

Developing a European Language Portfolio

This article provides an outline of an initiative to promote plurilingualism among citizens of Europe. The activity is carried out within the context of the Modern Languages Project, Strasbourg: Language policies for a multilingual and multicultural Europe.

What is a EUROPEAN LANGUAGE PORTFOLIO?— Definition

It is a document, or rather an organised collection of documents relating to language studies and assembled over a period of years, the purpose of which is to record qualifications, results and experience, and also containing samples of personal work.

The language portfolio is conceived as an instrument by means of which those who so desire will be able to record information about their formal and informal language learning attainments and experience, highlighting their acquired skills in a positive and internationally comprehensible way. The idea is to produce a document that fosters plurilingualism by stimulating young people and adults to build up throughout their lives the knowledge, skills and attitudes they need to become European citizens. The language portfolio will, therefore, have a lifelong use.

What is the purpose of a EUROPEAN LANGUAGE PORTFOLIO, what are its principles, objectives and functions?

A language portfolio has firstly a documentary function. It will provide relatively complete information about skills, knowledge and experience

acquired by its holder over a period of time, including those not highlighted in official – e.g. school – documents. It will also encourage holders to become aware of their language learning process. Assembling portfolios will encourage holders to plan, organise and assess their own learning process, and, it is hoped, will provide motivation for lifelong language learning. The portfolio can thus be considered to stimulate plurilingualism, and so has a pedagogic function as well as providing a record of attainments. It will provide potential employers with information about skills, knowledge and experience, and it will ensure that attainments are clear in every country, since it contains an international evaluation grid. The language portfolio thus has a presentational and informational function, as well as a pedagogic function, and it will, via this duality, facilitate and encourage mobility among European citizens.

One PORTFOLIO or several?

Discussions about portfolio holders naturally led to the question of whether there should be one portfolio for everyone, or a range of different ones. The tendency is to favour a set of portfolios to meet the different age-related needs. If there is a set of portfolios, however, they must have common features, so that there is no break in continuity. Here are three phases that might be distinguished for language portfolio use, with their respective functions:

- *Function of a PORTFOLIO in pre-primary and primary education:*

At this level, skills evaluation will be less necessary than providing information about introductory aspects characteristic of this form of teaching (songs, games, counting rhymes, sketches), and giving children a sense of purpose.



- *Function of a PORTFOLIO in secondary education:*

Here the main purpose will still be to motivate, but the aim of encouraging language learning and an awareness of pupils' own learning process will be more important. The portfolio will thus be an aid to self-directed learning. The need for an attestation of learning achievement will also be more manifest.

- *Function of a PORTFOLIO for adult learners:*

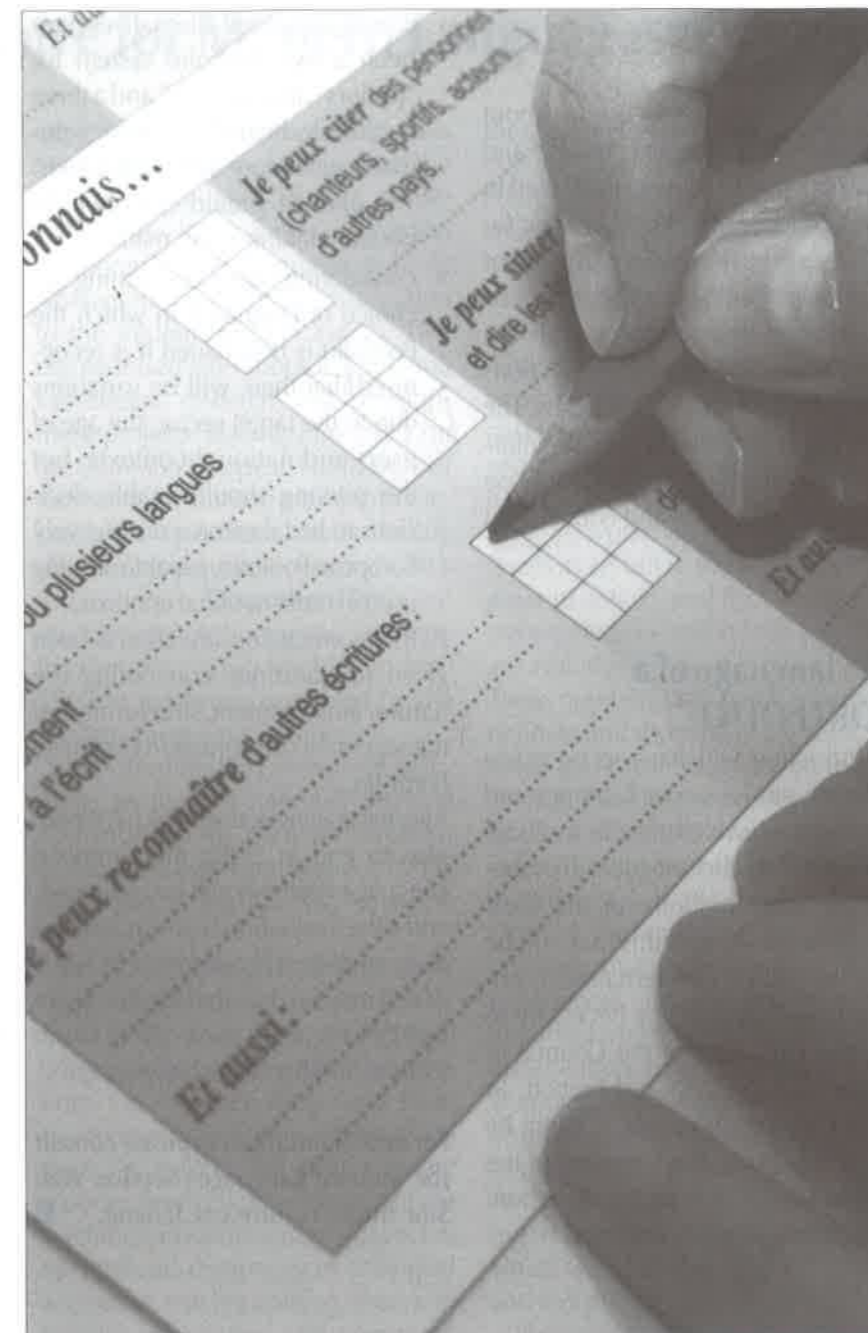
A portfolio for adults will certainly include a more detailed presentation of skills and information about achievements, as well as a job-oriented evaluation. In a school context the core of the portfolio will be the learning process (hence the learner), but at the adult stage, the addressee (the person to whom the portfolio is shown) will be more central to the selection of documents. This will also be the key phase for the portfolio as a means of backing up the holder's self-directed learning process, helping him or her to clarify personal objectives and facilitating self-evaluation.

