

Carmen Argondizzo* and Maria I. Sasso

The ELP through time: Background motivation, growing experience, current beliefs

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Abstract: This article offers an overview of research strategies currently in use at the Language Centre of the University of Calabria and aimed at observing university students' learning habits when they are asked to use the European Language Portfolio during language courses. We present evidence of how experimental groups of students belonging to different fields of study (e. g. business administration, engineering, humanities, natural sciences, social-political science) interact with the ELP toolkit. Variables are considered such as students' motivation and learning styles, which may be affected by different approaches to study in different academic disciplines. We hypothesize that the experimental groups will outperform the control group, made up of students who will not be using the ELP. The global objective of the research stems from the research team's belief that the ELP offers strong and effective support when teachers wish to encourage language learners to develop reflective learning and participative autonomy.

Keywords: autonomous learning, self-assessment, European Language Portfolio (ELP), language for academic purposes, CEFR proficiency levels, individual interests

1 Introduction

The year 2003 was a special one for the Language Centre at the University of Calabria (UniCal, Italy): the ELP that a team of researchers had developed was validated by the ELP Validation Committee (accreditation no. 40.2003). The team had been inspired by the *Common European Framework of Reference for Languages* (Council of Europe 2001) and the growing interest across Europe in the European Language Portfolio (ELP; Council of Europe 2011). The team's enthusiasm caused it to devote considerable time to designing the various

***Corresponding author: Carmen Argondizzo**, University of Calabria, Centro Linguistico di Ateneo, Cubo 25C, 87036 Arcavacata di Rende, Italy, E-mail: carmen.argondizzo@unical.it
Maria I. Sasso, University of Calabria, Centro Linguistico di Ateneo, Cubo 25C, 87036 Arcavacata di Rende, Italy, E-mail: maria.sasso@unical.it

parts of the document. Students studying Language for Academic Purposes (Jordan 1997) were the target group that the team wanted to reach, providing them with a didactic tool that would help them to develop language interests which university students should be encouraged to have. All this was happening at a time when concepts such as learner autonomy and self-assessment (Holec 1981, 1988; Little 1991; Hall and Beggs 1998) were still relatively new in the academic world. Since then, the ELP has become an important component in several language courses offered by the University of Calabria and a tool to support self-study that students are asked to carry out in the Language Centre multimedia lab. The aim has been and remains to enhance students' self-reflection and autonomy, while helping them to develop language skills for the longer term.

Based on these premises, this article offers an overview of the best practices observed throughout these ELP years and the attempts to overcome the discrepancies between an ideal use of the document and the difficulties that arise when using it with an ever-growing student population. The team has continued to observe the various dynamics of ELP use and has gradually become convinced of the ELP's usefulness in encouraging students' reflective learning and participative autonomy.

The article explores research strategies currently in use at the UniCal Language Centre. We present evidence of the techniques used by experimental groups of students from different fields of study (e. g. business administration, engineering, humanities, natural science, social-political science) when they use the ELP toolkit; we consider variables such as students' motivation and learning styles, which may be affected by different approaches to study in different academic disciplines; and we hypothesize on whether the experimental groups will outperform the control group, made up of students who will not be using the ELP.

2 Best practices through time

2.1 Background motivation

At the beginning of the 2000s so much was happening in Europe thanks to *the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages* (CEFR; Council of Europe 2001). The intention was to create a framework that would give language professionals across the continent a common language in which to discuss curricula, teaching and learning, and assessment. At the same time, there was growing awareness that a learner's competence cannot be captured by a single

label: beginner, elementary, intermediate, advanced. Researchers and practitioners needed more precise descriptors in order to identify levels of competence. There was also growing awareness that, on the basis of their individual interests and life experiences, learners can develop different competences in relation to each language skill. The strong message that the authors of the CEFR wished to convey focused on the desirability of enhancing mutual understanding and cooperation among European institutions. The studies and didactic tools that were produced as a result of their analysis created curiosity among many language professionals. As a consequence of this growing interest in the field, many books were published to support dissemination (e. g., Little 2000; Morrow 2004) and to encourage the development of new practices in language classrooms (e. g., Little 1999, Benson 2001, Gardner 2007). A relevant example was the CercleS version (2002) of the European Language Portfolio (ELP), which offered a learning tool that gave a central role to learners' self-assessment. The ELP, a document that encouraged language professionals to take into account the many variables occurring in language development, was an inspiring didactic tool that highlighted the relevance of learners' autonomous study and self-assessment of their language development. With its support, learners were encouraged to become aware of their learning process by using it to shape an appropriate rhythm of study on the basis of their individual interests and needs. At the same time, the ELP provided learners with the instruments they needed to gauge their progress and the quality of their learning achievements. Fifteen years after their launch in 2001, we can affirm that the CEFR and the ELP continue to play a determining role in language classes, supporting the development of students' awareness of learning and their self-assessment skills.

