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Using the European Language Portfolio in a Swedish Upper Secondary School

Att använda Evopeisk språkportfolio i en svensk gymnasieskola

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Abstract

The present study focuses on how the European Language Portfolio (ELP) can be used in a Swedish school. More particularly it aims at exploring how a group of teachers have adapted the use of the material to their particular pedagogical situation. It also aims at finding out what the same group of teachers identifies as the ELP’s strengths and possible weaknesses.

For this purpose, a case study was carried out in which semi-structured interviews were conducted with four language teachers at an upper secondary school in the south of Sweden. Although the teachers started out using the official ELP 16+, only the language passport has been kept. The teachers have adapted the rest of the material to their own situation. Three different adaptations were identified and presented. Moreover, the teachers identified a number of areas that they saw as the ELP’s strengths. Among these areas were the material’s compatibility with the Swedish steering documents and the language biography (in adapted versions). When asked about the possible weaknesses, the teachers’ main concerns were the standard checklists and the fact that working with the ELP is time-consuming in different ways.

Keywords: European Language Portfolio, teaching practices, Common European Framework, learning materials, learner autonomy, portfolio method
Table of Contents

1. Introduction .......................................................................................................................................................... 7
    1.1. Purpose and Research Questions .................................................................................................................. 8
    1.2. Learner Autonomy .......................................................................................................................................... 9
    1.3. The Portfolio Method ....................................................................................................................................... 10
    1.4. The Political Context of the ELP ..................................................................................................................... 13
    1.5. The European Language Portfolio ................................................................................................................ 17
        What is the ELP? .............................................................................................................................................. 17

2. Method .................................................................................................................................................................. 21
    2.1. Semi-Structured Interviews .......................................................................................................................... 21
    2.2. Selection of School and Informants .............................................................................................................. 22
    2.3. Procedure ....................................................................................................................................................... 23

3. Results and Analysis ............................................................................................................................................ 25
    3.1. Three ways of working.................................................................................................................................... 25
        Andrea: The Separate Language Portfolio .......................................................................................................... 25
        Beverly and Danielle: The all-inclusive “Theme Packet” ..................................................................................... 27
        Carlos: The Methodological Approach ............................................................................................................... 29
    3.2. Advantages of the ELP ................................................................................................................................... 31
    3.3. Weaknesses of the ELP ................................................................................................................................... 33

4. Conclusions and Discussion ................................................................................................................................ 36
    4.1. How the teachers work with the ELP ............................................................................................................... 36
    4.2. Strengths and Weaknesses of the ELP .............................................................................................................. 38

References .................................................................................................................................................................. 41
    Primary Sources .................................................................................................................................................... 41
    Secondary Sources ................................................................................................................................................ 41

Appendix 1: Mini Questionnaire ............................................................................................................................. 45
Appendix 2: Interview guide ...................................................................................................................................... 46

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1. Introduction

Think of a language you know. Maybe one you have learnt at school, at home or through travelling. How would you describe your speaking skills in this particular language? For what purposes can you use it? Without more scaffolding, such questions are rather vague and can therefore be difficult to answer. Let us try a different way of doing it.

Think again about the language from above and check the boxes for the statements that apply to your knowledge of the language:

- I can use basic greetings and courtesy phrases (e.g. 'please', 'thank you', 'how are you?', ‘I’m fine’).
- I can make and respond to invitations, suggestions, apologies and requests for permission.
- I can agree and disagree politely, exchange personal opinions, discuss what to do next, compare and contrast alternatives.
- I can exchange detailed factual information on matters related to my study, work or interests.
- I can participate fully in an interview, as either interviewer or interviewee, fluently expanding and developing the point under discussion, and handling interjections well.
- I can hold my own [sic.] in formal discussions of complex issues, arguing articulately and persuasively and without being at a disadvantage compared with native speakers.

(National Centre for Languages, 2006, B12-B14)

How did it go? Was it any easier?

The statements above are directly quoted from the UK version of the European Language Portfolio (ELP). The ELP is a tool that aims at documenting and motivating language learning. Although there are many adaptations of the material, they all have the three obligatory components in common, namely the language passport, where learners document their language skills; the language biography, where users reflect on and assess

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1 In this work the ELP user will be referred to as user, learner or student. Although the ELP can be used outside school settings, in other words with learners who are not students, the learners referred to in this study are, in fact, students. The three terms will therefore be used interchangeably.
their language learning, and finally the dossier, where learners keep a selection of their texts (in the wider sense of the word).

The self-assessment section of the language biography consists of checklists based on the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages (CEF). The CEF divides language proficiency into six levels and by using the checklists, learners can find out their proficiency level. Each of the statements in the checklist above represent one of the six levels, from beginner’s level, A1, at the top to the final level, C2, at the bottom. Today, there are three Swedish ELPs adapted respectively to users aged 6-11, 12 -16 and 16+ (that is including adults) (Myndigheten för Skolutveckling, 2005). This essay will focus on the latter of the three and the use thereof in Swedish schools.

1.1. Purpose and Research Questions

Not much is known about how widespread the use of the ELP 16+ is in Swedish schools. Surely, Uppsala University has statistics showing that 8000 ELPs have been sold and another 2000 have been handed out at conferences and workshops (Carin Söderberg, personal communication, April 22, 2009). Nonetheless, that information does not answer our initial question. It would in fact be possible, however illegal, for a school to buy one or a small number of ELPs and make photocopies for their students. It would also be possible for teachers to buy one ELP but decide to make their own version of it. Thus the statistics do not shed much light on the frequency of usage.

Nevertheless, that type of statistical information might be less interesting for practising teachers than knowing how to use the ELP with their students. Carin Söderberg, who works with the ELP at Uppsala University, explained that one of the very frequently asked questions about the material is “How can I use it at my school?” (personal communication, April 22, 2009). It thus seems natural to take a more practical approach to the matter. Consequently, the aim of this study is to explore how the ELP can be applied to language classrooms in Sweden.

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2 The checklists in the language biography are obviously more complex. For more information, see pp. 13-16.
3 It can be argued that this manner of proceeding automatically implies that the teacher does not use the ELP but rather a different type of language portfolio. This question will be discussed in chapter 4.
Two questions will guide the study: one focusing on the practical implementation of ELP and one that is more related to the material itself.

- How have teachers at a Swedish upper secondary school adapted the use of the ELP 16+ to their pedagogical context?
- What can be learnt about the strengths and weaknesses of the ELP from these teacher’s experiences of using it?

1.2. Learner Autonomy

To understand the ELP it is necessary to be aware of the pedagogical ideas that are central to the material and its design. Indeed, the ELP is closely related to both learner autonomy and the portfolio method. This and the following section will explain the fundamental principles of these two pedagogical concepts.

The term learner autonomy was first used and defined by the French researcher Henri Holec (Tornberg, 2000, p. 70; Tholin, 2001, p. 214). The term refers to an approach to teaching and learning, rather than a method itself (ibid). The fundamental principle of learner autonomy is to encourage students to take charge of their own learning, with the aim of helping them “learn to learn” (Tholin, 2001). Although this approach could probably be extended to most subjects, Ulrika Tornberg (2000) points out that “Holec works in the Language Policy Division of the Council of Europe and Learner Autonomy has thus mainly been associated with language teaching and language learning” (p. 70).

Learner autonomy changes the student’s role. Indeed, autonomous learners need to take responsibility for their language learning. However, not all students are used to this. As Jörgen Tholin (2001, p. 215) observes, not all students like the idea of taking over some of what they see as the teacher’s responsibilities. Therefore, Jörgen Tholin argues that an introduction period is necessary. During this introduction, students are progressively given more and more responsibility for setting goals for and planning their learning (Tholin, 2001). Thus, they are gradually taking on their new role.

Nevertheless, learner autonomy also changes the teacher’s role. As both Tholin (2001, p. 215) as well as Ágota Scharle and Anita Szabó (2000, p. 5) point out, working with learner autonomy requires a teacher role that is different from the traditional one. Indeed, assisting students in their planning implies taking a step back from the decision-making and adopting a supervising and guiding role. However, Tholin (2001) also emphasises that learner autonomy
requires a strict framework. He points out that although students are to be given a certain freedom to choose how and what they want to learn, the teacher needs to be clear about what is expected of them, for example in terms of how and where students’ planning and work should be documented.

