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## **THE EUROPEAN LANGUAGE PORTFOLIO: TIME FOR A FRESH START?**

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## THE EUROPEAN LANGUAGE PORTFOLIO: TIME FOR A FRESH START?

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### Abstract

This article is based on the plenary talk I gave at the 2016 GlobELT Conference (Antalya, 14–17 April). I begin by reminding readers of the structure of the ELP and pointing out that although it was greeted with enthusiasm in most Council of Europe member states, it is not widely used in most of them (Turkey and Albania are current exceptions to this general tendency). I then elaborate on the relation between the ELP and the CEFR and sketch the ELP's history from 1998 to 2014. After that I offer answers to two questions: Why has the ELP been a relative failure in most countries? And why did the ELP succeed in Ireland with learners from immigrant backgrounds? Finally, I consider how we might make a fresh start.

### 1. Introduction

The European Language Portfolio has three parts:

- a language passport, which contains a summary of the owner's experience of learning and using second and foreign languages (L2s), an updatable self-assessment of the owner's proficiency in L2s, and a record of certificates, diplomas and other language qualifications he or she has been awarded;
- a language biography, which is designed to encourage reflection and self-management and contains checklists of "I can" descriptors that are used for goal setting and self-assessment;
- a dossier, in which the learner keeps evidence of his or her language learning achievement and perhaps also work in progress.

The ELP has three pedagogical focuses. It is intended to foster the development of learner autonomy, promote intercultural awareness and intercultural competence, and encourage plurilingualism. And it has a reporting as well as a pedagogical function since it provides concrete evidence of language learning achievement that complements the grades awarded in tests and examinations. The Council of Europe developed the concept of a European Language Portfolio (ELP) in parallel with the *Common European Framework of Reference for Languages* (CEFR; Council of Europe 2001), and the ELP is linked to the CEFR by its "I can" checklists, which are derived from the descriptors in the CEFR's illustrative scales. The idea was that by supporting the development of learner autonomy, intercultural awareness and plurilingualism, the ELP would help to communicate the CEFR's ethos to language learners.

When the ELP was launched in 2001, many language educators in the Council of Europe's member states greeted it with enthusiasm. Between 2001 and 2010, the ELP Validation Committee validated and accredited 118 ELPs developed in 32 different countries and by 6 INGOs/international consortia. In 2011 validation was replaced by registration on the basis of self-declaration, and 22 ELPs were registered between 2011 and 2014, when registration came to an end. This reads like a success story, and yet the ELP has never been used on a large scale in most national education systems and seems to be largely forgotten in some of those that were among the first to develop ELPs and submit them for validation. It is

sometimes claimed that although the ELP as such is not in widespread use, it has had a transformative impact on curricula, textbooks and classroom practice. This claim is difficult to substantiate, however, and I am not aware of any large-scale study that supports it by providing evidence of significant changes in teaching methods and gains in learning outcomes.

Against the general trend, it is important to note that the ELP continues to be quite widely disseminated in at least two countries, Turkey and Albania, which were not involved in the first phase of ELP development. Turkey has eight ELPs, seven validated and one registered, and these are in relatively widespread use – 40,000 copies in public and 30,000 copies in private schools, a further 30,000 copies in private language schools, and 10,000 in universities (Mirici 2015 and personal communication). These figures must be set against the total number of learners estimated to be in full-time education in Turkey (about eighteen million), but they are nevertheless impressive in the broader European context. Albania has four ELPs, three validated and one registered, and these are requested by a growing number of schools (Tatjana Vucani, personal communication). It will be interesting to see whether ELP use in these two countries continues to grow. In any case, one must hope that efforts will be made to gauge the ELP's impact on classroom practice and language learning outcomes using empirical methods that go beyond the questionnaire surveys that have mostly been used to date.

