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Reflection in Language Teaching and Learning in Higher Education: Is the European Language Portfolio the Answer?

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In the past three decades, the whole university system has been undergoing a global shift to *a new way of creating and using knowledge* (Ramsden: 3). This shift brings together disciplines and encourages a practical approach focused on the learner through massive information systems like the internet. The pressures on university teachers have increased greatly, but the aim of teaching still remains the same: learning. All our teaching, assessing and planning need to be reconsidered in the current context of optimum learning; which in turn, argues for a reflective approach as a necessary condition for the improvement of teaching and learning.

The onus on language teachers is identical. The latest European Language Policy supports *an autonomous and reflective* approach (CoE, 2007: 46). At all levels, university participants are being requested to engage in *the development of a* […] *reflective academic community* for *the quality of its teaching* and learning (Ramsden: 231-2). This article examines the concept and practice of reflection in teaching and learning encouraged by educational theories, moving on to analyse the way in which the European Language Portfolio promotes reflective practice at learner level –and by proxy, at teacher level. In an attempt to evaluate the portfolio as a reflective tool, this article considers the benefits and drawbacks of using a ready-made tool for reflection and some alternative ways to enhance it.

Reflection is a useful but yet unclear concept. The term 'reflection' has been used to refer to a process, a set of skills and methods, and its conditions and outcomes. As a process, as early as in the 1930s, Dewey defined reflection as an active consideration of knowledge (9), but nowadays the term 'reflection' still evokes a process of passive self-examination. In the 1980s, Boud emphasized the active nature of the process and its continuous application to past knowledge in order to establish new knowledge (19). Kolb widened the concept by adding in the sphere of experiential learning (Fry: 215). This retrospective thinking was termed by Schön as reflection-on-action, but he provides a second type of reflection called reflection-in-action (1987: 34). Kemmis supports a reflection for action, emphasizing the need for a systematic action plan to transform future experiences (1985: 142). Tsang offers a new approach to reflection: dialogue. As an internal dialogue, he argues that any given person has integrated, throughout the course of their lives, a number of voices from parents, teachers, texts, etc. Reflection, then, becomes a process through which this person achieves a balance from all these different voices within (Tsang: 8).The inevitable outcome of reflection is learning (Mezirow: 23). As a personal process, reflection comprises not only a range of cognitive skills but a degree of emotional involvement. This intellectual and affective engagement generates a feeling of ownership towards the product of reflection (Johns: 35).

These authors have laid the foundations for the on-going debate on reflection, but they all share a common ground that defines it as a continuous, affective and cognitive, intra- and inter-personal process towards the development of an awareness of one's knowledge and practice that leads to responsible and autonomous action in order to transform one's way of knowing and doing.

In many respects, second language learning shares many of these features. It is a lifelong process that entails cognitive and affective skills. It is both an interpersonal and intrapersonal process. It clearly illustrates the difference between reflection-in-action and reflection-on-action proposed by Schön. Reflection-in-action in language learning requires the use of a number of strategies that allow the learner to monitor his output (Little & Perclová: 45). There has been extensive research on the topic of language learning strategies, which has lead to their classification on: memory, cognitive, compensation, metacognitive, affective and social strategies (Ellis: 537-8). With the exception of memory strategies, the other five groups require reflection to some extent. Among the metacognitive, directed and selective attention are crucial as they are both based on previous knowledge of the subject and self-awareness of

learning style. Among the compensation strategies, self-monitoring and self-evaluation are the most common. Through note-taking, grouping, audiovisual representation and contextualization, the learner relates the new materials through personalization. Among the cognitive strategies are deduction, transfer and translation. Among social and affective strategies, cooperation, communication and questioning skills are essential in order to build the dialogue on which language learning is based.

Reflection on action in language learning is mainly for planning and self-assessment (Little and Perclová: 45). This category can be subdivided in two for our own purposes: reflection on language as a product, and reflection on the learning process. The former would analyze language output -whether written or oral- and linguistic knowledge. Self-correction and linguistic analysis can foster this kind of reflection. At the level of linguistic knowledge reflective practice is difficult to accomplish because it involves the verbalization of technical knowledge. Reflection on the process involves questioning the contexts of learning and both the collective and personal itineraries. This is the most traditional model of reflection and it presupposes a certain degree of awareness, on the part of the learner, of the reasons for their learning, the purpose of the process and the methods that aid his/her learning. Transferable skills such as self-management, advance preparation, resourcing and planning are the stepping stones towards the goal of reflective learning. In order to do this, Brookfield (1995) suggests the quadrangulation of perspectives by means of autobiographies; peer feedback; teacher's feedback, and readings. Evans (1999) proposes critical incident analysis, reflective journal, and the analysis of strengths, weaknesses, opportunities and threats (SWOT). She also puts forward the practicality of 'reflective apprenticeship' through observation (140-5). The reflective dialogue before and after the observation is essential to bring about that understanding (Tsang: 3). Moon suggests learning contracts, action learning sets and learning partners/critical friends (44). Teachers should engage learners in learner-to-learner private reflective dialogue within the classroom. The atmosphere in the classroom is crucial to work towards reflection. In the criteria of favourable conditions for reflection, research has underlined the need for cooperative classrooms and responsible teaching/learning (Zeichner & Liston: 58).

