Chapter 11

Learning to LOLIPOP:
Developing an ePortfolio and Integrating it into a First–Year Research and Study Skills Module

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ABSTRACT

The focus of this chapter is twofold: firstly, on the development of an electronic version of a European Language Portfolio, known as the LOLIPOP ELP,[1] and, secondly, on its integration into a study and research skills module for first-year students on the BA in Applied Language and Intercultural Studies at Dublin City University. The chapter begins with an introduction to the concept of a European Language Portfolio (ELP) in the context of current trends in foreign language learning and teaching. It then describes the development and key features of the LOLIPOP ELP. It explains how it was integrated into a first-year, undergraduate research and study skills module focusing on elements of course design and assessment. Finally, the chapter concludes by analysing the output from the participants in this study which indicates that they appreciated the opportunity to engage with the LOLIPOP ELP and found it beneficial to their language learning although issues remain around its design and integration into an academic programme.

INTRODUCTION

Today's language undergraduates find themselves in a very different position to their counterparts 20 or even ten years ago. This difference is the result of several related factors. These include increased access to high quality internet connections and other information and communication technologies (Bruen & Sherry, 2007) as well as the development and implementation in the classroom of pedagogical frameworks which support

the concepts of self-regulated and intercultural language learning.

For example, with regard to self-regulation, since the 1970s, a significant amount of research in second or foreign language learning has been devoted to studying the L2 learning strategies employed by language learners. The primary goal of much of this research has been the exploration of ways of empowering language learners to become more self-directed and effective in their language learning (Tseng, Dörnyei, & Schmitt, 2006). A related area of activity exists around the teaching of language learning strategies to L2 learners (Cohen, 1998; Zhengdong, Humphries & Hamp-Lyons, 2004). It appears that such training is most successful and likely to facilitate self-directed or self-regulated learning when the strategies, for example goal-setting, are explicitly taught and when strategy training is associated with language tasks that the learners are normally expected to accomplish (Hsiao & Oxford, 2002).

Furthermore, there have been calls in recent times for an increased integration of such research in the field of language learning strategies into the area of self-regulation in research on strategic language learning (Dörnyei, 2003; Gao, 2006; Tseng et al., 2006). Self-regulation is closely allied with the concepts of metacognition (Wenden, 1998, 2002), strategic competence (Bachman & Palmer, 1996) and learner autonomy. There is greater emphasis placed, particularly in the areas of self-regulation and metacognition on an underlying understanding of their learning process on the part of the learner. Learner autonomy, on the other hand, requires the learner to take conscious responsibility for and control of their language learning.

In parallel, there has been a growing recognition of the fact that language learning necessarily equates with intercultural education, as speaking a foreign language implies entering a foreign culture (Sercu, 2002). Byram and Zarate (1997) further define an interculturally competent language learner as one who can cross borders and mediate between cultures. Such a learner is dissatisfied with a mere view from the outside with a focus on difference and 'the exotic'. Instead he or she is determined to gain an inside view of the other culture and to function effectively and appropriately within that culture.

Against this backdrop, the Council of Europe (http://www.coe.int/) issued a recommendation to member states in 1998 that a document to be known as the European Language Portfolio (ELP) be introduced to learners in all educational sectors. In particular, the European Language Portfolio seeks to promote the following:

- The development of learner responsibility and learner autonomy;
- The deepening of mutual understanding and respect among citizens in Europe;
- The protection and promotion of linguistic and cultural diversity;
- The promotion of life-long language and intercultural learning;
- The clear and transparent description of competences and qualifications to facilitate mobility and personal growth.

The document itself has three components: a Passport, a Biography and a Dossier. The Passport contains an identity profile of its bearer relating to their experiences and abilities in the different languages in which they have some level of competence as well as to their experience of different intercultural contexts. In the Passport, the language learner records their formal qualifications as well as a self-assessment of their linguistic skills. Self-assessment is defined in terms of proficiency levels set out by the 'Common European Framework of Reference for Languages' (CEFR).

The CEFR is the result of lengthy consultation and widespread collaboration among applied linguists in Europe. One of its central tenets is a global scale containing descriptors for each of six levels of competence which range from A1 (complete beginner) to C2 (highly proficient).

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