditions for validation or recommendations. These related to models for very young learners (24), learners in lower secondary education (23), upper secondary education (15) and models developed for higher education or adult education (28).

In all, these 93 letters contained 759 recommendations relating to 119 different points requiring changes.

Obviously, some of these points relate to just a small number of models, but nonetheless some of them are very frequent, which is why we feel it worthwhile to bring them to the attention of future ELP developers.

For example,
- 39 letters (42%) draw developers' attention to the need to have texts which are drafted in foreign languages checked by native speakers;
- 34 letters (36.5%) ask developers to give greater emphasis in the model to intercultural competence, which was often limited to a short, simple questionnaire;
- 29 letters (31%) call on developers to give more explanations so that learners can use the model without having to rely on assistance from teachers or trainers;
- 27 letters (29%) make future validation of the model contingent on the use of the precise terminology used in the ELP headings and parts;
- 26 letters (20%) point out that the very concept of the ELP requires formal language and intercultural learning, undertaken outside the school system, to be taken fully into account.

The types of changes requested or suggested fall into the following categories:

Areas for change	Percentage in relation to the total number of comments (759)
Presentation and consistency of the model	23.58%
Self-assessment arrangements	17.65%
Inclusion of the European dimension	17.65%
Consequences of the principle of learner ownership	11.86%
Education in the values of linguistic and cultural diversity	8.17%
Promotion of plurilingualism	5.93%
Intercultural dimension	5.80%
Possibilities for repeated use of the ELP	5.14%
Development of "learning to learn" skills	3.69%
Communication strategies	0.53%

The above table is not a list of items set out in order of importance to ensure a successful ELP model but reflects the difficulties developers find in fully complying with all the requirements. It does, however, give a clear indication of the areas which present the greatest difficulties and which prove the hardest to address.

Account should also be taken of some key differences according to the target groups of the models in question.

In the models for young children (6 to 9 years old), by far the most frequent difficulties relate to the use of descriptors and the use of proficiency levels in the self-assessment grid (24%) whereas this is a problem for no more than 10.5% of the models for upper secondary education for example. Similarly, upholding the principle of learner ownership is much more of a problem in the models for younger children (16%), than in the models for adults and university students (8%). Conversely, the majority of comments regarding document presentation and consistency concern the models for adults or students in higher education and the models for upper secondary education (22% and 21%), whereas this is an area in which developers of ELPs for younger children are more successful (13.5% of comments). It is not difficult to see why these specific differences have come about.

Lastly, the relatively low proportion of comments (6%) relating to plurilingual competence might seem surprising. This is no doubt explained partly by the fact that over the years increasing attention has been focused on this dimension (with the result that comments on this aspect have become more numerous as time goes by), and partly by the difficulty in giving precise indications to developers as to the ways and means of taking this dimension into account, a matter which is still being debated. Nevertheless, the Committee has systematically refused to validate ELP models relating to one specific language and those offering juxtaposed monolingual versions of the ELP.

I shall attempt below to detail the types of difficulty encountered and for each of these difficulties sum up the advice offered to developers by the Committee.

a) Comments relating to the presentation and consistency of models

There are two frequent shortcomings: errors or infelicities in the texts drafted in foreign languages, prompting the Committee to recommend that these texts be read through by native speakers of those languages (42% of letters); the failure to indicate the origin of the descriptors used in the checklists or to provide explanations on how the specific descriptors have been developed and validated (33% of letters).

Several provisos and recommendations concern the structure of the ELP:
- the need to ensure that every ELP comprises three distinct parts with a clear indication of the links between these three parts;
- the need to make sure that each component of the model belongs to one of these three parts; the checklists, for example, belong to the Language Biography;
- the importance of presenting the proficiency level grid and the descriptors in the checklists in the order in which they are presented in the CEFR and of using icons symbolising language activities in a clear way, if possible by adopting the symbols used in the Standard Language Passport;
- the need to ensure minimum consistency between the Passport and the Language Biography (for example regarding the language proficiency levels in the self-assessment grid, in the language profiles and in the checklists, or between the languages given as examples in the different parts), consistency in the content of the texts translated into several languages, consistency in the terminology used throughout the model.

