

# **Bridging the gap: The European Language Portfolio and L2 Irish Sign Languages Learners at A2-B1 level**

*Carmel Grehan & Lorraine Leeson*

*Trinity College Dublin*

[cgrehan@tcd.ie](mailto:cgrehan@tcd.ie)

[leesonl@tcd.ie](mailto:leesonl@tcd.ie)

## **Abstract**

The European Language Portfolio (ELP) has been widely implemented to support the development of learner autonomy in the teaching and learning of spoken languages, but, until this study, had not been implemented with learners of sign languages. Across 2017–18, we developed and piloted a sample ELP for Irish Sign Language (ISL), which fed into work on the development of an ELP for sign language learners, under the umbrella of the PRO-Sign 2 project (European Centre for Modern Languages). We piloted the ELP with a cohort of ISL learners in the second year of their Bachelor in Deaf Studies, who perform at A2-B1 level on the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages (CEFR) (2001; Leeson et al., 2016). All are learning ISL as a second language (L2), and are acquiring this sign language in what is, for them a new modality (M2). We met students on four occasions across 2017–18 to explore how/if use of the ELP in the ISL classroom supports the development of robust self-evaluation skills, and how the ELP enhances student-reported perception of motivation and autonomy. We report on the process, and present a grounded theory (Glaser & Strauss, 1968), “Bridging the Gap”, drawn from key concerns of these ISL M2L2 learners at A2-B1 level.

**Keywords:** *Classic Grounded Theory; Second Modality Second Language (M2L2); Sign Language Teaching and Learning; European Language Portfolio (ELP); Common European Framework of Reference for Languages (CEFR)*

## **1. Introduction**

Irish Sign Language (ISL) has been taught to adult learners as a second or subsequent language at Trinity College Dublin since the 1980s (Leeson & Lynch, 2009). The Centre for

Language and Communication Studies (CLCS) at Trinity College Dublin was the first to introduce extra-mural ISL classes in a university, beginning in the 1980s, and subsequently, their ‘daughter’ initiative, the Centre for Deaf Studies (CDS), has delivered Irish Sign Language as a credit bearing subject since 2001 (Leeson & Lynch, *ibid.*).

The lack of empirical research on the teaching, learning, and assessment of sign languages as L2s is well documented (Chen-Pichler, 2012; Chen-Pichler & Koulidobrova, 2016; Leeson, Muller de Quadros & Rossi Stumpf, *in press*; Leeson & van den Bogaerde, 2019; McKee, Rosen & McKee, 2014; Napier & Leeson, 2016), and this challenge extends to the Irish context. In line with the CDS mission of developing research in the field of Deaf Studies in Ireland, we have, since 2008, worked to map ISL teaching, learning and assessment to the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages (CEFR) (Council of Europe 2001). We have engaged in European funded projects that relate to the CEFR, like the D-Signs project, led by the University of Bristol (Leeson & Grehan, 2009). We have also led on work with the European Centre for Modern Languages (ECML) around the applicability of CEFR for sign language teaching, learning and assessment (Leeson, Haug, Rathmann, Van den Bogaerde, & Sheneman, 2018; Leeson & Van den Bogaerde, 2019, *in press*; Leeson, Van den Bogaerde, Rathmann, & Haug, 2016). This work is essential to facilitate the development of assessment instruments for the evaluation of adult learners of a sign language (Haug, Ebling, Boyes-Braem, Tissi, & Sidler-Miserez, 2019).

One of the tools that the Council of Europe has developed to support learner self-evaluation is the European Language Portfolio. However, until 2017–18, this had not, to the best of our knowledge, been leveraged with sign language learners. Given this, the European Centre for Modern Languages’ ProSign 2 project, Promoting Excellence in Sign Language Instruction,<sup>1</sup> set out to pilot the ELP with adult learners of a sign language in Ireland (Trinity College Dublin) and Germany (Humboldt University Berlin). Our goal was to develop a version of the European Language Portfolio that takes account of modality specific requirements for sign languages. Both the Centre for Deaf Studies at Trinity College Dublin and Humboldt University Berlin piloted ELPs with Irish Sign Language and German Sign Language learners respectively across 2017–18. Here, we focus on the Irish experience.

