

Foreign Language Assessment: “Can do” Know-How

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1. Introduction

Just over ten years ago now recommendations from the European Council of Ministers (1998), regarding measures to be implemented in the learning and teaching of modern languages, underlined the particular importance in teacher training of intercultural communicative competence, learner training, information and communication technologies (ICTs), and, the principles and practice of language testing and assessment, including learner self-assessment (SA); SA was actually singled out. Meanwhile, stakeholders throughout the European Union were calling for transparency in educational qualifications (with qualifications in foreign languages high on the agenda), to facilitate international educational and vocational mobility. In answer to these recommendations, the Council of Europe published the *Common European Framework of Reference for Languages: Learning, teaching, assessment* (CEF) (Council of Europe 2001). Today, any discussion by professionals working in the field of foreign language syllabus design, teaching and/or assessment necessarily involves reference to the CEF and to its six common reference levels, A1 – C2 and the “can do” statements provided to illustrate them. Consequently, the CEF, which sets out to trigger debate among modern language teachers, has managed to provoke much required, useful dialogue and discussion, not only among foreign language teaching professionals, but also among stakeholders in general, including language learners themselves both within the EU and beyond, with many recognising the urgent need for further, ongoing dialogue. Indeed, EU language policy, the Bologna Process, educational and vocational mobility, and, not least ICTs, have all contributed to growing worldwide interest in the CEF, albeit an interest which, on the surface at least, appears to be primarily in the

question of assessment, above all proficiency and mastery assessment. The CEF scales relate to language proficiency assessment, described as reflecting *the continuum of real world ability* (CEF 2001: 184). However, the CEF provides not only rating grids for examiners, but also a SA grid for learners (CEF 2001: 26-27), which focuses on communicative activities, and suggests *that at least adult learners are capable of making such qualitative judgements about their competence*, (CEF 2001: 192). This paper is concerned with the development of SA processes in the foreign language class at third level geared towards optimising learner engagement in language learning and the development of intercultural communicative competence via consciousness-raising and language awareness-raising activities and tasks.

Since the publication of the CEF, ongoing development has produced various validated models of another, closely related, document, The European Language Portfolio (ELP), wherein the language learner can record and reflect on her/his language learning and cultural experiences. Indeed, the SA grid, which first appeared in the CEF (2001: 26-27), is a fundamental component of the ELP. The distinguishing hallmark of the ELP is that it is a learner's personal document, as it is concerned with providing individual learners with the opportunity to illustrate, as they see fit, and to explain, both what they know they know, and, what they know they can do. However, the ELP is also designed for the promotion and development of learner-centred language teaching. At this juncture it is important to note that, unlike the CEF, the ELP explicitly calls on language teachers to create conditions whereby learners are involved in setting and sequencing aims and objectives, selecting materials and resources, experimenting with ways and means, and, assessing learning processes and outcomes. Hence, the ELP, designed to facilitate SA and to promote plurilingualism, is explicitly calling on language teachers to promote and develop learner autonomy as this goes a long way towards ensuring that lifelong learning is possible and, hopefully, sustained.

Like the CEF levels to which it is directly linked, SA is a subject of keen debate and research among an ever-growing number of language teaching professionals many of whom are anxious to discover more about the possible advantages the development of SA

represents. Unfortunately, both the CEF levels and the term SA are often misinterpreted and misconstrued, which is why it is important to bear in mind that, depending on the learner profiles and the learning context, both the CEF levels and the development of SA will have very different relevance and applications. Likewise, the uses and usefulness of the ELP will be very much context related. In tertiary education, two parts of the ELP, the passport and the dossier, are often perceived independently as meaningful, and consequently attractive to stakeholders, when, in fact, as parts of the ELP they represent illustrative complements to the language biography on which they should rely. It is the language biography, in which learners can document reflections on their learning processes and progress, that is central to the ELP and the part that makes the ELP a learner's document. While engaged in their learning tasks and the process of language learning, learners who have developed SA strategies and skills can reflect on what they are doing, to what end and how well they are progressing, in a collaborative learning environment. The rationale for the ELP is to enable learners to reach a stage where they can openly discuss, with others, in and outside the class, the learning and cultural experiences that they have reflected upon and documented. The language biography is the part of the ELP that supports the development of skills in SA and peer assessment as it is this part of the ELP which *facilitates the learner's involvement in planning, reflecting upon and assessing his or her learning process and progress* (Council of Europe 2002).

