

# Piloting the Uzbek Model of the European Language Portfolio: Preliminary Results

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This study presents the preliminary results of introducing the European Language Portfolio (ELP) to the pre-service English teacher training program courses in the higher education institutions in Uzbekistan. Despite the Common European Framework of Reference (CEFR) being introduced to the Uzbek education system in 2013, the teacher-centred approach to teaching continues to highly prevail in language classrooms. The aim of introducing the ELP was to suggest an alternative tool to foster learner autonomy, self-assessment and reflective thinking skills in ELP users. This move would shift towards a more learner-centred approach to teaching. The data was collected using survey and interview methods. The collected quantitative data was statistically analysed and interpreted. The findings suggest that the ELP was a totally new concept for students and they highly appreciated the opportunities offered by the ELP. When applied to pre-service English teacher training students, they identified its potential for use in their own teaching practices.

**Keywords:** *European language portfolio, Self-assessment, Learner autonomy, Reflective thinking, Pre-service language teacher education, CEFR.*

## Introduction

The portfolio approach in education had been practised long before the introduction of the European Language Portfolio. However, it was the European Language Portfolio that introduced the tool to many areas of language teaching and learning in various contexts, ranging from Ireland to Japan, and the Russian Federation to Vietnam. The European Language Portfolio, as a tool that reflects the philosophy of the Common European Framework of Reference (CEFR), was adopted in many countries which introduced the CEFR in their language curriculum and foreign languages learning policies. Nevertheless, according to David Little, this enthusiasm had not lasted long and interest in the ELP's use had been declining until 2018, when the CEFR Companion Volume with New Descriptors

(Council of Europe, 2018) was published by the Council of Europe. This volume encourages language educators to revisit the ELP and consider its functionalities even further (Little, 2016).

In the Uzbek context, the concept of portfolio in education is not new. The portfolio approach has been successfully implemented in in-service teacher training courses provided for secondary and post-secondary education level teachers. However, the language portfolio and the European Language Portfolio is a new tool in the context of Uzbekistan, although it has been eight years since the introduction of the CEFR based curriculum for all levels of education in the country. The present paper presents the preliminary results of piloting the Uzbek Model of European Language Portfolio which has been developed since 2014. The given model's implementation context was pre-service English teacher training programs offered in higher education institutions. It is suggested that the introduction of the ELP should start from teacher education programs, as it enables the future teachers of English to get insight into the idea of the portfolio approach, experience its use and reflect on the application of its use in their own teaching.

The Uzbek Model of the ELP, as required by the Language Policy Department of the Council of Europe, consists of three parts: language passport, language biography, and dossier. The language passport was not developed for the model. Instead the template language passport provided by the Council of Europe was used without any changes. In developing the language biography and the dossier sections of the ELP, they were developed to fit the content, structure and assessment types employed in the pre-service English teacher training programs. The piloting of the Uzbek Model of the ELP took place in Gulistan State University, during semester one of the 2019–2020 academic year.

The aim of the study is to verify whether the proposed model of the ELP functions appropriately in terms of:

- promoting self-assessment in language learners;
- facilitating familiarisation with CEFR levels;
- promoting autonomy in language learning and perceived ease of use and convenience for the owners of the ELP;
- developing students reflective thinking skills.

## **Literature Review**

The concept of the European Language Portfolio (ELP) was developed in parallel with the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages (Little, 2016). It is the “I can” checklists that are included in the ELP, which make it closely linked to the CEFR and which are the derivatives of illustrative scales given in the CEFR (Little, 2016). According to Little

(2016), the idea behind developing the ELP was to support and boost autonomy in language learning, intercultural awareness and communicate the CEFR philosophy to the learners of languages. Another important reason for developing the ELP, as Little (2016) claims, was partly to encourage learner centeredness.

Since its first introduction, the ELP has proven to be a very effective tool in fostering areas of language education. There are several positive impacts of the ELP, reported by various scholars in different contexts. Stoicheva, Hughes, and Speitz (2009) report a very positive effect of the ELP on textbooks' development. The ELP enabled textbook writers to align their materials to the CEFR levels and include activities on reflection and self-assessment using the CEFR descriptive scales. In terms of teaching, Stoicheva, Hughes, and Speitz (2009) also report that those teachers, who used the ELP in their teaching practice, stated a total recognition of their way of teaching. The implementation of the ELP in secondary schools enabled teachers to see what their students had done before in language learning, e.g. track their progress.