We embed this within a discussion of M2L2 learners of ISL at Trinity College Dublin who operate with Common European Framework of Reference (CEFR) A2-B1 proficiency

(Council of Europe 2001, Leeson et al. 2016). We also consider how students self-evaluate using the ELP in contrast to their teachers, and consider their key concern around progression with ISL.

## **2. The European Language Portfolio (ELP)**

The European Language Portfolio was developed by the Council of Europe's Language Policy Division, piloted from 1998 to 2000, and launched in 2001, the European Year of Languages ([www.edl.ecml.at](http://www.edl.ecml.at)). The ELP is a tool for learners that incorporates three elements: (i) a language passport, (ii) a language biography, and (iii) a dossier. In the language passport, the learner summarises their linguistic & cultural identity, language qualifications, experience of using different languages & contact with different cultures. The learner uses the language biography to set learning targets and to record and reflect on their language learning and intercultural experiences. This also offers a mechanism for learners to regularly assess their progress. Finally, the dossier allows learners to keep samples of their work in the language/s they have learned or are learning. The ELP is seen as the learner's property and this, in turn, underpins the principle of learner autonomy, as it is the learner who uses the ELP to plan, monitor and evaluate their progress. Using the ELP, learners engage in on-going formative self-assessment using the "can do" checklists attached to the language biography.

## **3. ISL and the Bachelor in Deaf Studies**

Trinity College Dublin offers the only undergraduate programme in Deaf Studies on the island of Ireland. Students at the Centre for Deaf Studies complete courses that total 80 ECTS (European Credit Transfer System) credits (some 1600–2000 hours of student study time) across their four years of study on the Bachelor in Deaf Studies programme. Under the current process, students complete 20 ECTS in Irish Sign Language in each year. In their third and fourth years, students continue to be exposed to ISL in the language classroom, but also engage in Content Learning in Language (CLIL), as several academic modules are delivered through the medium of Irish Sign Language.

#### **4. This Study**

Across 2017–18, the Centre for Deaf Studies piloted the European Language Portfolio biography with second year students (“Senior Fresh” (SF) students) learning Irish Sign Language as part of their four-year Bachelor in Deaf Studies programme. This cohort had already completed 20 ECTS of ISL in their first year of studies. Students at this level have generally attained A2 competency and are engaging with curricular content designed to develop proficiency to B1-B2 level. The entire SF cohort were exposed to the ELP for ISL across the academic year 2017–18 as they worked through the modules, ISL3 and ISL4.

With research ethics approval from the School of Linguistics, Speech and Communication Sciences, we carried out four focus groups across the academic year (Weeks 6 and 11 of Michaelmas Term 2017 (our first semester) and Weeks 5 and 11 of Hilary Term 2018 (our second semester). Thirteen second modality, second language (M2L2) learners from the SF ISL class participated in this component of the study. Each focus group lasted approx. 45 minutes. These were video recorded to allow the researchers to create an anonymized transcript after each meeting. The transcript was shared with participants who had an opportunity to amend or modify their contribution.

We took a classic grounded theory approach to this study (Glaser & Strauss, 1967), as this offers an inductive pathway to understanding the key concerns of adult ISL learners in a university setting. A grounded theory sets out to understand “the action in a substantive area from the point of view of the actors involved. This understanding revolves around the main concern of the participants whose behaviour continually resolves their main concern. Their continual resolving is the core variable.” (Glaser 1998, p. 115). We were particularly interested in how learners saw the ELP as part of their ISL learning experience, and thus engaged focus group participants on if/how using the ELP may have helped as part of their ISL learning experience. In line with classic grounded theory methodologies, we coded the data set carefully, and recursively, identifying the substantive and theoretical codes that led to our proposed theory. Across the process we also noted feedback that may inform modifications to the approach taken with implementing the ELP for sign languages in tertiary education classrooms in Ireland, and, by virtue of our feedback to the ProSign 2 project, across Europe.