It having been established that the functions may vary depending on the learning context, it must also be noted that there are crossover points and elements in common. For example a very young child who learns to record songs and nursery rhymes on a sheet prepared for that purpose is taking the first steps towards organising not only a language portfolio, but also his or her lifelong language learning.

Structure of the PORTFOLIO

A portfolio, depending on the type of user, will include:

- an overview of lifelong language learning (past and present), a kind of language "passport",
- a language "biography" or profile of the languages learnt,
- a dossier or compilation of personal work.



The overview or "passport" will present language attainments at a given time. It will list the languages known, the level, and any qualifications achieved; it will include intercultural experience.

The language "biography" (or profile) will detail language skills and experience, each language being considered separately, as well as any relevant intercultural experience. Self-assessment may be included here and also possibly in the "passport" section.

The dossier will contain additional information, giving the holder the opportunity to make a more personalised presentation. It may, for example,

include information about the holder's self-set and institutionally-set objectives. It may contain a "logbook" or learning diary, and possibly observations about the language learning process. Extracts from school curricula or lessons may be incorporated, as well as samples of evaluation and documentary backup. Learners may include evidence of authentic contacts, samples of completed projects and any other documents which will substantiate their qualifications. Since learning takes place over a period of time, the dossier as presented may become out-of-date, so the holder may remove and update it.

The form of the PORTFOLIO

The learning process brings about changes in attainment levels, and consequently in the way they need to be recorded. Accordingly, the portfolio needs to be flexible, e.g. in a format enabling pages to be added, removed or replaced in accordance with circumstances and needs. The sections will contain *hard* and *soft* pages. The hard pages will mainly contain information, while the soft pages focus on the learning process and educational considerations.

The language of a PORTFOLIO

A distinction will have to be made between entries under headings and the holder's own entries. In a school context the mother tongue will probably be used for both. In the local employment context this may still be sufficient, but in an international context, it will certainly be necessary to use the languages of the Council of Europe, i.e. English and French. In some contexts, however, it might be necessary to use the language of the addressee, i.e. the person to whom the portfolio is to be presented.

Pilot scheme

The Intergovernmental Conference held in Strasbourg in April 1997 approved the preliminary work carried out on the Portfolio. Versions of a European Language Portfolio are currently being piloted in a variety of educational contexts. Different formats and procedures are being tested and issues concerned with the introduction of a Portfolio on a wider scale are being examined. Specifically the piloting is investigating the following features:

- trying out different formats in the different pilots;
- testing different designs and procedures for different ages of learners –

among suggested alternatives have been a two Portfolio system for "juniors" and "seniors" and a three Portfolio system distinguishing primary, secondary and adult needs. The piloting should contribute to decision taking in this matter;

- considering issues concerning the choice of languages in which the Portfolio is best issued it is recognised that there will be variations due to the target sector, the age of users and national contexts, but the piloting should enable decisions to be taken on a distinctively European Portfolio, capable of being used in trans-national contexts.

At the moment consideration is being given to questions concerning the nature, aims, content, structuring and management of a European Language Portfolio.

After the trialling period, which is scheduled to end in 2000, the European Language Portfolio will be evaluated, and if the evaluation is positive, wider dissemination will commence in 2001, which may be declared the European Year of Languages (more about this in a future number of the Newsletter).