The development of a lifelong learning potential, particularly in the case of language learning, is highly recommendable, crucial even. To this end, the ELP has two basic functions: i) a reporting function primarily met by the passport and the dossier sections, and, ii) a pedagogic function. In the passport section of the ELP the learner provides: i) a profile of language skills by means of the user-oriented, SA grid¹; ii) a record of certificates and diplomas; iii) a summary of language learning and intercultural experiences. The passport section

¹ This is basically the same SA grid as the original one in the CEF (2001: 26-27).

is now also used as part of “Europass”, a European Commission initiative established to promote a single transparency framework for qualifications and competences. The dossier section, just like an artist’s portfolio, is compiled of whatever the learner selects to include as illustrative examples of what has been documented in the passport and the biography.

The pedagogic function of the ELP is met primarily by the biography section which is designed to encourage all concerned in modern language teaching and learning to reflect on aims, objectives, approaches, resources, strategies and progress. While the action-research reported upon in this paper is not directly related to the use of the ELP in the foreign language class, it is with this pedagogic function that this paper is primarily concerned. Indeed, it is this function which corresponds to the two main aims in the CEF (2001: xi), which in the first place sets out to encourage foreign language teaching professionals to reflect upon and discuss all aspects of the development of communicative competence and facilitate, thereby, the possibility of transparent exchange of learning, teaching and assessment purposes and practices.

2. Self-assessment and the development of lifelong learning

While there is much ignorance and consequent scepticism regarding what SA means in practice, informed teachers are in a position to clarify any misunderstandings. In the first place, SA is not about filling in an end-of-year questionnaire about aspects of the course. Nor does SA imply that the learner is the sole assessor of their progress, any more than peer assessment implies less work for the teacher. When SA is incorporated into classroom learning, students as well as teachers acknowledge assessment as a mutual responsibility (Oskarsson 1989). Assessment is no longer the sole responsibility of the teacher.

SA, in the context of this study is interpreted as a form of formative, and continuous, portfolio assessment that involves the learner, the learner’s peers and the teacher. As the learners set out on their learning path, they collaborate in the creation their own road map,

and, just as the long-distance cyclist or the travel writer might do, they reflect upon the important aspects of their journey, what each stage along the way will involve, what resources need to be prioritised, signposting every step, documenting everything and anything that matters, taking snapshots, videos, recordings, and, keeping written accounts. Whenever the need arises, they can call on help, expert or otherwise; they know where to call, and the teacher as expert is also there to provide necessary support.

The integration of SA procedures in the foreign language class implies a gradual increase in learner involvement in the learning process. Learners learn gradually how to take control of their own learning, to identify their needs, set objectives, select tasks, negotiate, co-operate, reflect, and evaluate. The aim is that learners develop the knowledge and skills necessary to manage their own language learning effectively and efficiently. Quality management leads to successful learning and becomes a positive motivating factor. The development of the learner's ability to be an effective and an efficient, independent learner forms part of the development and promotion of learner autonomy in the classroom. Learner autonomy, however, is not easily achieved and not all learners will necessarily be interested in meeting the challenge. *We should not be surprised if some learners are resistant to autonomy; for autonomy implies a continuous challenge to our certainties, and that can be very unsettling* (Little 1990: 12). Of course, there are a number of practical implications involved in the development of learner autonomy in the case of foreign language learning in formal settings and it is important that [...] *there is no question of wishing to force the learner to assume responsibility for his learning at all costs; [...] what must be developed is the learner's ability to assume this responsibility* (Holec 1981: 34).

Yet, the question remains, as to what benefits SA affords those involved in foreign language learning, teaching and assessment in the undergraduate class. The development of these skills, which is ideally suited to undergraduate foreign language classes at intermediate level and beyond, not only enhances the foreign language learners' ability to be in greater control of their learning but is also extremely relevant where their capacity for self-motivation and the development of

lifelong learning skills are concerned. The benefits include: an increase in learner motivation, and the enhancement and development of learning and learning skills. In addition, SA actually *expands the range of assessment criteria to include areas in which learners have special competence, such as the evaluation of their own needs and affective dimensions of the learning process* (Benson 2001: 155).

