



EMPOWERING LANGUAGE PROFESSIONALS  
VALORISER LES PROFESSIONNELS EN LANGUES  
SPRACHLEHRENDE IN IHRER ROLLE STÄRKEN



## Using the European Portfolio for Student Teachers of Languages

Edited by David Newby, Anne-Brit Fenner and Barry Jones



European Centre for Modern Languages  
Centre européen pour les langues vivantes  
Europäisches Fremdsprachenzentrum



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Council of Europe Publishing

German edition:

*Das Europäische Portfolio für Sprachlehrende in Ausbildung in der Praxis*

ISBN: 978-92-871-7163-4

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Cover: Georg Gross

Layout: Stenner Medienproduktion

Copy-editing: Robert Blackwell

<http://book.coe.int>

Council of Europe Publishing

F-67075 Strasbourg Cedex

European Centre for Modern Languages / Council of Europe

Nikolaipplatz 4

A-8020 Graz

[www.ecml.at](http://www.ecml.at)

ISBN: 978-92-871-7162-7

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Printed in Austria

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## Introduction

This publication is the result of a four-year project ‘Piloting and Implementing the *European Portfolio for Student Teachers of Languages*’ (EPOSTL2), which ran from 2008 to 2011. It was co-ordinated by David Newby (Austria), Anne-Brit Fenner (Norway), Barry Jones (UK) and Sylvia Velikova (Bulgaria). Following the publication of the *European Portfolio for Student Teachers of Languages* (EPOSTL) in 2007, many teacher educators expressed the need for support materials concerning the use of the EPOSTL since, despite the overwhelmingly positive reaction to the document itself, there were no clear guidelines on how to use it. In discussions with teacher educators it was found that EPOSTL was, in fact, used in many different ways and that any attempt to provide a manual for using the EPOSTL would be too prescriptive in nature and would impinge on individual teaching styles and local teacher education cultures. It was therefore felt that, rather than issue specific instructions, it would be more meaningful to provide two kinds of support materials: (a) a set of general guidelines in the form of an information folder; (b) a publication in which teacher educators from different member states of the ECML would contribute case studies, examples of good practice and the results of research among teacher educators and student teachers, which would provide concrete examples of how the EPOSTL is used and a discussion of various issues accompanying this use. These experiences would help other teacher educators to develop their own modes of using the EPOSTL.

The information folder was published in 2010 by the ECML and is available in English, French and German. It contains: a short brochure explaining the content and rationale of the EPOSTL; a sheet of guidelines for teacher educators and educational stakeholders which gives advice on strategic measures for introducing and implementing the EPOSTL in teacher education in a particular institution or in a country; an information flyer which can be used at presentations and exhibitions; a sheet ‘Why use the EPOSTL?’, which summarises the main advantages of using the EPOSTL and contains quotations from student teachers who have used it in their teacher education. The second support measure is the present publication, which contains contributions from teacher educators in eight member states in which they share their experiences and discuss issues relating to the use of the EPOSTL.

A further way of supporting teacher educators wishing to use the EPOSTL consists of various dissemination activities. The ECML has sponsored presentations of the EPOSTL in a variety of European countries and members of the project group have given presentations at a large number of local and international events, both in Europe and beyond. The success of the dissemination can be seen from the fact that the EPOSTL has been, or is being, translated into 14 languages. At the time of writing, the following versions can be downloaded from the ECML website: Croatian, English, French, German, Greek, Hungarian, Italian, Lithuanian, Polish and Spanish. A Russian version is in preparation. Of particular interest is the fact that a Japanese project group

is currently piloting two versions of the document to be used in both initial and in-service teacher education.

Throughout this publication, reference will be made to sections and descriptors in the EPOSTL. It is therefore advisable that readers familiarise themselves with its content and, if possible, have a copy available when reading the contributions. The EPOSTL can be downloaded from the ECML website at <http://epostl2.ecml.at/resources>. A short explanation of its content is given on the next page.

*David Newby*

*Anne-Brit Fenner*

*Barry Jones*

*(editors)*

## **EPOSTL2 project participants**

The co-ordinators of the project were: David Newby (Austria), Anne-Brit Fenner (Norway), Barry Jones (UK) and Sylvia Velikova (Bulgaria).

This publication and the EPOSTL information pack were planned by the network group: Barbara Mehlmauer-Larcher (Austria), Natalia Orlova (Czech Republic), Kaarina Mäkinen (Finland), Françoise Wolf-Mandroux (France), Hafðís Ingvarsdóttir (Iceland), Evija Latkovska (Latvia), Magdalena Urbaniak (Poland), José Rodríguez-Maimón (Spain) and Cecilia Nihlén (Sweden).

Other participating project members were: Vesna Bagaric (Croatia), Maria Iacovidou (Cyprus), Nida Kozemiakaite (Lithuania), Julie Rochat (Switzerland), Michaela Rückl (Austria) and Vilma Tafani (Albania).



## **The EPOSTL in brief**

### **European Portfolio for Student Teachers of Languages (EPOSTL) – A Reflection Tool for Language Teacher Education**

#### **Authors**

David Newby (Austria), Rebecca Allan (UK), Anne-Brit Fenner (Norway), Barry Jones (UK), Hanna Komorowska (Poland), Kristine Soghikyan (Armenia)

The EPOSTL is a didactic portfolio which helps to prepare student teachers of modern languages for their future profession by providing a framework for reflection during their teacher education course. It builds on insights from the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages and the European Language Portfolio as well as the European Profile for Language Teacher Education.

#### **The structure and purpose of the EPOSTL**

Designed to help student teachers reflect on and assess their developing knowledge, skills and values in a systematic and comprehensive way, the EPOSTL comprises:

- a personal statement which asks the student teacher at the beginning of a course to reflect on general questions related to teaching;
- a self-assessment section which identifies a core of 195 didactic competences expressed as ‘can-do’ descriptors, which enable reflection and self-assessment at different stages of teacher education;
- a dossier which encourages the student to provide evidence of progress and to record examples of work relevant to teaching;
- a glossary of the most important terms used in the EPOSTL;
- a users’ guide which provides detailed information about the EPOSTL.

#### **The aims of the EPOSTL**

- to make didactic competences explicit and transparent;
- to encourage students to reflect on the underlying knowledge which feeds these competences;
- to promote discussion between students and between students and their teacher educators and mentors;
- to facilitate self-assessment of students’ competences;

- to provide an instrument which helps chart progress.

In addition, the explicit descriptors of the EPOSTL serve to facilitate discussions of aims, course content and curricula between teacher educators working in different national contexts. The EPOSTL is widely used in many European countries and in other continents too.

### **Where is the EPOSTL available?**

Downloads in various languages are available from the EPOSTL website:  
<http://epostl2.ecml.at>.

Further information is available from the ECML or from the EPOSTL co-ordinator David Newby: [david.newby@uni-graz.at](mailto:david.newby@uni-graz.at).

# Issues in using the EPOSTL

**David Newby**

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## 1. Aims of this chapter

In the chapters that comprise this publication teacher educators from eight European countries will discuss issues relating to the use of the EPOSTL arising from their experiences of implementing it in their own context and from research they have carried out among users of the EPOSTL. The chapters will focus on various specific aspects of teacher education and various uses of the EPOSTL. It is the aim of this introductory chapter to prepare the ground for the following discussions by providing an overview of the issues that will be raised.

## 2. Context of use

The EPOSTL is used in three main types of teacher education contexts:

- the pre-service or initial teacher education programme of a university or other tertiary institution; lectures, seminars or tutorials are held by university teachers, also referred to as lecturers or tutors;
- the practicum or teaching practice, which in most countries is a period or periods spent by student teachers in a school, where they observe lessons and teach themselves; this teaching practice is often supervised by school-based teachers who are referred to as mentors. In some countries, lecturers may play a dual role – both as university teachers and mentors – though in many countries these roles are separate;
- in-service teacher development for qualified teachers; although not the main target group of the EPOSTL, it is often used in this context.

In this chapter, issues that arise when the EPOSTL is used in these three contexts will be referred to briefly and the chapters in which they are given more detailed discussion will be indicated.

### 3. Institutionalising the EPOSTL

Experience from teacher educators who have implemented the EPOSTL has shown that it is most effective when it is used systematically by everyone involved in the training process, both university-based lecturers and school-based mentors, and when it accompanies student teachers throughout their teacher education. It is important therefore to develop a strategy to ‘institutionalise’ the EPOSTL. This strategy should encompass, on the one hand, structural aspects; that is to say, how can one ensure that the EPOSTL is used by all teacher educators, including school-based mentors? Strategies that may be adopted to encourage all teacher educators to use the EPOSTL are described in the leaflet ‘Strategies for Implementing the EPOSTL in Teacher Education’, which can be found in the EPOSTL information folder, and reprinted at the end of this publication.

The other aspect of institutionalisation concerns the content and rationale of a teacher education programme. The EPOSTL is not a prescriptive document and is intended to be used flexibly and in a variety of contexts. The question then arises as to how the EPOSTL can be integrated into an existing teacher education programme and used systematically and coherently in specific courses. In Chapter Two, Natalia Orlova describes a six-stage model for implementing the EPOSTL at the University of J.E. Purkyne in the Czech Republic and shows that the EPOSTL does not require a change in existing methodology courses but rather complements and supports the content of existing programmes. Anne-Brit Fenner reports on her piloting of a use of the EPOSTL which embraces both university-based courses and teaching practice, and Barbara Mehlmauer-Larcher describes how the EPOSTL can support and strengthen a reflective mode of teacher education. Cecilia Nihlén gives the advice to ‘start small, think big’: before approaching specific questions such as which section of the EPOSTL to begin with, it is important to have an overall concept of how the EPOSTL will be implemented. Whilst the EPOSTL is intended to be supportive rather than intrusive, it may, however, be the case that the EPOSTL categories and descriptors lead to a reassessment of a teacher education curriculum and the aims and content of specific courses. In her study of students’ reactions to the EPOSTL, Vesna Bagarić shows an interesting correlation between a low self-assessment of their didactic competences by students and what she sees as deficiencies in the teacher education programme of her institution, which led to subsequent changes in the curriculum being made. Similarly, Barry Jones reports how the use of the EPOSTL identified ‘gaps in the range of training and teaching experiences’. The potential to use the EPOSTL as a means for adapting or designing curricula is greatest if used in conjunction with another important European document, the *European Profile for Language Teacher Education – A Frame of Reference* (Kelly, M. and Grenfell, M., online).

## 4. Using the sections of the EPOSTL

The three main sections of the EPOSTL are the Personal Statement, the Self-Assessment section, containing the descriptors of didactic competence, and the Dossier. Several contributions to this publication focus on these specific sections.

### 4.1. Personal Statement

For most students, the Personal Statement section of the EPOSTL is their first contact with the document. In this section, students are asked to reflect on questions such as their own learning experiences, their opinions about and expectations of teaching, etc. As has commonly been documented, newly qualified teachers tend to be strongly influenced by the teaching they experienced themselves while at school. It is an important task of the Personal Statement section to help students to reflect on these practices and develop a critical awareness of – in the positive and negative sense – the teaching procedures used by their own schoolteachers. In her chapter, Kaarina Mäkinen focuses on this and other questions and explains how her students came to a deeper awareness of the process of reflection by carrying out the four tasks it contains.

### 4.2. Self-Assessment descriptors

This section is the core of the EPOSTL and contains the 195 descriptors of didactic competences. It is also the section that is most challenging to use and it throws up a number of issues, both on the part of teacher educators and of students. Several issues derive from its comprehensive scope. Questions that are sometimes raised when the EPOSTL is first used are: (a) how to cope with the large number of descriptors, (b) whether all need to be covered, and (c) where to start. As far as (a) is concerned, various chapters suggest measures to prevent students from being overwhelmed when they first receive their copy. For example, Cecilia Nihlén provides students with a collection of cards on which descriptors are written and it is these, rather than the whole of the EPOSTL, which comprise the students' first contact. In the first session of my own 'Introduction to Foreign Language Didactics' course, students watch a video<sup>1</sup> recording of a lesson and are told to provide feedback to the teacher. In order to do this, they must look at the tree diagram of categories on page six of the EPOSTL and themselves choose those categories which they think will be most useful as a way of analysing the lesson they have seen. In this way they become familiar with and engage with both the overall categorisation and with the content of individual descriptors.

Concerning (b), it should be made clear to students at the outset that they will not cover all of the descriptors in the course of their teacher education. The EPOSTL is intended

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1 This is taken from a DVD of eight lessons which accompanies Harmer's *Practice of English Language Teaching* (4th edition).

as a lifelong document which can help teachers to develop their competences throughout their career.

With regard to (c), it is important that students realise that the EPOSTL is not a training manual or book on methodology and, although the sequencing and organisation of the sections have a certain coherence, it will probably not be dealt with in the order in which the categories are listed. Which sections are dealt with and at what stage in the teacher education programme will arise from the current topic or focus of a specific course. In my own 'Introduction to Foreign Language Didactics', the students first focus primarily on the Methodology section, though they will also discuss individual descriptors from other sections. For example, descriptors such as *I can understand the personal, intellectual and cultural value of learning other languages* (Context, Aims and Needs, p. 16) and *I can conduct a lesson in the target language* (Conducting a Lesson, Classroom Language, p. 43) can be discussed before students receive any input from a lecturer. In his teacher education course, Barry Jones first discusses the section on Speaking with his students; in the case of Hafþís Ingvarsdóttir, it is the section on Reading.

As far as the functions of the Self-Assessment descriptors are concerned, these are twofold: the reflection function, by means of which students think about and discuss specific competences and consider what being competent in a specific area entails, and the self-assessment function, which requires students to make a qualitative judgment about their developing competences and to chart their growth and progress by colouring in the arrows which will be found under each descriptor.

The reflection function represents the very essence of the EPOSTL and is discussed in almost all contributions in this publication. Barbara Mehlmauer-Larcher and Anne-Brit Fenner provide discussion of both theories about the nature and role of reflection and how the EPOSTL has helped to support this process in their courses. Various authors – Barry Jones and Hafþís Ingvarsdóttir – report the deeper understanding of competences among students that accompanies the specific focus provided by each descriptor and the greater awareness of teaching that follows. Reflection may be undertaken on an individual basis; in this case, it may be supported by measures such as writing entries in the EPOSTL Dossier or, in the case of my own students, keeping an online journal of reflections which is part of the course learning platform. Reflective tasks may also be used to foster dialogue between students or between students and their lecturers and mentors.

As far as the self-assessment function is concerned, various issues need to be addressed, not least of all the fact that in some teaching and learning cultures there is little or no tradition of assessing one's own competence and student teachers would rather leave assessment to their lecturers. Both the willingness and the ability to carry out a self-assessment should therefore be seen as a process that develops over time and which needs to be fostered by teacher educators. One way of encouraging students to make regular self-assessments is to stress the fact that by doing so students will be able to chart their progress as they continue through their teacher education. In the EPOSTL

it is suggested that the results of a self-assessment should be recorded by colouring in the bar below each descriptor and adding the date when the assessment is made. If a different colour is used whenever a new assessment is made, this provides a very visible record of a student's progress. In her chapter, Vesna Bagarić describes how a comparison of self-assessments of specific descriptors over a 12-month period by her students provided interesting insights for both the students themselves and for their lecturers.

One question that is sometimes raised is why the self-assessment arrows are not quantified in any way – a scale of 1-10, a row of smileys, a segmented pie are suggestions that have been made. After all, the European Language Portfolio does include the A1-C2 scaling of the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages, by means of which achievement and progress are made transparent. It was felt by the authors of the EPOSTL, and by most of the teacher educators who provided advice in the development phase, that, on the one hand, didactic competences, unlike language competences, are difficult to quantify and on the other that quantification makes self-assessment more difficult since committing themselves to a specific number is something of a straitjacket for students. The system chosen in the EPOSTL is also less threatening since the inevitable association with being graded is prevented. My own experience is that once students overcome the initial insecurity of this rather vague form of assessment, it soon ceases to be an issue.

A second issue, and one raised by Barbara Mehlmauer-Larcher in her chapter, is whether self-assessment should be monitored by teacher educators. The Users' Guide to the EPOSTL states that, as with the European Language Portfolio, the EPOSTL is 'the property of the student' (p. 84). However, this raises the question of whether the teacher educator should have no access at all to the students' use of the EPOSTL. This is for every teacher educator and student to decide for him/herself. In my own case, whilst regular self-assessment is a requirement of course participation, I never look at how students have assessed themselves. What I do look at is the evidence that students provide for a particular assessment, which is recorded either in their Dossier or in their online reflective journal.

Cecilia Nihlén considers the issue of whether there can be reflection without a formal self-assessment. This is, of course, quite possible and on some occasions may be appropriate. It would seem to me that, however, on the one hand, the act of making a self-assessment deepens the process of reflection and, on the other, provides a record for students which visibly charts their performance in the course of their teacher education.

A final question which is posed by many students, especially those at the beginning of their teacher education who may not have begun a practicum and who therefore have not been able to test out their competences in a classroom situation, is: 'how do I know if I can do this if I have never taught?' Natalia Orlova suggests a solution to this by reformulating the EPOSTL statements from 'I can do ...' to 'I think I am prepared/ aware how to do ...'. It seems to me that this is a very useful way of approaching this

issue; after all, if competences are to be applied during the practicum, the process of their development must begin long before.

### **4.3. The Dossier**

The primary function of the Dossier is ‘is to help support claims that your self-assessment of the “can do” statements is an accurate reflection of your specific skills and abilities’ (p. 59). Like the European Language Portfolio, this section provides evidence of the user’s competences. In the case of the ELP, evidence fulfils a dual function: on the one hand, a pedagogical function in which the task of compiling materials brings with it an intrinsic educational value, and, on the other, an external or showcase function, by which learners compile materials to be shown to teachers, future employers, etc. In the case of the EPOSTL, it is not intended that the second function should be fulfilled by the Dossier; it plays a purely pedagogic role. In her chapter, Cecilia Nihlén focuses on the Dossier and shows how it supports a student’s self-assessment and, in particular, how it is a useful tool during teaching practice.

## **5. Using the EPOSTL in the practicum**

One interesting fact that emerged in the course of the EPOSTL2 project is that in many European countries the practicum, or teaching practice, is seen for various reasons as a problematic area. In particular, communication and co-operation between university-based lecturers and school-based mentors are commonly felt to be in need of improvement. Hafdis Ingvarsdóttir devotes her chapter to the question of ‘getting the mentors on board’ and it is a topic that almost all authors refer to. Anne-Brit Fenner discusses some of the specific difficulties connected with mentoring.

As mentioned earlier, there are two general problems here: the first is, structural in nature – that teacher education courses and practicums are often organised separately and that there is too little contact between lecturers and mentors. The second issue concerns content, in particular that students do not receive enough structured preparation, support and feedback before, during and after the practicum. The EPOSTL has the potential to assist in overcoming both of these problems.

Barbara Mehlmauer-Larcher, Cecilia Nihlén and Barry Jones point to the pivotal role that the EPOSTL can play if a specific number of descriptors are taken to form the focus of teaching practice. At my own university, students are invited to select descriptors they would like to focus on during their practicum and to inform lecturers and mentors of their choice. This selection can, of course, be done by, or in conjunction with, lecturers and mentors. This procedure brings advantages concerning both content and structural aspects of the teaching practice. As far as content is concerned, it provides a way of setting clear objectives and of planning both observation and teaching sessions and serves as a means to give transparent and focused feedback. As



far as structural aspects are concerned, the focus on the EPOSTL in general, and specific descriptors in particular, provides a common language for all parties involved in teacher education. In this way, the EPOSTL helps to bridge the gap between lecturers, mentors and students and provides a basis for closer co-operation between university and schools.

A further issue in connection with teaching practice concerns the evaluation of students' teaching; in particular, teacher educators often discuss whether the EPOSTL should be incorporated into the process of assessing a student's performance by mentors. The EPOSTL can be used for evaluation in three main ways:

- students themselves can carry out a self-assessment of their own performance;
- the descriptors can be used as the basis of dialogue between student and mentor – the mentor uses specific descriptors to provide feedback to a student about his/her performance;
- mentors use the selected descriptors to assess and grade a student's teaching.

