

The Open University's repository of research publications and other research outputs

## Autonomy and self-assessment of individual learning styles using the European Language Portfolio (ELP)

### Journal Item

How to cite:

Peréz Cavana, Maria Luisa (2012). Autonomy and self-assessment of individual learning styles using the European Language Portfolio (ELP). *Language Learning in Higher Education. Journal of the European Confederation of Language Centres in Higher Education (CercleS)*, 1(1) pp. 211–228.

For guidance on citations see [FAQs](#).

© 2012 Mouton De Gruyter

Version: Accepted Manuscript

Link(s) to article on publisher's website:

<http://dx.doi.org/doi:10.1515/cercles-2011-0014>

---

Copyright and Moral Rights for the articles on this site are retained by the individual authors and/or other copyright owners. For more information on Open Research Online's data [policy](#) on reuse of materials please consult the policies page.

---

## **Autonomy and self-assessment of individual learning styles using the European Language Portfolio (ELP)**

Maria Luisa Pérez Cavana

### **Abstract**

Interest in learning styles has produced innumerable studies over the last three decades. However, the application of knowledge of learning styles in education is a controversial matter, particularly in instruction, where there is less evidence of the usefulness of learning styles tests.

This article is concerned with the role of reflection in autonomous learning and with how learners can develop awareness of their own learning style through self-assessment. In particular it explores the use of an electronic version of the European Language Portfolio (eELP) to assess learning styles, reporting on a pilot project with distance students in higher education that enabled students to reflect on their individual language learning process.

The article argues that the use of reflection and self-assessment with a focus on learning styles is useful for learners as it provides relevant information to improve their language learning. It concludes by suggesting that the ELP is a valuable instrument to assess individual learning styles, and that it can be considered as an alternative to tests.

**Key words:** learner autonomy, self-assessment, reflection, learning styles, electronic European Language Portfolio

### **1. Introduction**

Since was first introduced in 2001 one of the main functions of the European Language Portfolio (ELP) has been the development of learner autonomy and hence of the capacity for independent language learning. Different versions of the ELP had to be designed “to help learners to achieve a fuller awareness of themselves as language learners and to develop language learning skills that they can deploy to meet individual needs” (Council of Europe 2006, 1.6). This fundamental function of the ELP is realized in particular through the Language Biography, which helps learners to document and reflect on previous language learning, to assess their L2 proficiency, and to plan and monitor future learning (Schneider and Lenz 2001:19). Some ELPs have developed a section within the Language Biography that supports reflection on the learning process by asking general questions about the user’s preferred ways of learning — for example, the Irish (Integrate Ireland Language and Training, 2001), German (Brettmann et al., 2000) and the European Language Council models (Forster Vosicki, 2002); —, but none of them focuses explicitly on learning styles. One of the main purposes in designing the Open University’s electronic ELP (eELP) was to develop further this pedagogical aspect of the Language Biography, to encourage learners to reflect on their learning process and become aware of their individual learning styles. For this reason the model introduced categories and terms from the learning styles literature, seeking to make a focus on learning styles practical and useful for learners and to extend the self-assessment dimension of the ELP to include learning styles.

Learning styles and learning autonomy have been linked in a number of studies (Hurd 2003; Hurd and Murphy 2005; Nunan 1997). Nunan describes the awareness of individual learning styles as the first step towards learner autonomy. By contrast, this article moves from learner autonomy to learning styles; it shows how working autonomously with the ELP can help learners to assess their learning style and in this way illustrates the interdependence of learner autonomy and learning styles awareness.

The article begins by giving an overview of the complexity of the field of learning styles, then summarizes the pedagogy of learner autonomy and discusses the fundamental role played by reflection. Next the introduction of learning styles in the Language Biography part of the Open University's eELP is presented and the pilot project that was carried out with students using this eELP is described. Finally, in the last two sections, the findings of the pilot are presented and their implications are considered.

## **2. Learning styles**

Interest in learning styles has produced innumerable studies over the last three decades. The number of studies produced is remarkable, but so too is the lack of consensus about what constitutes a learning style and the number of different models that have been proposed. The thorough review undertaken by Coffield (2004) gives an insight into the complexity of the field. The application of learning styles knowledge to pedagogy is also a controversial matter: Coffield (2004) and Price (2004) found less evidence of usefulness of learning styles tests for education.

It is important to point out that research on the use of learning styles for education have focussed on teaching. The predominant idea has been the so-called "learning styles hypothesis", according to which instruction is best provided in a format that matches the preferences of the learner. This hypothesis has been revised and has recently been the object of strong criticism (Pashler et al. 2008). Traditionally the means to raise students' awareness of their learning styles have been tests and learning styles questionnaires (Dunn et al. 1978 Reid 1990), and most of the books on learning styles have been written for teachers (Ehrman 1996; Oxford 1990) and not for students. By contrast, the theoretical frame of the study reported in this article is learner autonomy, which stresses the importance of learners' taking responsibility for their own learning; and the study set out to explore the potential benefits of learners playing an active role in becoming aware of their own learning style. It focused not on instruction, but on learning: not on matching teaching to learning styles, but on how learners can benefit from developing an awareness of their own learning style through self-assessment.