2.2 Key-concepts related to the European Language Portfolio

The ELP opened a window for reflection on the following concepts:

- *Self-assessment*, which gives learners the opportunity to develop the ability to evaluate and thus become aware of their progress;
- *Levels of competence*, which the CEFR defines in macro and micro terms, respectively in the Global Scale and Self-assessment Grid (Council of Europe 2001: 24, 26–27) and in the illustrative scales in Chapters 4 and 5;
- *Varieties of competence according to language activities*, which make learners aware that their progress depends on what exposure they have to the target language;
- *Autonomous learning*, which is shaped by the interests and rhythms of the individual learner.

These concepts embody principles of paramount importance in the language classroom, where learners' various intelligences and learning styles should be respected and where creative and critical thinking should be part of their classroom experience on a daily basis.

2.3 The European Language Portfolio in the university context

The team of researchers decided to focus their attention on specific aspects of the ELP with the aim of developing a set of new descriptors which would give learners awareness of the importance of achieving academic language competences. The team's interest derived from their teaching activities, and this meant that their objective was twofold: to take account of the learners' pragmatic needs but also the instructors' academic oriented syllabus, which sought to integrate transversal academic skills (e. g., learning how to use a monolingual dictionary, take notes, analyse a graph, outline an oral presentation; Jordan 1997) with language for special purposes (e. g., English for Socio-Political Science, English for Applied Economics, Business English). This dual objective led to the creation of a European Language Portfolio specifically addressed to university students. In due course the Council of Europe's ELP Validation Committee validated and accredited the document (40.2003).¹ This highlighted the Council of Europe's role in providing continuous encouragement to professionals who, as a consequence, decide to challenge themselves with innovative actions.

2.4 The context and the document

Since then, the European Language Portfolio created at the University of Calabria (Figure 1) has been used during language courses to facilitate the acquisition of the language competences students need in order to perform academic tasks. In fact, the document offers didactic tools related to language and academic interests that university students develop and explore during their academic studies. As a consequence, the ELP has become a vital component in many language courses and a supportive tool for students' autonomous study and for reflection in the course of their learning.

Table 1 shows a grid of descriptors from the UniCal ELP that focus on listening and speaking skills. The academic dimension is clearly present in

¹ <http://archivio.pubblica.istruzione.it/argomenti/portfolio/pel.shtml>; <http://elp.ecml.at/tabid/2370/PublicationID/136/Default.aspx>



Figure 1: The ELP created at the University of Calabria.

descriptors like “I can interact in a simple way on the topic of the lesson if the questions are asked clearly and slowly” (A1); “I can understand the global content of a conversation taking place during group work” (A2); “I can express opinions regarding the topic of the lesson” (B1); “I can interact with the teacher and the students during lesson or group work; I can actively participate in a discussion on a topic I have studied stating and defending my point of view” (B2). In other words, the concept of authenticity in relation to students’ academic life and routines is taken into account and valorized. As a consequence, students tend to react with interest since they recognize in the descriptors the language needs that they come across on a daily basis.

2.5 Growing experience

Over the years it was encouraging to discover that students were gradually becoming aware of the value of CEFR levels, autonomous learning, and self-assessment. Nowadays, it is common to hear students on campus make comments like: “You know, B2 means very good, but if you get a C1, that means excellent”, as they chat to one another about exams or level tests or Erasmus applications. It is reassuring that they do not complain, as often happened in the past, about the autonomous study required of them as one of the most important components of their language course. They see it instead as a further challenge to grow linguistically and culturally. It is also encouraging to see that, when asked during exams at the end of a language course, they are prepared to give their self-assessment of the competences they have achieved and then compare their self-assessment with the level achieved in the exam (Figure 2). Yet the teachers’ background work and their awareness of the importance of adopting a

Table 1: Academic skills – a sample.