Whilst the first two ways are very much in the spirit of the EPOSTL and correspond to its overall aims, the third is somewhat controversial since this use would seem to shift the very nature of the EPOSTL from being a document which is the property of students, which has an intrinsic educational function and which fosters their autonomous development, to being the tool of lecturers and mentors, and thus taking on an external assessment function. Moreover, this use brings the danger that 'can-do' descriptors may now also become 'can't-do' descriptors. It is then a small step from here to the EPOSTL being used as a prescriptive checklist, in contradiction of its overall rationale. Nevertheless, it has been reported by various teacher educators that they find that the use of the EPOSTL as a means of assessment does not contradict but rather complements its intended use. Since some sort of assessment tool will be used in any case to assess teaching practice, why not continue to use the same descriptors which have formed the basis of the students' teaching and the mentors' feedback? If EPOSTL-based evaluation is seen as a complementary function to its functions of fostering reflection and self-assessment, this could be a perfectly valid role for it to play.

## **6. The EPOSTL in in-service teacher development**

Although not the topic of this publication, various teacher educators have discussed and reported on the use of the EPOSTL in in-service teacher development.<sup>2</sup> Indeed, it is sometimes suggested that the 'S' in the acronym should be omitted and the document re-titled *European Portfolio for Teachers of Languages*. Just as the EPOSTL provides a

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2 See, for example, Schallenberg, 2011.

means of analysing and assessing the content of teacher education curricula, so it can be used as a way of planning and determining the content of in-service courses. As stated earlier, it is impossible to cover the whole of the EPOSTL in a teacher education course; by using the descriptors, teachers may identify gaps in their didactic competences which may form the basis for in-service seminars.

## **7. Student teachers and the EPOSTL**

The proof of the pudding is in the eating, as a well-known English proverb says. Ultimately, the usefulness of the EPOSTL must be evaluated by its main target audience: student teachers undergoing their pre-service teacher education. Almost all chapters incorporate statements and opinions by students; an interesting perspective is provided by Barry Jones, who interviewed both English and French students participating in a bilateral teacher-education programme. One pattern that seems to emerge, both from these contributions and from various reports, is that the introduction of the EPOSTL is often met initially with scepticism on the part of students due to its length, the open-ended wording of the descriptors, which often ask questions but do not give answers, and the daunting task of self-assessment which it brings. However, once the EPOSTL is used, particularly in the teaching practice phase, students value the focused entry point to many aspects of teaching, both theoretical and practical, which the EPOSTL provides. This is summed up in a quotation from a Latvian student:

I think it is a good thing to have it [the EPOSTL] though at the beginning of filling it in I had a different opinion. It turned out to be really useful – I could spot my progress and, actually, it was the first time when I really went deep into details about my teaching style. ... it worked like a diary of self-development in TEFL, I could check my skills.

What seems especially significant is that the reflective mode of education inherent in the EPOSTL, the specific focus that the descriptors provide, the opportunity to set personal goals based on the descriptors and the process of self-assessment all contribute to making students more aware of many aspects of their future profession, contribute to their professional and personal growth and help to develop both a critical and autonomous attitude.

## **8. Concluding remarks**

The chapters which comprise this publication provide many useful insights from a variety of perspectives but they are in the nature of snapshots from specific teacher education programmes and do not provide ‘the full picture’; the publication is thus not a comprehensive account either of the EPOSTL or of its uses. For example, there is no discussion of important sections of the EPOSTL such as descriptors relating to

intercultural awareness or to assessment, which figure prominently in the document and in most teacher education programmes. Readers may therefore wish to explore other ways of using the EPOSTL. Since the EPOSTL is an ongoing project, a website will continue to be available where teacher educators can share their experiences with others.

### **Recommended reading:**

Newby, D., Fenner, A.-B., Komorowska, H. and Jones, B. (eds) (forthcoming), *Insights from the European Portfolio for Student Teachers of Languages*. Newcastle: Cambridge Scholars Press.



# Challenges of integrating the EPOSTL into pre-service teacher training

**Natalia Orlova**

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## 1. Introduction

The use of a teaching portfolio is seen as a positive measure in different teaching contexts and many teacher educators include work with portfolios in their course syllabuses as a complementary approach for reviewing and monitoring students' academic progress. For this reason, an international seminar on the *European Portfolio for Student Teachers of Languages* (EPOSTL), organised by the ECML in Graz in 2008, was a valuable opportunity for me to learn about this new portfolio, its structure and content.

At that time, as a teacher educator, I had been contemplating the benefits of a portfolio for prospective teachers' reflection and growth and my students had been encouraged to develop 'working portfolios' (Costantino and Lorenzo, 2002: 3) of their own. As I found the EPOSTL, its concept, content and design, in tune with my teaching philosophy, I became an ardent supporter and decided to incorporate it into my teaching. Participating in the follow-up seminars, reflecting on my experience, and learning about other colleagues' views on using the EPOSTL made me more convinced of the usefulness of this type of portfolio.

In this article I shall share my insights regarding the use of the EPOSTL; to be more precise, its self-assessment part, in English language didactics seminars which are an integral part of pre-service teacher programmes in the Czech Republic.

## 2. Description of the Context

The initial teacher training described in this chapter is conducted by the English Department at the Faculty of Education at the University of J.E. Purkyne, in Usti nad Labem. Our students graduate with a BA in English Language and Literature or an MA in Teaching English as a Foreign Language (TEFL). They can also take a double major as teachers of other school subjects, in this case their education being provided by the corresponding department. Currently, there is a transition from a four/five-year MA programme to a two-year MA programme, the prerequisite for which is a BA in English Language and Literature within the Faculty of Education. This BA programme is also taught by members of the English Department.

In the course of their studies, the student teachers are provided with comprehensive courses in linguistics, literature, cultural studies and practical language classes. As an indispensable part of the curriculum, courses in ELT methodology aim at developing the professional competence of prospective teachers. The three modules of English Language Didactics (indispensable parts of both the old and new types of MA programmes) focus on issues in language teaching and learning, assessment techniques, etc. The classes in methodology include lectures and seminars, which are conducted on a weekly basis, and they also prepare the students for the practicum, which is a very important component of teacher education. Within the framework of our programme, student teachers are placed at schools for four weeks in the last two years of their programmes.

The EPOSTL has been introduced into the TEFL programme of the English Department since October 2008 as a means of steering the student teachers toward the necessary professional expertise. Feedback on the first year of use of the EPOSTL was obtained with the help of survey tools such as questionnaires and interviews. The questionnaire was prepared in co-operation with other participants of the EPOSTL2 project.

The initial experience of using the EPOSTL brought interesting results. The interpretation of the data received suggested that the majority of student teachers regarded the EPOSTL as a useful tool that could help their orientation within the field of language teaching, as the 'can-do' statements comprehensively describe important teaching expertise and thus make student teachers aware of what aspects of their professional competence they should work on further. These results were reported at the Seventh International and Eleventh National Conference of the Association of Teachers of English of the Czech Republic (Orlova, 2010).

The positive, as well as some negative, feedback caused me to contemplate what changes and modifications should be introduced in working with the EPOSTL in order to optimise its use with pre-service teachers. The EPOSTL now implemented in the following six stages, which were made as a result of interviews with the student teachers, questionnaire results and my own insights.

- Stage 1.* Introducing the EPOSTL to student teachers. Setting the tasks in the Personal Statement.
- Stage 2.* Selecting the sections for self-assessment.
- Stage 3.* Integrating the 'can-do' descriptors into the course.
- Stage 4.* Employing 'can-do' descriptors for micro-teaching tasks.
- Stage 5.* Encouraging students to work with the EPOSTL during their school practicum.
- Stage 6.* Surveying students' opinions of the EPOSTL.

### **3. Integrating the EPOSTL into English language teaching methodology courses**

#### **Stage 1. Introducing the EPOSTL to student teachers. Setting the tasks in the Personal Statement**

In order to arouse my students' curiosity for the EPOSTL and teaching practice and to encourage their active participation, in the very first ELT seminar, I asked them to speculate on what the words of its title might mean. The word 'portfolio' made them brainstorm the concept and also recall their experience with other types of portfolios. Here my students quite often referred to the English Language Portfolio (Perclová, 2001), which was part of their high-school learning experience. Their previous work with the ELP caused them also to suggest that the EPOSTL might contain some 'can-do' statements. Further, the focus on the word 'European' in the title brought suggestions that the portfolio is used in the European context. This also led to the discussion that teachers need documents and tools which give them a sense of belonging to a wider professional community. In this context, they also referred to the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages.

At this initial stage, students were asked to consider, and answer at home, the questions of the Personal Statement, followed by an in-class discussion of those that seemed of great interest and importance to them. The questions selected by most students were:

- What do you expect most from your teacher education?
- What do you want most from your teacher education? (EPOSTL, p. 3)

#### **Stage 2. Selecting the sections for self-assessment**

The Self-Assessment section of the EPOSTL includes a wide range of competences. I decided to narrow the focus of my students' reflection and self-assessment by selecting the sections containing the 'can-do' descriptors that were relevant to the content of the courses I teach. Thus, for the course EFL Didactics 1, the focal point was the EPOSTL section Methodology, with the emphasis on the 'can-do' descriptors which deal with vocabulary, grammar teaching, listening and speaking. While the main issues under consideration in the course EFL Didactics 2 were the sections Lesson Planning and Conducting a Lesson. For the follow-up course, EFL Didactics 3, the 'can-do' statements from the section Assessment of Learning were of primary concern.

#### **Stage 3. Integrating the 'can-do' descriptors into the course**

The main challenge of this stage was to make the descriptors meaningful to student teachers. In addition, it was necessary to equip them with basic theoretical knowledge to help them interpret the meaning of 'can-do' statements. In this connection the

question arose: should reading of the theory precede or follow the consideration of descriptors? I used two parallel approaches, according to the student teachers' preferences.

Each topic in the course included home reading, in-class discussion, analyses of video sequences, as well as other techniques often used for teacher education. In-class discussion and reading assignments served as a preparatory basis for considering the selected sections. The students were asked to consider the 'can-do' descriptors at the beginning, in the middle and at the end of seminars on a particular topic.

The first exposure to the 'can-do' statements in the Vocabulary section caused little response from my students as they found the following descriptors quite abstract and difficult to understand:

1. I can evaluate and select a variety of activities which help learners to learn vocabulary;
2. I can evaluate and select tasks which help learners to use new vocabulary in oral and written contexts;
3. I can evaluate and select activities which enhance learners' awareness of register difference (EPOSTL, p. 28).

At a later stage, reflection on the 'can-do' statements led to a short discussion of students' interpretation of such notions as 'activity', 'exercise' and 'task'. This in turn resulted in the realisation on my students' part that they fully comprehended the 'can-do' statements and saw, for example, the difference between helping pupils 'to learn vocabulary' and helping them 'to use new vocabulary'.

The final in-class consideration of these descriptors caused some of my students to think that the descriptors needed to be expanded as the competences required to teach vocabulary include other abilities and skills. Some suggestions advanced by my students for additional descriptors were:

- 'I can use different ways of presenting and illustrating the meaning of new lexis';
- 'I can use different ways of clarifying the meaning of the new words';
- 'I can create an interesting context for illustrating the target words/phrases'.

It was at this stage that, quite unexpectedly, I was confronted with a situation when two students were unwilling to reflect on the EPOSTL self-assessment sections. They explained their standpoint by saying that it was difficult to state whether they can do something in class since they had never tried their hand at teaching. After careful consideration, I suggested reformulating the statements from 'I can do ...' to 'I think I am prepared/aware how to do ...'. When reading the post-practicum reflection papers students had written, I found that this change in the interpretation of the 'can-do'



statements helped to overcome their unwillingness to reflect on the Self-Assessment section and positively changed their views of the EPOSTL.

#### **Stage 4. Employing ‘can-do’ descriptors for micro-teaching tasks**

Participants in teacher education programmes need to develop a wide range of teaching skills and techniques, such as using a lesson plan, giving useful feedback, managing a class, introducing communicative activities and many others. To provide student teachers with opportunities for professional reflection and ‘safe’ experimentation in applying teaching skills and techniques, classes in methodology include micro-teaching. The four-stage format of micro-teaching proposed by Wallace (1991: 93) includes ‘the briefing’, ‘the teach,’ ‘the critique’ (though I personally prefer the term ‘discussion’), and ‘the reteach’. Each stage has its clear-cut aim and design.

Ideally, this technique should take place in a school setting where trainees monitor (or self-monitor if the lesson has been videotaped) their fellow students’ teaching in order to discover its strengths and weaknesses. If micro-teaching is done out of a school setting, as part of a practical methodology class, its effectiveness is significantly diminished, as the audience consists of fellow trainees who play the roles of pupils. This latter method is a common practice in many EFL teachers education programmes. In order to overcome this problem, I try to turn these sessions into ‘micro peer teaching’, where trainees have to design teaching sequences not for an imaginary group of learners at level ‘X’ but for their peers who attend the same course and whose language levels and ages are known. In addition, I video record my students’ micro-teaching on a regular basis (see Orlova, 2009) and encourage them to reflect critically on the recorded sequences.

To facilitate my students’ reflection on the ‘can-do’ statements, I integrated the descriptors into peer-teaching assignments. Each student teacher was asked, with the help of the descriptors, to identify the skills they would like to focus on in their peer teaching. The following list presents the tasks the students had to fulfil:

1. Select the area in the Methodology section of the EPOSTL that you would like to focus on.
2. Reread carefully the ‘can-do’ descriptors. Identify the skills you would like to practise.
3. If you think that the selected descriptors do not embrace all aspects of the skills you would like to reflect on, expand on them. Write them out on a separate piece of paper.
4. Consider and write down the objectives for your peer teaching. Select the material and the procedures appropriate to your peers’ language level and communicative competence.
5. Teach the sequence in class (you will be video recorded).

6. Ask your fellow students to identify your primary focus in terms of the 'can-do' descriptors. Compare their ideas with yours (that is why you were asked to write the 'can-do' statements).
7. At home, watch the video first alone, then with a friend. Compare your views on the successful and less successful aspects of your teaching with those of a friend.
8. View the video fragment with the teacher trainer. Reflect critically on the recorded micro-teaching. What elements of the lesson would you like to improve? Why?

Integrating the 'can-do' descriptors into peer teaching has various positive effects. First and foremost, they equip the student teachers with a more focused view of which particular skills they would like to try out in practice.

Second, the reflection on the descriptors and the self-assessment of their own performance contribute to their progress. As Crookes (2003: 13) points out, development in 'conceptual understanding of practice occurs through reflection and through various forms of consciousness-raising'. The descriptors also serve as a frame for follow-up discussions and encourage the students to discover links between the theoretical knowledge they have gained and its practical application during the micro-teaching.

### **Stage 5. Encouraging students to work with the EPOSTL during their school practicum**

During a four-week period of teaching practice, the student teachers were asked to consider the areas of teaching that they would like to develop and to set their personal targets, specifying them with the help of 'can-do' statements from the EPOSTL. As evidence of their achievement, they were asked to build up a dossier, in which the entries (for example, video-recorded lessons, lesson plans, examples of learner tasks, learners' work, classroom aids, mentor's comments, etc.) were solely the students' choice. They had to summarise their thoughts in their 'Practicum Reflection' paper. The students' after-practicum reflection papers, the submission of which is a fixed component of our teacher education programme, continually show the value of the practicum. The feedback on the four-week school practice received from 26 reflective papers this time, once again proved that students are aware of its benefits. However, there was a noticeable shift in the students' accounts of the practicum. Whereas previously the papers were mainly of an 'impressionistic' character, where student teachers focused on their feelings, the difficulties they faced, and maintaining good rapport (or not) with the pupils, this time, the main focus in students' considerations, while not excluding the aforementioned topics, was on their own competences in terms of the 'can-do' descriptors.

As evidence of this, I would like to share some of my students' comments about the practicum (the language of the original is preserved):

Prior to the practicum I had been quite concerned about lesson organisation and classroom management. Knowing that young learners have a much shorter attention span, I was worried if I would be able to plan an array of activities that would keep their attention long enough to achieve the objectives of the lesson. I tried out different modes of interaction and I think I was rather successful at these tasks and managed to keep a good pace of the lessons. Now I can claim that *I can create opportunities for and manage individual, partner, group and whole class work* (EPOSTL, p. 42).

One reflective paper ran as follows:

*I can adjust my time schedule when unforeseen situations occur* (EPOSTL, p. 39). During my practicum I thought of many interesting activities and games and I also found some on the Internet. So I made my personal database of these and always had some games or activities in mind in case there would be some time left or in case some students would be done with their work fast. I think it is always good to have a "plan B" in mind. And it is important to keep students busy at all times because otherwise they get bored and in few minutes angels can turn into little devils.

While another student, discussing the same descriptor, wrote:

I definitely did not stick to my lesson plan at all cost but adjusted it to students' interests and mood. Despite having enough activities prepared, I sometimes had problems picking up the right one that would take just the amount of time needed.

An extract from a student's paper traced the student's awareness of the need to improve her own classroom language:

The most crucial thing in my teaching is definitely classroom language. Therefore I have chosen to improve this competence: *I can conduct a lesson in the target language* (EPOSTL, p. 43) It seems to be a joke, everyone can do it. ... The thing is that though I am able to speak English it doesn't necessarily mean that I can use it appropriately with students. Speaking English all the time was a hard nut to crack because I didn't know how to formulate my instructions clearly so that students would get the message, besides, it was very tempting and easy to slip into Czech. So I was not only visualising my lessons but I was also thinking about what I am going to say, how I am going to say it and when I am going to say it. At the beginning it took me a lot of time and I was making a lot of notes, but I think I managed. You can see my classroom language in my lesson plans.

Another positive improvement in the quality of the after-practicum reflection papers which arose as a result of the EPOSTL use was student teachers' constructive self-criticism. As they were given a free choice as to what personal targets to set and what 'can-do' statements from the EPOSTL to select for this purpose, they could only have presented themselves in a positive light. Notably, many papers (like the ones that

follow) contained acknowledgement that a particular skill needed to be further improved. One student who was particularly interested in *I can create a supportive atmosphere that invites learners to take part in speaking activities* (EPOSTL, p. 21) confessed: ‘Unfortunately I have to admit that I am still not able to do so. I will have to find more effective ways how to deal with teenagers to make them talk in class.’ She continues by suggesting different steps she can make in future in order to improve this skill. Another student, who was reflecting on the descriptor *I can introduce a grammatical item and help learners to practice it through meaningful context and appropriate texts* (EPOSTL, p. 27), wrote in her paper:

When I was preparing lessons, I thought over how to introduce the grammar item, But when I started to do it in class, the pupils were confused because they didn’t understand it. So I had to explain it in Czech. I need to learn more how to introduce grammar material in an interesting way and I need to improve my meta language.

I think that the students’ realisation of the necessity to improve a certain teaching skill may serve as evidence that the EPOSTL does equip the user with tools for reflection and self-assessment.

## **Stage 6. Surveying students’ opinions of EPOSTL use for further improvement**

The interviews with students as well as the interpretation of the data received from a survey on the use of the EPOSTL (Orlova, 2010) suggest that student teachers regard the EPOSTL as a useful tool that can guide them towards the requisite professional expertise. The students’ feedback given below provides evidence that the EPOSTL successfully accomplishes its central aims (p. 5):

*To encourage students to reflect on the competences a teacher strives to attain and on the underlying knowledge which feed these competences:*

It made me reread some chapters in the textbooks on methodology. The EPOSTL provides a kind of a summary of all the aspects of my work as a teacher. It does serve as a reflection tool for me.

... it raises my awareness of the aspects I have to take in consideration while teaching.

... some students may not be aware of all the aspects that teaching requires. The EPOSTL helps to realise what a good teacher needs to know and do.

... “can-do” descriptors were thought-provoking for me. They showed what aspects of my teaching I have to think about.

*To help prepare students for their future profession in a variety of teaching contexts:*

Before the practicum I had had some private teaching experience. I thought I was quite good at teaching “face-to-face”. Thanks to the EPOSTL (frankly, I managed to work only

with the self-assessment section), I have a better understanding how many skills a teacher needs to have.

... it is full of ideas that help me think about the possibilities in the classroom, especially when I have to teach young learners and teenagers.

