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Assessing Learning Styles within the European Language Portfolio (ELP)

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This paper makes a specific contribution exploring the use of an electronic version of the European Language Portfolio (ELP) to assess learning styles. The ELP is a reporting and pedagogical tool based on the Common European Framework of Reference (CEFR) and on self-assessment. The reflective use of assessment is one of the main features of the ELP not only in relation to assessing language learning proficiency but also in relation to the learners' reflecting on their learning process.

The theoretical frame of this paper is learner autonomy. Although this learner-centred paradigm has played a major role in educational research over the last thirty years, there is still a significant gap between theory and teaching and learning practice, thus the necessity of new tools to foster learner autonomy. Learner's autonomy grows out of the individual learner's acceptance of responsibility for his or her own learning. Learners however cannot develop autonomy unless they understand their own learning process. Thus the use of reflection and metacognitive strategies are crucial in order to become an autonomous learner.

The rationale of the present study was to use a self-assessment tool, the European Language Portfolio (ELP), instead of external assessed tools (tests), to increase the student's involvement and thus the effectiveness of the process of awareness. Through the active participation of learners using metacognitive strategies, i.e. thinking about their process learning, the consequence should be higher motivation and better performance in learning.

In order to evaluate this idea, the Open University (OU) designed an eELP where a new section on learning styles and learning strategies was introduced. The purpose of this new portfolio was not only to explore the potential of an electronic portfolio, but also to develop pedagogical aspects. It was intended in particular to expand the section about learning awareness in the biography introducing some questionnaires about learning styles and information about appropriate learning strategies. Although some portfolios had already integrated general questions about individual learning, the OU eELP section "Me as language learner" was expanded to explore possibilities and usefulness of reflecting on and assessing individual learning style using specific learning styles categories. The aim was to encourage students not only to assess their learning styles but also to get awareness and information about which learning strategies were more adequate to their learning style.

The eELP was piloted with a small number of students, and experiences and feedback of the participants were collected. This paper aims to present the results of the ELP-Pilot and to examine the suitability of self-assessment in learning styles compared to other traditional evaluation modes.

As it was a small scale study the results are not representative from a quantitative point of view, but they are significant from a qualitative point of view, as they provide an insight in ways of improving learning based on learner autonomy. The results also show how learner styles awareness and learner autonomy are interrelated.

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Introduction

There is an enormous interest in the subject of learning styles within pedagogy which has produced innumerable studies over the last three decades. Not only the amount of literature produced is remarkable, but the lack of consensus about what is a learning style and the number of different models are also characteristic of this fascinating field. The thorough review undertaken by Coffield (2004) may give an insight into the complexity of the field. The application of learning styles knowledge to pedagogy is also a controversial matter. Colfield (2004) and Price (2004) found less evidence of usefulness of learning styles tests for education.

It is important to point out that research and studies 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).

The theoretical frame of this paper is learner autonomy, which aims to study the relevance of learning styles within education, and in particular its usefulness for language learning,. The stress is not set on instruction, but on the learner, not in how teaching has to match learning styles, but in how learners can develop awareness of their own learning style through self-assessment. Traditionally the means to raise students’ awareness of their learning styles have been tests and learning styles questionnaires (Dunn *et al.* 1975; Reid, 1990) and most of the books on learning styles have been written for teachers (Ehrman, 1996; Oxford, 1990) and not for students.

The instrument used in this study to develop self-assessment and awareness of individual learning styles was an electronic version of the European Language Portfolio (ELP). This eELP was designed for higher education distance students working independently, meaning without the support of tutors or teachers. The eELP allowed them to reflect on their language learning process and to report on their foreign language skills.

The following section will present some of the main features of learner autonomy.