	A1	A2	B1	B2
Listening	I can understand familiar words related to a specific academic context when people speak slowly and clearly. I can understand clear and short instructions during the lesson.	I can understand the global content of a conversation taking place in the classroom or during group work. I can understand the main points of short and simple messages concerning my field of study.	I can understand the main points and identify detailed information in a speech related to a specific context.	I can understand detailed information in specific contexts such as classes, seminars and presentations on familiar topics. I can follow a simple and clear lecture on a familiar topic.
Oral interaction	I can interact in a simple way on the topic of the lesson if the questions are asked clearly and slowly.	I can answer questions related to specialised texts by using simple expressions. I can interact on simple topics during the lesson or group work.	I can formulate appropriate questions and answers on topics related to the lessons.	I can easily interact with the teacher or the students during the lesson or group work. I can actively participate in a discussion on a topic I have studied stating and defending my point of view.
Oral production	I can express myself using simple sentences regarding the topic of the lesson.	I can describe my academic or working experience using simple expressions.	I can describe the topic of the lesson using simple and coherent sentences. I can express opinions regarding the topic of the lesson.	I can summarise oral or written texts and I can express my opinions on the topic appropriately. I can explain opinions on the topic I studied, stating the advantages or disadvantages and identify different points of views. I can give simple but accurate presentations on a familiar topic.

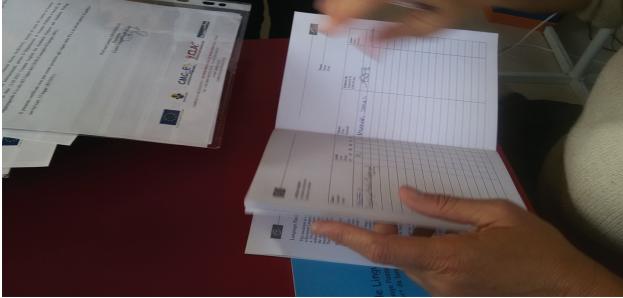


Figure 2: Office hours – a student asking for registration of her level of competence on the ELP Passport. Students often need this to participate in international mobility calls or for job applications.

teaching approach which accommodates autonomous learning and self-assessment, despite the ever-growing number of students who attend language classes, are still essential for successful use of the CEFR and the ELP and, as a consequence, for the achievement of meaningful learning outcomes. Learners, in fact, will react positively only if they are well introduced to the various tasks related to the ELP and CEFR and are given appropriate guidance during their studies.

3 Current beliefs: Reasons for (still) believing in the CEFR and the ELP

The message that welcomes students in the autonomous learning area of the University of Calabria Language Centre website states that “good learners are learners who are capable of assuming the role of manager of their learning. They know how to make all decisions involved. In other words, they know how to learn” (Holec 1996). The message is intended to reassure students that studying on their own does not mean being abandoned by their teachers. On the contrary, teachers have created an online platform and over the years filled it with many activities and links with the aim of offering meaningful learning materials to students who wish to improve their language competences autonomously, following their own rhythms of study and interests in terms of topics, skills and activities. This online autonomous learning platform offers guidelines related to the CEFR and to a downloadable version of the ELP. Learners, however, need guidance and support at the beginning and during their language courses; and this strong belief encouraged the Language

Centre team to carry out an investigation with short-term and long-term objectives on the use of the ELP.

The short-term objectives were to analyse students' interest in the concept of self-assessment and in the use of the ELP as a tool for practising self-assessment; to observe how their self-confidence grows while they are using the ELP; and to observe the development of their ability to assess themselves. The long-term objectives were to verify whether the ELP is still a valid learning tool when it is used digitally by the current generation of students; to identify difficulties or moments of boredom that students may face while using the ELP; to identify possible difficulties that teachers may face when using it in class; and to identify whether the students' fields of study can influence their motivation and learning styles.

Observation of routines in the use of the ELP would give the team the chance to understand to what extent feelings of uneasiness and boredom can be avoided while using the ELP. Moreover, by observing students who use it and adopt an autonomous learning approach to their language studies, researchers can better understand whether and how this learning tool needs to be updated to correspond to the interests, habits and personalities of younger learners.