The Swedish syllabi for English and modern languages comprise goals related to learner autonomy. Indeed, it is stated among the English subject goals to aim for that “The school in its teaching of English should aim to ensure that pupils […] take increasing responsibility for developing their language ability” (National Agency for Education, n.d. a). An identical goal can be found in the subject description of modern languages (National Agency for Education, n.d. a). Moreover, to pass English A/Modern languages stage 5 “[p]upils should […] be able to consciously use and evaluate different approaches to learning in order to promote learning” (National Agency for Education, 2000a; National Agency for Education, 2000d). Thus, learner autonomy is part of the Swedish steering documents.

1.3. The Portfolio Method

The portfolio method is closely related to learner autonomy. As explained by Ruth Pilkington and Joanne Gardner (2004), “[t]he ability to ‘review, plan and take responsibility for one’s own learning’ […] is an essential element of the learning process associated with portfolios” (p. 4). Roger Ellmin (1999) also makes this connection between portfolio and learner responsibility through “learning to learn”. His definition of a student portfolio encompasses this aspect:

Portfolio is a form of pedagogical documentation that is teacher-led and student-active, positive⁴ and meaningful and that aims at describing and clarifying what and how the student learns, wants to achieve as well as how the student thinks about his/her own learning and the needed support. (Ellmin, 1999, p. 27, my translation)

Considering that the ELP is intended to encourage independent language learning (Little, 2007, p. 1) and that users’ “reflection [on their own learning] is central to the ELP’s pedagogical function” (Little & Perclová, 2001, p. 43), this degree project will use Ellmin’s definition of the term.

⁴ Here, “positive” is used to refer to the portfolio as a material that focuses on what learners can do rather than what they cannot do (Ellmin, 1999, p. 28).
Karin Taube (1997) makes a distinction between the “outside” and the more important “inside” of the portfolio. In this case, the outside refers to the physical presentation of the portfolio, for example a binder, a box or a USB flash drive. The inside, on the other hand, designates the contents of the portfolio, in other words the student products. Through collecting and subsequently choosing what to keep in the portfolio, learners are expected to take an active part in their learning (Taube, 1997, p. 11).

Because portfolios can be used with different aims, their contents may vary. Indeed, several works in the field (Taube, 1997; Ellmin, 1999; Rolheiser et al., 2000; Trotman, 2004) classify portfolios according to their aim and contents. Trotman (2004) suggests the following categories:

- The work portfolio contains everything that the student has produced and thus shows all of the student’s efforts (Trotman, 2004, p. 64).
- The progress portfolio contains different student products that together show the student’s development. This means that the progress portfolio does not only contain the student’s best work but also the products that are of lesser quality but that have been important learning experiences for the student.
- The showcase portfolio (Trotman, 2004) contains only the student’s very best work. This type of portfolio shows what the learner has achieved, for example at the end of a course.

Trotman’s classification is more precise than those presented by Taube (1997), Ellmin (1999) and Rolheiser et al. (2000). Indeed, Taube and Ellmin does not distinguish the progress portfolio from the showcase portfolio whereas Rolheiser et al., although they briefly mentions working portfolios, focuses on growth portfolios (progress portfolios) and best work portfolios (showcase portfolios).

Independently of what type of portfolio a teacher chooses to use, portfolio work needs to integrate structured reflection. Because Ellmin’s (1999) main focus is “learning to learn”, he states that “[t]he portfolio must always reflect the metacognitive dimension – how the student thinks about and reflects on his/her learning” (p. 28). Both Ellmin (1999) and Taube (1997) argue that students should justify why a given product is put in the portfolio. Ellmin further explains that “experiences are meaningful only if you reflect on them afterwards” (1999, p. 117).

The aim of the reflection is that when the students become aware of how they learn best, they will be able to use this knowledge not only to learn outside school but also to learn more efficiently in class (Dryden & Vos, 1994, in Tornberg, 2000, p. 69). Nevertheless, Rolheiser
et al. (2000) also mention the teacher’s interest in students’ reflections on their learning by pointing out that reflection activities will “increase [the teacher’s] awareness of [the students] as learners” (p. 32).

However, Tornberg (2000) voices a certain scepticism about what she calls “the new wave of ‘Learning to Learn’” (p. 69). She argues that it might not be the teaching itself that needs changing but rather the way the goals of the teaching are communicated to the students. According to Tornberg, students may lose motivation because the goals and expectations are not clear enough and because they do not feel they can influence their own situation.

Nonetheless, in her chapter on learning strategies, Tornberg expresses a more positive opinion. Based on research on learning strategies, she concludes that “[i]t […] seems that metacognition, the awareness of how, what and why one learns and the ability to assess one’s own results, is an important factor when it comes to language learning” (Tornberg, 2000, p. 23, my translation).

Moreover, reflecting on and gaining insight into one’s learning is a goal in both the curriculum and the syllabi for English and modern languages. Indeed, the *Curriculum for the non-compulsory school system*, Lpf94, states that “the school shall strive to ensure that all pupils […] develop an insight into their own way of learning and an ability to evaluate their own learning” (National Agency of Education, 1994, p. 10). Furthermore, in the goals for both the syllabi for English and modern languages it is stated that students should gradually develop their ability to reflect on and evaluate their learning approaches, from “[being] able to reflect over their own learning of e.g. words and phrases” for modern languages, stage 1 (National Agency for Education, 2000c) to “[being] able to review, describe and analyse their needs in the language from the perspective of long-term study and vocational areas” for modern languages, stage 7/English C (National Agency for Education, 2000e, National Agency for Education, 2000b). Thus, teachers need to make sure that their students develop these abilities.

However, portfolios are not only used for learning but also for assessing (Harmer, 2007, p. 280). Trotman (2004) elaborates on the strengths and weaknesses of this type of assessment in higher education. According to him, the main advantage of portfolio assessment in relation to writing is its validity. He explains that giving students the time to really work through and edit their products increases the validity of the assessment. He concludes that portfolio assessment “enables the writer to present a much truer picture of how he/she writes” (Trotman, 2004, p. 63).
Nevertheless, in a response to Trotman, Whitaker (2005) expresses concern about the validity of portfolios as assessment. Whitaker argues that, because the student is allowed time outside of the exam room to write, the examiner cannot be sure that the work that is handed in is really the student’s own product. He points out both the risk of plagiarism and the risk of students asking other people for help.

However, it is obviously possible to allow portfolio work only during school hours. This solution is more easily applicable to compulsory schools although Trotman (2004) suggests including timed in-class essays in the students’ portfolios.

In this and the previous section, the principles behind learner autonomy and the portfolio method have been presented. Nevertheless, knowing about the pedagogical context of the ELP does not suffice. In order to fully understand the ELP, it is also necessary to take the political context into consideration. Indeed, the political context is part of the background of the project and has as such had an impact on the design of the ELP.

1.4. The Political Context of the ELP

This section will describe the political background of the ELP. After a short historical summary the Common European Framework will be presented.

A brief historical review of the work of the Council of Europe (CoE), shows that promoting language learning has been a part of the CoE’s aims from very early on. Indeed, in 1954, five years after Sweden and nine other states founded the CoE, the European Cultural Convention was ratified. Article two of this convention states that the ratifying countries should promote the learning of the other member states’ languages in their country as well as encourage the learning of their own country’s language(s) in the other member states (Council of Europe, 1954).

Since then the Language Policy Division of the CoE has worked in different projects to promote language learning. Per Malmberg (2001) notes that the CoE’s work has had an impact on the conception of language and language learning conveyed in the Swedish syllabi. According to him, learner autonomy, communicative competence and intercultural understanding are all concepts that have found their way from the CoE to the Swedish steering documents.

During the project entitled “Language Policies for a Multilingual and Multicultural Europe”, the CoE developed tools for mutual recognition of language skills (Council of
Towards the end of the project, in October 2000, a conference was organised in Cracow. At this conference, it was decided that the members of the CoE would introduce the ELP in their respective countries (Myndigheten för Skolutveckling, 2005, p. 7). The project concluded with the inauguration of the European Year of Languages during which both the ELP and the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages were presented (Council of Europe, n.d.).

The Common European Framework
In 2001 the CoE published the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages: Learning, Teaching, Assessment (CEF). The CEF aims at allowing language skill descriptions that are recognised in all of the CoE member states.

