

THE ELECTRONIC EUROPEAN LANGUAGE PORTFOLIO: AN ACCOUNT OF NEW EXPERIENCES IN THE USE OF ICT IN A FOREIGN LANGUAGE TEACHING RESOURCE CENTRE IN CUBA

Alicia Maria Moya Torres

Daniel Almeida Granela

Central University of Marta Abreu de Las Villas. CAELTIC (Cuba)

E-mails [aliciam@uclv.edu.cu], [dalmeida@uclv.edu.cu]

Technology is changing our lives in many ways, including how we learn and teach.

Foreign language teachers have been turning to information technology in many ways such as power point presentations, software, the World Wide Web and The European Language Portfolio.

A joint project created by The Flemish University Council (VLIR) and the central university "Marta Abreu" of Las Villas. (UCLV) uses English language as the lingua franca.

In order to facilitate the communication CAELTIC (Centre for Advanced English Language Training for International Collaboration) has been created and equipped with modern technology.

Under these conditions, CAELTIC staff was challenged to design ESP (English for Special Purposes) distant courses using ICT.

One of the software tools implemented in these courses was The European Language Portfolio (ELP) for self assessment.

The European Language Portfolio was developed from the Common European Framework of Reference for Language Learning (CEF). It was launched in 2001 by the Modern Languages Division of the Council of Europe. This document supports the CEF and serves as a record of the student learning progress. It has three components:

A language passport: summary of learners' proficiency in different languages and is linked to the common reference levels in the CEF. Learners record their formal

ABSTRACT

qualifications and language and intercultural skills, experiences and achievements. There is also a grid for self assessment.

A language biography: description of the owner's experiences in each language and which is designed to guide the learner in planning and assessing progress.

A dossier: collection of the best samples of his work and evidence of achievements in the foreign language learning.

Since it is a document that complements the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages (CEFR) and we are partners of a European project in a Cuban context we have adapted it to our Cuban reality.

This paper is aimed at presenting an account of our experience in the use of this tool in Cuba- Belgium project language courses and to prove the ELP can be successfully implemented as an electronic assessment tool for ESP distant courses and in a non European environment (CAELTIC, for instance) and can also be adapted to the learner' needs.

KEYWORDS: Innovation, technology, research projects, etc.

1 INTRODUCTION

Technology has influenced our lives in many areas and it has also found its way into education. There are not teachers who do not use it or who do not ask students to make use of it for their learning. The significant role of this new technology has been highlighted by many professors and researchers. As a result, new forms of learning environments are opening up to us with the use of ICT (Information Communication Technology) This innovative appearance of learning has the following advantages:

For students

- Play the leading role
- Develop autonomous, individual and collaborative learning.
- Feel a real sense of ownership of their learning
- Find learning meaningful and attractive
- Reflect on their own learning and assess each other's work
- Develop selfevaluation, coevaluation and heteroevaluation.

For teachers

- Play the role of facilitators / tutors
- Experience a new attractive way of teaching
- Receive a constant feedback from the students
- Develop digital literacy

Foreign language teachers have been turning to information technology in many ways: power point presentations, softwares, the World Wide Web and The European Language Portfolio.

The purpose of this article is to give an account of our experience in the use of the European Language Portfolio for ESP (English for Special Purposes) distant courses in a FLT (Foreign Language Teaching) self' access centre, CAELTIC (Centre for Advanced English Language Training for International Collaboration) in Cuba.

Due to the new policy of the international cooperation issued by the Cuban government, a joint project has been created by The Flemish University Council (VLIR) and the Central University Marta Abreu of Las Villas. (UCLV)

This project focuses mainly on the development (both academic and scientific) of the UCLV and to achieve this goal the Cuban and Belgian partners use the English language as lingua franca.

However, the proficiency in English of the Cuban professionals was below average. Therefore, they needed to be trained in English to interact successfully with the Belgian colleagues.

These members of the project are all academic and research professionals with different responsibilities who lack time to attend traditional crash courses. Hence, the teachers of English at the Department of English Language at the UCLV were asked to design and teach courses that meet the need of these professionals. In order to facilitate the training the self access centre CAELTIC has been created and equipped with modern technology. (Personal Computers, Laptops, LCD projectors, CD players, Video etc).

Under these conditions, CAELTIC staff was challenged to design and teach for the first time ESP distant courses using ICT (Information Communication technology).

One of the software tools implemented in these courses was the e- European Language Portfolio (e-ELP) for self assessment.

2 BODY

Why use the European Language Portfolio in Cuba?

Given the fact that these courses were conceived for the international collaboration with Belgium, we are partners of a European project in a Cuban context; the European language portfolio was included since it is based on the principles of language learning as set out in the Common European Framework of Reference. (CEFR)

What is the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages?

It is a Council of Europe document which sets up systems of validation of language competences in an internationally comparable manner. It provides a global scale to describe what a user of a language can 'do' at six different levels of performance ranging from Basic (A1, A2), through Independent (B1, B2) to Proficient (C1, C2).

It facilitates a clear definition of teaching and learning objectives and methods and provides the necessary tools for assessment of proficiency. . It is available in over 30 language versions.

The self-assessment grid with descriptors beginning 'I can' is used for learners to look at their own competences in the European language portfolio (ELP).

What is the ELP?

The European Language Portfolio, created simultaneously with the CEFR by the Council of Europe's Modern Languages Division between 1991 and 2001, is a record of an individual's language experiences across a life-time of learning. This tool was devised to support the CEFR.

What structure does it take?

