The European Language Portfolio in a Japanese University

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The European Language Portfolio (ELP) was conceived and developed alongside the Common European Framework of Reference for languages (CEFR) as a tool for enhancing, guiding and reporting on levels of language attainment. In some situations it successfully raised student motivation and autonomy, by fostering independent study and directing learner progress. With the acceptance and spread of the CEFR beyond Europe and into Asia, an investigation into the use of the ELP in an Asian context is warranted. This paper reports on a study into the implementation of the ELP in a university in Japan. Students used the portfolio for one semester, and then answered a questionnaire survey to give their opinions about the portfolio. While the results of the questionnaire showed mixed reactions in regard to its value for students, some important insights were given that will prove helpful for those wishing to develop a language portfolio in their own educational context.

ヨーロッパ言語ポートフォリオ（ELP）は、言語技能の向上、指導、および記録の手段として、ヨーロッパ言語共通参照枠（CEFR）と共に着想され発展してきた。ELPを用いて自主的な学習を効果的に促すことによって、学習者の意欲や自律性を向上させることに成功した例もある。今日CEFRがヨーロッパを越えアジア地域にまで普及している現状を鑑みると、ELP導入に関する調査、研究の範囲もアジア地域に拡張していくことが求められよう。そこで本稿では、日本の大学で実施したELPの導入とその分析結果について報告した。一学期間ポートフォリオを使用した学生を対象にアンケートを実施し、感想や意見を収集した。ポートフォリオが学生から高評価を得たとは言い難いが、本研究によって得られた知見は、今後ランゲージ・ポートフォリオを開発、導入したいと考えている英語教育者にとって重要な一助となろう。

The European Language Portfolio (ELP) has been used for over a decade throughout Europe as an effective tool for promoting language learning. The two main functions of this document are evaluative and pedagogical. It aims to

formally record learning and intercultural experiences of diverse kinds and also to provide direction and purpose for future language study. Both teachers and learners have reported benefits from using the ELP, in such areas as fostering student autonomy, raising awareness of the language learning process, building motivation, and providing clarity and focus to language curricula.

This paper will explain the rationale behind developing a Japanese version of the ELP, called the Japanese Language Portfolio (henceforth, JLP). A description of its development and implementation will also be given. Student perceptions regarding the language portfolio will be presented and discussed, which will provide the foundation for making some practical suggestions for using a language portfolio with Japanese learners.

The Rationale Behind Developing a Japanese Language Portfolio

The ELP is based upon the Common European Framework of Reference for languages (CEFR), and functions as a tool to help contextualize the CEFR into local educational environments. It was originally piloted from 1998 to 2000 in a number of European states. The final report of the pilot project stated, "the ELP, in a variety of forms, has proven itself a valid and innovative pedagogic tool. It helped improve both process and outcome of foreign language learning under widely differing pilot conditions" (Scharer, 2000, p. 9). Since then, subsequent research has shown the ELP to have a positive effect on motivational orientations (Glover, Miric & Aksu, 2005; Sisamakis, 2006), promoting learner autonomy (Gonzalez, 2009; Little, 2009), and enabling students to function actively and independently (Yilmaz & Akcan, 2012). O'Dwyer (2009) introduced the ELP to a Japanese university class and also reported a positive effect on learner autonomy and motivation.

The rationale behind developing a Japanese version of the ELP is twofold. Firstly, the present socio-cultural and educational context of Japan appears ripe for such an innovation. As the Japanese Ministry of Education (MEXT) is pushing toward an educational system that promotes internationalization and "Global Human Resources" (MEXT, 2010), increasing attention is being given

to developing practical English abilities that can be used in a plurilingual and globalized world. However, previous plans of MEXT have been criticized as being divorced from classroom realities and lacking in practicality. Hato argues that those plans were "ill-defined" and "impractical" (Hato, 2005, p. 46), due to the fact that there is no valid framework for describing and assessing L2 attainment. Moreover, in most English programs there is simply not enough hours of classroom instruction available to achieve those goals (Fukuda & Yoshida, 2013).

These two challenges of a lack of clear goals and a lack of time can potentially be addressed by a language portfolio. O'Dwyer (2009) writes,

> The ELP can bring learners incrementally toward the goal of life-long language learning, by highlighting the exact whats, whys, and hows of learning through self-assessment and goal-setting. In short, it creates a focus and transparency missing in most communicative language courses. (p. 19)

The ELP takes the internationally recognized levels of the CEFR and applies them as clear goals to the language classroom. Concerning lack of class time, the most obvious answer is to increase the time outside of class that students spend studying English. One way to do this is to increase motivation and autonomy. In the European context, an ELP has been successful in both these areas (Glover et al., 2005; Gonzalez, 2009; Little, 2009; Sisamakis, 2006).