The framework sees linguistic competence as a combination of five skills, all of which are individually explained using affirmative descriptors. Contrary to the traditional division of language competence into four skills (reading, writing, speaking and listening), the CEF divides speaking into spoken interaction and spoken production. As a result, the five skills of the CEF, and of the ELP, are listening, reading, writing, spoken interaction and spoken production (Council of Europe, 2001, p. 26).

The CEF divides language proficiency into six Common Reference Levels from A1 (Breakthrough) to C2 (Mastery). The six levels correspond to three types of Users: basic (A1, A2), independent (B1, B2) and proficient (C1, C2) (Council of Europe, 2001, p. 23). These user profiles are described through “Can do” statements that relate to examples of what the user is able to do in the language. The quoted table below describes the different users’ written competence in terms of spelling and global text structure.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>ORTHOGRAPHIC CONTROL</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>C2</td>
<td>Writing is orthographically free of error.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>C1</td>
<td>Layout, paragraphing and punctuation are consistent and helpful. Spelling is accurate, apart from occasional slips of the pen.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>B2</td>
<td>Can produce clearly intelligible continuous writing which follows standard layout and paragraphing conventions. Spelling and punctuation are reasonably accurate but may show signs of mother tongue influence.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>B1</td>
<td>Can produce continuous writing which is generally intelligible throughout. Spelling, punctuation and layout are accurate enough to be followed most of the time.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
A2  Can copy short sentences on everyday subjects – e.g. directions how to get somewhere.
    Can write with reasonable phonetic accuracy (but not necessarily fully standard spelling) short words that are in his/her oral vocabulary.

A1  Can copy familiar words and short phrases e.g. simple signs or instructions, names of everyday objects, names of shops and set phrases used regularly.
    Can spell his/her address, nationality and other personal details.

(Council of Europe, 2001, p.118)

The progress from one level to another is not linear. It is for example possible to attain level B1 in reading, A2 in spoken production and A1 in listening (Myndigheten för Skolutveckling, 2005, p. 19). Furthermore, the levels are not equal entities in the sense that the progression from one level to another will always demand the same amount of time and effort. Indeed, as the learner advances, more effort and time will be needed to attain the higher level (Kinrade & Stenberg, 2001, p. 8).

In several of the scales, the levels A2, B1 and B2 have been divided into two. In these cases, the lower section is the description of the level in question whereas the higher section describes language competence that is more advanced than the given level but less advanced than the level above. According to David Little and Radika Perclová (2001), “[t]he subdivision of levels should make the scales easier to use in planning and assessing learning that covers several years of formal education” (p. 72).

Nonetheless, one might question whether all descriptors are realistic. Indeed, in the scale for orthographic control the descriptor for C2 reads “[w]riting is orthographically free of error” (Council of Europe, 2001, p. 118). In a study from 2008 on spelling errors in texts by Swedish learners of French, none of the texts in the native French reference group were completely free from spelling errors (Splendido, 2008, p. 17). It should however be noted that the reference group consisted of upper secondary school students aged 15-18. Indeed, one might argue that the language user has not yet reached full mastery of their first language at that age. Moreover, the reference group consisted of only ten people and cannot really be considered a big enough sample to use as a basis for generalisations.

With the publication of Kursplaner 2000, a comparison between the six CEF Levels and the Swedish syllabi was presented. As is pointed out in the Swedish teacher’s guide for the ELP 6-16 (Myndigheten för Skolutveckling, 2005, p. 9), the seven stages in the Swedish syllabi are not completely parallel with or fully comparable to the CEF levels. Nevertheless,
there is a certain degree of correspondence between the two systems. This correspondence is presented in the chart below:

Table 2: Correspondence between the Swedish Stages and the six CEF Levels

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>English Stages</th>
<th>CEF Levels</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>C</td>
<td>C2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>B</td>
<td>C1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>A</td>
<td>B2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>B1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>A2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>A1</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

(Myndigheten för Skolutveckling, 2005, p. 9)

However, it would also be possible to interpret the information given in Handledning: Europeisk Språkportfolio, 6-16 (Myndigheten för Skolutveckling, 2005), as an indication that the Swedish stages overlap so that stage two comprises parts of both stage one and stage three. Nevertheless, according to the National Agency for Education, the different stages do indeed follow on one another as in table 2 (Information service of the National Agency for Education, personal communication, April 29, 2009).

According to Susanne Mehres, future syllabi for English and modern languages will both “reflect the common reference levels and be based on the same fundamental conception of language” (Sjögren, 2009). These changes have already been implemented in the syllabi for Swedish For Immigrants (SFI) (ibid).

Finally, as mentioned earlier, in the same year that the CEF was published, its companion piece, the European Language Portfolio, was launched.
1.5. The European Language Portfolio

As noted in the introduction, the ELP is a pedagogical material with the aim of motivating and documenting language learning. This section will further explain what the ELP is but also present the benefits and disadvantages of the material as seen by teachers in other countries.

What is the ELP?

Before answering this question, it must be noted that there is not one ELP but rather many different versions of the ELP. In addition, within the same country, there are generally different adaptations for different age groups. There are three Swedish versions of the ELP: one for learners aged six to eleven, one for the age group twelve to sixteen and one for learners who are sixteen or older (including adults).

Nevertheless, every version of the ELP must comply with the validation requirements set by the Council of Europe. Indeed, for a portfolio material to be validated, and thus to be able to label itself a European Language Portfolio, it must contain three sections: a language passport, a language biography and a dossier (Kinrade & Stenberg, 2001, p. 7).

The language passport consists of forms where users fill in information about themselves and their linguistic abilities as well as where they have learnt their different languages. For the ELP 16+, the passport is the only part of the portfolio material that is standardised (Kinrade & Stenberg, 2001, p. 3). The reason for this is that the language passport for adults should be recognisable and legible in all countries using the ELP (ibid).

The language biography is where the learners reflect on and assess their language learning. This work is somewhat scaffolded with the help of different worksheets that, for example, help the learner think about how they learn. One part of this section consists of checklists that allow users to assess their linguistic proficiency in relation to the CEF (ibid). In the ELP 16+, the checklists are presented in a separate booklet but are still considered part of the language biography (Kinrade & Stenberg, p. 9).

Even though the language passport is where learners document their skills, the information found in the language passport is first registered in the language biography. The learners use the checklists in the biography to assess their own language skills. They then transfer the information from the biography to the language passport.

The last part of the ELP is the dossier. The dossier is much like a portfolio in the sense of Ellmin’s (1999) definition (see section 1.3.). This is where the learners keep their finished work (ibid). The documents stored in the dossier are registered on the accompanying list. The
dossier also contains a register that allows users to keep a record of the longer texts they have read independently.

Although, the list serves as a register for the documents in the dossier, it does not provide space for any type of reflection. Indeed, there is no space for users to explain why a given text was put there or what they learnt from producing it. As noted earlier, both Ellmin and Taube reason in favour of some kind of motivation as to why each product is put in the portfolio. Furthermore, they also see structured reflection as an important characteristic of the pedagogical portfolio. This point is further underlined by Rolheiser et al. (2000), who states that “[m]erely collecting and storing that work in a folder […] cuts short the potential of that collection as an effective tool for assessment and instruction” (p. 31). However, the space allotted to reflection in the language biography is rather limited and does not have a clear connection to the work in the dossier.

The three parts of the ELP 16+ are presented as four separate booklets in a folder. This folder and its contents belong to the learner. Contrary to the ELPs 6-12 and 12-16, the version for older learners can only be bought. Nevertheless, in order to increase the use of the material, there are thoughts of providing the ELP 16+ in a free downloadable document as is now the case with the versions for younger learners (Carin Söderberg, personal communication, April 22, 2009).

**Aims and functions of the ELP**

In addition to its aims of documenting and motivating language learning, the ELP has both a reporting and a pedagogical function. The reporting function refers to the language passport whereas the pedagogical function is developed in the language biography and the dossier. The pedagogical function represents the intentions of motivating learners and “making the language learning process more transparent to learners, helping them to develop their capacity for reflection and self-assessment, and thus enabling them gradually to assume more and more responsibility for their own learning” (Little & Perclová, 2001, p. 3), in other words helping them become autonomous learners. Indeed, the language biography does both provide some space for reflection and checklists for self-assessment.

In her doctoral dissertation, Perclová (2006) studies teachers’ beliefs and attitudes to the ELP as it was implemented in the Czech Republic. According to the teachers in her study, the ELP encouraged both learner autonomy and self-assessment (Perclová, 2006, p. 126, 131).

