

Elena Di Benedetto

Introducing a Language Portfolio to Motivate High School Students.

Abstract I: The European Language Portfolio is one of the most innovative tools developed by the Council of Europe to implement its policies aimed at promoting plurilingualism and pluriculturalism. Based on the latest developments in metacognitive strategies for learning, it provides useful assistance to language teaching and learning.

This article analyses the introduction of a language portfolio into two secondary school first forms, as part of a teaching practice experience in a vocational school. Focusing on the phase of self-assessment and its impact on motivation to learn, it explores possible ways to introduce students who are not used to reflecting on their learning to metacognition.

Abstract II: Nell'ambito delle politiche del Consiglio d'Europa volte a promuovere la diversità linguistica e culturale, una delle proposte più innovative è il Portfolio Europeo delle Lingue. Basato sui risultati più recenti della didattica metacognitiva, tale documento costituisce un valido supporto pedagogico a sostegno del processo di apprendimento e quindi dell'insegnamento.

Nel presente articolo viene analizzata l'introduzione di un portfolio in due classi prime di scuola superiore durante un ciclo di tirocinio presso un istituto professionale. Esaminando in particolare la fase dell'auto-valutazione e il suo possibile impatto sulla motivazione ad apprendere, si indaga sulle modalità di introduzione della metacognizione a studenti che non sono abituati alla riflessione sul proprio apprendimento.

The European Language Portfolio (ELP) is one of the latest tools developed by the Council of Europe to promote plurilingualism and pluriculturalism. Validated

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and non-validated language portfolios have been developed over the last few years; some have been adopted by language teachers in Italian schools. While some general guidelines have been issued, the practical implementation of the portfolios has been left to the single teachers.

As part of my SSIS teaching practice (Scuola di Specializzazione per l'Insegnamento nella Scuola Secondaria), I had the opportunity to cooperate with two teachers in a vocational school and introduce a language portfolio into two classes, with the aim of enhancing students' motivation. In this paper I want to focus on the phase of the project concerning self-assessment. Before analysing my teaching experience, I will present some selected principles underlying the ELP and a concept which is fundamental to it, i.e. metacognition.

Principles and Guidelines

First of all, the ELP is "a tool to promote plurilingualism and pluriculturalism" (Council of Europe 2000:2.1). It presents different sections for any second or foreign language a person might learn and it makes explicit references not only to linguistic competences but also to the cultures related to the various languages and the learner's personal experience with these languages and cultures.

Another important point is that the ELP "is a property of the learner" (Council of Europe 2000: 2.2), a feature that might influence motivation: on the one hand students are free to compile their own portfolio, provided they follow some given guidelines; on the other, when they understand the functions of the ELP they see they are also responsible for it. In turn, responsibility is closely linked to autonomy: the ELP "is a tool to promote learner autonomy" (Council of Europe 2000: 2.4).

Finally, the ELP "has both a pedagogic function to guide and support the learner in the process of language learning and a reporting function to record proficiency in languages" (Council of Europe 2000: 2.5). The pedagogical function refers to the promotion of learners' motivation to improve their communicative competences, learn autonomously and seek intercultural experiences. The reporting function refers to the record of the learners' plurilingual language proficiency and experiences that the ELP provides. We will see how these functions are fulfilled through the three components of the ELP.

The *Language Passport* "provides an overview of the individual's proficiency in different languages at a given point in time" (Council of Europe 2000: 3.2); for this reason it includes the self-assessment checklists by the Common European Framework and a list of the formal qualifications achieved by the learner. It is expected to be updated to reflect the learner's progress in language learning.

The *Language Biography* "facilitates the learner's involvement in planning, reflecting upon and assessing his or her learning process and progress; it encourages the learner to state what he/she can do in each language and to include information on linguistic, cultural and learning experiences gained in and outside formal educational contexts" (Council of Europe 2000: 3.2). The

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Language Biography is therefore mainly concerned with the development of metacognition and of plurilingual and pluricultural awareness. It may vary according to the learners' age and level (Mariani and Tomai 2004), but it usually comprises:

- the learner's language learning history and his/her most significant intercultural experiences;
- the learner's language learning aims;
- questionnaires about learning styles - "overall approaches to learning and the environment" (Oxford 1989: 1); although not explicitly recommended by the Council of Europe, these questionnaires may facilitate metacognitive tasks;
- detailed self-assessment checklists.