Some remarks relate to a specific part of the ELP:
- the cover should indicate the target group;
- the Language Passport should enable users to enter their language qualifications and certificates; users should be able to enter details of their trips and experiences in months and years, as in the Standard Language Passport; lastly, the Passport should, except for the youngest learners, be detachable from the rest of the ELP so as to be able to fulfil its presentation function;
- there are a number of specific recommendations for the checklists: each page of the checklists should have space to indicate the language in question and the proficiency level to which the descriptors relate; where developers provide a minimum proficiency threshold for considering a level as attained (for example 80% of descriptors), it is imperative that users can find clear explanations in the ELP of how this condition is to be fulfilled.
  Even though self-assessment is a major component of the ELP, the Language Biography should not be restricted to this aspect alone and should attach importance to other objectives of this tool: learning to learn, the intercultural dimension, plurilingualism.
- Most remarks in this area concern the Dossier, recommending that it be further developed, with greater emphasis being placed on it in the model, that it include a space in which documents inserted by users can be indicated and updated, or that it be better structured with an introduction providing clear explanations as to the structure.

Other comments relate to less essential aspects aimed at improving the ELP's ease of use: page numbering, indicating on each page the part of the ELP to which it belongs, providing more space for users to write in answers or thoughts under the different headings and removing any ambiguities in the instructions or explanations.

b) Self-assessment arrangements

The difficulties relating to the introduction of self-assessment fall into three categories:

- **the descriptors in the checklists**: too often, these lists contain non-communicative descriptors, more relevant to teaching approaches or having no language component; some contain negative ways of describing user proficiency and are occasionally too general to be usable. On numerous occasions, the Committee has had to recommend that developers review these descriptors, especially in order to check their relationship to the stated proficiency level, and to make sure that the same lists did not mix up proficiency descriptors and any specific descriptors relating to other concerns. In addition, descriptors should not be numbered to avoid giving the impression that there was a progression between descriptors for the same proficiency level. Lastly, one model incorrectly stated that level C2 equated to "native speaker" level.

Several provisions must be fully complied with: the descriptors must cover the five language activities (making a distinction between spoken production and spoken interaction) at all proficiency levels considered relevant for the target audience (see below); there should be enough descriptors for each proficiency level (five would appear to be a minimum) but conversely, there should not be too many as this could discourage users. Checklists must under no circumstances relate to one particular language and must be able to be used for all languages known or learned, with a clear indication that the pages should be photocopied when such is the case. Moreover, there should always be space to indicate the language for which the self-assessment is being carried out.

Lastly, it is essential that for each proficiency level the checklists allow for additional descriptors to take account of users' particular experience of the language and that these descriptors may also be used to set individual objectives, including for languages learnt in the school environment.

- **taking into account the age of users**: as a result of its analysis of models, the Validation Committee has identified an approach which should be adhered to when developing new models. The levels set out in the checklists and in the language profiles in the Language Passport must cover all user aptitudes in all their languages. Consequently, these lists must include levels A1 and A2 as well as levels C1 and C2 for models designed for upper secondary education and for older users. For younger users, conceivably only levels A1, A2 and B1 may feature in the ELP, but subject to two provisos: first, users must be able to describe what they can do with the language over and above the levels covered by the checklists (for example in a space reserved for this purpose); and second, the complete self-assessment grid must be included in the documents intended for teachers or parents. Conversely, it may be counter-productive to include levels C1 and C2 in the checklists for younger learners and on several occasions, the Validation Committee has recommended that developers reformulate the A1 or A2 descriptors to make them clearer.

With the aim of making it easier to use the checklists, the Committee on one occasion asked for users to be provided with examples to illustrate the communicative dimension of the descriptors.

- **The role of self-assessment in the European Language Portfolio**: first of all, some models fail to make clear the necessary link between the Language Passport and the Language Biography. For example, not all models explicitly refer users to the checklists to enable them to identify their language profile. In certain draft electronic models, progression in the acquisition of proficiency levels reflected in the descriptors ticked by the user is not taken into account for the automatic establishment of the language profile in the Language Passport. Second, developers are reminded that any assessment made in the Portfolio (by teachers, on the basis of certificates etc) must refer to the CEFR proficiency levels; links between local assessment systems and CEFR levels must be explained in the European Language Portfolio. The role of teachers in assessment and assistance with self-assessment must be clarified and must uphold the principle of user ownership of the ELP.

c) Inclusion of the European dimension

While the importance of the European dimension of the ELP is broadly acknowledged, it is nevertheless not always given sufficient prominence in the explanatory texts found in the models.
Many errors could easily be avoided: inaccurate quotations of the Council of Europe bodies, URLs; confusion between the logos of the European organisations; inclusion of an incomplete map of Europe (cf. www.coe.int/T/e/com/about_coe/member_states/default.asp); inaccurate statements about the status, function and role of the Council of Europe and the CEFR.

