

# The European Language Portfolio

## and its Potential for Canada

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This article provides an overview of the national workshop on language portfolios held in Edmonton, Alberta from October 12 – 14, 2005. The lead organization for the workshop was the Second Language Education Centre at the University of New Brunswick. The Edmonton Public School Board acted as on-site hosts.

### **Background**

Sally Rehorick, Director of the Second Language Education Centre at the University of New Brunswick, has been participating as Canadian observer in a project of the Council of Europe concerning the implementation of the European Language Portfolio (ELP). Based on a design and proficiency guidelines that are common across all 47 member states of the Council of Europe, the ELP provides a method for learners, from young children to adults, to document their competence in different languages (including their first language), to describe their contacts with other cultures, and to guide their language learning. Implemented in 2001, the European Language Portfolio was developed by the Council of Europe through the European Centre for Modern Languages.

### **Objectives of the workshop**

The workshop was exploratory and informational in nature. The specific objectives were:

- To learn about the European Language Portfolio from its conception and design through to implementation
- To examine the European Common Framework of Languages, as a model of language competence
- To learn about a specific ELP implementation: the model of Sofia University
- To identify complementary endeavours in Canada in the specific areas of frameworks of competence, assessment and plurilingualism
- To determine the potential for a language portfolio in Canada in terms of values, feasibility and desirability
- To develop strategies for and elements of an action plan, if warranted

### **Features of the European Language Portfolio (ELP)**

- The ELP began through a Resolution on the European Language Portfolio adopted at the 20th Session of the Standing Conference of the Ministers of Education of the Council of Europe in October 2000.

- The objectives of the portfolio are: a) to encourage learners to continue language learning throughout their lifetime and b) to provide a common measure of language competence to facilitate mobility from one country to another.
- The basis for the ELP is the *Common European Framework of Reference*, which describes 5 skill areas (listening, spoken production, spoken interaction, reading, writing) and 6 skill levels. Developed through a process of scientific research and wide consultation, this document provides a practical tool for setting clear standards to be attained at successive stages of learning and for evaluating outcomes in an internationally comparable manner. The Framework provides a basis for the mutual recognition of language qualifications, thus facilitating educational and occupational mobility.
- The Common European Framework describes proficiency guidelines that each member state uses for its own portfolio(s). Thus each educational jurisdiction defines the objectives and targeted standards for their own needs based on these common proficiency guidelines.
- The ELP has the potential to track several languages, including the learner's mother tongue. The portfolio is the property of the learner.
- All ELP's have a common design core which includes: a Language Passport, summarizing the self-assessment, the courses/experiences, and diplomas/tests/certificates of the learner; a Language Biography, which contains the learner's detailed self-assessment and a record of linguistic and cultural experiences inside and outside formal educational contexts; and a Dossier, containing evidence and samples of the learner's work.
- The Common Core, based on the *Common European Framework of Reference*, assures coherence in the use of the ELP since this Common Core is the same for all ages of learners, from young learners through to adults.
- In addition to this common core, each portfolio model is tailored to local situations. Depending on the focus of a particular country (or jurisdiction within that country), a particular portfolio could be addressed to any age or level of learner from young children through to adults. There are now more than 70 validated models in use across Europe with additional models being presented continually.
- Each portfolio model is designed according to defined Principles and Guidelines, and validated through the Council of Europe's Validation Committee. In this way, standards and quality are assured.
- The ELP has 2 principal functions:
  - 1) *pedagogic function*: to motivate the learner and to provide a way for the learner to track and plan his/her own learning.
  - 2) *reporting function*: to document its holder's plurilingual language proficiency and experiences in other languages in a comprehensive, informative, transparent and reliable way. The instruments contained in the ELP help

learners to take stock of the levels of competence they have reached in their learning of one or several foreign languages in order to enable them to inform others in a detailed and internationally comparable manner.

### **What is the interest for Canada?**

- There are recommendations on several fronts for national proficiency guidelines and certificates in language learning.
- The Council of Ministers in Education Canada is interested in the themes of Literacy and Internationalization. Both of these themes coincide with the objectives and potential of the ELP.
- The Council of Europe resembles Canada in many ways, especially concerning education: the 47 member nations each have their own autonomous Ministry (or Ministries) of Education, yet share several common goals for cross-border mobility and comparability.