The ELP also encourages users to be more aware of their language learning objectives. Oscarson and Oscarson (2010), in their research conducted in the context of Swedish secondary and upper secondary school systems, revealed that alternative forms of assessment of the ELP and the CEFR based assessments were not used very often in the context. Those who used the ELP as a tool for alternative assessment reported the helpfulness of the ELP in enhancing language awareness. Moreover, the respondents claimed that due to the use of the ELP, they had a better understanding of the CEFR principles and descriptive scales.

The ELP has been the object of studies in various contexts and is proven to be a helpful tool in enhancing other domains of language learning as well. Glover, Mirici, and Aksu (2005) suggest that through self-reflection promoted by the ELP, learners develop autonomy and responsibility for their language learning. Numerous studies outlined the benefits of the ELP in promoting self-assessment using the CEFR descriptive scales and given in the form of "I can" checklists in the ELP (Little & Perclova, 2001). Self-assessment is a complex process with regards to language learning. Hung (2009), in his research into the value of self-assessment in writing practice through the use of e-portfolios, suggests employing portfolios in familiarising students with self-assessment practices in language learning.

In a wide variety of educational contexts, scholars reported the effectiveness of the pedagogical and reporting functions of the ELP. In the Czech context, Little and Perclova (2001) observed how the ELP helped teachers to reflect on their teaching. In the Finnish context, Kohonen and Westoff (2003) reported on how the ELP assisted language teachers in promoting learners' autonomy and their responsibility for language learning. In their research, Meister (2005) focussed on the reporting functions of the ELP and summarised that

the ELP helped learners to keep the records of their language learning experience and how self-assessment and teacher-assessment had been integrated into this process.

Another important feature of portfolios, and which is often discussed in light of the portfolio approach in language teaching and learning, is reflection. According to Sharifi and Hassaskhah (2011), there was a substantial use of reflection in the teaching of foreign languages during the last decades. Swarzenbruder describes reflection as “thinking about thinking” (in Sharifi & Hassakhah, 2011). In language learning, especially from the portfolio approach perspective, reflection is seen as an invaluable part of autonomous learning, since it enables students to reflect on their language learning practice, determine successful learning events and apply the techniques used in this event in the subsequent learning situations. In most parts of the ELP, the elements of reflective practice are instilled effectively. For instance, the language biography aspect of the ELP is built around the reflective practice. The self-assessment checklist also enables users of the ELP to reflect on their skills and abilities and determine their capabilities in the target language.

In this study, the students’ reflective practice and reflective skills development is studied in light of David A. Kolb’s experiential learning theory (Kolb, 1984). According to Kolb (1984, p.38), “learning is the process whereby knowledge is created through the transformation of experience”.

Kolb’s experiential learning cycle is built around four stages of learning, which are: stage one, experience; stage two, reflection on the experience; stage three, forming abstract notions and generalisations; and stage four, testing of the implications of concepts in new situations. Dearman et al. (2014) states that portfolio based learning is not a teacher led or expert led knowledge formation. Instead, it is a process where the learner is at the centre of learning and the learning is informed by active experience and reflection on the experience. Therefore, in the given research, experiential learning theory (ELT) will be used as a guiding framework for the qualitative part of the research and interpretation of the interview data.

## **Methodology**

The research employs a mixed-method approach. The questionnaire was used in identifying the effectiveness of the proposed model of the ELP and an interview was conducted with selected students who used the ELP.

The study was carried out among five groups of first year undergraduate level students of the Gulistan State University, taking the 5111400: Foreign Language and Literature course. Overall, the number of students who took part in the study was 150 (group one had 31 students; group two had 30 students; group three had 28 students; group four had 32 students;

and group five had 29 students). As the results of the statistical data analysis were significantly close between each of the five groups, only one group's results are presented in the tables provided in the subsequent sections.

The age of the participants ranged from 17 to 25 (Standard Deviation (SD) = 0.55). The number of years of the students' language learning ranged from one to 11 years (SD = 0.63).

In the research, the survey, adopted from Perclova, was used to collect quantitative data on the use of the ELP. The survey contained five-level Likert Scale questions and they were divided into four sections. A set of questions in the first section of the survey addressed the potential benefits of the ELP in promoting self-assessment in language learning. The second section aimed to collect data on the use of the ELP in familiarising students with the CEFR levels. The third section addressed the usefulness of the ELP in promoting learner autonomy. The last and fourth section of the survey was focussed on the perceived ease of use and convenience of the ELP.

A semi-structured interview was conducted with selected students, who completed all parts of the ELP during the pilot stage.

