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Developing the Language Learning Support Dimensions (LLSD) from research into second language acquisition and informed by the Effective Lifelong Learning Inventory (ELLI)

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1. Introduction

One of the abiding challenges for teachers is to improve ways of bringing learners into the subject and into study: enabling them to approach the particular modes of learning in ways that enhance their success. Both the literature and experience tell us that those studying a second language have some distinct and specific needs that are often not met. These have been described within a set of characteristics associated with the ‘Good Language Learner’ and have been identified and studied in numerous research studies in the field of second language acquisition over the last thirty years (Ehrman & Oxford, 1995; Dörnyei, 2005; Griffiths, 2008).

There are, of course, other ways of characterizing learners and their approaches to learning. One that has been developed and extensively trialed is the Effective Lifelong Learning Inventory (ELLI). Through a large evidence base this instrument has been demonstrated to be a robust indicator for assessing the relevant categories related to learning dispositions that can be developed to enhance capacity for learning. This inventory and its seven dimensions of learning power were developed and described in 2004 (Deakin Crick et al., 2004) and have been in constant use since.

When the seven dimensions of learning power within ELLI are considered alongside the characteristics of the Good Language Learner there appears to be common coverage. The focus of this paper is thus to explore the correspondence between these seven dimensions and the characteristics of the so-called ‘Good Language Learner’ (Rubin, 1975; Stern, 1975; Naiman et al, 1978). This paper considers the implications of the outcomes of this study particularly for empowering the new language learner.

This paper also describes an attempt to develop a tool grounded in research and useful to students beginning their learning journey in a second language. Whilst the theory of second language acquisition and learning develops becoming increasingly fine grained, the practical tools that students and their teachers have at their disposal to learn a second language are very thin on the ground. Through an exploration of two independently developed sets of concepts and ideas about learning this paper proposes a simple model that is intended to provide most effective support to second language learners, particularly at their early stages of taking up this challenge. The model does not intend to supersede or replace either of those it is based on. Rather, it intends to highlight the best areas to focus on for success through this initial stage of learning.

This paper is inspired by the original idea of the “Good Language Learner” studies that there are some characteristics, attitudes and strategy use of language learners that account for their success in language learning. It further integrates relevant findings and theory based constructs that Second Language Acquisition (SLA) research has produced over the last thirty years.

The proposed Language Learner Support Dimensions (LLSD) are framed in a learner-centered pedagogy and they aim at the development of relevant factors to increase the efficiency in language learning.

The Language Learner Support Dimensions (LLSD) are a facilitating instrument to:

1. Raise awareness of the factors that (positively or negatively) influence language learning
2. Enable individuals to reflect on their progress and development
3. Empower students to take control of their learning process

Language learning is a very complex process as clearly stated by H.D.Brown:

“Learning a second language is a long and complex undertaking. Your whole person is affected as you struggle to reach beyond the first language into a new language, a new culture, a new way of thinking, feeling and acting. Total commitment, total involvement, a total physical, intellectual, and emotional response, are necessary to successfully send and receive messages in a second language.” Brown, 2007, p.1.

While language learning materials – included the OU ones – deal with specific linguistic, cultural, and social aspects of a concrete language, other relevant aspects, such as emotion, motivation, dispositions, learner beliefs etc. are not taken enough into consideration. However the knowledge and awareness of these factors can make a difference in the experience and ability to learn a foreign language, in particular for new students.

2. *The Effective Lifelong Learning Inventory*

The Effective Lifelong Learning Inventory (ELLI) is an online inventory linking to a model of learning disposition that has seven dimensions, each with two poles. The model was developed at Bristol in the mid-2000s and the development process is described in (Deakin Crick et al, 2004).

