

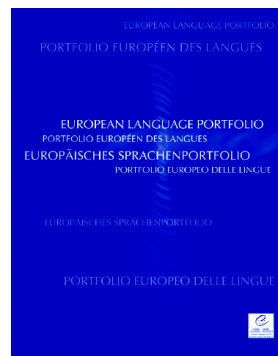
# IMPLEMENTING THE EUROPEAN LANGUAGE PORTFOLIO IN THE ENGLISH CLASS. A ROMANIAN CASE STUDY

**Marina CRISTIAN**

English teacher, mentor trainer,  
EAQUALS inspector-in-training

## Background information

It is amazing how our perception of things changes with time and experience! I remember that I first saw the *European Language Portfolio*, in its elegant navy-blue cover, six years ago, at the RATE-QUEST Romania joint conference, when Dr. Laura Muresan had a plenary presentation. I remember that I was impressed by the idea of European standardization of language levels and by the fact that the portfolio had been translated into several languages, including Romanian. Several years later I found myself at the EAQUALS conference and workshops in Budapest, working in two special interest groups: the first one, under the guidance of Dr. Brian North, focusing on fine-tuning the can-do descriptors which are part of the documents of the portfolio; the second one, with Dr. Laura Muresan, developing instruments to follow-up the way in which the portfolio had been implemented in institutions across Europe. Although by the time I had gained a much deeper understanding of the documents included in the *European Language Portfolio*, I was, I now realize, not entirely aware of its value.



It took several more years and two professional meetings before I came to use it in class. Firstly, I myself presented the *European Language Portfolio* to other English teachers during a meeting of the Cluj English Teachers' Association (CETA), which is part of the Romanian Association of Teachers of English (RATE). Secondly, I attended the QUEST conference in Bucharest in May 2010, and I had the chance to hear of experiences going on in other European countries (e.g. Bulgaria, Greece). I then decided to try and use it in my own classes.

## Target group

That academic year (2009-2010) I was working in Liceul Teoretic “Nicolae Balcescu” Cluj-Napoca, Romania, one of the best upper secondary schools in the city, and I believed that my students were old enough to understand the requirements of the tasks I intended to put forward and mature enough to respond appropriately.

The oldest students I had at the time became my target group: fifteen 9<sup>th</sup> graders, 16-17 years old, and a group of 10<sup>th</sup> graders, 17-18 years old, both from the philology line, with a focus on humanistic studies. Each group had three 50 minutes’ classes of English and a 50 minutes’ optional class entitled “Developing Speaking Skills” per week, a total of four 50 minutes’ classes weekly. Most of them had studied English at school on a regular basis for at least four years, but their levels of English were very different. I was fully aware of that, as the 9<sup>th</sup> graders had taken a placement test and the 10<sup>th</sup> graders an initial test at the beginning of the academic year.

## Aims

The main aims of the series of workshops were:

- fostering the students’ understanding of the need of standardizing levels of language competencies at European / international level;
- araising the students’ awareness of the complexity of the language learning process;
- creating a friendly environment for the students to practice applying evaluation criteria;
- increasing their motivation for self-development and self-improvement

## Procedure

There was a set of activities that I used, all based on the EAQUALS-ALTE version of the *European Language Portfolio*, in several successive meetings in May-June 2010:

- a presentation of the *European Language Portfolio* and of the *Common European Framework of Reference* for languages done by the teacher;
  - students’ own self-assessment, based on the Self-Assessment Grid in the *European Language Passport*, part of the portfolio;
  - short feedback to the teacher, who accordingly prepared the handouts for the next stage;
  - students’ individual completion of the corresponding grid
- (from the *European Language Portfolio: The Language Biography*, EAQUALS-



ALTE, 2001), matching the level they had previously decided on, to identify their current language learning priorities;

- written feedback to the teacher, concerning the impact of both handouts: the Self-Assessment Grid and the Current Language Learning Priorities grid.

### **Students' feedback**

The students' feedback, written either in English or in Romanian, revealed the impact the activities had had on them. Their self-assessment proved to be generally accurate, as they honestly wanted to find out where they stood.

Here are some of the students' ideas referring to the way they felt about using the Self-Assessment Grid, the Current Language Learning Priorities grid, and about the CEFR:

*"...now I don't need to explain to my friends or teachers all that I know. They will understand my English level when I will say only one letter and one number. It is practical and easy." (9,e)*

*"[The] self-assessment grid gives us a clear perspective of our current language skills, teaches us to evaluate our own situation, helps putting our knowledge of English to certain level, reveals us on what to focus in order to improve our skills. By teaching us how to evaluate us, also teaches us how to work and think when evaluating other people." (9,a)*

*"[The] self-assessment grid helped me realize my English level and because it was well structured it was very useful to me."(9,e)*

*"It helped me identify my own English levels and understand the real importance of using English nowadays. It's much more easy to learn English when you know the exact level you have. It's a great idea for those who want to learn English by all means, but they don't know where to start from." (9,b)*

*"I have realized, with the help of these objects, what my English level looks like. It is one of the best self-assessment instruments that had really helped me realize where I stand and what I need to improve." (9,c)*

*"This self-assessment grid made me see how much English do I know, and also made me realize that I have to study a lot to reach the level that I want. In a certain way made me want to know more English because I'm aware that knowing English will help me in the future." (9,d)*

*"I think it's useful because you can see at what level you are and it will help you in the future for your studies and job." (10, a)*

The students also referred to their own language learning priorities, after having read and filled in the checklist corresponding to the level of English they had identified as theirs:

*“This helped me realize what I need to improve to my English and what things I have to worry about. Is like a test, well structured and easy to understand.” (9,e)*

*“Once I’ve found what my English level is, I can follow the line of my priorities right away. I want to understand extended speech and lectures without any problems. I want to be able to speak in a standard dialect. I absolutely want to interact with a degree of fluency and spontaneity that makes interaction with native speakers quite easy.” (9,b)*

*“Right now my priorities are to study more English and to have the opportunity to talk to a native speaker.” (9,d)*

*[My current language learning priorities are] “to write and speak to the highest level.” (10,a)*

## **Conclusion**

The students’ feedback to the teacher revealed the impact of the activities based on the European Language Portfolio, namely: reflection on their own learning and achievement; increased awareness of the complexity of language learning and assessment; understanding the need for and the value of using the CEFR (e.g. relating their knowledge to other learners’); identifying personal goals for future language learning and, consequently, increased motivation for further study. And “where there is a will, there is a way”.



*A group of 9<sup>th</sup> graders and their teacher, Marina Cristian, May 2010*