Nevertheless, as any informed teacher will know, there is a need for a great deal more classroom research into good practices on how best to develop SA skills. Indeed, the development of these skills requires a great deal of planning on the part of the teacher whose job it is to ensure that the learners' communicative competence develops and progresses effectively and efficiently. However, in foreign language courses involving young adults who need to develop their communicative competence to a B2 level and beyond, the development of SA skills is a worthwhile endeavour. SA, including portfolio development, can contribute to informing the learner throughout the learning process about what they can and cannot do, how well they are progressing, how effective or otherwise their learning strategies may be. In this sense, SA requires learners to involve others, including experts, in the assessment of their learning. This means that at the end of the day there are no big disappointments, as learners are in a relatively good position to say just how well they are doing, often becoming their own best judges. SA is not a replacement for examinations; rather it supports effective examination preparation. This is particularly important when students are required to take in-house and/or external examinations. Such teaching approaches ensure that the learners are well informed with regards to the test purpose, content and requirements, that they have adequate examination practice and that they can make informed judgements about their proficiency levels, including partial and emerging competences.

Peer assessment, including, peer review, correction and feedback, can act as a vital support to the development of SA practices in language learning. In classes where SA is promoted the likelihood is that peer assessment will have an equally important role to play. In my experience, collaborative assessment amongst learners can be most beneficial. Collaborative peer assessment produces valuable debate and

discussion and adds a highly meaningful dimension to SA, especially in the case of adult monolingual FL groups.

While it is hard to keep abreast of the very rapid changes we are subject to in our professional lives, to do so successfully, without drowning in the process, I am convinced that we FL teachers, both individually and collectively need to adopt the position of co-learner with our students as well as with our peers. It goes without saying that the foreign language teacher's job is to teach the language, however, how best to do so depends upon how much we know about our learners' learning processes. Today effective foreign language teaching seeks to involve learners in constant and consistent interaction with their learning processes and progress. This implies an extension of the teacher's role to that of co-learner in the teaching-learning process. Effective teaching is now rooted in the promotion of experiential learning where learning takes place by means of exploration, interpretation, interaction, communication, evaluation and reflection. While attending to language learning activities, the language teacher should seek to raise learner awareness of learning strategies and provide learners with systematic practice in self-monitoring of their strategy use. Just like language learning, this involves a cyclical process whereby learners identify what they need to reconsider and revise as well as where they can develop and extend not only their language skills and strategies but also their learning skills and strategies, and, inevitably, they learn a lot more besides.

The ELP, of course, encourages teachers and learners to embark upon this chartering of learning paths and to put learners in the driving seat. However, while the ELP represents an extremely useful tool, one with which I have slowly, but surely, come to grips, it is a tool that has a useful role to play when there is the possibility for continued and extensive development. Indeed, no one teacher can hope to successfully introduce the ELP to learners unless they receive institution-wide support. This means that only through cooperation among like-minded teachers will portfolio development be feasible. In fact, the rationale for including mention of international projects reported upon in the following section is to highlight the importance of developing the teacher's philosophy and pedagogy towards promoting SA in the

foreign language class, as this is a process that requires solid grounding and informed practice, preferably resulting from hands-on experience of peer and SA procedures and practices. Collaboration and dialogue among teachers locally, nationally and internationally is vital as it helps provide a greater understanding of how it is that learners learn and how best to create conditions conducive to that learning. To this end, the next sections provide accounts of participation in international projects related to assessment, including both peer assessment and SA.

3. Value judgements

One project in which I participated (2003-2005) related to the principles and practice of language testing and assessment. The project was led by a colleague from Roehampton University, who, in 2003, had invited 64 universities to answer a detailed questionnaire on the assessment of EFL writing at undergraduate level in the EU. 32/64 universities from thirteen countries participated and it was found that assessment practices varied between countries, within the same country and, in some universities, within the same department. The survey found that there is wide variation in: the ability that is assessed; the amount and range of writing sampled; how it is sampled; the reliability of the scores and the impact of writing on the rest of the programme. The survey highlights the many considerations and challenges involved in ensuring fair and valid assessment of writing proficiency.

As a result of the survey, a group of nine like-minded researchers, responsible for the assessment of written English on English language majors for our universities in Belgium, Bulgaria, Holland, Italy, Hungary, Latvia, Spain, Portugal and the UK, formed a project group, VALUE (Validating Assessment on Language degrees in Universities in Europe). The aims of the project group were to create guidelines for the validation of assessments of writing proficiency on language majors in European universities at the end of the undergraduate cycle. In the two

years we worked together drafting specifications for validation there were three, highly productive, face-to-face meetings².