Doel *et al.* (2002) support the use of a portfolio as a tool for reflection. The portfolio is a type of learning journal which combines autobiographical writing with other sources of documents such as examples of practice and reflective statements. The use of portfolios is not recent. Disciplines such as art, finance, history and education have been using them for a long time. The main advantage of a portfolio is that it integrates learning, practice, assessment and reflection. It encourages an analytical attitude towards knowledge and experience, which may potentially lead to greater autonomy. On the other hand, it promotes professional aptitude by the identification of transferable skills and the ability of recognizing errors and difficulties. The main obstacle has been its written nature. With the proliferation of audiovisual preferences in terms of learning style, writing has grown unpopular. The use of technology has made it more appealing with the creation of blogs and podcasting. Learning style and approach may hinder or assist the promotion of reflection in the classroom context. Entwistle puts forward three types of learning approach: deep – to understand ideas for yourself -, strategic – to achieve highest possible grades - and surface – to cope with course requirements (19). Learners change approach depending on the task or subject in question. One of the functions of reflection through the use of a portfolio is to help the learner recognize these styles and approaches in order to broaden her/his learning experiences.

Leaving aside teaching style, curricular constraints and time management problems, which are likely to arise in any academic module, another issue that arises from the use of portfolios is whether or not they should be assessed. Moon (1999a) argues that the assessment of personal development is unreliable and that the criteria for assessment are not transparent (51). On the other hand, the expectation of a grade would influence the nature of the writing. However, assessment is part of the learning process and it ensures participation. Teachers should be able to outline a set of assessable criteria and applied them consistently. In the case of language portfolios, the easy way out is to assess the linguistic proficiency leaving aside the content of the portfolio in question.

The Language Division of the Council of Europe (CoE) developed a European Language Portfolio during the last decade, in which all learners throughout Europe can record their standards and cultural experiences in a validated document. The ELP is personal and includes three compulsory sections:

A passport for language qualifications and skills;
A biography to describe linguistic knowledge and experiences;
A dossier with examples of personal work.

It aims, as stated in the official documentation, are mainly *motivating people to learn languages* and contribute to mobility within Europe (CoE, 2001: 90). It displays a double functionality: pedagogical and reporting. The reporting function is developed primarily by the passport and dossier in which the learner describes his identity as a language user (passport) and presents examples of his/her own work (dossier). Unlike a standard CV, the portfolio validates informal linguistic experiences as long as they are properly reported. Disregarding the difficulties that this validation entails, our goal in this article is to analyze the pedagogical function of the ELP, and specifically its relation to the promotion of reflective teaching and learning. Little & Perclová describe the ELP's pedagogical function as

> *making the language learning process more transparent to learners, helping them to develop their capacity for reflection and self-assessment, and thus enabling them gradually to assume more and more responsibility for their own learning* (25-36).

This function is attained mainly by the biography section. In the Irish portfolio for post primary education, which was approved in 2001, this section contains 8 activity files:

General Aims
Checklists of Standards
Spoken Interaction
Spoken Production
Writing
Listening
Reading
Setting Goals and Thinking about Learning
Target
Achievement level
Self-Reflection
Things I notice about language and Culture
Materials used.
Aspects I noticed.
How I solve communication problems
Problem
Solution
Methods I use to learn languages
What I do and why it helps me
Intercultural Experiences
I have experience the culture of this language in the following ways (enter dates)
I have been able to use this language in the following ways (enter dates)
I have learnt about the culture of this language in the following ways (enter dates)
Heritage Languages
This language is important to me because…
Here are the ways I have learned and used this language…

The Spanish Portfolio for Adults, approved in 2003, the biography contains the following elements:

Historial lingüístico (or 'linguistic record')
Aprender a Aprender (or 'learning to learn')
Actividades de aprendizaje (or 'activities for learning)
En el aula (or 'in the classroom')
Por mi cuenta (or 'on my own')
Tablas de Descriptores (or 'checklists of standards')
Planes de futuro (or 'planning)

In terms of reflection-in-action, both ELPs foster the use of compensation strategies by the emphasis placed on self-assessment by the mandatory checklists of standards. They focus on communicative and social strategies in line with their choice for the communicative approach for language learning, but they leave the metacognitive and affective strategies up to the learner's ability to recognize them.