Learner autonomy and the role of reflection

An early version of the idea of learner autonomy can be found in the 1970's 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, 1976,18)

An often quoted definition of learner autonomy was provided later by Henri Holec as the "ability to take charge of one's own learning" (Holec, 1981, 1). Since then the term learner autonomy has developed into 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 (Holec *et al*, 1996; White, 2007; Nunan, 1988; Benson, 2001; Benson & Voller, 1997; Wenden & Rubin 1987). Although very little research has focused on the relation between learner autonomy and the processes of language learning (Little, 2007), the learner autonomy theory suggests that only when learners take the responsibility of their own learning, can the learning process develop properly, i.e. when learners actively control and thus 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 build upon previous experiences and knowledge. According to the psychologist 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 an autonomous learner (Little, 2007, 20).

Critical reflection represents a fundamental element to foster 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 when learners “stand back and assess what they are learning and the way in which they go about it” (Ridley, 2003, 78)

Also within the learner autonomy framework Wenden (1987) highlights the importance of the role of reflection as a process of “self-deconditioning”, meaning that learners have to re-examine their prejudices and preconceptions about their abilities and ways to learn a language, she stresses as well the importance of learners’ beliefs: learners need to learn to believe in their potential to learn and to manage their learning. (Wenden, 1987, 12).

Self-awareness and metacognition can therefore be considered as core concepts for this study as the purpose of the introduction and pilot of the learners styles section in the eELP was to explore the usefulness and experiences of learners by self-assessment and reflection on their learning styles.

Learning styles and learning autonomy have been linked in a number of studies (Nunan, 1997; Hurd, 2003; Hurd & Murphy 2005). Nunan describes the awareness of individual learning styles as the first step towards learner autonomy. This paper focuses on another aspect of this relation between learning styles and learner autonomy: how learner autonomy can help develop methods to assess learning styles, and this way it illustrates the interdependence of learner autonomy and learning styles awareness (Fig.1).

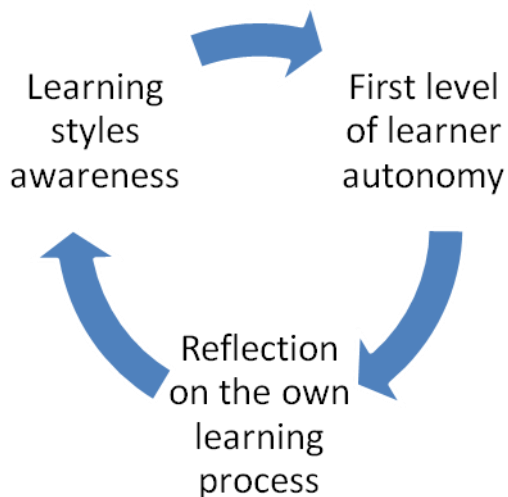


Fig.1

The following section will discuss how the ELP is an adequate instrument to develop this interrelation.

The ELP and self-assessment

The European Language Portfolio was developed between 1998 and 2000 and launched in 2001 as an application of the Common European Framework of reference (CEFR) (Schneider /Lenz, 2001). This Common Framework defines communicative proficiency at six levels arranged in three bands (A1-C2) in relation to the five skills: listening, reading, spoken production, spoken interaction and writing.

Within this framework the ELP provides an international 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: Passport, Biography and Dossier.

- The language passport shows at a glance the current level of language proficiency and intercultural experience. The learner records his/her 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 Biography helps learners to document and reflect on previous language learning, intercultural experience and learning processes, to assess the language skills, to set learning goals and to plan and monitor future learning
- The Dossier contains selection of work that in the owner's view best represents his/her 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 the pedagogical function.

The reporting function the ELP displays the learner capabilities in relation to foreign languages. It presents additional information to certificates and diplomas about language learning experience.

The pedagogical function 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-funtions: one within the cognitive domain (experiences that have contributed to the foreign-language acquisition) and the other within the metacognitive domain (activites aiming at learning to learn and learner autonomy; such as self-observation and reflection) (Kohonen/Westhoff, 2001,34). Portfolios are good tools for training metacognitive skills in general and for structuring reflection in particular (Kohonen/Westhoff, 2001, Wade/Yarborough, 1996).

Kohonen has pointed out the relevance of making language learning more visible because an understanding of oneself as a language learner is essential for promoting 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/Westhoff, 2001,11).