The second reason for developing a JLP lies with the growing acceptance of the CEFR as a global standard. Most course books from large international publishers (such as Oxford, Cambridge, Cengage and Macmillan) are now rated according to their CEFR level, and in second language assessment discourse the CEFR is referred to with increasing regularity. For educators in Japan faced with the growing influence of the CEFR, a tool to take that framework and apply it to the classroom in practical ways will prove invaluable. A language portfolio that performs the same function as the ELP but is tailored to address the unique needs of Japanese learners could make a valuable contribution in this area.

Language Portfolio Development and Implementation

Following the principles outlined in Schneider and Lenz (2000), a JLP was developed for use in a Japanese university. It has two basic functions: a pedagogic function and a reporting function. The pedagogic function has three purposes. Firstly, to motivate students to improve their language skills and seek new intercultural experiences. Secondly, to help learners plan, undertake and reflect on their learning autonomously. Thirdly, to encourage learners to enhance their intercultural experiences through travel, reading, media and projects (Schneider & Lenz, 2000).

The reporting function aims to comprehensively document the student's language ability and intercultural experiences. It includes items such as TOEIC scores, school certificates and awards. Other kinds of evidence that suggest intercultural competence are also documented, such as participation in homestay programs, intercultural friendships, volunteer work abroad, etc. (Schneider & Lenz, 2000).

Like the ELP, the JLP was divided into three parts: the Language Passport, the Language Biography, and the Language Dossier. It was A4 size, containing 16 colour pages printed on high quality paper, with an attractive design. Instructions were provided in English and Japanese. The main point of departure with the ELP, however, was the self-assessment framework. Instead of the pure CEFR descriptors, the CEFR-J descriptors were used (Tono, 2013). These descriptors are firmly rooted in the CEFR, but aim to provide a more detailed breakdown of proficiency levels that is better suited to Japanese learners.

Participants in the study were first and second year university students at a large university in central Japan. They were all non-English majors, enrolled in a compulsory course of general English. The JLP was trialed in six classes, ranging from basic to intermediate level (roughly CEFR A1 to B1).

At the end of one semester, questionnaires were collected from 125 students, based upon the questionnaires used in Europe during the ELP Pilot Project Phase (Scharer, 2000). The questionnaire consisted of seven questions using a

Likert scale and two free response questions. Descriptive quantitative analysis was performed on the Likert questions. Students' comments to free response questions underwent qualitative analysis; the comments were coded after multiple readings in order to uncover common themes and find patterns in student opinions (Nunan & Bailey, 2009).

Students were given seven multiple response questions, with answers aligned on a 5-point scale ranging from 5 = "strongly yes," to 1 = "strongly no," with 3 = "unsure." The results are shown in Table 1.

Table 1
Language Portfolio Student Questionnaire Survey N = 125

Question	Percentage of responses					Average score out of 5
	Strong yes	Yes	Unsure	No	Strong no	
1. Does the Language Portfolio allow you to show what you can do in English and other foreign languages?	7.2	52.8	29.6	10.4	0	3.57
2. Does the Language Portfolio help you see progress in learning?	12	56.8	24.8	6.4	0	3.74
3. Does the Language Portfolio help you assess your competence?	11.2	52.8	25.6	10.4	0	3.65
4. Does the Language Portfolio stimulate you to participate more fully in the language learning process?	4	23.2	37.6	33.6	1.6	2.94
5. Do you think that the time spent on keeping your Language Portfolio was time well spent?	7.2	39.2	36	16.8	0.8	3.35
6. Do you think all learners should be encouraged to keep a Language Portfolio?	6.4	27.2	46.4	17.6	2.4	3.18
7. Does keeping a Language Portfolio help you to do self-study outside of the classroom?	7.2	37.6	32.8	20.8	1.6	3.28

Generally, the data seem to show that students were slightly favorable towards the language portfolio, tending to answer most questions in the positive. However, in most responses over a quarter were "unsure," and this increased to almost half the responses in Question 6 (46.4%), which asked, "Do you think all learners should be encouraged to keep a language portfolio?". The most positive feedback concerned students being able to see progress in learning (Question 2) and being able to assess their competence (Question 3).

The final two questions allowed students to freely express their opinions. Question 8 asked, "What do you like best about your language portfolio?" while Question 9 asked, "What do you like least about your language portfolio?" By far the most positive response was that the JLP allowed students to understand their own level of language ability (36 comments). "I can understand at a glance my own English ability," wrote one student, while others wrote, "My language ability is able to be looked at objectively," and "I can get a general feeling for my practical ability." Students said they appreciated being able to know their strengths and weaknesses, aided by the detail of the CEFR-J descriptors.

The second thing students liked best about their portfolio was that they could show their language learning history (11 comments). One student liked that "The results from past exams can be seen," and another wrote, "I'm able to bring together everything I've experienced in English up until now," and "[The language portfolio] makes it easy for me to look back and reflect on my English study." Many students had a sense of satisfaction in looking back over their past learning experiences, both within and without the formal education system, and seeing their progress.