A recent study shows (Peterson et al. 2009) that learning style researchers perceive the unreliability of learning style tests and their lack of validity as the most important weakness in this field; it also points out the dissatisfaction with "the purely positivist and experimental approach" (Peterson et al. 2009: 521). This suggests that it is important to explore different approaches to raising learning style awareness, such as self-assessment and learner autonomy.

Taking into account the questionable usefulness of learning style tests for learners, the instrument used in this study to develop awareness of individual learning styles was not based on diagnostic tools but on reflection and self-assessment supported by an eELP designed for higher education distance students working independently, without the immediate support of tutors or teachers. The eELP allowed them to reflect on their language learning process and to report on their foreign language skills.

### **3. The pedagogical context of the ELP: learner autonomy and reflection**

As previously mentioned, the basis of the ELP is the idea of autonomous learning. An early version of the idea of learner autonomy can be found in the 1970s in the work of Knowles with his definition of “self-directed learning”: “In its broadest meaning, self-directed learning describes a process in which individuals take the initiative, with or without the help of others, in diagnosing their learning needs, formulating learning goals, identifying human and material resources for learning, choosing and implementing appropriate learning strategies, and evaluating learning outcomes” (Knowles 1975: 18).

Henri Holec later provided an often quoted definition of learner autonomy as the “ability to take charge of one’s own learning” (Holec 1981: 1). Since then learner autonomy has become a widely accepted goal in different educational settings, sometimes referred to as “independent learning” or “critical thinking”. The concern for individual learner choice, control and responsibility has produced a number of influential works in this field (Benson 2001; Benson and Voller 1997; Holec et al. 1996; Nunan 1988; Wenden and Rubin 1987; White 2007). Although very little research has focused on the relation between learner autonomy and the processes of language learning (Little 2007), the theory of learner autonomy suggests that only when learners take responsibility for their own learning can the learning process develop properly, i.e. when learners actively control and construct their own learning.

There is a clear link between learner autonomy and constructivist theories of learning. Both stress the idea that knowledge is not passively received but actively constructed and built upon previous experience and knowledge. According to Bruner, learning is maximally effective when it is proactive and “given over to constructing meanings rather to receiving them” (Bruner 1986: 84). In fact David Little uses the concept of “reflective intervention”, defined by Bruner as a capacity to develop a sense of self “to control and select knowledge as needed”, to define what it is to be an autonomous learner (Little 2007: 20).

Critical reflection is fundamental to learner autonomy, as learners direct their attention to the way they learn as well as to their learning goals. Focusing on autonomous language learners, Ridley (2003) distinguishes two types of reflection: metalinguistic skills (analysing target language structures or developing control over the language produced) and metacognitive skills, which learners exercise when they “stand back and assess what they are learning and the way in which they go about it” (Ridley 2003: 78). In this study we are dealing with this second type of reflection, involving metacognitive skills.

Also within the learner autonomy framework, Wenden (Wenden and Rubin 1987) highlights the importance of the role of reflection as a process of “deconditioning”, meaning that learners have to re-examine their prejudices and preconceptions about their abilities and methods to learn a language. She stresses the importance of learners’ beliefs, and that learners need to learn to believe in their potential to learn and to manage their learning (Wenden and Rubin, 1987: 11).

#### **4. The ELP and the pedagogical function of self-assessment**

The ELP was developed between 1998 and 2000 and launched in 2001, as an application of the *Common European Framework of Reference for Languages* (CEFR; Council of Europe 2001; Schneider and Lenz, 2001). The CEFR defines communicative proficiency at six levels arranged in three bands (A1–C2) in relation to the skills of listening, reading, spoken interaction, spoken production, and writing. Following this scheme, the ELP provides an internationally recognized set of categories to describe language proficiency and to help language learners to plan, manage and assess their learning. The ELP consists of three parts: Language Passport, Language Biography and Dossier:

- The Language Passport shows the current level of the learner’s language proficiency and intercultural experience. The learner records their profile of language skills in relation to the CEFR, a summary of language learning and intercultural experiences and a record of certificates and diplomas.
- The Language Biography helps learners to document and reflect on previous language learning, intercultural experience and learning processes, to assess language skills, to set learning goals, and to plan and monitor future learning
- The Dossier contains a selection of work that in the owner’s view best represents their foreign language proficiency.

The ELP is a personal document. It is at the same time an information tool and a companion to language learning because it enables all language proficiency and intercultural experience to be presented in a comprehensible, complete and internationally comparable way. It also contains guidelines and tools for reflecting on the learning process and for planning and monitoring further learning. These are the two essential aspects of the ELP: the reporting and pedagogical function.

In its reporting function the ELP displays the user’s capabilities in relation to foreign languages and it showcases additional information such as certificates and diplomas on language learning. In its pedagogical function it is designed to make the language learning process more transparent and to help learners to develop their capacity for reflection and self-assessment. The pedagogical function has, according to Westhoff, two sub-functions: one within the cognitive domain, having to do with experiences that have contributed to language learning, and the other within the metacognitive domain, having to do with activities such as self-observation and reflection, which focus on learning to learn and learner autonomy (Kohonen and Westhoff 2001: 34). Portfolios are good tools for training metacognitive skills

in general and for structuring reflection in particular (Kohonen and Westhoff 2001; Wade and Yarborough 1996).