Also Little (2004) states that the ELP provides a means for quickly developing an autonomy culture in contexts previously dominated by traditional pedagogy. Portfolios have been described as an ideal tool for self-assessment (Hirvela / Pierson, 2000). The ELP is based on self-assessment, that means that “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 the language skills, but also in metacognitive skills, in the “ability to learn”, in language learning awareness, which is mainly recorded in the “Biography”.

For this reason, to increase the visibility of language learning, I argue that the eELP is an ideal instrument for raising awareness in learning styles and strategies.

Assessing Language Styles within the OU electronic ELP

The context

The Department of Languages of the Open University (OU) developed and piloted in 2008 an electronic version of the Council of Europe’s European Language Portfolio (ELP).

Some ELPs had already integrated some general questions about the own way of learning within the Biography. For example the Irish, German and Swiss portfolios (Forster Vosicki, 2000; Brettman *et al*, 2000).

The specific contribution of this eELP was to use explicit learning style categories and learning strategies. In the Biography of the eELP the section “Me as language learner” was expanded to explore possibilities and usefulness of reflecting on and assessing individual learning styles using specific learning styles categories, based on learner autonomy theories. The pedagogical concept of this section drew also on the approach called “Styles- and Strategies-Based Instruction” (SSBI) developed by Cohen and Dörnyei (Cohen, 1998; Cohen & Dörnyei, 2002) to assist learners to develop an awareness of their learning style, to determine the nature of their current learner strategy repertoire and to complement their strategy repertoire with additional strategies that match their styles. This approach was adapted into an online tool, the eELP, and into the circumstance that the participants were working on their own, without the guidance of a teacher.

Although it is well known that learners differ in their ways of learning, the field of learning styles is extremely complex, and moreover, as shown in the study by Price (2004) the value of learning style tests is limited.

Tests as external tools might not have significant impact in the learning awareness of the students. To improve the effectiveness of learning styles knowledge, the input, the motivation should come from the learners. From the point of view of learner autonomy the interest to know their learning styles, that is, the use of metacognitive knowledge is the responsibility of students. Therefore learners should be given the tools to understand better how they learn in order to be able to choose and develop specific learning strategies, as well as trying other learning styles. Except for the personality dimension, the method provided to the students to assess their learning style within the eELP was based on reflection and self observation. The purpose of using a mixture of tests and open questions was to explore the potential of self-assessment and reflection in evaluating learning styles and the reactions of the students.

The eELP Learning Styles section: “Me as language learner”

The section “Me as a language learner” in the Biography, started with some general questions about the way students learn, here learners had to complete sentences about how they learn a language, 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 & Oxford 1990; Riding 2002), and also the adequacy to language learning skills.

A. The first section: My preferred sensory channel

Sensory preferences categorized as “visual”, “auditory” and “kinesthetic” are well established sensory channel modalities to account for learning styles (Ehrman, 1996; Dörnyei, 2005). In order to present clearly 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 possibilities suggested 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.

To facilitate self-assessment examples illustrating different sensory channels were provided: “ I use pictures, colours, diagrammes, 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.

B. 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. Under analytical were subsumed categories such as Left-brain and Field-independent. Under global, Right-brain and Field-dependent. 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.

In this section there were introductory questions and then students were asked to reflect on their cognitive style 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.

C. 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 test. An introduction to this test and explanations to 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 & Oxford, 1990; Oxford & Ehrman 1988). There were also some suggested strategies for each function or attitude.

Each of these sections consisted of one part for self-checking and reflection and one part with suggested strategies adequate 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 the different possibilities and ways of learning. Students learned by going through this o some specific vocabulary to talk about their learning style and possible learning strategies.

The eELP pilot

Methodology

The electronic ELP was piloted with volunteer students of the Open University from 04/04/08 until 30/06/08. There were seventeen respondents, eight participants submitted a log at the end of the pilot and there were follow-up telephone interviews with five participants.