The data collected through the questionnaire was statistically tested using the IBM SPSS Version 17. The interview responses of the participants were analysed using a coding and categorical approach.

## **Results and Discussion**

### ***Questionnaire***

In this section, the analysis and interpretation of the research results are presented and discussed in the order of four sub-sections.

### ***The ELP and Self-Assessment***

The first section of the questionnaire was designed to understand the benefits of the ELP in students' self-assessment of their language skills, according to the CEFR levels. According to the results, 45.2 per cent of the respondents strongly agreed, 45.2 per cent agreed, and 9.7 per cent were neutral in terms of the ELP's function in showing them what they could do in a foreign language. The next question in the first section addressed the ability of the ELP to show the respondents the level they possess in a foreign language. The results of the survey indicate that 25.8 per cent of the respondents strongly agreed on the usefulness of the ELP to evaluate where they stand in language learning. Meanwhile, 61.3 per cent agreed on this

statement, and 12.9 per cent of the survey participants neither agreed nor disagreed. Most of the respondents strongly agreed (34.5 per cent) and agreed (54.8 per cent) on the usefulness of the ELP in identifying the level they want to achieve in the language learning process. Next, nearly half of the respondents strongly agreed (48.4 per cent) on the helpfulness of the ELP in understanding their language learning objectives. The descriptive statistical information on the other remaining questionnaire items is presented in Table 1. Similar results were obtained in the studies conducted by Perclova (2006), conducted in the context of Czech primary and lower-secondary schools. In the Czech context, 88.6 per cent of the 701 participants admitted the usefulness of the ELP in showing what they can do in a foreign language. A further 69.5 per cent of respondents admitted the usefulness of the ELP in seeing their progress in language learning.

**Table 1:** The ELP and Self-Assessment

<b>Survey Items</b>	<b>Mean</b>	<b>Median</b>	<b>Mode</b>	<b>SD</b>
<i>The ELP allows me to show what I can do in a foreign language.</i>	4.3548	4.0000	4.00	0.66073
<i>The ELP is useful to evaluate where one stands.</i>	4.1290	4.0000	4.00	0.61870
<i>The ELP allows me to see clearly what level I want to achieve.</i>	4.6774	5.0000	5.00	0.54081
<i>The ELP helps me to understand the foreign language learning objectives.</i>	4.2581	4.0000	4.00	0.63075
<i>The ELP helps me to self-assess my language skills.</i>	4.4194	4.0000	5.00	0.62044
<i>The ELP helps me to see progress in my language learning.</i>	4.0645	4.0000	4.00	0.72735
<i>The ELP helped me to learn English better.</i>	3.9677	4.0000	4.00	0.75206
<i>I find the ELP useful, it helps to know what one still needs to learn.</i>	4.0000	4.0000	4.00	0.89443

### ***The ELP and CEFR Levels Familiarisation***

The questions provided in the second section of the questionnaire were asked to understand the use of the ELP in familiarising the participants with the CEFR scales and descriptors. Nearly half of the respondents (48.4 per cent) strongly agreed and 29 per cent agreed that the ELP enabled them to understand the CEFR descriptors better. It is worthwhile to mention that before the implementation of the ELP with the piloting groups, a brief introductory lecture and practice activities to the CEFR were conducted within the practical sessions of the Independent Study Skills module. A majority of the respondents admitted their enthusiasm in comparing their language competence to the CEFR Scales, and admitted that the ELP helped them to understand the CEFR better (see Table 2). It is worth mentioning that this potential of

the ELP and use of the ELP in familiarising users has never been studied before. Especially, the future teachers of languages with the CEFR descriptors and scales, which has to be considered separately with a specific research design.

**Table 2:** The ELP and CEFR Levels

Survey Items	Mean	Median	SD
<i>I like to compare my language competence to CEFR Scales.</i>	3.6129	4.0	0.91933
<i>The ELP helps to understand CEFR levels better.</i>	4.1613	4.0	1.03591
<i>The ELP helps to understand CEFR principles better.</i>	3.8710	4.0	0.67042

### ***The ELP and Learner Autonomy***

The third section questions provided in the survey addressed the potential of the ELP in developing learners' autonomy in language learning. The statistical data provided in Table 3 indicates that most of the students appreciated the ability of the ELP in promoting their autonomy in the language learning process. Similar results were obtained in the piloting studies carried out by Little and Perclova (2001), Oscarson and Oscarson (2010), and Kohonen and Westoff (2003). In the study conducted by Perclova (2006), almost 82.5 per cent of the 701 participants of the study admitted that the ELP's use should be encouraged among all students. In our context, the results suggest that most of the respondents want to see the ELP used as a part of their language learning process. Another important result obtained from the pilot study is that most of the respondents (45.2 per cent) admitted to the helpfulness of the ELP in reflecting on their language learning process. The potential of the ELP in promoting reflective thinking in terms of the language learning experience was outlined in the studies by Little (2001; 2016), Perclova (2006), and O'Dwyer (2011).