In relation to the ELP's pedagogical function, Kohonen has pointed out the relevance of making language learning more visible: an understanding of oneself as a language learner is essential to learner autonomy: "Without a clear awareness of what learning to learn means for [learners] in their own contexts, students may have difficulties in undertaking a conscious reflection and assessment of their language learning" (Kohonen and Westhoff 2001: 11).

Little (2005) argues that the ELP provides a means for quickly developing an autonomy culture in contexts previously dominated by traditional pedagogy. The benefits of using portfolios for self-assessment has been shown in a number of studies (Ekbatani and Pierson, 2000) and in particular the pedagogical relevance of self-assessment has been stressed, as "it promotes reflection and helps learners to take responsibility for their own learning, it enables to see gaps in their learning and enable learners to take risks" (Ekbatani 2000: 6–7).

Self-assessment in the ELP takes place not only in relation to L2 proficiency, but also in metacognitive skills, in the "ability to learn", in language learning awareness, which is mainly recorded in the Language Biography. Some validated ELPs include questionnaires that prompt learners to reflect on the way they learn but (as mentioned above) to date there has been no explicit learning styles dimension. Thus the main purpose of the new section introduced in the Language Biography of the Open University's eELP was to create a space and to provide the tools to enable learners to reflect on and assess their learning styles.

## **5. The pilot study**

### *5.1. The research questions*

In 2008 the Department of Languages at the Open University developed and piloted an eELP in order to investigate (i) the possibility of using the ELP to assess learning styles; (ii) the usefulness of self-assessment applied to learning styles; and (iii) the possible advantages of using self-assessment compared to tests.

Drawing on a theoretical approach based on learner autonomy, the specific contribution of this pilot eELP was to use explicit learning style categories and some suggested learning strategies. In the eELP's Language Biography, the section "Me as language learner" was expanded to explore the possibilities and usefulness of reflecting on and assessing individual learning styles using specific learning styles categories. Mostly open questions were used to encourage learners to reflect on their language learning and to explore the potential of the ELP for self-assessment of their learning style. A test was also used in order to compare both formats, tests and self-reflection questionnaires.

### *5.2. The eELP learning styles section*

The section "Me as a language learner" in the Language Biography started with some general questions about the approach to different dimensions of language learning, for example:

- To revise my vocabulary I ...
- To learn a grammar rule I...
- To improve my pronunciation I...

Then, after clicking on “My learning style”, students had to assess their learning style in three dimensions: sensory channel, cognitive style, and personality type. The criteria used to select these three categories were based on well-established style dimensions (Ehrman 1996; Ehrman and Oxford 1990; Riding 2002) and also on the relevance of these categories to language learning skills. After assessing their learning style in each of these three dimensions learners were presented with suggested strategies for each learning style.