These seven dimensions of learning power, as they referred to by Deakin Crick, are set out in Table 1 below.

| Dimension | main pole | contrast pole |
|-------------------------------|-------------------------------|-------------------------|
| Creativity | creativity | rule bound |
| Growth orientation | changing and learning | stuck and static |
| Critical curiosity | critical curiosity | passivity |
| Meaning making | meaning-making | fragmentation |
| Dependence and fragility* | dependence and fragility | resilience |
| Relationships/interdependence | relationships/interdependence | dependence or isolation |
| Strategic awareness | strategic awareness | robotic |

* We refer to ‘resilience’ rather than ‘dependence and fragility’. This is in line with practice within the *Bristol team*

Table 1, The list of the dimensions of learning power (Deakin Crick et al, 2004)

We began exploring the use of this inventory in 2008 with a pilot study involving students studying one of two contrasting subjects, arts and engineering, and of students in their first and others in their last year of study for their degree. The findings of this pilot study were encouraging and are described more fully in (Edwards & Hush, 2009). The data from the pilot study were also combined with those from the ELLI in HE project, a parallel study concluding at the same time. Together these data represented the first organized use of ELLI in higher education and the outcomes are discussed in (Small & Deakin Crick, 2008).

The ELLI tool comprises a set of online, statements and to each an individual responds how like them the statement is. The responses are taken and used to construct an individual profile, and it is this profile that forms the basis of a conversation with a mentor. An example profile is shown in Figure 1.

ELLI is designed to be a mentored instrument, and mentors undertake two days’ training. This makes them familiar with the dimensions, viewing and considering individual profiles and provides some practice and reflection on the kinds of intervention that might be used to modify an individuals’ profile. Mentoring can take place individually, or in groups. In a school environment a teacher might consider the profiles of an entire class and include some interventions in their planned lessons. In a college or university, the tutor group would be a natural place where this conversation can take place. Whilst teachers in all establishments might plan strategies that develop particular dimensions, individuals are encouraged to engage with their own profile and consider whether there are any aspects of their approaches to learning they might like to develop.

Although it is considered that some kind of planned intervention is the usual approach, sometimes the framework of dimensions and the discussion of the profile with a mentor is sufficient to clarify aspects of learning in a student's mind. The dimensions provide a language to discuss one's approaches to learning, and for many this is new and enables them to reflect on their own learning and how they can adapt.

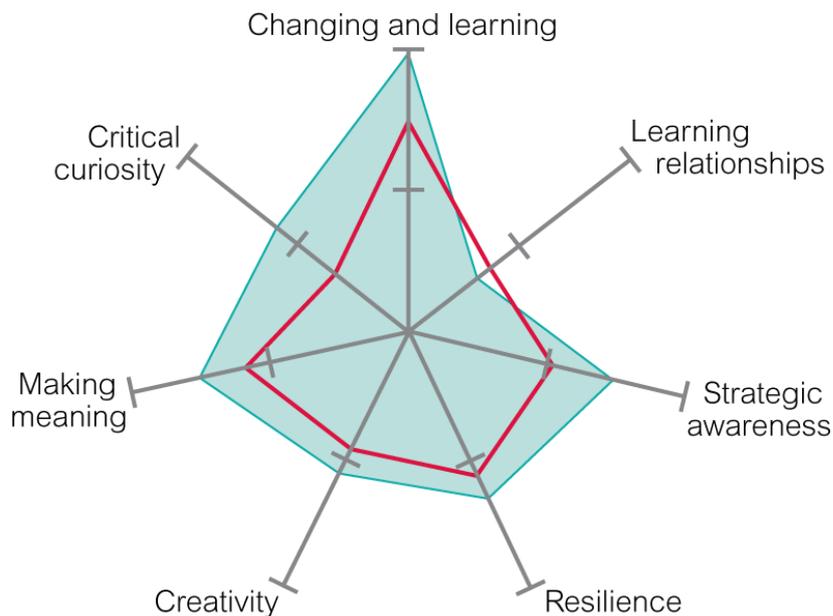


Figure 1, An example ELLI, before and after, profile. The solid line is the initial profile and the shaded shape the second profile.

