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European Language Portfolio for Deaf and Hard of Hearing People

EMPLOYER'S GUIDE



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An Employer's Guide to the European Language Portfolio, with special reference to the version for the Deaf and Hard of Hearing People (ELPDHH)

The European Language Portfolio, aims and principal features.

The idea of a European Language Portfolio was conceived under the aegis of the Council of Europe (CoE). The primary goal of the CoE is to promote the unity of the continent by fostering mutual respect between its citizens. One approach to this is to promote awareness of a European cultural identity and to develop mutual understanding among people of different cultures. An important element in this mutual understanding is awareness of language diversity, to which an individual's competence in languages other than their mother tongue contributes greatly.

Of particular interest to you is the CoE's wish, through the ELP, to encourage mobility of labour by making it easier for you and your present or prospective employees to be sure that their language proficiency is compatible with the requirements of the job.

In order that individuals might be able to produce evidence of, and reflect upon, their language learning, the CoE proposed the creation of a document in which a record of their personal experience and attainment in languages could be kept. This document was to be called a European Language Portfolio (ELP).

The ELP has two major functions, (a) **reporting** the achievements of the user and (b) assisting the learning and teaching process (**pedagogic**).

The reporting function.

The ELP provides information in both a summarised form (for quick reference) and an extended form (for deeper insights) about the learner's current level of attainment in the languages they have learnt or acquired. It also contains information about the individual's experience of working within cultures other than that of their community of origin.

This information is useful during the educational process, for example at the point of transfer between educational institutions (primary - secondary - higher) where the institution receiving the learner needs to know what point they have reached in their language studies. More importantly, for you, the employer, the ELP can give you a good idea of whether a present or intending employee is likely to be comfortable with and effective in using the predominant language or languages arising in your workplace.

The pedagogic function.

The ELP provides information that will enable teachers to cater for the individual needs of the learner (e.g. what progress, if any, they have made to date and how they respond to a range of teaching methods).

It also encourages the learner to reflect upon how they best learn a language. It promotes an ongoing discussion between learner and language teacher, for example, regarding the

learner's strengths and challenges and those methods which have the best impact on progress.

From your point of view, this function might prove valuable should you wish to invest in an employee's language training to increase their effectiveness, either within your workplace or, for example, when representing your company in international business.

How the ELP is structured

The ELP consists of three parts:

1. The Language Passport
2. The Language Biography
3. The Language Dossier

The Language Passport

For you, this may be the key document. It summarises all the language attainments of the holder and may be regarded for employment purposes as a 'languages curriculum vitae'.

After an introductory section explaining the use of the document, there is a section in which all the languages with which the holder is familiar are profiled. That is to say that in each skill (see below) a level of competence is recorded for every language.

There then follows a very important section, containing the 'Self-Assessment Scale' of language competence, based of the CoE's '*Common European Framework of Reference: Learning, Teaching and Assessment*' (CEFR).

This scale is set out as a grid. For any language assessed, there are five skills:

- Listening
- Spoken Interaction (conversational speaking)
- Spoken Production (delivering talks etc with minimal interaction)
- Reading
- Writing

and six levels. For anyone not yet familiar with the CoE's Framework, these are the approximate equivalents of each level:

- C2 Highest level – many characteristics of a native speaker
- C1 Compatible with university a university degree in the language
- B2 Compatible with an advanced school leaver's certificate at age 18+
- B1 Compatible with an ordinary school certificate at age 15+
- A2 Able to communicate in a limited number of rehearsed situations with some ability to create independent sentences
- A1 Lowest level – very basic, can communicate using set phrases in familiar situations

If you look through the grid, you will see that each statement of competence begins 'I can...'. This is because the learner using the ELP is encouraged to exercise judgement about what he/she can do using the language. You will also see that many factors are

taken into account, such as the complexity of the language, how familiar are the expressions required, the formality of the interaction, and so on.

How the self-assessment scale is interpreted for Deaf or Hard of Hearing (DHH) learner.

