



Pädagogisches Institut der Stadt Wien  
Burggasse 14-16  
1070 Wien

[www.pi-wien.at](http://www.pi-wien.at)

Bericht über die  
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vorgelegt von Dr. Carol Morgan, University of Bath  
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Weiterführende Informationen bei  
Mag. Christa Schubert, [c.schubert@m56ssr.wien.at](mailto:c.schubert@m56ssr.wien.at)  
und  
Mag. Claudia Valsky, [c.valsky@m56ssr.wien.at](mailto:c.valsky@m56ssr.wien.at)



UNIVERSITY OF  
**BATH**

Department of Education

**THE  
PÄDAGOGISCHES INSTITUT IN  
VIENNA**

**EVALUATION REPORT**

**THE EUROPEAN LANGUAGE  
PORTFOLIO PROJECT**

# Evaluation of the European Language Portfolio project co-ordinated by the Pädagogisches Institut in Vienna

## The European Language Portfolio

The European Language Portfolio (ELP) represents the most recent innovative assessment instrument from the Council of Europe in its Common European Framework of Reference (2000). The portfolio was originally conceived at the 1991 symposium in Rüschiiken, Switzerland on 'Transparency and coherence in language learning in Europe: objectives, evaluation, accreditation'

The ELP has three components:

- a language passport (or overview of learning);
- a language profile (of languages learnt);
- a dossier of chosen pieces of work.

Each country or institution can produce its own core document with customised detail to fit its own particular context, but this must be ratified by the Council of Europe before having international validity.

It seems sensible before embarking on an analysis of the empirical research collected for this evaluation to report on other ELP evaluations and to examine the claims made for the benefits of the ELP and to analyse ELP implementation successes and problems.

Prior to its launch in the European Year of Languages (2001), the ELP was piloted in fifteen different European countries and evaluations of these pilots appear in *Babylonia* 1 & 4 (2000) as well as elsewhere. There has been considerable interest in the portfolios for many reasons including:

- allowing for a set of common European language descriptors;
- appearing to accommodate the plurilingualism which is characteristic of many learners in Europe (and likely to be more so in the future);
- allowing for a more learner-centred approach to assessment;
- providing a document which is suitable for the lifelong learner and which can accommodate both inside and outside school accomplishments and both linguistic and cultural dimensions.

It should also be noted that the Council of Europe's previous work on language descriptors (van Ek and Trim, 1984) had a wide ranging impact in encouraging a notional-functional approach. It seems likely that the current team work in Strasbourg will have a similar long-term impact.

Most reports on the ELP focus on its two functions: reporting and pedagogic (eg Christ, 1998; Dobson, 2000; Lenz and Schneider, 2002; Little 2002) seeing these two functions as co-existing peacefully. In fact Little goes so far as to say that "the ELP is likely to fulfil its reporting function to the extent that it also fulfils its pedagogical function" (2002: 186). However, Dobson does also point to some potential tension between the two (2000: 205). This "function" distinction though does not always address some of the more complicated issues at stake so in this analysis three dimensions have been incorporated instead:

- the ELP as an "assessment" tool;

- the ELP as a “learning” tool, and
- the ELP and its contexts.

### **An assessment tool**

The ELP is clearly grounded in an assessment framework as it is presented as the major means of operationalising the new six-level scale of descriptors presented in the Council of Europe common reference levels. “Learning”, “Teaching” and “Assessment” are all included in the framework title so the message is clear here.

What is not so clear are the status of the “assessment”, the relationship of self-assessment to official/formal assessment and the relationship of formative to summative assessment. (These two latter sets do not always coincide). There seem to be several responses to resolving the tensions here:

- one response is to just accept the ELP as a kind of exam, a summative document. Little, for example, in his overview of the ELP suggests "self assessment... performs much the same function as an exam at the end of a phase of learning" (2002: 186). There is also some implication that the ELP will be similar to "official" recognition [i.e. officially recognised assessment] in the original Council of Europe descriptions of the portfolio (1998: 107), since here the comments on official recognition of partial competence for example actually appear in the short section devoted to the portfolio. Also the comments on assessment in general in the Council of Europe document refer to all the elements that the ELP incorporates: plurilingual/pluricultural skills; partial competence; separate recognition of the four skills; informal and formal learning experiences. In one sense of course the ELP can be taken as an official document since it will contain officially externally validated work in its dossier section. Hodel (a teacher of French in Switzerland) for example, describes a seemingly unproblematic system of using the ELP for all grading, including using the "in-between" grades available on the web ([www.unifr.ch/ids/portfolio/deskriptoren](http://www.unifr.ch/ids/portfolio/deskriptoren) 2000: 41);
- another response is to view the ELP as definitely not an exam. Gyöngyösi and Tóthné, teaching Slovak in a Hungarian primary school, for example, state that the ELP “is certainly different from a language exam certificate” (2000: 62) Perclová makes a similar suggestion in a Czech context: "self-assessment [as in the ELP] complements teachers' assessment and does not substitute for it” (2000:50). Oscarson in a Swedish context points to the responsibility of teachers (not pupils) in giving summative feedback (2000:19). Fehlmann in the context of a French vocational school is certain of the non-summative status of the ELP: “Ce n’est ni une méthode d’apprentissage, ni un examen” (2000:21). Jones (himself a member of the University of Cambridge Local Examinations Syndicate) points out the need to balance what he calls "the descriptive approach -even where based on empirical evidence" (as seen in the ELP and the "can do" statements trialled by the Association of Language Testers Across Europe/ALTE) with more formal examination assessment (2002: 182). Sometimes this rejection of the ELP as a summative document is expressed negatively. Alkema et al in their evaluation of a large Dutch pilot scheme comment that “on average both teachers and representatives of potential employers and educational institutions for continuing education are negative about the validity of the Dutch version of the ELP for assessing skills in foreign languages” (2000: 69);

- another response is somehow to denigrate “official” summative assessment techniques. This seems to be the implication in the critiques of existing assessment arrangements and the promotion of self-assessment in the original Council of Europe document. The two following comments seem to suggest that competitive assessment is less worthy of consideration: “Research suggests [no referencing here] that provided ‘high stakes’ are not involved [e.g. screening for acceptance onto courses], self assessment can be an effective complement to tests and teacher assessment”; “if a set of scaled levels of proficiency are to serve as objectives rather than just as an instrument for screening candidates into grade groups” (1988: 151 and 120).. The reality that many teachers experience is that learners are precisely interested in “high stakes” and “grade groups” and are not interested in activities that do not relate to these. Here the laudable ideal of educational improvement seems to have replaced the utilitarian reality present in many educational establishments.

Much of the difficulty in establishing the status of the ELP hinges on the validity of self-assessment and its credibility as an assessment tool. Clearly the ‘dossier’ section of the ELP can provide externally authenticated validation of language skills. It is in the “biography” section with its list of “can do” statements that more problems can occur. These problems include the following:

the acceptability of the ELP to businesses and HE institutions;  
 the accuracy of self assessment;  
 the validity of "can do" statements;  
 learners’ understanding of grade descriptors.

### *Acceptability*

Those writers who do comment on the currency of the ELP in the world beyond the educational institution generally make negative comments about the self-assessment aspects. Thus Dobson (2002) compares the ELP to the National Record of Achievement portfolio “[which] has experienced some difficulty in gaining acceptance across a wide range of users, particularly with employers and higher education. The ELP will similarly have to establish itself as a currency” (p. 205). The *language learning ladder* research by the Nuffield Foundation in its overview of different qualifications similarly did not categorise the ELP as being either “valid” or “reliable” or having clear quality assurance (2002: 20). Little suggests that there was considerable anxiety in the ELP pilot projects about its professional acceptability, with teachers and learners asking “for professionally validated evaluation tools and transparent links between the ELP and national exams and diplomas” (2002: 184). Lenz (2000b) also points to the questioning of the usefulness of the ELP by Swiss vocational schools given its lack of credibility, existing international qualifications and the questionability of self assessment: “Eine Frage nach dem zukünftigen ‘Verkehrswert’ des ELP in der Bildungslandschaft und in der Arbeitswelt” (p. 27). This is reiterated in a later description of the Swiss project: "the unclear status of the ELP...doubts about its future value on the labour market" (Lenz and Schneider, 2002: 80

On the positive side there is some reporting of the usefulness of the dossier in the context of refugee students in Ireland for providing evidence of language skills (Simpson and Little, 2000)), and in a later description of this project for providing access to vocational courses and improving refugees' self-esteem (Little et al, 2002). The reference scales common across European countries in general were also deemed useful by business representatives in a French vocational context (Fehlmann, 2000).

There is, then, some problem with the face validity of the ELP in the world beyond school which may be resolved in time or which may require adaptation of the ELP itself.

#### *Accuracy*

Accounts here are also mixed. Some writers claim that self-assessment statements reflect more or less teachers' judgements (eg Halberstadt, 2000, Oscarson, 2000). Others are much more sceptical (eg Blue, 1988; Alderson and Banerjee, 2001, Jones 2002), Alderson & Banerjee mention particularly the "acquiescence effect" (responding positively regardless) and "overestimation" (2001: 228). Reporting inaccurately may be linked to age or proficiency. For example, Broeder in a Dutch primary context suggests that: "the teachers ... were not sure that the [young] children were able to give a correct self-judgement of their language proficiency ... The children claimed to have learned something from working with the language portfolio [but] this is questioned by their teachers" (2000:72). Oscarson (2000) in his Swedish context points to research that suggests that it is abler students who are more able to self-assess (2000:21). Jones (2002) also suggests that school-children are more likely to misfit in their judgements. However he does not attribute this to a poor ability to self-assess (in younger adults/children) but rather to inappropriate descriptors: "The 'can do' statements chiefly concern ability to operate in an adult world and refer to tasks which children of school age would probably have had no experience of" (p. 180). Little recognises this concern over accuracy (and possible overstatement of achievements) but suggests that this can be resolved by cross checking pupils' statements with the evidence in their dossiers. These anxieties about accuracy clearly form part of the problem of the external acceptability of the ELP.