3. The Language Learner Support Dimensions (LLSD)

We reviewed and analysed the main categories that according to SLA research play a fundamental role in language learning and we grouped them in five main categories (Edwards/Perez Cavana 2012). The following dimensions should not be considered as a final product but as work in process.

3.1 Willingness to communicate (WTC)

Rubin showed in her seminal study of 1975 that the use of communication strategies was one of the main characteristics of Good Language Learners: "The Good Language Learner has a strong drive to communicate, or to learn from communication. He is willing to do many things to get his message across." (Rubin, 1975, p. 46). This includes the willingness to make mistakes and even to appear foolish. She observed also that Good Language Learners used any possible opportunity to practice and use the language. The studies of Stern (1975) and Naiman et al (1978) on Good Language Learners also agreed with this characteristic: The GLL "welcomes exposure to language use in communicative situations even beyond his level of competence" (Stern, 1975, 314-315).

In spite of this early acknowledgement of the importance of this category for language learners, it was not until the 1990s that the construct "Willingness to Communicate" was developed for second language (L2) learning. It originated in first language (L1) communication studies (McCroskey/Baer, 1985; McCroskey/Richmond 1987, 1991). MacIntyre has been the main researcher to adapt this category to L2. According to his definition, WTC is "an underlying continuum representing the predisposition toward or away from communicating, given the choice" (MacIntyre et al. 2001, p.538). This category has proved to be very complex and dependent of a number of affective and social factors, such as motivation, personality, communication anxiety, intergroup motivation etc. (MacIntyre et al, 1998). Willingness to communicate has been well established in many independent studies and its relevance for language learning stressed also by Dörnyei (2005), who writes: "Additional importance is lent to the concept by the fact that it can be seen as the ultimate goal of L2 instruction – thus, WTC is a means and end at the same time. (Dörnyei, 2005, p.210).

3.2 *Ego flexibility*

This dimension refers to the role that the self, the ego, plays in learning a foreign language. The studies presented by Guiora et al. (1972), Ehrman (1996) have shown how learning a new language involves to some extent an identity conflict as language learners adopt a new identity with this new language competence. This conflict can lead to inhibition, building “sets of defences to protect the ego” (Brown, 2007, 157), but a flexible, permeable ego would enable learners to lower the defences that may prevent success.

Within this dimension, the category “Tolerance of ambiguity” (TA) plays a relevant role in relation to language learning.

This category refers to the ability to tolerate uncertainty or ambiguity. Budner (1962) has defined TA as an individual tendency to view ambiguous situations as either threatening or desirable. There are other personality variables related to language learning, such as risk-taking, sensitivity to rejection, empathy, anxiety, extroversion and self-esteem (Ehrman, M. & Oxford, R. 1995, Larsen-Freeman / Long 1991) however tolerance of ambiguity seems to be the main predictor of language success (Ely, 1989; Naiman et al. 1978; Larsen-Freeman & Long 1991, Chapelle & Roberts, 1986).

Language learning in particular for real communicative use (Ely, 1989; Ehrmann, 1996) always implies uncertainty: we do not know the exact meaning of new words, we often do not understand the exact temporal reference of a L2 verb form or we feel that we are not pronouncing a L2 sound with total accuracy. Students with low TA can find it very challenging to cope with this uncertainty and can develop negative feelings towards the language or their language learning.

According to M.Ehrman (1996, 1993) there are three levels in TA: Intake (letting new information in), Tolerance of Ambiguity Proper (Accepting contradictions and incomplete information) and Accommodation (Making distinctions, setting priorities, restructuring cognitive schemata) (Ehrman, 1996, p.119-120). A certain degree of tolerance of ambiguity is also necessary to be a “good guesser”, one of the main characteristics found in “Good language learners” (Rubin, 1975)

The concept of “ego boundaries” has also been studied by M.Ehrman (1993, 1996) in how it affects language learning. She distinguishes between “thin” and “thick” ego boundaries. According to her, “thin ego boundaries” are related to openness, vulnerability and tolerance to ambiguity and can create different pathways to success, whereas “thick ego boundaries”, associated to rigid, hard-driving, systematic, perfectionistic students, would not facilitate language learning.