## 2. The relation between the ELP and the CEFR

The authors of the CEFR explain that “it is not the function of the Framework to promote one particular language teaching methodology, but instead to present options” (Council of Europe 2001: 142). This reminder of its purpose is sometimes taken to mean that the CEFR is methodologically neutral, but this is emphatically not the case. The sentence that immediately precedes the one I have just quoted reads as follows: “For many years the Council of Europe has promoted an approach based on the communicative needs of learners and the use of materials and methods that will enable learners to satisfy these needs and which are appropriate to their characteristics as learners” (ibid.). By treating language learning as a variety of language use (Council of Europe 2001: 9), the CEFR clearly implies that use of the target language should be central to the activities of the language classroom. What is more, its use of “can do” descriptors portrays the user/learner as an autonomous social agent; and recognizing that learners themselves are “the persons ultimately concerned with language acquisition and learning processes” (Council of Europe 2001: 141), the authors commend autonomous learning:

Autonomous learning can be promoted if “learning to learn” is regarded as an integral part of language learning, so that learners become increasingly aware of the way they learn, the options open to them and the options that best suit them. Even within the given institutional system they can then be brought increasingly to make choices in respect of objectives, materials and working methods in the light of their own needs, motivations, characteristics and resources. (Council of Europe 2001: 141–142)

The ELP was devised partly in order to support these processes.

It is important to point out that the Council of Europe has a long-standing commitment to learner-centredness and the democratization of education, which ultimately derives from its foundation document, the European Convention on Human Rights. In the 1970s its first modern languages projects were carried out under the aegis of the Committee for Out-of-School Education. This meant that they focused on adult learning and were informed by the ethos of the committee's major project, *Organisation, Content and Methods*

*of Adult Education*. The final report on the project (Janne 1977), argued that adult education could no longer be seen simply as a way of filling in the gaps left by compulsory schooling. Rather, it should be “an integral part of the process of economic, political and cultural democratisation”,

an instrument for arousing an increasing sense of awareness and liberation in man and, in some cases, an instrument for changing the environment itself. From the idea of man “product of his society”, one moves to the idea of man “producer of his society” (Janne 1977, p. 15).

By implication these sentences align adult education with two of the Council of Europe’s foundational values, democratic governance and human rights.

In accordance with these values, Janne’s report argues that adult education should be shaped by four objectives: equality of opportunity, responsible autonomy, personal fulfilment, and democratisation of education (Janne 1977, p. 17). Clearly, the last of these objectives implies the active involvement of the learner, which requires the exercise of responsible autonomy, which in turn entails self-management. This helps to explain the project’s belief that adult education should be based on “self-learning”, which the report contrasts with “self-teaching”. Whereas self-teaching is defined as a solitary process unsupported by an institution or a teacher, self-learning “generally refers to the practice of working in groups, and to the choice by participants of objectives, curriculum content and working methods and pace” (Janne 1977, p. 27). This general orientation helps to explain the interest in self-assessment (Oskarsson 1978) and autonomous learning (Holec 1979) that informed the early modern languages projects; it also explains the official hostility to formal tests and exams (Trim in Little & King 2014). The concern to “democratize” language education underlay pioneering work on needs analysis, the insistence on making learners active agents of their own learning, and the belief that decisions should be taken as close as possible to the point of teaching/learning (Trim 1978).

In 1991 an intergovernmental symposium hosted by the Federal Swiss authorities in Rüşchlikon recommended that the Council of Europe should “establish ... a comprehensive, coherent and transparent framework for the description of language proficiency which will enable learners to find their place and assess their progress with reference to a set of defined reference points” (Council of Europe 1992: 39), and “set up a working party to consider possible forms and functions of a ‘European Language Portfolio’ to be issued under its aegis and held by individuals, in which they may record their cumulative experience and qualifications in modern languages” (Council of Europe 1992: 40). The report on the symposium (Council of Europe 1992) indicates that the need for a framework was most urgently felt in respect of assessment and certification, and much of the discussion of a possible ELP focused on its reporting function, though there was one substantial and radical contribution (from Viljo Kohonen of the University of Tampere, Finland) that focused on learner autonomy. Two drafts of the CEFR were published in quick succession in 1996, and the second was presented at an intergovernmental conference held in Strasbourg in 1997, together with a set of proposals for the design and development of the ELP (Council of Europe 1997a). In the conference report, the Council of Europe’s Modern Languages Project Group, “aware of the need to encourage and recognise a wider range of cultural and language learning achievements than a record of formal qualifications alone can provide” (Council of Europe 1997b: 73), recommended further development of the ELP.

