Experiencia docente universitaria con el Portfolio Europeo de Lenguas electrónico: una innovación para la promoción del plurilingüismo y la interculturalidad

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Resumen
Este artículo describe la experiencia docente de la introducción del Portfolio Europeo de las Lenguas electrónico español (ePEL+14) en la docencia universitaria de los Erasmus Intensive Language Courses (EILC) de la Red Vives de Universidades. Se pretende conocer la opinión de los docentes en una primera experimentación con estudiantes universitarios en relación con su aprendizaje de la lengua y cultura catalanas. Se ha realizado un estudio piloto siguiendo una metodología híbrida, con un diseño QUAN+qual, mediante dos cuestionarios ad hoc en línea (pretest-postest). La valoración global de la herramienta ha sido positiva en cuanto a los aspectos pedagógicos (reflexión y autoevaluación de la Biografía) e informativos (el perfil lingüístico del Pasaporte), aunque se han señalado dificultades resultado de la diferencia entre el tiempo de dedicación necesario para el alumnado y el tiempo del que disponía, así como la necesidad de introducir mejoras tecnológicas y lingüísticas. Por un lado, se reconoce el ePEL como una innovación educativa válida para el ámbito universitario actual, y por el otro, se considera que en el presente desempeña una influencia moderada en el aprendizaje de las lenguas y las culturas.

Palabras clave: Percepción docente; Enseñanza de lengua y cultura; Portfolio Europeo de las Lenguas electrónico; Educación Superior; Plurilingüismo; Interculturalidad.

University teaching experience with the electronic European Language Portfolio: an innovation for the promotion of plurilingualism and interculturality

Abstract
This article describes the teaching experience gained from the introduction of the Spanish electronic European Language Portfolio (eELP+14) in the university teaching of the Erasmus Intensive Language Course (EILC) within the Vives Network of Universities. The aim was to seek the views of teachers during their first experimental work with undergraduates in relation to their learning of Catalan culture and language. A pilot study was carried out following a mixed methods methodology, with a QUAN+qual design, through two online ad hoc questionnaires (pretest-posttest). Overall, the tool has been assessed positively with regard to pedagogical aspects (reflection and self-evaluation of the Biography) and communication aspects (the linguistic profile of the Passport), although some difficulties have been highlighted concerning the time students need to dedicate to it and the amount of time they actually have, as well as the need to introduce technological and linguistic improvements. On the one hand, the eELP is recognised as an educational innovation which is entirely suitable for the current university context, and on the other hand, it is considered to have only a moderate influence in the learning of languages and cultures.

Keywords: Teachers’ perceptions; Teaching of language and culture; electronic European Language Portfolio; Higher Education; Plurilingualism; Interculturality.
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Focus and approach

Changes in higher education and in the learning of languages in Europe

The construction of the European Higher Education Area (EHEA) has led to the implementation of new teaching and learning methods that are more proactive for students and that aim to measure the work involved and to evaluate learning progress in terms of competences. Among these methods we regularly see portfolios and eportfolios as an alternative means of evaluating learning. In Spain, the virtual folder Practual (Castelló & Monereo, 2000), or digital folders with Moodle (Lopez-Fernandez, 2007), have been the first empirical experiences to be studied as innovative university teaching methods.

Between 1998 and 2000, the pilot project of the European Language Portfolio (ELP) was developed and culminated in its official launch in 2001, the European Year of Languages as celebrated by the European Council (EC). Linguistic and cultural diversity was promoted, and focused initially on secondary and adult education (Little, 2003). In just one decade, 47 member states have had 117 ELP models validated for all levels of education, of which five of these are electronic versions (eELP), with one of them being the eELP+14 of the Ministry of Education, Culture and Sports (MECD) through the Autonomous Organisation of European Educative Programmes (OAPEE).