#### *4.1. Towards a Grounded Theory: Bridging the Gap*

Recent work on ISL learners demonstrates that beginners struggle greatly with ‘exposure insecurity’, arising from a learner’s perception that are being intently observed when they use the language (Sheridan, 2019). Learners report that, because of the physicality of the language, where they must use their body to articulate the language, they feel exposed (ibid.). Sheridan presents a grounded theory, “Composing the L2-M2 Self”, to account for the process of how learners deal with their ‘exposure insecurity’ as they produce a piece of work in ISL. She goes on to account for how ISL learners develop the resources to negotiate their main concern as they progress. Sheridan’s participants were first year students on the Bachelor in Deaf Studies programme. One of the interesting points emerging from our study is that this concern around exposure seems to dissipate completely by the end of the first semester of second year. While our SF participants had some interesting comments on the ELP (which we return to shortly), their primary concern was firmly focused on how they could bridge the gap between what they currently know and where they need to be in order to meet the module learning outcome requirements and successfully pass their course. Further, second year students are cognizant that they must achieve a II.1 grade or better in ISL (60% or above)<sup>2</sup> in order to progress to the interpreting or ISL teaching strand of the Bachelor in Deaf Studies programme. Thus, the assessment of the ISL4 module at the end of the second year serves as a high stakes test (Leeson, 2011; McNamara, 2000), and this certainly influences how learners engage. Participants report that they grapple with knowing that they will be able to execute certain functions or use particular grammatical features of ISL by the end of their module but don’t know how to get from where they are, linguistically, to where they need to be.

Against this backdrop, we propose a grounded theory, BRIDGING THE GAP, that proposes that M2L2 learners of ISL at B1-B2 proficiency level work through a series of phases, sometimes recursively, that is guided by their desire to move toward set targets in their language learning. Successful learners, we suggest, move from a position of STRUGGLING to NAVIGATING to ENGAGING. This is a recursive process, where learner autonomy is a key factor in facilitating learner skill in reflective and recursive learning processes. As they progress, they bring focused attention to their learning and develop metalinguistic competence that successful learners leverage in their development.

#### 4.1.1. Struggling

The primary phase in our theory is that of STRUGGLING. Struggling is inherent to skill development in any language, with participants reporting that the nature of their struggle shifts as they progress. For example, some learners reported that in their first year of studies, they had struggled with grasping the difference between Irish Sign Language and Signed English (see McDonnell, 1997 for an outline.), especially as ISL presents information about the location and interaction of entities in space in a way that differs significantly from English (Focus Group 1) (See Leeson & Saeed, 2012 for detailed discussion of event packaging in ISL.) Some participants said that they were only now, in their second year, really starting to understand the difference between how ISL is structured in comparison to English.

Features referenced by participants across the year include that of constructed action (CA) and constructed dialogue (CD) (Metzger, 1995, 1999) (which many of them still refer to as ‘role-shift[ing]’, an earlier term used in the sign linguistics literature (Padden, 1990). This involves the signer using their body to adopt the role of a character in an event, and in so doing, engaging in displaced action or dialogue. A signer will typically break eye-contact with their addressee, and their non-manual features may change. Leeson & Saeed (2012, p. 184) describe constructed action, noting:

Sometimes body position is adjusted, with the signer rotating the shoulders to the left or the right. This seems to be more marked in certain settings, particularly those where there are a larger number of participants. In such instances, the signer’s torso can rotate to mark a referential shift, probably a function of the fact that he or she may need to be visible to a larger audience, for example at a conference. In less-populated settings, eyegaze along with a slight inclination of the head can mark such a shift. These differences in usage may or may not have so much to do with the formality of the event as with the number of participants by whom a signer has to be clearly viewed. It may be that instead of being a corollary of formality, a highly visible referential shift may be a function of the fact that the signer wishes to have his or her differentiation of characters more clearly viewed by the interlocutors in large-scale multi-party interactions than in smaller-scale events.

