

English in Mind and the use of a portfolio: what's in it for you and your students?

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The European Language Portfolio (ELP) is becoming a buzzword, and while many teachers have been quite enthusiastic about portfolio work with their students, other colleagues worry that it might be 'just too much work'. There are also colleagues who do not have enough information about how to use portfolios with their students.

This paper looks at three questions:

- What is the European Language Portfolio?
- What are the advantages of using a portfolio?
- What specific help does *English in Mind* – the new course for teenage students of English – give to support and facilitate portfolio assessment?

What is a language portfolio?

Portfolios have been used for a long time by various professions as a means to document a person's achievements. Artists, architects or designers collect samples of their work in portfolios. They use them to show evidence of their best practice, but also to demonstrate how their skills have developed over the years as a consequence of their learning biography.

The European Language Portfolio (ELP) has similar aims with regard to a learner's language and intercultural competence. Devised by the Council of Europe's Modern Languages Division, it was piloted in 15 Council of Europe member countries, and was launched during the European Year of Languages in 2001.

The portfolio is the property of the learner, and the basic idea is that students collect samples of their work in their portfolio. Most of the time, these samples will be texts created by the students, but might also include photos of classroom scenes, audio recordings, or even DVDs. All these documents provide evidence of a student's performance, e.g. during a discussion or a role play. Naturally, collecting such performance data over a period of several years requires a basic level of understanding and motivation on the students' part, as Vicky Spandal & Ruth Culham (1994) stress:

What do you picture when you hear the word Portfolio? Maybe you think of an artist's case, a scrapbook, drawstring bag, shoe box or manila folder... In truth, any portfolio exists first and foremost in the heart and mind of the designer who

selects with care those works and artefacts that best tell the story of who a person is now – and who he or she is becoming.

However, the ELP does not only contain evidence of a student's performance. All in all, it consists of three parts.

The **Language Passport** section gives information about a student's proficiency in one or more languages at given points of time. In this part of the portfolio, students record formal qualifications and give information about their language competencies with regard to the common reference levels in the Common European Framework (CEF). This part of the portfolio can contain evidence of self assessment, assessment by the teacher and assessment by educational institutions and examination boards, e.g. international exams such as Cambridge ESOL or Trinity.

The **Language Biography** aims to encourage students to get involved in the planning, reflecting upon and assessing of their own learning process and progress. It gives students an opportunity to state what they can do in their foreign language(s). In this part of the portfolio, students can also list and reflect upon important language and intercultural learning experiences, for example, time they have spent studying abroad, intercultural projects they have taken part in, etc.

As briefly described previously, the **Dossier** is a collection of materials and data put together by students to document and illustrate their proficiency and the learning experiences which are listed and reflected upon in the Language Passport and the Biography.

What are the key advantages of using a portfolio?

Students, parents and teachers will find the European Language Portfolio most useful if it is part of a teaching programme that is in line with the levels and descriptors specified in the Common European Framework. If students understand that what they are doing in their language class is in line with an internationally recognised framework of communicative competencies, their learning becomes more meaningful.

Advantages for the students and their parents

A portfolio helps to make the students' learning progress and process visible and noticeable. This means that students will be able to appreciate more what they are learning, and because the CEF descriptors can be used by the students to assess what kind of real-world language tasks they are able to do, the students' confidence will grow with their competence.

Furthermore, a teaching and learning programme that is in line with the CEF and its descriptors will quite naturally help to prepare students with the appropriate skills they need to pass internationally recognised exams. It will also take seriously the development of students' study skills and their cross-cultural understanding. These important aims rank high in the recommendations given in the Common European Framework.

Advantages for the teacher

If your students have successfully learnt to monitor their own learning process, to document and reflect on their learning, and to set personal language objectives and plan their further learning, you are no longer solely responsible for the success of your teaching and the outcomes of your students' learning. This process certainly demands flexibility and sensitivity on the teacher's part. However, once the students' motivation to be involved in planning, to take responsibility for their own learning and to assess and document their progress has been aroused, the teacher may to a certain extent become a facilitator, a consultant and an adviser of the students' learning. This in turn may lead to increased participation and autonomy on the learners' part.

What specific help does *English in Mind* – the new course for teenage students of English – give to facilitate portfolio assessment?

English in Mind is in accordance with the linguistic competencies, and the cross-cultural and pedagogical objectives listed in the Common European Framework.

English in Mind facilitates language learning that is in line with Cambridge ESOL and Trinity exams by using many tasks similar to those that students can expect to find in these exams.

English in Mind offers the teacher a specific photocopiable portfolio. This portfolio, developed by expert Ewa Kolodziejaska, supports students in putting together their language biography, and in assessing their competencies, by offering them checklists that are in line with the CEF descriptors. It further supports their ability to reflect on their learning process by furnishing students with questions that help them to set goals and reflect on the achievement of these goals.

English in Mind employs a systematic approach to developing students' writing skills via a variety of tasks and text types throughout the course. A specific section in the Student's Books called 'For your Portfolio' leads to the creation of texts that are in line with the descriptors in the for the development of the students' writing skills. Teachers can be sure that most of the writing skills listed in the CEF are covered, and the dovetailing system between the 'For Your Portfolio' sections in the Student's Books, and the cover pages of the Dossier in the English in Mind Portfolio, takes a lot of work off the teacher's hands because it ensures that students develop the writing skills specified in the CEF.