#### *Validity of "can-do" statements*

Again, here views are mixed. Some writers are convinced that learners should be able to identify what it is they can do. Kohonen (2000b) from his Finnish context, for example, suggests that "students are more likely to know what they can do with the target language in concrete situations and tasks ... The functional 'can do' statements are thus more natural [sic] to begin with" (2000: 16-17; see also Little 2002). The Council of Europe of Framework document also points to the desirable positive element of "can do" formulations (1998: 120-21), and this positive aspect was also highlighted by teachers in the Swiss project (Lenz and Schneider, 2002:70). However, Alderson and Banerjee (2001), in their overview of testing and assessment in general, question the effectiveness of "can-do" statements as descriptors. They point to research that shows that "learners were more able to identify what they found difficult to do in a language than what they found easy". They conclude: "therefore, 'can-do' questions were the least effective question type" (p. 228).

Thus, although using "can-do" statements has become popular as a way of categorising outcomes, this may not always be a helpful framework. The Council of Europe document does recognise some concern here but suggests that positive wording is an overriding consideration: "It is more difficult to formulate proficiency at low levels in terms of what the learner can do rather in terms of what they can't do, but ... positive formulation is desirable" (1998: 120-121).

#### *Learners' understanding of descriptors*

While on the one hand the comprehensiveness and trans-national nature of the descriptors is welcomed by many (eg. Lenz 2000b; Fehlmann, 2000; Lenz and Schneider, 2002; Little, 2002) there are also suggestions that there may be descriptor problems with certain groups of

ELP users. Dobson explains this terminology problem clearly: “The internationally comprehensible and rigorously drafted descriptors of language performance of the CEF [Council of Europe Framework] are needed for comparison across national frontiers. However, these may not be ‘user friendly’ for younger or inexperienced learners”. (2000:205). Examples of problems with descriptors are found in the descriptions of the different European pilot projects. For example, Schneider (2000) suggests that some teachers in early Lower Secondary classes had problems with descriptors (see also Lenz 2000b). For primary pupils Broeder suggests that the instructions and statements in the language biography were too difficult to understand because of difficult terminology and overlong sentences (2000:71). Tagliante (2000) in her French primary context suggests that she needed to turn the descriptors in the ELP into concrete communicative tasks in order for her pupils to be able to understand them (p. 57).

There are, then, several problematic areas related to the language biography/self assessment section of the ELP. However, many other aspects of the assessment framework, which underpin the ELP, are welcomed without reservation.

### **Plurilingualism**

We have already mentioned the welcoming of the transferability of the ELP across different European countries because of the common reference levels. Linked to this is the capacity of the ELP to celebrate plurilingualism (Halberstadt 2000 sees this as its "political" role). The portfolio can contain heritage, regional and foreign languages as Halberstadt points out (2000: 39) and can be particularly suitable for bilingual or multilingual students. Lenz for example, comments that in a Swiss context: “zwei und mehrsprachige Jugendliche – besonders auch Migrantenkinder – es richtig-gehend geniessen zu zeigen, was sie alles können, was sonst von Schule und Mitschülern selten genug positiv wahrgenommen wird” (2000b:26), Here, then the non-native speaker is seen in a different light. Clément (2000) in a French context offers some useful advice in operationalising linguistic and cultural awareness (by using the languages and cultures of the pupils themselves and by encouraging the sharing of out-of-school experiences of different languages and cultures). Broeder, (2000) comments on similar experiences in a Dutch context: "the multilingual children were put in the spot-light [sic] [showing] how they could teach their peers something about their own language and culture. According to the teachers this was very good for their self-confidence" (p. 72). Simpson and Little similarly point to the benefits of the ELP in establishing linguistic identity for refugees in Ireland: “[The ELP] helps many refugees to come to terms with their linguistic identity for the first time ... In particular it helps them to understand that proficiency in languages other than English can enhance their career prospects in Ireland” (2000: 67).

However, plurilingualism does not feature strongly in the descriptions of the ELP from the pilot projects, or in the Vienna pilot, perhaps because the pilots are likely to take place in single schools or in single foreign language departments. In order to strengthen this aspect of the ELP it will be necessary for the ELP to be used across departments in school as well as accommodating other languages outside school.

One aspect of plurilingualism mentioned in the original Council of Europe document (1998) seems more difficult to accommodate. There is a suggestion that there is a global plurilingual/pluricultural competence that goes beyond the “collection of distinct and separate competences” of knowing different languages (p. 96). This notion of an overarching competence is also backed up by research on bilingualism (see Baker, 2001). However there is little suggestion in the CEF as to how this overarching competence might either be represented or assessed. Given the increasing number of multilingual students this seems an important competence to be able to assess and one which the flexibility of the ELP could, perhaps, accommodate. However, research is needed in this area.

### **Kinds of Assessment**

Other benefits of the underpinning assessment framework relate to its capacity to embrace a wider range of information and types of learning than is normally available in more traditional forms of assessment. Fehlmann (2000) for example, comments on the usefulness of the wide range of competences made available in a vocational context by ELP entries: “Ces possibilités ne sont offertes par aucune validation reconnue” (p. 23). In the original Council of Europe document much is made of the differences between achievement and proficiency assessment, between formal and informal achievements and of the importance of lifelong learning. There are new ways of thinking about learning and it is useful to have a flexible form of assessment, which can accommodate these.

Five aspects can usefully be mentioned here:

assessing communicative language skills;

assessing the four language skills;

assessing other language skills;

assessing across phases and sectors;

multiple judgements.

### *Communicative Language Skills*

Oscarson helpfully identifies the difficulty of assessing communicative skills: “Es ist komplizierter und zeitraubender die generelle Kommunikations-Fähigkeit (Fertigkeiten) der Schüler [sic] zu beurteilen, als die formalen linguistischen Kenntnisse der Schüler zu überprüfen” (2000:19); and indeed, the original Council of Europe document pays a great deal of attention to the different skills needed for communicative language competence (linguistic, sociolinguistic and pragmatic) and the difference between knowing about (savoir) and knowing how to (savoir-faire) (1998: 11 & 13). It seems that the ELP has the potential to record successful communicative events, including intercultural understanding. In the Swiss ELP

project the main focus was on communicative competence. It was recognised that other aspects of language proficiency such as accuracy might need teacher input: "qualitative aspects (e.g. accuracy) which cannot always be self-assessed by learners and therefore represent a teacher-specific complement to self-assessment." (Lenz and Schneider, 2002: 79). There is perhaps a hidden tension ( which emerged in the ELP Vienna research) between the overriding communicative emphasis of the CEF/ELP with existing models of language in European education systems based on accuracy. In the 2001 version of the CEF the following mission statement occurs: "The Common European Framework describes in a comprehensive way what language learners have to learn to do in order to use a language for communication" (2001:12). Other caveats here relate to the anxieties voiced earlier that validation beyond self-assessment may be difficult to obtain. Further, Lenz noted in his evaluation of the Swiss ELP project that teachers sought more specified cultural descriptors for this aspect to be taken seriously: "das ESP in ihren Augen die (inter-) kulturelle Kompetenz nur dann als Lernziel wirklich ernst nehmen würde, wenn diese auch in der Raster und Checklisten enthalten wäre"(2000b:27). In the original Council of Europe document examples are given of how particular plurilingual communicative skills might be demonstrated in interaction and mediation (translating from one foreign language to another, for example), but it may be difficult to operationalise these interesting but perhaps, over-ambitious ideals (1998: 107).

### *The four language skills*

The importance of separating out different language skills is also emphasised in the original document, thinking that different levels of competence might be acceptable in each. Lenz (2000b) shows that the separation of skills was also something that the teachers in the Swiss project appreciated. Assessing skills separately is, of course, something that is already part of traditional assessment systems, although these tend to be subsumed into a final mark. One danger that should be noted here is that whilst this separation has considerable value, it ignores the interactive links between skills where there is also considerable interest in finding ways of assessing combinations of skills. Lenz (2000b) also points out that in the Swiss pilot teachers were concerned that the CEF reference grid was difficult to use when assessing responses to literature in the target language.

### *Other language skills*

Both Kohonen (2000) and Oscarson (2000) comment on the range of other language skills that underpin language competence (learning strategies, risk-taking etc.) Kohonen calls these "invisible" skills which students "have acquired as part of their learning biographies in their families and in school" (2000:15). For him the ELP allows these skills to become visible. Oscarson specifically points to the value of students, themselves, reporting on the bigger picture which embraces other language skills because "sind...es...die Schülerinnen and Schüler selbst, die hinsichtlich einer umfassenderen Perspektive ...am besten urteilen und oft auch für die Wahl von Lernaktivitäten ... die wichtigsten Hinweisen geben können" (2000:20). Oscarson notes particularly in his own context of learners of English in Sweden that probably students have *more* contact with the target language outside school than inside. Clearly this is one of the key strengths of the ELP and one, for example, which was appreciated by the business leaders in Fehlmann's vocational French context (2000).