In attempting to perform CA (or, indeed, CD), participants in this study report that they struggle to know where they should look, and report that they feel “awkward” and “unnatural”. In addition to representing a struggle to master a single feature of a sign language, we suggest that this also could be considered as a struggle with what has been called “thinking for speaking” where learners of a language are finding new ways of “structuring a mental representation of an event for verbal expression” (Slobin 1987, p. 443). Here, ISL learners are working to internalize ways in which an interactive engagement is presented in a typologically different language, a visual-gestural language, using the vehicle of constructed action and constructed discourse.

Learners, critically, across their language learning journey, thus struggle to bridge the gap between where they are and where they need to be. One participant describes the unsettling feeling that persists while waiting for (in her words), ‘the penny to drop’. She says:

...we were in a group for our portfolio [and] I said to [student’s name], the two of us know what we need to be doing but we don’t actually know how to get there. And I’m watching thinking like when does the penny just drop that you know how to do it right and do it by yourself. I think that’s the “ahaa” moment we’re all waiting for. (Focus Group 4).

#### 4.1.2. Navigating

As they develop confidence in their proficiency, learners begin to navigate their learning pathway [NAVIGATING]. In Focus Group 1, learners were already growing in confidence with regard to strategies that support communicative engagement, such as the use of classifier constructions (McDonnell, 1996) in lieu of an established lexical item. The concept of ‘classifier’ stems from the work of Allan (1977) who established a typology of classificatory morphemes in verb systems in Athabaskan languages. American Sign Language linguists including Frishberg (1975) and Supalla (1978) drew comparisons to structures they saw in ASL, especially with regard to Allan’s class of predicate classifiers, which are morphemes that allow speakers to classify the subjects or objects of associated verbs according to particular semantic features, most notably shape, number or distribution of entities (Aikhenvald, 2000). Working on ISL, McDonnell (1996) drew on this literature, as well as that of Brennan (1992) for British Sign Language, to propose four categories:

1. Whole entity-CL stems (including hand configurations that refer to semantic, size and shape, and instrumental categories).
2. Extension-CL stems (including reference to tracing size and shape configurations).
3. Handle entity-CL stems (including reference to handling and touch categories).
4. Body-CL stems (which is where the signer's body functions in a way that is similar to the way that handshake functions in certain two-handed configurations).

In such constructions, we typically see modification of the handshape parameter to align with the salient characteristics of the target referent, e.g. the size and shape of the referent will influence the choice of handshape selected (Schembri, 2000). While contested in the sign linguistics literature (see Schembri *ibid.* for discussion), reference to classifier constructions is widespread, though we note that more recent linguistic descriptions label constructions like these as 'depicting signs', a term that also needs to be folded into sign language teaching and learning pedagogy (Liddell, 2003; Mesch, Raanes, & Ferarra, 2015; Smith & Hoffman, this volume).

For language learners, figuring out how this system operates is liberating. One participant stated:

I think you can express yourself more with different classifiers because, like, in first year, you've a very small vocabulary where, ... you know a lot of classifiers, because the thing looks like a handshape so you're able to act out a conversation. It's easier than learning all this vocabulary... And also, you feel like you're actually using the language, you're not just making it up.

Another learner added:

And when you find yourself at a loss for a lexical sign, using classifiers actions and role-shift can accommodate whatever you're trying to get across ... another way of doing it.

Such comments also point, we suggest, to latent language ideologies, mapping to ideas that the grammar of a visual-gestural language 'should' look unlike that of a spoken language



(Peterson, 2009). This is certainly an issue that deserves further unpicking in the M2L2 environment.