*To facilitate self-assessment of developing students' competence:*

... it worked like a diary of self-development in TEFL, I could check my skills.

The EPOSTL shows different aspects we need to be aware of; lots of useful info in one place.

... it is well organised, it forces us to think about our knowledge and skills.

It is good to know yourself if you can do this or that. If you do not ask yourself you never understand.

*To provide an instrument which helps chart progress:*

... the EPOSTL helped to uncover my weak points, that's why it was thought provoking for me though time-consuming.

I realised I am quite good (though it is always hard for any Czech to admit this) at using resources.

I realised there are many ways in which I can improve my teaching.

The EPOSTL helped me to spot my weaker aspects of teaching ... Thus I was able to improve them before my practicum and I felt less anxious in class.

In my opinion, the EPOSTL is useful as I could see my own progress ...

It is always interesting to watch how you develop ... The EPOSTL helped me in that.

The EPOSTL provides a kind of a summary of all the criteria my work can be evaluated by. It does provide a tool for self-reflection.

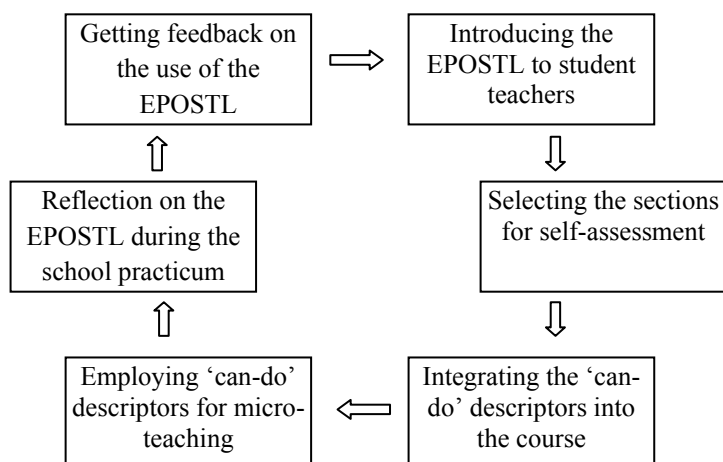
*To promote discussion between students and between students and their teacher educators and mentors:*

I showed the EPOSTL to my teacher at school. She took into consideration my personal targets for the practicum, she always referred to them when we discussed my classes.

The most interesting and rewarding feedback on the usefulness of the EPOSTL was received from a student who was initially completely unwilling to work with the EPOSTL and who finally realised the benefits of the EPOSTL:

The EPOSTL advised me where to go and what to explore in my profession ... It lets students know how complex teaching profession is and what it feels like to be a good, skilled teacher. I have decided to reprint the EPOSTL and check it up later again.

The above described stages are briefly summed up in the following diagram.



#### 4. Conclusion

This chapter has been concerned with the pattern of integrating the EPOSTL into pre-service teacher education. The EPOSTL has been consistently used during the three modules of EFL didactics courses which are provided within the framework of an MA programme. The course format includes lectures, seminars and two periods of practicum. The feedback from student teachers bears evidence that they regard the EPOSTL as a useful tool in their learning process. I would argue that in order to achieve the central aims of the EPOSTL, namely ‘to encourage students to reflect on the competences’, ‘to help prepare students for their future profession in a variety of teaching contexts’, etc. (EPOSTL, p. 5), the EPOSTL has to be used systematically and continuously and it should be an integral part of various courses related to EFL didactics. A possible model for integrating the EPOSTL into pre-service teacher education, consisting of several stages, has been described in this article.

Author’s note: I wish to thank my colleague Radka Perclová for her help and co-operation in using the EPOSTL.

# **Implementing the EPOSTL in the early phase of pre-service EFL teacher education**

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## **1. The teacher education programme at CELT (Centre for English Language Teaching)**

At CELT, which is part of the English Department at the University of Vienna, about 1 900 students are presently educated to become English foreign language teachers for lower and upper secondary schools in Austria. Student teachers are prepared to teach two school subjects. The pre-service teacher education programme lasts for nine semesters and includes – for the school subject ‘English as a foreign language’ – courses in linguistics and applied linguistics, Anglophone cultural and literary studies, English language education, EFL methodology and two school practicums. CELT is responsible for the EFL methodology programme and the second practicum phase with a stronger focus on subject-specific issues.

### **1.1. The EFL methodology programme at CELT**

The methodology programme follows the principle of a close interrelation between theory and practice. The scientific research areas on which the programme is based are the fields of applied linguistics, research on foreign and second language teaching and learning, as well as relevant areas of cultural and literary studies. Future teachers of English need to be prepared to teach in a variety of educational institutions with lower and upper secondary schools as their main domain. Apart from grammar schools (Gymnasiums) the traditional type of secondary school, future English teachers must also be prepared to teach at vocational upper secondary schools which prepare students to enter the world of work directly after leaving school. In addition to the various types of secondary schools, student teachers of English also work in institutions offering adult education.

The methodology courses at CELT are based on the principles of a reflective teacher education programme (cf. Bartlett, 1990; Burton, 2009; Moon, 1999; Wallace, 1991) with a special focus on reflection as an essential cognitive activity for the professional development of teachers. At the beginning of the last century, for the American educational philosopher John Dewey, the process of reflection played a central role for the critical evaluation of professional activities; he considered reflection as a prerequisite for professional development. Dewey coined the term ‘reframing’ in connection with the cognitive process of reflection, referring to the ability to look at professional issues from different perspectives (Dewey, 1910: 68 ff.). In the sense of a

reflective teacher education programme, student teachers (as well as practising teachers) gradually become autonomous and reflective teachers who regularly evaluate their teaching activities in a critical way. Through the process of reflection they constantly work on the improvement of their teaching practice as well as their approaches to teaching (cf. Barduhn and Johnson, 2009: 61).

The EFL methodology programme at CELT starts in the third semester and comprises two introductory courses to EFL methodology during the first part of the study programme. The aims and objectives of these two courses are to provide an overview of the basic issues in foreign language methodology, for example:

- teaching the four skills and systemic aspects of language;
- roles of ELT teachers and EFL learners;
- classroom management;
- lesson planning;
- an introduction to communicative language teaching;
- peer teaching and initial experiences with micro-teaching.

These two introductory courses are the prerequisite for the second and more subject-specific practicum which student teachers usually attend during their fifth semester. During their practicum phase, students observe lessons of experienced teachers and they are supported by their mentors when planning lessons. Furthermore, they receive feedback from their mentors on their planning and teaching activities. Parallel to the practicum phase, student teachers also attend a university-based practicum tutorial held by methodology teachers who are also experienced EFL teachers.

After the subject-specific practicum, student teachers have to attend three topic-related methodology classes which focus on issues such as English for Specific Purposes (ESP) and Content and Language-integrated Learning (CLIL), assessment, testing and educational standards, teaching the four skills and systemic aspects of language, as well as literature and culture in the language classroom. The final methodology course provides students with an overview of current trends in the field of EFL methodology and introduces them to various approaches to foreign language teaching, including a critical analysis of each.



## **2. The implementation of the EPOSTL**

When the EPOSTL was published in 2007, this new reflection and self-assessment tool was immediately implemented in the methodology programme at CELT.<sup>3</sup> The EPOSTL fits ideally into the concept of a reflective teacher education programme with its clear overview of attainable competences as shown by the illustration at the beginning of the book (EPOSTL, p. 6), followed by a personal statement section meant to help student teachers to reflect on their teacher education programme as well as on their future role as teachers of English as a foreign language. The comprehensive list of ‘can-do’ descriptors in the EPOSTL offers support to student teachers in terms of developing the ability of self-assessment and consequently helps them to define future learning aims and objectives. As an exemplification of the use of the EPOSTL in a pre-service teacher education programme, the implementation of the EPOSTL in two different methodology courses will be described; firstly, the initial introductory course to EFL methodology and, secondly, the university-based tutorial given parallel to the subject-specific school practicum phase (see also Mehlmauer-Larcher, 2010 and 2011).

### **2.1. Implementing the EPOSTL in Introduction to Language Teaching 1 (ILT 1)**

The aims and objectives of the methodology course ILT 1 (3 ECTS) are the following:

- roles of ELT teachers and EFL learners;
- classroom management;
- EFL classroom observation;
- activity and lesson planning;
- introduction to communicative language teaching;
- teaching vocabulary;
- teaching listening skills.

ILT 1 is an interactive course with a variety of activities related to the above-mentioned topics. A selected range of activities is collected in a portfolio which forms an essential basis for course assessment. The more practice-oriented activities are observation tasks in schools and, at the end of the course, a peer-teaching activity for each course participant.

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<sup>3</sup> Thanks go to my colleagues G. Dirnberger, S. Katzböck and D. Weitensfelder for their many ideas and enthusiastic support they have provided for the implementation of the EPOSTL at CELT.

For many of the listed aims and objectives of this course, descriptors can be found in the EPOSTL, for example the very basic competences in the area of planning and conducting activities and lessons, teaching vocabulary and teaching listening. In this context it needs to be mentioned that, within a professional language teacher education programme, it is not sufficient for student teachers to develop practical competences (listed as ‘can-do’ statements in the EPOSTL). They need also to acquire the underlying theoretical knowledge (cf. Newby, 2007: 27).

At the beginning of the course the EPOSTL is introduced to students and its similarity to the European Language Portfolio (ELP) is pointed out. After the contents and the functions of the EPOSTL have been explained to the student teachers, they are asked to organise a print version of the EPOSTL and work individually on the Personal Statement section of the document. In the following session, students discuss in small groups their entries in the Personal Statement and afterwards they report the results of their group discussions in a plenary.

Topics of the course, such as planning and conducting a lesson, teaching vocabulary or teaching listening, are always linked to relevant descriptors of the EPOSTL. In addition, relevant theoretical background knowledge is presented and discussed as well as the actual operationalisation of descriptor competences in classroom settings.

Towards the end of the course, student teachers have to carry out some peer teaching. After these peer-teaching sessions, students write a guided reflection on their (usually first) practical experiences. In addition to their individual reflections, students meet up with a so-called ‘critical friend’ (cf. Farrell, 2007: Chapter 12) who experienced their teaching as a ‘learner’ and from whom they receive feedback. In exchange they provide the same for their critical friend. This peer feedback forms an essential component of their reflection papers. For both types of reflection, individual and with their critical friend, student teachers are asked to work on selected and relevant descriptors from the EPOSTL to support their reflection processes and to assist with the self-assessment of their competences. Students are encouraged to have a close look at descriptors defining basic teaching competences, such as – in the section Lesson Planning – the first descriptor on pages 34, 35 and 37; in the section Listening, the first four descriptors on page 25 or in the section Vocabulary, the first two descriptors on page 28. Firstly, they self-assess their competences on their own with the help of the descriptors mentioned above. Then student teachers discuss the results of their self-assessment with their critical friend and give reasons why they think that they have developed certain competences.

Students hand in copies of the EPOSTL pages they have worked on, together with their portfolio. It is made clear to students that their entries in the EPOSTL are not used for any kind of assessment. Furthermore, they are informed that it is absolutely acceptable and normal that, at the beginning of their education programme, they can only acquire some very basic teaching competences (for example, a minimal competence level of descriptor 1, p. 34) of the many listed in the EPOSTL.

## 2.2. The EPOSTL in the tutorial accompanying the practicum phase

As already described above, students at CELT do a subject-specific practicum after they have finished the two introductory courses to EFL methodology. Parallel to their practicum at a secondary school they attend a university-based tutorial (1 ECTS). This tutorial comprises three block sessions and finishes after the practicum phase with a reflective talk with the course leader during a tutorial. The main aims and objectives of the tutorial are: to assist and support student teachers during their practicum phase with regard to:

- observation techniques and criteria;
- planning tasks in connection with their teaching practice;
- guided reflections on the experiences gained during their practicum;
- assessment of their acquired competences and defining further competences to be acquired in the near future.

### First session: observation

During the first session before the actual practicum phase, the tutorial starts with an activity called ‘Deconstructing an EPOSTL descriptor’. For this kind of activity a basic descriptor is chosen and analysed, for example, the first descriptor of the section Conducting a Lesson: *I can start a lesson in an engaging way* (p. 39). With the course leader, the students try to analyse what it means to start a lesson and to do this in an engaging way. Furthermore, they discuss the relevance of engaging language learners from the very beginning of a lesson and why this might be important for achieving the active involvement of learners for what remains of the lesson. The main purpose of this discussion is to help student teachers understand that the descriptors are not just checklists but that the competences they represent refer to theoretical background knowledge as well as to a variety of practical teaching strategies, depending on the actual target group, the setting and the aims and objectives of a teaching event.

After this ‘deconstruction’ of a descriptor, student teachers get together in small groups and choose another basic descriptor which they analyse in the ways described above and try to formulate observation criteria for their specific descriptor. Following the group discussion all groups report their results in a plenary which serves further preparation for the observation tasks student teachers have to carry out during the practicum. Finally, guidelines for the collection and documentation of observation data are repeated and student teachers are provided with a collection of language-specific observation tasks.

## **Second session: lesson planning**

For the second session, the student teachers are introduced to the practice of ‘Collaborative teacher development’ and are asked to bring a lesson plan they have prepared for their practicum, including references to relevant descriptors in the EPOSTL. The lesson plans are displayed around the room together with feedback sheets. The students walk from lesson plan to lesson plan and write down their comments for their colleagues on the feedback sheets provided until they come back to their own plan and read the feedback they have received from their peers. Thereafter they discuss the comments and possible improvements to their plans in small groups.

At the end of the second session the student teachers’ attention is drawn to the sections in the EPOSTL dealing with the four skills and teaching the language system. In groups they choose one or two basic descriptors from these sections in the EPOSTL. As an assignment for the third and last session, they read up on the relevant chapter(s) in Hedge’s (2000) coursebook on EFL methodology, which relates to the theme of their chosen descriptor(s) and which they used in the two introductory courses they attended before the practicum. For example, they might read the chapter on ‘Teaching Reading’ if they had chosen a basic descriptor from the EPOSTL section called Reading (p. 26). This would help them to refresh their theoretical background knowledge in this aspect of EFL methodology.

## **Third session: linking theory and practice**

In the last session, student teachers, together with the course leader, try to construct links between theoretical background knowledge and actual teaching. For example, with regard to teaching reading, first the functions and purposes of pre-reading, during-reading and post-reading activities as described in Hedge (2000) are discussed. Secondly, the relationship between these activities with the EPOSTL descriptors in the section Reading are discussed and analysed (in particular the descriptors 2, 5 and 7 on page 26). Thirdly, examples of pre-, during- and post-reading activities are listed, analysed and their suitability for various text types and target groups discussed. This procedure is applied to the various topic areas students have chosen for their ‘theory reading assignments’.

Linking the EPOSTL descriptors to descriptors in the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages (CEFR) follows as a next step. For instance, the EPOSTL descriptor *I can select texts appropriate to the needs, interests and language level of learners* (p. 26) is compared with the CEFR descriptors referring to the ‘skill of reading and following instructions’ on the proficiency levels A, B, and C (CEFR, p. 71). Finally, students have a look at various examples of instructional reading texts and, in groups, they are asked to define the level of learner proficiency these texts represent according to the CEFR.

## **Reflective talk**

Student teachers bring their lesson plans, materials they have used and their EPOSTL to the individual reflective talks with the tutorial leader. The aim of the reflective talk is a structured discussion on the experiences student teachers gained during the practicum phase. The quality of lesson plans, the operationalisation of these plans, and the materials used are discussed as well as possible improvements to these for future teaching activities. With the help of relevant descriptors in the EPOSTL, student teachers are encouraged to assess their strengths and weaknesses they have identified during the practicum. In this context, it is important for the course leaders to use the EPOSTL for motivational purposes. This means offering students help to chart the progress they have made during the practicum and devising a plan for their further professional development.

## **3. Conclusion**

Since the first implementation of the EPOSTL in the pre-service teacher education programme at the Centre for English Language Teaching, members of the team have been enthusiastic about the EPOSTL and have constantly tried to improve the use of this reflection and self-assessment instrument for its student teachers. It is the declared aim of the team to intensify its application, particularly in the student teachers' school practice and field experiences. As a further step towards a more intensive use of the EPOSTL, tasks have been devised which the student teachers need to carry out during their pre- and post-teaching conferences with their school mentors. From this it follows that workshops need to be organised for school mentors to introduce them to the EPOSTL and to encourage them to use it in their work with student teachers.



# **The EPOSTL as a tool for reflection in three contexts of language teacher education**

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## **1. Introduction**

This article examines the piloting of the EPOSTL in a one-year postgraduate course for student teachers of languages at the University of Bergen, Norway, in the autumn of 2009. The students on this course have finished their bachelor degree or masters degree in two school subjects, including at least one foreign language. The course consists of six weeks of intensive lecturing in subject-specific didactics as well as general pedagogy and a school practice period of 60 hours over six weeks each semester. During their practice, the students have a short time of observation before they start teaching their two subjects individually or in pairs.

The EPOSTL was employed in the following contexts of their one-year English didactics course: in lectures at the university, which focused on the students' needs based on their self-assessment, in seminars to prepare them for school practice and during their teaching practice in lower and upper secondary schools. As there is a new intake of students each semester, two cohorts of students participated in the piloting project in the autumn semester. Since the EPOSTL is a tool for reflection, each stage of using the portfolio aimed at developing the students' ability to critically reflect in order to enhance their professional development by discovering their strengths and weaknesses and providing opportunities to reflect on and discuss these in different contexts. At the end of the semester, two questionnaires with open questions were answered, one by students and one by mentors in schools.

Reflection plays an important role in teacher education, greatly influenced by the pragmatic theories of Dewey (1922, 1933 and 1966) and Schön (1983). Especially Schön's concepts of reflection-in-action and reflection-on-action are frequently referred to. Both these philosophers focus primarily on practical situations and their theories are, consequently, most useful in a school practice context. The Frankfurt School of thought, on the other hand, regards reflection in a wider social context and emphasises dialogue and change as aims of reflection. As change is required in order to improve foreign language teaching, reflection based on critical thinking and dialogue is important throughout a teacher education programme, and must be linked not only to practice but to theory as well. Habermas (1974) sees reflection as informed judgment by a group of people, which requires dialogue. This is a reflective process which occurs in a context of what he calls 'critical intent'. The dialogic process is what generates

critical ideas, not the individual reflection itself. Kemmis (1985: 140) defines this kind of reflection in the following way:

- Reflection is not a purely 'internal', psychological process: it is action oriented and historically embedded.
- Reflection is not a purely individual process: like language, it is a social process.
- Reflection is shaped by ideology; in turn, it shapes ideology.
- Reflection is a practice which expresses our power to reconstitute social life by the way we participate in communication, decision making and social action.

Since it is an important aim of teacher education to improve teaching in schools by generating critical ideas in a social context and not only to regard teaching practice as apprenticeship, the above definition of reflection formed the theoretical basis for the implementation of the EPOSTL in this particular teacher education programme.

This chapter will present and discuss the above-mentioned contexts of using the EPOSTL in the programme: in university lectures on English didactics, while preparing the students for school practice and during the practice period itself. Central to the piloting project was the idea that students participated in dialogue, what Wenger (1998: 13) calls 'learning as participation', which '[takes] place through our engagement in actions and interactions, but it embeds this engagement in culture and history. Through these local actions and interactions, learning reproduces and transforms the social structure in which it takes place.'

## **2. University lectures**

The period of lectures at the beginning of the teacher education programme is very limited and one, therefore, has to carry out what Klafki (1996) calls exemplary teaching: in addition to gaining knowledge of theories of language and language learning, the students are given examples of how specific items of English can be taught. Reflection in this context is primarily related to knowledge and hypothetical teaching situations.

The aim of introducing the EPOSTL at this stage of the course was to enable the students to critically reflect upon their knowledge and to link it to hypothetical classroom situations, and thus to provide a link between theory and practice. The topics on which the lectures focused were Methodology and Independent Learning. Using specific descriptors in the Self-Assessment section of the EPOSTL as guidelines enabled the students to reflect upon their knowledge by asking themselves: what do I already know about this? Would I be capable of carrying this out in the classroom? What do I need to read more about in order to be able to teach it? In trying to answer such questions and discussing them in groups and with the lecturer, the students were able to reflect on their previous knowledge and experience, what they needed to read



more about, and what they wanted the lecturer to focus on related to specific competence areas.