This dimension is clearly related to some of the findings of the Good language learner studies in relation to the willingness to make mistakes, which is one important characteristic of learning a language. Mistakes can be considered as threats to one’s ego (Brown, 2007).

3.3 *Strategic self-regulation*

The use of Learning Strategies (LS) is one of the main characteristics of Good Language Learners. More effective learners can be distinguished from less effective learners by the number of and range of LS, by the way they apply them and appropriateness of the LS chosen (Oxford 1990, Chamot 2001).

It is not easy to define Learning Strategies as there are very different types and also a considerable amount of studies and research in this complex field. However Carol Griffiths (2008) proposes one definition based on six essential features taking into account findings of 30 years research. According to her learning strategies are ‘Activities consciously chosen by learners for the purpose of regulating their own learning’ (Griffiths, 2008), p.87).

Thus six essential features of LSs are:

1. Actions, activities (what students do)
2. Consciousness
3. Chosen by learners
4. Goal-oriented
5. LS are used to regulate or control their learning (Self-regulation)
6. Goal of LSs is facilitation of learning

Learning strategies are closely related to learner autonomy, where learners take responsibility of their own learning and they emphasize the importance of human agency: strategic behaviour involves learning decisions aimed at maximizing results.

There are different taxonomies of LSs, one of the most influential models was proposed by Rebecca Oxford (1990). She distinguishes between direct strategies, which engage with the L2 directly, such as memory,

cognitive and compensation strategies, and indirect strategies, which deal with how to learn the L2, how to seek situations to practice etc. and include metacognitive, affective and social strategies.

Oxford (2011) proposes a model of learning using LS based on self-regulation (self-management, self – adjustment). According to this model, LSs are “deliberate, goal-directed attempts to manage and control efforts to learn the L2” (Oxford, 2011, p.x). This implies that learners actively and constructively use strategies to manage their own learning.

3.4 Social Integration

In the 1990s there was a increasing interest in sociological and anthropological aspects of second language acquisition based on the work of Vygotsky (1978) e.g. (Kramsch, 1993, Lantolf/Pavlenko 1995) . This trend in using sociocultural theories has continued until now and it has been also applied in relation to the Good Language Learner studies. Norton and Toohey have introduced the social variable to study how it influences the success in language learning. According to them (Norton/Toohey, 2001) success of Good Language Learners is based on their access to a variety of conversations in their communities rather than on the basis of their control of linguistic forms. They stress the importance of the practice and the presence of co-participants more experienced in the activities. They based their work on the sociocultural approach (Rogoff, 1994) that learning and development occur as people participate in the sociocultural activities of their community and they use the notion of community of practice introduced by Lave and Wenger (1991). The importance of the social context and how the communities of practice facilitate or constrains learners’ access to the linguistic resources is completed with another element: the learner identity. The relevant role of identity for L2 has been mentioned in relation to the “Ego flexibility” dimension. In this social dimension, identity has also to do with relations of power between language learners and target language speakers. In this context the notion of investment (Angelil-Carter, 1997; Norton Peirce, 1995) seems to be relevant as it extends the notion of motivation: “when learners invest in an L2 they do so anticipating that they will acquire a wider range of symbolic and material resources, which will in turn enhance their conception of themselves and their desires for the future.” (Norton/Toohey, 2001, p. 312). The willingness to participate in communities of practice of L2 learners as well as to build social interactions seems to play a very relevant role in language learning success. Norton/Toohey (2001) used for their research study Good Languages Learners and noticed that the willingness to actively participate in communities of practice and in social interaction made a difference in greater success compared with the others. Also the ability to form and reform their identity in these contexts played a relevant role.