The investigation started in the spring of 2015, in the second semester of the academic year, at the beginning of the language courses which the Language Centre organizes for students enrolled in various degree courses (the so-called OLA-Offerta Linguistica di Ateneo).² The Language Centre involves approximately 1,500 students per semester each year, most of them enrolled in their first year of study, and organizes for them language courses for basic academic language skills. The investigation was carried out in English courses, which comprise a total of 70 h: 40 h in class; 10 h in the multimedia lab, supported by a language tutor; and 20 h of self-study in blended learning mode, supervised by a language tutor at the end of the self-study activity. The investigation adopted a qualitative approach and involved 230 out of 1,500 students. The next section provides details.

4 An investigation in progress

As stated above, the main objective of our investigation is to identify students who are able to organize their own learning and build their own linguistic knowledge, defining the time needed and the topics of interest. Therefore, the investigation and findings focus on the autonomous learning of students who are encouraged

² The OLA-Offerta Linguistica di Ateneo offers basic Language for Academic Purposes courses. In the specific, at the end of the English course students are expected to reach a B1 lower level, or above, according to the CEFR.

to learn how to select their own materials according to their different learning styles and identify their cultural interests, and who are independent of the teacher and select the assessment methods appropriate to their learning. This approach aims to foster awareness in language learning as an ongoing process that includes personal ambition and mobility (Holec 1979, 1981).

The data presented in this section refers only to the first stage of an ongoing investigation. In the subsequent stages we hope to verify the ELP's pedagogical effectiveness, identify the difficulties – if any – encountered by students and teachers, and explore the motivations and learning styles of students who come to the Language Centre from different fields of study.

Data collection involved eight groups of students (230 in all). One group of students taking a degree course in Political Science was introduced to the ELP but given no guidance in its use (control group 1). Six groups comprising approximately 600 students taking degree courses in Mechanical Engineering, Administration Sciences, Business Administration, Biology, Natural Science, and Conservation and Restoration of Cultural Heritage, were introduced to the ELP and given access to an online platform created specially for them, with didactic materials designed for autonomous learning and self-assessment tasks (experimental groups 2–7). And one group of students taking a degree course in Civil Engineering was introduced to the CEFR descriptors via a hand-out but was given no further guidance (control group 8).

All groups were asked to carry out a simulated self-assessment under the supervision of a teacher. The six experimental groups were also shown how to use an online platform that was designed to encourage them to practise language activities useful for self-assessment. Members of these groups frequently shared opinions on the activities they had carried out and on the ELP descriptors. They were required to fill in a questionnaire at the beginning and at the end of the course.

The online platform used *Dokeos*TM, which has a front-end interface for students and a back-end interface for the administrator. The students accessed the platform using their student number and a password of their own choice. After login, the platform automatically takes students to their groups, to a page that presents them with the various activities they can choose from. The page is conveniently organized and gives quick access to the self-assessment activities and to selected material to support self-study. The platform is also equipped with additional tools such as personalized calendars and interaction/communication functions. Students appreciated the fact that they could use the tools and the materials provided via a familiar Web browser-based interaction. Interestingly, students showed a great deal of interest in using the platform's chat and forum functions to communicate among themselves. This made it easy to “break the ice” with the platform, especially in the early days of the investigation. All in all, using an

e-learning platform like *Dokeos*TM proved very useful and helpful for the students in their learning and self-assessment.

4.1 Interim results

As mentioned above, at the beginning of their language course, participants in the six experimental groups responded to a survey so that we could gather information on their previous language learning experience, their motivation, and their self-assessed language level. They were also asked to participate in an end-of-course survey, mainly in order to give us feedback on the learning process they had gone through. Between the two surveys, students were encouraged to learn autonomously by making use of the language activities available on the CLA website and the *Dokeos*TM platform; helped to become more aware of the self-assessment process; and monitored during the self-assessment stages.