### **2.1. The ELP from 1998 to 2014**

In 1997 the ELP was a concept that had yet to be converted into a practical tool and used in different domains of formal L2 learning. From 1998 to 2000 the Council of Europe’s

Language Policy Division co-ordinated a network of pilot projects that developed and implemented versions of the ELP on the basis of the proposals presented at the 1997 conference (Council of Europe 1997a). The pilot projects were carried out in the school systems of fifteen Council of Europe member states (Austria, Czech Republic, Germany, Hungary, France, Finland, Ireland, Italy, Netherlands, Portugal, Russia, Sweden, Slovenia, Switzerland, United Kingdom), in private language schools under the aegis of EAQUALS (the European Association for Quality Language Services), and in universities under the auspices of CercleS (European Confederation of Language Centres in Higher Education) and the European Language Council (for a detailed report on the pilot projects, see Schärer 2000). Altogether some eight hundred teachers and thirty thousand learners were involved in the projects. There was generally a greater focus on learner autonomy than on intercultural awareness/competence and plurilingualism, and English was usually the language taught in pilot project classrooms (though not, of course, in the UK and Ireland). Self-assessment plays a central role in ELP implementation, and feedback from learners indicated that they were generally in favour of setting their own goals and evaluating learning outcomes, though some learners wondered who would pay attention to their judgements (Schärer 2000: 13). During the period of the pilot projects the ELP Principles and Guidelines were elaborated, and guides were written for ELP developers (Schneider and Lenz 2000) and teachers and teacher trainers (Little and Perclová 2000).

In 2000 the Council of Europe established the ELP Validation Committee. The first ELPs submitted for validation came from the pilot projects, and it quickly emerged that the ELP Principles and Guidelines on their own were not an appropriate tool for developing or validating ELPs because they were couched in very general terms that required detailed interpretation. As a result, an annotated version was elaborated and published in 2004 (now available as Council of Europe 2011). When the validation process was nearing its end in 2010, Francis Goullier analysed the documentation generated by eleven years of ELP validation in order to inform future ELP developers (Goullier 2010). He found that the four most persistent problem areas were: the standard and consistency of presentation; the way in which self-assessment was managed; the lack of a clear European dimension; and appropriate acknowledgement of the principle of learner ownership. As Table 1 shows, the great majority of ELPs were developed for the school sector, with a few models serving both upper secondary and tertiary education (the total is more than 118 because some models were assigned to more than one category). Table 2 shows three distinct periods of ELP development. The most sustained covered the first five years of validation and involved countries that had carried out pilot projects or embarked on ELP development when the ELP was formally launched in 2001; the second ran from 2005 to 2010, with peaks in 2006 and 2010, and mostly involved new countries; and the third covered the period of ELP registration, from 2011 to 2014.

**Table 1.** *Number of ELPs validated and accredited for different educational domains, 2000–2010*

Adolescents/adults	21
Pre-primary	3
Primary	33
Secondary	34
Upper secondary and higher education	21
Vocational	5
Migrants	6

**Table 2.** *Number of ELPs validated and registered by year*

2000	6	2008	4
2001	18	2009	6
2002	13	2010	15
2003	17	2011	1
2004	11	2012	6
2005	4	2013	3
2006	15	2014	12
2007	9		

## 2.2. Why has the ELP been a relative failure in most countries?

There are, I think, four reasons why the ELP has failed to establish itself in the education systems of most Council of Europe member states. First, there was a widespread expectation that it would be a “magic bullet”, spontaneously providing a universal remedy for the ills of language teaching and learning. To enthusiasts it seemed to offer everything that language education needed, and some of them clearly believed that if only an ELP could be put into the hands of every learner its impact would be unstoppable. This may help to explain why, when funding was provided for ELP development, it didn’t always provide for the preparation of teachers and rarely lasted beyond the pilot phase (cf. Stoicheva et al. 2009). In most countries ELP implementation needed much more support than the authorities were prepared to provide.

Secondly, the ELP’s pedagogical focuses were alien to the majority of educational systems. Although curricula in many countries have for some time emphasized the importance of critical thinking and independent learning, the practice of learner autonomy in school classrooms remains a minority pursuit. The radical changes it demands in teaching approaches and classroom discourse are simply incomprehensible to the majority of teachers and educational administrators. In much the same way, despite the wealth of theoretical and practical work that has focused on intercultural awareness and the development of intercultural competence, both concepts have had little impact on what happens in most L2 classrooms. And the promotion of plurilingualism – “a communicative competence to which all knowledge and experience of language contributes and in which languages interrelate and interact” (Council of Europe 2001: 4) – has still to be widely adopted as a key educational goal. Most L2 education continues to focus on individual languages in isolation from one another.

