

HELPING TEACHERS TO USE THE EUROPEAN LANGUAGE PORTFOLIO FOR THE BLIND AND VISUALLY IMPAIRED

Diana TSOTOVA¹

Abstract

The article describes a model of the European Language Portfolio specially developed for people with visual impairments within a European project and received the accreditation of the Council of Europe. It outlines specific features of the electronic model, gives a short review of its structure and provides some practical recommendations on introducing the ELPBVI in the language classroom with a particular focus on building of self-evaluative skills. Furthermore, the article briefly presents further initiatives of the developers to disseminate the ELPBVI and support both teachers using the application and individual unsighted language learners.

Keywords: European Language Portfolio, electronic format, blind and visually impaired, self-evaluative skills, self-assessment checklist

The ELPBVI project

The European Language Portfolio for the Blind and Visually Impaired (ELPBVI) was created in 2007-2009 by a European consortium of experts from Bulgaria, Greece, Great Britain, Austria and Germany within a EU-funded project².

The European Language Portfolio (ELP) is a tool developed by the Council of Europe to make the language learning process more transparent to learners and to support the learner's autonomy (Little, D., Goullier, F. and G. Hughes, 2011:7). At the same time the ELP aims to promote the linguistic and cultural diversity and encourages the development of plurilingualism in Europe.

The first model of the European Language Portfolio was introduced in 2001 (the European Year of Languages). Since then, 118 ELP models have been accredited which address the language learning needs of students in different educational sectors and contexts. Each ELP model should consider the age of the students, their social and educational characteristics (such as vocational training, a certain level of general education or education for special needs, etc.) and should provide the ELP in an appropriate format (paper or electronic) for a certain type of learners.

The ELPBVI is a specific model of the ELP and its purpose is to provide unsighted language learners (aged 16 and over) with the opportunities that are contained in

¹ Diana Tsootova, teacher trainer Bulgaria, diana.geleta@gmail.com

² European Language Portfolio for the Blind and Visually Impaired, Project No 225869-CP-1-2005-1-BG-LINGUA-L2, www.elpforblind.eu

the European Language Portfolio. The ELPBVI helps to put language teaching to the blind in the context of the European standards presented in the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages (Council of Europe, 2001).

The aim of this paper is to share information about the ELPBVI and its specific features. Furthermore, we invite language teachers working with visually impaired students to use this model in their classroom.

Specific features of the ELPBVI and its mandatory ELP elements

Teachers who have already used some of the ELP models know that most registered and accredited ELP models are created in paper copy, i.e. they have to be completed by hand. In contrast to them, the model for people with visual disabilities has been developed as an electronic application so that to meet the particular needs of target learners.

The electronic format appeared to be the only possible way to ensure that users with severe visual disabilities have an access to the same benefits that are provided by other ELP models to sighted learners. The ELPBVI is consistent with the international accessibility standards³ offering to blind people a user-friendly navigation adapted to their needs and compatibility of the application with widespread browsers and assistive technologies. Thus, for example, this language portfolio excludes any tables, commonly used in other ELP models, to ensure linear presentation of content. This enables users to read the content and verify the entered by them data through a screen reader or Braille terminal.

The electronic format allows for integration of multiple options such as automatic transfer of data to different sections of the portfolio, calculation of the self-assessment scores, monitoring of learning progress (by recording the dates of self-assessment) etc. Apart from that, the electronic format allows for a number of additional features to facilitate user's performance, such as possibility to print or download the entire portfolio or its selected parts which can be extracted in various formats such as WORD, PDF, HTML and TXT (which allows for printing of the selected texts also in Braille). Furthermore, the user can send the portfolio or its parts by email directly from the electronic application.

At the same time, the ELPBVI is fully compliant with the adopted structure of the ELP and contains the common elements which are mandatory for all language portfolios and which make them recognizable as models of the European Language Portfolio: the 3-part structure, the logo and the texts provided by the Council of Europe Language Policy Division, ELP terminology and standard self-assessment scales.

³ Web Content Accessibility Guidelines (WCAG) 2.0 (Available at: <http://www.w3.org/TR/WCAG20/>)

Like all ELP models, the ELPBVI performs two important functions. Firstly it serves as a reporting informative instrument: it enables users to document in personal profiles their language skills and experiences in a comprehensive, transparent and reliable manner, giving clear information of how the language skills of the ELPBVI profile's holder correlate with the common reference levels of the CEFR.

Along with this, the ELPBVI has a pedagogical function: it encourages unsighted learners to reflect on and expand their language learning experience, helps them to build their self-evaluative skills through the use of special instruments, such as the self-assessment scales and checklists which take into consideration the specific conditions and “constraints” of the blind and visually impaired.

Access to the application

The ELPBVI is free for personal and educational use either online or as desktop application. It is available at <http://elpforblind.eu/elpbvi/front.php>. For online application the user has to create his/her account and further to login with the personal password.