4.2 Initial survey

147 participants belonging to the six experimental groups took part in the initial survey. The small number of students who did not participate had either dropped out of their course or had missed several classes. The first thing the team was interested in was students' background school experience as well as their university language learning curriculum. As reported in Figure 3, their background differed since they had attended different types of secondary schools. Data show that most participants came from *Licei Scientifici*, secondary

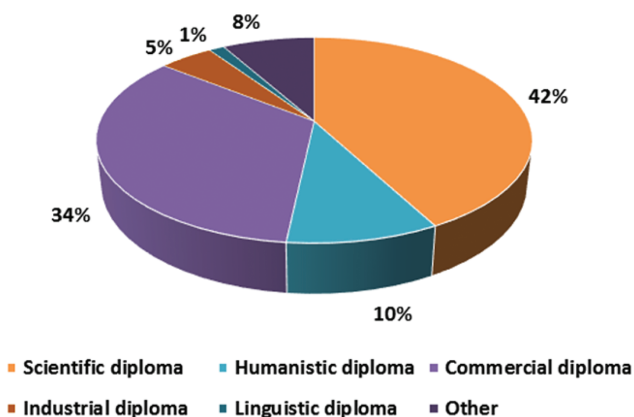


Figure 3: Distribution of participants according to their secondary school diploma.

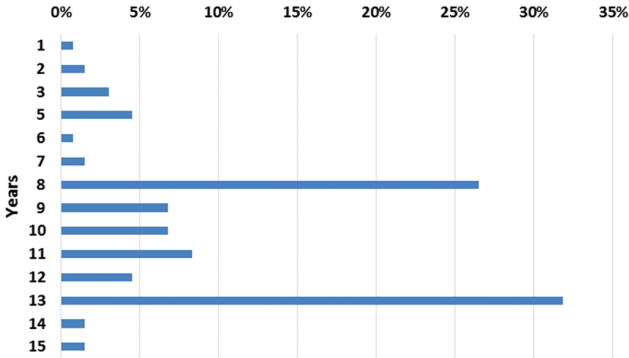


Figure 4: Number of years participants had been learning English.

schools specializing in scientific subjects (42%), or from *Istituti Commerciali*, vocational schools specializing in Business (34%). The majority of participants reported that they had been learning English for 8 or 13 years (Figure 4), depending on whether they had started at primary school or at middle/secondary school.

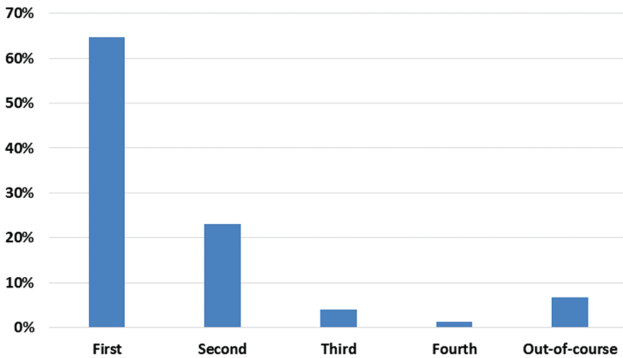


Figure 5: Distribution of participants according to their year of enrolment.

Figure 5 shows the distribution of participants according to their year of enrolment at the university; most of them were in their first or second year (88% total).

In terms of background motivation to learn English, 67% of participants said that they wanted to improve their overall language skills, while 33% focused on other needs, such as cultural interest and university objectives (Figure 6). This suggests that only a minority of students had instrumental

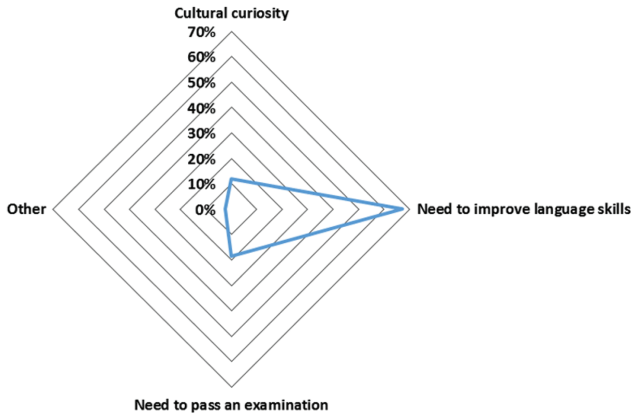


Figure 6: Background motivation in this sample of university students.