Discussions among students and between university teacher and students created a critical awareness related to the reading materials which the course included. It also provided an opportunity to analyse literature and other course content in relation to what students needed to know in order to develop the required competences at a later stage. Feedback from student questionnaire emphasises this:

[the EPOSTL] can be very useful related to lectures and reading, as it gives us a good opportunity for an overview of what we know and what we don't know. Many of the descriptors in the Self-Assessment section functioned very well as a basis for discussions in seminars.

It functions very well as a tool for discussing examples of teaching in lectures and as a tool for reflection when I read myself.

A general problem in the teacher education course is that students fail to discover links between theory and practice. Student teachers, especially in the first term, continually ask for recipes for teaching. They tend to lack an understanding of teaching and learning being situational and, consequently, what works well in one setting cannot automatically be transferred to a different classroom setting. As the descriptors in the EPOSTL cover a whole range of potential situations related to each topic category, the EPOSTL can, if used as a basis for discussion, provide a link between theory and practice. In the case of this course, both students and university lecturer could relate the teaching of theoretical aspects to the students' future teaching practice context through working with the descriptors and trying to see what knowledge was required for each category, with a view to developing the competences which are necessary in practical teaching situations.

By opening up for critical reflection and discussion on the nature of competences required for the various descriptors, the university teacher could challenge individual students' knowledge, beliefs and understanding. In advance of the actual classroom situation, in which most student teachers feel insecure and vulnerable, the students could critically reflect on their strengths and weaknesses, what knowledge they possessed or lacked, and on how they might act in a number of situations. Through the descriptors they discovered what was expected of them in the classroom, and they could be better prepared for their teaching practice in advance, as the following student feedback shows:

It gives us a better understanding of what we, as teachers, are expected to be able to carry out within each topic.

I believe strongly that the EPOSTL should be part of the lectures in English didactics. The way the teaching has been conducted this term, it has been very good that the sections relevant to the topics dealt with in lectures have been commented and discussed. This also makes it easier to see how it can be used with mentors in school.

While working on specific topics in the EPOSTL related to the themes of the lectures, it became evident that the students' reading list did not cover them well enough and this needed to be compensated for in lectures. As reflection and discussion at this point in the course arose from developing knowledge and dealt with potential situations and not real practical classroom situations, the students could allow themselves to be more critical and analytical than when they find themselves in an actual teaching context with a whole class in front of them, which requires spontaneous action and a different kind of reflection. Through the discussions in this context the students shared ideas, developed new ones and learnt from their peers.

### **3. Preparation for school practice**

Although all the lectures at the beginning of the two semesters of this course can be said to prepare students for school practice, the seminars immediately before the school practice period are of a different character from the lectures given on subject didactics.

The first part of the course focuses on gaining theoretical knowledge, although potential teaching situations are discussed and examples of teaching methods presented. The next part of the course is supposed to give the students tools for planning lessons and developing competences in this specific area. The students tend to base their planning on previous experience as learners or teachers but both their knowledge and experience are limited. They usually have a narrow scope of ideas at this point and limited understanding of how detailed lesson planning has to be. Obviously second-semester students are better equipped than first-semester students.

To prepare for the seminars, the groups of students in this study were asked to read the section Lesson Planning in the EPOSTL (pp. 33-37) in advance. In the seminar itself they were given examples of short factual and fictional texts on which to plan their teaching, or they could select a grammar item they wanted to prepare. They had to decide at which level the learners were and were encouraged to consider the fact that learners in a classroom have very varied levels of English. After planning a lesson or period of teaching from the materials in pairs, the results were presented in the groups.

Previous experience has shown that students tend to be very traditional when they plan English lessons: the first part of the lesson often consists of learners reading a textbook text aloud, individually to the whole class or in pairs to each other, the second part consists of learners doing written tasks from the textbook, and the last part is the teacher preparing the following homework. Research shows that the textbook dominates almost all English teaching in Norway (Skjelbred, Solstad and Aamotsbakken, 2005; Kløve Juuhl, Hontvedt and Skjelbred, 2010). The students also tend to think that learner activities are always good, without critically assessing the character and aims of the activities.

The descriptors in the Lesson Planning section of the EPOSTL quickly made the students realise that aims and objectives have to determine how the materials are going to be used. They also discovered from the presentations that, although they did not freely choose the learning materials, each text or topic could be employed with a number of different aims. The tasks they created for their potential learners made this very clear.

Determining aims and objectives for learning within the limits of the curriculum is difficult for student teachers and requires a lot of practice. This is also a weakness in their actual teaching practice, as many mentors also use the textbook slavishly. As teachers are required to describe aims for learners over a period of one school term, they often just copy curriculum aims when a plan has to be handed in to the school principal. If English teaching is going to improve, practising planning for specific learning aims is, therefore, a very important topic to deal with before the students are placed in schools.

Discussions following the student presentations as well as oral feedback at the end of the seminar proved that using the EPOSTL descriptors for planning an English lesson made the students understand how important specific aims and objectives are for what happens in the classroom and for the learning that takes place. As one student stated about the use of the portfolio in this context: 'We learn to design, analyse and assess lesson plans.' The presentations and discussion also functioned as an exchange of ideas where creativity, and not only the students' previous experience as learners, was opened up for. Providing the student teachers with learning materials, as well as the detailed descriptors of this particular EPOSTL section, made them reflect critically and, consequently, distance themselves from their previous, traditional ideas of how a text can be used in an English classroom. The presentations and discussions also enabled the lecturer to challenge their ideas and enhance their understanding of the interdependence of learning objectives, learning materials and classroom activities.

## **4. Teaching practice**

Teaching practice is an important part of the students' development of professional skills and competences. In recent years there has been an increased focus on practice as apprenticeship (Lave and Wenger, 1991; Wenger, 1998) leading authorities to increase periods of school practice and play down the more theoretical role of university teaching. Unfortunately, the teaching practice periods are not optimal for all students. Universities in Norway have problems finding enough good practice placements for students, and the decision of who is going to be a mentor is left to the schools. This means that many mentors are fairly traditional in their teaching and students do not necessarily have the opportunity to develop new ideas for teaching. The EPOSTL is a tool for reflection and, as stated previously, this should be critical reflection in order for

foreign language teaching to be changed and improved. If the students are placed in classrooms where the teaching is very traditional there will be little change.

Introducing the EPOSTL into this part of the programme also created an opportunity to improve collaboration with mentors in school. However, this proved problematic. The contact with schools is mainly left to the Faculty of Psychology, which is responsible for teaching general pedagogy. Few of the mentors turned up to the introductory meeting to present the EPOSTL and it was therefore sent to most of them via e-mail together with the necessary information. Although they are paid by the university, there is no way to impose specific materials on mentors. Consequently, much of the responsibility of actually using the portfolio during school practice rested with the students. The EPOSTL was, however, used in feedback sessions when university lecturers observed and assessed the students' teaching. These sessions also served as examples for the mentors of how the portfolio could be employed, related to specific topics and ways of teaching. Based on the chosen areas of teaching and learning, the EPOSTL descriptors were used to discuss both strengths and weaknesses in the students' lessons.

After the practice period, students and mentors answered questionnaires consisting of mainly open questions. The students first answered a question about how they had used the EPOSTL:

I used it to focus on specific areas where I wanted feedback from my mentor.

My mentor focused the feedback on specific topics.

The first quotation exemplifies a student who employs the portfolio to focus the mentor's feedback and thus takes control of the feedback sessions. The second is an example of the mentor taking charge of focusing feedback on specific areas of teaching. One problem that often arises is that many mentors tend to be too general when they assess students' teaching, often focusing on pedagogical issues like discipline, contact with learners, the use of the blackboard (whiteboard), etc., rather than emphasising subject-related issues. The following student response to the above question shows how the student has used the EPOSTL to make up for a lack of mentoring: 'I used the section Assessment of Learning when I marked learners' written work, as we didn't receive any mentoring on this.' Not all students found support from their mentors during their practice, as proved by the following feedback:

My mentor wanted to use his own criteria for assessing my teaching.

Our mentor did not want to use the EPOSTL even if we tried to introduce it in discussions about lessons. She was not a good mentor.

These comments show mentors who do not want to be influenced by the university, although they are responsible for the students' progress. The latter one could probably have become a better mentor if she had been willing to use the EPOSTL. Despite some problems the majority of students found it very useful as a reflection tool related to their school practice, as can be summed up in this comment by one of the students: 'It

made me feel confident about areas where I had control and made me aware of things I needed to develop.'

The few mentors who used the portfolio during the students' school practice gave fairly extensive feedback on their experience. They also gave information about how they had used the EPOSTL in co-operation with the students:

For students to assess their own performance in specific areas of teaching which they selected themselves.

Descriptors used as starting points for discussions about specific aspects of teaching.

As a tool for reflection and for developing new ideas.

The first answer shows a mentor who assisted the independent development of the students and believed that the students were capable of self-assessment. The last quotation proves that some mentors are fully aware that new ideas are important in order to improve English teaching. The mentors also pointed out that the EPOSTL helped to make tasks which students had to carry out more concrete and specific and that it provided a number of areas on which to base discussions.

When asked how they thought the EPOSTL could help the students' learning processes, the mentors mentioned that it, for instance, forced the students to think and reflect on what they do in the classroom and that it encouraged self-assessment. '[It] makes them reflect on a more neutral basis than merely what the mentor focuses on' was stated by one of the mentors. This comment proves how subjective mentoring normally is. As there are no specific standards by which to assess student teachers in the Norwegian system, it is usually up to the mentor to decide on the focus of the feedback after lessons. The list of descriptors provided by the EPOSTL can reduce the very subjective aspect of mentoring.

It is an expressed wish from the university to improve the level of mentoring in schools. Norway is one of the few countries which offer university qualifications in mentoring for teachers (Kelly et al., 2004) but the course has a general pedagogical focus rather than the teaching of specific subjects. Because of this a question about how the EPOSTL could be a tool for the mentors' own development was included in the questionnaire. The following is a selection of the answers given:

Helps to continue self-assessment as a teacher.

To rethink one's own practice and the pupils' learning.

To structure lessons and plan activities in the classroom.

To reflect and to offer new ideas for teaching.

These answers clearly show that developing as a teacher is a continuous process and that the EPOSTL can also function as a tool for experienced practitioners to improve their teaching. The mentors who actually used the EPOSTL during the students' teaching practice were very positive about the experience. It must be added that the

mentors who responded were probably the ones who were good mentors to start with and who use the practice period to keep up with current theories of teaching.

## **5. Conclusion**

In this article three different contexts related to using the EPOSTL have been discussed: in university lectures, in seminars to develop students' lesson-planning competence and during school practice. The aims in each context were to enhance the students' ability to critically reflect on the various stages of their professional development. Part of the discussion has been to consider the EPOSTL also as a tool for mentors to improve their mentoring and to increase collaboration between the university and schools.

Although this was only a pilot project carried out with two cohorts of students over one semester, it has given valuable information through student and mentor feedback. In the first context, the EPOSTL helped students to focus their reading and clarified their expectations of teaching. It enabled them, in the second context, to plan and critically reflect on the important task of planning lessons based on learning aims and objectives. In the final context, school practice, it made them aware of their individual strengths and weaknesses in the classroom, as one student comment certifies: 'It made me feel confident about areas where I had control and made me aware of things I needed to develop.'

In the cases where mentors were willing to use the EPOSTL in collaboration with students, it clearly improved the feedback sessions by making them more focused on specific aspects of English teaching rather than on more general pedagogical aspects. Both students and mentors were able to focus on particular areas where they felt improvement was needed.

From a university point of view, the EPOSTL provided a common tool for the different participants to guide the students through all the various stages of their course and thus constituted a tool which improved the links between theory and practice.

# **The use of the Personal Statement**

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## **1. Introduction**

In the present chapter I would like to share with the reader the way in which I used the tasks in the Personal Statement section of the EPOSTL. The aims of the article are twofold: firstly, to describe and analyse some of the activities that were found interesting and useful in subject teacher education at the University of Oulu, Finland, in 2008-10; secondly, to present the students' reactions to the activities, supplemented by my own commentary. I hope that the reader will get useful ideas on how to use the tasks in the Personal Statement section in his or her own teaching context.

## **2. The context**

Before dealing with the tasks I shall give a brief explanation of the context in which the Personal Statement section was used. In the Finnish system of subject teacher education, students start their pedagogical studies in the autumn term of the third year of their MA studies. The total number of ECTS credits is 25. During the autumn term, they begin their pedagogical studies by doing a five-credit education studies module and, simultaneously, a five-credit period of language teaching methodology.

The students who took part in the EPOSTL project had already passed the five-credit module and teaching practice, and had started the education and foreign language teaching methodology courses in the Faculty of Education and Social Sciences. It is on this five-credit course of foreign language teaching methodology that this chapter is focused. The participants were students of English, German and Swedish, all in the same group.

## **3. First steps with the EPOSTL**

At the beginning of the methodology course, the students received a copy of the first 12 pages of the EPOSTL, which comprise the Introduction and the Personal Statement. I also distributed some copies of the full EPOSTL to give the students a better understanding of what the other sections of the document looked like, and what help they could get, for example, from the Glossary. When we had explored the aims and

contents of the EPOSTL, the students (in pairs) had a close look at the categorisation of descriptors shown by means of the diagram on page 6, in order to get a general idea of the main areas that we intended to cover during the foreign language teaching methodology course. Of particular relevance to teaching practice and to school-based mentors were the two sections, Lesson Planning (p. 33) and, particularly, Conducting a Lesson (p. 38), although during the five-credit language teaching methodology course described here, the principal focus was on the sections Context (p. 14) and Methodology (p. 20). We also spent some time exploring the example of self-assessment scales (pp. 6-7). We then took a closer look at some of the descriptors and began with the section Speaking/Spoken Interaction (p. 21). The students were asked to investigate in small groups the first three descriptors:

1. I can create a supportive atmosphere that invites learners to take part in speaking activities.
2. I can evaluate and select meaningful speaking and interactional activities to encourage learners of differing abilities to participate.
3. I can evaluate and select meaningful speaking and interactional activities to encourage learners to express their opinions, identity, culture etc.

The aim of the task was to make the students analyse the descriptors in order to find out what kind of underlying competences they thought these would require, and how a teacher would be able to achieve at least part of the required competence. This procedure served as a sensitising task which would be relevant throughout the language teaching methodology course.

After an overview of the whole document, we concentrated on the Personal Statement by looking at the specific aims of this section (p. 9). These are: to help students reflect on aspects related to teaching in general, and to think about questions that may be important at an early stage in their teacher education. In the next section, I shall explain how the tasks in the Personal Statement were dealt with.

#### **4. The tasks in the Personal Statement**

The principal focus here is on the task description, and on responses, improvements and suggestions that emerged from discussion. These will be followed by my comments.

Task 1 (p. 10) Experiences of being taught

*As learners of language in school, you already have had a lot of contact with teaching. What aspects – teacher's qualities, practices etc. – of your own language teaching might influence how you wish or do not wish to teach – positive: ... negative: .... (Try*



*to analyse why these points were unsuccessful and consider what steps could be taken to improve the points you have mentioned.)*

It is true that as language learners in school and also as university students of languages, the student teachers had had a lot of contact with foreign language teaching. For years they had witnessed both successful and not so successful ways and practices of teaching as well as different teacher qualities. Now, at the beginning of the first methodology course, the students' task was to go back to their own experiences of being taught in more detail, and to think about how certain practices or teacher qualities might have influenced the way they themselves wished or did not wish to teach. In my introduction, I emphasised the fact that being aware of their former beliefs, experiences, attitudes, emotions and motivation would help the students discover where they stood at this initial stage of their teacher education. Only by understanding such starting points would they be able to absorb and analyse new knowledge and information about their future profession.

After this short introduction, the students had to think about Task 1 for a following lecture by writing down both their positive and negative experiences of being taught. In addition, they were asked to analyse in detail what they felt to be unsuccessful practice to discover why the teaching they had experienced had not been so efficient, and, finally, to outline possible improvements as well as describe and justify what they would do in their own classroom practice. During the following lecture, the students first discussed with a partner both their positive and negative experiences of being taught. To engage and, simultaneously, to introduce the students to a teaching technique, which was new for them, I used a so-called 'forward snowball strategy of co-operative learning'. When dealing with Task 1 the focus was on using this teaching technique.

The procedure was for students to work with a partner. Each pair would choose a secretary to write the main points that emerged from their joint discussions. Then the pair joined another group of two, and, in groups of four, and with the help of the notes that the two secretaries had written, they discussed what had been said. The secretaries were asked not to record the same comment twice. Then each foursome came together to make a group of eight – and again shared and analysed the notes collected by the other secretaries. A new secretary summarised the conversation. The same procedure was repeated. Finally, the four secretaries from the groups of eight read out the principal points from their discussion. This was followed by a whole-group conversation in which the most important points were crystallised. Some of the positive experiences of being taught mentioned by the students were:

1. 'My English teacher had just qualified, she was full of energy, and she tried different kinds of language teaching approaches. I regard her as my professional idol.'
2. 'My Swedish teacher had a good discipline and forced us to work ... We worked conscientiously.'

3. 'Quite a few teachers used very versatile methods and devices in teaching. Thus, the teaching was meaningful and flexible, and the drumming of the grammar into one's head did not feel so numbing.'

The students had had positive experiences of teachers who were enthusiastic, energetic and interested in their work, and who planned their lessons in a versatile manner by using, for instance, video, computer, PowerPoint presentations, group work, in order to capture learners' interest. That is why it is important that during the subject teacher education courses, students become acquainted with the possible effects of the personality and attitudes of teachers towards learners, as well as with a variety of language teaching approaches, teaching materials and ways in which to put them into practice.

Creating a good classroom climate that allowed learners to express themselves and also understand the meaning of goal-oriented work was considered to be positive in language instruction. In discussions during the methodology course, the students often mentioned the central role of teaching grammar. They felt that if teachers used a range of imaginative approaches and materials the teaching of grammar could be contextualised and would thus be less dominant.

Some of the negative experiences of being taught were:

1. 'The teacher advanced at the speed of the best learners. The poorer learners had hardly any possibilities to follow the teaching.'
2. '*Ett äpple, äpplet, äpplen, äpplena*. Senseless, robot-like repetition. I can remember nothing else of the Swedish lessons.'
3. 'There were teachers who always favoured and praised certain pupils ignoring the others.'
4. 'Many language teachers were too strict. They hardly ever gave any positive feedback.'
5. 'A teacher who is not motivated or does not care for his or her pupils. I was once taught by one of those. It resulted in me getting my worst grades even in English. In addition, that teacher was prone to losing her temper. It was not motivating at all.'

When dealing with the negative aspects of being taught, the students also suggested some solutions or improvements, as they were asked to do in the Task instructions. From the first quotation (1), the students felt that the teacher had to pay special attention to the pace of the lesson so that slow learners were able to follow. They considered it unfair if the teacher focused only on the most able learners. To avoid the problem, the teacher should cater for all learner needs by providing the class with different kinds of tasks and teaching materials to enable both fast and slow learners to follow and profit from a lesson. If the teacher did not interact with the learners or if he or she only utilised a lecture mode of teaching, learners would lose interest. To avoid a

monotonous way of teaching grammar, for example, the teacher should vary his or her practices and experiment with a variety of activities which emphasised speaking and spoken interaction.

Among the students' negative teaching experiences were encounters with language teachers who had 'pets' in their groups, and who neglected the other learners. The students felt that best practice was to build a democratic learning climate in the classroom by getting to know learners and their strengths, and by interacting with them. Such a strategy would prevent an uneven power relationship in the classroom.

They felt that the teacher should also have a good sense of humour and that language classrooms should be stress-free, warm and encouraging learning environments. A teacher's sense of humour and a relaxed attitude towards the subject and learners were appreciated. If these were absent, learners would be alienated and lose motivation. Losing one's temper at work would make the situation even worse.