The concept of Social Distance is also relevant for this dimension. Social distance refers to the cognitive and affective proximity of two cultures that come into contact within an individual (Brown, 2007). Within this context Schumann (1976) proposed the hypothesis that the greater the social distance between two cultures, the greater the difficulty the learner will have in learning the second language, and conversely, the smaller the social distance, the better will be the language situation. (Brown, 2007) Based on previous research Acton (1979) developed the concept of perceived social distance, stressing the importance of how learners’ perceptions form their own reality. In his studies he found that there is an optimal personal distance that typifies “good” language learners: successful language learners see themselves as maintaining some distance between their native culture and the target culture, that means, neither too close nor too distant. (Acton, 1979, Brown, 1980).

Social integration would refer to both the willingness to participate in communities of practice and the awareness of social distance.

3.5 Creativity

Creativity is, according to Stern (1975) one of the four characteristics of the native speaker’s knowledge or competence, that also L2 speakers should aim “to approximate” (Stern, 1975), 305). Stern refers to the creativity of language use in relation to the concept of language competence:

“Competence is dynamic and active and not mechanical or static. We don’t handle our native language in a robot-like fashion as if we had swallowed a phrase book. We constantly adjust language use to novel situations and changing circumstances. We use the language for productive thinking.” (Stern, 1975), p.307).

More recent research studies have reported on the relevance of creativity for L2 (Runco, 2004; Sternberg, 2002). In particular Ottó (1998) and Albert and Kormos (2004) found a significant positive relationship between L2 and language learning success. According to Sternberg (2002) one of the main characteristics of “creative intelligence” is how well individuals can cope with relative novelty.

It is not difficult to see the link between language learning and creativity, as communicative competence often involves (role-play) situations where students need to use their imagination, and in particular within a context of communicative, learner-centred pedagogies. In spite of all this evidence, more research is needed (Dörnyei, 2005), in this field, in particular on how creativity affect which aspects of language learning.

4. LLS and ELLI

Our familiarity with the ideas of the LLS and the ELLI dimensions of learning power suggests to us that there is potentially a synergy between the two. An attempt to bring these two sets of ideas together may lead to a potential group of dimensions, particularly relevant to those studying a second language. Our first attempt at doing this is represented in Figure 2. It shows a direct mapping for just one dimension, Creativity. The remaining LLS might be expected to have a looser connection with the ELLI dimensions, with ‘willingness to communicate’ appearing to relate in some way to all the ELLI dimensions. From this initial mapping there appears to be no gaps: no dimensions in either scheme that do not connect with at least one in the other scheme. Willingness to communicate, in contrast to ‘Creativity’, would seem to link with every ELLI dimension. If the number of connections is a measure of the importance of the LLS dimension, this pattern may lead to a prioritization of the LLS. With ‘Willingness to communicate’ being the most fundamental to success in language study. ‘Ego permeability’ makes the second largest number of connections with ELLI and might be the next most important for success. ‘Strategic self-regulation’, ‘Social integration’ and ‘creativity’ following in order. This may, of course, not be the case at all and study is required to establish what correlation exists between these two sets of dimensions, and between the dimensions and measures of successful study.