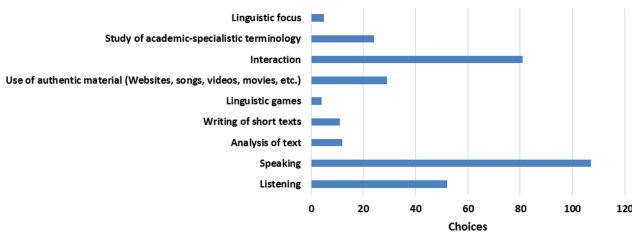


Figure 7: Students' favoured language learning activities.

motivation (e. g., for university reasons, because they need to pass the exam), whereas the majority of students were motivated by interactional and cultural interests. This is confirmed by Figure 7, which shows that the participants were particularly interested in specific language skills, such as speaking (107), interaction (81) and listening (52).

4.3 End-of-course survey

Four experimental groups out of six completed their course in the July session 2015. Two groups (a total of 66 students) participated in the end-of-term survey; two other groups missed it because their teachers failed to ask them to participate; and two groups completed their course at the end of September 2015 and their survey results will be available soon.

Of the 66 students who participated in the survey, 95% stated that they had become familiar with the ELP self-assessment tool during the three-month experiment. Furthermore, in 71% of cases, participants agreed that the experiment had led them to greater awareness of the importance of self-assessment. 27% were only partially satisfied on this point, because they lacked confidence in their self-assessment ability (33%) or felt that they needed to be assessed by an instructor (23%) (Figure 8). However, 92% of participants believed that their knowledge of the European levels had increased.

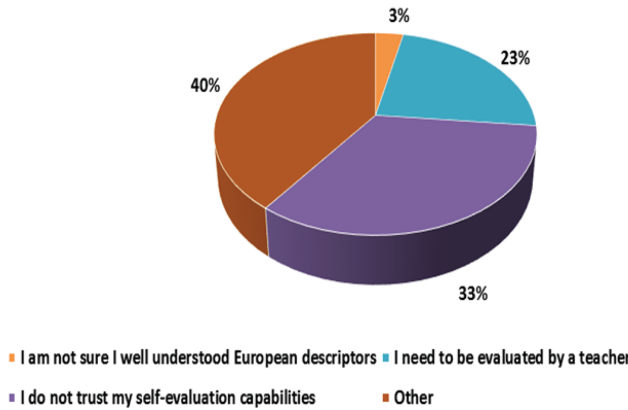


Figure 8: Critical aspects of students' attitudes to self-assessment.

As for the assessment of language skills, data concerning the difference between the initial and final self-assessed levels (Figure 9) is encouraging. In particular, at the beginning of the course, 91% of participants assessed

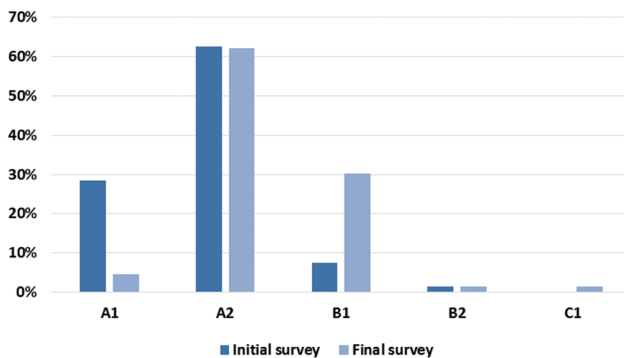


Figure 9: Overall results of student self-assessment.

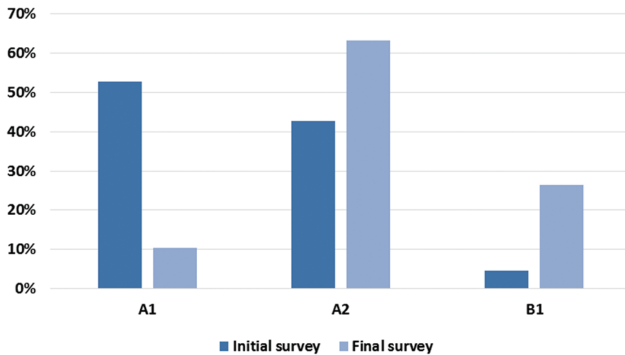


Figure 10: Self-assessed levels in listening skills.

themselves at an A1/A2 level, while at the end 92% indicated levels between A2 and B1. This is confirmed by the self-assessment values they gave to listening skills (Figure 10). In fact, 96% of participants stated that their level was between A1 and A2 when they entered the course and 90%, thus the overwhelming majority of students, reported levels between A2 and B1 at the end of the course.