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5 As mentioned above, the checklists are presented in a booklet separate from the language biography.
Perclová further explains that teachers saw a positive effect on learners’ motivation (ibid). Thus, in this case, the ELP had fulfilled its pedagogical functions.

Moreover, Perclová also studies learners’ attitudes. At the end of the pilot phase, 71.9% of the 893 participating students thought that working with the ELP was “useful and interesting” (Perclová, 2006, p. 143). What learners valued the highest in this work was that it increased their self-confidence (ibid, p. 227).

Reported Weaknesses of the ELP

Not much research seems to have been published that critically and independently evaluates the ELP. This section will therefore primarily summarise aspects brought up in reports published by the CoE.

Little and Perclová (2001) point out that working with the ELP takes a lot of time. They base this on teacher feedback indicating that the process needs to take time in order for the ELP work to be worthwhile (Little & Perclová, 2001, p. 25). Perclová’s doctoral thesis (2006, p. 223) confirm the problem. Indeed, her study also observes that teachers felt the time constraint was one of the main negative aspects of working with the ELP. Most recently, in the Interim report 2007, Schärer (2008) notes that “[s]pace in the working routine is needed to make good use of the ELP” (p. 5). In fact, Little and Perclová (2001) report that even when students take more responsibility for their work “teachers do not become less busy” (p. 26).

The problems that have been observed in relation to the actual ELP material are issues regarding the language biography. These issues concern both the checklists and the reflecting section of the biography.

Little and Perclová (2001) report on several issues relating to the formulation of the self-assessment criteria. Indeed, teachers have found the descriptors too imprecise. They have felt that because of this the criteria are difficult to relate to their students’ level when planning lessons or courses and that it is difficult to evaluate whether a student has fulfilled the criteria for a given level. Finally, the vague and general articulation of the descriptors makes it difficult for students to see their progress even after a longer period of time (Little & Perclová, 2001, pp. 35-37). To counter these problems the authors suggest breaking down and expanding on the criteria (ibid.).

Furthermore, teachers have voiced worries concerning the accuracy of the students’ self-assessment. According to Little and Perclová (2001), many teachers have expressed scepticism regarding students’ ability to self-assess objectively and truthfully.
In the Finnish pilot study, students needed a certain amount of time to adjust to the idea of assessing themselves. Teijo Päkkilä (2003) reports that “[t]o begin with, students found it difficult to understand the significance of reflection for their language learning” (p. 7).

Furthermore, it is not sure that working with the ELP improves students’ self-assessment skills. This is the focus in Cox and Jullia (2006). The study compares the performances of two groups of students: one that uses the ELP and one that does not. The authors observe no significant difference in the two groups’ ability to self-assess.

Päkkilä (2003) also explains that both “students (and teachers) were somewhat frustrated with reflection” (p. 7) at the end of the pilot year. Päkkilä connects this to the fact that the questions given for reflection lacked focus and therefore became difficult for the learners to answer. He also mentioned the fact that the reflection might have become too repetitive, given that the students were given the same questions in several different classes.

Regarding students’ ability to apply their metacognitive knowledge, the French pilot at a technical secondary school encountered some minor problems. Indeed, when they were given the responsibility for their learning, and could decide what they wanted to do, most students chose only one type of exercise (L’Hotellier & Troisgros, 2003, p. 18). It thus appears that students need help applying the goals and reflections from the language biography.

Finally, Perclová (2006) reports that teachers experience the difficulties, and sometimes failure, of getting all students involved as an important negative factor in the work with the ELP.

The results related to the second research question, about the strengths and weaknesses of the ELP, will be compared to the aims and functions of the material as well as the reported weaknesses presented above.
2. Method

To investigate the research questions posed in section 1.1., I conducted a qualitative case study in which I explored how four teachers worked with the ELP. Because I had chosen to look in depth at a limited number of teachers’ experiences, interviews were considered the most appropriate method.

2.1. Semi-Structured Interviews

The material used for this study is composed of semi-structured interviews with four teachers who work with the ELP. This choice of interviews was based on the intention to investigate the informants’ personal ideas and experiences. Indeed, questionnaires would not have yielded the needed qualitative data and would have made it difficult to ask follow-up questions.

Furthermore, this study would benefit more from semi-structured interviews than from both fully structured and freer forms of interviews. Indeed, structuring the interview assures that the necessary areas of investigation are covered. However, opting for a semi-structured interview rather than a highly structured one allows for the interviewer to ask follow-up questions if anything is unclear (Dörnyei, 2007, p. 136). Thus, semi-structured interviews seemed to be the most appropriate method.

However, semi-structured interviews do have their limitations. These concern the informants anonymity, the limits to generalising conclusions and the lack of complementary data.

Face to face interviews always imply a lack of anonymity between the informant and the interviewer. The fact that the interviewer knows who the interviewees are might have an impact on the information the informants choose to share (Dörnyei, 2007, p. 144). Indeed, in order to protect or maintain a certain image of themselves or to conform to what they think is expected of them, informants may choose to make certain aspects of their experiences seem more positive or negative than they really are. For the same reasons, interviewees might also choose to exclude particular experiences.

Another limitation lies in the fact that the results cannot easily be generalised (Kruuse, 1998, p. 28; Dörnyei, 2007, p. 41). Admittedly, interviews with only four teachers can in no
way be a sample big enough to provide a foundation for a generalisation of the results. Nevertheless, because this study is a case study and because it primarily aims at presenting examples, generalisation is not necessarily of interest in this context. Indeed, O’Tool (2003) pointed out “[e]ach teacher will supplement the ELP and vary its use according to the needs of his/her particular learners” (p. 36)

Ideally, I would have used observations to complement the interviews. As observed by Drever (1997) when using interviews only, there is a risk of the informant “[talking] as much about general notions of good practice as about what actually [happens] in classrooms” (p. 8). However, the observations needed for this study would have extended beyond the time at hand⁶. Moreover, the focus of the present study is not on what exactly happens in the teachers’ classrooms but on the teachers’ experiences and ways of using the ELP. Furthermore, the aim is to give teachers an idea of how the material could be used. From this perspective observations would have been an interesting but not essential complement to the interviews.

Finally it should be noted that, in addition to the interviews, I have also looked at some of the teachers’ material. Indeed, two of the teachers were kind enough to share examples of their material with me. These texts were also used in the description of their way of working.

2.2. Selection of School and Informants

The school in this study is one that I had personal knowledge of prior to the project. I knew that the language teachers used the ELP and contacted the school’s head teacher who was positive to the school’s participation.

The school is a small independent upper secondary school in a city in the south of Sweden. It offers the social studies and the natural science programmes. Apart from English, students at the social studies programme can choose to study one, two or three modern languages (School website).

The teachers interviewed for this study are the four language teachers on the school’s social studies programme. They all teach different languages, namely English, French, German and Spanish, but have in common that they somehow use the ELP in their teaching.

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⁶ Indeed, to be able to observe how the different parts of the ELP were used, one would have to observe at least one class per teacher over the 3-5 week period of a theme. Moreover, because the language passport is only used at the very end of year three, the observations would have to take place at a point in time after this project is due.
They have an average of 20 years’ experience as teachers and have taught at the school for 12 years, on average. One of the teachers, Andrea, started using the ELP seven years ago and the other teachers followed a year later.

In order to guarantee the informants anonymity, they were all given fictitious names. To make these names distinctly different from one another, they start with different letters, A-D, given in the order I interviewed the different teachers. Thus the informant I interviewed first is called Andrea and the last informant I interviewed has been named Danielle.

2.3. Procedure

All interviews were conducted individually in one of the school’s group rooms. Because the teachers at this school teach their first languages, I carried out the interviews with the teachers of English and French in the teachers’ respective first languages. I conducted the interviews with the other two teachers in Swedish.

I sent the interview questions to the teachers approximately one week before the actual interview. This way, the informants would have the time to look through and start thinking about the questions if they felt they needed or wished to do so.

Before the interview, I informed the teachers more specifically about the aim of the study. I asked them to fill out a form (see appendix 1) about for example how long they had been teachers. Before starting the recording, I asked the teachers if they agreed to the recording of the interview. All the teachers agreed and gave their consent in writing.

The interviews were recorded using the software Audacity. This way, the only material needed for the interviews was a laptop with an integrated microphone. It should however be noted that the acoustics of the different rooms where the interviews were conducted, as well as the short distance between the informants and the computer, had a slightly unfavourable impact on the quality of the recording.