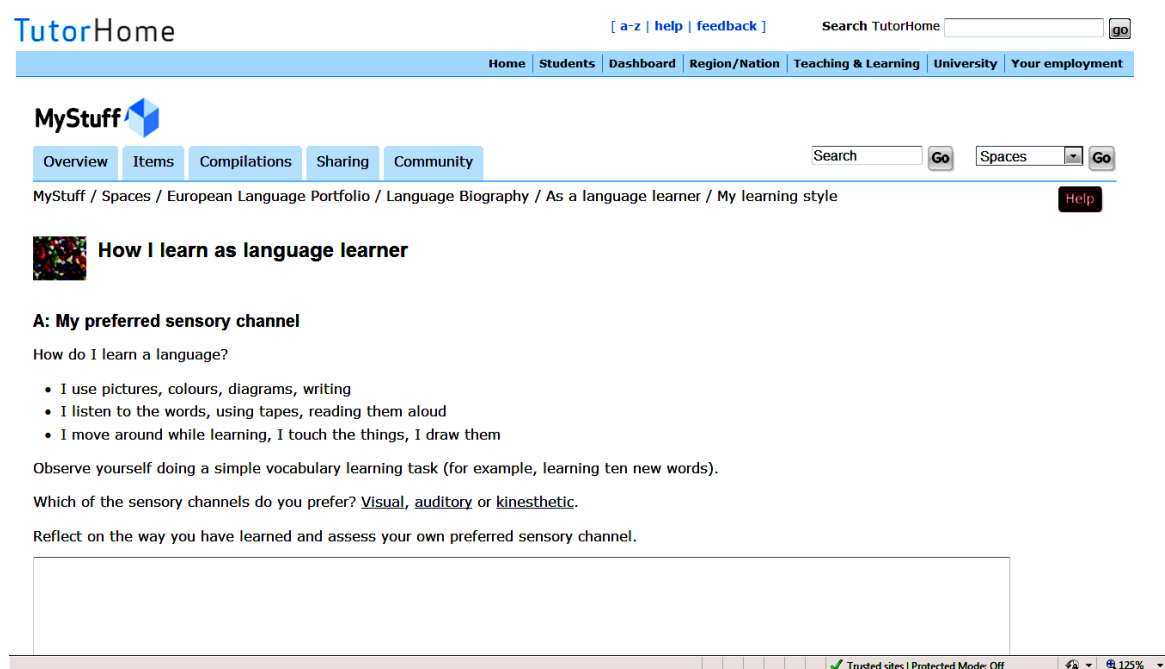
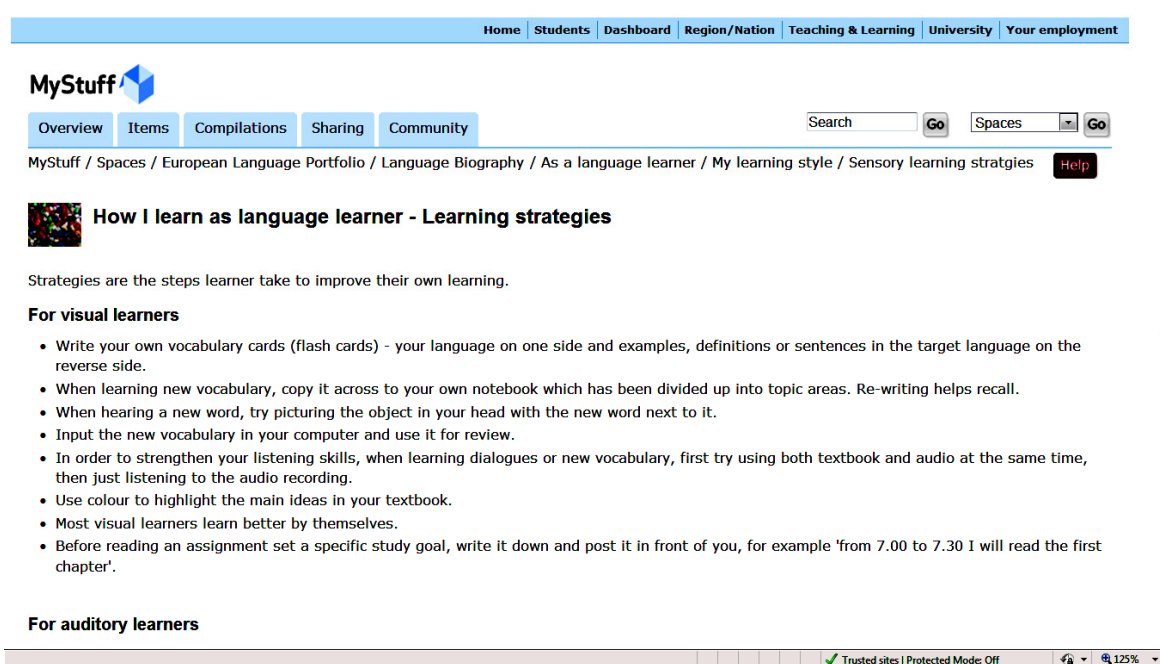


Fig. 1

5.2.1. *My preferred sensory channel.* Sensory preferences, categorized as “visual”, “auditory” and “kinesthetic”, are well-established sensory channel modalities that help to account for learning styles (Dörnyei 2005; Ehrman 1996). To help them understand the relevance of these categories for language learning, learners had to reflect on the question about which method they use when they learnt vocabulary in a foreign language (for example, ten new words). There were three suggested possibilities corresponding to the categories of visual, auditory and kinesthetic learners. Students were asked to look into their preferred ways of learning and to assess their preferred sensory channel (Figure 1). To facilitate self-assessment, examples illustrating different sensory channels were provided: “I use pictures, colours, diagrams, writing”, “I listen to the words, using tapes, reading them aloud”, etc. The

three sensory channels were also explained and different learning strategies were suggested for visual, auditory and kinesthetic learners (Figure 2).



The screenshot shows a web browser window displaying a page from MyStuff. The page title is "How I learn as language learner - Learning strategies". The content includes a sub-header "Strategies are the steps learner take to improve their own learning." followed by a section "For visual learners" with a bulleted list of seven strategies. Below this is a section "For auditory learners". The browser's address bar shows the URL: "MyStuff / Spaces / European Language Portfolio / Language Biography / As a language learner / My learning style / Sensory learning strategies". The browser's status bar at the bottom indicates "Trusted sites | Protected Mode: Off" and a zoom level of "125%".

Home | Students | Dashboard | Region/Nation | Teaching & Learning | University | Your employment

MyStuff

Overview | Items | Compilations | Sharing | Community

Search [Go] Spaces [Go]

MyStuff / Spaces / European Language Portfolio / Language Biography / As a language learner / My learning style / Sensory learning strategies [Help]

### How I learn as language learner - Learning strategies

Strategies are the steps learner take to improve their own learning.

#### For visual learners

- Write your own vocabulary cards (flash cards) - your language on one side and examples, definitions or sentences in the target language on the reverse side.
- When learning new vocabulary, copy it across to your own notebook which has been divided up into topic areas. Re-writing helps recall.
- When hearing a new word, try picturing the object in your head with the new word next to it.
- Input the new vocabulary in your computer and use it for review.
- In order to strengthen your listening skills, when learning dialogues or new vocabulary, first try using both textbook and audio at the same time, then just listening to the audio recording.
- Use colour to highlight the main ideas in your textbook.
- Most visual learners learn better by themselves.
- Before reading an assignment set a specific study goal, write it down and post it in front of you, for example 'from 7.00 to 7.30 I will read the first chapter'.

