

ELP in whole-school use

Case study – Czech Republic

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Summary

- Zakladni skola Matice skolske, České Budějovice
- 500 pupils (primary/lower secondary)
- Languages taught: Czech (as language of schooling/school subject), English, German
- Scope of the project: one teacher of English interviewed on her use of the ELP

This report is based on an interview with one teacher of English in a school that was interested in developing portfolio approaches across the curriculum but was not using the ELP on a whole-school basis. The teacher interviewed was herself using the ELP, but she was an exception. She used 'I can' checklists to make comparisons between English and German in classes where pupils were learning both languages. She identified a number of problems in the school's use of portfolios, including lack of coordination and lack of training/support for teachers. She also mentioned that some of the older pupils could see no point in working with a portfolio because it had no official status and thus could not be used to support their progress from one educational level to the next.

Description of context

I contacted several schools in the city to find out whether any of them use the ELP not just in individual classes but on a whole-school basis. I found just one school and got in touch with the headmaster and a foreign language teacher. I interviewed the teacher about how the school works with portfolios. As the school faces a number of difficulties implementing its portfolio project, it would appreciate guidance and support from me on the basis of experience and expertise gained through the ECML project.

When I interviewed the teacher for the second time she told me that the project was at very much the same level as at the time of the first interview, except that in the meantime the school had launched its own portfolio (see below). As an English teacher, she enjoys contributing to the portfolio, but for many other teachers it continues to be merely a formality.

Zakladni skola Matice skolske is a nine-year co-educational elementary school located in the centre of České Budějovice, a town with a population of 100,000. There are 500 students at the school. The languages taught there are English and German. English is taught from the 3rd class and German from the 8th class. Some pupils attend an after-school English club from the 1st class. The school is considering the introduction of Spanish as an optional, after-school club, not a mandatory subject in the curriculum.

The school uses a standard ELP for primary pupils and the school's own version of a portfolio at lower-secondary level. All the pupils at the school and seven foreign language teachers are involved in the project.

The school's primary motivation for working with a portfolio is to introduce a modern educational approach and support innovation in teaching. By working with a portfolio the school gets extra funding, which is another significant motivating factor. The school's concept of portfolio work, however, does not include merely foreign languages. The idea is that throughout their years at this school, the pupils collect their best work from all subjects in a personal portfolio. This means that the dossier element is strongly accentuated. The project has the official support of the school management and is definitely a top-down initiative.

Organizational arrangements

The project is coordinated by the foreign language methodologist at the school. Working with the portfolio is a must for all teachers and it is listed in the school's education programme.

The teacher I interviewed enjoys working with the ELP in her English lessons (in spite of not having any training on how to work with it). She encourages her pupils to record various types of foreign language experience (not only subjects at school but also after-school activities). However, she feels that the school does not really have a meaningful aim in this project. It is carried out in a very formal way, there are no coordination meetings, there is no discussion among the teachers, and there is no sharing of materials and procedures. Most teachers view it as a necessity and do not feel particularly excited about working with it. Each teacher can implement his/her own approach to using the portfolio. Every three months there is an official check that portfolio tasks have been completed, but no attention is paid to their quality or content. The teachers do not have any support material.

The pupils do not get their portfolios free of charge; their parents have to buy them. Even though they are not very expensive (€3), parents object to paying for them, arguing that there are many different school-related costs. That is why the school has decided to create its own material, which would be given to the pupils free of charge.

In February 2010, the pupils in several classes started using the school's own portfolio, called *A pupil's personal portfolio*. It is intended to cover all the subjects taught at school, which means that in addition to records from foreign languages, there are also entries from other subjects, such as Geography, Maths, Science, etc. As for English, the portfolio contains several photocopied pages from the official Czech ELP for young learners as well as other materials collected from lesson work.

Pedagogical exploitation of the ELP

As portfolio work is carried out in a very formal and uncoordinated manner, the ELP is essentially not exploited as a pedagogical tool. The teacher I interviewed uses techniques such as working with the "Can do" statements, making comparisons between English and German in classes where pupils have experience of both languages, and teaching about the culture of English-speaking countries. However, her approach is exceptional; most other teachers are not even aware of the pedagogical value of the ELP.

At this point it seems to me that there is potential to work with this school on improving its approach to portfolio work. There is obviously an understanding that a portfolio can be a useful tool but very little awareness of how to work with portfolios effectively and in a truly innovative way. I could see my role in the project as a mediator of international experience in portfolio use to the teachers at the school. According to the teacher I interviewed, such support, assistance and guidance would definitely be valued.

At the second interview the teacher still felt that there was a lack of coordination and training for the teachers. One of the difficulties she described was that older pupils did not see the point of producing a portfolio because it cannot be used as an official document, e.g. for getting accepted into high school. Younger pupils, on the other hand, are more enthusiastic and often contribute their own ideas about what could go into the portfolio.

Evaluation of whole-school ELP use

In the context of the school I am reporting about, the focus of evaluation could be the impact of the ELP on learners and on teachers, and possibly the impact on the school.

I am able to collect the following kinds of data

- interviews with teachers and pupils
- examples of pupils' work
- video recording of a lesson which contains portfolio work and photographs

The frequency of data collection is difficult to estimate. I assume that I can collect data at least once a month during the school year.

I have made an appointment with the teacher to visit a lesson which will include portfolio work in March 2010. This will be a good source of authentic data. I have also been able to make copies of several portfolios in progress, which I could bring to our meeting in Graz.