In terms of reflection-on-action, they highlight the importance of personal planning, whether in terms of general aims or specific goals. They both work at the level of learning style, encouraging the learner to reflect mainly upon sensory and learning approach. The Irish portfolio focuses on communication strategies, whereas the Spanish portfolio works from the learner perspective and encourages the learner state all the strategies of which s/he is aware. Finally the Irish portfolio incorporates the cultural and heritage section in order to raise awareness of the Irish legacy and the immigrant community. Thus, the ELP definitely engages learners in a kind of planning, monitoring and self-evaluation (Little and Perclová: 45), which are all part of the reflective process.

The weakness of both portfolios comes not from their nature but from the practicalities of an official printed document as a tool for independent reflection. Both of them heavily rely on checklists. If the portfolio were to be used in class, the danger of this sort of activity is that it will encourage a very passive mode by which the learner quickly fills in without thinking much instead of the active reflective attitude that is conducive to learning because the qualitative job of self-analysis has already been done for him/her. This may be solved by the use of reflective activities, such as the ones proposed by Little & Perclová (1999), which lead to the completion of these ELP forms.

They tend to repeat the same kind of pattern of questions for several languages and different skills, presenting very official-looking forms for planning and reflecting. These repetitive forms may help students by providing them with a standard aid to reflection or lead them to boredom and passive thinking patterns of the copy-and-paste type. Depending on the learning style of the class, the teacher would have to gauge its appeal for the learners in question. Again the onus is on the teacher to enhance the appeal of these materials.

Its official document appearance, which enhances the reporting function, may deter the reflective nature of it because the learner may not develop a personal or emotional sense of ownership. This could be avoided by the use of alternative methods of reporting, using the ELP as a departing point, and creating classroom activities with the use of ICT or other means more appealing to the learners involved.

Its written nature and the quality of the questions stated does not encourage dialogue in the way the above mentioned theorists have proposed. In order to fulfil a dialogic purpose, which will also be in line with successful language learning techniques, the ELP needs to be based on cooperative debates and tasks leading to a truly reflective attitude. The voice of academic research, yet very well integrated into the ELP, is not transparent enough. In higher education, the ELP needs to be supplemented with articles and bibliography that would provide the learner with the theoretical map to explore the issues of language learning at an abstract level. Otherwise, the ELP runs the risk of promoting a strategic or surface approach to language learning and research at the university level.

The ELP, however, has definitely initiated a process of reflective consideration that involves learners as well as their teachers. It is the first step towards the goal of language learning autonomy in line with the recommendations of the most recent linguistic policy published in Europe (CoE, 2007: 69). It stands as an invitation to inclusive dialogue and participation on how participants of linguistic contact

situations may assist in the improvement of teaching and learning of languages by heightening their awareness of what the process entails and the obstacles that they are bound to face, personally and collectively. The Comenius Project 06-09 is currently working towards the creation of European Language Teaching Portfolio (EUROPROF) which will in turn question language teaching professionals across Europe about their reflective practices. With the alignment of all these efforts and the creativity of the individuals that design, analyze and supplement these learning materials, both our university students and teachers can become more reflective and develop a more active approach to teaching and learning, which will hopefully lead to a more responsible and autonomous way of thinking about and making use of language.

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Endnotes:

i.Learning strategies are defined as "specific actions, behaviors, steps, or techniques -- such as seeking out conversation partners, or giving oneself encouragement to tackle a difficult language task -- used by students to enhance their own learning" (Oxford, 2003).

ii.There is an electronic version of the ELP as well that can be used in a multimedia laboratory, which can be obtained from: HYPERLINK "http://eelp.gap.it/partners.asp" http://eelp.gap.it/partners.asp

iii.For more information, check the official website: HYPERLINK "http://www.coe.int/portfolio" http://www.coe.int/portfolio.

iv.Copies of this portfolio can be purchased through: HYPERLINK "http://www.tcd.ie/clcs" www.tcd.ie/clcs or HYPERLINK "http://www.authentik.ie" www.authentik.ie

v.Copies of this portfolio can be obtained free of charge from HYPERLINK "http://aplicaciones.mec.es/programas-europeos/jsp/plantilla.jsp?id=pel_docs" http://aplicaciones.mec.es/programas-europeos/jsp/plantilla.jsp?id=pel_docs