One reason I mention this project here is to stress how extremely useful it was for each and every one of us to meet in this form of collaborative team work, which represented SA in action for those of us involved in terms of our value judgements and teacher assessment. We soon discovered, just as the findings in the project leader's survey suggested we might, that tools and practices very familiar to some were totally unknown to others, including University of Cambridge ESOL Exams, not to mention the ELP. In one of a number of memorable activities we all formally marked student scripts and, while there was general consensus regarding results, which in itself is a point worth highlighting, we all agreed that we had learned a great deal about how writing is assessed elsewhere in terms of validity and reliability. We all worked on peer assessment of our colleagues' students' scripts. I provided 12 compositions, two each from the top six in alphabetical order out of a total of 33 examination scripts obtained from 3rd year undergraduates in English Philology in June 2004, and was delighted to see how highly impressed colleagues were at the level attained by the candidates, especially when the examination conditions, which are similar to Cambridge Proficiency, were taken into account. They were considered by all of a very high standard indeed, much to the surprise of a couple of colleagues. Through our experience of working together it became very evident that there was a real need for much more collaborative research work of this kind. Working in this way led us to explore and interpret others' perspectives, priorities and practices. Among the important questions for further discussion that arose from our deliberations were the feasibility and usefulness of portfolio-

² The first at the inaugural conference of the European Association for Language Testing and Assessment (EALTA), Kranjska Gora, Slovenia, 14-16 May 2004, on "Relating Language Examinations to the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages; Learning, Teaching, Assessment"; the second at the University of Latvia, in Riga, in March 2005, and the third at the University of León in June/July 2005.

assessment along the lines of those proposed by the ELP, and, the importance of exploring ways to develop formative assessment.

4. High flyers

In a very different project related to peer assessment of L2 writing, carried out in conjunction with an Intensive Programme (IP)³ in which twenty students from three partner universities in Germany, Spain and Sweden were involved, students from the University of León in Spain and the University of Umeå in Sweden collaborated in a writing experiment during the first term of the academic year, 2005-2006. Thirty-two students of English Philology at the University of León, all members of the third-year EFL class, participated in the experiment. On a voluntary basis and in their own time, they composed and submitted a total of seventy-three texts written in English on the following topics “A Day in the life of León”, “4 Seasons in one Day”, “My Passion”, or a topic of their choice. The two texts that produced the best effect on the reviewers, the Swedish students, were to be chosen for inclusion in an in-flight magazine. The magazine, prepared by five students in León in just two months and which, on completion, looked identical to the airline’s regular in-flight magazine, was a key component in a business proposal prepared by the students in Germany to be presented to the low-fare airline, Germanwings, before the Christmas recess. The business proposal aimed to convince the airline to consider operating a flight from Cologne in Germany to León in Spain at a time when the young airport in León was finishing a runway long enough for such aircraft.

The students in Umeå supplied an initial questionnaire about León that provided an initial launching pad for communication across

³ The IP, called Intercultural Strategies for International Success (ISIS), was sponsored by the European Commission under the SOCRATES programme for Higher Education, Directorate General of Education and Culture, October 2005 – February 2006.

student stations and for brain storming ideas for the business proposal and the in-flight magazine. (In the proposal, the in-flight magazine was submitted as the copy for the maiden flight from Cologne to León.) This was appropriate as the students in Umeå commenced their academic year in late August. In addition the students in Sweden were to provide editorial services for the in-flight magazine. This plan sought to ensure plenty of engaging and valuable work in terms of intercultural online communication in English and in terms of the needs of both the language students and the business students. The students were all non-native speakers of English aged between 18 and 30 and had a wide range of varying levels of language competence. The nationalities included not only German, Spanish and Swedish but also French, Italian, Lithuanian, Moroccan and Pakistani, as well as an English teacher and an Irish teacher. The IP and its preparation with the help of digital media was also seen as a vehicle for the professional development of the teachers involved who experimented with new forms of teaching in order to: design and develop new learning environments; design materials and curricula for distance education; modify our own role as teachers; evaluate the didactic effects of international virtual learning communities.