In working through the ELP, learners report that they could identify progress on receptive skill development more easily than for productive skill development. At the same time, they reported that the ELP descriptors allow them the opportunity to reflect and identify where they currently lack skills: "...we're definitely not there yet so, within a lot of the topics..." (Focus Group 3). Learners also reported that the inventory of descriptors in the ELP serves as a guide to how they are developing:

But then there's a lot of places that we are at, you know? Having a general conversation - we're able to do that. ... So there would have been a lot where I would say that I fully understand. Yeah it was kind of half and half. (Focus Group 3).

A critical point that emerged from the data is that learners say that they value seeing other students further along the process, that this reassures them that they too "can get there". This is an important point for teachers: the burden of 'bridging the gap' is not wholly their responsibility— instead, ISL instructors should be mindful of how they can facilitate peer-to-peer engagement across cohorts, which offers an indication to learners that they too will get to be where their more advanced peers are. Learner comments reflect introspection around language use, alongside growing metalinguistic awareness of how ISL functions. The communicative goal of language use also is foregrounded, with learners considering how they can achieve engagement, working around deficits in their grammatical or lexical repertoires.

#### 4.1.3. Engaging

Ultimately, learners at the B1-B2 level are ENGAGING - with resources, and with the Deaf community. Participants reflected that they found classroom discussion that focused on topics of relevance to them most engaging, relevant, and motivating while they found exercises that required them to (for example) use a particular lexical item in a sentence or short story unnatural and stressful:

Last year, [teacher's name] used to give us ... a word, say we were doing ... all verbs starting with A so like 'answer' and all these, right and they would give it to you and

tell you to do a 30 second story on it but like, it's so stressful, and you're like OMG I don't know... And you'd have to make up the story as well and like it's not natural. (Focus Group 4).

Authenticity of the communicative act promoted engagement and, for some, made use of their L2 "easier". One learner noted "I find when you're talking to a Deaf person it's easier, but when you're going in to do your presentation you're so forced or something. It's hard to explain." (Focus Group 4). However, another learner countered this, reporting that they preferred to have the opportunity to prepare a piece, suggesting that "...if somebody just approaches me and starts signing, I'm really bad" (Focus Group 4).

Fear of appearing rude, 'stupid', or a poor signer is a barrier to engaging, and remained a factor for learners across their second year, and sometimes impacted on how learners felt teachers perceived them. One learner reported that:

I'm still afraid of [name]. And I don't know why because I had my interactive exam and I was so terrified but I did it. But oh my, [they were] so clear, and [they are] the most natural signer, [they are] so clear [but] when [they] come toward me I'm like "oh nooo".... (Focus Group 4).

Despite this, learners valued the opportunity to engage. This lecturer delivers an academic module in ISL that is usually interpreted to English. On one occasion across the academic year, the interpreter was ill and students agreed to go ahead with the class without interpretation. While they were anxious about how well they would understand the lecture, they reported that they really enjoyed the class and how the lecturer presented the class material in ISL to the point where "... we would prefer it going from [them] to us rather than through an interpreter." (Focus Group 4). This comment also suggests that the issue of content learning through language (CLIL) is one that deserves further unpacking in sign language contexts.

Despite the positive experience with their lecturer, learners also discussed the need "to build oneself up" to interacting with the target community at large, demonstrating the recursive nature of development via the phases of STRUGGLING, NAVIGATING and ENGAGING. As one participant put it:

...if someone actually walks up to me, I still panic. I have to get rid of that ... I was at St. Patrick's Day parade with a [deaf group] and afterwards we went to the Deaf Club and I stepped in and there were a couple of people that I didn't know and I froze and I ran out of there. Oh I can't do this, I don't know how to sign to these people, what if I don't understand them. I even said it to [name], like this is ridiculous, I am in year two of Deaf Studies!