After the interviews, the recordings were transcribed. I also e-mailed a copy of the transcription to the interviewed teacher. This contact not only gave me the opportunity to ask for clarifications, but it also let the informants make sure that I had understood them correctly. Furthermore, this contact also allowed for a written follow-up that gave the informants the possibility to add any information they had thought about after the interview.
I transcribed the interviews using the software CLAN (MacWhinney, 2000). My transcriptions respected the conventions of the minChat format\(^7\) with one exception. Because the focus is on the content and not on linguistic form or conversation analysis, the convention to only transcribe one utterance per line has not been fully respected. Indeed, some of the utterances have been grouped together based on how the informant delivered them.

For partly the same reason, the transcriptions have been somewhat simplified. As indicated in the transcriptions’ @Warning header, reformulations\(^8\), fillers, brief feedback from the interviewer\(^9\) etc. were not coded. One reason for doing this was to increase the legibility of the transcriptions (Appendices 3-6). Indeed, too much coded information can make the transcriptions difficult to read and thus take away the focus from what the informants are saying. Furthermore, coding that kind of information is too time-consuming in relation to the little quality it adds to the transcriptions.

During the entire process, attention was paid to the ethical aspects of the study. The informants were informed of the aims of my study as well as of the use of the material collected. Moreover, as noted above, the teachers gave their written consent to the recording of the interview. Finally, as explained earlier, the informants were granted anonymity through the use of fictitious names in both the transcriptions and the presentation of the study.

It should however be noted that there was a lack of anonymity between the informants. Because it is a small school, and because I interviewed all the teachers who use the ELP, the informants knew who the other informants were. Furthermore, the informants all know what languages their colleagues teach and more or less how they work with the ELP material. Consequently, even though I have only told the informants about their own fictitious name, they will be able to identify the other informants without much difficulty.

\(^{7}\) The minChat format is a set of conventions that need to be respected in order for the commands of the CLAN programme to work. For more information see MacWhinney (2008, p. 20).

\(^{8}\) Although it should be noted that some reformulations (marked [//]) have been kept in order to make the utterances intelligible.

\(^{9}\) “Brief feedback from the interviewer” refers to short utterances such as “mm,” “ok,” “yes” and “mhm.” In other words, feedback that only aims at keeping the informant talking and showing that one pays attention.
3. Results and Analysis

This chapter will present the results from the interviews with the four teachers. It will first describe the teachers’ different ways of working with the material. It will then summarise what the teachers’ use and comments say about the strengths and weaknesses of the ELP material.

3.1. Three ways of working

Even though all four teachers started out using the entire official Swedish ELP 16+, this is no longer the case. In fact, the school no longer buys copies of the ELP 16+ for their students. As this section will explain, the material has been altered and adapted to suit each teacher’s personality and student groups. Consequently, the teachers use the material in different ways.

Nevertheless, one part, the language passport, has been kept. At the end of year three, the teachers look at the different courses the students have taken and the grades they have been given. They then use this information to fill in the passports for the students (Andrea, interview, April 21, 2009). Finally, the students receive their passports together with their grades at the graduation ceremony (Beverly, interview, April 23, 2009). Thus, the students do not see their passport before graduation and it is not they who are responsible for documenting their language skills in the passport. It can furthermore be noted that these language passports document the students’ language skills at the end of upper secondary school without indication of how these skills have developed over the three years.

As mentioned above, the teachers work somewhat differently. In the interviews with the four teachers, three different approaches emerged: the separate language portfolio, the all-inclusive theme and the methodological approach. This section will present the three ways of working.

**Andrea: The Separate Language Portfolio**

Andrea was the first teacher who started to use the ELP at the school. Today she has adapted the ELP material into her own “Europäisches Sprachenportfolio”, a booklet that she uses together with other booklets she produces for each theme but that she has also used with textbooks. Andrea’s main goal with the use of the ELP is “learning to learn”.
Andrea’s ELP\textsuperscript{10} is an adaptation of the official language biography. It contains both worksheets for reflection and checklists. The students receive the booklet at the beginning of a course and keep it until the end of the course, even if it lasts for more than one year.

The first thing Andrea has her students do in the ELP is to set their goals. The first page of her ELP presents three “ski pistes” for the course: G, VG and MVG. Each piste is illustrated with a colour and briefly described. Students set their goals and work towards them during the course.

Just like with skiing, if the students “go off piste” and do not reach their goal, they go to the Emergency Room (EM room, for short). The EM room is open once a week and although it is obligatory for students who risk failing the course, it is also open to other students who are not sure of reaching their goals.

Andrea’s material also contains worksheets to help the students think about their learning. These worksheets have been photocopied from the official ELP 16+. The material also cover students’ reflections on their intercultural experiences as well as on situations when they have used German. Because these worksheets have been taken from the official version, they are written in Swedish.

Finally, Andrea’s material contains revised checklists. As recommended by Little and Perclová (2001), Andrea has adapted the checklist items to the course in question. This adaptation involves three aspects. Firstly, because Stage 1 corresponds to two reference levels (A1 and A2), Andrea’s checklists regroup items from both levels’ checklists. Secondly, Andrea has broken down the checklists. Consequently, one original item may correspond to several elements on Andrea’s checklists. Moreover, many of the goals are further explained through examples of useful sentences or the type of vocabulary related to the item. Finally, Andrea has translated the items into German. Thus the original item for spoken production at level A2, “I can describe myself, my family and other people” (Kinrade & Stenberg, 2001, p. 35, my translation), becomes\textsuperscript{11}:

- **Ich kann mich vorstellen.** *Ich heisse...* (I can introduce myself. My name is…)
- **Ich kann meine Freunde vorstellen.** *Das ist mein Freund Fritz...* (I can introduce my friends. This is my friend Fritz)

\textsuperscript{10} I have chosen to call this material ELP even though it is an adaptation that has not been validated. The reasons for this are that Andrea calls it an “Europäisches Sprachenportfolio” (European language portfolio) and that *The European language portfolio: a guide for teachers and teacher trainers* (Little & Perclová, 2001) suggests adapting the material. This issue will be further discussed in chapter four.

\textsuperscript{11} I have kept the typography (bold and italics) from Andrea’s original presentation in the checklists. Nevertheless, the bullet points are not part of the original presentation.
• Ich kann sagen, woher ich komme. Ich komme aus Schweden, Ich wohne in Schweden. (I can say where I come from. I come from Sweden. I live in Sweden)

(from Andrea’s “Europäisches Sprachenportfolio”)

In the checklists, students highlight the items that are the goals for each theme. The students then work independently, with others or individually, to achieve the goals set for the theme. In addition to the material provided in the theme booklet, Andrea also uses a smorgasbord of exercises. Andrea explains that “from there, [the students] can pick and choose and then you can create material or I’ll let them do the teaching” (Andrea, interview, April 21, 2009, my translation). She further clarifies that she also allows students to come up with their own tasks or exercises in order to attain a certain goal. Thus, the students can choose in what way they want to work in order to attain the goals for the theme.

Andrea feels her students often need training in being in charge of their own language learning. According to Andrea, most students are not used to taking responsibility for their learning. Consequently, they do not know how to deal with this situation when they start their first year. She explains that “they’re so used to you saying ‘Now you should open your book to page bla, bla, bla’ and when you don’t do that they are completely paralysed” (Andrea, interview, April 21, 2009, my translation). Just like Tholin (2001), she has noticed that the learners need an introduction period to this way of working.

As students work, they check the boxes corresponding to the goals they have attained. At the bottom of each checklist students can add their own goals. When they have checked an item Andrea can mark that she has checked the goal if the student shows this in some way. Finally, when the component is examined, the teacher puts a dot in the corresponding box. The dots are colour coded, like the ski pistes, to represent the grade the student obtained.

Andrea has chosen not to use the dossier. The students have a general work portfolio, called “Kompass”, for the other subjects but Andrea has decided not to actively use that even though she thinks the idea is good. “It feels like I’m […] suffocating the students”, she says explaining that she feels it would be too much considering that she already uses a theme booklet and her own ELP material. Nevertheless, the students can still collect their German texts in the common portfolio.