### *Cross-phase and sector assessment*

The original Council of Europe document emphasises the importance of life-long learning (1998: 106) and the ELP is particularly suited to the notions of assessment transferred across phases and sectors since it is transported by the learner. One area where this has been particularly identified as successful is at the point of transition between primary and secondary. Lippelt et al (2002) in a German context and McLagan (2000) in an English context, both note the value of having a document, which can make previous learning skills visible thus ensuring much better continuity. Little et al (2002) also note the usefulness of evidence for adult refugees in Ireland wishing to gain entry onto vocational courses. In the English context the National Curriculum levels, which span learning phases and sectors can also play a part.

### *Multiple judgements within a single framework*

One area where the ELP is seen positively in terms of its validity as an assessment tool is its capacity to incorporate a range of judgements. Clearly this avoids the simple snap-shot judgement danger of, say, traditional tests where what is measured is an individual's ability to perform on one occasion and where, often, there is a single arbiter. Oscarson (2000) points to the usefulness of the ELP not only in sharing the burden of assessment between teacher and pupils but also by ensuring that assessment is a more democratic process: "Schüler selbst, die hinsichtlich einer umfassenderen Perspektive...am besten urteilen und oft auch für die Wahl von Lernaktivitäten...die wichtigsten Hinweisen geben können" (see also Lenz 2000a). Schneider sees this as a kind of bottom-up quality assurance: "[als] Instrument einer Qualität-entwicklung von unten wirken" (2000:20). Learner-centredness has become characteristic of language teaching pedagogy and it is certainly this aspect that Yurota (2000) focuses on in her evaluation of the ELP in a Russian context. With the ELP the learner can take responsibility for assessment too. Lenz and Schneider (2002) point to the political significance of this involvement: "Self-assessment is strongly promoted not only for pedagogical but also political reasons based on the assumption that citizens of democratic societies need to be autonomous personalities" (p. 69).

The ELP thus represents rather a clever combination of multiple judgements (allowing for comprehensivity and democracy) and an overarching framework of criteria which ensures some kind of coherence. Flügel (2000) points to the standardised passport now common across European countries for 15+ learners (available on <http://culture.coe.int/lang>). In the original Council of Europe document, the authors usefully point out the "myriad of standards" that co-exist between classes in a school and between schools (1998:120). The comprehensive 6-level reference grid and the central ratification of ELPs in Brussels ensure, then, some kind of coherence across a variety of contexts while still allowing for multiple judgements within the Portfolio.

The ELP as an assessment tool has thus been seen in rather a mixed way: on the one hand its comprehensiveness is welcomed; on the other the validity of self-assessment judgements is queried. This form of assessment is still new, so it seems inevitable that there will be some shaking down in terms of its acceptability to users and interested parties and this point is explored in more detail in the section on contexts below.

## A learning tool

Although much of the literature on the ELP uses “pedagogic” when talking about its non-reporting function (as mentioned earlier), “learning” may be a more useful focus, since this is primarily what is discussed. Six kinds of learning have been highlighted:

students’ awareness of and reflection on learning;

better motivation for learning;

teachers learning about students;

teachers learning about themselves;

teachers learning new roles;

teachers and learners learning through dialogue.

### *Students’ awareness of and reflection on learning*

The development of awareness and the ability to reflect on all aspects of the learning process is seen as a major benefit in the literature on the ELP. Little (2002) links the kind of activities the student must undertake in the ELP (identifying language skills, considering evaluation criteria) as vital steps towards learner autonomy, incorporating “the cyclical fashion in which learning progresses” (p. 187). Kohonen also identifies the ELP as a tool to promote: “a critical awareness of language learning” but does point out that “developing learner autonomy in language learning requires time, commitment and explicit pedagogical guidance” (2000b:16). Tagliante in her primary French context gives examples of four key areas where her pupils were asked to reflect on their linguistic and cultural experiences: “ma famille at mes amis”; “je parle, je comprends, je connais ...”; “mes goûts”; “mes voyages et mes échanges” (2000:58).

Because students have to choose their own examples in the ELP, this should make them consider more deeply the nature of their own experiences. Because they then have to match their achievements to particular criteria, this should bring about greater understanding and awareness of the criteria and of the different levels of achievement. Krieger et al (2000) report on the implementation of the ELP in an Austrian secondary context and in particular on an exercise comparing ELP descriptors with those in their own textbooks. This activity motivated students and made them much more aware of different levels of proficiency: “eher unbeliebte Aufgabenstellungen...gewannen plötzlich neue Bedeutung und Akzeptanz, wenn sie als konkrete Schritte zum Erreichen des nächsthöheren Niveaus verstanden werden können” (2000:31).

Nikolayevna as a psychologist in Russia (2000) took a rather different view of this process in research comparing two different groups of learners: one (experimental) using the ELP, and the other (control) group following more traditional methods. For Nikolayevna the key result was that in the ELP experimental group there was a significant shift in the dynamics of the control locus (with 73% of reported external control shifting to 45% internal control) compared to the control group's progression (from 76% reported external control on to 81% external control).

Reflection and awareness may thus focus on different aspects but will help to support a more significant role for the learner in the language learning process.

### *Better motivation for learning*

In the original Council of Europe document there is a clear expectation that the self-assessment aspect of the ELP will be motivating: "a tool for motivation and awareness raising: helping learners to appreciate their strengths, recognise their weaknesses and orient their learning more effectively" (1998:152). This ideal is also commented on by Christ (1998) and suggested by Alderson & Banerjee (2001) when they comment on learners becoming more confident in their own judgement by using self-assessment.

However, the reality for practitioners appears to be different. What seems more likely is that this form of assessment is motivating for *some* learners and not for others (and perhaps, this is true of every pedagogic strategy). Jermann reports on her French context where pupils experienced confusion when using the ELP. She suggests that this should be an option for interested pupils and not a core component: "travail individuel à chaque élève intéressé sous la conduite d'un enseignant qui connaît bien le PEL, et non dans le cadre d'un cours" (2000:39). Oscarson also identifies the problem when the ELP is only popular with some learners: "Wenn Selbstbeurteilung zwar bei einigen Gruppen oder Kategorien von Schülern funktioniert, nicht aber bei andern" (2000:21). Lenz and Schneider (2002) in their overview of the Swiss pilot comment on the unsuitability of the ELP for Lower Secondary: "too demanding for 7<sup>th</sup>-graders and non-academically oriented pupils...[and] limited usefulness as a planning instrument when much is predefined by curricula and textbook" (p. 80).

However, the notion of optionality flies in the face of the proclaimed advantages of the ELP: namely that it can be a transnational, a universal form of qualification. Clearly then, the self-assessment aspect of the ELP is not entirely satisfactory either in its current format and/or in the current climate. Lenz (2000a:34) succinctly summarises the problem: "Waren insbesondere die Lernende nicht immer bereit, Zeit und Energie auf etwas zu verwenden, was zwar Nützlichkeit für sich beanspruchte, sie aber noch nicht bewiesen hätte".

Another aspect that might be considered here is the nature of student involvement that is being asked for. On the one hand students are asked to engage with the ELP as autonomous

learners and on the other the engagement being asked for seems to be of a particular kind i.e. one that is approved of by the teacher! A close reading of the original Council of Europe document also reveals this paradox. In talking about the formative potential of the ELP there is an underlying suggestion that the learner needs to have a particular kind of orientation despite the claim that the aim is *self-direction*. Thus, the learner needs to interpret the ELP “i.e. has sufficient pre-knowledge and awareness to understand the point at issue and *not to take counterproductive action* and ... to integrate i.e. has the time, *orientation* and relevant resources to reflect on, integrate and so remember the new information. This implies self-direction” (1998:147, my emphasis).

### *Teachers learning about students*

If there is some dubiety about the suitability of the ELP for every student, there seems some consensus on the utility of the document for *teachers*. We have already commented on the usefulness of the ELP in making learning visible across sectors. The ELP can also make students' learning visible for their own teachers (Little, 2002). This kind of self assessment can give teachers feedback on learning styles and highlight areas which may need remediation (Alderson & Banerjee, 2001, see also Koch, 2000).

### *Teachers learning about themselves*

In the process of identifying what has been learnt, teachers are likely to have to reflect on their own practice in the past. In addition, using the ELP is likely to be for many a new kind of process which will call for a different approach to teaching. Kohonen in his evaluation of Finnish teachers' reactions to the ELP comments as follows: “portfolio work has opened up significant new perspectives of their work” (2000a: 11). Yurota (2000) in a Russian context notes the new move from authoritarian teaching to partnership which has been brought about by the introduction of the ELP.

### *Teachers learning new roles*

As well as students having to undertake new responsibilities in using the ELP, teachers also will need to adapt their practice (depending, of course, how learner-centred their approaches already are). Kohonen in his two articles on the Finnish trial of the ELP notes particularly the new roles of the teacher: “becoming an observer, a tutor, a professional consultant of student learning and organiser of learning opportunities” (2000b: 18). He also notes some particular kinds of behaviour that teachers need to demonstrate: “It [using the ELP] ... required a new kind of firmness in setting the tone of the work, negotiating the process and expecting that the students also observe the agreed deadlines” (2000a: 12). Little, in his overview of the implementation of the ELP, notes the particular contexts where teachers may have experienced difficulty in shifting roles: “self-assessment proved difficult in pedagogical traditions that were strongly teacher-led and did not encourage learners to share in the setting of learning targets and the evaluation of learning progress” (2002: 185).