Several conditions have to be met for the ELP to be given international recognition: the exact use of the terminology for the various parts of the ELP, the different headings and the key concepts regarding the use of languages, learning and assessment. Similarly, it is essential that the self-assessment grid reproduced in the models is the official version of this grid for the language concerned. Furthermore, it

is recommended that the Standard Language Passport be adopted for users in upper secondary education and for adults; in this connection, I should point out that the adoption of this document presupposes that no changes are made to it.

It is also necessary to make reference to the Council of Europe, including the Council of Europe logo on the cover and introduction to each of the three ELP parts; space for the accreditation number of the validated model and the Council of Europe copyright; use of one of the two official languages of the Council of Europe for the titles of the ELP, each of the three parts and the headings; inclusion of the text presenting the Council of Europe featured in the Standard Language Passport. Use of this logo naturally presupposes that it is not used for the pages or parts of the ELP which are specific to the local situation.

d) Consequences of the principle of learner ownership

Upholding this principle means first of all avoiding any professional jargon and providing sufficient explanations and examples to make it possible to use the ELP without having to rely on the assistance of a teacher.

It also means that all the texts featured in the ELP should be translated into the language of instruction or a language which is immediately understandable to the user, for example in the languages of the linguistic minorities located in the territory where the ELP is to be distributed.
Lastly, in compliance with this principle, users should not be referred to in the third person. Rather descriptors should be worded in the form of "I can ...". Furthermore, the assessment by the teacher or instructor of the proficiency level must depend on the user's own wishes and must not be presented as mandatory or having greater value than the learner's own self-assessment.

Clearly, it will be hardest to apply this principle in the models intended for the youngest learners. The Validation Committee has made three recommendations: the Standard Language Passport intended for adults should not be used for this age group; the standard text presenting the Council of Europe should be replaced by a text suitable for younger learners (available on the European Language Portfolio website www.coe.int/portfolio); and more generally, texts should be adapted to the user's age and attempts should be made to make them more interactive.

e) Other areas in which there are recurring difficulties

There are some other areas that should be mentioned in order to alert future developers to errors committed in previous models:
- **education in the values of cultural and linguistic diversity**: failure to take into account learning outside the formal framework, the association of languages with national flags or specific countries, no references in the models to minority languages present in the country or the region, limitation of the languages covered by the ELP to a closed list of languages, examples exclusively in English, misuse of the adjective "foreign" when speaking of languages or cultures other than those of the majority, referring to "mother tongue" in the singular, illustrations in the model using photographs or drawings which do not reflect the diversity of users (including sometimes by ignoring learner mix).
- **promotion of plurilingualism**: failure to include this objective when setting out the purposes of the ELP, too few possible language profiles in the Language Passport, reference to "the language" (in the singular), self-assessment for a single language, adopting a separate, language-by-language approach.
- **intercultural dimension**: limiting users' activities to spotting differences without prompting them to engage in personal reflection; restricting intercultural reflection to experiences in other countries and excluding or overlooking experiences in the immediate environment; omitting this dimension in the Language Passport; in general, too little space given over to this component of the ELP.
- **learning to learn**: too little work done on reflection on learning strategies

- **communicative strategies**: mixture of receptive and productive strategies, absence of comprehension activities in the list of strategies proposed.

Lastly, particular reference should be made to **the essential requirement for users to be able to make repeated use of the ELP**. In many models, the headings can be used only once, which goes against the idea of being able to use it repeatedly, especially in the parts requiring learners to reflect on their learning, their intercultural experiences and in their use of languages. On several occasions, the Committee has called on developers to make provision for dating self-assessments or language profiles, to make it clear to users that they should photocopy the pages which are to be used several times and to explain to them how they can date the entries they make in their ELP. In the very specific case of an electronic model, the developers had not made provision for updating the user's photograph.

The Validation Committee hopes that this overview of the weaknesses identified in all the models submitted for analysis for validation may help improve the quality of future models. It also hopes that this assistance will help channel all the efforts and energy available towards greater creativity in developing these new European Language Portfolios.

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