

# ELPUE: European Language Portfolio for University Education

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## Abstract

The Common European Framework of Reference for Languages (CEFRL) published by the Council of Europe has laid down a common foundation on which we can work to minimise the differences among the educational systems in the different countries and standardise the criteria in language learning. The CEFRL describes and lists the knowledge and skills that language students must acquire in order to have effective linguistic behaviour. It defines six levels of competences that enable us to measure individuals' progress in each of the stages of learning throughout their entire lifetime. The CEFRL promotes the creation of a European Language Portfolio that contains the student's intercultural and learning experiences. The ELPUE is a digital, multilingual portfolio addressed specifically to university students.

## General area of interest of this innovation

In recent years, we have seen the importance of language learning in university degrees and in society in general. Clear proof of this is that the ministerial orders regulating the new degrees in Primary Education and Early Childhood Education state that by the end of their degree programmes students must have achieved level C1 of the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages in Spanish and Catalan, and level B2 in a foreign language. Likewise the Council of Innovation, University and Enterprise asks that all university students finish their degrees with at least level B2 in a foreign language. Therefore, we need a tool that will enable us to easily evaluate university students' knowledge of languages.

In 2000, with the publication of the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages (CEFRL), the Council of Europe laid down a common foundation on which we can work to minimise the differences among the educational systems

in the different countries and standardise the criteria in language learning. The CEFRL describes and lists the knowledge and skills that students must acquire in order to have effective linguistic behaviour. It defines six levels of competences that enable us to measure individuals' progress in each of the stages of learning throughout their entire lifetime. In order to encourage learners to reflect and make them active and responsible in their language acquisition/learning process, the CEFRL promotes the creation of a European Language Portfolio (ELP) that contains the student's intercultural and learning experiences. Although Catalonia and Spain already have portfolios targeted at the different stages of primary and secondary education, there is no specific portfolio for university students. We need an ELP for higher education, an ELP that takes into account the specificities of this stage, such as the non-language courses taken in a foreign language (FL), the literature examined in different languages, stays and practices at universities or companies in other countries, among others.

## 1. Objectives

The ELPUE enables us to achieve the following goals:

1. To develop students' awareness of their level of language knowledge by showing that different levels of language competences can be developed according to one's use and need of a language.
2. To value the acquisition of partial language competences.
3. To help students become aware of their own language learning strategies.
4. To make available to students, and by extension to the entire university community, digital materials that make it easy to store the linguistic biography and the portfolio that accompanies it.
5. To stress the importance of mastery of Catalan, Spanish and foreign languages in university education in the 21st century.
6. To encourage the teaching of non-language courses in foreign languages.
7. To stimulate university students to expand their language experiences by doing part of their degree programme at a foreign university.
8. To reward an open, positive attitude towards multilingualism, multiculturalism and diversity.

Despite the fact that the portfolio that we are proposing is a tool that can be generalised to any member of the university community, we aim to implement it experimentally with a group of students in the Faculty of Education. Using the ELPUE, these students will be able to identify the linguistic competences they have already acquired, and in what languages and to what degree they have done so. They will also gain awareness of their learning and the strategies and techniques that enable them to improve their communicative level in languages. Using the portfolio will also help to stimulate self-evaluation and independent learning among students. The mid-term

goal is for students in the Faculty of Education to receive and use the ELPUE to accredit their level of language knowledge.

## 2. Description of the project

The ELPUE is therefore a language portfolio adapted to the Catalan university community. Users can choose Catalan, Spanish, English or French as their languages. The portfolio has three parts: a linguistic biography with all the descriptors needed to make a self-assessment of the student's competences, a portfolio where users can store their output, and a passport.

A special computer application was developed for the ELPUE that creates an document that can be generated from any computer. This enables users to update their information very easily simply by loading the application onto any PC or Mac.

### 2.1. The linguistic biography

As the CEFRL suggests, the linguistic biography is divided into two parts. The first one is more experiential, in which the user indicates their relationship with languages. Users have to tell, for example, which languages they speak, with whom, in which circumstances; which languages they read, and in which cases. In this part, they must also list the languages they have studied, which non-language courses they have taken in foreign languages, any stays abroad they have made for both Erasmus or mobility stays, shorter stays for learning languages, and trips for non-educational reasons.

The second part is related to language competences. In the CEFRL, the Council of Europe distinguishes between three types of language users: basic (levels A1 and A2), independent (levels B1 and B2) and experienced (levels C1 and C2). In reality, these three types of users encompass six different levels of competences, six key junctures in language learning.

The framework determines the competences that language learners must have in each of these six levels, regardless of which language. As can be seen in the grid below, the designers of the framework used very general descriptors to define the competences of each of the levels, and it is clear that these competences are also valid for one's native language. Each level has between three and four descriptors that broadly indicate what the user who has reached this level is capable of doing.