## *Learning through dialogue*

As well as learners and teachers both having the opportunity to become more reflective by using the ELP, a further dimension may be added by the dialogue that can be generated between teachers and students. Perclová in a description of implementing the ELP in Czech schools saw dialogue as a real beneficial outcome: “The project encouraged an open dialogue with learners and some teachers succeeded in sustaining this” (2000: 51). Koch in a German context is more explicit about the greater equality in teacher-learner dialogue with the use of the ELP: “Gespräche zwischen Lehrpersonen und Lernenden über den Unterricht und das Sprachenlernen werden konkreter, denn mit dem Portfolio haben vor allem auch Lernende etwas in der Hand, mit dem sie ihre Bedürfnisse und Ziele leichter formulieren und besprechen können” (2000:44).

It is thus clear that whilst there are some problems with the variability of the ELP as an assessment tool, the ELP has considerable potential as a learning tool for those students who feel comfortable with a self-aware, reflective learning style.

### **Practical issues and contexts**

A few practical issues are raised in the literature relating to the time needed to complete it (Lenz, 2000b), and the size of the ELP (Lenz 2000a & b; Broeder, 2000). However, as versions of the ELP vary, and the portfolio itself is a new tool, some practical problems are to be expected.

More important is the question of how use of the ELP can be integrated into systems that already exist. We have already mentioned some difficulty with the ELP being widely accepted as a qualification in contexts beyond school and the difficulty teachers may experience if using the ELP differs greatly from their usual praxis. There are also though other integration issues:

integration with cultural systems across countries;

integration into national language policies;

integration with other national qualifications;

integration across schools;

integration across departments in schools;

integration into classroom practice.

These six types of integration can be broadly divided into those relating to the macro-climate and those on a micro level.

### *Macro-level integration*

As the ELP is envisaged as a Europe-wide learning, teaching and assessment tool, integration on a macro-level is clearly crucial. We have already seen that having a common set of descriptors (customised for individual contexts) provides a strong base for this. However, several writers raise queries in this area. Halberstadt (2001) for example, questions the compatibility of the ELP with different educational systems (and we have already seen that this can be problematic in overly teacher-led contexts see also Schneider, 2000); Lenz (2000a & b) emphasises the need for regular use of the ELP to become part of national language policies and Boldizar (2000) provides an example of this in Hungary; and Little (2002) points to the need both for integration across schools and with national qualifications. (Jones' article (2002) helps to clarify this situation). He points out that both aspects are important for the ELP's credibility: "The long term acceptance and viability of the ELP inevitably depend on its being taken up by school systems and becoming an integral part of pupils' language learning experience" (p186). Little also points out that the ELP can only be said to promote plurilingualism if it is used across the language departments in a school.

### *Micro-level integration*

Equally as important as macro-level integration is the congruence of the ELP with everyday classroom practice. Lenz points out that in classes in the Swiss project where ELP has posed problems, it was helpful if a learner-centred approach was already present: "das ESP...erfolgreich eingesetzt werden kann, wenn Selbstevaluation und bewusstes Planen von Lernzielen zum Lern-Alltag gehören" (2000b: 26).

There are differing reports on how well the ELP fits into existing curricula. In the Swiss context Lenz is sceptical: "die Ziele, die in den Deskriptoren beschrieben sind, und die Ziele in des tatsächlichen Unterrichts bzw des Lehrwerks im Unterricht oft nicht zueinander in Beziehung gesetzt wurden" (2000b: 25). Jermann also reports her French students' failure to see the connection between usual classroom practice and the ELP: "On apprend de la grammaire, on lit des livres et on écrit des compositions ... cela n'a rien à voir avec ce qui est décrit là" (2000:37). Krieger on the other hand, reports on a successful attempt in an Austrian context to link the ELP descriptors to the textbook. I have mentioned earlier that this activity helped students to understand the levels better, but it also had additional benefit of helping students to move away from a compartmentalised view of ELP and classroom praxis: "während sie es (das ELP) zuvor noch eher als ein bloß dokumentierendes, aber von tatsächlichen Unterrichts geschehen losgelöstes Mittel zum Nachweis ihres Spracherwerbs gesehen hatten" (2000:31).

What is likely, given differing experiences with the ELP, is that training is necessary for both teachers and learners. Little, for example, points out that the European Centre for Modern Languages in Graz could undertake such training, and the importance of training is empha-

sised by several others (eg. Halberstadt, 2001 and Kohonen 2000a). One area that is mentioned in the original Council of Europe document is training in encouraging the learner “to develop a personalised meta-language on aspects of quality with which to monitor work for strengths and weaknesses and to formulate a self-directed learner contract” (1998:147, see also Oscarson, 2000).

It seems then that the ELP has a somewhat mixed profile. Little suggests that only the implementation can be evaluated: “empirical methods of evaluation cannot prove the ELP is a good or bad thing in itself. Evaluation can only focus on the effectiveness of implementation though this may draw attention to problems in the design of particular ESP models” (2002:188). However, if self-assessment, for example, is not workable in some contexts this does seem to pose a problem with the fundamental nature of the ELP. This is a new and ambitious assessment tool in its early stages of use. Further experience with using this portfolio will not doubt shed more light on its viability.

### **Evaluating the ELP Project**

The Pädagogisches Institut in Vienna has co-ordinated a one year pilot project with 15 teachers and approximately 200 students at Upper Secondary level and will wish to submit their own version of the ELP to Brussels for ratification. It will be helpful if an external evaluator can provide evidence of the perceived usability of this ELP.

In order to research and evaluate this pilot project it will be important to elicit the views of the teachers and students involved in the pilot. Since the ELP is essentially a private self-assessment document where there is also negotiation with the teacher it will be useful to access the private views of those involved. It would not be possible to make any external objective judgements about the value and effectiveness of the portfolio beyond the perceptions of these two sets of stakeholder groups for the following reasons:

- the validity of control groups with innovative language programmes is questioned by many researchers ( Beretta, 1986 and 1992; Harris, 1990; Alderson, 1992; Lynch, 1996);
- if such research were to be undertaken it would need to be longitudinal and use other groups for comparison. Neither of these conditions are possible in the current context;
- objective assessment of effectiveness can be predicated on the notion of a Jet-In, Jet-Out, Expert-based outsider evaluation which ignores the value of an 'illuminative' evaluation model (Parlett and Hamilton, 1972), based on grounded theory where priorities and criteria are defined by the stakeholders.

It would have been possible to consider an objective comparison of the format of this pilot European Language Portfolio with other examples of portfolios in Austria or in other countries, or looking at the portfolio in terms of its realisation of Council of Europe objectives, but in discussion with the ELP co-ordinators this did not seem to be an option that was favoured.

In terms of implementation, it has been pointed out that an evaluation has little point if recommendations are not seen as useful or acted upon: what Lynch terms ‘the utility factor’

(1996). Rea-Dickens & Germaine comment that: "it is more likely that classroom innovation or modification will be successfully implemented if the users of the innovation have contributed to its development" (1992:67); and Alderson and Scott point to a further dimension in that: "experience shows ... that unpalatable findings are most likely to be accepted if they have been 'discovered' by those working on the project ... The model fits the Chinese saying 'tell me and I forget, show me and I remember, involve me and I learn' " (1992: 55 &57).

There is also some pragmatic value in involving "insiders" in evaluations, particularly teachers, in that they will have more information than someone from outside. Saravia-Shore in her analysis of policy implications for ethnographic research into bilingual schools points to the usefulness of "the experience of key informants ... supplementing the ethnographer's observations" (1992:285). Alderson comments that "insiders have an experience and knowledge of a programme that can be invaluable to an evaluator" (1990:279). Rea-Dickens & Germaine also usefully point out that "teachers ... have the advantage of being better able to explain and offer different interpretations of various classroom phenomena" (1992: 67). This is of course not to deny the value as well of the fresh view of the outsider, a disinterested external observer.

If the above represents practical reasons for involving stakeholders in evaluations, there are also theoretical and ideological considerations. Alderson points out persuasively that one "should ... beware of concluding ... that there is One Best Way of conducting an evaluation ... [one] should also be warned that evaluations will not reveal The Truth about a programme or project ... a multitude of 'truths' or interpretations can be constructed and presented for inspection by interested parties" (1992:274). An honest way then of evaluating a project is to embrace this plurality and include insider as well as outsider viewpoints. Alderson and Scott further point out the ideological superiority of such a stance in that "participatory evaluation is ... evidently a ... democratic way of proceeding" (1992:54).

It therefore seems crucial to adopt both an outsider-insider model for evaluation which will maximise comprehensiveness and utility, and a flexible model which will be suitable for the particular environment to be evaluated.

A useful model which would seem to meet these criteria is Parlett and Hamilton's Illuminative Model (1972). This model follows a grounded theory approach (cf Strauss & Corbin, 1990) where priorities and criteria are drawn from an initial grass-roots investigation of a project milieu. It also allows for another important element, namely sufficient space for the inclusion of any unexpected outcomes or aspects which may occur (Alderson, 1992). Parlett and Hamilton move from a global investigation of the configuration of a learning milieu (including where appropriate an historical perspective) to a narrower focus on those issues prioritised by stakeholders. Their aim is "to provide a comprehensive understanding of the complex reality ... surrounding the program, to 'illuminate' " (1992:30).

It is important to consider what research instruments could best capture the perceptions of the two stakeholder groups and help to evaluate the new assessment technique being trialled, given the private nature of the document involved. The model outlined below is based on a combination of global and particular insights.