The scale in this specialised passport has certain modifications to the standard scale. These take account of situations unique to DHH learners, and may acknowledge that DHH learner may:

- make use of certain devices (e.g. hearing aids)
- resort to one or more DHH-specific strategies (e.g. lip-reading)
- be unable to communicate/understand under certain conditions (e.g. speech where the speaker's face cannot be seen).

Notwithstanding these special exceptions, the DHH learner will be expected to meet the criteria specified. If a performance at (e.g.) level B2 is recorded in the Language Passport, the DHH learner is assumed to be able to communicate/understand as effectively as a hearing learner in the language specified. The former may take a little longer over the task, and perform it with slight inaccuracies. However, such delays or minor inaccuracies are allowable only as a result of shortcomings in the mode of communication and not as a result of lack of vocabulary or grammatical knowledge of the language used. You, as an employer, are entitled to expect that the DHH learner will be able to use the foreign language in your employment as effectively as a hearing person claiming the same recorded level in a skill.

The next part of the Language Passport is devoted to recording the learner's language learning and intercultural experiences. For each language recorded, the learner enters information in two sections:

(1) their language learning in a country or region in which the language learned is not spoken; (this tends typically to cover their learning experiences at school or university or a company-sponsored training course in their native country);

(2) Their language learning in a country or region in which the language is spoken; (this might typically include both languages learned informally through day-to-day contact with native speakers and language learned formally on a course based in the country where the language is spoken).

This section also covers the experience a learner has gained of the culture of that country – e.g. how they have benefited in being able to cope with the aspects of that culture that differ from their own (courtesies, customs, business practices etc).

The final section of the Language Passport is a brief record of actual language qualifications gained by the learner. Each item specifies the language learned, the level attained, the name of the certificate or diploma, the awarding body and the year of the award.

The Language Passport is likely to be the first document you are shown as an employer, since it is concise and objective.

Nonetheless, you may also have reason to look at one or both of the other two documents that form the complete European Language Portfolio.

The Language Biography is a record of the learner's language learning experiences, both formal (in school etc) and informal (contact with family, friends or associates) and of their reflections on how they learn most effectively. It is a more subjective record than the Language Passport, but may be valuable to a language trainer should you wish to send the learner on a language course to refresh or extend their language competence to meet your company's needs.

The Language Dossier may also be of interest to you insofar as it will contain important evidence of the language competence recorded in the Language Passport. This evidence may take the form of samples of successfully performed language tasks, or of certificates and diplomas gained by the learner. It is your way of checking the competences recorded in the Language Passport. It is sometimes argued that the ELP is not as reliable a language attainment record as traditional qualifications, because the learner might make exaggerated claims, yet in fact, samples of performance in the Dossier section should provide ample verification of levels attained.

The Language Biography.

This document has three sections:

1. 'My personal language background'
2. 'My present language learning'
3. 'My intercultural experiences'

'My personal language background'

The first of these is a record of both (a) native and (b) foreign language learning or acquisition.

(a) The learner records the language or languages they have grown up with, at home and in their native language community. These may be associated with a DHH-specific mode of communication, such as lip-reading, but that mode will relate to the language of the hearing community. Thus, a DHH Bulgarian will regard Bulgarian as their Mother Tongue, even though they might never have heard spoken Bulgarian. They may also regard the sign language used in Bulgaria as a Mother Tongue, though it should be pointed out that this will have no linguistic relevance to Bulgarian as its signs and movements 'by-pass' actual words and relate directly to the notions conveyed.

(b) The learner records languages (i) formally learnt, as, for example, in school or on a course and (ii) informally acquired, as, for example, through association or correspondence with a speaker of another language. They are also invited to comment, for each language recorded, on aspects of their learning experience they see as important, such as their reasons for learning the language or teaching methods they preferred. They then record, for each of the five skills of the self-assessment scale, the levels attained.

'My present language learning'

The next section is a checklist for each language. This is derived from the self-assessment scale. For each skill and level, there are five related language tasks, expressed in a more concrete way than in the scale, against which the learner records that they can perform the task 'a little', fairly well' or 'really well'. This enables them to track their progress at a glance. When they can perform four of the five tasks 'really well', and this is agreed by their teacher, they may record this level of attainment definitively in their Language Passport. This can be a valuable motivation for the learner to maintain a constructive dialogue with their teacher about their ongoing progress.