From the ELP pilot phase to international empirical studies
The basic principles of the ELP are (Schärer, 2000, p. 5): “All competences are evaluated (...); it belongs to the learner; it is based on the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages (CEFR) and a set of directives and common principles are applicable to it”. The focus of Little’s (2002) approach is on self-study and reflexive processes. Ushioda and Ridley (2002) observed that while the tool did involve students, making them more active, it also generated problems and they detected that it only motivated younger students. Rantz and Horan (2005) investigated the extent to which teachers could promote interculturality among students through the ELP. Little (2005) continued to promote self-study through the ELP and the CEFR with guidelines for working towards a new assessment culture. The “Can-do” project (Hasselgreen, 2005) implemented these European instruments for children and adolescents, even though their teachers warned that the descriptors were insufficient and questioned their reliability. Glover, Mirici and Aksu (2005), identified the need to provide teachers with more training given that the success of the ELP seemed to depend on their attitudes.

With regard to the eELP, Crosbie (2006) developed the “Language On-line Portfolio Project” in order to address the intercultural dimension of the linguistic profile. González (2009) tested out the ePEL with adults alongside the Europass and the DIALANG to encourage online self-assessment. Cummins and Davesne (2009) present American adaptations of the eELP (“Linguafolio” and ”Global Language Portfolio”) and highlight the fact that the qualitative assessment of the portfolio complements other quantitative measures. In an ELP and CEFR teacher training programme, Sahinkarakas, Yumru and Inuzo (2010) managed to overcome initial resistance (large classes, heavy teaching loads and a teacher-centred educational culture).
**From the ELP to the eELP in Spain**

In 2001, the MECD started coordinating the development and validation of the different ELP models in Spain. The models pertaining to primary and secondary school were implemented in the co-official languages, as well as in English and French in the Passport descriptors. From 2004 onwards, experimentation began with secondary and adult education (Cassany, Esteve, Martín Peris & Pérez-Vidal, 2004; González López & Cabezas Álvarez, 2006; Mundiñano & Santos, 2006). The Autonomous Organisation of European Educative Programmes (2006) carried out the pilot study in approximately 300 schools across the whole of Spain, the results of which showed a greater involvement of students in the learning of languages that has positive effects on their levels of autonomy, in improvements of the assessment of linguistic competences and in an increased awareness and sensitivity toward linguistic and cultural diversity (OAPEE, 2008).

The ELP is a personal document that is kept in a file with three sections: the Language Passport, the Linguistic Biography and the Dossier, URL: [http://www.oapee.es/oapee/inicio/iniciativas/portfolio.html](http://www.oapee.es/oapee/inicio/iniciativas/portfolio.html). The first and last sections are informative in nature, whereas the second section is pedagogical – this is the part which has more educational potential (Lopez-Fernandez, 2011). The Passport shows the learner’s competences in different languages and is used by the learner to reflect and provide a self-assessment in terms of different skills (reading, speaking, listening, writing) and by CEFR levels (from A1 to C2). The Biography details linguistic and cultural knowledge and is designed as a guide for planning and evaluating progress.
through reflection on the learning of languages and cultures, and to help in the formulation of learning plans. The Dossier contains examples of personal work that certify the learner’s capacities and linguistic and cultural knowledge (this constitutes the learner’s repository of evidence).

The eELP+14 follows a similar structure and is hosted on an institutional server with free access (URL: https://www.oapee.es/e-pel/). It is protected with a password and is available in 10 languages (German, English, French, Italian, Portuguese, Spanish, Basque, Galician, Catalan and Valencian), although reflections can actually be made in 31 languages (co-official and foreign languages including Arabic, Chinese, Japanese and Russian). The aim of it is to promote life long learning through an electronic application which is valid across Europe (accreditation no. 105.2010). Its characteristic principles (Pitarch Gil, Álvarez Platero & Monferrer Daudí, 2009) can be considered in terms of both their advantages and disadvantages (Lopez-Fernandez, 2011).

