



The contribution of the ELP is in fact related to our conception of learning. Nowadays there is a widely shared notion of the kind of learning that we want to promote: learning that is active, creative, participative and, above all, meaningful. If this is the aim, then we must think through what learning of this type implies for the teachers. It is important to pose this question because in order to understand what exactly the ELP provides, we must realise that in learning of the type described there is an important element of autonomy. The ELP is precisely a tool that helps the learner to become autonomous. What do we mean by 'autonomous learning'? It means active learning, with the awareness that it prepares the way for self-regulation, (the capacity to learn starting with external help and gradually realising how to manage one's own learning process).

This is what the teacher gets from the ELP: a tool that can be used, provided learning is understood as a process in which mediation is the main idea and is seen as an aid for the learners to gradually manage their learning efficiently, and thus become autonomous. The ELP is not a new fashion. In recent years there have been great advances in the research on language acquisition and this has led to the appearance of more sophisticated teaching tools. Consequently, if one starts from an 'autonomising' view of teaching, everything that takes place in the classroom can be beneficial.

In the sections corresponding to this set of questions we present an overall view of current learning concepts with their theoretical grounding and we set out the different levels of awareness that must be promoted so that the learner becomes autonomous; these are levels that are also found in the ELP.



General learning concepts

Coll (1993: 66) presents an outline of the three views of teaching-learning accepted by most teachers.

- A. Learning at school consists in knowing the correct answers to the questions posed by the teacher. Teaching provides the pupils with what they need in order to be able to give these answers.
- B. Learning at school consists in acquiring the knowledge that is important for a particular culture. Here, teaching provides the pupils with the information that they need..
- C. Learning at school consists in constructing knowledge. It is the pupils who, through their own activities, produce the cultural knowledge. Consequently, teaching consists in providing the pupils with the help that is necessary for constructing knowledge.

If we analyse these three descriptions, we can see that the second and third have points in common, whereas the first is distant from the other two. It sees learning “as the acquisition of appropriate answers thanks to a mechanical process of positive and negative reinforcement” (Coll, 1993: 67). In general, if one subscribes to this view, the pupils are seen as passive receivers of reinforcement. Recent studies of language acquisition, together with the experience in the classroom, leads us to reject this first view, also in the area of foreign languages. In fact, based on the results of research into foreign and second language learning, this process is not seen as consisting of “the reproduction unchanged of the information that reaches the pupil through different means”, but as a gradual process of personal construction where the learners themselves construct new meanings (as adduced by those who hold the constructivist theory of learning: Coll, 1993).

This is the view of the learner in theories B and C. These see the language learners as cognitively active. In trying to manage the new language, they activate a set of mental



mechanisms which allow them to acquire new knowledge through the application of various strategies, including the important one of activating previous knowledge. This includes social experience and world knowledge as well as the capacity to use language which derives from the knowledge of the mother tongue (or first and second languages). For example, when a primary school pupil has to name a flower or talk about the colours of the rainbow in the foreign language that she is learning, it is obvious that she will start from the concept of 'flower' or 'rainbow' that she knows and has internalised. Thus the teacher does not need to introduce a new concept, but only a name for a concept or a thing that she already knows. The same thing happens in dealing with stories in the foreign language classroom: when pupils read a story in English, they immediately activate the mental schemas related to this type of text that they are familiar with since infancy. These examples are intended to show that in foreign language learning we never start from pupils as a tabula rasa, but rather children who already have internalised a lot of linguistic knowledge.

This view of learning is amply evidenced and supported in the Common European Framework of Reference.

The contribution of sociocultural theory

We would like to supplement these concepts of the learning process with another perspective: that of the socioconstructivist view, which is based on the principles of the sociocultural theory of learning (Vygotsky, 1978; Lantolf, 2002).