#### 4.1.4. Learner Autonomy and Noticing as drivers of development

Across the phases, learners are engaging in autonomous learning (Little, 1991; O'Rourke & Carson, 2010; Ridley, 1997). Through reflective learning and focused attending, they are developing metalinguistic competence that they leverage in their practice. This may map things learned in class to language behaviours that are worked on outside of the classroom setting. For example, in Focus Group 4, a participant commented on how the group's use of constructed discourse/ constructed action had developed across the semester. She said, "I don't think we're as bad as we were. [Teacher's name] has kind of worked on it this semester with us", going on to describe how the learners themselves were working consciously with this aspect of ISL production. She reports that learners:

... ask each other questions about our holiday and then we go back the next day and then film ourselves on our own and film that conversation .... Yeah I think you feel very conscious that you have to do it, it's very difficult whereas sometimes when you do it spontaneously when you're trying to tell a story, sometimes it's there without realising, but if you're very aware of it then it becomes very confusing because you're like oh no I turned the other way, oh no I forgot I must do it from this point. (Focus Group 4).

We emphasise that not all students progress at the same pace. While some students discussed how they were making some kind of progress in figuring out how to use constructed discourse and constructed action, another student noted that even at the end of their second year of study they were "still trying to avoid it [constructed discourse/ constructed action]" (Focus Group 4).

This process of moving between conscious awareness (noticing) of use of a linguistic feature versus unconscious embedding of a feature of the language is an issue that has been debated in the literature (e.g. see Schmidt, 2010 for an overview of the arguments for and against "The Noticing Hypothesis"). He differentiates between "noticing" as a technical term limited to the conscious registration of attended specific instances of language, and "understanding", a higher level of awareness that includes generalizations across instances, arguing that metalinguistic awareness and knowledge of rules both belong to this higher level of awareness (Schmidt, 1990, 2001). The issue of learners noticing and working to consciously embed features in their ISL performance was a theme that recurred in the focus group data. What was interesting is that sometimes the prompt to notice was driven by an ELP descriptor. Participants reported that they use the ELP as a checklist against which they can gauge their progress and identify areas that they need to work further on, which in turn, reinforces learner autonomy. They liked the fact that the ELP presents:

... the different areas that you're able to do, like productive skills, in, like how you feel your productive skills would be in information [settings] that you know and then information that you don't know and like, how you're what level you're at in some areas and how your receptive skills... and like, I noticed that my receptive skills are way better than my productive skills. (Focus Group 3)

Noticing, with ever-developing sensitivity to quality of proficiency is key to identifying strategies for progression – individually, in partnership with peers, and with feedback from their teachers. For example, the understanding that use of constructed action is an integral part of the ISL language system is in tension with the learners' attempts to develop proficiency in use of this type of construction. As one learner in Focus Group 4 commented, "I don't think Deaf signers really need to establish when they're role shifting [CA], whereas for me it's not a natural thing to do because I'm just so not sure how to do it properly." Another learner in the same focus group added their concern about effectively distinguishing between referents:

And how to distinguish between characters ... to make it clear that you have switched. Or even, the feedback that I got from my mock exam was like, talking about three different characters in this TV programme, and [the teacher] said I really need to make clear who is who by acting out you know, who they are in personality,

but I find that very difficult even though you think you're doing it ... and you have all these different people talking like that and you have to try to distinguish between them and in my head I'm thinking, oh I'm doing this....

Managing reference in ISL also entails use of pointing signs, which are typically co-referential with a locus associated with a referent (Leeson & Saeed, 2012). However, learners coming towards the end of their second year of instruction report that their teacher noticed that they were over-using pointing strategies suggesting that they could instead make greater use of CA:

Even just going back to our feedback this morning that we got back, like [Teacher's Name] said "you pointed too much" you can be that person you know instead of always pointing, so like instead of "[pointing sign to locus] KNOCK-ON-DOOR" you can just automatically knock on the door, but I feel like because I have that person set up, I need to use it, but you know ... I don't think I've ever been told that I pointed too much. (Focus Group 4).

The fact that this learner refers to how they reviewed their signed feedback from their teacher as a mechanism for revisiting their progress also indicates how an autonomous learner engages in M2L2 learning.

