Developing a recognition of prior learning procedure: from exemption exam to e-portfolio

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INTRODUCTION

In recent years, higher education institutions in Finland have been incorporating policies and procedures that support internationalization, especially those linked to the European Higher Education Area. One such procedure includes implementing practices for recognizing prior learning (RPL), whether formal, non-formal, or informal. For these terms, we adopt the following EU definitions:

1)   Formal learning occurs in an organized and structured environment and is explicitly designated as learning. It is assessed, credit rated, and leads to recognized qualifications (p. 99).

2)   Non-formal learning is embedded in planned activities, not explicitly designated as learning and takes place alongside the mainstream education and training (pp. 183-84).

3)   Informal learning is usually unintended learning and takes place through life and work experiences. It is not organized or structured in terms of objectives, time, or learning support. Often learners themselves do not realize that they are involved in a process that contributes to the development of their experience and skills (p. 111).

These definitions were adopted from terminology collection by the Centre for the Development of Vocational Training in the EU [1]. This terminology is used in RPL in all fields, not only in language.

Although EU policy encourages RPL, Finnish universities tend to link their RPL procedures to formal learning. This practice marginalizes the recognition of non-formal and informal learning [2] (pp 20-30). For example, some university students in Finland acquire English communication skills through their work or internship experiences in industry. This informal learning of English may be relevant to fulfilling the university regulations on foreign language studies.

English is the most common foreign language students at Aalto University study to fulfill the university requirement. This leads to full groups in English courses and sometimes students also complain their graduation may be delayed for not being able to attend an English class. Although there are many ways in which these issues can be resolved, it is relevant to offer students other ways to complete their foreign language requirement in addition to courses.

This paper explores the development process for a new RPL procedure for English at Aalto University Language Centre as well as the experiences gained from it. This process is still on-going and, therefore, our aim is to show the current situation and get feedback and further development suggestions.

Due to the descriptive nature of this paper, as well as to the process not having been implemented as of yet, the structure of it is as follows: the first section discusses the reasons for the change in the RPL procedure for English at Aalto University while the second section describes this new procedure in detail. As this new process will be implemented in the coming academic year, the present results are the choices made when planning the new procedure and are seen in its description. The discussion section anticipates the implementation of the RPL procedure and how students should benefit from it. The future research is planned both from the student and teacher perspective regarding this procedure.

1   FROM EXEMPTION EXAM TO E-PORTFOLIO

1.1 English Exemption Exam

In order to comply with the EU regulations regarding RPL, the Aalto University Language Centre implemented an RPL procedure in 2011. For English, this entailed passing an exemption exam. The exam included a written, computerized exam and a spoken part where students were to plan and deliver a scientific presentation based on the given instructions.

This exemption exam was originally developed to allow those students with sufficient English skills to obtain the required foreign language credits without having to attend an English course. When an RPL procedure was required, this exemption exam was slightly modified to meet these new requirements. Over time, however, the English teachers began to question whether this RPL procedure adequately captured the prior learning. *Figure 1* illustrates the exam-based RPL procedure.
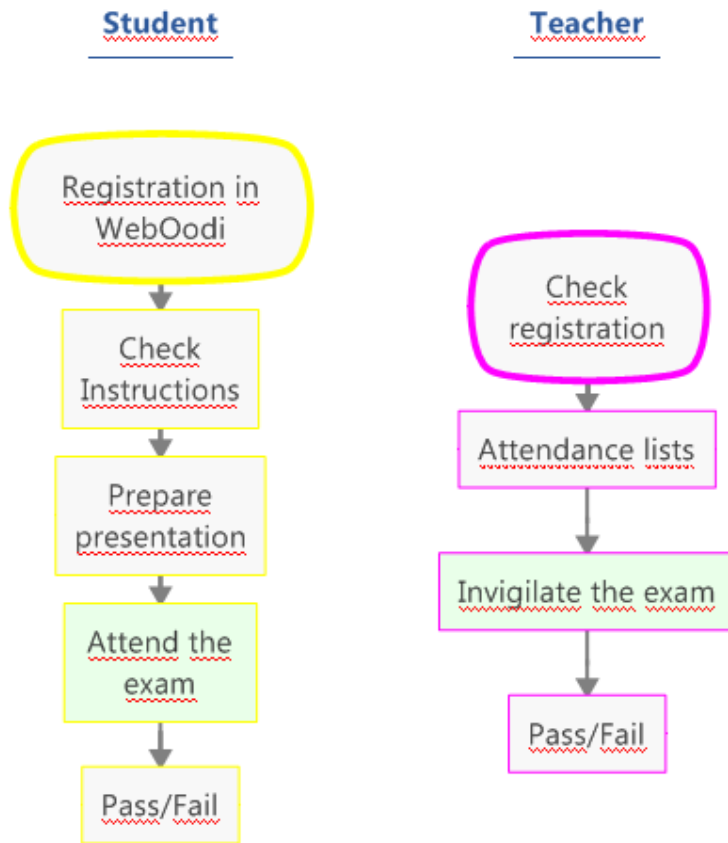
Figure 1: RPL Exemption Exam Process