### **Principal conclusions**

At the conclusion of the workshop, participants agreed that:

- The European Language Portfolio has potential as a concept for Canada and should be examined further.
- The Common European Framework is a useful scaffold for describing language proficiency and should be examined further.
- There are strong assets in language assessment and learner development already in place in Canada that can be built on.
- There is strong interest among participants to cooperate in some way.
- There is value in continuing to stay abreast of developments in Europe and elsewhere.

### **Next Steps**

- Information about this workshop will be disseminated via this report and via the individual commitments and follow-up actions of the participants. The list of these commitments and follow-up actions is attached to this report as Appendix 2.
- A Language Portfolio Study Group, formed by the participants, will exchange information on the various follow-up endeavours which take place over the next year.
- Participants will reconvene in the fall of 2006 on the occasion of the annual conference of Teaching English as a Second Language (TESL) Canada in Winnipeg, conditional on funding.

## Presenters

The following experts made presentations:

- Rolf Schärer, Consultant on language policy, educational strategies and innovation, Switzerland. “Patterns of Implementation of the European Language Portfolio.”
- Maria Stoicheva, Lecturer of English, Sofia University, Bulgaria. “ELP Case Study: the Model of Sofia University.”
- Sally Rehorick, Director, Second Language Education Centre, University of New Brunswick, Fredericton. “Background to the workshop: *Plan 2013* and the IMPEL project at the Council of Europe”.
- Alina MacFarlane, Consultant and Project Manager, Perth, Ontario. “National Language Competencies, Proficiency Test and Certificate in Canada.”
- Larry Vandergrift, University of Ottawa, Virtual Scholar in Residence, Department of Canadian Heritage. “Development of a Definition for ‘Functional’ Competency in a Language.”
- Wally Lazaruk, Principal Consultant, Evaluation Plus Inc., Edmonton. “Is Canada read for a nationally-recognized assessment tool? Alberta’s French as a second language project with the Public Service Commission of Canada.”
- Pauline MacNaughton, Executive Director, Centre for Canadian Language Benchmarks, Ottawa. “The Canadian Language Benchmarks and related assessment tools.”
- Joanne Pettis, Coordinator, Adult EAL Curriculum Development & Implementation, Manitoba Department of Training and Immigration, Winnipeg. “Collaborative Language Portfolio Assessment: An example from Manitoba.”
- Joan Boyer, Acting Director, Social Sciences Unit & Second Languages Consultant, Saskatchewan Learning, Regina; John Sokolowski, Team Leader International Languages, Alberta Education and Janice Aubrey, Consultant, International Languages, Alberta Education, Edmonton. “The Common Curriculum Framework for Languages as Developed by the Western and Northern Canadian Protocol.”
- Loretta Kuttner, Consultant in Language Evaluation, Fredericton. “Language Assessment in New Brunswick: Public Schools and Civil Service.”
- Sandy Forster, Program Coordinator, Curriculum, Edmonton Public Schools. “Promoting plurilingualism in the Edmonton Public Schools: FSL Renewal Project and International/indigenous language learning.”

## Participants

Forty participants attended the workshop, representing the following organizations:

Provincial and Territorial Departments of Education

- British Columbia, Alberta, Saskatchewan, Manitoba, Northwest Territories, Nunavut, New Brunswick, Prince Edward Island, Nova Scotia

Federal Ministries and other nationally-focussed organizations

- Department of Indian Affairs, Department of Canadian Heritage, Canada School of Public Service, Public Service Commission

- Centre for Canadian Language Benchmarks
- Office of the Commissioner of Official Languages

#### Post-secondary institutions

- University of New Brunswick, University of Ottawa, University of Western Ontario

Participants brought a wide range of expertise, responsibilities and language areas. These included:

- Curriculum
- Teacher development
- Evaluation
- Indigenous languages
- English as a second language
- French as a second language
- Heritage languages
- International languages
- Professional teacher associations (Canadian Association of Second Language Teachers, Canadian Association of Immersion Teachers, Ontario Modern Language Teachers Association)
- Adult learners: immigrant language needs
- K – 12 school system

#### **Additional Resources**

European Language Portfolio. Online at: <http://culture2.coe.int/portfolio>

#### **Complete Report of Proceedings**

A copy of the complete report can be obtained by contacting the Second Language Education Centre at the University of New Brunswick at [slec@unb.ca](mailto:slec@unb.ca) or by download at <http://www.unb.ca/slec> .