



Seitova, M. (2017). The European Portfolio for Student Teachers of Languages (EPOSTL) promotes professional development: ELT in-service teachers' views. *International Online Journal of Education and Teaching (IOJET)*, 4(4), 541-550. <http://iojet.org/index.php/IOJET/article/view/241/189>

Received: 19.07.2017
Received in revised form: 14.09.2017
Accepted: 17.09.2017

THE EUROPEAN PORTFOLIO FOR STUDENT TEACHERS OF LANGUAGES (EPOSTL) PROMOTES PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT: ELT IN-SERVICE TEACHERS' VIEWS

Meruyert Seitova 

Hacettepe University

seitovameruyert@gmail.com

Meruyert Seitova is a PhD student at Hacettepe University, ELT department in Ankara, Turkey. Her research interests are pre-service and in-service language teacher education.

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Meruyert Seitova

seitovameruyert@gmail.com

Abstract

In both pre-service and in-service teacher development, portfolios are used for a variety of purposes ranging from teacher education to development, stimulators for reflection and tools to plan and monitor competency and personal development. The European Portfolio for Student Teachers of Languages (EPOSTL) provides a tool for reflection and self-assessment for student teachers during their initial teacher education. It also assists curriculum development and course planning. Thus, this study tried to investigate the ELT in-service teachers' views on the use of the EPOSTL to promote professional development at Akhmet Yassawi International Kazakh-Turkish University, in Kazakhstan. Upon the implementation of the EPOSTL in the ELT department, seven in-service teachers of English were interviewed through the questions prepared. The data gathered from interviews were analyzed through thematic analysis. The findings indicated that teachers found the use of the EPOSTL beneficial in terms of self-assessment and self-reflection. According to the findings, it is suggested that EPOSTL is not only useful for pre-service teachers but it is also very effective for in-service teachers.

Keywords: portfolio, EPOSTL (European portfolio for student teachers of languages), in-service teachers, professional development, self-assessment, self-reflection

1. Introduction

Recent changes in education policy which emphasize greater teacher improvement in designing curriculum and assessing students have also been an impetus to increased portfolio use. Portfolios are useful as a support to the new instructional approaches that emphasize the student's role in curricular areas. Portfolios provide such a reflective experience to student teachers to reflect regularly on their strengths and weaknesses as they progress through their teacher education. Teacher educators have reported that the process of developing portfolios can help student teachers understand the complexities of teaching better, make connections between classroom learning and teaching experiences, and become reflective practitioners (Loughran & Corrigan, 1995; Winsor & Ellefson, 1995).

There is a reasonable connection between effective teaching and student achievement (Hornig & Loeb, 2010). Thus, in order to facilitate effective teaching, the relationship between learning and teaching has to be comprehended completely. It is important that teachers have an understanding of how students learn and, what practices are the most effective. Thus, teachers as active participants in the language development process should be placed at the center of

attention. As a result of increasing focus on maximization of effective teaching, teachers' professional development has drawn significant consideration and has been referred in literature (Richards & Farell,2005).

2. The European Portfolio for Student Teachers of English (EPOSTL)

Professional development refers to the development of a person in his or her professional development. Namely, "teacher development is the professional growth a teacher achieves as a result of a gaining increased experience and examining his, or her teaching systematically" (Glatthorn,1995, p. 41). There is not a certain form or model of professional development. Professional development may look and be very different in diverse settings and even within a single setting, it can have a variety of dimensions. Thus, "The European Portfolio for Student Teachers of English (EPOSTL)" is an instrument to promote professional growth through reflection and dialogue. The main aim of the EPOSTL is to provide a tool for reflection and self-assessment for student teachers during their initial teacher education. It should further assist curriculum development and course planning and should also be used as an awareness-raising instrument for in-service teacher education. The EPOSTL as such ought to be integrated into existing course structure and, if possible, be used throughout the teacher education programme.