In spite of all the research, scarce attention has been paid to the perspective of the university teacher (Kohonen & Westhoff, 2000; Little, 2005; Little & Perclová, 2003; Mansilla, 2007; Stoicheva, Hughes & Speitz, 2009). Similarly, no empirical studies have been carried out on the eELP+14. In view of this, the Vives Network of Universities (RVU) has coordinated the first pre-experimentation with the eELP+14 during the Erasmus Intensive Language Courses (EILC) through the University of Barcelona (UB). In the case of these teachers, how do they perceive and assess the use of the eELP+14 in the intensive and classroom-based teaching of an introductory course of Catalan language and culture aimed at Erasmus students? The aim is to seek teachers’ opinions on the eELP+14 in an EILC context to ascertain its effectiveness.
Methodology

This study has been devised using a mixed methods research approach; a methodology which is on the increase in educational sciences (Tashakkori & Teddlie, 2003). A simultaneous implantation design has been applied with different QUAN+qual priorities, (Johnson & Onwuegbuzie, 2004) in order to achieve complementarity.

Sample

11 teachers of Catalan language from 8 of the 21 RVU universities. With regard to gender, 4 men (36.4%) and 7 women (63.6%) with an average age (M) of 35.82 and a standard deviation (SD) of 9.097 (range of 32 years old: 24-56).

Instruments

Two online questionnaires have been designed and carried out as a pretest and posttest. The pretest questionnaire includes the following sections:

1) Instructions: respondents are asked to be sincere and anonymity is guaranteed.

2) Socio-demographic variables: a name and a pseudonym is given (to control the pretest and posttest data), the gender (if male or female), age (in years) and the university where they taught the EILC course.

3) Variables on the teaching-learning of languages and cultures: questions were asked about the ELP, the eELP, European instruments and plurilingualism and interculturality, with two types of questions: in relation to levels of agreement
measured on a Likert scale from 1 to 5 (with 1 “completely agree” and 5 “completely disagree”) or from 1 to 10 (with 1 “totally agree” and 10 “totally disagree”).

The posttest questionnaire had similar sections, except for the third part which covers the consequences, sections and repercussions of the eELP for EILC teachers, plurilingualism and interculturality, through closed questions that measure levels of agreement or disagreement in the same way.

**Results, discussion and conclusions**

In the pretest, 90.9% of teachers state that they had previous knowledge of the ELP prior to the pilot study and that 72.7% had created their own eELP. Those who rate it positively highlight the promotion of learner autonomy and the ability to monitor one’s own progress in terms of the language level achieved: “I think it is a good tool for promoting language learning in an autonomous way and can be useful for providing information on the levels achieved in each language and each skill” (29 year-old male teacher). The other 9.1% were neutral, indicating some difficulties and suggesting future improvements: “It's a real pain to fill in, not at all attractive on the eye, too detailed and slightly oriented toward people with linguistic leanings” (36 year-old male teacher).

72.7% had not used it in their previous teaching. 45.5% were confident in relation to the promotion of language learning with the eELP. Concerning first impressions, only 36.4% of the teachers agree that it is easy and 9.1% consider it useful. On the other hand, the most complex thing about the eELP is the way it is filled in, the design of the interface, etc. Nevertheless, the initial attitude of students when they come across the eELP is classified as sufficient ($M = 4.18; SD = 1.471$), given that the $Mdn$ is 5 with the
Likert scale out of 10. The positive scores (18.2%) highlight the electronic component, the ease of use of the tool and the fact that it is an educational innovation. The negative scores (36.4%) point to disinterest or too little time dedicated to it.

The sections which are the most interesting for teachers initially are the Biography (54.5%) and the Passport (45.5%). With regards the first, the self-assessment tables and the reflection on their learning experiences stand out in particular. “Because it contains self-assessment tables that seem to me to be the core of the portfolio as they determine the linguistic profile, and other sections that I find very interesting to reflect on learning experiences such as, for example, the Learning Activities section” (36 year-old female teacher). They highlight the summary of the level of each language and the different skills provided in the Passport: “It’s like your own language curriculum” (46 year-old female teacher). With regard to the European instruments, only 27.3% of Erasmus students know about the CEFR and 9.1% know about Europass.