#### 4.1.5. The ELP: Helping ISL learners bridge the gap

Learners report that the ELP descriptors serve as a prompt for them to review what they have covered in class, and identify what they have not yet learned or mastered. Having a checklist in the form of the ELP, then, helps them to navigate on progress. Having a portfolio of work that they can refer back to reinforces this sense of development over time. The second year learners in this study reported that they still review their productive language content from their first year of ISL learning and consciously identify the differences in terms of lexical production, pace of fingerspelling, and grammatical accuracy. They pointed to how they recognised their significant development in receptive language skill over the period. For example, one participant noted that they reviewed a video of an ISL signer discussing Peru. They report that, "I watched it through and I understood the whole lot, and I was so proud because they were signing so fast and I thought, 'Yeah. I'm getting somewhere now.'" (Focus Group 3).

This sense of “getting somewhere”, of bridging the gap between where they were and where they are moving towards are sometimes best illuminated in contexts where learners feel stretched. By the middle of the second semester, learners reported that they felt more confident in settings that they would not normally have operated in without support. Learners noted that the interpreter had been ill for a recent class delivered by a deaf lecturer, and so they took the class without interpretation support. Acknowledging that the lecturer made great efforts to slow down for them, the learners reported that they still understood a lot more than they thought they would. They felt that they were more involved than usual, and felt more confident because of this positive experience, reporting that the experience was “a testament to this year and last semester and just getting the skills.” (Focus Group 3).

Key to this process is access to resources that learners can leverage to help them negotiate, navigate and self-evaluate progression against stated norms, embedded in ELP descriptors.

Across the focus groups (but particularly in Focus Groups 3 and 4 in semester 2), learners reflected on the ELP. In considering how they were exposed to the ELP and how they used it, they suggested that introducing the Language Biography as soon as classes start would help to clearly mark it out as a key tool for learners. They also suggested that they would find it helpful if the ISL instructor were to revisit it at least once a semester, to bring it to the foreground of students’ consciousness. They commented on the usefulness of statements in the Language Biography that prompt learner reflection. Examples cited included the use of the prompt phrases that students are invited to complete, for example:

- (1) “I am learning this language because....” [MOTIVATION]
- (2) “In this language I want to be able to...” [GOAL-SETTING]
- (3) “Things I like doing in language class...” [REFLECTIVE LEARNING]
- (4) “Things I am good at....” [REFLECTIVE LEARNING]
- (5) “Things I find difficult....” [REFLECTIVE LEARNING, GOAL-SETTING]

ISL learners reported that these phrases helped motivate them (example 1), prompt them to set goals (2), reflect on their learning (3, 4, 5), and figure out how they might move from finding something difficult by means of including their challenging aspect into a new individualized goal (5).

Learners also reflected on the kind of feedback that they receive from instructors, noting that not all feedback is equal. They find that timely, video recorded feedback in ISL, is most useful. The language that the teacher uses in describing their progress is also key. Learners noted that mapping progress to the components outlined in the ELP descriptors is helpful, while comments like “that isn’t deaf friendly” are not helpful at all. Learners do not know what ‘deaf friendly’ means in terms of how a piece of discourse should be structured. They want feedback that is framed in a way that will be helpful, pointing out a way to move towards greater proficiency.

We have noted previously that both the CEFR and the ELP support learner autonomy. Our pilot group demonstrated embodiment of learner autonomy principles when they talk about using the ELP as a mechanism for self-monitoring development and leveraging video feedback from their instructors. For example, one of the participants noted:

We’ve had to do like a self-analysis. We’ve had to watch it and actually pick out what’s wrong so that when you go back to do a similar thing you actually know where the problems lie. (Focus Group 3)

Learners report that they draw on prized video feedback from their instructor several times to inform learning. They also value the opportunity to have one-to-one sessions with their instructor, which offers them highly individualised guidance regarding progression.