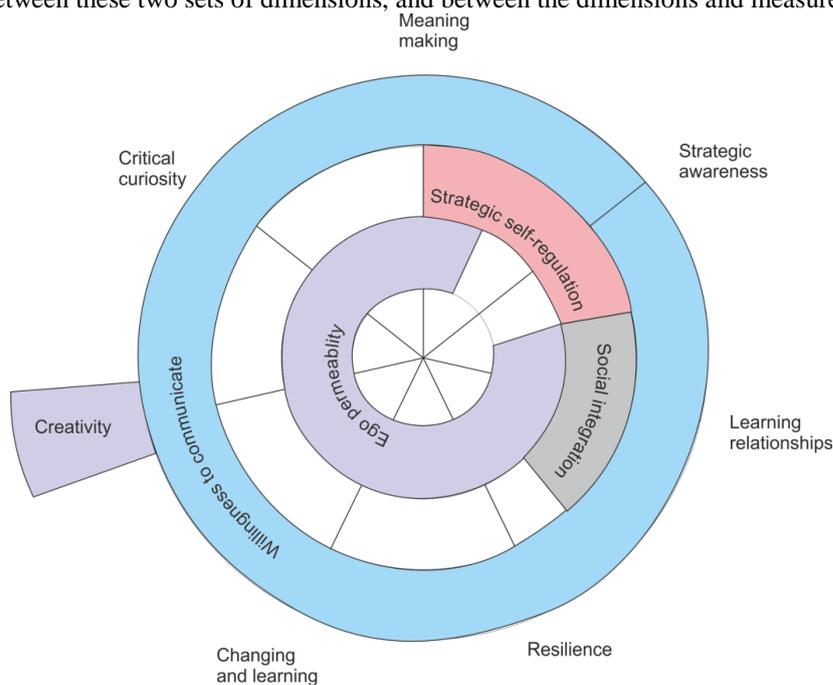


Figure 2, A first attempt at mapping the LLS against the seven dimensions within ELLI

Once we developed these dimensions the question was how to work reflectively and effectively with them. We opted to develop descriptors for each dimension to be used reflectively as self-assessment.

Each dimension was considered under the three domains proposed by Bloom et al (Bloom, Engelhart, Furst, Hill, & Krathwohl, 1956) as the three main domains involved in learning: cognitive, affective and psychomotor. These three dimensions have proved to be very useful in relation to developing descriptors of competences, for example the CARAP project has developed descriptors using the domains: knowledge, attitudes and skills for developing plurilingual and intercultural education.

In relation to the proposed LLS dimensions we developed descriptors to each dimension for Knowledge / attitudes and skills. Here is an example for Willingness to communicate. The idea behind these three elements is

that it is not only important to “know” about something, the attitude plays a fundamental role in the LLSD and so do the skills.

Here is an example (Table 2.) of descriptors for “Willingness to communicate” using the three domains:

| | Knowledge | Attitudes | Skills |
|-----------------------------------|---|---|--|
| Willingness to communicate | I know the importance of practice and communication to learn a language | I have a strong drive to communicate | I can use different strategies to get my message across |
| | I know that learning a language involves making mistakes | I have a disposition to use any opportunity to communicate in the target language | I can use different strategies to get my message across |
| | I know the importance of getting my message across | I am willing to make mistakes or even appear foolish | I can recognize that communication is more important than accuracy |
| | | I have a disposition to learn from communication | I can engage in different forms of communication |
| | | | I can cope with the idea of making mistakes and not being perfect. |
| | | | |

Table 2, An example of the initial descriptors written for the dimension willingness to communicate.

One possible way to work reflectively with these dimensions and the descriptors is to use an electronic Portfolio: as ePortfolios foster self-assessment and reflection, as well as the possibility to share and communicate with peers. Therefore, we used the ePortfolio EPOS developed by the University of Bremen to set up a self-evaluation grid where students could assess their knowledge, attitudes and skills in relation to the Language Learning Support Dimensions. The ePortfolio would enable students to get a profile of the LLSD and to set up possible learning or development targets for their language learning (Fig.3).