The students regarded it as important that the teacher should encourage his or her pupils by providing as much positive and constructive feedback as possible. This suggestion stemmed from their own experiences since most thought that their teachers had not given them sufficient positive feedback. The students were genuinely interested in learning how to encourage language learners to achieve their goals although they acknowledged that there were problems in allowing sufficient time for written feedback. They all agreed that giving feedback should not depend on the teacher's personality and attitude towards their work or their learners.

The students' comments indicate that their focus was as much on the personality and attitudes of the teacher as it was on the methodological issues concerning effective language teaching. The first task in the Personal Statement opened up an interesting dialogue between the teacher and the students, as well as among other students in the group; it served as a good beginning for what was to come later during the methodology course.

As for the forward snowball strategy of co-operative learning, my purpose was to familiarise the students with a variety of techniques to be used during the methodology course. We agreed that it worked well for this size of group. It would need further modification, however, if the group were larger. We also discussed how this technique could be used in a foreign language classroom. We came to the conclusion that, in a group of 20-25 learners which is the average classroom size in Finland, it would be a practical and motivating technique in teaching, for instance, aspects of culture and for developing cultural awareness.

Task 2a (p. 10) *What aspects of teaching are you most looking forward to?*

We then moved on to Task 2a. The students were asked to work in groups of four. They had to prepare a PowerPoint presentation listing aspects outlined in the task. We

focused on some of the ideas that I wanted them to elaborate on. Among such topics were:

- motivating students to do their best;
- trying to excel in the craft both professionally and personally;
- interacting with pupils;
- building a good relationship and hopefully earning respect.

By asking further questions I tried to make the students analyse their suggestions more profoundly, for example, what does ‘motivating students to do their best’ mean in practice? Among the ideas mentioned were, for instance, choosing teaching materials carefully, not utilising monotonous lecturing styles, rewarding learners’ successes, and supporting those who have problems in learning a language. It was motivating if teachers were chatty at times, told jokes and interacted with learners. When asked what ‘Trying to excel in the craft professionally and personally’ meant, the students’ suggestions were as follows: to provide students with the latest knowledge, teaching methods and research results as well as to support and encourage them. To speak at the level of the learners, to create a relaxed atmosphere in the language classroom and to care for the pupils would help the teacher to win their trust, which was regarded as vital for learning and interaction.

Task 2b (p. 10) *What aspects of teaching are you least looking forward to?*

Among the aspects that they were least looking forward to were:

Accepting that budget cuts and bureaucracy as a part of the profession.

The red tape. Bureaucracy. Even correcting exams and such is much more interesting.

The students were afraid of being faced with such external factors as budget cuts, which could have a negative influence on a language teacher’s work.

Task 3 (p. 11): *Expectations of your teacher education course*

a) *What do you expect most from your teacher education course?*

Theory. Skills. To become a competent and experienced teacher, later on.

The students expected to learn both theoretical aspects and the required skills to be able to put theory into practice. They were also aware that becoming a competent and experienced teacher would require years of work and that they were at the beginning of their professional development.

*b) What do you want most from your teacher education?*

I expect to get a good grasp on what it takes to be a teacher.

Theory and skills and methods.

Tools for becoming a teacher who knows what to teach and the techniques that can be utilised.

To become a competent teacher with the potential of becoming a good one.

Confidence in class.

Learning grammar.

The participants' expectations mainly concerned mastery of language teaching theory as well as practical skills and methods to put them to use. What they also needed was to become confident in their classroom practice. Learning to master the grammar of the language and applying it in foreign language instruction were among the expectations mentioned in this context. The last short quotation – 'learning grammar' – was a reference to both the student's own mastery of the grammar and also to ways of teaching it to learners in a motivating and interesting way. The students seemed to understand the significance of linking theory and practice during their teacher education. They felt that a command of theoretical aspects of language teaching and a variety of teaching methods would guarantee, at least, a certain degree of self-confidence. The students' comments and the discussions with them really showed that they wanted to become familiar with a variety of teaching techniques to stimulate language learners.

*c) What do you think that your teacher educators expect from you?*

They expect me to attend and learn, but at my own pace.

The quotation indicates that regular attendance was expected to be the principal requirement for learning. Working in a group would help students to share ideas, beliefs, experiences and attitudes, and thus widen horizons. The following points were mentioned under this subtitle: perseverance, flexibility, motivation and patience. The ability to be a persevering and flexible teacher who was patient and whose teaching encouraged learners of all levels to participate were emphasised in the discussions. These points complemented issues already explored under the previous headings and also in Task 4. Even at this early stage of their pedagogical studies, the students understood the meaning of progressing at one's own, individual speed. Hopefully, they also realised, on the basis of our discussions, that this applied to learners in language classrooms as well.

Task 4 (p. 11): *How important do you consider the following for a language teacher?*

Add your own ideas. Discuss with a partner and give reasons for your choices.

*How important?*

*Not → very important*

1. *Cooperating with others*
2. *Good organisational skills*
3. *Being able to explain grammar*
4. ...

Firstly, the students completed Task 4 on their own. Then discussion focused on the concept of reflection – both personal reflection and dialogic reflection. The framework for this was found on page 12 in the EPOSTL, where the importance of reflection in teacher education is discussed and illustrated with the example of *Being able to explain grammar*. The students were asked to evaluate the issues that they identified on a five-point scale ranging from *not important* to *very important*.

Among the issues listed by the students which were regarded as important or very important were:

- being able to teach vocabulary;
- good pronunciation;
- keeping discipline;
- motivation;
- sense of humour;
- use of new methods of teaching/learning;
- patience;
- teaching different accents and dialects;
- supporting those with excellent language skills and those lacking language skills.

We then chose the first item, ‘being able to teach vocabulary’, for further exploration. The following aspects connected with teaching vocabulary emerged from the small group conversations: the use of synonyms, opposites, word families, word formation, inferring, guessing unknown words, different ways of testing the command of vocabulary (for example, word tests). The discussions revealed many important aspects of teaching vocabulary; Task 4 served as a very practical and necessary springboard for later, more profound analysis.

The points arising from discussions of the Personal Statement of the EPOSTL were closely related to the students’ very first teaching practice at the teacher training school, during which classroom observation focused on the following aspects of

language teaching: the atmosphere in the classroom, the interaction between the teacher and the pupils or students, how the teacher kept discipline in his or her group, what kind of teaching methods the teacher used, and how he or she motivated the learners.

Other aspects in the Personal Statement of the EPOSTL – how to motivate learners and how to keep discipline – were also discussed in the education course that they attended at the same time. During this education course these topics were dealt with at a more general level than in the foreign language methodology course, where the focus was more specifically on teaching and learning a foreign language. Discussion in two different settings did, however, help students to reflect on general as well as on more specific issues from a range of viewpoints.

## **5. Conclusion**

This chapter set out to provide the reader with a glimpse of how the Personal Statement section was applied in the context of Finnish subject teacher education. My intention was to provide teacher educators with ideas for implementing this particular section of the EPOSTL in their own context.

The main aims of the Personal Statement listed at the beginning of the EPOSTL encourage students to reflect on general questions related to teaching as well as to consider specific competences needed at an initial stage of teacher education. Investigating the students' former experiences of being taught, as well as the aspects that they were most and least looking forward to, their expectations of this particular course, and other issues – ranked in order of importance in Task 4 – revealed highly interesting points of view that were useful in discussions. The Personal Statement also familiarised them with the concept and function of reflection, both in the form of personal reflection and that of dialogic reflection.

Dealing with the Personal Statement section served as an important source of shared information and knowledge. It encouraged a joint exploration of further theoretical and practical aspects of foreign language teaching. The student participants in the EPOSTL project regarded the tasks in this section as relevant and challenging, encouraging independent as well as group reflection and discussion. A number of issues raised prompted debate and an exchange of ideas, beliefs, attitudes and experiences. The students felt that the use of the Personal Statement in a language teaching methodology course was an inspiring and thought-provoking beginning. It made them think about a foreign language teacher's work in a flexible manner, helping them as student teachers realise what specific questions of teaching and learning needed to be addressed to enhance their professional development.





# What goes into the EPOSTL Dossier and why?

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## 1. Introduction

Working with portfolios has been common practice during the last two decades in schools as well as at university level. By collecting and selecting artefacts produced in one or several subjects over a longer period of time, students can track their development and it gives them the opportunity to reflect on their own learning process. As new ways of assessing students' performance have emerged, portfolios have also become important evaluation tools and part of assessment procedures (Rea-Dickins, 2003). Since there are a number of different portfolio models to choose from, teacher educators should ask themselves the following questions before they introduce a portfolio in their system: What is the purpose of the portfolio? What should the contents be? How should it be organised? Who is the audience? Another important issue to discuss is the ownership of the portfolio.

At the University of Gothenburg in Sweden we started working with portfolios in our subject-matter didactics course in English in the 1990s and we created a framework for a 'teaching portfolio' which the student teachers developed over two terms. During the course we regarded it as a 'working portfolio', focusing on the process rather than the product and the contents consisted of different assignments. However, at the end of the year, the student teachers were asked to organise it as a 'teaching portfolio', which illustrated their philosophy of teaching and it was handed in for assessment purposes (Bailey, 2009).

When introduced to *The European Portfolio for Student Teachers of Languages* (EPOSTL) we discussed how it could best be incorporated into our existing course structure and it was a question of adapting it, not adopting it, due to the limited number of hours we have for didactics. Our subject-matter didactics course, English: Learning, Teaching and Assessment, runs parallel with the subject-theory courses during one year of the nine-term-long teacher education programme and there are four short periods of teaching practice during the year.

In this chapter, which is divided into three parts, I will first give an overview of how the EPOSTL was implemented in our courses with student teachers studying English as a foreign language. Between 2008 and 2010 over one hundred student teachers worked with the EPOSTL. In the second part, I will focus on the Dossier and describe two different models we used and what kinds of evidence the student teachers collected during their teaching practice and why they collected them. Finally, some student teacher reflections about the EPOSTL will be presented and discussed.

## **2. Implementation of the EPOSTL**

The EPOSTL has eight central aims and we decided to focus on two aims when implementing it in our didactics course. One aim was that we wanted to improve collaboration between university teaching and mentoring in schools. Due to changes in the supervision of the teaching practice at our university, we, as teacher educators, are no longer in charge of visiting the schools and therefore have little or no contact with the mentors. By using the EPOSTL we wanted to create a bridge between theory and practice and thereby give our student teachers a tool to promote discussion between themselves, their teacher educators and mentors.

Another aim was to let the student teachers experience self-assessment and reflection as part of their own learning process since they will be expected to use self-assessment and reflection with students in their own classrooms in the future, for example, by using nationally produced self-assessment material in English or international materials such as the European Language Portfolio. According to the Swedish National Curriculum for both compulsory and upper-secondary school, students should develop their ability to plan and evaluate their learning and have the opportunity to reflect.

At an early stage we decided to focus on three parts of the Self-Assessment section: Methodology, Lesson Planning and Conducting a Lesson. The first group received a paper copy of the whole EPOSTL, although we only used some sections, but the other groups were given one part at a time.

### **2.1. First term**

The EPOSTL was introduced at the beginning of the didactics course after lectures and seminars about the Common European Framework of References for Languages and the European Language Portfolio. Since we usually ask the student teachers to write about their own experiences as a language learner, it was natural to use the Personal Statement as an introduction.

We decided to start with Methodology in the Self-Assessment section since the main focus during the first term in our course is on the learning, teaching and assessment of the receptive, productive and interactive skills, and the elements grammar and vocabulary. In that way, the EPOSTL was incorporated into our existing course structure. After each lecture or seminar the student teachers assessed their own didactic knowledge and skills in, for example, speaking, writing or vocabulary, by discussing the descriptors in groups. Many questions about theories of learning and teaching principles were raised before they were ready to fill in the appropriate bars.

During the first term of the course there are three weeks of teaching practice, one week at the beginning and two weeks at the end of the term. Before the student teachers started their second teaching practice, they had made their first entries in all the parts of Methodology and, during their practice, they were asked to collect evidence for their

Dossier for the ‘can-do’ descriptors they had marked. After the practice they discussed their evidence and assessed their progress by making new entries in their portfolios.

## **2.2. Second term**

Although our main aim was to involve the mentors in schools, we did not actually get them involved until the second term, because we wanted the student teachers to be familiar with the EPOSTL first. It was also important that they had had the experience of self-assessment before they started discussing descriptors with the mentors, and that they had reflected on what their strengths and weaknesses were as teachers.

During the second term, there are two teaching practice periods (two weeks at the beginning and two weeks at the end of the term) and the focus is on lesson planning, using teaching resources, assessment and grading. At the beginning of the course, the student teachers started on two new parts in the Self-Assessment section: Lesson Planning and Conducting a Lesson and assessed their skills and competences in these areas.

The student teachers introduced the EPOSTL to their mentors during the first teaching practice by showing them the Methodology part as well as the two new parts. By sharing the self-assessment they had carried out and pointing out their own strengths and weaknesses, student teachers and mentors were expected to decide how best to use the EPOSTL during the two teaching practice periods. The mentors were invited to a seminar at the university to discuss the use of the EPOSTL, but due to busy schedules very few mentors were able to come. However, we were able to interview a few of them about the use of the EPOSTL and get their opinions of it. The mentors all wanted to have more contact with the university and suggested that seminars and workshops should be held together with other mentors and student teachers. They saw the EPOSTL as a tool for in-service training and one mentor said: ‘It made me think about my own practice and my pupils’ learning.’

Another observation made was that the EPOSTL could help mentors to talk about didactic issues in a more theoretical way when giving feedback to student teachers. Descriptors could, for instance, be used as starting points for discussions about specific aspects of teaching:

Sometimes after a lesson when you talk about it you might not touch upon the really important things. Sometimes you think it is awkward to bring up certain issues, you don’t want to be too nit-picking ... But if you have it on paper it is easier to bring it up. We have had some really interesting discussions. The material has been of great help.

At the end of the term one of the course requirements was to hand in several lesson plans. By having the student teachers share their lesson plans orally during a seminar they could refer to the descriptors in the EPOSTL and share experiences of how they had become aware of their own strengths and weaknesses when planning and conducting lessons.

### 3. What goes into the Dossier and why?

In some portfolio models, for example the ‘presentation’ or the ‘showcase’ portfolio, the dossier is the portfolio. However, the owner of the portfolio has a responsibility to make the samples of work understandable to an audience, and therefore structure is important, but even more important is the brief reflective explanation why this piece of work has been chosen by the learner.

The structure of the EPOSTL, similar to the European Language Portfolio with ‘can-do’ descriptors in one part and a Dossier in another, requires the student teachers to see the connection between the Self-Assessment section and the Dossier. If you claim that you can do certain things, you must also have some kind of evidence in your Dossier to show that you really can do it.

Student teachers must make a personal choice of what they want to include in their Dossier, but included in the EPOSTL (p. 60) is a list of suggestions for different kinds of evidence:

- a) Evidence from lessons you have given
- b) Evidence in the form of lesson observation and evaluations
- c) Evidence such as detailed reports, comments, checklists etc. compiled by different people involved in your teacher education
- d) Evidence from your analysis of what you have done as a teacher – your ‘teacher actions’ – and from learners’ tasks and related performance
- e) Evidence in the form of case studies and action research
- f) Evidence from reflection

For each category there is a ‘list of documents’ sheet provided, which can be used as a table of contents. The evidence above includes a variety of activities that can either be performed during teaching practice or during regular course work at the university.

#### 3.1. Understanding the descriptors

To be able to collect evidence for a descriptor, you must understand the meaning of it, but it takes time to develop an understanding of what specific competences are behind the ‘can-do’ statements. There are 195 descriptors in the EPOSTL and it was an overwhelming experience for some when they were introduced to it. One student teacher thought that:

... there should have been fewer descriptors to consider due to the depth of each one. At first it felt like I was going to climb a mountain, seeing the EPOSTL. It was first later on I could appreciate and have an understanding of it.

Although we only focused on Methodology during the first term and a limited number of descriptors, all of our groups have initially had difficulties with the amount of descriptors and the sequenced order in spite of the information given in the Users' Guide in the EPOSTL (p. 66). The descriptors should not be regarded as a checklist but as a point of discussion. To overcome this problem, we changed the procedures and printed the descriptors on cards, which were pulled one at a time by one of the group members. In that way we avoided the misunderstanding by some students, who thought that the numbering of the descriptors was important. By not seeing the bar, they could engage in discussions about the descriptor and the underlying learning and teaching principles before they assessed their own didactic skills and competences.

### **3.2. Preparing the first Dossier**

Before the second teaching practice the student teachers had made entries in all parts of Methodology and they were asked to collect evidence to support their claims during their practice. Instead of showing them the list of evidence in the EPOSTL, we wanted to check what kind of evidence they would come up with themselves. After the practice, the following instructions were given for a 10-minute individual oral presentation:

1. Give an overview of the Methodology part in your EPOSTL. What does it look like and why?
2. Focus on one of the areas that you have worked with the most, for example, speaking. Select descriptors that you have prepared evidence of and present it.
3. Prepare a discussion question for the others based on the EPOSTL descriptors.

It was obvious that it was not until the student teachers gave the oral presentation of their Methodology part that they understood the connection between the Self-Assessment descriptors and the Dossier. There was not as much variety of evidence as we had expected. Most of it was lesson plans and learners' tasks from textbook materials referred to as category A above. As the student teachers were discussing their evidence in groups, relating them to selected descriptors, we noticed that many of them had only received oral feedback from their mentors. When we pointed this out, the student teachers decided that during their next practice they would ask for written feedback so they could include this in their dossiers. Another interesting part of the presentations was the discussion questions they had prepared based on some of the descriptors. Although some student teachers had selected the same descriptors, they had prepared different discussion questions which revealed to them how open the descriptors are to individual interpretation.

### 3.3. Using a more structured model

After evaluations were made by the first group of how we had incorporated the EPOSTL into the course structure, we decided to change the procedures for collecting evidence for the Dossier during the teaching practice of the first semester. In the second and third groups, we explained what kinds of evidence they could gather by giving the following instructions:

During your two weeks of teaching practice you will prepare a Dossier with evidence (see pages 59-60 in the EPOSTL) for some of the “can-do” statements that you have filled in. Here are some examples of evidence: a lesson plan, an example of a learner task, entries in your reading log, a lesson observation/evaluation written by your mentor. Try to collect a variety of evidence! After your teaching practice you should make new entries in the Self-Assessment section. During a seminar you will meet in small groups and discuss your different pieces of evidence. A week later you will hand in your Methodology part and Dossier. Remember that you should have evidence from at least four of the six sections: Grammar, Vocabulary, Listening, Reading, Speaking, Writing. Each piece of evidence should be related to one (or several) descriptors in the section, e.g. B1 or C3 and C4. You need to provide reflective comments for each piece of evidence (about 150 words). Your comments could include a very short description of the activity, but should focus on what didactic skills and competences you have developed.

This model was used with two groups during one year and the sharing of evidence with peers in oral discussions continued to be an excellent way for the student teachers to learn from each other and to reflect on their practice. Another dimension was added when they were also asked to write down their reflective comments for each piece of evidence. Many appreciated the more systematic approach to reflection offered in the EPOSTL and thought that reflection – a word often used in teacher education – had taken on a new meaning. The structure had helped them to develop a more reflective approach:

Working with the EPOSTL has been a new kind of experience for me. Not that I have not reflected or thought about my progression and development as a teacher in previous courses; it is just that I have never had the opportunity to do it in such an organised way as with working with the EPOSTL. And as we all know, sometimes properly thinking over and analysing what you are doing is a difficult and strenuous activity.

It helps me to take time for reflections, which I probably wouldn't take otherwise.

Compared with the first group, which did not get a list of examples of evidence, the second and the third groups collected a variety of activities from categories A-D to support their claims of knowledge and skills as language teachers. The dossiers still contained many lesson plans and learners' tasks, but were much better structured and now there were excerpts from diaries, reading logs and lesson observation notes written by mentors. In fact, some student teachers, who had not previously got feedback from their mentors, had actually used the collection of evidence for the Dossier as a means to

get feedback. 'It has helped me to actually get some feedback from my mentor, because he didn't give me any oral or written feedback before.'

There were also comments from students in school on lessons that a student teacher had planned and performed. The student teacher had tried out some new ways of working with a text and wanted to get feedback from the students. This turned out to be a nice form of evaluation with helpful comments which the student teacher had added and related to appropriate descriptors.