There was a fairly strong correlation between students' self-assessment grades and the end-of-term exam. Almost 90% of the participants assessed their level between A2 and B1, and nearly 60% passed the exam, which requires a B1 Lower / B1 level (Figure 11).

However, if we consider students' self-assessment results in detail, there was still a large measure of uncertainty in their perception of their competences

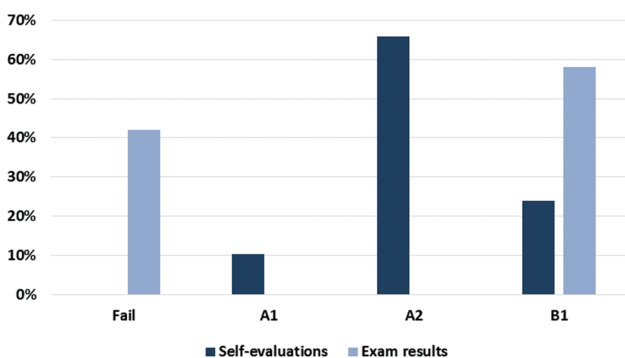


Figure 11: Students' self-evaluation and exam results.

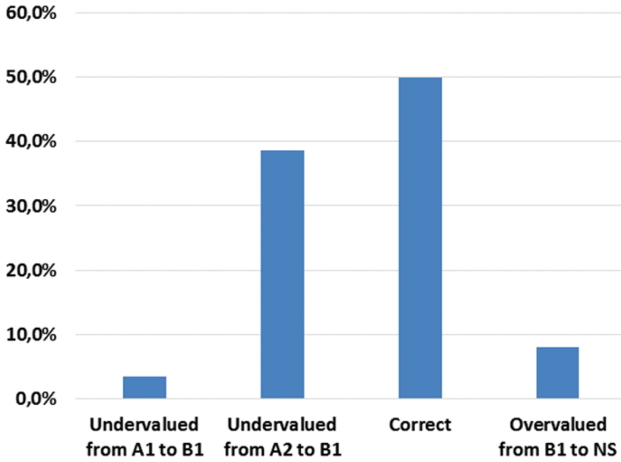


Figure 12: Students' perception of their language competence level.

(Figure 12). Correlation with the end-of-term results shows that 50% of the participants self-assessed their competences correctly. Among the other 50%, the majority tended to undervalue their competences (nearly 40%), which reflects a common tendency to poor self-esteem among students, whereas only about 10% overvalued their competences. These figures show that self-assessment of language competences is not an easy task to accomplish accurately. Indeed, the development of self-assessment skills requires a period of training longer than an academic quarter, especially when learners have not received any training in self-assessment while at school. Data on participants' overall satisfaction regarding their involvement in the experiment is shown in Figure 13. This data is particularly encouraging since 65% of participants indicated satisfaction levels greater than 80%.

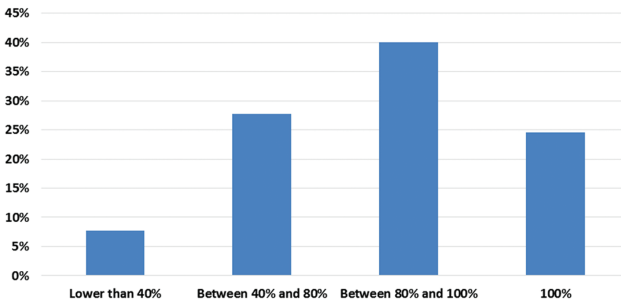


Figure 13: Students' overall satisfaction level.

5 Reflections and final remarks

The case study in progress that we have presented in this article aims to renew students' interest in developing self-assessment skills relative to language learning. The overall data refer to the first phase of the experiment, which will continue in the academic year 2015–2016. The positive initial feedback that participants provided has encouraged the research team to continue its observation of students' learning behaviour. Students' interest in approaches that give value to autonomous learning and self-self-assessment tends to grow over five years of university studies, as they gradually become more mature and aware of what their “self” is and what it wants to be.