Table 1. Different types of users and their corresponding levels.

<b>Experienced user</b>	<b>C2</b>	Can effortlessly understand almost everything they read and hear. Can summarise information from different oral or written sources, reconstruct facts and arguments and present them coherently. Can express themselves spontaneously, with fluency and accuracy, distinguishing subtle nuances of meaning even in the most complex situations.
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	<b>C1</b>	Can understand a wide range of long, complex texts and recognise their implicit meaning. Can express themselves fluently and spontaneously without having to obviously grasp for words or expressions. Can use the language flexibly and effectively for social, academic and professional purposes. Can produce clear, well-organised, detail texts on complex subjects, and demonstrates a controlled use of organisational structures, connectors and cohesion mechanisms.
<b>Independent user</b>	<b>B2</b>	Can understand the main ideas of complex texts about both concrete and abstract subjects, including technical discussions in their field of professional specialisation. Can express themselves with a degree of fluency and spontaneity that makes everyday interaction with native speakers possible without prompting tension in either of the speakers. Can produce clear, detailed texts in a wide range of subjects and express a standpoint on an issue, setting forth the advantages and disadvantages of different options.
	<b>B1</b>	Can understand the main ideas of clear information on subjects related to work, school, free time, etc. Can handle the majority of linguistic situations that arise when travelling to a place where the target language is spoken. Can produce simple, coherent discourse on subjects that are familiar to them or personally interest them. Can describe facts and experiences, dreams, hopes and ambitions, and give brief reasons and explanations for their opinions and plans.
<b>Basic user</b>	<b>A2</b>	Can understand commonly used phrases and expressions related to issues of immediate importance (such as basic personal information, family information, shopping, local geography and work). Can communicate in simple, everyday situations that require a simple, direct exchange of information on familiar, everyday matters. Can simply describe aspects of their experiences or personal background, aspects about their immediate environment, and matters related to immediate needs.
	<b>A1</b>	Can understand and use everyday, familiar expressions and very simple sentences aimed at meeting their basic needs. Can introduce themselves and introduce a third person, and can ask and answer questions on personal information such as where they live, the people they know and the things they own. Can interact simply as long as the other person speaks slowly and clearly and is willing to help.

One might think that this definition of competences is overly general and that we need more specific descriptors that indicate much more clearly the levels to be achieved. With this purpose in mind, the framework divides the linguistic competences of each level into five different areas: listening and reading (comprehension), taking part in conversations and expressing oneself orally afterward (oral expression) and writing. The ELPUE has added a sixth area: sociocultural knowledge. This sociocultural knowledge has not been organised into levels, as we cannot universally determine which cultural aspects one should know before others. Should one become familiar with the written literature of a language when in level B1 or B2? There might be some users who are familiar with the written literature of a language without having knowledge of that language because they might have read the works in translation. So can we say that that person is familiar with the written literature in that language? If they liked read-

ing it in translation, when they reach the right level they will most likely try to read some of the works in the second language. With regard to knowledge on the behaviour, habits and customs of individuals in a given society, should they be acquired in a given order? If so, what is this order? In the cases of languages spoken in more than one country (English, French or Spanish, just to cite three), which customs should be taken into account? For all these reasons and others, the sociocultural knowledge is not organised into six levels in the CEFRL.

For each of the areas we have also drawn up descriptors on the learning strategies that should be mobilised in order to facilitate language learning. Including descriptors on language acquisition processes and language learning techniques and strategies in the ELPUE can only help to improve academic performance. The repertoire proposed for each of the areas has the aim of encouraging learners to reflect on what they do and how they do it, on their own learning style. We have tried to set forth the most commonly used techniques and strategies so that all learners can become aware of what they do, and especially about what they do not do. When students gain awareness of what helps them to learn and which strategies they can apply to be more effective in their language learning, it is much easier for them to put them into practice in order to reach the level they want.

## 2.2. The CEFRL descriptors

The authors of the CEFRL defined a variety of descriptors for each of the levels and areas cited in the previous section. Despite the fact that these descriptors are more concrete than the ones established in the definitions of levels of competence, they are still overly generic and can often give rise to confusion when performing a self-evaluation. Other times they are clear enough and no one would have doubts about what they refer to.

Let us analyse the descriptors of levels A1 and A2 in the area of understanding: oral comprehension:

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<b>A1</b>	I can recognise familiar words and very basic expressions on issues related to the family and immediate environment if people speak slowly and clearly.
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<b>A2</b>	I can understand the most common expressions and vocabulary about issues that personally interest me (such as very basic personal and family information, shopping, place of residence, job). I can understand the general gist of short, clear and simple messages and notices.