Results from this project suggest the given the necessary scope and responsibility to freely develop linguistic and communicative competence the majority of undergraduates do so remarkably well. High on the list of learning outcomes valued by students in León included what they learned about their own city through the design and creation of the magazine. However, interestingly enough from the teachers' perspective, attempts at prompting students in Sweden to carry out a peer review and assessment of the anonymous texts submitted by the students from León were unsuccessful. Despite encouragement from their teacher, any call for selection was rejected. Even though based on checklists, peer assessment was not forthcoming. This was a difficult stumbling block upon which my colleagues in Sweden, both English, were able to shed some light, putting it down to a cultural tendency; the Swedish students as students shared a common bond with their peers in León, and, while happy to reach a consensus that involves

everyone, they shied away from any rating of the texts and instead found all of them equally deserving of inclusion in the magazine.

5. Cultural make-up

The contact between at least two languages and their respective cultures is a constant in foreign language learning both in and beyond the foreign language classroom. We must not lose sight of the fact that our mother-tongue and particular culture bring a great lot to bear on our general language competence and awareness, as well as our various attitudes to foreign languages and their speakers. Indeed, this is why in the development of intercultural awareness the learner's own identity must be taken into account as it is through learner-centred, intercultural dialogue that our cultural make-up can undergo meaningful lifts.

In a GRUNDTVIG 1 project⁴, (“Teaching Culture! Teacher Training in Intercultural Awareness”), which developed a training course for teachers in adult education to enable them to deal with intercultural issues, a key element was to be portfolio development. In this project thirteen partners from nine European countries shared their expertise in fields ranging from adult education and teacher training to online learning, learner autonomy and intercultural communicative competence. Together they designed a blended learning course that aimed to involve participant interaction so as to promote development in intercultural communicative competence. The course called on participants to use reflective learner diaries along with personal portfolios to document and collect all types of materials related to intercultural issues in formal, non-formal and informal settings. In the second and third years of the project there were two, year-long, pilot

⁴ In this project there were thirteen partners from nine European countries: Austria, Denmark, Germany, Great Britain, Ireland, Lithuania, Romania, Spain, and Sweden. The project was funded by the European Union. (2003-2006). <http://www.teaching-culture.de/index.htm>.

runs of the blended learning course, each involving a face-to-face intensive week, one in Vilnius, Lithuania, and the other in León.

While both pilot runs were highly successful not only in terms of outputs and results in line with the original workplan, but also in terms of participant and project partner satisfaction, the one element conspicuous by its absence is the reflective learner diary. Only one participant out of twenty-six produced a truly reflective diary; and it was a wonderfully rich one. Incidentally, she happened to be German, a point which might suggest that cultural background played a role. However, stereotyping aside, project partners agreed that, in our experience, good reflective diaries exist, regardless of the nationality, and, that they illustrate that the owner, who tends to be an autonomous learner, is on a sound and solid learning path. Nonetheless, hurdles in language learner portfolio development in formal learning contexts do exist, some of which have already been referred to above. Notwithstanding, given the merit of reflective learner biographies, there is a need to explore ways of addressing these hurdles in the teaching and learning dialogue, particularly in the undergraduate foreign language class.

6. Formative self-assessment

While there are some independent learners who have developed a wide range of successful learning strategies, generally it is the case that learners in formal settings require direction and guidance in how best to go about their learning. Hence, it is useful and recommendable that teachers create conditions for learners to develop their learning potential in a systematic way as this provides necessary support for ongoing, efficient lifelong learning.

It is clear that as language learning progresses the development of communicative competence becomes more and more complex, just as the CEF's descriptors indicate, and so too do the demands on the teaching and learning process. Suggesting that B1 is probably as far as general language teaching/learning can go, and citing some of the B2 descriptors from the SA grid (Council of Europe 2001: 27) to illustrate