Learners suggest that opportunities to re-do pieces of work, following from feedback (a submit-feedback-edit-resubmit cycle) would be very helpful and allow them to integrate learning into their performance rather than moving, as is often the case in language classes, on to the next topic on the curriculum. This ‘less is more’ approach offers opportunities for learners to mindfully engage in recursive learning through practice and performance. This participant’s comments illustrate how learners’ ‘exposure anxiety’ has clearly been resolved, with the focus moving towards identifying (in this case) errors, and working to correct them:

Everybody hates watching themselves back, but- especially this year because we’ve had to do like a self-analysis. We’ve had to watch it and actually pick out what’s wrong so that when you go back to do a similar thing you actually know where the problems lie. (Focus Group 1)

Learners emphasise the importance of video recorded feedback in ISL, which allows them the opportunity to review feedback relative to performance, scaffolding their learning, and supporting recursive learning opportunities. This was an issue that was raised in all four focus groups that we ran. Learners report that they value the description that is outlined in CEFR and the ELP that captures “what I can do” and value the description outlined in the CEFR and the ELP that show “where I need to get to”. Finally, learners reported that when they returned to self-evaluate using the ELP towards the end of the academic year, they were surprised by the progress they had made, and noted that the opportunity to revisit progression on a number of occasions across the year using the same tool was beneficial.

However, practicing autonomy in these ways does not necessarily mean that the learner is self-evaluating themselves in the same way as their teacher will. In reviewing student self-assessment, students sometimes under- or over-evaluated capacity in comparison to how their instructor rated their proficiency. Learning to calibrate self-evaluation is clearly a skill-set that requires guidance, and this offers an opportunity for teachers of ISL to draw learners out on their reasons for self-evaluating in a particular way to better understand how they view their learning journey.

## **5. Next Steps**

While we have presented a general overview of our ELP pilot, there is further work to be done. We plan to build a more comprehensive grounded theory from the data drawn on here, presenting on how intermediate learners engage with the learning process. Themes that have emerged include discussion of motivation, which offers opportunity for us to consider our findings with respect to the substantive literature on motivation that exists.

We note that learners in our pilot made repeated reference to their experience of developing a new identity in their L2, using the metaphor of ‘growing up’ in this new language community. For example, learners talked about their initial language learner status as one of “being a baby”, and of “growing up” as they develop competence. They talk of their teacher as their “linguistic parent” and of more advanced students as “older siblings”. Unpacking this metaphor further as it relates to M2L2 learners of ISL is something we would like to explore further.



## **6. Conclusions**

In this paper, we have reported on a pilot study that introduced the European Language Portfolio to a cohort of adult M2L2 Irish Sign Language learners in a higher education setting. Working with Classic Grounded Theory led to the identification of a pattern of progress whereby learners move through recursive phases of struggling, navigating and engaging, informed by a sense of how they “should” ultimately be able to perform in their target language, as articulated by the European Language Portfolio can-do statements. Learners report that they find the ELP to be a valuable tool for planning and navigating their progress in tandem with guidance from their teacher. They reported that having teacher feedback in Irish Sign Language (video recorded), which they can return to repeatedly is essential in supporting recursive autonomous learning. The use of the ELP as a tool that supports both individual learner and peer reflection on language learning is also reported. Given the positive response to the ELP pilot, we look forward to further implementing its use at the Centre for Deaf Studies, and in facilitating teachers of ISL to consider the ways in which it can support the teaching and learning of Irish Sign Language.

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<sup>1</sup> <https://www.ecml.at/ECML-Programme/Programme2016-2019/SignLanguageInstruction/tabid/1856/language/en-GB/Default.aspx>

<sup>2</sup> International grade conversion details are available here: [https://www.tcd.ie/study/assets/PDF/Grade%20Conversion%20Tables\\_November%202017.pdf](https://www.tcd.ie/study/assets/PDF/Grade%20Conversion%20Tables_November%202017.pdf)