#### For auditory learners

Fig.2

5.2.2. *My cognitive style.* Cognitive styles are usually defined as an individual's preferred and habitual modes of perceiving, remembering, processing and representing information (Dörnyei 2005). Many different dimensions have been identified for this field. For the sake of simplicity only two modalities were introduced: analytical and global. Categories such as left-brain and field-independent were subsumed under "analytical", right-brain and field-dependent under "global". These choices were supported by the work of Schmeck (1988), who suggests that many of these dimensions may be correlated as different measures of one dichotomy: global/holistic and focused/detailed.

This section began with introductory questions, and then students were asked to reflect on their cognitive style and to assess it by means of the two categories named above. Both cognitive styles were explained and illustrated with examples. There was also a link to suggested learning strategies for analytical and global learners.

5.2.3. *My personality type.* This section was the only one in which a test was provided. There was a link to a short online version of the Myers-Briggs Type Indicator (MBTI) test. An introduction to this test and explanations of the four dimensions of the test (Extraversion–Introversion, Sensing–Intuition, Thinking–Feeling, Judging–Perceiving) were provided. The MBTI was chosen as several of these dimensions appear to significantly influence how students choose to learn languages, according to some research (Ehrman and Oxford, 1990;



Ehrman and Oxford, 1989). There were also some suggested strategies for each function or attitude.

Each of these sections consisted of a subsection devoted to self-checking and reflection and a subsection with suggested strategies to each style or type. Three different dimensions of learning styles were used to raise the student's awareness of the variety of factors implied in language learning and to encourage reflection on personal preferences.

The section "Me as language learner" provided not only a reflection and self-assessment tool, but also relevant information about different possibilities and ways of learning. The idea was to enable students to think and talk about their learning style and possible learning strategies, because by working on this section they learned some specific vocabulary relevant to this field.

### *5.3. Methodology*

The eELP was piloted with volunteer students of the Open University from 4 April to 30 June 2008. There were seventeen participants, eight of whom submitted a log at the end of the pilot, and there were follow-up telephone interviews with five. Most of the students had knowledge of three or more languages, so they all had experience of formal or informal language learning.

A team from the Department of Languages created a website with instructions, and work on the eELP was exclusively online. Technical support was available and the students could work autonomously on each section of the ELP.

The main purpose of the eELP pilot was to test the technical, as well as the pedagogical characteristics of the ELP. There is a report on this pilot (Jones and Goodfellow, 2008) based on quantitative and qualitative findings of the questionnaires, interviews and logs. The questionnaires were semi-structured and accessed online, with the possibility to add comments and feedback to the questions. The questions focused on the instructions and structure of the eELP, on the pedagogical usefulness of working with the portfolio and on the new sections introduced: learning styles and the Autobiography of Intercultural Encounters.

In what follows I concentrate in the findings and results relating to the pedagogical aspects of the ELP, focusing particularly on the findings of the learning styles section.

## **6. Findings of the pilot**

In this section the quantitative and then the qualitative data are presented. As it was a small scale study, the quantitative data are not very significant; however, the qualitative data collected provide very interesting insights and information about the experiences and perceptions of the participants. Accordingly I will mainly concentrate on the analysis of the qualitative findings and will quote relevant student comments on their work with the eELP.

In relation to the general questions of the online questionnaire about the value of the ELP as a learning tool, 9 out of 17 respondents (53%) said the ELP had helped them to become aware

of their skills in different languages, and 11 (65%) said the ELP had helped them to become aware of their level of proficiency in different languages. This is a particularly useful response as levels of proficiency are difficult to self-assess. In relation to the section on learning styles, 9 (56%) of the participants said the ELP had helped them to become aware of their preferred learning style. Of these 9 participants, 7 said that it had helped them to choose learning strategies. Most of the respondents (14/82%) said the explanations of learning styles and learning strategies were clear.

When asked which part of the learning styles questions they found the most useful, the results were as follows:

- 5 (38.46%) – Sensory channel
- 4 (30.77%) – Cognitive styles
- 4 (30.77%) – Personality test

One student commented: “I found them all useful in different ways.” At least three interviewees said that this section was one of the most enjoyable activities in the ELP.

More significant than the quantitative data were the qualitative data collected from the comments of the participants in their log and online questionnaire, and gathered in the telephone interviews. The qualitative data are analysed in relation to the hypothesis of the study, i.e. the pedagogical value of self-assessment in relation to learning styles and the suitability of the ELP as an instrument for this purpose.

### *6.1. Using the ELP to assess learning styles*

In relation to our initial research questions on the possibility of using the ELP to assess learning styles, more than half of the participants said that the eELP section “Me as a language learner” helped them to become aware of their learning styles, and that the experience of working online with the eELP had encouraged them to reflect on their language learning. The feedback indicates that reflecting on their learning style brought very valuable insights. One student wrote:

“I really liked analysing how I view issues as it made me think about my view of the world in general. Not just about how to learn.”