The desktop version is downloadable from the above webpage. After the user has downloaded it on his/her computer, he/she can access it without registration. It is recommend, however, to use whenever possible, the online application rather than the desktop version as all updates made to the online version to facilitate the user are integrated in the user's account keeping safe all information recorded by the user, while the downloaded offline version is not affected by such updates.

A brief review of the ELPBVI structure

Like all language portfolios recognized as the Council of Europe's ELP, the ELPBVI consists of three obligatory parts. They are briefly outlined below.

The ELPBVI Language Passport presents a summary of all the information regarding attainment levels and qualifications of the language user. It also contains additional information for visually impaired users explaining briefly the purpose and structure of this section to make the user aware of what he/she is expected to record in their Language Passport. Each attainment is registered according to the six levels (A1-C2) of the CEFR in relation to the language skills: listening, speaking (divided into spoken interaction and spoken production), reading and writing.

The ELPBVI Language Passport contains two self-assessment scales: the standard one (commonly known as a ‘self-assessment grid’ but presented here as a plain text) and the self-assessment scale adapted for the blind and visually impaired

which presents the same levels of language proficiency considering the particular circumstances of unsighted learners, such as lack of visual clues, environmental conditions (e.g. high level of noise), the need to use special devices (e.g. Braille display, screen reader, etc.) and some others.

The ELPBVI Language Biography gives the visually impaired learners the opportunity to provide a detailed picture, not only of where they have got to with languages, but also of how they got there and how they feel about themselves as a language learner. The first sub-section of the language biography encourages the learner to acknowledge and reflect on all their language learning, both in formal settings and outside the classroom, for example, making a new friend, or working abroad. Such experiences may even have been more important to them than those of their formal education.

The Language Biography provides a link to the self-assessment checklists. Apart from being a tool, which learners use to assess their current achievements and to set and prioritize their goals, the checklists are of high didactic importance, because they enable the learners to think objectively about their progress and, on the other hand, provide a focus for discussion between the learner and the teacher.

The unique feature of the ELPBVI Language Biography is presented in sub-section 'My language learning experience': this part invites the learner to take a quiz reflecting on various language learning activities and finding out which of them he/she prefers or considers the most or the less successful.

The last section of the Biography focuses on intercultural awareness. Here learners should be encouraged to reflect on how effectively they interact with people whose culture differs from their own. The emphasis in this part of the Language Biography is on experiences and encounters of learners with people from different cultures which form their attitudes, rather than on language alone.

The ELPBVI Dossier serves to prove the levels of proficiency and enables the learner to include evidence of his/her attainment. This evidence can take several forms: electronic copies of the learner's diplomas and certificates, scanned copies of texts the learner has written, audio or video recordings of the learner speaking in the target language, etc, statements of people who are competent to testify a successful performance of a practical task in learning environment or on real life situation. There is a number of downloadable templates to help the learner to create the evidences of their language learning achievements.

Apart from the three obligatory parts, the application includes also two reference sections:

The User Guide aims to facilitate navigation and to ensure the effective use of the language portfolio. It outlines the aims of the European Language Portfolio and gives a step-by-step guidance on the work with the language portfolio. The

descriptions of the three parts of the ELPBVI in the User Guide are hyperlinked to the corresponding sections of the language portfolio.

Teacher's Supplement to the User's Guide is also a part of the electronic package of the ELPBVI. This is an instructional manual for teachers which should be read together with the User Guide and has a particular emphasis on how to build the ELPBV into the process of language teaching to the blind. There are concrete suggestions that provide guidance for designing tasks and help the teacher to apply the task-oriented approach in the context of teaching to learners with special needs.

Introducing the ELPBVI to visually impaired students

Teaching foreign languages to students with visual impairments often poses challenges to language teachers. Teacher must always consider the particular circumstances of unsighted language learners and take into account various assistive devices they may use (e.g. screen readers, Braille devices, screen magnification programs, etc). Added to everything else, teaching to blind students may expand and even transform the traditional understanding of language performance (E.g. reading can become listening to screen reader and a task like 'look and describe' transforms into 'touch and describe').

Particular attention should be paid to the development of self-evaluative skills. In the ELPBVI (like in other accredited ELP models) self-assessment is performed with the help of self-assessment checklists. The descriptors contained in these checklists are formulated in the form of tasks (so called "I can do" statements). Successful performance of these tasks means that the learner has achieved a certain level of language competence. Our piloting sessions showed that learners often have difficulties interpreting the descriptors (as they are rich in content but very compact) so they often need help to "unpack" the "I can do" statements so that the task are presented as a specific example derived from a real communicative situation. Thus we have come to the need of providing further illustrative examples ("sub-descriptors") to assist the ELPBVI users in developing their self-evaluative skills. These examples are now built into the ELPBVI self-assessment checklists.