Beverly and Danielle: The all-inclusive “Theme Packet”
Just like Andrea, both Beverley and Danielle work with a theme-based approach. Although they use the themes in slightly different ways, they do have what Beverley calls the “theme packet” in common.
The “theme packet” is a booklet that, in addition to the teacher’s selection of texts and exercises, consists of goals for the theme, a list to check whether the goals have been attained and an evaluation of the theme. Beverley has also chosen to include the planning for the time period in her booklets.

Both Beverley and Danielle combine goals from both the official ELP and the steering documents. The goals are presented on one of the first pages of the booklet. Like Andrea, Danielle lets the students set their own goals. She points out that although most of her students do, not everyone sets themselves personal goals. Beverley, on the other hand, does not actively encourage students to set goals for themselves. Nevertheless, she sometimes gives students extra details about the specific goals related to the theme examination. Beverley does this through matrixes that she also uses for the grading of the given examination.

Beverley uses the language biography to get to know new students. She explains that “I start at the beginning of the year, when students come the first year, and interview everyone” (Beverley, interview, April 23, 2009). Before the meeting, Beverley asks the students to fill in a section from the language biography. She finds that “that’s a good starting point for a short interview” (ibid).

The material provided to students in the booklets encompasses a variety of activities. Both Beverley and Danielle make sure that every theme contains activities for all the skills. Danielle pays particular attention to finding material that provides application for new or recently presented grammar points. She explains that “[she tries] to integrate into three completely different themes […] why not the near-future tense” (Danielle, interview, April 23, 2009).

Danielle always lets her students choose between two or more activities. She wants to encourage them to take responsibility for their learning and always includes extra exercises for advanced students. Although she accepts that first-year students ask her what words mean, she tries to encourage them to look for the answers themselves. Furthermore, when students work in groups, those who are experiencing difficulties can stay back and get extra help.

Both Beverley and Danielle use checklists that the students fill in to evaluate their learning during a specific theme. Beverley also includes boxes for the teacher to check on the students’ checklists. Danielle, on the other hand, does not use boxes but a scale from 1-5, where students rate how well they have achieved the different goals. She explains that “if you didn’t understand well, then you go for one or two and then you know that you may have to go back and do it again” (Danielle, interview, April 23, 2009, my translation).
With the aim of improving their teaching and themes, both teachers have evaluations at the end of each theme. Beverley asks the students to evaluate both the theme and their own performance in the written theme evaluation whereas Danielle focuses on the theme in either an oral or written evaluation. The two teachers explicitly use these evaluations to improve their material for next time.

Beverley uses the school’s general work portfolio, “Kompass”, with her students. As mentioned above, the students have a work portfolio for all their subjects. Beverley states that today “it’s basically a portfolio where they have everything saved that they want to save” (Beverley, interview, April 23, 2009). However, she would like to work more with it. She explains that she would like to “take work done in English in the beginning, when they start, and then go back to it and [...] reflect on it and look at it and be able to see that progress has been made” (Beverley, interview, April 23, 2009). The reason she does not do that today is that she feels she does not have enough time.

In conclusion, the two teachers both use “theme packets” that contain both the learning material and the ELP material. Nonetheless, their ways of working with these packets vary somewhat.

Carlos: The Methodological Approach  
Carlos appears to be the teacher in the study that uses the ELP the least. His focus lies on portfolio as a method and what he sees as the cornerstones of this method, namely students’ responsibility, autonomy, revision of their texts and awareness of their learning.

Carlos previously worked in a way that is similar to Beverley’s and Danielle’s approach. Indeed, at the same time that the school started using the ELP, it was also decided that the language teachers would not use one specific textbook but rather combine sections from different textbooks and produce their own teaching material. However, as Carlos didn’t feel comfortable photocopying large amounts of texts, he decided to go back to working with Internet sources combined with one specific book for each class.

Carlos has also used checklists before but does not use any part of the language biography this year. In previous years he has used both the standard checklists from the ELP 16+ and his own revised versions of them. Nevertheless, Carlos explains that “I make no checklists, at least I haven’t made any this year, but I’ll get back to that next year” (Carlos, interview, April 23, 2009, my translation). He thus thinks he will return to using the lists in the next academic year because he believes the checklists are a good way of formulating the
different skills as separate components of language competence. That way, he explains, the different skills can be described more clearly than with the grading criteria.

Carlos uses a work portfolio with his students. Nevertheless, this portfolio is not the dossier in the ELP 16+ but rather a binder or folder where students keep their texts so that they can go back and revise them at a later point. It should however be noted that Carlos admits to not being strict about the use of the portfolio. Because of this, he says, not everyone uses it. He noticed that:

[t]hose who prioritise the languages because they want to become teachers […] or they want to move to Spain or South America, […] they take care of this work with the portfolio, in the sense that they revise their products and so on. You notice that right away. But the vast majority, so to speak, they are a bit so-so” (Carlos, interview, April 23, 2009, my translation).

Carlos’ limited use of the ELP is most probably due to his approach to the material. He clearly says that he sees ELP as a methodology more than as concrete material that can be used as it is, as he states that “this thing that is the ELP […] is nothing you can hold in your hand […], it’s quite abstract. […] you can make it a bit more tangible […] but in the end it’s just methodology” (Carlos, interview, April 23, 2009, my translation). This approach is similar to that of Ellmin, who first and foremost sees portfolios as an approach to teaching (Ellmin & Ellmin, 2003).

Furthermore, Carlos has an explicitly eclectic approach to teaching. He explains that he does not want to become a slave to any method and prefers combining different materials and ways of working. This could explain why Carlos appears to keep a certain distance to the official ELP material.

As this chapter has explained, the four teachers use and present the material in rather different ways. The different approaches are summarised in the chart below:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Uses (even if modified version)</th>
<th>Andrea</th>
<th>Beverley</th>
<th>Carlos</th>
<th>Danielle</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Language Passport</td>
<td>x</td>
<td></td>
<td>x</td>
<td>x</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Language Biography - Reflection</td>
<td>x</td>
<td>x</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Language Biography - Checklists</td>
<td>x</td>
<td>x</td>
<td></td>
<td>x</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Dossier</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>x</td>
<td>x</td>
<td>-</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

As the table shows, Beverley integrates parts of all four components in her “theme packets”, whereas the other teachers have chosen to focus on two or three components.

What can we learn about the advantages and drawbacks by looking at how the four teachers use the material in their teaching and what they had to say about the ELP? The
following sections will present what the teachers and their use of the ELP indicate as the ELP’s strengths and weaknesses.

### 3.2. Advantages of the ELP

After a brief presentation of what the informants saw as general advantages of working with the ELP, this section will present positive aspects that the teachers have identified in relation to particular sections of the ELP.

Andrea and Danielle see the connection between the steering documents and the ELP as a positive aspect of working with the material. As mentioned earlier, the ELP and the Swedish steering documents share the same basic conception of language and language learning (Kinrade & Stenberg, 2001, p.8). Rolf Schärer, the CoE’s rapporteur general for the ELP project, has already indicated that this makes it easier to use the material (Schärer, 2008, p. 5). Andrea further points out that the ELP helps working towards goals related to “learning to learn.” She explains that “it is our commission as teachers to teach [the students] to learn” (Andrea, interview, April 21, 2009). Danielle, on the other hand, appreciates the fact that the goals from the ELP checklists can be easily combined with goals from the syllabi for modern languages.

The same teachers feel that working with the ELP makes it easier to adapt the teaching to the individual students and thus benefits both stronger and weaker students. Andrea finds that when students set a goal at the beginning of the course (by choosing pistes), it is easier to adapt the learning to the students. Based on the piste they have decided on, students can choose exercises that correspond to that level. According to Andrea this is an advantage for weaker students, who do not “fail in the same way” (Andrea, interview, April 21, 2009, my translation) as when the exercises are the same for all students. Nevertheless, Danielle observes that stronger students also benefit from this way of working. Indeed, because students work at their own pace the more advanced students can move on even if other students have not finished. Hence, using the ELP can benefit all students.

When it comes to the teachers’ comments on specific parts of the ELP, focus has been on the language biography but their use of the ELP material also allows us to draw conclusions about their opinion on the language passport.

The teachers’ unquestioned use of the language passport indicates that they see it as a useful part of the ELP. Although the school no longer buys the complete ELP, they still buy...
language passports for their students. Their use is not questioned by any of the teachers. Because it is valid in all CoE member states, Carlos sees the language passport as a good incentive for students to use the ELP. According to Andrea, former students have reported having used the passport when applying for jobs. Thus, the teacher team appears to appreciate the reporting function of the ELP.