his proposal, Little (2005) makes the point that it is only through some version of content-and-language-integrated learning *that learners are likely to master tasks specified for B2* (Little 2005: 8). The EFL upper-intermediate to lower advanced undergraduate class, where there can be a spread of levels from B1 to C1, is then the ideal place for learners to consider all aspects of their learning processes. In my experience there are three solid reasons for this: i) undergraduate students specialising in foreign languages already have a wealth of language learning experiences and skills and are ready and able to develop these valuable, transferable skills; ii) the development of SA skills goes a long way towards engaging these learners fully in the development of their foreign language skills, along with their capacity to develop independently as language learners; iii) this learner-centred approach, which emphasises language awareness and consciousness-raising activities, and, higher-level learning objectives, encourages active participation in intercultural dialogue and promotes positive attitudes and improved self-confidence in learners. Stages of development in transitional communicative competence are affected by a number of variables which include the individual learner's personality, learning style, previous learning experience, learning strategies, mother-tongue and mother-tongue literacy skills, to mention but a few. One proposal for addressing the complex question of how to cope with learner variables is provided by a learner-centred approach to teaching that not only draws on a wide variety of methods and techniques, but that also includes language awareness training across languages, and, consciousness raising.

Although the development of the language learners' capacity to engage in SA is part of the teacher's job, many practising teachers have yet to become familiar with ways of promoting this development. The development of SA practices is not necessarily easy, and requires adequate planning and motivation, ample experience even, but the rewards can make it worthwhile. *The CEF's scaled checklists of "I can" descriptors imply learning by doing* (Little 2005: 3). In the case of the undergraduate EFL class for students specialising in English Philology, the development of SA skills will be intimately related not only to their linguistic competence, or their communicative competence,

but to every subject of their degree course and thus represents a version of content-and-language-integrated learning. Here better than anywhere the development of SA, through the medium of English, certainly should go a long way towards engaging these learners fully in the development of their foreign language skills.

7. Upping the ante to self-assessment “know how”

Having provided a solid rationale for developing peer assessment and SA in the undergraduate foreign language class here in Spain, in this section I provide a summary of good-practice guidelines aimed at similar learner groups. The focus here is on the development of know-how skills for teachers and learners in the development of peer and SA.

Typically, when a teacher meets a new class, the students have mixed language learning experiences in terms of both training and levels. A useful, first step in SA in a learner-centred, undergraduate, foreign language class is for learners to share, discuss and reflect upon their learning experiences in general, both good and bad. When learners reflect upon and share anecdotes, they should be encouraged to analyse what made these experiences good or otherwise. They can then be encouraged to go on to share language learning experiences and skills. Sharing information about how much and what types of language learning experience each one has had helps everyone appreciate some of the reasons for the inevitable variation in competence levels, and this constitutes a healthy step towards positive group dynamics and the creation of a comfortable classroom ambience.

Likewise, it is very helpful to have students consider some of their assumptions and beliefs about language learning and about themselves as language learners. Then, the teacher can encourage learners to discuss their language learning needs, interests and expectations. This should lead on to another important focus of exchange about learner styles and learning strategies. In fact, learners’ beliefs, preferences and practices as well as their needs, interests and expectations are all central in getting learners to reflect, and, in prompting learners to

assume more and more responsibility for their learning. All these issues can and should be revisited and reconsidered at appropriate stages throughout SA development.

The organisation of these activities is the responsibility of the teacher who should seek to ensure variety and to include individual and collaborative work, in and out of class, and, both written or spoken. The most important aspect is to set the right tone by giving the learners adequate learning space, time and responsibility. In examining ways of involving foreign language undergraduates in SA and peer assessment, i.e., finding effective ways to involve learners in planning, reflecting upon and assessing their learning processes and their learning progress, it is important not to jump in at the deep-end, but rather to go easy, a little at a time. A gradual approach is best. The experienced teacher will be adept in time management and in the development of group dynamics, both of which are crucial to the success of SA development in these contexts. The teacher in the early stages will also plan and prepare: contracts, rules, questions including follow-up questions, checklists, questionnaires, models, including models of learner diaries, portfolios and suggestions for documentation, and other resources.

One way to involve learners in collaborative learning from the commencement of a course is to explore the syllabus with them, let's take, for example, assessment. First, the teacher establishes whether the learners are familiar with assessment criteria. If they are not, they can begin with an exploratory exercise, e.g., they can brainstorm assessment criteria for writing. This can be done first individually and then in small groups. They can then order their lists in terms of importance before going on to interpret and explain what they mean by each one. Consensus within groups can be called for. Groups can compare and contrast, and defend their proposals. After this they can be presented with the teacher's and others' lists, including those from recognised bodies. This task often represents a confidence booster for learners who see that their lists are similar to more official ones. An obvious follow-up here is to refer to the SA grid (CEF 2001: 26-27) and explore what it means to learners. There can be little doubt that writing gainfully serves the reflective process and has an important

role to play in shaping ideas and in the development of critical thinking (Council of Europe 2001; Ellis 1997; Harris 1997; Hyland 2002; James 1998; Skehan 2001; Stoicheva, Hughes & Speitz 2009; Swain 1997). The uses and usefulness of reflective learner diaries can be explored in just the same way, as can all the other language skills.