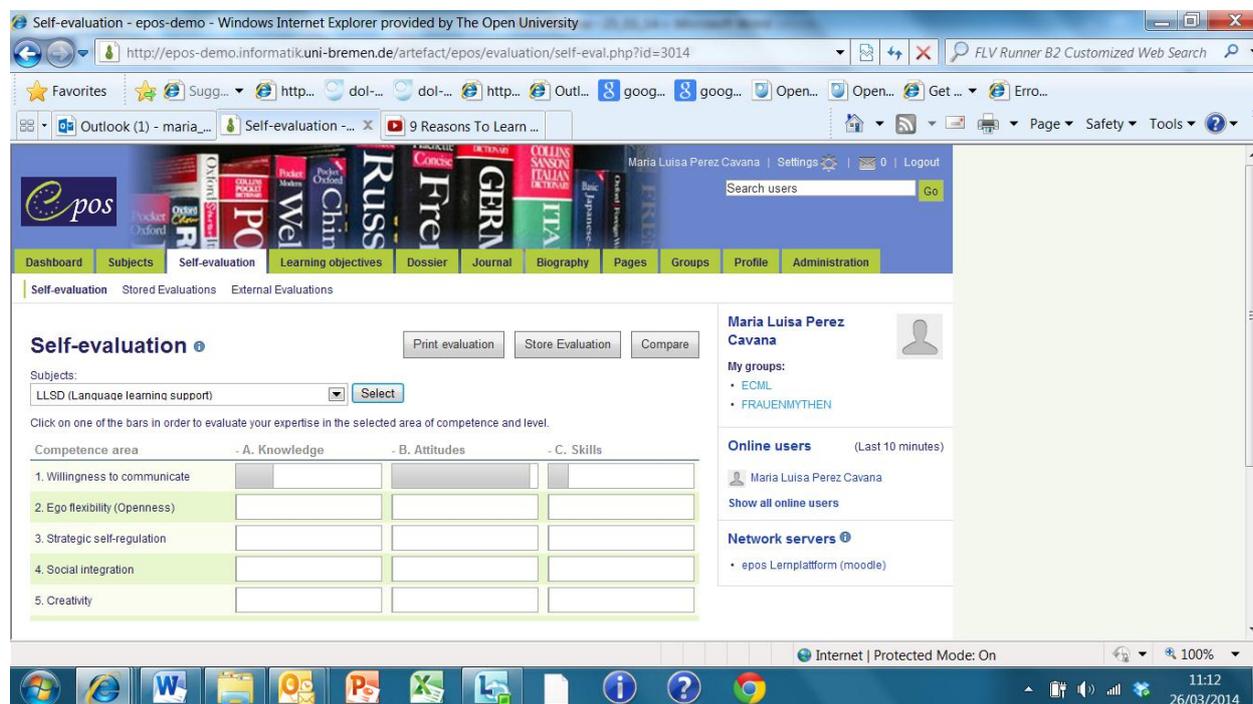


Fig. 3, Screen shot of the ePortfolio EPOS

However we realized that the LLSD descriptors were too general and that more detail and more opportunities for reflection were needed. For this reason we developed a template to assess the views, attitudes and skills of students in relation to the five Language Learning Support Dimensions and reflect on the own experience. The template consists of two parts. The first part relates to the views about the LLSD and presents a set of statements in relation to each dimension, where students can agree or disagree, e.g. “Learning a language involves making many mistakes”. The second part refers to the attitudes and skills in each dimension: “I am willing to make mistakes or even appear foolish”. In this second part students are asked to write an example of their own experience and then to reflect on how their examples demonstrate their attitude in relation to a particular dimension.¹

We have commenced a pilot study using a template we implemented using SurveyMonkey. After they have completed the online activity within SurveyMonkey, participants will complete a feedback questionnaire and then be interviewed individually about their experiences working with the Language Learning Support Dimensions.

Although this is still work in progress, we have started to get positive feedback in relation to our main hypothesis, that engaging with the LLSD increases the language awareness, and this would facilitate language learning. As the participants for our pilot are teacher students, we are also exploring the usefulness of the LLSD for teaching languages. We consider the increased awareness of an individual in the way they learn languages would have an impact in the way this individual would teach languages. In addition, the early findings in our research with teacher students also suggest the potential for application within schools.

The LLSD offer a potential and relatively simple descriptive framework to reflect, discuss and develop critical factors in learning languages and in particular to inform the learning and teaching of a second language within a higher education context. Initial considerations show there appears to be no misalignment or conflict with a successful set of generic lifelong learning dimensions.

As this data collection phase is yet to complete we can currently only report on this initial positive feedback in relation to the usefulness of the LLSD that envisages our LLSD work as promising and worthwhile to be further developed.

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¹ The idea of working with the own examples and reflect on them was inspired by the work that Maria Fernandez-Toro and Dorota Zarnowska developed for the MAGICC project in relation to Intercultural Competence.

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