This theory views learners as constructing new meanings and knowledge through the interaction with their surroundings. Constructivism sees learning as an active process in which the pupils construct, expand and diversify their knowledge of various contents through the sense and meaning that are attributed to them (Coll, 1993). Socioconstructivism points out that cognitive development (i.e. learning) does not occur only through an innate biological mechanism but it is above all the fruit of a socially mediated process. One of the most significant contribution of Vygotski – and consequently of sociocultural theory – is precisely that it depicts human activity as a phenomenon mediated by signs and tools. According to Vygotski, through the use of various tools, people regulate and transform their environment and at the same time



they are transformed by it. In sum, in 'being transformed', they are learning, evolving, developing.

For Vygotski language is the principal system of signs for human psychological development. This medium serves both to relate the individual to others and also to oneself. From this viewpoint, language is firstly a tool shared with other participants in the course of social activities, and later becomes a tool for an interior dialogue. At first, language has an essentially communicative and cultural function, regulating the relations with the external world, and allowing the individual to share knowledge. But language does not only consist of an external representation of ideas, or the expression aloud of ideas that already exist in the mind, only waiting to be realised in words. Vygotski points out that as we speak and write, we organise our ideas and construct knowledge. Language thus goes beyond its communicative function; it has a private internal function, organising and realising mental activity and regulating one's actions.

In the learning process, external instruments play an important role in helping the learner to become aware of how to learn and how to learn better. There are various mediating instruments: they include the teacher and the classroom activities, the textbook, other pupils and/or the ELP. What is important is that their aim is to gradually promote the most essential aspect of autonomy: the control over one's own learning. This is something that is taken up in most current curricula.

The language Portfolio has to be understood as a mediating instrument that serves to promote processes of self-regulation, but we mustn't think that simply by using it, a good result is guaranteed. Experience has shown that in any process that introduces this kind of instruments for action, the teacher's way of working is fundamental. This is why it is essential to understand the importance of implementing interactive methods based on the parameters of learning how to learn and therefore focused on the learner.

As we have said, the Portfolio cannot be considered an isolated instrument but must be understood as a means to attaining aims that are based on the assumptions of the sociocultural theory of learning that we have outlined. The Portfolio has three overall aims:



- To promote an interaction that helps the learner to be aware of the learning process. The interaction is internal and also with others, with the former normally preceding the latter. Through a dialogue with others, the learner becomes aware of her learning and initiates a dialogue with herself which helps her to regulate her own conduct. This interaction must be seen as a 'verbalisation of the internal voice', which often occurs intuitively when we are faced with learning task: "What is this like?", "What's 16 and 16?", "I don't know where to begin?", etc. The point is the awareness of what to do in the learning process and how to do it.
- To gradually transfer control and the awareness of each learning activity to the pupils without this leading to the loss of an external perspective deriving from the teacher or other learners. The idea is to make the relationship between the teacher and the pupils more symmetrical so that both participate in a truly responsible way in the learning process.
- To ensure that assessment includes the meaningful convergence of different perspectives and at different moments because this is the way to obtain many snapshots of the dynamic process involved in foreign language learning.

The use of the Portfolio as a mediating instrument that promotes awareness of one's learning must necessarily activate three fields of awareness-raising which, from our point of view, must always be present when incorporating this kind of instruments. These are:

- a) The pupil's awareness of herself as a language learner. (Which languages do I speak? Which do I prefer to speak and why? Which languages are spoken around me? How do others speak my language?)
- b) The pupil's awareness of the most appropriate ways and means of handling a part of her own learning process:
 - Of the learning tasks that have to be carried out: What is the purpose of this task? Do I like it? Why or why not?



- Of her level in each of the language competences and in various phases of the learning process, that's to say, the evidence of progress. At the end of a learning sequence: What can I do now that I couldn't do before? How exactly have I improved? Do others see it as I do? I will show them something I wrote two months ago and something that I have just written, both on the same topic, and I will tell them how I've improved. For example, my vocabulary in the second text is more varied; the second text is longer and is more interesting because I don't always use the same structure, etc.