### **3.4. Letting go**

During the second term of the course we let the student teachers be in charge of using the EPOSTL as they saw fit after having introduced their Dossier and the three Self-Assessment parts to their mentors. Some mentors showed little interest and thought it was too time consuming, but one student teacher found a way to get around this problem: 'I discussed the lesson with my mentor without him realising that I was referring to the descriptors.'

Others used the EPOSTL in a systematic way together with the mentors: 'I looked at the descriptors with my mentor before planning a lesson and once again afterwards as a kind of reflection. Good to know what is expected of us.'

The question of ownership became a topic of discussion at the end of the first term since the student teachers handed in their self-assessment of the Methodology part and their Dossier with pieces of evidence and reflective comments for assessment. We encouraged them to keep a Dossier and update it with documents that would reflect their progress and development during the second term, but they were not asked to hand in their EPOSTL. Instead they were given assignments that were handed in for grading, for example, lesson plans. During an oral seminar when they presented lesson plans they were asked to refer to the Self-Assessment descriptors in Lesson Planning.

## **4. Students' voices**

At the end of the courses, questionnaires were given and students were able to express their opinions about the use of the EPOSTL and they could also write reflective comments on what they had learned by using it. There were some critical voices about how time consuming it had been to work with the portfolio and some did not like the format in the Self-Assessment section: 'I think the bars are really bad and would want another way to answer the descriptors.' Others pointed out difficulties they had had with reflection and questioned how much can be accomplished during the short periods of teaching practice:

I found it difficult to give a fair and correct description of my capabilities as a teacher through the Self-Assessment descriptors. First of all, I am only in my second term of the

teacher programme, so many of the questions ... were completely new to me and quite frankly things I have never even reflected on. Second of all, the time that we spent out in the field in our schools is too short a time to properly get a chance to incorporate EPOSTL into your consciousness whilst trying to teach.

However, the majority of the student teachers were positive and saw the EPOSTL as a good reflective tool that helps them to become aware of their strengths and weaknesses. Many said that they would continue to use the EPOSTL because it would help them to set goals: 'I have come to realise that this is a lifelong process and that I can use the EPOSTL to check up on myself, to see what I have improved since I started, which is sort of satisfying to see my own development.' One person pointed out the 'heart and soul' of the EPOSTL by saying:

How good I am at evaluating speaking exercises is still to see; that is the problem with the EPOSTL, it asks a lot of questions that you might not know how to answer. But then again, that is also the advantage of the EPOSTL; it makes you think.

## **5. Conclusion**

This article has described how parts of the EPOSTL were implemented into a subject-matter didactics course for student teachers studying English as a foreign language at the University of Gothenburg in Sweden. One of the aims was to encourage self-assessment and reflection among the student teachers and, after working with the EPOSTL for a year, most students felt that they had developed a more reflective approach. They could relate the Self-Assessment descriptors in Methodology, Lesson Planning and Conducting a Lesson to different kinds of evidence that they had collected for their Dossier during the teaching practice periods. At first, the most common pieces of evidence in the Dossier were lesson plans, but when discussing their evidence with peers and receiving more structured instructions, the student teachers collected a variety of activities, for example, lesson observation notes from mentors, learners' tasks, excerpts from diaries and reading logs. By collecting evidence for their Dossier, the student teachers had received more oral and written feedback from their mentors, and the use of the EPOSTL had assisted them in discussions during their teaching practice. However, the aim of involving the mentors needs to be developed and must be planned in collaboration with the Board of Teacher Education at the university since it would involve in-service training.

I would like to end with some advice that is common in the portfolio community: start small, but think big. Using the EPOSTL in our teacher education programme has been an inspiration, both in planning our courses and writing new syllabuses. I agree with the student above – the EPOSTL makes you think.



# **The EPOSTL in Iceland: getting the mentors on board**

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## **1. Introduction**

From the beginning of the project on the *European Portfolio for Student Teachers of Languages* a representative from the University of Iceland has participated in its activities and we have thus been able to closely follow the development of the project. After a workshop in Graz in June 2008, which launched the EPOSTL2 project, it was decided by the lecturers in the Department of Education at the University of Iceland to pilot the EPOSTL in a course entitled 'The Teaching of Modern Languages,' which is part of our postgraduate certificate of education (PGCE) programme. In this chapter I will report on the development of introducing the EPOSTL to our programme, focusing on how school mentors were included and how the process we established leads to improved co-operation between university lecturers and school mentors.

## **2. The teacher education programme in Iceland**

The Teacher Education Programme for secondary schoolteachers at the University of Iceland follows a consecutive model and was, at the time of the start of the EPOSTL project, a one-year postgraduate programme offering teaching qualifications in one or two subjects at secondary level after the completion of a first university degree. Many courses in the programme are on general pedagogy, learning theories, curriculum theory, etc. There are, however, additional subject-focused compulsory courses, one of which is the Teaching of Modern Languages (10 ETCS). Parallel with the course is a field-based component (another 10 ETCS) which is carried out in co-operation with our partnership schools. The emphasis in that course is on relating theory on teaching and learning languages to school practice. There are two practicum periods, one during the autumn semester and the other in the spring.

One problem which has been encountered has been the nature of co-operation with our partnership schools: it has been felt that there was not enough communication between the university and the partnership schools and that more cohesion was needed. Whilst the mentors have been given increased responsibility, this has not been accompanied by progress in narrowing the gap between the university and the partnership schools.

### 3. Theoretical background of mentoring

The importance of mentoring to optimise teacher education has expanded at considerable speed in many European countries. The mentor has always played an important role in various models of teacher education, for example in what Wallace (1991) refers to as ‘the craft model’, according to which ‘The master teacher told the students what to do, showed them how to do it and the students imitated the master’ (Stones and Morris, 1972: 7, quoted in Wallace, 1991: 6).

The 1950s saw what is often called the ‘traditional model’, that is a model of linking theory and practice: students learn theory at the university which they are then expected to put into practice in school. This model is dependent on students successfully mastering the skills, techniques and methods of teaching informed by theory (Zeichner, 1983). This model has its roots in behaviouristic theory with the assumption that ‘following the recipe would ensure successful teaching in any school context’ (Ewing and Le Cornu, 2010: 33). The model is in its nature hierarchical with the university supervisors at the top, the student teacher at the bottom and the mentor in-between, with not much liaison between the three.

With the development of reflective approaches to teacher education, often attributed to Schön (1983), the conception of the role of both students and mentor changed radically. Schön’s work, in which he describes teachers reflecting ‘in’ and ‘on’ action, stemmed from his profound dissatisfaction with and reaction against what he has called ‘technical rationality’, that is the application of conventional social science to the problems and tasks of professional practice. Schön claimed that a practitioner’s knowledge was embedded in action; he talked about knowing-in-action, reflecting-in-action, referring to these concepts as the core of an ‘epistemology of practice’ (Schön, 1992: 51). Reflection became the keyword; instead of being told how to behave, students learn by reflecting on what they are doing and what they had been doing and why.

Closely related, or rather an added dimension, to Schön’s ideas of the reflective practitioner is Handal and Lauvås’ construct of ‘practical theory’, which they defined ‘as private, integrated but ever-changing system of knowledge, experience and values which is relevant to teaching practice at any particular time’ (1987: 8). They claimed that ‘every teacher possesses a ‘practical theory’ of teaching which is subjectively the strongest determining factor in her educational practice’ (ibid.: 86). To make this personal, practical theory explicit the student teachers have to reflect on their actions. In Handal and Lauvås’ model of teachers’ practical theories, the theories are formed on three levels and the model is presented as a pyramid: at the top is the ethical/political justification emphasising the ethical implications for the teacher’s decisions. On the next level is theory, based on results, which have been established by empirical research and practice-based theories which refer to practical evidence about what works and what does not work and the bottom level represents the action which is influenced by the two upper levels.

For teacher education the emphasis on reflection means that the mentor will play a different role, helping student teachers to reflect on their personal theories and make them explicit. There is recognition that student teachers are not blank slates but bring with them understanding and experience of school (Ewing and Le Cornu, 2010). It is embedded in this theory that student teachers are capable of evaluating their own work through reflection. Helping the student teachers make their personal theories explicit is a challenging task, which mentors may not be prepared for. This is a new role and mentors may not, in many cases, have made their own personal theories explicit, which is the prerequisite for helping others. In my experience it takes time to teach student teachers to reflect but it can be done as the learning portfolios (based on the European Language Portfolio) my students have produced over the last decade have proved. However, I have gradually come to realise that if mentors are not included in the process an important piece is missing from the jigsaw. How this can be done is another matter.

A further change in the development of mentoring centres on the notion of learning communities or communities of practice, CP (Lave and Wenger, 1991). This concept has had a major influence on how we think about learning from practice. Wenger defines the formation of CP as follows: 'Communities of practice grow out of convergent interplay of competence and experience that involves mutual engagement' (Wenger, 2000: 229). Wenger also stresses that collegiality, reciprocity, expertise, and contribution to the practice are the hallmarks of the learning process and that the learning agenda is negotiated. In the learning community model, the emphasis is on shared learning and new terms like 'collaborative mentoring' emerge (Mullen, 2000).

I have now briefly reported the major developments relating to the role of mentors in the practicum in teacher education at the risk of having simplified matters too much. It has to be stated that presenting the development in this way may lead the reader to believe that this is a linear process. It therefore has to be emphasised that all the models discussed probably still exist and in many cases there will be a mixture of models in use.

In the case of the programme at the University of Iceland, we have been interested in working towards the concept of community of learning for some time. This includes all three partners: the mentor, the student teacher and the university lecturer. We have been looking for a platform from which to start. After piloting the EPOSTL we saw it open up mutual engagement and shared learning between all three partners. The EPOSTL had the potential to create a common ground to discuss, negotiate, evaluate and share learning experiences working towards collaborative mentoring instead of being in a hierarchical pyramid as in the 'traditional model' previously mentioned.

## **4. Piloting the EPOSTL**

I shall now recount our experiences with the EPOSTL, focusing on steps taken to involve the mentors. At the same time, I shall attempt to answer the question whether the EPOSTL has in any way helped to reduce the gap between the university lecturers and the mentors.

### **4.1. The first year of piloting**

At the outset it was decided that the EPOSTL should be a part of the course ‘Teaching of Modern Languages’. It soon became apparent that it also needed to be used in the teaching practice to obtain its full potential. This meant introducing it to our mentors in our partnership schools. We introduced the EPOSTL to our students (15 in number that year) about two weeks into the course. We began by looking at the introduction and the various sections. Our working procedure when piloting the EPOSTL in the first year was to have students look at the self-evaluation descriptors relating to the relevant section in the EPOSTL according to which the Self-Assessment descriptors are organised – Methodology, Independent Learning, Assessment, etc.

I will take reading comprehension, which is introduced in the first semester, as an example. Students meet weekly in this course and the time is divided between interactive lectures, discussions and workshops. The procedure was as follows:

1. Looking at the descriptors on reading and estimating how proficient they were in this aspect of teaching.
2. Theories on reading comprehension were read, followed by interactive lectures and discussions; the session finished with a workshop.
3. First practicum period in schools.
4. After the practicum: re-evaluating their self-evaluation (EPOSTL) on the teaching of reading through their discussion with mentors/university lecturers.
5. Discussion in class with the university lecturer, reflecting once again on their teaching which led to a revised version of the self-evaluation, which afterwards went into their learning-to-teach portfolios as evidence of their progress.

Students were always encouraged to discuss the descriptors in pairs as far as possible. During and after the discussion in class, students sometimes made changes in filling in the descriptors; they became aware of the potential of the tool and began to take it more seriously. The student teachers could thus compare their expected proficiency with the self-evaluation which took place during and after the practicum period. This comparison helped them understand better the complexity of teaching reading comprehension and made their learning more transparent. The final assignment in relation to the EPOSTL was a written reflection on their experience of working with

the self-evaluation descriptors, which became a part of their ‘learning-to-teach portfolio’. It has to be acknowledged that, at the beginning, the EPOSTL was received with scepticism and lack of enthusiasm by the students but this scepticism was gradually replaced by an acceptance of its usefulness for their learning, as we shall see.

## **4.2. Students’ experiences**

The main themes which emerged from students’ reflection were:

- *Doubts.* Doubts about the usefulness of the EPOSTL which was expressed by almost everyone in their first reflections.
- *Honesty.* The importance of being honest towards oneself, realising when filling in the descriptors that they were cheating no one but themselves if they were not truthful.
- *Awareness.* Increased awareness of one’s own learning. Becoming more aware of the gaps in their own learning and competence.
- *Progress.* Because of the procedure we used they could monitor their own progress.
- *Focus.* There was a consensus that the EPOSTL made their reflection more focused.

To sum up: students in general found the EPOSTL useful to get to know themselves better and to be able to look critically at their own learning. All in all, this first experience was positive. However, we felt that more was clearly needed if the EPOSTL was to fulfil its potential and more involvement by mentors was required.

## **4.3. Involving the mentors**

At the beginning of the autumn semester 2008 a meeting was held with all the mentors (eight in all, as each mentor usually has two students) in modern languages – Danish, English, French, German and Spanish this year – from our partnership schools where the EPOSTL was introduced. At the meeting we discussed the purpose of the EPOSTL and went through the sections which particularly related to the school practicum, Lesson Planning and Conducting a Lesson, as we felt we had to be careful not to give them too much to concentrate on at one time. The mentors were quite positive and saw this as a useful tool to help students focus on important areas. We explained that we saw the possibilities of the EPOSTL not just as a tool for reflection and self-evaluation for students but as a very good platform for mentors and students to discuss students’ lessons in a more focused way and for making a bridge between the students, mentors and university lecturers. We therefore suggested that they used it in discussions with their student teachers. This, however, did not happen; a few mentors did so but others did not.

The first year was thus not a success in terms of involving all three partners. When the mentors were asked how they had been using the descriptors, only a few of them had actually used them in the discussions. In most cases it turned out that mentors reminded students to fill in the descriptors but did not sit down with them to discuss the descriptors, as was our intention. Our original aim of having the students and their mentors learn together in this way had failed. With hindsight, we should have stated more clearly that we expected the mentors to refer to at least the two sections mentioned above in their mentor-student discussions. Another mistake we made was not to make it clear to students that we definitely expected them to work through these sections with their mentors. A third mistake was not being consistent in discussing the use of the EPOSTL when university lecturers visited the schools. In the light of this experience it became apparent that we needed to work much more closely with our mentors in order to involve them in the thinking and principles behind the EPOSTL and to follow up our initial meeting. The EPOSTL needed to be added to the list of items to be discussed when visiting the schools. We also needed to take some time at the university to give students more support when starting to work with the EPOSTL.

#### **4.4. Year two of piloting**

Although the first year of using the EPOSTL proved to have given students positive experiences, there were a number of things we needed to improve. We started by introducing the EPOSTL to the students at the very beginning of the course (instead of two weeks into the course) and emphasised what kind of tool it was and why it was an important learning tool. We used the same procedure with the students as in the previous year but allowed more time for reflection in pairs on the various components. Prior to the practicum, a meeting was held with all the mentors – who were nine in number this year, representing five languages as before (Danish, English, French, German and Spanish). We explained in what we hoped was a much clearer way that we did not only see this as a tool for the students but also as common ground for all of us to discuss students' progress. We did not make a suggestion as before, but a strong recommendation that they use the EPOSTL and that it would be the focus of our discussion when visiting the schools. We also invited them to contact us if there were any questions. Subsequently, we sent all the mentors an electronic copy of the EPOSTL.

Just before the teaching practicum began we contacted the mentors by e-mail and reminded them of the EPOSTL and asked if there were any questions concerning its use. We also reminded the students of the two sections, Lesson Planning and Conducting a Lesson, and asked them to make a self-assessment of the descriptors in these sections according to their expectations before starting their practicum, as they had done in other sections of the EPOSTL during the course. When the university lecturers visited the schools, all three partners sat down to discuss students' and mentor's experiences of the practicum, as we always do. The difference this time was that in addition to the general discussion there was a common framework for evaluating

and discussing progress that we could use. We learned that the mentors in many cases had used the EPOSTL when observing the students; the students who had already filled in the descriptors before the practicum could now look back at their assessment and reconsider it; the university lecturer who was familiar with the framework had used it as a checklist when observing. As it turned out, in most cases we also looked at other relevant sections which were suggested by the mentors and occasionally by the students themselves. These sessions seemed to be creating an excellent opportunity to help student teachers make their personal theories explicit. I would maintain that it is on the basis of students' personal theories that they set the criteria for their self-evaluation.

#### **4.5. Feedback from year two**

As there were only nine mentors, I did not see the point of designing a questionnaire to obtain their opinions. Instead, I asked the mentors to write about one or two pages about their experience with using the EPOSTL, mentioning what were the important features in implementing the EPOSTL and, for those who had had students in the first year, noting the difference between the two year groups. Perhaps not surprisingly there were several issues that were commonly identified:

- It was important to understand the purpose behind the EPOSTL.
- It was important not to have too many sections to focus on at the beginning.
- The EPOSTL helped students to reach a better understanding of what was important.
- The EPOSTL helped make the feedback sessions with the students more focused.
- The EPOSTL helped create a common focus in discussions with the university lecturers.

The 'experienced' mentors wrote about the message from the university being much clearer as to how to use the EPOSTL in year two and also that the students seemed to be more aware of the usefulness and more aware that the EPOSTL was a tool they were expected to spend time on and pay attention to. A few mentors felt that the descriptors could be equally useful in in-service teacher education.

### **5. Where we are now?**

We have now started our third year of using the EPOSTL. At the beginning of the course 'The Teaching of Modern Languages' we asked some of our former students to come and tell the new students about their experiences with the EPOSTL. This turned out to be a good idea as it helped the new students to overcome their scepticism. The

former students also gave the new ones some good advice as how best to go about using the descriptors.

We also held a meeting with our mentors, some of whom now had two years of experience, and some of whom were new in this role. We went through our experiences and both mentors and university lectures expressed their satisfaction with the use of the EPOSTL. There was a consensus that this was an awareness-raising tool which made the discussions more profound and gave all three partners a common framework and an equal voice; consequently, the discussions did not follow the previous hierarchical model. We also agreed that it was important to keep reminding students to use the EPOSTL continually and allow for time and space for them to reflect together both at the university and in school.

We may not yet have reached our long-term goal of creating a learning community between university and schools. More than the EPOSTL is needed for that: for example, accepting that the partnership school as a whole has a role in teacher education and not just individual teachers. The EPOSTL has, however, undoubtedly brought the partners closer and has narrowed the gap between university and the partnership schools. After the two years of the pilot, there is a consensus between university lecturers and mentors that the EPOSTL is on its way to becoming an integral part of our programme.



# **The role of the EPOSTL in the evaluation and development of teacher education programmes in Croatia**

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## **1. Introduction**

In line with the general concept of portfolios (see, for example, Paulson, Paulson and Meyer, 1991), the aims of the EPOSTL (p. 2) reflect a twofold dimension of this document: it is both product-oriented and process-oriented (see Westhoff, 1999). The product-oriented dimension of the EPOSTL is mainly seen in its function as a self-assessment tool: it helps to describe competences attained and gives evidence of their attainment. The process dimension is particularly evident in encouraging reflection on learning and teaching experiences and in monitoring student teachers' development.

Given these dimensions, the EPOSTL is extremely valuable to student teachers. It helps them to identify and reflect on their strengths and weaknesses related to their underlying knowledge and teaching skills. It also stimulates their awareness of the positive growth that is taking place during the study, thus 'enhancing their self-esteem and nurturing further growth' (Schafer, 1993, cited in Bailey, 1998: 216). This latter use of the EPOSTL not only indicates the student teachers' achievements but can also reveal much about their teacher education programme and help in its further improvement.

Drawing on the (self)-assessment function of the EPOSTL, we conducted a study to examine the use of the EPOSTL in the two-year master-level study programmes in teaching English and/or German as a foreign language at the Faculty of Philosophy in Osijek, Croatia. This study is a part of a small-scale project on the use of the EPOSTL in the pre-service teacher education at the Faculty of Philosophy in Osijek, Croatia. The project started in March 2009 and will be completed in June 2011.