This figure shows how the connection, marked by green background, between the teacher and the student is present only at the exam. Furthermore, the students are not reflecting on their prior learning, they are merely trying to pass an exam. There is no feedback given to the student at any point of this process, only pass/fail at the end of it.

In addition to questioning the prior learning and how well the exam captured it, evidence gathered at the exams indicated that some of the students were merely "trying their luck" when they registered to take the exam. The teachers felt frustrated when some of the students had not prepared for the presentation properly while the students voiced their frustration when not passing (especially) the written part of the exam.

These frustrations led to a re-evaluation of the exemption exam and, as a result, a new procedure better equipped to identify students' prior learning was planned. This procedure was to be such that it would also allow students themselves to identify the knowledge and skills they had acquired non-formally and informally.

1.2 Developing the New RPL Procedure

The starting point for developing a new RPL procedure that better aligns with the EU policy on RPL was the original exemption exam which was used as the basis for the new procedure.

The stages for developing our new RPL procedure include the following:

- Empirically investigating the current procedure

  - Distributed a questionnaire to 379 students participating in the oral RPL exemption exam
    - o This exploration indicated a portfolio would provide a better venue to recognize especially non-formal and informal learning
    - o Three elementary prior learning types: work experience, self-study and leisure activities – which primarily involved using English as a lingua franca.

- Examining EU and institutional policies

  - Centre for the Development of Vocational Training in the EU [1]
  - Aalto University General Guideline on Credit Transfer [3]
  - Government Decree on University Degrees 794/2004 [4]

- Benchmarking with other universities

  - Benchmarking Good AHOT [RPL] Practices in Finnish Language Centres – English Exemption Tests. A report from the Network of Finnish University Language Centres (FINELC) [5]

- Conceptualizing a framework for the new procedure

  - Digital language portfolio was introduced in 2004 [6] and Scheinin has extended the use of it for employees and their (self)development in several companies [7].
  - Universities of Applied Sciences have examined their RPL-procedures and these reports provide valuable information when developing the framework, e.g. [8].

- RPL studies elsewhere in the world:

  - Scotland [9]
  - English-speaking countries including reports on European, OECD, South African and Quebec research [10].

What this development has shown us is that in most cases non-formal and informal learning is either less present in the RPL processes or even completely missing. Because we felt our students learn their English especially when attending internships or exchange programs or in their summer jobs, we wanted to develop a process where these learning paths were recognized and identifiable.