When advanced foreign language learners become wholly involved in collaborative learning and in every aspect of learning, the result is a far more meaningful and complete learning experience. The teacher's role becomes more one of collaborator and guide, less central and controlling. Peer teaching and self- and peer assessment ultimately have far more to offer the learner than do teacher talk and assessment. In my experience of several similar learner groups, in the initial stages such students will at best: know where their some of their own strengths and weaknesses lie; be likely to recognise the need to assume some responsibility for their learning; respond quite positively to encouragement; be interested in improving their language skills; be capable of rising to the challenges and worthwhile enterprises. In pre-course planning and throughout the early stages of the course, the teacher will create, manage and negotiate opportunities, challenges and responsibilities. Gradually, and from the very start, the teacher will prompt learners to take charge of their learning, slowly but surely, and to seek out opportunities themselves and rise to challenges.

Learners need to become aware of both what is involved in a learning task and how to go about it. When learners, individually and independently, are able explain their learning objectives, when they know what it is they want to achieve, within what timeframe, under what conditions, and, most importantly, to what end, then they are already in a very good position to become fully engaged in the learning process. To get to that stage, they often need to be prompted to consider, and sometimes guided to discover, why and to what end, as well as how, and with what resources. If the teacher communicates the objectives, and the analysis of the objectives, it is simply not the same at all. Here, the meaning of the Chinese saying “give a man a fish, and you feed him for a day, teach him how to fish and you feed him for life” literally says it all. In the development of meaningful SA in the foreign language class, i.e., relevant to the development of lifelong

learning, learners certainly need to be able to communicate (and in their terms, not those of the textbook or the teacher) and analyse the “what” and the “whys and wherefores”. However, prior to this, if they are on their own learning path, it may well be that they first have to discover, and then interpret, what it is they subsequently go on to communicate and analyse. The individual’s learning path is, after all, the road less travelled.

The development of SA skills is about preparing the learner’s road map, and the sooner learners take charge of charting their own learning course, the better, especially in the foreign language class, where inevitably each and every learner’s profile is quite simply unique. However, just like the key on the keyboard, learners should work together and find their way by cooperating and collaborating with others when appropriate.

8. Conclusion

SA is a highly valuable language learning skill and discipline that learners develop best in collaboration with others. It is through the development of this skill that they become more effective, efficient and informed learners, and gradually become capable of taking charge of their own learning. The development of this skill is central to true, learner-centred pedagogy and, in the context of the foreign language class in tertiary education, forms part and parcel of the development of the lifelong language learning process. SA has a part to play at every step throughout the learning process. The learner is at the centre of this process and is assisted by the informed foreign language teacher, who plans for, initiates, prompts and fosters the development of this skill, while pursuing the development of the language learners’ intercultural communicative competence by means of learner-centred language tasks. Learners’ are able to self-assess their language performance once they receive adequate and appropriate training. Nonetheless, scepticism persists in some quarters as to whether this is a worthwhile endeavour.

There is an urgent need for collaboration among all those involved in the assessment of learning processes and outcomes to ensure optimal clarity and transparency for all stakeholders where objectives, criteria and procedures are concerned. Language learning is a lifelong process and insights from classrooms help provide a greater understanding of how it is that learners learn. The ongoing, action-research work reported upon here is concerned with exploring the promotion of effective and efficient learning strategies. When we consider the framework stakeholders in university education throughout Europe are operating within, which is one of unprecedented development not only technologically but also economically and socially, it stands to reason that we teachers and researchers should seek to become involved, and to involve our students, more and more in collaborative project work and team work, locally, nationally and internationally. Changes in classroom approaches tend to lag behind changes in theory and in research. Learner-centred syllabus design that meets local needs and that covers all aspects of the curriculum, including assessment and evaluation, is what is required. Change has been initiated but there remains much to be shared so that many more insights can be profitably employed.

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