Chapter XIV

Language Learning and User-Centered Design: The Development of the Electronic European Language Portfolio

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Abstract

This chapter will discuss the rationale behind the development of the electronic version of the European Language Portfolio (ELP), its technological and pedagogical aspects, and its advantages over print-based counterparts. The electronic European Language Portfolio (e-ELP) has been developed following a user-centered design (UCD) framework. This framework will be discussed in detail. The e-ELP is part of a Minerva project funded by the European Union (EU) with the main goal to adapt the paper-based ELP in an electronic format. Some ELPs have already been validated and edited in a hardcopy format. These hardcopy editions present several limitations, such as maintenance and long-term updating. In this chapter, emphasis will be placed on discussing the affordances of the electronic environment in supporting language teaching and learning and the user-centered approach in developing the prototype.
Introduction

Emerging technologies and their affordances require that educators rethink their fundamental assumptions about teaching and learning (Vrasidas & Glass, 2002). Technology affordances played a major role in reshaping teaching and assessment and have revolutionized the use of portfolios as a pedagogical, reflective and assessment tool (Mason, 2002; Vrasidas & Glass, 2004). International organizations, such as the International Society for Technology in Education, UNESCO and the European Commission (EC), have established guides, plans and standards for the use of technology in education and training. In light of these developments brought about by rapid technology growth and use in education, the digital e-ELP was developed to examine the ways in which technology can support reflection and language learning.

The Common European Framework of Reference for Languages underlines the need for the European citizen to have a personal document describing all his or her linguistic experiences and certifications. This need for a language passport, called European Language Portfolio - ELP (see http://culture2.coe.int/portfolio) has been recognized by many European institutions that have already accepted the suggestions put forward by the Framework regarding the ELP. The EC encourages individual institutions to adapt the ELP to their specific needs and to submit their new ELP to a validation procedure to verify its conformity to the requested format. Several ELPs have already been validated and published in hardcopy format. Nevertheless, these existing hardcopy editions present several limitations (e.g., difficulties in life-long updating and maintenance). One of the main objectives of this project is to overcome such barriers and take advantage of the affordances of technology in serving the needs of language teachers and students alike.

Definition and Description of the ELP

The ELP is part of the EC language policies and suggestions to support European mobility and cohesion among its citizens through the development of multilingualism and multiculturalism. The ELP aims at helping European citizens understand and appreciate the cultural and linguistic richness of Europe. Furthermore, the ELP is an EC initiative to support life-long learning as a way of responding to economic, social and cultural changes in Europe. It is a personal document in which the owner can record and reflect on his or her scholastic and non-scholastic language learning and cultural experiences. Its aims include:

1. To motivate learners to improve their ability to communicate in different languages and to enhance their multilingual and intercultural experience.
2. To encourage learners to reflect on their objectives and ways of achieving autonomous language learning.
3. To provide a record of the linguistic and cultural skills of learners.
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