### *6.2. Usefulness of self-assessment in relation to learning-styles*

As regards the second question, the usefulness of self-assessment in relation to learning styles, after analysing the feedback and comments of the participants of the study, four main areas were identified where assessing their learning style within the eELP was perceived as useful and positive.

*6.2.1. Helping learners to understand their learning process.* Working with the learning styles sections of the eELP helped participants to understand their way of learning. It made them think retrospectively – even back to their school days – of their preferences and characteristics in learning, and in particular it helped them to become aware of their

difficulties in some aspects of language learning and even how to cope with them. Some of the comments written by the participants were as follows:

“Yes, I realised that I really don’t learn through grammar books and that I was gradually coming towards ... for example, I have Harry Potter in several different languages; I have them on DVDs and I have the books. It’s incredible how much you can learn just by having the subtitles on screen.”

“It was when you look at how you learn in different ways that I actually realised, yes I do learn better like that. For me, that’s the best way. ... It does a bit of assessment on your personality as well. It brought me out as being an introvert, which doesn’t tally with my idea of myself at all. This explains why my entire grammar school education was an absolute disaster! It was nice to know it wasn’t all my fault! It was at a time when language learning was very formal.”

“... the ‘feeling’ strategies very much rang true. The need for bonding and identification with tutors and other students helped me understand my difficulties with distance learning ...”

This feedback suggests that the learning styles sections helped the students to understand not only their way of learning, but also their past failures in language learning. This reflective process as a means of developing self-knowledge seemed to have a positive effect on their motivation for learning. This is also a good example of how reflection on one’s own learning process can produce what Wenden calls “deconditioning process” (Wenden and Rubin, 1987:11), arising from a re-examination of preconceptions about learning and abilities. Some of the students were able to define and confirm their preferred learning method, which gave them a more solid basis to plan their learning.

6.2.2. *Helping to develop learning strategies and setting learning goals.* More than half of the participants said that the eELP had helped them to become aware of their preferred learning style. Of the nine participants who answered positively, seven said that it had helped them to choose their learning strategies. Here are some of their comments:

“The section on how you learn gives much food for thought and helps you develop strategies that are stimulating and effective for your learning style.”

“I found this really useful because it focused my attention on the different strategies I have used over the years to deal with learning language.”

“It helps you identify weak areas and encourages you to develop a strategy to overcome them. The reward is being able to tick off goals as they are achieved, move on and select new objectives. You know where you are heading, which is very motivating.”

The field of learning strategies is as complex as that of learning styles, and there a large number of definitions and different classifications have been produced over the last thirty years (Cohen and Macaro, 2007). Griffiths (2008: 87) defines strategies as “activities

consciously chosen by learners for the purpose of regulating their own language learning”. In this sense learning styles and learning strategies are closely related, because to be able to choose consciously which strategies to use, learners need to be aware of their own learning characteristics and needs. The experiences of the participants in this study suggest that engaging in assessing their learning style facilitated their choice of appropriate learning strategies and was considered very useful. It also helped them to set learning targets and explore other ways of learning.

6.2.3. *Fostering self-confidence.* The knowledge of different styles that the students acquired through their experience of assessing their own learning style made some of them feel more confident and confirmed in their “non-traditional” learning styles and ways of learning. This was clearly expressed in a number of comments, for example:

“Although I was aware that I tend to learn well orally and by using the language in real situations and listening to as much as I can, it refocused me on this and helped get me out of a rut.”

“I feel surer of my preferred approach, i.e. listening, reading, watching DVDs and grabbing every opportunity to talk to native speakers rather than using formal grammar books etc.”

This feedback is evidence of the positive impact that reflection and self-awareness can have on self-confidence. The opportunities to engage with different styles and strategies made learners feel more confident in their personal way of learning, i.e. it had a direct impact on their motivation and their emotions.

6.2.4. *Acquiring metacognitive knowledge and vocabulary.* When engaging with the learning styles section of the eELP, the participants not only learned about themselves, but about learning style categories and the learning style dimension in general. They acquired some basic but fundamental knowledge about metacognitive categories and vocabulary, such as sensory channels, cognitive styles and personality dimensions. This new terminology and categories enabled students to talk about aspects of themselves and their learning in a way that was not possible before, so working with the eELP had an empowering effect.

“A target for my own learning is to take a step back and attempt to see the bigger picture rather than getting swamped by details at the outset, then using this information to work out the details of what I actually need to know at a given point”

This is an example of reflection on metacognitive knowledge, in particular in relation to global and analytical thinking. This student was applying metacognitive categories to their own learning to set learning targets.

### 6.3 *Advantages of using self-assessment instead of tests*

In relation to the third hypothesis, the possible advantages of using the ELP compared to tests, the feedback suggests that self-assessment worked better than tests. Most of the participants said that the explanations provided for learning styles and learning strategies

were clear. A very interesting finding of this study was that self-assessment, based on reflection and the explanations of different styles and strategies that we provided, was considered more useful than diagnostic tools (tests) in helping students to develop a sense of their own learning styles and strategies:

“I could use the explanations more than the questionnaires. They made me reflect more, in terms of why this is unsuitable although recommended for the answers, I have given and come to better conclusions than the system did”

Two students wrote in relation to the personality test:

“I feel it’s too much of a rough and ready tool to be much use”.