Information was to be gathered from:

- attending one of the first meetings (on February 9) with the 15 teachers involved in the project (Phase One);
- gathering global questionnaire information from these 15 teachers (Phase 1) and the students who will be using the ELP (Phase 2)

- carrying out individual interviews with a sample of teachers. Here questions of feasibility limited the number of interviews possible (Phase 3).

In the analysis below of the data gathered from Phases 1 and 2, the chronology has been shifted slightly to allow for the teachers' questionnaires to be amalgamated with the data from the teacher interviews (Phase 3).

### **The Student Questionnaires**

This questionnaire was administered in March 2004 and each school was provided in advance with a letter for parents explaining what the research was about (see Appendix 1). The questions were not piloted but were discussed in detail with the 15 teachers and the co-ordinators at the February meeting, and then rewritten before distribution (see Appendix 2 for a description of this process). The German wording was also checked several times by the project co-ordinators (see Appendix 3 for the final version). Returns were received from eleven schools with 142 questionnaires. These were alphabetically designated (A-L) and divided into younger and older age groups. (Years. 5/6 and 7/8/9 respectively). There were 69 returns in the younger age groups (Schools A, D, E, F & H) and 73 in the older age groups (Schools B, C, G, J, K & L). The following gender divisions were noted in the number of questionnaires submitted (93f and 49m), but apart from differences in the appearance of the writing on the page (girls neater) there did not seem to be significant gender differences in the opinions expressed. There was some indication that groups of students from one school seemed to share a certain mind-set. Adrian Holliday in some recent research (2000) has suggested that a classroom in itself represents a "small culture" with shared ideas, and this concept has been confirmed by recent research by one of my own doctoral students (Door, forthcoming) looking at responses of five different groups of pupils (all with the same teacher) to a reading task. One of the teachers interviewed (Teacher 4) also identified "group" reaction to the ELP. In the case of the Viennese students it may be that the teacher's presentation of the ELP will have influenced the student responses. But it may also be true that a certain attitude is generated within the classroom, which then "takes over".

The breakdown of the answers is given in Appendix 5 and it should be noted that:

- there was insufficient time to analyse the first three questions so only questions 4-8 relating to the ELP were analysed;
- in answers to questions 4 & 5 it is possible to count the number of students answering. Elsewhere the numbers given are numbers of comments (i.e. students may give more than one comment);
- the answers are broken down into young (Y) and older (O) groups;
- where quotes are given in the text, the gender of the student is also added (eg G4f).

The students' verdict generally on the ELP was mixed and this also reflects the opinions of those who were involved in the European pilot projects, as was noted earlier. If we look at the answers to Question 4 – "Wie oft beschäftigst du dich mit dem Europäischen Sprachenportfolio?" the answers here are likely to reflect the general level of interest of the students, since it will reveal the level of commitment to using the ELP. Only one student from the young group and two from the older group reported once or twice a week. Almost equal numbers reported filling in the ELP either once or twice a month (33Y, 33 O) or not very often (35Y 38 O). In other words the students were almost equally divided between being moderately interested and hardly interested at all. 32 comments (25Y and 7 O) were given for reasons for moderate interest, many of these apologetic. Lack of time featured most strongly (11Y 3 O) here. The comments explaining rarely filling in the ELP related to comments given elsewhere in the questionnaire. 98 comments were given here (50Y, 48O). Again, lack of

time featured (15Y, 22O) and also lack of interest (18Y, 8O). The size of the folder (a point raised again in answers to Question 8) was also mentioned by six older students.

Question 5 was designed to try and understand how students viewed the ELP in terms of other assessments that happen in school (a point also made more explicit in Question 8). Surprisingly not everyone answered “No” to the question “Denkst du, dass die Europäische Sprachenportfolio eine Art Test ist ?” 24 students (13Y, 11O) answered Yes (one each also ‘both’, ‘don’t know’, and ‘no answer’). Comments here though show that these students were thinking of ‘self-testing’. Typical comments were [for Yes] “ man fasst eigene Leistung zusammen und testet wie gut man ist” (K8f) “[for No] Man kann dadurch gut bemerken was man noch üben/lernen muss. Es gibt kein richtig oder falsch” (G4f). Although there is a difference of emphasis between these two comments in terms of how the “assessment” is seen, both focus on the sense of personal responsibility.

Questions 6 & 7 asked students what they liked and disliked about the portfolio. Overall there were more positive comments than negative (200 as opposed to 126, 3 negative being included in Question 6 and 10 positive in Question 7). The younger age group contributed more comments here than the older (118:82 for positive, 77:49 for negative) perhaps prefiguring the older students' preoccupation with other school work, which emerges as a feature of the data. For the younger age-group the most popular aspect of the ELP was the check lists (40 comments). For the older group this aspect did also feature (12 comments), but was outflanked by students celebrating the personal control that the ELP offered them (17 comments). One older student wrote: “Man kann freier schreiben als bei Schularbeiten” (C4m).

When it came to aspects not liked both sets of students had similar complaints: the unwieldy size of the ELP (Y19:10 O) and the lay-out (Y16; 12 O). Typical comments here were: “Es ist zu locker, somit wird es automatisch nicht ernst genommen und sofort abgelehnt” (K6m); “Es ist grau, nicht grad eine Farbe die motiviert” (G14f). The size of the ELP was also something noticed in the evaluations of other ELP projects mentioned earlier in this report. It is perhaps, timely to note that these students live in an age where information is stored in light portable form. In fact, one student does comment that the portfolio should be digital. The media (eg advertising and software) make use of images and colour in sophisticated and witty ways so that young people have a highly developed sense of visual literacy (see Kress, 2003).

Rather a surprising comment from a small number of students, given the emphasis in the original Council of Europe document, is the rejection of the intercultural dimensions (4Y; 3O). Thus one older student wrote: “Interkulturelle Erfahrungen finde ich unnötig. Es heißt ja Sprachenportfolio und das soll sich nur auf die Sprache beziehen und nicht auf die Erfahrungen, die man erlebt hat”. Here then there may be some ethnocentricity or a feeling that personal experiences are not part of the remit of school work.

Question 8 yielded quite a number of interesting answers. It was designed to elicit students' responses to the ELP in the context of their other assessment practices: “Was sagt das Portfolio im Vergleich zu einer Schularbeitsnote über dein Können aus ?”. Two main aspects emerged here: the perception that the ELP allowed for a spread of skills to be recognised, where marked pieces of work usually related to written skills; and the fact that marked pieces of work only capture a snapshot performance, whereas the ELP allowed for recognition of achievements over time and in greater breadth. Both these aspects then affirm the comprehensivity of the ELP. The skills aspect was noticed more by the younger group (40 comments as opposed to 15) with the snapshot/continuous assessment aspect more evident to the older age group (26 comments as opposed to 15). Typical comments were “Bei einer Schularbeit habe ich mein schriftliches Können geprüft, Aber das Portfolio bezieht sich auf alle

Bereiche der Sprache" (H4f); "Portfolio ist nicht nur eine Note, man sieht die sprachliche Entwicklung" (F15f); interestingly, this last student (F15f) saw the ELP as a "test" in Question 5.

However there were also comments that suggested either directly or obliquely that a marked piece of work was seen as more useful (Y7; O4). A comment made in Question 4 may help to sum up this aspect: "Wenn man es benoten würde, würde ich mich mehr damit beschäftigen" (D4f).

A final point which perhaps does not emerge so strongly from the data analysis tables is the *personal* nature of work with the ELP. Thus one younger student writes in answer to Question 8 "Im Portfolio sind viel mehr Arbeiten von mir drinnen. Bei einer Schularbeit muss man zu einem bestimmten Thema einen Text schreiben und das finde ich nicht so super" (D3f). An older student focuses on the opportunity to engage with assessment herself; [this student wrote her answers to Questions 4-8 in English] "With the portfolio you see your mistakes because you mark it where as [sic] with a test you write and forget about and don't try to correct your mistakes" (K10f, emphasis in the original).

Thus many students seem appreciative of the potential that the ELP offers for autonomous learning despite some misgivings about the format. There are, though clearly some students who are resistant. This situation then is likely to pose problems in the immediate present for some teachers. It may be that in the future other options will ameliorate the situation: either by making the ELP more of an optional choice (while still retaining the 'European' skills reference grids) or as a complete opposite by making the ELP such common practice that students become completely used to it. This point was discussed in the second meeting with the teachers that I attended where the publicly expressed opinion was that the latter was a preferable option. In the interviews there was more ambivalence expressed.

One final note was that one older student added a vote of thanks for the evaluation: "Meiner Meinung nach bringt dieses Portfolio nichts. Aber trotzdem finde ich Ihre Bemühungen toll!" (B13f).

### **The Teacher Questionnaires**

The plenary sessions on February 9<sup>th</sup> provided verbal written feedback on teachers' experiences with the ELP so far (see Appendix 2). The teacher questionnaires (see Appendix 4) were also filled out at this meeting by the 15 teachers involved in the project. This questionnaire was designed to explore the current assessment context in Austria, into which the ELP is fitting, ie to consider whether current ways of assessing are congruent with the ELP; whether desired changes might be accommodated by the ELP; and whether the multicultural context of many Austrian schools is catered for particularly by the ELP. The questionnaire was piloted and discussed with the project co-ordinators and revised accordingly (see Appendix 2 for a description of the changes)..