Two of the teachers show they find the reflective part of the language biography to be useful. As mentioned earlier, Beverley’s usage of and comments about the language biography indicate that she finds it to be a good way to get to know her students. She also thinks it is a good way to show students that they learn English outside school, stating that “I think the biography is good. Both to give the students perspective on how they have gathered their knowledge of language, where and how and in what ways it’s come to them. Because it’s not all just from school, obviously” (Beverley, interview, April 23, 2009). Moreover, the fact that Andrea uses photocopies of worksheets from the official language biography in her version of the ELP, indicates that she finds them good and useful.

Regarding the use of the checklists, a conclusion similar to that concerning the language passport can be drawn. As explained above, all teachers except for Carlos use the checklists. As the next section will explain, when the teachers started to work with the official ELP, the checklists posed a lot of problems. Nevertheless, as the teacher team decided to adapt the official material to the different courses, it was decided that the checklists should be kept (Danielle, interview, April 23, 2009). Although most of the teachers do not mention any advantages with the checklists, I conclude that they consider them useful. Indeed, if they did not see them as valuable, they would have chosen not to use the checklists.

Interestingly, the only teacher who mentions the checklists as one of the ELP’s strengths does not use them at the moment. As noted earlier, Carlos does not use any checklists this year. Nevertheless, he has used checklists before and intends to go back to doing so next year. In Carlos’ experience, the checklists make both the actual assessment and the communication about assessment easier. The reason for this, he says, is that the clearly formulated items on the checklists complement the more generally formulated grading criteria. However, he also notes that it is important to break down the items from the list, saying that “the checklists can be valid when simplified, much simplified, if you yourself formulate them” (Carlos, interview, April 23, 2009). Although the reformulation of the various items on the checklists took a lot of time, Carlos found this work worthwhile.
3.3. Weaknesses of the ELP

Just like the previous section, this one will first present what the teachers identified as general weaknesses related to working with the ELP. It will then account for the issues raised in relation to individual sections of the material.

Working with the ELP takes time. Both Beverley and Carlos mention that working with the checklists or having the students reflect on their learning takes time that could otherwise be spent learning the language, for example Beverly points out that she does not work as much with the “Kompass” as she would like to because she feels there is no time. Moreover, working with the ELP takes time outside of the classroom. Danielle mentions that it normally takes her six to seven hours to plan a theme. She understands that this may discourage teachers that would have liked to use the ELP. Carlos also notes that the work of reformulating and breaking down the items from the checklists does take a lot of time, even though he found it interesting. As mentioned earlier, the time aspect was what most teachers in Perclová’s (2006) study saw as negative. The problem was also raised by Little and Perclová (2001) as well as by Schärer (2008).

Just like Tholin (2001) observed, three of the four teachers note that the students need training in taking charge of their own learning. Indeed, Andrea, Carlos and Danielle note that when students arrive from secondary school they are not used to working according to the concept of learner autonomy and therefore need time to accept their new student role. As Danielle puts it, “they’re not used to working that way. They’re used to being very closely supervised by the teacher” (Danielle, interview, April 23, 2009). Thus, the work with the ELP is time-consuming in many different ways.

As reported by Scharle and Szabó (2000) and Tholin (2001), the teacher’s role changes too and although the informants have accepted this new role, they understand that it might be intimidating to others. Andrea explains that “you have to be very secure in your teacher role […]. You have to let go of a lot of things and I could imagine that many others don’t dare to do that.” (Andrea, interview, April 23, 2009). She adds that, because you need to multitask, this challenge might seem daunting to less experienced teachers.

Moreover, Carlos relates difficulties in accepting the new role to some teachers’ desire to show what they can do. He explains that “you don’t do that that easily if you let the students loose. Then I’m not the one teaching, showing him how good I am” (Carlos, interview, April 23, 2009). Furthermore, like the teachers who ask Carin Söderberg how they can use the ELP (personal communication, April 22, 2009), Carlos thinks that there is too
little advice on how to use the material practically (Carlos, interview, April 21, 2009) and this makes the task more difficult for the prospective ELP teacher.

Using the ELP means students always have to bring something extra to class. One of the reasons Danielle opted for the “theme packet” was that she wanted the students to have everything in one place. She explains that when they started to use the official ELP 16+ “there were three booklets plus the theme, which added up to four new things” (Danielle, interview, April 23, 2009). She describes the situation using the Swedish expression “kaka på kaka.”

Andrea, who uses both a theme booklet and her ELP, does not share this point of view. Nevertheless, Andrea uses the same expression to refer to the dossier, which she feels would be one item too many. Furthermore Danielle notes that, because there are textbooks that use the thinking of the ELP (with goals, reflection and checklists), the ELP material might actually seem superfluous for teachers who use textbooks.

Regarding comments on specific sections in the ELP, the big problem for this team of teachers has undoubtedly been the checklists provided in the ELP 16+. While the teachers were all positive to working with them, they encountered several problems when using them with their students. Beverley explains that “[she] thought the idea behind them was very, very good but […] as a tool they became obsolete after a while.” There are several reasons for this development.

The checklists were repetitive to the students. Carlos explained that, because the items on the lists had not been broken down, the students worked towards the same goals in many different themes. This was also connected to the fact that evaluations were done very often. “Almost after every lesson, they were supposed to asses ‘What did you learn today and what have you done and…’ […] They got tired of it” (Carlos, interview, April 23, 2009). Furthermore, both Andrea and Beverley observed that working with the same material in, for some students, as many as four subjects makes the work very repetitive and monotonous.

Beverley and Danielle further noted that the students did not really care about the checklists. Danielle points out that working with the original material required a lot of explanations, to the point where whole lessons were devoted to explaining the material (Danielle, interview, April 23, 2009). Moreover the teachers “realised that the students weren’t even doing [the self-assessment]” (ibid.).

Moreover, as was also reported by teachers in Little and Perclová (2001), Beverley questions the students’ ability to truthfully self-assess. She explains that “a lot of the times

12 “Kaka på kaka” (sometimes “tårta på tårta”) is a Swedish expression used to illustrate redundancy. “Det är kaka på kaka” could be translated as “It’s the same thing twice.”
[she] would love to have said, you know, this is not accurate or that’s not the way I saw it or question it” (ibid.) and questions whether the students are mature enough “to do that kind of honest self-assessment” (Beverley, interview, April 23, 2009).

Finally, it should be noted that the negative comments about the checklists refer to the standard version from the official material. Indeed, none of these comments refer to the reformulated checklists or the use thereof.
4. Conclusions and Discussion

This study set out to investigate how the ELP could be integrated into the situation of a language classroom in Sweden. I posed two research questions to guide the study. The first one focused on how a group of teachers used the ELP in their teaching whereas the second attempted to explore what these teachers’ experiences and use of the ELP says about the strengths and weaknesses of the material. This chapter will summarise and discuss the findings presented in the previous chapter.

4.1. How the teachers work with the ELP

Originally, the informants used the entire official ELP 16+. However, after a year or two they found that it did not work for them. They therefore had to come up with new ways of working with the material. Today, the four teachers interviewed for this study have all adapted the official ELP 16+ to their own courses and groups of students. Three different ways of presenting the material were described.

Andrea has adapted the language biography into what she calls her “Europäisches Sprachenportfolio.” This booklet combines standard ELP worksheets for reflections with Andrea’s own checklists that are used to set and evaluate goals for each of the teaching theme. Because Andrea’s way of working is strongly influenced by learner autonomy, students can choose how they want to work to achieve the goals set for the theme in question. Andrea does not actively use the school’s work portfolio because she feels that that would be too much for her students.

Beverley and Danielle have opted for the all-inclusive “theme packet”. The two teachers work with theme-based units presented in a booklet, the “theme packet,” that combines texts and exercises with the ELP material related to the particular theme. Danielle does not use the school’s work portfolio. Beverley, on the other hand, encourages her students to keep their work in the portfolio. Nevertheless, she would like to have the time to work more with the portfolio. She would in particular like to give her students the possibility to go back and look at their earlier products and reflect on how their language skills have improved.

Carlos also uses a portfolio for his students. The intention is that the students should go back and revise their texts. Nevertheless, he admits to a certain leniency towards this.
Consequently, he has noticed that although the highly motivated students do go back and revise earlier products, most of the students do not. It was also explained that although Carlos has used both his own the standard checklists and his own versions in the past, he has chosen not to do so this year. However, he does see the checklists as a valuable part of the ELP material and will use them again next year.