“The personality test was the least useful, as some of the analysis was conflicting!”

These comments clearly coincide with the argument that learner autonomy entails using reflective tools and self-assessment and they provide encouragement for future research in learning styles to move away from tests as an assessment model as suggested by Peterson et al. (2009).

## **7. Aspects to improve**

Taking into account the last comments about the usefulness of tests, it might be better not to include tests in the learning styles section, but to develop reflective tools based on self-assessment for all the dimensions. The inclusion of learning strategies for every learning style was considered useful, though the strategies suggested for the different dimensions were sometimes contradictory:

“Different learning styles were quite fascinating but it seemed to throw up a lot of contradictory advice on learning styles – or maybe that’s a reflection on my personality or my judgment of it! For example, as someone who prefers the auditory channel the suggestion was to work with others conversationally, whereas as an introvert, it was suggested that I’d prefer to work at home alone!”

This feedback clearly indicates that more work is needed on how to relate strategies to learning styles. One possibility would be to work further along the lines of the styles-and-strategies-based instruction developed by Cohen and Dörnyei (Cohen, 1998; Cohen and Dörnyei, 2002), including more strategies practice, where students are encouraged to experiment with strategies when performing different tasks. Another possible improvement could be to introduce a self-regulation phase where learners personalize what they have learned about strategies, evaluate them and look for ways of transferring them to other contexts.

## **8. Conclusions**

In this study the self-assessment element of the ELP was further developed and its pedagogical relevance was affirmed in relation to the metacognitive dimension of language learning. Students’ comments and feedback suggest that by working autonomously they

achieved valuable insight into their learning styles. The pilot explored the assessment of learning styles from this perspective and helped to develop a different approach to both learning styles assessment and the use of the ELP as a metacognitive tool. It also provided some confirmation of the benefits of allowing learners to actively control and construct their own learning.

By working with the eELP instead of simply taking learning style tests, students were not just labelled as, for example, “global” or “visual” learners; in order to assess their styles they had to review their learning and retrospectively consider and analyse their learning process, their successes and their failures. This reflection was highly valuable in terms of self-knowledge, planning for future learning, reconsidering preferred styles, and exploring new ways of learning. Tests cannot provide self-awareness of this kind, or the motivation that arises from actively engaging with and constructing one’s own learning.

The results of the pilot project provide a positive response to the question whether the ELP is an appropriate instrument for working with learning styles and learning strategies. The use of the eELP was positively valued by the participants. The learner autonomy approach – reflection, metacognition and self-assessment – seemed to give them valuable knowledge about themselves. It helped to make their learning transparent, gave them insight into the way they learn, increased their self-confidence, and enabled them to set learning goals.

The eELP supplied learners with a precise vocabulary for talking and thinking productively about their learning, and it encouraged them to explore other learning styles and try out alternative approaches and learning strategies. It also helped them to link their growing awareness of learning styles to past learning experiences and difficulties and to future learning targets. The use of explanations and descriptions instead of tests was positively valued.

However, the feedback suggests that the strategies associated with learning styles were sometimes contradictory and confusing, and there is a clear indication that some changes in the learning strategies sections are needed. One possible development would be to introduce more experimentation with strategies and allow students to personalize learning strategies by associating them with individual constellations of learning styles. Finally, the positive feedback suggests that more effort should be made to introduce learning styles within the ELP generally and that this section should be expanded and developed in electronic versions.

## **References**

- Benson, Phil. 2001. *Teaching and researching autonomy in language learning*. Harlow: Longman.
- Benson, Phil & Peter Voller (eds). 1997. *Autonomy and independence in language learning*. London & New York: Longman
- Brettmann, Horst, Ursula Gerling, Andreas Nieweler & Eike Thürmann. 2000. *Europäisches Portfolio der Sprachen*. Bönen: Verlag für Schule und Weiterbildung.

- Bruner, Jerome. 1986. *Actual minds, possible worlds*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.
- Coffield, Frank. 2004. *Learning styles and pedagogy in post-16 learning: A systematic and critical review*. London: Learning and Skills Centre.
- Cohen, Andrew. 1998. *Strategies in learning and using a second language*. Harlow: Longman.
- Cohen, Andrew & Zoltán Dörnyei. 2002. Focus on the language learner: Motivation, styles and strategies. In Norbert Schmitt (ed.), *An introduction to applied linguistics*, 170–190. London: Arnold.
- Cohen, Andrew & Ernesto Macaro. 2007. *Language learner strategies: Thirty years of research and practice*. Oxford: Oxford University Press
- Council of Europe. 2001. *Common European Framework of Reference for Languages: Learning, teaching, assessment*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Council of Europe. 2006. *European Language Portfolio: Key Reference Documents*. Strasbourg: Council of Europe.
- Dörnyei, Zoltán. 2005. *The psychology of the language learner*. New York & London: Routledge.
- Dunn, Rita, Kenneth Dunn & Gary E. Price. 1978. *The learning style inventory*. Lawrence, KA: Price Systems.
- Ehrman, Madeline. 1996. *Understanding second language learning difficulties*. London & New Dehli: Sage.
- Ehrman, Madeline & Rebecca Oxford. 1990. Adult language learning styles and strategies in an intensive training setting. *The Modern Language Journal* 74 (3). 311–327.
- Ehrman, Madeline & Rebecca Oxford. 1989. Effects of sex differences, career choice, and psychological type on adults' language learning strategies. *Modern Language Journal* 73 (1). 1-13.
- Ekbatani, Glayol. 2000. Moving toward learner-directed assessment. In Glayol Ekbatani & Herbert Pierson (eds.), *Learner-directed assessment in ESL*, 1–11. Mahwah, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates.
- Ekbatani, Glayol & Herbert Pierson (eds.). 2002. *Learner-directed assessment in ESL*. Mahwah, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates.
- Forster Vosicki, Brigitte. 2002. *European Language Portfolio (Higher Education)* European Language Council (ELC/CEL). Frauenfeld: Hueber.