Questions 5, 6 and 7 related to the multiculturalism of classrooms because it was thought that this might be a significant factor in terms of the cultural suitability of different assessment instruments. The answers here showed that class sizes varied between 7-26 students. Three classes had many non-German speakers, five had several, three a few and three none. There were, however, seven schools with many non-German speakers, even though individual classes might have had fewer.

| No. of Students | No. of non-German speak- | No of non-German speak- |
|-----------------|--------------------------|-------------------------|
|-----------------|--------------------------|-------------------------|

|    | <b>ing students in school</b> | <b>ing students in class</b> |
|----|-------------------------------|------------------------------|
| 26 | Many                          | Many                         |
| 25 | Many                          | Many                         |
| 23 | Some                          | Some                         |
| 23 | Many                          | Some                         |
| 17 | Few                           | None                         |
| 17 | Some                          | Some                         |
| 16 | Many                          | Some                         |
| 13 | Few                           | Few                          |
| 13 | Many                          | Many                         |
| 12 | Some                          | Few                          |
| 12 | Many                          | Some                         |
| 10 | Many                          | Few                          |
| 10 | Some                          | None                         |
| 9  | Some                          | None                         |
| 7  | Some                          | None                         |

There is then a mixed picture of class sizes and multilingual mixes. However the feedback from the teachers did not suggest any special issues that arose from the mixed nature of classrooms in terms of assessment so this aspect has not been pursued in the analysis.

### **The findings**

Rather than restricting the analysis to question by question answers, most data will be looked at globally because comments in one section often refer across the whole questionnaire. There are basically two areas covered by the questionnaire:

- teachers' global responses to the ELP and self-assessment
- teachers' views of assessing the four skills

Several questions in the ELP focus separately on the four skills since this is one feature of the ELP that has been noted as being particularly important (see comments on other pilot projects in Section 1 and also in the Council of Europe document itself).

### **The ELP and self-assessment (Questions 1,9,10 and 11)**

Answers here can be divided into three dimensions:

- for the students
- for the teacher
- for the outside world

Interestingly, responses to Question 9: "Was meinen Sie zu, oder halten Sie von Selbstbeurteilung?" yielded a range of answers: 8 absolutely positive answers, five moderately positive and two more sceptical answers.

#### *For Students*

There was considerable emphasis on the (new) possibilities opened up for students with the ELP with more opportunities for taking responsibility, reflecting and checking progress, more chance to take personal control, set targets and be creative and generally a more motivating approach. These themes are picked up again in answers to questions 9 and 10 but with some further exploration here of issues of honesty and the ability to be critically accurate. One teacher also comments on a better understanding of the assessment process itself and of learning to deal with feedback: "SchülerIn erwirbt Fähigkeit mit 'Feedback' (auch von anderen) umzu-

gehen". Whilst many of the other aspects highlighted by the teachers confirm the responses in other pilot projects, the notion of working with feedback is particularly interesting given the climate of "appraisal" which is currently becoming more fashionable (certainly in UK/US contexts). In order to focus on this "appraisal" aspect, it could be useful to include a sheet in the portfolio to allow for annual (or bi-annual) target-setting.

One answer to Question 9 questioning the suitability of self-assessment for every student links in more to the students' questionnaire responses – where it was clear that some students did not like using the ELP: "Nur sinnvoll mit Menschen, die bereit sind, darin einen Sinn zu sehen; dann aber ja". One response also focuses on the need for clear understanding of self-assessment: "Eine gute Sache, solange den Schülern, die Lernziele, Anforderungen, Standards ganz klar sind". This recognises a point made in the student questionnaires that sometimes for the students the ELP was a confusing document. Since the ELP represents a new way of considering assessment and learning "eine neue Lernsituation" as one teacher commented, this clarification may be an area that teachers and students can work on together.

#### *For teachers*

Self-assessment and the ELP also challenge traditional teaching contexts. One teacher writes in response to Question 1: "Viele 'traditionelle' Sichtweisen werden in Frage gestellt". Thus although the ELP presents a new way of assessing it can also be useful in linking to communicative teaching practice and in making students' progress more visible. Answers to Question 9 suggest that complementing self-assessment with external assessment can be a good solution: "Kinder wünschen oft die Fremdbeurteilung". Thus some of the unease expressed by the students about the 'worth' of the ELP if it is not counted as an assessment could be helped here.

There was some recognition that as well as students needing support/training in using the ELP, this was also necessary for teachers, "Unwirklich 'flächendeckende' Veränderungen zu erzielen wird ein großes Angebot an Lehrerfortbildungen notwendig sein". This then echoes the findings from other pilot projects.

#### *For the outside world*

The main feature here was the usefulness of the ELP in providing a trans-European consistency of assessment measures. The ELP can offer transparency and is a useful reporting mechanism of both in and out-of-school learning. All these features were also appreciated in other pilot projects.

#### *Assessing the four skills*

It was noticeable that in the student questionnaires there was a real appreciation of all four skills counting equally and separately in the ELP and this is echoed in the teachers' comments.

Some interesting details emerged from answers to the question on the four skills (Questions 2 & 3). Firstly, it seems that the kinds of activities that teachers are already engaged in match up well with the examples in the ELP self-assessment grids, so there should be good coherence here. For example, the ELP grid for speaking level B2 includes both expressing inner feelings and participation in discussion: "Ich kann die meisten Gefühle zum Ausdruck bringen und klar machen, was für mich wichtig und bedeutsam ist", "Ich kann in Diskussionen und Gespräche meine Gedanken und Meinungen zu den meisten Themen klar formulieren und auf die Argumentation anderer reagieren". In responding to Question 2 teachers mention both these aspects in describing their own teaching praxis. Overall, as well, many other suggestions

given by teachers for different ways of monitoring proficiency in the four skills often mirrored the kinds of activities which linked into the ELP grids.

Another feature is that many of the activities that are cited under one skill also, of course, entail another skill (e.g. reading a book and presenting it; listening to a question and answering it). A major deficit, in my opinion, of the ELP is that in separating out the skills this inter-skill dependence is obliterated. It might be possible, perhaps, to consider adding a further column to the ELP grid (especially as grid-filling seems popular) asking students to consider which of the other skills might also be implicated when focussing on one particular skill. In this way students themselves could become more aware of inter-skill dependence.

Bearing in mind the emphasis in the student questionnaire on the difference between specific/snapshot assessment and more global assessment, it was interesting to see a pattern emerge in the different activities suggested for the four skills. One might expect that the single snapshot activity might be more evident in the activities suggested for *writing*, for example, since a traditional picture of class work is of short written tasks but this was not the case. A large number of the writing activities were more creatively focussed: trying out different genres, writing silent dialogues, group writing. It was in *reading* that much more detailed work was suggested (ordering, matching, underlining). It could be helpful here then perhaps to think of a range of 'global' reading tasks (although some were also mentioned) which link into speaking as well as writing, since student answers in their questionnaire showed that they particularly appreciated global assessment of their language skills. This was then an area planned as part of the interview questions.

When it came to Question 4, asking about desired changes in assessing different skills, there was a difference here between the number of teachers' comments (speaking/listening x 12; Reading/writing x 9). Particularly in "reading" there seemed to be few complaints about current assessment procedures. "Listening" seemed to be the skill where most assessment changes were sought. It would be interesting then, perhaps to focus on this skill in particular and consider how the ELP might play a part in providing new ways of assessing Listening to fill the currently perceived "gaps".

Many teachers who commented here preferred to talk more globally about changes in assessment, making suggestions such as:

- more flexibility;
- more "real" language contexts in which to make judgements, such as native speaker contexts (here the spirit of some of the suggestions in the original Council of Europe document is reiterated);
- linking texts to new learning methods;
- weaning students away from a dependency on marks. One teacher wrote in answer to Question 8 "Meine schwächeren Schüler erleben oft den Frust, dass bei der Ziffernoten-Beurteilung der Teil, den sie gut können, nicht angeführt wird. Das ELP kommt den Schulen in ihrer Forderung nach detaillierter Auflistung von Sprechen – Lesen - Hören – Verstehen sehr nach".

The ELP then, here might be seen as satisfying some of these desired changes in assessment.

### **The Teacher Interviews**

Six teacher interviews were carried out in Phase 3 (May 24 2004). The interviewees were chosen from the ten volunteers who identified themselves in the teacher questionnaires from the meeting on February 9 (2004). The choice, made by myself and the two project co-

ordinators, aimed to include as broad a spectrum as possible of different contexts. Thus the following dimensions were included:

- different languages (English, French, Italian, Spanish and Russian)
- different types of upper secondary school (all boys – private; “normal” grammar schools (AHS); a bilingual German-English school; a school with a stream for gifted students; and schools with different socio-economic backgrounds
- some teachers involved in co-ordinating the project and other teachers not involved (see Appendix 2 for details of the choosing process).

Some interviews were carried out in the teachers' own schools (Teachers 1 and 6) and other teachers (Teachers 2, 3, 4 & 5) were interviewed at the Pädagogisches Institut. Each interview lasted approximately 30 minutes and was taped and transcribed. Two teachers chose German as the interview medium and four the medium of English.

Follow-on issues, which were raised after the analysis of the student and teacher questionnaires, formed the basis of some of the interview questions and teachers themselves raised some different issues. Because some quite formal lines of enquiry had been followed before, it was felt more valuable to use the interviews to function as a free-ranging data collection technique rather than following a strict interview schedule. And, indeed, some new issues did emerge which were neither in the literature describing pilot projects in other countries nor in the data from the questionnaires or from the meeting.

The analysis below is divided into four sections with new perspectives emerging particularly in the last two sections.