## **2. The present study**

### **2.1. Context**

At the Faculty of Philosophy in Osijek, English and/or German students who have completed their bachelor-level study programme can continue their education by taking the two-year master-level study programme in teaching English and/or German as a foreign language. This programme qualifies them to teach English/German in

educational institutions at all levels where these languages are taught as foreign languages.

The study programme includes two types of courses: general pedagogically oriented courses and subject-specific didactic courses. Subject-specific courses include didactics and methodology courses (for example, Methodology of Teaching English/German as a Foreign Language).

Each semester the students are offered at least two elective courses (for example, Teaching English/German to Young Learners, Testing and Evaluating Communicative Language Ability, Literature and Teaching English/German as a Foreign Language, Individual Differences in Foreign Language Learning, Corpus Analyses, Contrastive Analyses, etc.). At the end of their studies, students take two periods of practicum. The school mentors are external associates who host students in their schools, advise them and monitor their progress, and serve as co-evaluators at the end of the practicum.

## **2.2. Aims of the study**

The main aim of the study was to find out how the EPOSTL could be used as a springboard for the evaluation and development of a teacher education programme. In line with this aim, the study focused on the use of the EPOSTL descriptors of competences with the following purposes:

1. to monitor how student teachers' didactic competences develop during the two-year master-level teacher education programme;
2. to compare the level of attained competences with the expected learning outcomes of specific methodology courses in the study programme and state to what extent these courses contribute to the development of teachers' competences;
3. to develop students' awareness and understanding of their growth through self-evaluation.

It was our assumption that a comparison of students' perceptions of the level of their competences within particular competence areas described in the EPOSTL with the learning outcomes of courses taught in the first and second year of the teacher education programme could give insights into the strengths and weaknesses of the education programme. Additionally, the study addressed the question of the use of the EPOSTL in general, namely its practicality and usefulness.

## **2.3. Participants**

The study was conducted on a sample of 14 (56%) student teachers of German and 11 (44%) student teachers of English and German. Both groups of students were enrolled in a two-year master-level study programme in teaching English and German as a

foreign language. None of the students had previous teaching experience when they embarked on the teacher education programme.

## **2.4. Instruments**

The instruments used in the study were the EPOSTL and a questionnaire. The Self-Assessment section of the EPOSTL, more precisely the descriptors of competences from the sections Methodology, Resources, Lesson Planning, Conducting a Lesson and Assessment of Learning, were used as indicators of the competences acquired and as a basis for reflection on learning/teaching outcomes. The above-mentioned sections were chosen because the expected learning outcomes (knowledge and skills) of a great majority of the specialised courses in the study programme are related to those areas of teachers' competences. To enable a quantitative analysis of data, participants in the study rated developing competences within the target competence area(s) on a scale from 0 (not developed at all) to 10 (fully developed). The numbers had to be written in the bar, and the date on which the assessment was carried out, above the bar.

The second source of findings in the study, as mentioned earlier, was a questionnaire. Its objective was to gain insights into the student teachers' views on work with the EPOSTL, the relation between the EPOSTL descriptors of competences and the learning outcomes of subject-specific courses and on the purpose and usefulness of the EPOSTL. The questionnaire (see Appendix 1) included:

1. student teachers' first impressions of the EPOSTL (question 1);
2. a closed-response question on the time of the use of the EPOSTL sections (before, during or after the teaching practice) (question 2);
3. a series of closed-response items on the level of difficulty when completing the sections and subsections of the EPOSTL (question 3a);
4. an open-response question, asking which subsections were most difficult to use and why (question 3b);
5. a series of closed-response questions on the level of correlation between learning outcomes of the compulsory courses and competences referred to in the descriptors of the EPOSTL (question 4);
6. an open question related to other elective courses that contributed to the development of particular teacher competences (question 5);
7. a series of seven closed statements investigating the student teachers' opinions on the usefulness of the EPOSTL (a five-point Likert scale was used ranging from 1 – strongly disagree – to 5 – strongly agree) (question 6);
8. a closed-response question on the usefulness of each section of the EPOSTL and an open question eliciting student teachers' suggestions for improvement of any sections of the EPOSTL (questions 7a and 7b);

9. an open question asking for student teachers' opinions on the implementation possibilities of the EPOSTL (questions 8).

## **2.5. Procedure**

In March 2009, the EPOSTL was introduced to two groups of students at the beginning of the course 'Theory of Teaching German as a Foreign Language', namely immediately after they had been familiarised with the aims, content, learning outcomes, teaching methods, evaluation procedures and materials needed for the course. The students were told that they would use the EPOSTL or refer to it in different courses during their master-level study programme at the faculty and would most probably continue using it in their in-service training.

In June 2009, at the end of this course, the students were asked to carry out their self-assessment for the first time, and in June 2010 for the second time, that is, after they had attended the following courses: Methodology of Teaching English/German as a Foreign Language, Practicum in Teaching English/German as a Foreign Language 1 and 2 as well as several elective courses. Students were additionally asked to fill in the questionnaire by the end of September 2010. Both qualitative and quantitative analyses were performed on the collected data. The qualitative analysis was conducted on open-format questions in the questionnaire. The quantitative analyses included descriptive statistics and a paired-samples t-test. Descriptive statistics were used to calculate the minimum, maximum, mean and standard deviation ( $\sigma$ ) of numerically stated responses in both the EPOSTL and the questionnaire. A paired-samples t-test was performed to establish if there were statistically significant differences between students' self-ratings in June 2009 and those in June 2010. The statistical procedures were performed using SPSS for Windows 16.0.

## **3. Results**

### **3.1. Analysis of the Self-Assessment**

This section will be devoted to the students' self-ratings of their competences. It was the main aim of this analysis to show their perceived development of their competences over a period of a year. Since for the purpose of the study the students had scaled the Self-Assessment bars in their EPOSTL on a scale of 0-10, it was possible to quantify their self-assessment of five sections and subsections of the EPOSTL. Table 1 shows both how students perceive the level of their competence in specific areas at two different stages and the degree of development that has taken place in their competences. The capitalised terms (METHODOLOGY, RESOURCES, LESSON PLANNING, CONDUCTING A LESSON, ASSESSMENT OF LEARNING) show

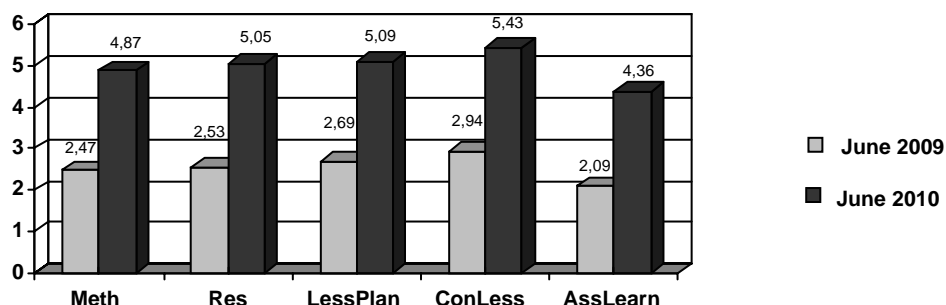
the results for this EPOSTL section as a whole. The others (Speaking/Spoken Interaction, etc.) are subcategories of the general sections.

<b>Sections and subsections</b>	<b>Mean 2009</b>	<b>Mean 2010</b>	<b>Difference</b>
METHODOLOGY	<b>2.471</b>	<b>4.878</b>	<b>2.407</b>
Speaking/Spoken Interaction	2.590	4.996	2.406
Writing/Written Interaction	2.449	4.670	2.221
Listening	2.745	4.951	2.206
Reading	2.744	5.053	2.309
Grammar	<b>1.991</b>	<b>4.722</b>	<b>2.731</b>
Vocabulary	2.406	5.087	2.681
Culture	2.375	4.668	2.293
RESOURCES	<b>2.534</b>	<b>5.055</b>	<b>2.521</b>
LESSON PLANNING	<b>2.686</b>	<b>5.098</b>	<b>2.412</b>
Identification of Learning Objectives	2.254	4.877	2.623
Lesson Content	2.880	5.254	2.374
Organisation	2.924	5.163	2.239
CONDUCTING A LESSON	<b>2.937</b>	<b>5.436</b>	<b>2.499</b>
Using Lesson Plans	2.877	5.377	2.500
Content	2.652	5.087	2.435
Interaction with Learners	2.858	5.196	2.338
Classroom Management	3.096	5.600	2.504
Classroom Language	3.210	5.920	2.710
ASSESSMENT OF LEARNING	<b>2.090</b>	<b>4.368</b>	<b>2.278</b>
Designing Assessment Tools	2.145	4.130	1.985
Evaluation	1.962	4.184	2.222
Self- and Peer Assessment	1.739	3.986	2.247
Language Performance	2.246	4.688	2.442
Culture	2.174	4.406	2.232
Error Analysis	2.275	4.815	2.540

*Table 1. Descriptive statistics for the self-assessment of students' didactic competences at two times: in June 2009 and in June 2010 (n=25)*

In the following, I shall first comment on the perceived level of students' competences after the first and the second year of the study, and then compare it with the learning outcomes of subject-matter methodology courses taught in the first and the second year of the master study programme. It is our opinion that this comparison could give us a fair insight into some strengths and weakness of the curriculum.

According to the results presented in Table 1, the students' competences have improved to a noticeable degree between the first and the second year of the master study programme. To make the improvement even more transparent, Figure 1 summarises the development in competences in the five main categories: Methodology, Resources, Lesson Planning, Conducting a Lesson and Assessment of Learning.



*Figure 1. Students' ratings of their competences in five categories at two different stages*

In order to establish if there are statistically significant differences between the students' self-ratings of competences, that is competence areas (see variables in Table 1) in June 2009 and those in June 2010, a paired-samples t-test was performed. As expected, the results of a paired-samples t-test revealed a statistically significant difference between the students' ratings in June 2009 and those in June 2010 ( $p = .000$  for each pair of variables).

Furthermore, the results presented in Table 1 reveal that at both self-assessment stages the students perceived their competences as being developed to a similar degree in all competence areas except for Assessment of Learning. A closer look into the students' evaluation of single competences which was made after the first year of study showed that the highest rating (above 3) was given to the competences related to the following aspects:

- evaluation and selection of a variety of materials to stimulate speaking activities and writing (EPOSTL, pp. 21-23);
- evaluation and selection of listening and reading texts appropriate to the needs, interests and language level of the learners, evaluation and selection of listening and reading, pre- and post-listening and reading activities, and application of appropriate ways of reading a text in class (EPOSTL, p. 26);

- designing learning materials and activities appropriate for particular learners (EPOSTL, p. 31);
- variation and balance of activities to include a variety of skills and competences, planning activities to ensure the interdependence of listening, reading, writing and speaking, planning to teach elements of other subjects using the target language, identification of time needed for specific topics and activities, and designing activities to make the learners aware and build on their existing knowledge (EPOSTL, p. 35);
- selection and planning of a variety of organisational forms (EPOSTL, p. 37);
- finishing off a lesson in a focused way (EPOSTL, p. 39);
- relating the target language to the culture of those who speak it (EPOSTL, p. 40);
- focusing learners' attention at the beginning of a lesson, keeping their attention, reacting supportively to learners' initiative, and encouraging learner participation in different activities (EPOSTL, p. 41);
- creating opportunities for and managing individual, partner, group and whole-class work, making and using resources efficiently, and using instructional media efficiently (EPOSTL, p. 42);
- conducting a lesson in the target language, using it when appropriate and as a metalanguage (EPOSTL, p. 43);
- analysing learners' errors and dealing with them in spoken and written language in ways which support learning processes and do not undermine confidence and communication (EPOSTL, p. 57).

After the second study year, the following competences, which in students' opinions have developed the most, are to be added to the above list:

- evaluation and selection of a range of meaningful speaking and interactional activities to develop fluency, and to help learners to become aware of and use different text types (EPOSTL, p. 21);
- evaluation and selection of meaningful writing activities to encourage learners to develop their creative potential, and to consolidate learning (EPOSTL, pp. 23-24);
- encouraging learners to use their knowledge of a topic and their expectations about a text when listening and reading (EPOSTL, pp. 25-26);
- evaluation and selection of grammatical and vocabulary tasks and activities, which support learning and help learners to use new vocabulary and grammar structures in oral and written texts (EPOSTL, pp. 27-28);
- evaluation and selection of a variety of texts, source materials and activities which awaken learners' interest in and help them to develop their knowledge and understanding of their own and the other language culture (EPOSTL, p. 43);

- almost all competences related to the following areas: Resources, Lesson Planning, and Conducting a Lesson.

The above competences are very much in accordance with the expected learning outcomes of the first and the second-year compulsory subject-matter methodology courses. The aims of the first-year courses are to enable learners:

- to teach the language (pronunciation, grammar, vocabulary) as well as the receptive and productive language skills;
- to correct learners' errors appropriately;
- to understand what to test and evaluate, and how;
- to recognise the role, characteristics and ways of usage of teaching aids;
- to select and evaluate teaching materials;
- to understand the role of culture in teaching the foreign language;
- to be aware of the role of different factors in learning and teaching the language (age, gender, motivation, attitudes, intelligence, learning styles and strategies, talent, teacher, context of learning, other languages, etc.).

The second-year courses are devoted to the teaching practice: selection and evaluation of texts, tasks and activities, lesson planning and conducting the lesson. A relationship between gained competences and learning outcomes of the subject-matter methodology courses is recognised by the students, too. In question 4 of the questionnaire students were asked to 'estimate the level of correlation between the learning outcomes of the compulsory courses and the teacher competences defined by the descriptors in the EPOSTL on a scale ranging from 1 to 5'. Students replied that there was a high level of correlation (see Table 2). This seems to support the validity of learning outcomes of the master study programme courses.

<b>Compulsory courses</b>	<b>Min</b>	<b>Max</b>	<b>Mean</b>	<b><math>\sigma</math></b>
Second and Foreign Language Acquisition	3.00	5.00	4.280	.791
Theory of Foreign Language Teaching	3.00	5.00	<b>4.480</b>	.585
Methodology of Teaching English/German as a Foreign Language	1.00	5.00	4.000	1.040
Practicum in Teaching English/German as a Foreign Language 1 and 2	3.00	5.00	<b>4.360</b>	.757

*Table 2. The students' perception of the level of correlation between the learning outcomes of compulsory courses and the descriptors of teachers' competences in the EPOSTL (n=25)*



However, there are a few competence areas that the above-mentioned courses clearly do not adequately address, for example those within the category of Assessment of Learning. The reason for this may be that school mentors very rarely discuss their assessment procedures with the students. What is more, the students usually do not have the possibility to test and assess the learners' language performance. From this finding it was concluded that changes need to be made in the curriculum with respect to this field. Firstly, much of the content of the elective course 'Testing and Evaluating Communicative Language Ability' should be included in the compulsory course 'Methodology of Teaching English/German as a Foreign Language', and thus made available to all students. Secondly, more time should be devoted to the discussion and practice of the assessment of learners' communicative language ability during the students' teaching practice in elementary and secondary schools.

Judging from the students' responses in the Self-Assessment part of the EPOSTL, grammar is the second field which seems to be insufficiently dealt with in the courses, especially in those taught in the first year of the programme. The above results suggest that students need more input on how to introduce and practise different grammatical items in meaningful and appropriate contexts before they are sent to schools.

Finally, a more detailed analysis of the results of each subsection of the Self-Assessment part of the EPOSTL revealed that our students are at least satisfied with their didactic competences in respect of the following:

- how to vary and balance activities in order to respond to individual learners' learning styles (EPOSTL, p. 36);
- how to implement intercultural awareness-raising activities (EPOSTL, p. 36);
- how to identify and evaluate coursebooks appropriate for the age, interests and the language level of the learners (EPOSTL, p. 31);
- how to meet special educational needs of learners (EPOSTL, p. 34).

Since many of these competences could not be satisfactorily developed in one-semester courses on the theory and methodology of teaching a foreign language, we will have to offer more elective courses whose content deal with these issues as well as those summed up in the section Independent Learning.

### **3.2. Analysis of the usefulness of the EPOSTL**

Although the students experienced some difficulties in filling in the Self-Assessment section of the EPOSTL, they found this part of the EPOSTL to be the most useful (see Table 3).

Statements	Min	Max	Mean	$\sigma$
The EPOSTL made me think about different aspects of teacher education.	3.00	5.00	3.960	.734
The EPOSTL helped me to understand what competences a teacher of foreign languages should have.	2.00	5.00	4.080	.812
The EPOSTL made me aware of the competences I have developed as well as those I still need to develop.	2.00	5.00	4.080	.953
The EPOSTL helped me to log my progress.	3.00	5.00	4.040	.735
The EPOSTL helped me to understand the relationship between underlying knowledge and practical skills in the process of teaching.	3.00	5.00	4.040	.790
The EPOSTL is a good instrument for the self-assessment of teacher competences.	2.00	5.00	4.120	.971
The EPOSTL is a useful teaching and learning device.	2.00	5.00	3.920	.862

*Table 3. The general usefulness of the EPOSTL estimated on a scale ranging from 1 (strongly disagree) to 5 (strongly agree) (n=25)*

In sum, the best recognised functions of the EPOSTL seem to be those which help students to develop awareness of their strengths and weaknesses through self-assessment, to chart their progress and to better understand the relationship between underlying knowledge and practical skills a teacher strives to develop.

#### **4. Concluding remarks**

The project on the use of the EPOSTL in the Faculty of Philosophy in Osijek is still in progress. This means that not all the data have been gathered and analysed up to this point. Therefore, it is not possible to draw firm conclusions on the possibility of using the EPOSTL for all the purposes stated in the introduction to this paper. However, the results of our study suggest that the EPOSTL can be relatively efficiently used for the purposes of evaluation and further development of teacher education programmes. The students' self-ratings provided a good insight into the strengths and weaknesses of our teacher education programme, and gave us guidelines for its improvement. In this respect we have already made changes to the contents of compulsory courses and introduced two elective courses: Teaching Grammar, and Learning Styles and

Strategies. At the same time, we are considering the possibility of proposing a course on foreign language teaching to learners with special needs. Furthermore, the use of the EPOSTL at different stages of the teacher education programme enables teacher educators and mentors to monitor students’ progress and provides them with feedback on the effectiveness of their teaching. At the same time, the EPOSTL enables students to log their growth and reflect on what has been and should be taught and learned as well as on how the contents of different courses are interrelated, thus contributing to the overall teacher competence. All in all, in our study the EPOSTL seems to have proved its multiple assessment function: it enables the students’ self-assessment and the teacher educators’ monitoring of students’ progress. This, in turn, can lead to an evaluation of teaching and teacher education programmes and, consequently, to their improvement and further development.

### Appendix 1 – Questionnaire on the use of the EPOSTL

1. What was your first impression of the EPOSTL?
2. Which sections of the EPOSTL did you use before, during and after your teaching practice – Personal Statement, Self-Assessment, Dossier?
- 3a. Which sections and subsections of the EPOSTL were the easiest/the most difficult to complete?
- 3b. Which subsections of the Self-Assessment part were the most difficult to complete and why?
4. Please estimate the level of correlation between the learning outcomes of the compulsory courses and the teacher competences defined by the descriptors in the EPOSTL on a scale ranging from 1 (very low correlation) to 5 (very high correlation).

Compulsory subject-specific courses	Correlation				
	very low			very high	
Second and Foreign Language Acquisition	1	2	3	4	5
Theory of Foreign language Teaching	1	2	3	4	5
Methodology of Teaching English/German as a Foreign Language	1	2	3	4	5
Practicum in Teaching English/German as a Foreign Language 1 and 2	1	2	3	4	5

5. Which elective courses contributed to the development of which teacher competences?
6. Do you agree with the following statements? (Please circle the number on a scale ranging from 1 – strongly disagree – to 5 – strongly agree.)