Another important issue is the inclusion of teacher's assessment. The ELPBVI provides an option for the teacher to participation in the assessment process. However, we must remember that one of the underlying principles of the European Language Portfolio is ownership of the ELP by its user. Therefore, the teacher's assessment must never supersede the learner's self-assessment. Rather it should help to focus the discussion between the learner and the teacher when there is a need for clarification as to the level of competence at which the learner is performing and to create a ground for a common understanding of how they feel about the ongoing teaching and learning process.

When introducing the ELPBVI to visually impaired students, it is crucial that the language portfolio is integrated with a language curriculum. It should not be a separate and artificially introduced aspect of the course. Using the ELPBVI the teacher should aim to encourage students to set their personal learning goals, develop self-evaluative and reflective skills and monitor their progress by performing their self-assessment on a regular basis. Only through these steps the students may perceive the benefits of the European Language Portfolio and accept responsibility for their learning.

European accreditation and further steps: 'Tell Me How!' project

In 2010 the ELPBVI model was validated and accredited by the ELP Validation Committee at the Council of Europe (accreditation number 108.2010). The European recognition of the project success inspired the partners to initiate the second ELPBVI project called 'Tell me how!' ⁴ This project is motivated by the desire of partners to support blind and visually impaired people in learning foreign languages. Furthermore, the project aimed to help language teachers to introduce European Language Portfolio in their classroom practice when teaching people with sight loss (both in mainstream education, special educational settings or individual tutoring). Project consortium welcomed new partners from Italy and Malta. Not only has been the geography of the ELPBVI expanded within the 'Tell me how!' project but also this model of the European Language Portfolio became available in Italian.

The main focus of 'Tell Me How' activities has been particularly upon five training workshops for language teachers in partner countries. At these workshops the ELPBVI has been presented as an instrument to better understand learning needs of the visually impaired students and achieve greater success with them. Teachers have been guided through the whole electronic application and encouraged to develop their own ways of working with the ELPBVI.

Moreover, the partners of 'Tell me how!' project have carried out pilot sessions with visually impaired learners in Bulgaria, Malta, Italy, Germany and Greece during which the unsighted language users had the opportunity to really understand the advantages of the multilingual electronic language portfolio to improve the learning process and keep their motivation at high level.

During teacher's workshops and piloting sessions with visually impaired users, a lot of attention has been paid to the development of self-evaluative skills and practical ways of using the results of learners' self-assessment. The focus on this aspect was especially important since within 'Tell Me How' project partners

⁴ "Tell Me How! – Dissemination of the European Language Portfolio for the Blind and Visually Impaired" (ELPBVI+), Project No 511622-LLP-1-2010-1-BG-KA2-KA2AM, www.elpforblind.eu/tellmehow

developed an additional mechanism (in-built examples) to assist learners in understanding and interpreting the language proficiency descriptors.

Conclusion

The two ELPBVI projects highlight the importance of acknowledging the specific needs of blind and visually impaired learners in a positive light. Since this is the first ELP model designed for people with special educational needs, the ELPBVI developers would like to encourage teachers across Europe interested in using this ELP model in their teaching practice to share their experiences.

The ELPBVI consortium is open for cooperation with national bodies and organisations in all European countries wishing to have a version of the ELPBVI in their national language.

Project partners⁵ are grateful to all language experts involved in both ELPBVI projects for their contribution and professional dedication. We also express special thanks to language teachers and students with visual impairments participated in the piloting of this model for their support and stimulating ideas.

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⁵ Euroinform Ltd (Bulgaria), National Association of Blind Entrepreneurs (Bulgaria), Sirma Media (Bulgaria), Helios School for the Blind of Northern Greece (Thessaloniki, Greece), ICC International Language Network (Germany), Language Training London (Great Britain), bfi Steiermark (Austria), Centre for Education and Rehabilitation of the Blind (Greece), AcrossLimits Ltd (Malta), Novacultur Srl (Italy)

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The author

Diana Tsotova is a teacher trainer and coordinator of EU funded language projects such as 'Listen and Touch' (received the Silver award of the European Commission), 'Read It Easy' (raising awareness of the Cyrillic alphabet), ELPBVI, 'Be My Guest' (online course of Russian for hospitality staff), etc. D. Tsotova holds MA degree in linguistics from Moscow Lomonosov University. She collaborates as an external evaluator of language curricula at the National Agency of Vocational Education. She is a co-author of a number of methodological materials developed within EU projects such as 'Learning a Language Through Singing', 'Russian for Intercultural Communication: some notes on social behaviour & cultural context', 'ELPBVI: Teacher's Booklet', etc. Her professional interests include teacher training, early and late bilingualism, teaching languages to SEN learners, development and use of electronic platforms in language learning. Born in Russia, she has been living many years in Bulgaria. D. Tsotova has been awarded an honorary medal for excellence in the implementation and application of EU educational programmes in Bulgaria.