- the ELP document itself
- the pedagogical usefulness of the ELP
- implementation difficulties
- integration within school and with the outside world

These perspectives do not entirely match the units of analysis in earlier sections for either the literature (pedagogical tool/learning tool/contexts and practical issues) or for the teacher questionnaire (students/teacher/outside world), but there is some coherence. In this section on the teacher interviews pedagogy/learning categories have been looked at together as have the teacher/learner. categories The (outside) context has remained consistent as a separate category.

### **The ELP document**

Comments on the ELP document itself were mainly positive and echoed those found in the questionnaire data and the literature,

The Portfolio was seen as clear and transparent “klar und übersichtlich” (Teacher 1). The checklists were popular with students and teachers: “von diesen Tabellen, die es gibt und von den Listen ... finde ich das sehr angenehm, das strukturiert untereinanderstehen zu haben und da kann man Hakerl machen” (Teacher 1); “das [Checklisten machen] hat ihnen [den Schülern] gut gefallen. Es kam gleich als Kritikpunkt bei Fragen die mehrere Dinge beinhaltet haben, ‘was mache ich jetzt, wenn ich das eine schon kann, das andere aber noch nicht?’”(Teacher 2); ‘This filling-in the grid thing, they [the pupils] enjoy doing that’” (Teacher 6).

The dossier was also seen as a good site for assembling diverse pieces of work: “Wir können ja auch jetzt das Portfolio schon ergänzen durch die verschiedensten Arbeiten” (Teacher 2).

One teacher reiterated the views expressed in the pupil questionnaires concerning layout which were more negative: “Our folder ... is not very practical. This layout” (Teacher 5).

Comments then on the Portfolio itself served to confirm opinions elsewhere: positive reactions to comprehensiveness and transparency, student satisfaction in ticking off achievements, but some problems with layout.

### **Pedagogical usefulness**

A couple of teachers commented on the relationship of the Portfolio assessment to school grades: a point also raised in the student questionnaires but generally skirted round in the literature. One teacher raised the point (also made in the original Council of Europe document) that teacher grades can be variable: ‘It may happen that one teacher is a strict teacher and then there is another who isn’t so strict and you end up with better grades, or some teachers are more interested in you getting by orally’ (Teacher 6). The Council of Europe comments focused on the *meaning* of grade levels for teachers at different stages and in different schools. (1998:20). In this teacher’s comments there seems to be a much sharper (and more pertinent) differentiation between conceptualisations of the *language to be graded*.

One teacher also commented on students’ over-dependence on grades: “so this [the ELP task] won’t help me get a 1 in school”, “I would like to tell them there is more to life than marks” [Teacher 4]. It is this student perception which is perhaps not taken into account by the original Council of Europe documentation as mentioned earlier.

Some comments related to what the Portfolio was able to offer the learner: an ability to check progress: “was das Portfolio einfach so eine Hilfe zu sagen, jetzt schaut’s einmal genau, was könnt ihr oder was sollt ihr können einfach ... um für sie selber ... um zu sehen ... dass sie schon etwas gelernt haben ... damit man auch sich selber einschätzen kann, was kann ich denn jetzt schon in dieser Fremdsprache. Diese Stufen, die man da erreicht, das finde ich als sehr angenehmes Feedback für einen selber als Lerner” (Teacher 1) “optische einen Fortschritt irgendwie deutlich zn machen”(Teacher 2).

Another teacher though did point out that it was difficult to be aware of progress if the Portfolio was looked at too frequently: “it’s frustrating because you can’t see so much progress ... You don’t really improve too much within a few months. So I think that’s a little bit frustrating if you do it too often” (Teacher 6). It is possible though to use the Portfolio to identify steps towards desired targets. “Man merkt einfach, was, wo sind die Schritte, die man noch machen muss, um zu einen gesetzten Ziel zu kommen” (Teacher 1). Most of the ideas here then echo those found elsewhere.

Other teachers commented on the new skills that were prompted or encouraged by using the ELP. Some of the comments here provided new and different insights to those encountered elsewhere.

One skill was that of time organisation: “[The ELP] is good for time management. If you tell them a particular time that they should really get that done by ... then they know roughly” (Teacher 6); “[die SchulerInnen] lernen auch diese Organisation, wirklich auch so eine Zeitorganisation, weil wie ist das realistisch ... so wie ich dahin überhaupt komme, zu diesem Lernziel oder wie auch immer” (Teacher 1). Sorting out "time" in terms of goals was also a factor noted by Little et al in their evaluation of using the ELP with adult refugees in Ireland; the non-English-speaking incomers had to learn that their own estimates of task duration were often over-ambitious (2002:64). Time management with these learners in Ireland then focus-

sed not so much on how to fit a variety of activities into a particular time-frame (although no doubt this skill was also called on), but rather learning to gauge how long it would take to learn something.

Teachers also commented on the new kinds of skill and ways of thinking prompted by the use of the ELP. As well as reiterating ideas in the other project data and the literature there are also some new perspectives offered here. Using the ELP can raise a general level of awareness of learning a language (and this appears to have been a common experience in other ELP projects): “the advantage of the portfolio because the kids do not know what they actually can do with the language ... they’ve never consciously thought about the actual skills so it's really making them aware”. (Teacher 6).

Other teachers point out the sharper refinement of this awareness when pupils need to identify the different skills involved in particular tasks: “which skills are needed to do the task” (Teacher 5); “die Studenten sind das nicht gewohnt, noch in diesen Fertigkeiten auch zu denken. Also das ist so dann dieses umdenken müssen, dass man ... was lernt man da jetzt eigentlich mit dieser Übung? Welche Fertigkeit wendet man da an? oder dass man zum Beispiel Fertigkeiten, die ja auch kombiniert sein sollten in den Übungen” (Teacher 1).

Students need to be aware of their own work in a different way when they make judgments about what to include in the portfolio. One teacher comments as follows, on his students: “very often they write something and they’re happy with it and that’s it. That will do and they don’t care any more. In this procedure [using the ELP] they had to care about what they had written and change it and come back then” (Teacher 5). Another teacher pointed out the benefit of discussing the choice of items: “[Pupils] have to explain why they chose it [a topic] and what they did, what sort of activities they did ... think that’s a good practice for explanation” (Teacher 6). Other projects mentioned earlier also comment on the usefulness of teacher/learner dialogue (Perclová, 2000; Koch, 2000) but the particular usefulness here is the students’ accountability.

There are then a number of comments which point to the usefulness of the ELP as both a pedagogical and learning tool, many of which echo comments elsewhere.

### **Implementation difficulties**

There were several difficulties that related to the wording and remit of the Portfolio. All these areas seem worthy of consideration and mostly had not surfaced elsewhere.

Firstly, there was the issue of identifying a “mother-tongue”. This was an issue which I had discussed with the teachers at the February 9 meeting (see Appendix 2) but not one which appears either in the literature or in the project questionnaire answers. This language-identification problem is enhanced where there is a bilingual context and of course many schools in Vienna (and in many other parts of Europe) are multilingual and multicultural. Thus one teacher working in a bilingual school commented as follows:- “I am also doing the Portfolio ... this made it a little bit difficult sometimes because for some of the children neither German or English was the foreign languages. It was all of them foreign languages sometimes” (Teacher 3).

Another "language" problem is the differences between languages in terms of their difficulty and status,. It may be difficult then perhaps to make comparisons across a portfolio (when several languages are included) or between groups studying different languages and all using the ELP. Thus the common descriptors may actually have different weight, different meanings when used with different languages. For example, one teacher identified several diffi-

culties related to learning Italian: “Italian to be covered in a much shorter space ... whereas English you have much more time ... the chance to learn in peace and quiet ... The prestige of English is much higher [than other languages] .. [students] find the morphology [of Italian] so difficult. Every sentence you produce needs different forms and pronouns” (Teacher 4). Another teacher pointed out particular difficulties with Russian: “the Russian vocabulary is quite difficult to remember ... Russian words are the problem ... they tend to be long with few vowels” (Teacher 6). The involvement of other teachers may also be problematic, as one teacher noted: “the French, Italian teacher, I felt so pressed for time and I kind of reflected this to them and said ‘They probably don’t have time either’ and nowadays you hardly dare ask people to spare a lesson” (Teacher 3).

Another problem identified with the ELP relates to its communicative focus. It was noted earlier that oblique reference was made in the literature to a possible tension between this communicative form and the need for accuracy. One teacher perceptively points out this real tension: “the Portfolio tends to emphasise the communicative aspect and to rather neglect I’m afraid as far as our school system is concerned, the grammar part or the accuracy part which has to come into the business sometime. Maybe this should find some place in the Portfolio as well ... our students are so used to being judged on the basis of grammatical competence” (Teacher 4). It is interesting that the ELP may, perhaps, be a victim of the slow process of democracy. The Portfolio has taken over ten years to come to fruition and during this period of time there has been a considerable shift in beliefs in terms of the efficiency of communicative methods with a new concentration on focus on form (Mitchell & Myles, 1998; Morgan and Neil 2001). This tension between whether fluency or accuracy is prioritised thus represents a fundamental problem area which will need to be addressed by schools and teachers.