In order to capture students' prior learning through this process, at the moment we have drawn a process map to illustrate this new procedure (*Figure 2*).
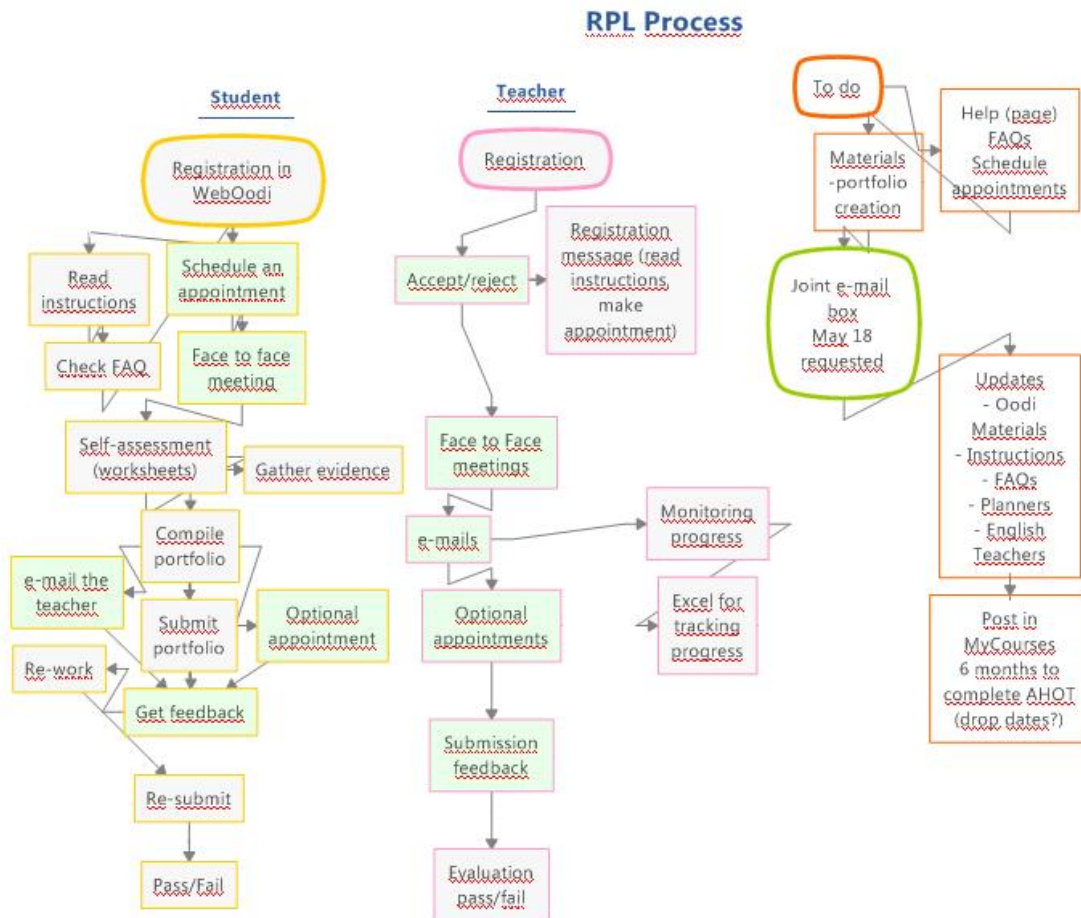
RPL Process

Figure 2: New RPL Process

In this figure, all shapes with green background indicate some type of connection/interaction between the student and the teacher. As the process is implemented, we will see how our assumed process description matches the actual process.

The new process will be more time consuming for both the teacher and the student, but it also has the self-reflection which is important for recognition of skills as well as for transformative learning [11]. This new process is, furthermore, learning-centred, which is seen pedagogically more appropriate and effective [12].

2   DISCUSSION

2.1 Prototyping the New RPL Process

We are looking forward to completing our preparations for the new process. As of now we still have quite a few loose ends, but by the beginning of the new academic year, the process will be ready.

We anticipate many questions and even frustration which is usual when any procedure is changed. However, pedagogically the new procedure is more sensible taking into consideration the ways in which students have said they learn their English.

Next year will be a trial period for the new RPL process and it requires diligent information gathering and continuous tweaking of the process. The workload for both students and teachers will have to be monitored throughout the year and students will have an opportunity to give feedback on the process.

2.2 Future Research

Since we have the information from student questionnaire gathered at the exemption exam events, we will collect similar information from those students completing the new RPL procedure. We look forward to student feedback on the process, its workload, and its meaningfulness to them. We anticipate, however, some complaints due to the changes in the RPL process. Some students may view the exam a better option as a recent study [13] also indicates. Nevertheless, we assume the exam did not capture the essence of students' prior learning and it did not provide students with new skills they are able to use in the future. Compiling an RPL portfolio will allow students to learn many skills necessary in the working life.

3 SUMMARY AND ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

3.1 Summary

The objective of this system paper was to report on the experiences of developing a new RPL procedure for English at Aalto University Language Centre. As this process is still on-going, we have only our plans and experiences so far to report. However, this development is based on the theory and earlier research shown in Section 1.2.

Despite the work ahead, we feel confident our aim to identify and capture true prior learning as well as empower students will be met through the new RPL process.

3.2 Acknowledgments

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