Thirdly, the ELP encountered problems of integration in at least three ways. Most models were not developed as part of a larger project of curricular reform, which meant that the checklists of “I can” descriptors were often difficult to relate to curriculum goals, especially when the latter were expressed in traditional terms. A further difficulty arose from the fact that most L2 classrooms work with a textbook, and teachers were faced with a great deal of extra work if they wanted to use the ELP and the textbook in tandem with each other. Also, the CEFR and ELP imply an assessment culture in which learners are active agents via self-assessment and the reflective learning on which it depends, but in most educational systems such a culture is unthinkable.

Fourthly, the ELP itself is not without problems. For example, the CEFR defines L2 proficiency in terms that imply a key role for target language use in the language classroom; and if the reflective processes of planning, monitoring and evaluation are to be part of target language use, it makes sense to provide learners with “I can” checklists in the language(s)



they are learning. This, however, may be thought to work against the principle of plurilingualism because checklists in several different languages are likely to reinforce the tendency to see them as entirely separate entities. On the other hand, providing checklists in the language of schooling may support plurilingualism while working against reflective target language use. Also, as it is defined in the Principles and Guidelines the ELP provides a comprehensive embodiment of the Council of Europe's political, cultural and educational ethos; but it seems unlikely that all contexts of learning will be able to respond equally to each dimension of that ethos. Immigrant language learners in Ireland, however, proved to be an exception.

### **2.3. Why did the ELP succeed in Ireland with learners from migrant backgrounds?**

From 1998 to 2008, Integrate Ireland Language and Training (IILT), a not-for-profit campus company of Trinity College Dublin, was funded by the Irish government to provide intensive English language courses (20 contact hours per week) for adult immigrants with refugee status and to support the teaching of English as an Additional Language to primary pupils and post-primary students whose home language was neither English nor Irish. IILT used six ELPs as key pedagogical tools in this work: 11.2001 rev. 2004 in primary schools; 12.2001 rev. 2004 in post-primary schools; and 13.2001a–c, later superseded by 37.2002, with adult refugees. This last model is the so-called Milestone ELP, developed by an EU-funded project with members in Finland, Germany, Ireland, the Netherlands and Sweden); an updated version is available on the website of the Council of Europe's LIAM (Linguistic Integration of Adult Migrants) project (<http://www.coe.int/lang-migrants>).

If the ELP struggled to establish itself in foreign language classrooms, its relevance to immigrant language learners of all ages was obvious. Learning the language of the host community is not a task that can be accomplished quickly, so developing learners' capacity for autonomous learning has to be a pedagogical priority; a key part of the integration process has to do with understanding a new set of cultural expectations and cultural norms, so the focus on intercultural awareness and intercultural competence was welcome; and for immigrants plurilingualism is part of everyday reality. Also, the lack of established textbooks meant that the ELP could be adopted as the foundation of learning in primary and post-primary schools and in IILT's courses for adult refugees. This gave the ELP a genuine reporting function. Adult learners could show prospective employers practical evidence of what they were capable of not only in English but in the other languages they knew; while the primary and post-primary ELPs informed class teachers, principals, school inspectors and parents of learners' progress in English.

Two more factors contributed to the ELP's success with immigrant learners. First, in IILT's intensive English courses for adult refugees the development of a strong portfolio learning culture coincided with the portfolio assessment used by Ireland's Further Education Training and Awards Council. In FETAC's scheme of things students were individually responsible for maintaining their portfolios, which must include: a learning plan and learning targets; a diary in which reflections, plans and decisions were recorded; for each module, proofs that learning targets had been met; and regular self-assessment. The ELP, of course, imposes the same requirements on learners, so it was easy enough for IILT to integrate work on FETAC modules with language learning based on the Milestone ELP, explicitly linking items in the Milestone ELP checklists to descriptors for FETAC Specific Learning Outcomes. IILT's learners took three FETAC modules, in English as a Second Language, Computer Literacy, and Preparation for Work. Successful completion of the modules gained them credits within the Irish system of adult education that they could build on when they had finished their course with IILT.