For further information please consult the Modern Languages Section Web Site: <http://culture.coe.fr/lang>. ■

Contact:

Joseph SHEILS
Tel.: +33 (0)3 88 41 20 79
e-mail: joseph.sheils@coe.int

Johanna PANTHIER
Tel.: +33 (0)3 88 41 23 84
e-mail: johanna.panthier@coe.int

The Lisbon recognition Convention enters into force

The Council of Europe/UNESCO Convention on the Recognition of Qualifications concerning Higher Education in the European Region (better known as the Lisbon Recognition Convention) entered into force on 1 February 1999. Currently, eight countries have declared themselves bound by the Convention: Austria, Azerbaijan, Estonia, Kazakhstan, Lithuania, Norway, Romania and Switzerland.

The first meeting of the Lisbon Recognition Convention Committee was held in Vilnius on 16 June. Reports from the states present suggest that there is good hope that a substantial number of them will ratify the Convention within the next year.

The Council of Europe is very pleased that the Lisbon Recognition Convention entered into force less than two years after its adoption and hopes that more countries will ratify it in the months to come. Currently, 37 countries have signed the Convention.

The Convention and its Explanatory Report are now available in a handy edition published by the Council of Europe Press and comprising all four language versions in a single volume. The publication (ISBN 92-871-3552-5) may be ordered through Council of Europe sales agents or directly from the Council: publishing@coe.fr or <http://book.coe.fr>. ■

Contact:

Sjur BERGAN
Tel.: +33 (0)3 88 41 26 43
e-mail: sjur.bergan@coe.int

Newsletter education

No. 7. – August 1999



Editorial

As this edition of the Education Newsletter appears, the Council of Europe is celebrating fifty years of existence. The achievements of the organisation are wide-ranging, and over the coming weeks and months considerable attention will be given to its role in protecting human rights, sustaining the rule of law and promoting democracy, as well as to the importance of being the first European organisation to bring in the countries of Central and Eastern Europe after the fall of the Berlin wall in 1989. Often, the Council of Europe has been responsible for important work which doesn't make the headlines, but which nevertheless makes a deep and lasting impact. This is particularly true in the field of education. Enormous progress has been made in European educational co-operation during the past 50 years, and it is opportune to think both of the breadth of experience acquired over the last half century, and of how this can best be used to meet future challenges – particularly in view of the current dramatic situation in South Eastern Europe.

Educational cooperation has taken many forms, and involved many different partners – ministries of education, inter-governmental organisations, representatives of civil society and many others. The meetings of our own Education and Higher Education Committees, bringing together both academic and governmental representatives of 47 states as well other governmental and non governmental organisations, are themselves the source of long-standing and important European educational networks, providing opportunities for new ideas to be explored, approaches to common problems to be analysed, and new projects and partnerships to be forged. One of the most obvious and important signs of cultural difference is language, and it is particularly appropriate that the Council of Europe has been able to play a strong role in promoting the dissemination of good practice in language teaching and learning. This has been facilitated in recent years by the establishment of a European Centre for Modern Languages in Graz, and the importance of the work undertaken at this centre is examined in an article on p 5.

The pace of societal change continues to increase, carrying immense implications for education policy. New needs, both for individuals and societies, are emerging, and education structures will have to adapt to meet them. Many of these new challenges are being addressed through the CC-HER project on "Lifelong learning for equity and social cohesion" which is outlined on p 6.

The Education Department has a major role to play in providing technical assistance and expertise in very specific

circumstances. Our work in Bosnia and Herzegovina since the end of the war in 1996 was outlined in the previous edition, and recent events in South-Eastern Europe demonstrate that many countries are certain to require considerable support for a number of years – particularly in democratising educational culture, teaching and understanding sensitive periods of history, and in ensuring that adequate and appropriate educational opportunities are provided for refugees and returnees whose world has quite literally been blown apart through conflict.

The post-conflict educational challenges in South Eastern Europe will be on a scale which far exceed anything which Europe has faced in the past fifty years. How are security and common European democratic values respecting human rights and cultural difference to be assured where they have been so recently and totally violated? It is imperative to think differently about the kind of attention which should be given to South Eastern Europe, and the development of a regional education policy, affirming the common European identity of all cultures and peoples, is now underway at the Council of Europe. This policy will, in practice, be implemented in a variety of local contexts, and will aim to assist a process of democratic stability through education which gradually but profoundly permeates society.

The countries of South Eastern Europe should continue to play a major role in all forms of European educational cooperation. Many such educational activities may now seem commonplace and banal, but they are in fact major achievements. European student and academic exchange programmes, whether at regional level or throughout the continent, are increasingly taken for granted, yet without the Council of Europe, it is far from certain that such programmes would have developed as they have. Their benefits are impossible to quantify, as they not only have direct impact on personal and professional development, but also bring indirect advantages to all of our societies, especially in terms of increasing knowledge and cultural awareness. Bringing people together was the inspirational reason for creating the Council of Europe 50 years ago. The horrifying events which we have all witnessed over the last few months illustrate that it remains the main reason why the organisation is still urgently required.

Gabriele Mazza
(Tel. +33 (0)3 88 41 26 29)