This summary also calls for a brief comment on the teachers’ use of the material in relation to learner autonomy. As explained in the introductory chapter, the concept of learner autonomy is central to the ELP. Looking at the teachers in the present study, it can be said that Andrea, Carlos and Danielle see learner autonomy as an important part of their work with the ELP. Nevertheless, as has been explained earlier and as will be discussed in the next section, working with learner autonomy comes with a few challenges.

Having presented the teachers’ three ways of using the material, it would be justified to ask whether the results actually answer the initial question. To what extent can these teachers be said to use the ELP if they are not using a validated version? Indeed, all of the informants use the standard language passport, but they use their own, non-validated, adaptations of the other parts of the material.

Nevertheless, the guide to the Swedish ELP 16+, suggests introducing one section at a time. If someone who has just introduced the language passport but does not use any other part of the official material can be considered to use the ELP, then the teachers in this study must logically be considered the same. Yet, regarding this aspect, there is a need to consider the fact that the teachers have earlier used all parts of the official ELP.

However, continuing to use the entire validated ELP16+ would have implied setting aside the aims of the material. Indeed, the teachers decided to adapt the material because they realised that the official version did not work for them. They found that the students thought it was boring, repetitive and difficult to understand. The teachers even noticed that the students did not use their ELPs. Thus, continuing with the validated version would neither have motivated nor documented any language learning. The way I see it, these teachers put the aims of the ELP before its actual form and therefore decided to adapt the material so that it would indeed work towards the two main goals: motivating and documenting language learning.

Furthermore, the teachers needed several different versions of the ELP. I am sure that, given the required time, this team of teachers are able to create ELP material that would be validated by the CoE. Nevertheless, when the teachers used the official ELP 16+ one of the problems was related to the fact that the students were using the same material in all language
courses. Indeed, because all teachers used the validated version, students used the same ELP in as many as four subjects. The teachers observed that this made the use of the ELP very repetitive and discouraged students from using it. Thus, even a validated version created by the teachers, as a team, would not be ideal in this specific situation.

Moreover, as mentioned several times, Little and Perclová (2001) suggest breaking down the different items in the checklists. Indeed, as Eilis O’Toole (2003) explains, “[e]ach teacher will supplement the ELP and vary its use according to the needs of his/her particular learners” (p. 36). As noted above, the informants still work towards the aims of the ELP but in a way that has been adapted to both teacher and students.

Additionally, adapting the material we use to our students is not something we can choose to do – it is part of our commission as teachers. Indeed, the *Curriculum for the non-compulsory school system* states that “[t]he teachers shall take as the starting point each individual pupil’s needs, preconditions, experience and thinking” (National Agency for Education, 1994, p. 13).

Finally, one must decide whether using the ELP is more about working towards documenting and motivating language learning or about using a specific material. It is thus an issue of whether the ELP is mainly approach to teaching (related to what one wants to achieve and why) or mainly a teaching material (related to how one is going to achieve one’s goals). When taken to this extreme, I believe that the approach and the pedagogical aim of the ELP, and everything else we do in the language classroom, need to be more important than the form. For these reasons, I have considered that the interviewed teachers work with the ELP.

### 4.2. Strengths and Weaknesses of the ELP

The dimensions that the teachers in this study identified as the strengths of the ELP are the material’s compatibility with the Swedish steering documents, its adaptability to the individual student, the language passport, the reflection worksheets and the checklists.

The areas that the teachers in this study saw as possible weaknesses of the ELP are the standard checklists, the time factor, the particular demands on the teacher and the fact that the ELP is an extra item that students have to bring to class.

Although two of the teachers found that the ELP helped them in the work towards the learner autonomy-related goals in the syllabus, learner autonomy was also linked to two of the identified weaknesses: the time factor and the demands on the teacher. Regarding the time
aspect, the teachers found that the students needed time to get used to taking charge of their own learning. It was also noted that giving students responsibility puts specific demands on the teachers. Andrea noted that working with the ELP requires the ability to multitask, because different students are working with different tasks. She also pointed out that because you cannot supervise the students every move, “you need to be very secure in your teacher role” (Andrea, interview, April 21, 2009). These difficulties related to learner autonomy had previously been observed by Tholin (2001) and Scharle and Szabó (2000). Thus, the ELP can help bring the advantages of learner autonomy to the classroom but it also comes with the challenges of the approach.

Regarding the checklists, it can be argued that one reason why they have been problematic for these four teachers is the inexact parallel between the different language courses and the common reference levels. Although, a comparison between the two systems has been made (see p. 15), the practical implications have not been clarified. This becomes particularly problematic when three different courses are compared to one common reference level as is the case with for example B2 which, according to the comparison, represents English A, B and C. Thus, it is difficult for teachers to know exactly what items or parts of items on the checklists correspond to a given course. Furthermore, students might feel that they are not learning fast enough when they are not able to check off items on the checklists after a certain period of time. This factor further underlines the need to reformulate the checklists.

Based on the experienced repetitiveness of the checklists, it could be said that there is a risk of the ELP counteracting itself. The aims of the material are to document and motivate language learning. However, when an ELP user learns more languages, more time is spent updating the checklists. Because the checklists are the same for all languages, there is a risk of the learner finding this activity tedious and repetitive, as the informants’ students did (Beverley, interview, April 23, 2009). As a consequence, the user might either feel demotivated and stop learning languages or stop documenting the learning. This turn of events has been avoided by the teachers’ individual adaptations of the material. Indeed, because no two teachers use the material in the exact same way, students have a better chance of not finding the work monotonous even if they use the ELP in four different subjects.

There is a lot more to study when it comes to the practical implementation of the ELP in Swedish schools. It is clear that this degree project can be no more than a starting point for looking more at the way the ELP is used in Sweden. Interesting areas for further research
would include the student perspective. It would also be interesting to investigate how using the ELP affects students’ language learning.
References

Primary Sources

Andrea, April 21, 2009. Interview.
Andrea’s “Europäisches Sprachenportfolio” for stage 1
Beverley, April 23, 2009. Interview.
Beverley’s “We the people” (Theme packet)
Beverley’s “Where in the world is English?” (Theme packet)
Carlos, April 23, 2009. Interview.
Danielle, April 23, 2009. Interview.

Secondary Sources


13 The transcriptions of the interviews are available on demand.


Appendix 1: Mini Questionnaire

Om studien:
Syftet med studien är att undersöka upplevda för- och nackdelar med Europeisk Språkportfolio (ESP). Speciell tonvikt läggs vid reflektionen kring lärandet.

Intervjun kommer att spelas in med hjälp av dator. Du kan när som helst avbryta eller ställa frågor.

Din anonymitet kommer att garanteras och även om du fyller i ditt namn nedan, kommer det inte att användas i redovisningen av studien. Du kommer självklart även att få ta del av resultaten från studien.

Tack för din medverkan! Den är mycket värdefull för studien.

Vänligen fyll i informationen nedan.

Namn:
Ålder:
Antal år på skolan:
Antal år som lärare:
Antal år jag använt ESP:
Ämnen:

Mina noteringar

Fingerat namn:
Namn på ljudfilen:
Datum för inspelningen:
Appendix 2: Interview guide

Introduction:
Brief presentation/reminder of the study – Inform about change of focus
Ask the teacher to fill out the “mini form”
Make sure that it is OK to record the interview

Dimensions: Reasons, practice, outcomes, advantages, drawbacks

1. Hur kom det sig att du började använda ESP?
   _Hur kom du först i kontakt med ESP?_

2. Vad har du för mål med användandet av ESP i din undervisning?

3. Hur använder du ESP för att uppnå dessa mål?
   _På vilket sätt, hur ofta, vilka delar_

4. Vad ser du som de huvudsakliga för- och nackdelarna med ESP?

5. Har du stött på några problem när du använt ESP i dina olika
   undervisningsgrupper?
   _Vilken typ av problem/vad hände?_
   _Hur hanterade du dem?_

6. Skulle du rekommendera andra språklärare att använda ESP?
   _Varför/Varför inte?_

7. Varför tror du att det inte är fler som använder ESP?

8. Är det något jag inte frågat om som du skulle vilja tillägga?
   Är det något du vill fråga mig om?

Får jag återkomma om det är något jag undrar över?
TACK!