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

The purpose of the pilot was to test the technical as well as the pedagogical characteristics of the ELP. There was a report on this pilot (Jones & Goodfellow, 2008) based on quantitative and qualitative findings of the questionnaires, interviews and logs. In following I will concentrate in the findings and results relating to the pedagogical aspects of the ELP and in particular I will focus on the feedback on the learning styles section. As it was a small scale study, the quantitative data is not very significant, however the qualitative data collected provide very interesting insights and information about the experiences and opinions of the participants. Therefore I will concentrate on the qualitative findings and I will quote relevant comments and feedback of the students by working with their eELP.

Findings of the pilot

(65%) of the students said that the experience of working online with the eELP had encouraged them to reflect on their language learning. To follow up on how the ELP helped participants with their language learning, interviewees were asked whether it helped with any specific aspects of their learning. (Q2.4.) The comments made suggest that it helped two of the interviewees by encouraging them to reflect on how they learn:

“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 feedback points out that reflecting on their learning style brought very valuable insights. It helped understand their way of learning and also past failures in language learning. This is also a good example of how reflection on the own learning process has produced what

Wenden (1987) called: “self-deconditioning”; where learners have re-examined their preconceptions about their learning and abilities.

56% of the participants said that the ELP had helped them to become aware of their preferred learning style. Of the nine participants who had answered positively, seven said that it had helped them to choose learning strategies. Below is some associated feedback.

“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”

The possibility to reflect on their learning was also positively valued:

“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”

“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.”

One interesting outcome was that Some students felt more confident and reaffirmed in their “non traditional” learning styles and ways of learning

“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 suggests some evidence of the positive effects that reflection and self-awareness has for language learning: The possibility offered in this portfolio to be confronted with an array of different but equally good styles and strategies made learners feel more confident in their personal way of learning, i.e. it had a direct effect in their motivation and their emotions.

However 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 was a clear indicator that there is some more work needed in strategies and the relation between learning styles and strategies. One possible direction to develop would be to work further on a similar line as the Styles- and strategies-based instruction in order to integrate more strategies practice, that is, where students are encouraged to experiment in different tasks with strategies. Another possible improvement could be to introduce a personalization phase of strategies (Cohen, 2002) where learners personalize what they have learned about strategies, evaluate them and look to ways that they can transfer the use of these strategies to other contexts.

14 (82%) said the explanations of learning styles and learning strategies were clear. Some of the feedback points out that the explanations on different styles and strategies were more useful than the diagnostic tools (tests) in helping people 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"

This is another interesting finding indicating the effectiveness of using reflecting tools and self-assessment.

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

5 (38.46%) Sensory channel

4 (30.77%) Cognitive styles

4 (30.77%) Personality test

The following comment was made:

"I found them all useful in different ways"

Working with the learning styles section helped students to understand why they have some difficulties in language learning and even how to cope with them

..."the 'feeling' strategies very much rang true. The need for bonding and identification with tutors and other students helped me understand my difficulties with Lyceum on course L231..."

It also helped them to set learning targets and explore other ways of learning,

“Helped focus on the best and most stimulating ways for me to learn. This in turn made language learning more fun”

“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”

Conclusions

The pilot of the electronic ELP produced interesting and positive results in relation to the question whether this tool is an adequate instrument to work with learning styles and learning strategies.

The use of the ELP was positively valued by the participants. The learner autonomy approach: reflection, metacognition and self-assessment, seemed to bring for students valuable knowledge about themselves. It helped learners to understand the way they learn, to make transparent their learning and to feel surer in their own style.

The ELP also provided a tool where learning styles awareness can be linked to past learning experiences – difficulties – and to future learning targets. It helped students to feel more confident with their style and thus enhanced their motivation for language learning.

It supplied learners with precise vocabulary to talk and to think productively about their learning and it incited learners to explore other learning styles and to try other ways and other learning strategies. The use of explanations and descriptions instead of tests, was positively valued.

However the feedback suggests that the strategies for learning styles was contradictory and confusing and there is a clear indication that some changes in the learning strategies sections are needed. One possible development of this aspect would be to introduce more experimentation with the strategies and the possibility to personalize learning strategies according with individual constellations of learning styles.

The major challenge in these questions is how to adapt this to an autonomous learning within an online learning environment.

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