- Griffiths, Carol (ed.). 2008. *Lessons from good language learners*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Holec, Henri. 1981. *Autonomy and foreign language learning*. Oxford: Pergamon.
- Holec, Henri, David Little & René Richterich. 1996. *Strategies in language learning and use*. Strasbourg: Council of Europe Publishing.
- Hurd, Stella. 2003. Learner difference in independent language learning contexts: Guide to good practice for learning and teaching in Languages, Linguistics and Area Studies <http://www.llas.ac.uk/resources/gpg/1573> (accessed 18/01/2007)
- Hurd, Stella & Linda Murphy (eds.). 2005. *Success with languages*. London & New York: Routledge/ The Open University.
- Integrate Ireland Language and Training. 2001. ELP. Primary. Council of Europe. [http://www.ncca.ie/uploadedfiles/Curriculum/inclusion/primary\\_elp.pdf](http://www.ncca.ie/uploadedfiles/Curriculum/inclusion/primary_elp.pdf) accessed 22.03.2012
- Jones, Jan & Robin Goodfellow. 2008. *Analysis of European Language Portfolio (ELP) template*. Milton Keynes: The Open University, Institute of Educational Technology.
- Knowles, Malcolm. 1975. *Self-directed learning: A guide for learners and teachers*. Chicago: Association Press.
- Kohonen, Viljo & Gerard Westhoff. 2001. *Enhancing the pedagogical aspects of the European Language Portfolio (ELP)*. Strasbourg: Council of Europe.
- Little, David. 2005. The Common European Framework and the European Language Portfolio: Involving learners and their judgments in the assessment process. *Language Testing* 22(3). 321–336.
- Little, David. 2007. Language learner autonomy: Some fundamental considerations revisited. *Innovation in Language Learning and Teaching* 1(1). 14–29.
- Nunan, David. 1997. Designing and adapting materials to encourage learner autonomy. In Phil Benson & Peter Voller (eds.), *Autonomy and independence in language learning*, 192–203. London & New York: Longman.
- Nunan, David. 1988. *The Learner-Centred Curriculum*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Oxford, Rebecca. 1990. *Language learning strategies: What every teacher should know*. Boston: Heinle & Heinle.
- Pashler, Harold, Mark McDaniel, Doug Rohrer & Robert Bjork. 2008. Learning styles: concepts and evidence. *Psychological Science in the Public Interest* 9 (3). 105–119.



- Peterson, Elisabeth R., Stephen G. Rayner & Steven J. Armstrong. 2009. Researching the psychology of cognitive style and learning style: Is there a really future? *Learning and Individual Differences* 19. 518–523.
- Price, Linda. 2004. Individual differences in learning: Cognitive control, cognitive style, and learning style. *Educational Psychology* 24(5). 681–698.
- Reid, Joy. M. 1990. *Learning styles in the ESL/EFL classroom*. New York: Heinle & Heinle.
- Riding, Richard. 2002. *School learning and cognitive style*. London: David Fulton.
- Ridley, Jennifer. 2003. Learners' ability to reflect on language and on their learning. In David Little, Jennifer Ridley & Ema Ushioda (eds.), *Learner autonomy in the foreign language classroom*, 78–89. Dublin: Authentik.
- Schmeck, Ronald. 1988. *Learning strategies and learning styles*. New York: Plenum.
- Schneider. Günther & Peter Lenz. 2001. *European Language Portfolio: Guide for Developers*. Council of Europe: Strasbourg.
- Wade, Rahima C. & Donald B. Yarborough. 1996. Portfolios: a tool for reflective thinking in teacher education. *Teaching and Teacher Education* 12 (1). 63–79.
- Wenden, Anita & Joan Rubin. 1987. *Learner strategies in language learning*. New Jersey: Prentice Hall International.
- White, Cynthia. 2007. Autonomy, independence and control: Mapping the future of distance language learning. In D. Gardner (ed.), *Learner autonomy 10: Integration and support*, 56–71. Dublin: Authentik.

Maria Luisa Pérez Cavana is Lecturer in German and Spanish at the Open University.

Address for correspondence: Department of Languages, Faculty of Education and Languages, The Open University, Walton Hall, Milton Keynes, MK7 6AA, UK (Tel. 0044 1908 652137; Fax 0044 1908 652187)

E-mail: [m.l.perez-cavana@open.ac.uk](mailto:m.l.perez-cavana@open.ac.uk)