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Examining the challenges of implementing the pedagogy of the European Language Portfolio

12 years of the ELP at the University of Padua, Italy

1. Introduction

The purpose of this paper is to describe the gradual integration of the pedagogy of the European Language Portfolio into two English language degree courses at the University of Padova and how this has evolved over time. The CercleS (European Confederation of Language Centres) version of the ELP¹ (European Language Portfolio) was first adopted in 2002. We will examine the context in which the ELP was first introduced, then the progression the project has made, including the evolution of various activities designed to promote the pedagogic principles (e.g. self-assessment, learner reflection and target language use) of the ELP ‘as a tool to promote learner autonomy’² as well as some of the challenges faced by teachers and students. We will also explore how, in our university context, this tool has become fundamental in underpinning the tenets of learner autonomy where large numbers of students of varying language ability and experience enrol to study English. Due to the various problems associated with these large numbers and little classroom contact time a blended approach is integral to the organization of the courses. Not only has the learning platform facilitated the creation of ELP related tasks but has further enhanced them through providing a collaborative online environment thus also fostering a sense of belonging to a shared “learning community”. The paper will also stress how consistent production in the target language can lead to authentic writing, speaking and listening practice.

¹ The CercleS ELP for learners in Higher Education validated 2002
<http://www.cercler.org/en/main.html>

² Council of Europe DGIV/EDU/LANG (2000) 33 rev.1 Revised June 2004, 2.4

2. Background

The CercleS ELP was first piloted at the University of Padova in the 2002-2003 academic year, and since then has been used with varying degrees of success and involvement (Dalziel 2005a, 2005b). Initially many teachers and students alike viewed it as an “add-on” to the language courses, but fairly early on those involved in piloting realized that to successfully implement the ELP, the underlying pedagogical principles had to become the scaffolding for these courses. These principles are embodied in the concept of learner autonomy and of empowering learners to take charge of their learning, as Little and Perclová (2001:3) so aptly describe: ‘[...] of making the language learning process more transparent to learners, helping them to develop their capacity for reflection and self-assessment, and thus enabling them to gradually assume more and more responsibility for their own learning’. According to Little (1991, 2007, Little et al 2002), three main principles of language learning and teaching are: learner involvement, learner reflection and target language use.

Learner autonomy does not mean individual students working or learning on their own (Kohonen 2000; Little et al 2002). On the contrary it requires interaction and learning with and from others, along with developing learning strategies and ability to self-manage and self-assess. The English language degree courses at the University of Padova have until recently been strongly characterized by the use of computer-mediated communication (CMC) by means of conferencing software (Dalziel 2004, 2005b).³ This blended approach makes it possible to cultivate an environment where students share experiences, ideas, opinions, reflections and information all in the target language; thus creating an online “learning community” to which collaborative learning is fundamental.

Learner autonomy and strong online presence are of great importance given the practical difficulties of teaching languages at a large university where student numbers are very high. For example, much of the experience gained using the CercleS ELP is with the first-year undergraduates studying English as part of their degree course in *Mediazione Linguistica e Culturale* (MZL) and *Lingue e Culture Moderne* (LCM), where on average, approximately 600 students choose English as their major language. LCM is more “traditional” and strongly focuses on literature whilst MZL is more of an interdisciplinary degree

³ This has now been replaced by an open source learning platform

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