- A Language Passport
- A Language Biography
- A Dossier

The Language passport reviews the owner's linguistic identity, the language learning achievement and intercultural experience and sums up the owner's language proficiency according to the Council of Europe's Common Reference Levels.

The language biography credits the owner's history of language learning. It helps setting goals, review progress, and record significant language learning and intercultural experiences.

The dossier is a collection of the owners' samples of his/her work and evidence of his/her achievements in second/foreign language learning.

What are the advantages of ELP?

For the user it serves the following purposes:

- To keep a record of all languages learned and qualifications gained
- To keep samples of work done in different languages
- To record progress in language learning
- To plan future development in language learning
- To assist mobility between countries by providing comprehensive information to language trainers and employers about your language abilities

For instructors it serves the following purposes:

- To show at a glance the holder's proficiency in languages
- To illustrate language proficiency through samples of work
- To indicate the extent of the learner's language knowledge
- To illustrate the extent of the learner's cultural contact
- To show the learner's learning preferences
- To indicate learning methodologies with which the learner is familiar

What are the principles for ELP?

A wide range of portfolios has been produced in different European countries and by transnational organizations. They all vary according to the context but they should all follow these principles:

- It belongs in the hands of the learner
- It documents and gives value to all language and intercultural competences and experiences
- It promotes plurilingualism and multiculturalism
- It helps to develop learner autonomy [1]

3 RESULTS

Since the CEFR is flexible, not dogmatic and provides a reasoned description of what the Communicative Approach implies: needs analysis based on the learner's functional objectives, the learner's motivation as a central feature, and a realistic way of fitting the course to the resources available [2]; the Cuban context, following the

principles mentioned above, also required the following adaptations to the Can do statements.

Methodological proposal for CAELTIC e- ELP

1. New can do statements were written according to the specific aims and contents for each unit.

- AIM: to get familiar with general information on Belgian airports to proceed accordingly
- DESCRIPTOR: I can guide myself and proceed accordingly in an airport to interact socially

2. The CEFR descriptors were reformulated.

- DESCRIPTOR: I can report the plot of a film and talk about my impressions of it.
- ADAPTATION: I can report on my ongoing research and give my opinion

3 The strategic, linguistic, discourse and intercultural competences were added since the course emphasizes on the intercultural communication.

- Discourse: I can pursue coherence and cohesion by using linking words and connectors.
- Strategic: I can start, maintain and end a short conversation.
- Linguistic: Vocabulary range and control, grammatical accuracy, phonological and orthographic control.
- Intercultural: I can interpret and react to Flemish patterns in daily situations. (most frequently used signs and signals, typical traditions and customs.

The eight students enrolled in the course created their portfolios following this structure and the can do statements as well. These descriptors were also used as an objective base for an ongoing diagnosis during the whole course.

About CAELTIC portfolio format

There has been a great variety of portfolios' designs. It has been kept as ring-binders, booklets, and a Word document but some e learning tools have been used as electronic portfolios such as the Lolly pop, Exabis, SPDC, Mystuff and Mahara.

Established in 2006, Mahara is the result of a collaborative venture funded by New Zealand's Tertiary Education Commission's e-learning Collaborative Development Fund.

Mahara is a fully featured electronic portfolio, weblog, resume builder and social networking system, connecting users and creating online communities. It is designed to provide users with the tools to create a personal and professional learning and development environment [3].

Given the fact that Mahara is provided freely as an open source software, our staff has decided to use it and to modify it according to our needs, but agreeing to provide the source code to others; not to modify or remove the original license and copyrights, and apply this same license to any derivative work, as allowed by the GNU Public License.

These adaptations are still in process, but we will share a description of our applications briefly.

Mahara provides different sections covering: logging in, user settings, creating a profile and a resumé, creating portfolios with the use of files, views and blogs and joining groups, but CAELTIC e- ELP will make customary use mainly of some of them as follow:

The Profile area will be used as the Language Passport in which users store their personal information, the linguistic identity, the language learning achievement and intercultural experiences as well as their summary of their language proficiency according to the Council of Europe's Common Reference Levels.

In the Portfolio section the Language Biography will be stored as a file document and the creation of blogs and views are to be used for the Dossier.

A view in Mahara is a collection of Artefacts, encompassing selected files, and Blogs of your choice. It can be kept private or shared and can also be used to submit work for assessment to a Controlled Group; on the other hand Blogs are journal-like tools that allow to record thoughts and reflections. By adding a Blog to a View you

can allow other users to place comments on your work, allowing you to create a dialogue with your readers; for this reason blogs and views perfectly suit the purpose of the dossier of our e- ELP.

This virtual environment turns out to be an important instrument since students do not depend on a specific location to work; learners and instructors can work and communicate wherever they are and can comment on their works as interaction takes place. In addition, learners can easily attach documents of all format types (text files, sound, picture and video files, etc.)

Above all, it helps achieve autonomous learning and assessment or collaborative learning which the major goal of portfolios is.

4 CONCLUSIONS

The E- European language portfolio can be successfully implemented as an electronic assessment tool for ESP distant courses.

It can also be used in a non European environment (CAELTIC) using Mahara since it can be applicable to the requirements and structure of the ELP.

The e-ELP can also be adapted to the learners' needs helping the users develop autonomous, individual and collaborative learning and experience a real sense of ownership of it.

5 REFERENCES

[1] Reference 1 [Lenz, P.2002. The European Language Portfolio. Insights from the CEF]

[2] Reference 2 [Lenz, P.2002. Heyworht, F.2001. Why the CEF is important. Insights from the CEF]

[3] Reference 3 [<http://demo.mahara.org/artefact/file/download.php?file=4276>]