Since metacognitive tasks are demanding especially to younger students, the ELP and the Language Biography in particular may be written in the students' mother tongue (Mariani and Tomai 2004).

The *Dossier* "offers the learner the opportunity to select materials to document and illustrate achievements or experiences recorded in the Language Biography or Passport" (Council of Europe 2000: 3.2). A main function is to support self-assessment providing evidence for what the learner states in the other parts of the ELP. In this way students are made both responsible for what they maintain they can do and aware of their progress. By showing what learners can do, the dossier promotes their motivation.

Metacognition

A general definition of metacognition is "thinking about thinking" (Peirce 2003: I), that is the process of reflecting on one's cognitive processes. More specifically, "[m]etacognition includes goal setting, monitoring, self-assessing, and regulating during thinking and writing processes" (Peirce 2003: III), which are exactly the processes to which the Principles and Guidelines (Council of Europe 2000) make explicit reference.

The ELP is therefore based on metacognition, and I will now try to analyse in simple terms the relationship between metacognition and the aforementioned pedagogical function of the ELP.

As a general principle, "[t]he more students are aware of their thinking processes as they learn, the more they can control such matters as goals, dispositions, and attention. Self-awareness promotes self-regulation" (Peirce 2003: I). This means that only if students are aware of their weaknesses can they take action to overcome them, only if students are aware of their strengths are they able to exploit them in their learning process.

As pointed out, the whole ELP and the Language Biography in particular are aimed at promoting students' self-awareness: for example, when considering the self-assessment checklists, students are compelled to think about specific

learning situations in order to decide on the level of satisfaction of their performances; when answering the questionnaires about learning styles, they have to think about the ways they are used to learning and their effectiveness. But metacognition is a more complex task.

To develop metacognitive abilities, three kinds of knowledge are needed: declarative knowledge, or “the factual information that one knows” (Peirce 2003: II), procedural knowledge, or “knowledge of how to do something” (Peirce 2003: II), and conditional knowledge, i.e. “knowledge about when to use a procedure, skill, or strategy and when not to use it; why a procedure works and under what conditions” (Peirce 2003: II).

In particular, the procedural knowledge implies the mastering of learning strategies, that “are specific actions, behaviors, steps, or techniques students use - often consciously - to improve their progress in apprehending, internalizing, and using” a foreign or second language (Oxford 1994: 1). Research has shown that students who use learning strategies that are appropriate to the material, to the task, and to their own goals, needs, and stage of learning are more effective learners (Oxford 1994). In other words, by developing procedural and conditional knowledge, students are very likely to learn more effectively and collect success more frequently. Frequent success, in turn, increases self-confidence and motivation to learn.

These considerations suggest that the metacognitive processes cannot be developed only through a language portfolio. Although a portfolio makes “learners reflect more on their learning” (Little and Perclová 2001: 43), it is just one of the tools that can be exploited to promote learning self-awareness. A more extensive programme on metacognition needs to be developed. Mariani and Tomai (2004) suggest that the portfolio is taken as a starting point to stimulate students’ reflection; subsequently, these reflections should be translated into concrete activities for the everyday teaching-learning process, and then re-organised in a systematic way in the portfolio (Mariani and Tomai 2004: 35-36). In this way the ELP can perform its pedagogical function at its best.

The language portfolio project

The final aim of the project I participated in was to motivate students. The basic idea was to give students some evidence of their progress and to make them feel part of a wider English learning community. The classes involved were two first forms of a vocational school, and the students’ English level was on average A1/A2 (CEF).

The references for the project were the Principles and Guidelines of the Council of Europe (2000), Mariani and Tomai’s book *Il portfolio delle lingue* (2004) and the ELPs accredited models No. 6.2000 and 54.2003.