The most common recurring comment as to what students liked least about the JLP was that they didn't understand it (16 comments). For example, "There were a lot of difficult questions that I couldn't understand," "The basis for making a [self-] assessment was too vague," and "It was difficult to evaluate my own level using the CEFR-J." Other negative comments were made by students who didn't see the relevance of the JLP to their study. "I don't think this is necessary for English study," wrote one learner, and another, "Because this is self-evaluation, it doesn't have any meaning." A few learners commented that they would have put

more effort into using the JLP if it had contributed to their final grades.

Discussion

The strongest claim that can be made from the questionnaire results is that the students in this study were "unsure" of the value of using the language portfolio. Some students had doubts about their own ability to do self-evaluation, some found the can-do statements difficult to understand, and in general, there seemed to be a lack of understanding as to the reasons behind its use. However, the students who did understand the aims and objectives of the JLP affirmed its utility for their own language learning, and expressed favourable attitudes towards it. These students valued the JLP primarily because it allowed them to see progress in learning. They could clearly record their current level of language attainment, showing how far they had progressed while also pointing the way to future learning objectives. Accordingly, the JLP helped to foster a sense of achievement. This is a key area in which the JLP can make a positive contribution to English education in Japan. The failure of English education to foster a sense of achievement is a major concern of some educators of late (Clark, 2010), while Dörnyei argues that monitoring learner progress increases learning satisfaction (Dörnyei, 2001).

Just under half of the respondents said that time spent keeping their language portfolio was "well spent," indicating that many students do not attach much value to the JLP. However, there was a great deal of uncertainty regarding student opinions, as evidenced by the large proportion of "unsure" answers. In the future, more care will need to be taken to clearly explain the function and purpose of the JLP. As the experience of using an ELP in Finland indicates,

> the teacher also needs to justify the benefits of reflection to the students and explain why she is asking them to reflect on their learning and assess their communicative knowledge, skills and attitudes. Once the students realize the purpose of reflection and self-assessment they have crossed the basic motivational threshold for reflective activities in class. (Kohonen, 2002, p. 88)

The JLP piloted in this study will need to be refined in order to better fulfill

the purposes for which it was created. Much care and deliberation needs to be taken in explaining the goals of the JLP, and in making evident the value of its pedagogical and reporting functions. A few students admitted that because the JLP didn't contribute to their final grades, they lacked the necessary motivation to use it to its full extent. Incorporating a JLP into the core components of a language course would provide the necessary extrinsic motivation for students to get the most value from it, rather than just offering a JLP as an optional extra.

Students will also need to be trained in the process of self-evaluation. This was a foreign concept for many of the respondents, and they struggled with it. To help with that, it is recommended that students write in their JLP every lesson. The teacher can tell students the learning goal at the start of the lesson, and then students can check the corresponding can-do statement at the end of the lesson. One student liked this process because "I can understand the goal of every lesson and keep it in mind as I'm studying." Of course, if the curriculum is not based on CEFR-J descriptors, the portfolio developer could use the learning goals of his or her particular language program.

And here is the crux of the issue – for any version of a Language Portfolio to have a chance of success in Japan, it must be woven tightly through the fabric of the language program and not just sewn on to the outside as a patch. It needs to consolidate all that the students are doing in class from lesson to lesson and from one semester to the next, as well as independent study and extra-curricular cross cultural experiences. The goals of the program need to be stated explicitly and written clearly in the can-do statements, and students helped to evaluate their own progress in achieving those goals. Without such tight integration, as this study suggests and the European experience has shown (Little, 2014), any language portfolio will not achieve the purpose for which it was created.

Conclusion

As educators in Japan turn their attention to building global citizens, the increasing recognition of the importance of regional languages and plurilingualism have created a fertile environment for the development of a JLP. The ELP provides a helpful platform for developing a portfolio tailored to address local and regional

needs. From the point of view of students, the biggest challenges will be training learners in the process of self-evaluation, and guiding them to appreciate its value. As already noted, there is no one-size-fits-all approach to designing a language portfolio. The challenge for teachers is to create a portfolio template that is adapted to their unique teaching situation, while also adhering to a common standard that is understood domestically and internationally. The JLP used in the current study has made some contribution toward that end, but needs further improvement.

However, as Little (2002) notes,

From a pedagogical point of view the ELP is a tool that can be used well or badly, which means that empirical methods of evaluation cannot prove that 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 ELP models. (p. 188)

It is quite possible that the success of a particular JLP would not be repeated in a different educational environment or with a different method of implementation. Therefore, the focus of the present study is not to make a categorical statement about the worth of language portfolios in the Japanese context, but rather to gauge the effectiveness of one particular language portfolio, and so help make a contribution to future dialogue concerning the place of language portfolios in Japan.

Acknowledgements

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