In relation to the level of plurilingualism and interculturality measured on a Likert scale of 10 points, the two competences have obtained an initially insufficient score (plurilingualism: $M = 7.27$, $Md = 7$, $SD = 1.348$; interculturality: $M = 7.36$, $Md = 7$, $SD = 1.027$).

In the posttest, 33.3% confirm that the eELP has helped to get their students more involved in linguistic learning and has helped them to define their own goals. 67% confirm that they have seen improvements in the linguistic capacities of their students in terms of autonomy, motivation, learning to achieve objectives, the CEFR, as well as linguistic and intercultural awareness through reflection: “Progress has been really good given that after the first session they have become autonomous and have shown a keen interest in completing the eELP in all the languages they know” (28 year-old female
teacher). However, some unfavourable opinions have emerged in relation to the short duration of the EILC: “As an unfavourable factor I would mention time, since this is a very intensive course and the hours that we have spent working on the eELP means that we have not been able to spend time working on other contents” (33 year-old female teacher).

66.7% have found that the results in the Biography on PDF coincide with the self-assessment. Thus, in the end, 77.8% of the teachers consider the eELP to be useful. 55.6% confirm that their students have more knowledge of the eELP, CEFR and Europass, and 88.9% of them state that they now have their eELP for when they return to their own country. With regard to the consequences of using the eELP, 77.8% think that their students have taken on a greater level of responsibility, and only 44.4% state that the application has motivated them. The most valued elements have been the reflection (88.9%) and the linguistic information (100%). 44.4% consider that the eELP will play a role in their higher education, 77.8% agree that the document will help to provide information on linguistic and cultural abilities and that it will be useful in their future careers.

With regard to the impact of the eELP on teaching, measured on a Likert scale of 10, teachers scored it as moderately positive ((\(M = 6.67, Mdn = 6.5, DT = 1.862\)): “(...) because the objectives have changed and, therefore, so have the mechanics of the classes. The fact that a European standard exists helps to assess language learning and, in our case, this helps to normalise the language and to situate it at the same level as others” (41 year-old male teacher).

In relation to the level of plurilingualism and interculturality measured on a Likert scale of 10 points, the final score obtained was sufficient (plurilingualism: \(M = 5, Mdn = 5, SD = 2.598\); interculturality: \(M = 4.33, Mdn = 4, SD = 2\)). So that when performing the
Wilcoxon Test, both competences show statistically significant differences between the pretest and the posttest (plurilingualism: \( Z = 2.207, p < 0.05 \); interculturality: \( Z = 2.555, p < 0.05 \)) guaranteeing a slight improvement.

From the teachers’ perspective, the eELP+14 in the EILC has been useful, as already shown by Little (2002). According to this study, it seems that the tool has been more successful in encouraging the acquisition of information and the development of reflection than in language learning. Its application has not sufficiently motivated university students to learn Catalan, perhaps due to the lack of time (Glover et al., 2005), lack of enthusiasm (González, 2009), due to age (Ushioda & Ridley, 2002) or other uncontrolled factors. In spite of this, teachers suggest that this tool can help language learners and encourage them to be more autonomous and responsible and to take control of their own progress (González, 2009; Little, 2005). Indirectly, there even seems to be a certain level of concordance between the students’ self-assessments of their linguistic competences and those of their teachers; although more tests should be performed to guarantee the reliability of both results as it may be that adult learners are better able to carry out self-assessments (Hasselgreen, 2005). Finally, given that levels of plurilingualism and interculturality have improved slightly, and despite the intensity and brevity of the EILC, it seems that although it will be somewhat difficult to improve skills in these competences, it will, nevertheless, be possible.

The eELP+14 can be a complementary support within the university context, given that it covers the main areas of action that need to be addressed by teachers within the EHEA (Rodríguez, Álvarez, Gil & Romero, 2011). The plurilingualism and interculturality it promotes are vital elements of European societies (Díaz, 2006) and the
development of these competences is of particular importance for current universities. Multilingual education remains a challenge for both today’s university teachers (Guasch, 2007) and for the EHEA.