Two more teachers also commented on some of the communicative goals outlined in the ELP, pointing out that, in fact, these might be achieved by non-linguistic means! “The categories suggested by the Portfolio are too open because ... so many things in fact don’t need any language really” (Teacher 4); “sometimes they [the pupils] had problems with the questions so they had made quite a few suggestions of how to manage the questions so they would be more meaningful to them ... for instance for A1 it says ‘I can buy things in a shop and can also ask for the price’. That was one of the statements and you don’t need to know a language for that. You point at it, you have the price tag” (Teacher 5). Here although some of the grey areas round “communication” are also flagged up, it is more a question of checking the wording of the ELP Statements rather than the fundamental pedagogical priorities which lie behind the difference between a fluency- or an accuracy-orientated approach.

The teachers also commented on the difficulties some students have in using the Portfolio and here echoed ideas found elsewhere. The teachers commented on students’ problems with gauging their own achievements: “They say ‘what is this self- evaluation for? I need the teacher to evaluate me. What do I know about myself? I might be cheating” (Teacher 4); “I’m still not sure if they’re really able to evaluate their competence ... I am not quite sure and they’re not sure. They ask me ‘can I?’ ... they really don’t know sometimes what they’re ticking off” (Teacher 3); “[The pupils] couldn’t judge themselves. They thought they were much better than they really were” (Teacher 5). These experiences were noted in other European projects and may, of course, relate to the newness of the activity for the students.

Another difficulty in the area of responses to the ELP lies in the suitability (or not) for every student. One teacher comments: “There are just some students who cannot be bothered [to work on the ELP]” (Teacher 3), and this, of course, was borne out by comments in the Teachers’ meeting (see Appendix 2 and responses to the student questionnaires). Another teacher tried to categorise levels of interest and according to types of students: “Es gibt einige ... die

sowieso selbständig lernen, die können gut umgehen, die machen das sozusagen aus diesem Ehrgeiz ... die sind ja interessiert, auch, diese Art Dokumentation zu haben. Und die, die weniger strukturiert sind, da müsste man, glaube ich, das Portfolio wirklich als konsequente Unterrichtsarbeit mit verwenden" (Teacher 1). It is interesting in this connection that the teacher in the gifted and able stream found that her pupils were enthusiastic and were already used to working independently: "sind die Schüler eigentlich sehr selbständig und frei in ihrer Art zu lernen" (Teacher 2). It may be over-hasty to try and identify which student groups might favour the ELP or not but it is clear both from this research and the evaluations of other pilot projects that the ELP is not universally welcomed by all students.

Interestingly, it may be that students can be more influenced by group-peer pressure than their own personal responses. One teacher mentions that in her own rather non-enthusiastic group "One or two students are quite interested. They did not dare to say so in front of the others because they were afraid of the general climate". (Teacher 4). This idea of a 'group ethos' was also noted in the analysis of the student questionnaires.

The teachers' comments then on implementation difficulties re-iterate some of the experiences of ELP praxis in other countries but also pointed out some fundamental problem areas in the conceptualization of the Portfolio.

### **Integration with school and the outside world**

There were mixed responses to the notion of how useful the Portfolio would be in the outside world. One teacher felt that the ELP would be useful to take to university interviews if these were introduced in Austria. "They're talking about doing things like that in Austria too ... then they [the pupils] could actually bring it [the ELP] along ... They can actually show what they've done" (Teacher 6). Other teachers were more sceptical, either themselves, or reporting on their students' attitudes: "we were told that students could use it for interviews when they go to employers and present their stuff and that would be an advantage for them, but I'm not sure about this" (Teacher 5). "My students are quite old and they were very sceptical ... who's going to be interested anyway [in the ELP] ? Will anybody have the time to look through it? (Teacher 4) These comments echo views mentioned earlier on the face-validity of the ELP.

Also on the macro-level in terms of integration there is the growth of different kinds of assessment (including film for example) where the ELP might prove a more flexible means. One teacher comments: "da man da viel mit Filmen auch erreichen kann ... wenn ich die Sache festhalten kann, und nachher noch einmal anschauen kann, oder anhören halt, das hat schon eine andere Qualität ... es gibt einfach immer sehr viele Kanäle über die soetwas funktionieren kann" (Teacher 2). This multi-modality echoes ideas expressed for example, by Kress (2003) on the shift towards new modes of communication in our electronic age.

Integration within the school is also important and here there were several useful ideas voiced. Most importantly the issue of timing was mentioned as one which will have an influence on the success or failure of the ELP in any one context. "Timing" here is taken on two levels: either in terms of the phase of schooling where the ELP is introduced, or in terms of the moment in the school year when it is used. In terms of the phase for starting there seemed consensus between the three teachers that mentioned this aspect that "early" was better than "late". One teacher pointed to the difficulty of having started too late in their school career with her group: "One of the problems was that they were too old and too busy with their Matura work and too far into learning ...and it was too late for them to really realise what progress they were making" (Teacher 4). The other two teachers emphasised the importance of using the ELP at primary level: "I think it would also be important to start early. I think in primary

school you do have time for introducing and it's a lot simpler, but they're used to the procedure". (Teacher 3); "So actually what one should do is really start at a very early age so that then the teacher's work is less than when they're in the upper form"(Teacher 6). This seems eminently practical advice but of course requires a policy initiative rather than individual school initiatives. The ELP represents a new way of considering assessment and understanding learning and clearly the more used pupils are to the procedures the more useful and efficient the process will become.

The other kind of timing is more within the control of the teacher, namely choosing an appropriate period within the school year. There were different suggestions from the three teachers who raised this issue. One teacher suggested the beginning of the school year: "Probably when you're least busy ... The beginning of the school year is probably easy because you need to collect ..." (Teacher 3). Another teacher specified definitely not this moment: "You can't do it at the beginning of the school year because they've already forgotten over the holidays so you have to give them time" (Teacher 6). The third teacher specified a different time: "We have weeks before the end of the first semester ... you have two or three or five days or so and the students know nothing is going to happen ... this was the time when I used it [the ELP] or immediately after a test ... I used it in these periods and I think that was a good idea" (Teacher 5). Here, rather than identifying an optimum moment in the school year to introduce the ELP, it is the principle of taking timing into account that is important and which is likely to be influential in the success or future of the ELP.

For some teachers the ELP represented similar practice to what they were already doing. Thus, one teacher allocates specific exercises to go into the portfolio: "Wir kombinieren das insofern, also indem ... sie bestimmte Aufgaben ins Portfolio legen sollen, mir dann auch ... sie müssen aber nicht, sie können es überarbeiten lassen und so weiter" (Teacher 1). Another teacher had already established the practice of collecting together good pieces of work in preparation for the Matura: "We'll use it to collect your good exercises and prove what you can do in our system. I think it works best when they keep things for their Matura, their final exam" (Teacher 6).

For some other teachers there are identified areas in language work where the ELP may or may not offer an alternative means of assessment. This line of thought lay behind some of the questions in the Teacher Questionnaire analysed earlier). One teacher, for example, commented on the lack of listening and comprehensive reading assessment in her language; "In Spanish .. gibt es ja überhaupt kein Hörverstehen, da wird ja überhaupt nichts evaluiert ... das Leseverstehen irgendwie so automatish irgendwie so durchrutsht, dass man auch nicht in dem Sinne evaluiert". In these circumstances the ELP seems to offer something positive: "um einfach so diese Bewusstmachung, dass das auch Lernprozesse sind, die da durchgeführt werden" (Teacher 1).

Another teacher points to the difficulties that students have with global understanding of texts in general: "da ist eine Sache, die mit der Fremdsprache wenig zu tun hat. Das ist überhaupt ein Problem, das viele haben, einen Text global zu verstehen ... denke ich mir, das ist etwas, das in der Schule geschult werden muss". In this context the ELP with its wide range of tasks may be helpful in broadening students' awareness.

Another teacher comments on the predominance of written language for the students (and this also surfaced in answers to the student questionnaire): "the kids very much tend to concentrate on the written work. Whatever they have on the written work is what they think is the most important"(Teacher 6). Because the ELP spreads out the emphasis across the four skills this should help to diffuse this tendency for a single focus.

One skill mentioned by a further teacher links more to intercultural competence and should thus be catered for more satisfactorily by the ELP: “I think there is a fifth skill ... translation ...you have to read, so it's reading comprehension, but you've also got to anticipate the person who reads your translation and you have to combine the two” (Teacher 5). Here the end product should not be “a German text with English vocabulary” but a truly mediated text demonstrating cultural understanding. The aims in the original Council of Europe document included such intercultural mediation so this skill seems an ideal candidate to be catered for by the ELP.

## Conclusions

It seems that:

- generally the ELP has mixed reception with students and teachers, with teachers being more positive. This reflects similar findings in the prior projects;
- many details of responses fit in with responses in other countries: liking the autonomy, flexibility, transparency, consistency across Europe; disliking the size, layout and unsuitability for some students;
- some particular aspects emerged which seemed to have had less emphasis in the other projects:
  - the very personal nature of the ELP;
  - the difference between snapshot and global assessment (the former appearing to feature more in listening activities);
  - the need for ‘real’ language situation;
  - the need for clarity to reveal an existing coherence between the ELP and current practice.

It seems that the ELP can offer a great deal to the educational world but perhaps, this world is not yet ready to exploit its full potential. One teacher summed this up in a helpful way: “There’s a complete change of culture that’s needed, a complete change in feedback that we should give students. A change in focus. They should be much more at the centre, much more active and dynamic in their learning process. They’re so passive. They wait for us to tell them things ... they’re not ready to accept that it’s a continuous learning process” (Teacher 4). The ELP both captures continuity of learning and also offers the opportunity to put responsibility in the hands of the learners. This research has shown that this opportunity has been seized in many contexts although there are many areas where aspects could be rethought or changed.

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