The results of this first part of our investigation highlight the importance that students attach to communication abilities (Figures 6 and 7) when they enter university. In fact, they greatly value social aspects of language learning that help to prepare them for mobility and study at universities abroad. Also, we observed variation in the use of the ELP, depending on students' main field of study. Specifically, learners following scientific courses generally carried out their tasks in a more accurate and detailed way. We hope that long-term observation and a quantitative approach involving a more meaningful number of participants will show whether this phenomenon can be linked to the academic habits associated with particular disciplines. The team will also explore:

- the correlation between students' self-assessment of their language skills, which the six experimental groups will continue to practise, and the results they achieve in other English courses they will be attending in the academic year 2015–2016 and in their final exams (this will give some indication of the extent to which their ability to assess themselves has developed);
- the increase (if any) of the two control groups' awareness of the ELP and the CEFR grid they received at the beginning of their first English course, even though they were not specifically guided either in the use of the ELP or in the interpretation of the CEFR levels. In other words, will they develop such awareness by themselves thanks to the learning context in which they find themselves? Or will the learning tools (ELP and CEFR grid) that they received become a forgotten object that they never consider?
- the language progress of the experimental groups over three academic years. This long-term observation will show whether and to what extent the experimental groups outperform other students. In other words, it will demonstrate if a growth in awareness of language progress supports the further development of language competences.

Answers on these three points will help us, if necessary, to correct and adapt our strategies, like the amount of support provided by teachers, who should become fully aware of the importance of adopting teaching approaches which take account not only of end-of-term objectives (“All *my* students have to pass the test, so let’s concentrate on that”) but also of the learning process (“All students have to be aware of what they are doing, why and how, and share their awareness with the others”). This weakness was observed in our investigation, although with a limited number of teachers.

We hope that answers on these points will also confirm the continuing effectiveness of the two learning tools and the added value that efficient use of the ELP and the CEFR brings for students. Our data already shows (Figure 13) that students become interested in pedagogical practices that enhance autonomous learning. This suggests that school and university should not neglect an important opportunity to promote the global growth and linguistic development of younger learners. For this reason the team is planning to implement a parallel experiment involving high school students in their final grade. Our intention is to create a link between school and university, building continuity between the two institutions, which often fail to share the same objectives concerning the competences learners need to achieve. This lack of continuity is responsible for the fact that students entering university frequently lack the competences they should possess, especially language competences. An experiment involving a limited number of schools can create greater awareness of the concepts the current experiment wants to promote: learner autonomy, self-assessment, CEFR proficiency levels, individual interests, and the ELP.

Finally, the research team, which is made up of experts and younger people belonging to both the didactic and technical-administrative sectors, wishes to underline the importance of integrating the world outside the university, especially the world of work, when developing more dynamic tools that are adapted to a new generation of students (e. g., a hi-tech digital version of the ELP) and, as a consequence, capable of creating a basis for so much more to come. These actions should be welcomed in a university context, which is gradually though slowly beginning to adopt self-assessment in several sectors. Indeed, recently introduced guidelines in the Italian university system are currently boosting the role of self-assessment in many areas of work (e. g., administrative, didactic, managerial, technical). This has the aim, once again, of fostering greater awareness of tasks on the part of employees of all kinds, while enhancing the quality of both short-term and long-term activities. The ELP has the added value of being a didactic tool that anticipated current academic evaluation criteria. It is time therefore to put the ELP, together with its companion piece, the CEFR, back on track with even greater determination.

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Bionotes

Carmen Argondizzo

Carmen Argondizzo is Professors of English Linguistics at the University of Calabria (Italy) where she teaches students majoring in Economics, Business Administration and Political Science. Her research interests focus on discourse analysis in the field of Language for Academic Purposes and the related pedagogical implications, considered from a humanistic perspective. She is President of the University Language Centre where she coordinates European projects aimed at enhancing students' autonomous learning in the academic and professional sectors.

Maria I. Sasso

Maria I. Sasso works as administrative personnel of the Language Centre at the University of Calabria. She is in charge of linguistic orientation for students who will be attending degree courses at the same University. More recently, she has been participating in research activities about the use of the ELP and about tools and strategies for the improvement of self-learning.