Following Mariani and Tomai’s suggestion (Mariani and Tomai 2004: 107-109), my training colleague and I (from now on, ‘we’) decided to introduce the portfolio to the students by starting from the Language Biography. We chose to prepare four self-assessment checklists for the four macro-skills (listening, speaking,

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reading and writing) and one questionnaire about learning styles. As indicated in Mariani and Tomai (Mariani and Tomai 2004: 127) and in Little and Perclová (quoted in Mariani and Tomai 2001: 46), in order to decide on the language to use we considered the students' level and agreed on the use of the Italian language for all metacognitive tasks - with one exception, as I will explain.

Preparing the self-assessment checklists

When we set to prepare the checklists, we were bearing in mind that the primary aim of the project was to motivate students by making them see they were making progress. Being aware that learners might "find it easier to say what they cannot do, or what they have difficulty doing, than what they can (Bachman and Palmer 1989; Ready-Morfitt 1991)" (Brindley 2001: 141), we worded all descriptors in terms of 'can do' statements and identified the levels of proficiency students had to tick for each ability with propositions starting with the affirmative adverb "Sì", followed by a qualification - "con qualche incertezza", "abbastanza bene", "molto bene". In many portfolios the levels of proficiency are expressed also graphically, sometimes through emoticons. Although these pictures can be very attractive to young learners, usually the lowest level of proficiency corresponds to the emoticon depicting a sad face. Since this sad face could be counterproductive in terms of its possible impact on students' self-esteem and motivation, we decided to adopt other graphical symbols, i.e. exclamation marks, as in the accredited model No. 54.2003: one exclamation mark for the lowest level of proficiency, three exclamation marks for the highest level. All exclamation marks were associated to the statements starting with "Sì", hopefully promoting the idea that self-assessment means evaluating what one can do - not what one cannot do.

We also considered that "learners seem to be able to assess their abilities more accurately when the self-assessment statements are couched in specific terms and are closely related to their personal experience (Oscarson 1997; Ross 1998)" (Brindley 2001: 141). Therefore, we decided that the language should be simple and clear in order to help students identify the abilities defined by the descriptors. Also, we organised an activity for each macro-skill to be carried out before the corresponding self-assessment. The activities should be suited to the students' level, interests and needs in order to be challenging enough and promote students' participation, and hopefully provide an experience of success. In this way we aimed both to provide a recent learning experience to evaluate and to encourage students in their self-assessment task.

Preparing students for the metacognitive task of self-assessment

Simple and clear checklists and the explicit reference to relevant activities might not be sufficient to ensure that students engage seriously in the metacognitive process of self-assessing. "[E]vidence suggests that the concept of self-assessment may be quite unfamiliar and threatening to many learners since it

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alters traditional teacher-learner relationships (Blue 1994; Heron 1988)" (Brindley 2001: 141). Also, students might not be used to metacognitive processes in general. In order to prevent students from getting confused, Dörnyei (2001) suggests that the purpose and utility of tasks should be explained (Dörnyei 2001: 77).

Thus, students should be first introduced to the language portfolio and led to understand its purposes. In order to involve them, we let them leaf through the accredited model No. 54.2003, which is colourful and has a clear graphical layout; we explained clearly the main parts and functions of a language portfolio, and with appropriate questions guided students to identify the practical reasons why building a portfolio could be useful to their learning and working experience. Students were very involved, and subsequently they were able to express with simple words the "pedagogic function" and the "reporting function" (Council of Europe 2002: 2.5) of a language portfolio: they explained that a portfolio could help them keep track of their improvement in language learning, identify their strengths and weaknesses and actually display their abilities (with the pieces of works selected for the dossier). They recognised the interrelation among the components of a language portfolio; in particular, it was clear to them that they should always be able to demonstrate in the dossier what they stated they could do in the language biography. Also, they knew that they had to repeat the self-assessment process at different times during a school year/s in order to monitor their progress. Finally, they understood that the main beneficiaries of the project were themselves and that the tasks required were not supposed to be corrected or assessed by the teacher.

To promote their sense of responsibility, we pointed out from the start that the portfolio was their property; as a very first task, we let them draw the front cover with their name, the writing 'language portfolio' and any drawings they wished to add. We could then proceed to the self-assessment phase.

The impact of self-assessment on students' motivation

After carrying out a communicative activity (1) for each macro-skill, students were very quick to fill in the relevant self-assessment checklists.