**Table 3:** The ELP and Learner Autonomy

Survey Items	Mean	Median	Mode	SD
<i>The ELP stimulates me to participate in the language learning process fully.</i>	3.8065	4.0	4.00	0.87252
<i>I like having an ELP as part of my language learning.</i>	4.0000	4.0	4.00	1.00000
<i>The ELP puts more responsibility on me as a learner.</i>	4.0968	4.0	4.00	0.65089
<i>Time spent on keeping my ELP was well spent time.</i>	3.9355	4.0	4.00	0.72735
<i>All language learners should be encouraged to keep a portfolio.</i>	3.8710	4.0	4.00	0.92166
<i>The ELP helps to reflect on language learning.</i>	5.2258	4.0	4.00	7.23284

### *The ELP and Its Ease of Use*

The last and fourth section of the questionnaire was included to evaluate the convenience of the ELP's use for students and their perceived ease of portfolio use in the educational process. Unlike the Czech context, where the majority (69.8 per cent) of participants admitted that the ELP use took too much time (Perclova, 2006), the participants of the present study did not agree that the ELP is time consuming. Only 6.5 per cent of participants strongly agreed and 9.7 per cent agreed that the ELP use is a labourious process. Another parallel between Perclova's (2006) study in the Czech context and our study, is that most of the students in both of the contexts agreed that school and university marks are not sufficient in the assessment of language learning.

The next questions of the section were posed to know the respondents' opinion regarding the inclusion of the ELP as a part of their language learning experience at university (see Table 4). The results and the statistical data indicate that most of the participants of the pilot study considered the ELP model as a useful tool in their language learning process and would like to see the ELP used as part of their university studies.

**Table 4:** Perceived Ease of Use and Convenience of the ELP

<b>Survey Items</b>	<b>Mean</b>	<b>Median</b>	<b>Mode</b>	<b>SD</b>
<i>The ELP takes up too much time.</i>	2.5484	2.0000	2.00	1.05952
<i>The ELP is a waste of time — university subject marks are sufficient.</i>	2.2258	2.0000	1.00	1.20304
<i>The ELP should be connected with teaching and the work in class.</i>	3.3548	4.0000	4.00	1.27928
<i>The ELP should be part of regular lessons at the university.</i>	3.5484	4.0000	4.00	1.26065
<i>The ELP should be brought up to date (filled in) once a month.</i>	3.3226	4.0000	4.00	1.30095
<i>The ELP makes sense if used regularly.</i>	3.6452	4.0000	4.00	0.98483
<i>The ELP improves the dialogue between me and my teacher(s).</i>	3.3548	4.0000	4.00	1.17042

### *Interview*

The purpose of the interview was to first triangulate the survey results and test the applicability of Kolb's experiential learning theory to the ELP's use, specifically in the parts that require students to reflect on their language learning experience and the application of the learned skills and knowledge. Semi-structured interview was considered appropriate for the study, since it enables the interviewer to ask probing and additional questions to obtain in-

depth responses from interviewees. Ten out of 150 students were invited to participate in the interview. Convenience sampling was used in identifying the interview participants for the study. A full, accurate and neat compilation of the ELP was the main criteria in selecting the interview participants. The interview was conducted in the native language of the participants.

Three categories were identified before the interview for coding purposes. They include:

1. ELP and self-assessment
2. ELP and Learner Autonomy
3. Reflective Practice while Using ELP

### ***The ELP and Self-Assessment***

Seven out of 10 interview participants admitted that the use of the ELP helped them to see what they can do, not only in the English language but also in the Russian language, which they were learning in the first semester of their university studies. They were pleased with the fact that the ELP is applicable not only to English but also to other foreign languages. They also admitted that they developed a criticising view towards their own accomplishments in the English language. Two participants, *Nazokat* and *Mohira*, also admitted that they constantly checked the self-assessment checklist in the ELP whenever they did the writing, listening or reading tasks at home and tried to identify their level in terms of the particular text level. When asked about the benefits of self-assessment, the participants mentioned the future application of the ELP and they admitted that it can be helpful for them to prepare for international standardised tests, such as the IELTS and national testing system. Three out of 10 participants mentioned the benefit of knowing about self-assessment and practicing it at university for their future profession as an English teacher. Moreover, the participants of the study acknowledged that now they know what level they need to reach by the end of their studies at university (according to the State Educational Standard of Uzbekistan, graduates of the faculties specialised in foreign languages should possess CEFR C1 level by the end of the baccalaureate level) Similar to Hung's (2009) findings, students were concerned with the unofficial nature of self-assessment. They considered that the self-assessment does not play any role in grading their progress in certain language skills development related modules taught at university.