Statement	Strongly disagree			Strongly agree	
The EPOSTL made me think about different aspects of teacher education.	1	2	3	4	5
The EPOSTL helped me to understand what competences a teacher of foreign languages should have.	1	2	3	4	5
The EPOSTL made me aware of the competences I have developed as well as those I still need to develop.	1	2	3	4	5
The EPOSTL helped me to log my progress.	1	2	3	4	5
The EPOSTL helped me to understand the relationship between underlying knowledge and practical skills in the process of teaching.	1	2	3	4	5
The EPOSTL is a good instrument for the self-assessment of teacher competences.	1	2	3	4	5
The EPOSTL is a useful teaching and learning device.	1	2	3	4	5

- 7a. Which sections of the EPOSTL are the least/the most useful and why?
- 7b. Do you have any suggestions for improvement of any sections of the EPOSTL? If so, what would your suggestions be?
8. How would you use the EPOSTL during teacher education at the faculty?

# **The use of the EPOSTL in a bilateral teacher-education programme**

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## **1. Introduction**

It is commonplace for foreign language students in one country to spend part of their undergraduate or postgraduate course in another. For those who are following a modern languages teacher education programme, however, such an experience, although comparatively unusual, is arguably even more valuable. The opportunity to experience part of their training abroad not only provides the powerful linguistic and cultural experiences of time in the foreign country, but also creates substantial professional and pedagogical opportunities derived from teaching and working in different educational contexts where traditions and practices may differ.

The chapter explores how a bilateral teacher training programme, which operated between the Faculty of Education at the University of Cambridge and the then Institut Universitaire de Formation des Maîtres (IUFM) at Antony, near Paris, from 2007 to 2008, enhanced student teachers' pedagogical as well as linguistic and cultural experiences. It will illustrate how the EPOSTL can be used to structure, focus, fine-tune and evaluate a mutually supportive and complementary course run by teacher-training institutions in two countries. Student teacher opinions and feelings, based on their training and teaching in different national contexts during one training year, are documented in detail with reference to sections of the EPOSTL.

## **2. The bilateral programme**

A bilateral programme has a number of interrelated and interdependent aims. These seek to help students to:

- enhance and widen an understanding of their institution's training course content by comparison with that operating in another country;
- improve their competence in another language, both in subject-specific and in more general terms;
- develop social and intercultural awareness;

- engage in discussion and collaboration with others working in a similar professional context, involving other student teachers, school mentors and university tutors.

These aims underpinned the bilateral student-teacher programme. When the programme was devised there were no plans to evaluate the programme by students or tutors other than by criteria and practice determined by each institution within each particular national context. No common assessment tool was in place.

This study will focus on the experiences of one group of English primary school student teachers who were training to be generalist teachers with a subject specialism (French as a foreign language), and one group of French students who were training as primary school generalist teachers but who could teach English as part of the curriculum in France. Each student cohort spent four weeks of the training year in schools which were part of a university-school partnership already well established in each country. Some 12 French student teachers arrived in Cambridge in January 2008, and the English group of five went to France at Easter 2008.

The teacher-training context for both groups of student teachers during these four weeks was similar: participation in professional courses run by the university and four weeks' teaching practice in school. The four weeks complemented other parts of the training year, which included lectures, seminars and workshops designed to make explicit and develop links between the theory and practice of teaching modern languages to young learners aged 7 to 11.

To function efficiently a bilateral programme requires a framework within which broadly agreed course content, opportunities for classroom practice and common assessment procedures can be set. The EPOSTL was considered to be appropriate for such a function, being pan-European in its aim, a culturally neutral tool and comprehensive in its coverage. Although not envisaged either for the purpose of curriculum planning and evaluation or for use in primary teacher education – it is intended for the secondary sector – the EPOSTL was thought to be sufficiently broadly based and detailed for a pilot study to be conducted, exploring its use in this context.

### **3. The training context: the English and the French groups**

The training year for the English students was significantly different from that of the French cohort. During the first term – September to December – each student worked in a first placement school initially observing teachers, then teaching whole classes. In January of term two the students began a second primary school placement near Cambridge where, in addition to teaching other subjects in the school curriculum, they started to observe and teach French as a foreign language. In France, the English group started teaching in a French primary school for the last two weeks of term two and, after Easter, for the first two weeks of term three. They taught first part, then whole

lessons using French as the medium of instruction for a range of subjects. On their return to Cambridge the group attended two whole-day seminars in the Faculty of Education during which comparisons were drawn between teaching in England and teaching in France.

The interviews with the English students which inform this study took place on 2 May, two weeks after their return from France. At this stage in their training year they had experienced two terms' observing and teaching classes in two countries in addition to regular school and faculty-based seminars and discussions on a range of pedagogical issues. The English group's responses to their use of the EPOSTL were made, therefore, after some practical school experience and limited but focused discussion of some theoretical issues. As a consequence, sections of the EPOSTL were considered more relevant than others at this point in their training.

For the French group, the context of their comments was the autumn term in the IUFM described by the French cohort as 'Primary school teaching, seen from practical and theoretical perspectives'. They spent a few days in a French school before they began their month's primary school placement in England. In the English school they observed classes for most of their first week. In the following three weeks they taught lessons using English as the medium of instruction for a range of subjects. As had happened in France with the English students, all their lessons were observed by mentors in school, by university tutors from Cambridge and by their own tutors from France. The French students were therefore accustomed to evaluating their lessons with others, although their practical teaching experience had only just begun. On their return to France the French resumed their training course at the IUFM, again focusing on practical and theoretical issues.

The interviews with the French students were conducted on 14 April at a stage in the course when they had had limited experience of classroom teaching but considerably more discussion and exemplification of pedagogical practices than the English group.

#### **4. How the EPOSTL was presented to the student teachers**

The EPOSTL was introduced to both student groups before the beginning of the teaching placements in Britain and in France. The document was presented as a set of teaching competences which was neither official or mandatory, nor country specific. It was also emphasised that the EPOSTL was in no way an assessment tool to determine whether students passed or failed a practical component of their training year – a particular preoccupation of the French group, for whom a pass was essential not only for their professional teaching qualification (as it was for the English) but also to enable them to become a *fonctionnaire* (civil servant) in France.

All students were encouraged to use the document to evaluate and to log their professional progress. In an introduction to the EPOSTL the course tutor illustrated:

- how the ‘can-do’ statements could be used for self-assessment as their teaching progressed;
- that it was for students to choose and use the sections they felt to be helpful;
- that they could work with the EPOSTL on their own or with others if they wished;
- that by using the EPOSTL they would be able to evaluate and compare their practice in France and in England using a common set of competences. In addition, they knew that their observations and comments might be used to provide pointers to improve future collaborative planning of the bilateral programme.

## **5. Student teachers’ comments on the EPOSTL**

Based on the two sets of interviews the chapter describes the students’ experiences of using different sections in the EPOSTL during and after teaching, the English students in France and the French students in England.

### **5.1. What student teachers found useful**

One of the most frequent reactions to the EPOSTL was an appreciation of its clear, organised structure and its comprehensive coverage of what should be considered when preparing, conducting and evaluating lessons. Although the students acknowledged that it was up to them to devise classroom activities they felt that prompts offered by the descriptors provided clear guidance as to what they could or should include in a lesson.

The content of different sections encouraged them to think beyond what ‘immediately sprang to mind’; it helped them decide what to include in lessons, what learning to promote, what the pupils should be doing, and how they, as student teachers, could evaluate their professional progress.

The EPOSTL was seen by a majority of the students as having two functions: as a detailed training document and as a tool for self-assessment. Its function as pedagogical prompt – and even at times as an indicator of possible classroom activities – was frequently mentioned especially by the French group, who had had less experience of practical teaching.

The use of the EPOSTL to chart progress was appreciated by several respondents. French students, in particular, were quite clear that the Self-Assessment section was underpinned by clear pedagogic principles – albeit not expressed – and that if they reflected on these their practice might change. The English group appreciated its supportive tenor:



What I found really good about it – it’s always “I can ...”. It’s never “I can’t ...”. That’s very positive.

The student reactions showed no national divide. All commented on how useful the document was in enabling them, as student teachers, to express in clear and unambiguous statements what they felt they were able to do. They also realised that, as a result of using the EPOSTL, they had made progress and were able to be more explicit about the areas in which they had improved as well as aspects of their teaching and pupils’ learning that they needed to work on. The glossary was helpful in this respect, too. It enabled them to define terminology within the EPOSTL and also to use appropriate language in discussions with tutors and school mentors.

Some students referred to specific descriptors which encouraged them to reflect on and discuss particular issues. Two examples quoted were:

What can I do if a child does not participate? How can I make a child feel comfortable?  
In that respect, [the descriptor] helped me think [of what I would do].

(French student).

This student’s concerns about how to create a positive and encouraging atmosphere were identified as especially relevant for those who wanted to focus on learners’ oral participation.

I also found useful the bit *I can help learners to set personal targets and assess their own performance*.

(English student).

This student’s comment showed how the EPOSTL could prompt reflection on ways in which learners could be encouraged to decide for themselves how to improve their performance. The descriptor served as reminder for planning and for future practice.

The EPOSTL was considered by most student teachers in both countries to be constructive. Its value was to be found in the detail; it was not enough in the opinion of some to be told by their tutors or their mentors that they – or their practice – were either, in their words, ‘very good’ or ‘no good’. Such judgments were of little value to them because statements of this kind lacked specificity. The descriptors in the EPOSTL encouraged precise, focused, transparent and constructively diagnostic evaluations.

The document also allowed users to access a set of descriptors at an appropriate – and personal – stage in their practice or training because it is organised by theme. This structure helped them build systematically on what they felt they had already achieved. All students appreciated the use of arrows in the Self-Assessment section to log progress over time.

I had a go at [colouring in] all of them but was also thinking about my experience in France as well as my experience in England, so that was why I could do the written as

well as the reading – I could cover both. I was certainly bearing in mind that I had taught French in France and English in France – and other subjects in French.

(English student).

This student appreciated that the descriptors helped her to reflect on practice in both countries.

Parts of the EPOSTL were not completed by either group of students. These included the section Assessment (p. 51 ff.), and descriptors related to Projects and Portfolios (pp. 47-48). These omissions can be explained as either the result of the students' lack of experience or because they had had insufficient time to respond to all parts of the EPOSTL before the interviews took place.

## **5.2. Sections which students considered particularly significant**

The EPOSTL received very positive comments in general. Specific elements identified by each group offer insights into what the students perceived as most relevant at a midpoint in their respective training years.

Several French students commented that the scope of the EPOSTL was sometimes wider than that presented during their training course in the IUFM. They said, for example, that although self-assessment had been promoted during the course in France, the EPOSTL offered criteria which made the process easier and more structured.

The EPOSTL was considered to be a training tool which enabled students to plan realistic lessons for whole classes. The French students were primarily concerned, when they taught French as a foreign language, with developing learners' oral competence. This had been a main focus of much of their autumn term work in the IUFM but, because of the French training course structure, had not yet been put into practice in school. For most, the section in the EPOSTL which related to oral production provided a useful entry point into the document and was a timely support when they came to teach French in England. More generally, the freedom to choose and focus on one particular section was a very positive and encouraging aspect of the EPOSTL; to work on one section at a time boosted morale.

The English students also made positive comments about particular elements of the EPOSTL:

Particularly the Methodology bit I thought was a really good section – again it has to do with expectations – knowing [enough] to tick them off [as completed].

This comment reflects, perhaps, the classroom experience in two different schools which the English group had had by this stage in their training year. Not only had they gained more first-hand practical experience, but discussions with school mentors and tutors had explored speaking and spoken interaction as well as writing activities, listening and reading tasks, teaching grammar and developing cultural awareness.

Despite some reservations expressed about the wordiness of some of the descriptors, English student opinion mostly mirrored that of the French; both groups commented favourably on the clarity of the EPOSTL. This was in sharp contrast to official documents they were required to fill in and complete during the training year.

Certain sections were mentioned as especially relevant and helpful. These were seen as complementary to aspects of the faculty-based course in Cambridge.

I used it for the Speaking/Spoken Interaction section ... I found that useful, for just going through [and deciding] if I could “create a supportive atmosphere” ... what do I do with the children so that they could feel comfortable with speaking ... and there were things we have learned or talked about ... it was quite useful to remind myself of what we’d been doing [in seminars].

The sections on speaking in particular *I can encourage the children to ...* that really helped me reflect on what I’m doing and think back to lessons we did.

The interviews provided considerable evidence that both groups used the EPOSTL not just for self-assessment but as a prompt for planning lessons. It frequently served as a trigger to incorporate a range of teaching strategies and learning activities. Different sections prompted reflection at a particular moment or at a specific stage of their classroom practice. Sections mentioned related to:

- learner autonomy;
- informal assessment;
- conducting lessons in the target language;
- peer and self-assessment.

### **5.3. Using the EPOSTL for facilitating dialogue**

The use of the EPOSTL as a focus for joint discussions involving school mentors, student teachers and university tutors working together was viewed positively. The French considered that the document was a neutral and comprehensive guide to be used to compare a student’s self-assessment and a tutor’s assessment of lessons and classroom performance. It could also serve to pinpoint future training opportunities.

The English students already had the assessment of performance criteria issued by the English Government, which mentors, university tutors and they used as a nationally imposed, statutory teacher education course requirement. For them the function of the EPOSTL was mainly to prompt reflection which they could, if they chose, share with others. The purpose of the EPOSTL was, for them, certainly not to be, as the Users’ Guide confirms, either to provide ‘a prescriptive list’ or ‘as comprising a fixed qualification profile’ (p. 85).

Two English students saw the potential in using the EPOSTL with their mentor, in one case to identify gaps in the range of training and teaching experiences planned for them

and, in a second, to help them work with a mentor who, although an experienced generalist primary schoolteacher, had only recently started teaching a modern foreign language.

## **5.4. Suggestions for improvements**

Limitations and a few parts found not to be particularly relevant were identified by some of the students. This was to be expected either because some sections were less appropriate for them as primary school student teachers or because their experience at this stage of the course was still not extensive. Overall, there was little consistency of comment. Considering the large number of descriptors coloured in after nearly four months, these comments should be seen in the context of the few problems identified by either group.

The descriptors in the EPOSTL were, in the opinion of the French group – who used the English version of the document – clearly expressed and unproblematic, partly perhaps because they mainly chose categories of descriptors which related to their immediate concerns and experience. The English had several comments to make:

I actually found it quite difficult in some cases to distinguish between one descriptor and another on the same page – the differences were quite subtle – and that's one of the reasons I found it heavy going.

Page 16, Aims and Needs, and page 19, Institutional Resources and Constraints – I didn't really look at these at all ... I didn't find them useful.

In the interviews several English students said that parts of the document needed explanation and illustration for meaning to be clearer and unambiguous, and that its value as a tool for reflection needed to be dialogic. These reactions, however, must be set in a context where there were limited possibilities for discussion in either the university or in school.

## **5.5. Introducing the EPOSTL: student recommendations**

Although the authors of the EPOSTL intended the Personal Statement to be used to introduce the EPOSTL and to help students to 'think about questions which may be important at the beginning of [their] teacher education' (p. 9), the Personal Statement was not referred to in the bilateral programme. In both courses, similar and detailed discussions had already taken place at the start of the training year in September and tutors did not want to repeat what had already been said. However, although students focused on other ways to introduce the EPOSTL, elements of the Personal Statement were echoed in what they suggested.

As far as the Self-Assessment section was concerned, student advice was varied. There were some who advocated reading the document through in September, at the beginning of the training year, and others who felt that this would be off-putting. The

advantages cited for reading the EPOSTL as a whole at the start of the course were that readers would gain an overview of what was involved in becoming a modern language teacher. This would help users identify aspects of teaching a modern language which they may not have considered. The disadvantage of this approach, in the opinion of others, might be that the list of competences and descriptors could appear daunting and some of the content might seem abstract.

When asked how to introduce and use the EPOSTL, this English student echoed the opinion of some of the French:

Don't try to do it all in one go! ... set yourself a goal of one section per week or something ... because I was certainly rushing it, and not thinking about it as much by the time I got to the end.

The most enthusiastically expressed advice on how to introduce the EPOSTL was for university tutors to select the Self-Assessment section and use it as a prompt for seminar discussion and debate. The topics thought to be most helpful and practical as an introduction to the document were Lesson Planning and Conducting a Lesson (pp. 33-43). Here the focus is on classroom practice and demonstrates how a range of issues and practices within a training programme can be based on specific 'can-do' statements. This constructive and practical strategy would, they believed, relate to students' most immediate concerns of 'how to cope in school'.

## **5.6. Using the EPOSTL: summary**

All the students said they would recommend the EPOSTL to future student teachers, to tutors and to mentors in school. Three of the French students would do so because the EPOSTL had helped them analyse their own knowledge and classroom performance. Others appreciated its value in defining exactly what was involved in self-assessment – a process they said they did not fully understand, despite the fact that self-assessment had been encouraged during their training year. The detailed structure of the EPOSTL was also seen as a means of evaluating the training course.

Other reasons for recommendation were that the EPOSTL could be adapted as a model for learners in school, that it was a means of defining good practice, and that it could promote an understanding of what is involved in teaching a modern language.

## **6. Conclusion**

Working with groups of student teachers from two European countries provided a unique opportunity to evaluate the use of the EPOSTL in several settings. The bilateral programme in which each group was engaged allowed comparisons to be made, showing sometimes similar and sometimes different uses of the document within a

similar time span. Although reactions differed there was a commonality of opinion; from the students' responses it is clear that the EPOSTL can be used constructively and imaginatively in a variety of contexts, within and outside those experienced in this particular programme. From a tutor's perspective, what was developed by its authors as a self-assessment tool for secondary school student-teachers clearly has other potential and valuable uses: in this specific context, as a framework for planning, implementing and evaluating a bilateral primary school teacher-training programme but also more widely as a dialogic tool in a range of teacher-education models.

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## **Strategies for implementing the EPOSTL in teacher education**

As with many innovative measures, implementing the EPOSTL at an institutional or national level requires certain strategic measures to facilitate its acceptance.

### **Getting started**

1. Familiarise yourself with the content and rationale of the EPOSTL.
2. Identify what is relevant for your course or courses.
3. Integrate the EPOSTL into your existing courses or programmes.
4. Consider possible ways of introducing the EPOSTL to your students.
5. Discuss and illustrate how it can enhance their didactic competences.
6. Raise students' awareness of the EPOSTL's use as an international self-assessment tool in teacher education.
7. Explore different ways of using the EPOSTL.
8. Collect students' feedback.

### **Interacting with other teacher educators within your institution**

1. Share experiences of using the EPOSTL with colleagues.
2. Involve teacher educators of all languages.
3. Give presentations on how you use the EPOSTL.
4. Explore benefits of the use of the EPOSTL.
5. Discuss different options for using the EPOSTL – methodology/didactic course, teaching practice, mobility programmes, course assignments, etc.

## **Actions**

1. Work out a coherent approach to the EPOSTL with your colleagues – for example, which descriptors might be the focus of which course.
2. Agree with colleagues a concrete action plan for using the EPOSTL – aims, content, timescale, etc.
3. Involve schools/mentors.

## **Between institutions: networking**

1. Organise seminars, workshops and conferences, etc. for teacher educators, mentors in schools and other interested parties.

## **Top-down support**

1. Inform stakeholders (ministry of education, language teaching associations, heads of institutes, etc.) by means of meetings, conference reports, presentations, articles, etc.
2. Seek support to organise national networks.

The EPOSTL can be used more effectively and with greater sustainability if it is not only used individually in a specific teacher education course but by all language teacher educators and mentors within and between institutions. This ensures greater coherence in teacher education programmes and promotes collaboration amongst teacher educators, mentors and student teachers.

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# Using the European Portfolio for Student Teachers of Languages

Edited by David Newby, Anne-Brit Fenner and Barry Jones

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The *European Portfolio for Student Teachers of Languages* is a tool for reflection and self-assessment of the didactic knowledge and skills necessary to teach languages. It builds on insights from the *Common European Framework of Reference for Languages* and the *European Language Portfolio* as well as the *European Profile for Language Teacher Education*. Four years after its initial publication it has been translated into twelve European and Asian languages. To meet widespread demand this ECML publication provides materials which support its implementation in teacher education.

The book entitled *Using the European Portfolio for Student Teachers of Languages* presents examples, discussions and research findings of how the EPOSTL is used in initial teacher education courses, in bi-lateral teacher-education programmes and in teaching practice. The accompanying folder and flyer feature, among others, guidelines for strategic measures for introducing the EPOSTL in a particular institution or in a country.

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ISBN 978-92-871-7162-7