Since the limited duration of our teaching practice prevented us from understanding whether the students were underestimating or overestimating their levels and none of the students made any comments, we had no elements at our disposal to evaluate the immediate impact of self-assessment on students' self-esteem, their attitude towards the English language or towards language learning and other factors that contribute to language learning motivation. Wanting to learn something about these motivational factors, one day, after the self-assessing phase, we handed out a simple one-question survey to investigate students' feelings, self-esteem and attitude towards the self-assessing task: among a few options - 'happy', 'proud', 'anxious', 'confused', 'bored' and 'interested' - students had to circle the one/s that best described how they felt. In this way we wanted them to be aware of their feelings - a

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metacognitive task. Since the activity was clear and easy enough, it was carried out in English. We pointed out that the survey must remain anonymous and that we needed it for our research.

The two classes produced quite different results: in one class, most students were interested, happy and/or proud; in the other, a few students selected only positive adjectives, a few only negative ones and some circled both positive and negative adjectives - on the whole, a general sense of anxiety emerged, which was in line with the usual behaviour of many students. I cannot know whether the circles were sincere; but, since we insisted that the survey should remain anonymous (and nobody wrote their name), it is likely that the students did not lie. If the results reflect the real situation, they suggest that some students had not developed strategies to lower their anxiety and manage their emotions. Emotional factors like anxiety influence not only motivation, but also the choice of learning strategies (Oxford 1989), which in turn has a great impact on students' success (Oxford 1994). In this class context, a programme devoted to the development of metacognition could be very useful. Students need to develop both procedural and conditional knowledge; as a first step, they should be led to develop deeper self-awareness, in terms not only of their language abilities, but also of their learning styles and of other internal factors that influence motivation.

I will not analyse this point, since it exceeds the scope of this paper. Instead, starting from the belief that self-assessment "can assist learners to become skilled judges of their own strengths and weaknesses and to set realistic goals for themselves, thus developing their capacity to become self-directed (Dickinson 1987; Oscarson 1997)" (Brindley 2001: 140), I will explore how we could have exploited better the self-assessment phase in order to give a greater contribution to the development of students' metacognitive abilities and their motivation to learn.

Another metacognitive process related to self-assessment

As previously mentioned, "[m]etacognition includes goal setting, monitoring, self-assessing, and regulating during thinking and writing processes" (Peirce 2003: III), and these processes are also mentioned in the Principles and Guidelines (Council of Europe 2000). Actually, in the explanatory note to the guidelines referring to the Language Biography, the Language Policy Division (2004) maintains that, "[i]n order to plan their learning and assess their progress, learners need goal-setting and self-assessment checklists" (Language Policy Division 2004: 3.2). It is therefore clear that goal setting and self-assessment are closely connected.

While in our teaching practice time and efforts were devoted to developing the students' ability to self-assess, we only mentioned the importance of goal setting, without training students in the use of this metacognitive strategy. To enhance the positive impact of self-assessment on the learning process, we could have simply added a 'goals' column to the self-assessment checklists,

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where students should have had to select which abilities to improve in a near future. In the very first place I had planned to create such a column (as in the ELP accredited model No. 54.2003), but then the idea was ruled out because this additional metacognitive task was thought to be counterproductive overwork.

On the contrary, I believe that, if we had added the 'goals' column in the self-assessment checklists, we could have made the self-assessment process more meaningful and therefore promoted better the students' metacognitive abilities, enhancing also motivation. If students had set some goals, whenever self-assessing their abilities, they would have some precise and limited objectives to pursue and check; consequently, they would have also made sure that they could reach these objectives; gradually, they would learn to set more realistic objectives and to monitor their learning, focusing their efforts on specific language tasks.

An integrated approach of goal-setting and self-assessment, if accompanied by overt teaching of learning strategies, would therefore really promote learning autonomy - one the final aims of the ELP and of any portfolio that draws inspiration from its principles.

A portfolio project can be a useful starting point, and the teachers who felt the need to develop it had a correct intuition: this set of tools can assist them in promoting students' motivation, and I hope the project achieved this objective.

NOTE:

1. By 'communicative activity' I mean an activity based on the communicative approach that considers language as a means of communication.

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