In the school sector the *English Language Proficiency Benchmarks* for primary and post-primary learners of English as an Additional Language were the additional factor contributing to the ELP's success. The *Benchmarks* were adaptations of the first three levels of the CEFR presented as a succession of grids. They were not a curriculum in the usual sense but a map of the ground that immigrant learners had to cover in order to communicate fully in the mainstream classroom; effectively, the descriptors specified the extent to which they could participate in mainstream classroom discourse at levels A1, A2 and B1. Because the *Benchmarks* were widely used by teachers to plan their lessons, the checklist descriptors in the ELPs had immediate relevance for pupils and students. The *Benchmarks* and the ELP were supported by an ongoing programme of in-service seminars for English language teachers; and in due course empirical research confirmed that the trajectory of linguistic development hypothesized by the *Benchmarks* was reflected in the language learning of immigrant pupils in primary schools (Ćatibušić and Little 2014).

Unfortunately IILT was closed down in 2008 and use of the ELP with immigrant learners in adult education and schools quickly diminished to vanishing point.

#### 2.4. How do we make a fresh start?

The educational ideals on which the CEFR and the ELP are founded have lost nothing of their relevance and urgency; use of the ELP to support immigrants' language learning in Ireland and the success of pilot projects in other countries confirms that the ELP's pedagogical function can support innovative practice; and the current high level of interest in the ELP in Turkey and Albania shows that it still has the power to inspire language educators. So perhaps it is not entirely fanciful to hope for a return of the ELP in the many countries where it was introduced but failed to take hold. I conclude my article by briefly suggesting five things we need to do in order to secure such a return.

First we should take seriously the CEFR's view of language learning as a variety of language use. This is how that view is summarized:

Language use, embracing language learning, comprises the actions performed by persons who as individuals and as social agents develop a range of *competences*, both *general* and in particular *communicative language competences*. They draw on the competences at their disposal in various contexts under various *conditions* and under various *constraints* to engage in *language activities* involving *language processes* to produce and/or receive *texts* in relation to *themes* in specific *domains*, activating those *strategies* which seem most appropriate for carrying out the *tasks* to be accomplished. The monitoring of these actions by the participants leads to the reinforcement or modification of their competences. (Council of Europe, 2001, p. 9; italics in original)

The words and phrases printed in italics, to which "contexts" in the second sentence should be added, refer to the principal dimensions of the CEFR's descriptive scheme. A large part of the CEFR flows from these sentences, of course, but I want to draw attention to just three elements. The first comes at the beginning: "Language use, embracing language learning ...". By treating language learning as a variety of language use, the CEFR proposes that proficiency in a language develops from sustained interaction between the learner/user's competences and the communicative tasks whose performance requires him or her to use the language in question. A large body of second language acquisition research confirms this view. Accordingly, success in L2 education depends on using the target language spontaneously and authentically as the preferred medium of teaching and learning. The second element that I want to highlight also occurs in the first sentence: "as individuals and as social agents". Like the rest of the Council of Europe's work in language education, the



CEFR is uncompromisingly learner-centred; its use of “can do” descriptors treats proficiency as a developing capacity of the individual in his or her social context and not as a body of linguistic knowledge to be mastered. “Can do” implies autonomous behaviour; and if language use is autonomous behaviour and language learning is a variety of language use, it follows that language learning should also be rooted in autonomous behaviour. Autonomous learning, in other words, is not an option but an imperative. The third element of the above summary that I want to draw attention to is the last sentence: “The monitoring of [language use] by the participants leads to the reinforcement or modification of their competences.” In the language classroom monitoring begins as a reflective process driven by self-assessment; and using the target language as the channel of explicit monitoring helps to develop our learners’ capacity for involuntary and implicit monitoring that is fundamental to spontaneous and autonomous language use. The ELP, with its goal-setting and self-assessment checklists, is designed to support this development.

The second thing we need to do in order to secure a return of the ELP is work for change from the bottom up. Educational reform is notoriously difficult to implement top-down; the gap between top-level goals and the classroom is simply too great. Educational reform works best at the level of the individual institution (school, college, university) or institutional network (chains of schools, university associations, etc.), in other words, by working from the bottom up.