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It becomes quite clear that level A1 talks about *familiar words and very basic expressions on issues related to the family and immediate environment*, that is, about the family, work and social spheres. These same subjects appear in level A2 when talking about subjects of personal interest, as it says *such as very basic personal and family information, shopping, place of residence, job*. Can we therefore deduce that the difference between these two levels lies in whether one only recognises isolated words in

A1 or understands expressions and the overall gist of the message or notice in A2? Can we deduce that in level A1 there is no comprehension, rather just recognition? But if these words were recognised, were they not comprehended? Can we orally recognise something that we do not comprehend?

If we ask a level A1 user to give more specific examples of what they understand, oftentimes they will not know how to answer beyond the fact that they understand isolated words. Users need the competences to be made a little more explicit in order for them to identify what they know and don't know. It is true that people use language (at least their native language), but when doing it, they do not necessarily think about what they are doing with the language, what they use it for.

The grid below shows that the borderline between certain levels is quite blurry and that users may well have problems or doubts when trying to more specifically situate themselves in either level. With regard to the descriptors for B2 to C1 in the area of oral interaction, what difference can be distinguished between *being able to communicate with a certain degree of spontaneity and fluency* (B2) and *being able to communicate spontaneously and fluently* (C1)? Where, then, is the boundary between B2 and C1? It is obvious that users of the portfolio need to have much more specific descriptors for both B2 and C2 than the ones proposed in the framework.

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**B2** I can communicate with a certain degree of spontaneity and fluency, which makes it possible for me to interact with native speakers. I can actively participate in a conversation in familiar context, presenting and defending my opinions.

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**C1** I can expression myself spontaneously and fluently without having to grasp for words. I can use the language flexibly and effectively for social and professional purposes. I can precisely express ideas and opinions and easily relate my contribution to the discourse with that of the other speakers.

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We could perform this analysis for each of the areas of the CEFRL and always reach the same conclusion. The descriptors proposed for each level are overly general and do not enable users to identify clearly and precisely the specific competences that they must have to reach this level.

In order for a users to discover their degree of knowledge of a language, they need much more specific descriptors than the ones provided in the framework. Therefore, we must create more specific descriptors for each of the levels in each of the five areas defined by the CEFRL.

### 2.3. The ELPUE descriptors

The descriptors that were developed for the ELPUE are much more specific than the ones proposed by the CEFRL. What was done was that the general descriptors from the framework were broken down into much more specific descriptors and especially into descriptors that are much more easily identifiable for users. Therefore, among the

descriptors of oral interaction in level A1 we have identified some of the most common and basic communicative situations such as greeting, thanking and introducing oneself. We have also defined some of the subjects about which users can ask and answer questions, such as asking for information on people's identity, and asking for and telling the time. Nevertheless, there is still some degree of ambiguity in the descriptors. For examples, it says *I can respond to simple questions as long as they are about everyday matters or subjects related to an immediate need*.

Keeping this ambiguity about *everyday matters* and *subjects related to an immediate need* enables all the different users to find themselves reflected, as this prevents us from having to use or cite specific lexis for each user.

Below is an example of the descriptors used in A1 in the area of Oral interaction (the text in bold corresponds to the general descriptor proposed by the CEFRL and in italics the descriptors that are specific to the ELPUE):

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I can communicate simply as long as the speaker is willing to repeat what they said or say it using other words and more slowly, and as long as they help me to express what I am trying to say. I can ask and answer simple questions about everyday matters or subjects related to an immediate need

- *I can greet, say goodbye and thank.*
  - *I can introduce myself and other people.*
  - *I can ask for personal information on people's identity, such as their age, nationality, everyday activities, etc.*
  - *I can answer questions on personal information, such as my name, my age, where I live and my profession.*
  - *I can say that I don't understand and ask the other speaker to repeat what they said.*
  - *I can respond to simple questions as long as they are about everyday matters or subjects related to an immediate need, and as long as the other speaker speaks, slowly and clearly and helps me to express what I want to say.*
  - *I can tell the time and manipulate figures, quantities and prices.*
  - *I can use time expressions like «next week», «last Friday», «in November» and «at three o'clock».*
  - ...
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For each of the languages mentioned in their biography, users must mark whether or not they are able to accomplish what the descriptors say. They have to identify what they can and cannot do, and they can also add other descriptors that they can find in a bank of descriptors that they are offered, or they can write their own descriptors.

Following are examples of descriptors used in C1 in the area of Understand – Read:

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I understand all the details of lengthy, complex texts, regardless of whether or not they are related to my speciality as long as I can reread the more difficult sections. I understand specialised articles and long technical instructions even if they are not related to my speciality.