### ***The ELP and Learner Autonomy***

According to the interview results, most of the students who used the ELP started to appreciate the benefit of autonomous learning. They stated that before using the ELP, they had never thought about being autonomous, explicitly. The ELP, as stated by the

interviewees, enabled them to be more organised, plan their studies accordingly, and review their progress constantly. They especially appreciated the third section of the language biography component — the my language learning diary. According to their responses, this component of the ELP enabled them to track what they had done in a week during the university lessons and plan for the next week, the areas they will focus and develop further. It also enabled them to keep the list of idiomatic expressions they had learnt, new words and grammar structures they had encountered for the first time. Again, when asked about the application of the learner autonomy in their future profession, a majority of the respondents admitted that autonomy was not something practised at school separately, and it would be “good to know these ways of developing autonomy in learning English” (Interviewee 2: Muzaffar).

### ***Reflective Practice while Using the ELP***

The most difficult part of analysing the interview results was identifying whether the pilot stage users of the ELP were following Kolb’s learning cycle. Several probing questions and supplementary questions were asked during the interview in order to understand the cycle students followed in using the ELP.

A majority of the respondents admitted that many sections of the ELP required remembering how they had learned English and other foreign languages in the past before getting into the university. They also acknowledged that remembering how they successfully learned the language enabled them to identify the strategies and techniques they would use in learning and developing language skills. One participant stated that it was particularly helpful to remember the situations (place and time) when he had learnt grammar better and he successfully applied the same strategy to learn the advanced level grammar related topic discussed at university. It may be suggested that the overall idea of the ELP follows the cycle of learning suggested by Kolb (1984). It enables the users to reflect on their experience, bring relevant conclusions on the experience, and apply it in future learning events. Interestingly, other previous interview section findings suggest that there is a high possibility that students may be willing to use their ELP experience in their future teaching practices.

Students were unconsciously following Kolb’s learning cycle while reflecting on their successful learning experiences and applying those experiences in learning to the new content at university. However, Kolb’s learning cycle and its reflection in the ELP needs a rigorous investigation, involving experimental design.

## Conclusion and Implications

The present research was a preliminary investigation of implementing the Uzbek Model of the European Language Portfolio in pre-service English teacher training programs.

First, the survey data obtained from the participants and its analysis suggest that the model was successful among the future teachers of English. The ELP enabled its users to possess an artifact that reflects their experience in language learning and documents their progress in this process.

Second, the ELP proved to be effective in terms of its pedagogical function as it introduced students to the concept of self-assessment, which was new for them in their first year at university. Another important advantage of that ELP, according to the students, is that the ELP allowed them to see what level they need to reach by the end of their studies. The results suggest that the ELP may facilitate communication of the curriculum aims, outcomes and levels to the actual participants of the learning process, the students. By reflecting the CEFR based curriculum philosophy, the ELP creates an opportunity to clarify the learning outcomes, which are at times blurry and remain non-transparent to students in official documents, such as a syllabus, curriculum or state educational standards. This may turn the students into central participants of language education.

Third, the education system of Uzbekistan has for many years been heavily reliant on teacher centred approaches to teaching. Teachers at schools and tertiary education institutions are seen as the centre of the educational process. According to the findings of the study, the ELP, in the context of Uzbekistan, fills in the gap by providing alternative methods of developing learner autonomy, moving from a teacher centred to learner centred classroom and developing the reflective thinking skills of students.

Another important and hidden potential of the ELP is in its use with future English teachers. The ELP may provide the students with the tools and techniques of developing learner autonomy, self-assessment and reflective thinking in their own students, in their future teaching practices.

Finally, there are other aspects and areas of the ELP which require further investigation. This includes the role of the ELP in familiarising the students, especially the future teachers of foreign languages with the CEFR. Since the foreign language teachers are seen as one of the stakeholders in the education process, the benefits of in-depth knowledge and familiarisation with the CEFR are enormous.

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