The third thing we should do is to establish a firm link between the ELP and the official curriculum by restating communicative curriculum goals in terms of the CEFR’s proficiency levels and illustrative scales. This is a matter of linking statements of what, for example, learners should be able to read and write to appropriate “can do” descriptors; converting the “can do” descriptors into “I can” checklists; and translating the checklist descriptors into the second/foreign languages of the curriculum. One possible model for such an exercise is provided by the *English Language Proficiency Benchmarks* referred to above, which can be downloaded from the website of Ireland’s National Council for Curriculum and Assessment (<http://www.ncca.ie/iilt>).

The fourth thing we should do is redesign the ELP to suit our particular context, whatever that may be, taking advantage of the new freedom available to ELP developers now that validation and registration have come to an end. It makes sense to retain the language passport in its traditional form, available on the Council of Europe’s ELP website (<http://www.coe.int/portfolio> → Developing an ELP), because it provides a comprehensive but portable summary of language learning experience and achievement and can be carried from one educational sector or level to the next. We should structure the language biography around the checklists, with a reflective focus appropriate to the learners for whom our ELP is intended (again the Council of Europe’s ELP website provides templates and sample pages). And the dossier should be designed as a flexible learning journal that reflects the structure and focus of the language course(s) our ELP is designed to support. If we are working in a school context, it may be appropriate to create different dossier sections for different school levels, for bands within each level, or for each year of schooling. Experience suggests that any redesigned ELP should be easily portable; it should also assign a clear central role to goal setting and self-assessment. While designing an ELP it is important to think hard not only about how exactly it will be used in class and outside, but also about how it will be managed. For example: How often will the ELP be used for goal setting and self-assessment? Where will our learners keep their ELP? How often will they discard material they have collected in their dossier? When they discard such material, will it be thrown away or stored in some kind of archive (which could be exploited for a variety of research purposes)? Bearing in mind the principle of learner ownership of the ELP, we should discuss and answer these and other

questions with our learners; and we should ensure that they can impose their individual identity on their ELPs.

Finally, we should redesign our local assessment procedures so that self-assessment, peer, teacher and institutional assessment are all informed by the CEFR's view of language learning as language use. When designing tasks for institutional language exams, we would be well advised to focus on integrated tasks that combine receptive and productive skills: listening/reading in order to speak/write. We should also ensure that the tasks can easily and explicitly be linked to the "can do" descriptors that capture the communicative dimension of the curriculum and the "I can" descriptors of the ELP checklists, bearing in mind that integrated tasks entail a focus on more than one activity. One of the most important of the CEFR's many innovative features is the fact that "can do" descriptors bring curriculum, teaching/learning, and assessment into closer interaction with one another than has usually been the case. Each descriptor can simultaneously embody a curriculum goal, imply a learning activity, and serve as the starting point for designing assessment procedures. As part of our reflective learning strategy, we should involve our learners in task design and discuss with them the criteria by which task performance should be judged. We should also develop rating schemes that can be shared with our learners and used by them for peer and self-assessment.

### 3. Conclusion

In a globalized world, language learning is more important than ever. Without communication between speakers of different languages there can be no political and cultural exchange and no mutual understanding. In most countries language learning outcomes remain disappointingly low – see, for example, the European Commission's *First European Survey on Language Competences* (European Commission 2012). The CEFR has become the accepted international "metric" for language testing and is widely used by ministries of education to specify the language learning outcomes pupils and students should achieve. But the pedagogical implications of the CEFR's view of language learning, embodied in the concept of the ELP, have mostly been ignored. As I have argued, the CEFR defines language learning as a variety of language use, treats the language user/learner as an autonomous social agent, and assigns a central role to monitoring in the development of proficiency, which implies reflective learning. If we accept this view we shall believe that the most successful language learning environments are those in which, from the beginning, the target language is the principal channel of the learners' agency: the communicative and metacognitive medium through which, individually and collaboratively, they plan, execute, monitor and evaluate their own learning. This is the essence of language learner autonomy. It is also the truth we must embrace if we want our learners to develop a plurilingual proficiency that is part of their identity. The ELP was designed to promote learner autonomy and support the development of plurilingualism and intercultural awareness. Can we afford to do without it?

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