It is likely that evidence of this attainment will be placed in their Dossier, to confirm the Passport entry.

'My language learning experience'

In this section, the learner is invited to reflect on what kind of a learner they are, and to what teaching methods they believe they respond best.

The learner is first asked to consider where they are on the dimensions 'introvert→extravert' and 'play safe → risk-taking', and to give their reasons.

They then answer a simple questionnaire in which they evaluate a range of teaching/learning activities. Using the key provided, they then arrive at a broad profile of how they learn best. This helps the teacher plan their teaching strategy for this learner, but also, where the learner's response may be biased towards a narrow way of learning, can encourage them to try out approaches they have previously avoided.

You as an employer may find it helpful to draw a language trainer's attention to the implications of this section for the way an employee may respond to various training methods.

'My intercultural experiences and encounters'

The learner is asked to record what experiences they have had of encounters with people of cultures other than their own, saying both (a) what happened and (b) how this influenced their response to subsequent encounters.

They are then asked to evaluate their ability to interact effectively in intercultural situations and are given a simple self-assessment scale with criteria for three levels of competence.

There follows a reference list of issues around which intercultural conflict may arise. Awareness of such issues can help the learner more effective in dealing with people of other cultures.

Language Dossier

In some ways, this section is an abstract concept. It could be nothing more than a folder in which evidence of language competence is filed. In practice, it is normal for the learner to be given advice on how evidence should be stored and identified and this ELP is no exception.

The DHH learner is advised as to what kinds of evidence may be included and given a model reference system for the retrieval of evidence as it may be required. You, as an employer, may expect the evidence you are looking for to be clearly identified and filed for easy access.

Evidence may take several forms:

1. Tasks successfully performed under simulated conditions. These are normally tasks set by a teacher or trainer to assess the learner's competence at various stages of learning. They may have been performed during a lesson or as a formal test item in an examination. Such tasks are best evidenced by showing both the task and the learner's response. On occasion, explanatory notes may also help,

(e.g. stating that the learner made unassisted use of a dictionary to check their writing). Cover sheets are provided to accompany evidence of this kind, where it has been necessary to clarify the nature of the task and the conditions under which it has been performed. Obviously, DHH learners using signing mode (e.g. to convey their understanding of something they have heard in the language) are best recorded on video. Evidence codes relating to performance under simulated conditions are suffixed 'S'.

2. Tasks performed in real-life (e.g. workplace) situations in the presence of a witness. Although evidence similar to that for simulated conditions is allowable, (e.g. a letter written by the learner in authentic work correspondence), it may not always be appropriate for successful real-life performance to be placed in the Dossier (e.g. convenience or confidentiality issues). In such circumstances, learners are provided with witness statement forms on which a suitably qualified witness to their language performance can record that they carried out the task effectively at a given level of the self-assessment scale. A witness statement might also report habitual demonstration of competence by the learner over a period of time. Evidence codes relating to witnessed competence are suffixed 'W'.
3. Competence may be demonstrated through the learner having taken an examination in the language recorded. In this case, the evidence would be the actual certificate or diploma awarded. Such evidence does have the authority of a recognised awarding body, but carries with it the problem that many such awards do not reveal any disparity between the skills assessed. For example some highly respected degrees in Modern Languages may reward formal writing skills while overlooking lesser competence in colloquial fluency. Certificates confirming attendance on language courses may also be included in this category, though you may need to check at what level the course was aimed and whether the learner fulfilled the course targets. Evidence codes relating to certificates and diplomas are suffixed 'C'.

A final feature of the Dossier is a **Language Learning Journal** section. Here, the learner gives a periodic account of issues they have found important (successes, difficulties, approaches to study, preferred methods etc) in the learning process. This provides practical evidence to support their remarks under the Language Biography section 'My present language learning'. If you are recommending the learner for a language training programme, your trainer may be interested in reading the language learning journal.