- *I understand long, complex literary or factual texts, and I can distinguish among different styles.*
  - *I understand any kind of correspondence without having to look up words in the dictionary.*
  - *I can scan for information in long texts and on websites.*
  - *I can scan for information in specialised articles and technical instructions within my speciality.*
  - *I understand long, complex texts related to my social, professional or academic life fairly well.*
  - *I understand lengthy, complex instructions in my speciality or on other subjects fairly well if I can reread the difficult sections.*
  - *I can read and understand journals and books in my field.*
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As you can see in these last descriptors, what we have done is broken down two general descriptors (bold) into seven descriptors (italics). One of our goals was to distinguish between the ability to look for information and effective comprehension of what was read. In reality, oftentimes readers do not necessarily understand absolutely everything they read, rather what they need to do is quickly identify a series of data or information in a written document (either a text or a website) in order to reuse them in an oral utterance or include them or comment on them in another document they are writing. Despite the fact that one might think that looking for information in a document does not fit in at the C1 level of the CEFRL, if we bear in mind that it says that these are long texts, specialised articles, technical instructions or websites, we can see that this type of search is not such an obvious thing as users must manipulate complex information that is also structured and organised in a complex fashion. However, it is clear that a user who has reached level C1 in reading comprehension in a language should not merely be able to locate information but must also be capable of understanding what is written with a certain degree of ease. For this reason we added the next two descriptors. One of the two says: *I understand extensive and complex instructions on my speciality, or on other subjects, if I can reread the difficult parts*. However, is it necessary to mention the possibility of rereading the difficult parts in level C1? Oftentimes in our native languages we have to read and reread a paragraph that is more complex than others, and not stop rereading it until we understand it. If this does not make the reader ineffective, we have to understand that level C1 also includes the possibility of rereading part of a text.

### 3. Methodology

This project has two phases, the first to create a digital support and the second to experiment with the ELPUE.

With regard to the former, using the general descriptors for each area and level of the CEFRL, we wrote the descriptors that best adapt to each of them. To do this, we analysed the referentials that were published in the different languages. These referentials group together the linguistic utterances of each language and take into account communicative, grammatical and lexical factors. Given the specialisation of the group members, we prepared the descriptors by binomials and then discussed in a large group what modifications were needed.

In the second phase we will begin experimenting with the ELPUE with a group of students in the faculty. This experimentation will be conducted in three parts. The first will consist of making an initial self-assessment of language knowledge (Catalan, Spanish, English, French and others should students know other languages), thus laying the groundwork for a reflection on students' language learning strategies. The second part will come at the end of the term, when students will once again evaluate themselves in order to see what progress they have made, complete the self-evaluation question-



naires and add the necessary proof to their portfolio. The third part will consist of evaluating the results of the experiment.

#### 4. Results

Given the fact that the ELPUE has not yet been implemented in the different degree programmes in the Faculty of Education, we can only present the results that we expect to get, namely, that students gain awareness of their ability to learn languages and reflect on the acquisition/learning strategies they use. Students are also expected to show a more open attitude towards the multilingualism, multiculturalism and language diversity that characterise today's society, and especially today's schools. In this sense, the assessment of any language experience in the students' biography will be extremely important, as the goal is to value every step, both large and small, that makes peaceful coexistence among diverse cultures and languages possible. All of these results obviously converge in a single one: improved academic performance in the language courses in the different degree programmes.

#### 5. Conclusions

Despite the fact that this project is still underway and no definitive conclusions can be drawn, we can posit that the implementation and everyday use of the ELPUE will help students to create the habit of self-evaluation of their language knowledge, and that this should serve as a stimulus for continuing to learn languages and initiating new learning experiences in other languages that they do not yet know.

The ELPUE should also contribute to the internationalisation of the degree programmes in the faculty given the fact that it aims to encourage students to take non-language courses in a foreign language, as well as to take advantage of exchanges and agreements with foreign universities. The everyday use of the ELPUE should encourage students to increase the number of short stays and visits to schools outside of Spain, going abroad either to complete part of their degree or to do the practices in their programme abroad.

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**Interesting links**

- [http://www.coe.int/t/dg4/portfolio/default.asp?l=e&m=/main\\_pages/welcome.html](http://www.coe.int/t/dg4/portfolio/default.asp?l=e&m=/main_pages/welcome.html)
- <http://www.ecml.at/>

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**Financing**

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**Project leader**

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**Presentation of the working group**

The faculty involved in this project has extensive experience in the field of teaching languages (both native and foreign) and has participated in different projects related to defining curriculum, evaluation and developing learning strategies. All the members of this working group have taught or are teaching in the degree programme in Primary Teacher Training in the speciality of Foreign Languages in the Faculty of Education at the Universitat Autònoma de Barcelona.

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