The EPOSTL consists of the following seven sections that will be presented briefly:

1. Introduction
2. Personal statement
3. Self-assessment
4. Dossier
5. Glossary
6. Index
7. User's guide

The Introduction is an initiatory section informing student teachers about the objectives, content and usage of EPOSTL (Newby et al., 2007). Within the Personal Statement section there are various tasks aspiring to elicit student teachers' universal viewpoints on general teaching issues at the initial stages of their education. The self-assessment section is the core of the EPOSTL. The EPOSTL has 195 *can-do* descriptors referring to the key didactic competences a teacher should have to attain. Along with it, the EPOSTL is intended to be seen as a kind of checklist to be ticked off by student teachers. It should also be used as an instrument that helps student teachers to *reflect* on their *knowledge, skills* and *values*. It therefore recognizes the differences and backgrounds of individual student teachers. The descriptors should be used as springboards for discussions among student teachers, and between student teachers and their teacher educators and mentors. Thus particular attention is given to the role of the EPOSTL in collaborative activities. The descriptors are seen as a guideline, they can be adapted and others can be added or deleted.

3. Recent studies on the "The European Portfolio for Student Teachers of English (EPOSTL)"

Many scholars have been studying the EPOSTL in various contexts. For example, Mehlmauer-Larcher (2009) describes the EPOSTL implementation at the University of Vienna. Specifically, the EPOSTL was implemented in the early phases of pre-service ELT teacher

education. Orlova (2011) gives an account of introducing the EPOSTL in pre-service teacher education programs in the Czech Republic. According to this account, the tool has been used since 2008, and as a result of initial feedback provided by the students, a six-stage procedure has been suggested to make its implementation as effective as possible. These stages include: 1) introducing the EPOSTL to student teachers and setting the tasks in the Personal Statement, 2) selecting the sections for self-assessment, 3) integrating the ‘can-do’ descriptors into the course, 4) employing ‘can-do’ descriptors for micro-teaching tasks, 5) encouraging students to work with the EPOSTL during their school practicum, and 6) surveying students’ opinions of the EPOSTL (Orlova 2011:20). Orlova (2011, p. 28) concludes that in order to make the most efficient use of EPOSTL, it should be integrated in all components of teacher training courses (i.e. seminars, lectures, the practicum, etc) and should be used on systematic and continuous basis.

Fenner (2011) provides a description of a one-year pilot implementation of the EPOSTL in a post-graduate program at University of Bergen in Norway. The implementation took place in 2009 and it involved three kinds of contexts: lectures (on methodology), seminars, and the practicum at schools. The main aim of using EPOSTL was to stimulate reflections about the developing knowledge and skills of the trainees. The pilot course was followed by questionnaires addressed at the students and their mentors. As was revealed by the questionnaire findings, the EPOSTL helped the students to see a link between the theory and practice of teaching, to define their expectations of teaching, to reflect upon the aims and objectives of the lessons they planned, and on their own teaching. Fenner (2001, p. 44) concludes that the EPOSTL turned out to be a tool which facilitated the process of guiding the trainees through different stages of their training, and not only for the students themselves, but also for the mentors and trainers at the university. Ingvarsdóttir (2011) casts a light on a pilot project of using the EPOSTL in the Department of Education at the University of Iceland, in which a significant focus was on strengthening the links between the University and partnership schools in the process of offering teacher training. The EPOSTL was treated as a platform for transforming the traditional model of training into a collaborative learning environment, in which all parties involved (trainees, trainers at the university and mentors at schools) would constitute a community of learning. The process of implementing was not very positive. However, with changes introduced in the way the students and the mentors were involved in the process, in the third year of the pilot implementation, the EPOSTL “brought the partnership schools”, and was supposed to become an integral part of teacher training courses (Ingvarsdóttir, 2011, p. 70).

Mirici (2014-2016) coordinated the project “EFUESTE-Effective Use of the EPOSTL by Student Teachers of English” in Turkey. The project has been funded with support from the European Commission. This project aims to gather English language teacher training academics and student teachers from different European contexts and to provide them with a common basis for sharing ideas and experiences about how to design effective EPOSTL supported implementations in their system.

Jimbo et al. (2010) conducted the research projects to contextualize and adapt self-assessment descriptors of the EPOSTL in the Japanese educational context. In 2010, 100 descriptors of J-POSTL (Japanese Portfolio for Student Teachers of Languages) for pre-service teacher education

were elaborated by adopting, modifying, or combining 113 out of 195 descriptors of the original EPOSTL. After that, they have been piloted for three years, providing useful data for analysis and further steps in refining the descriptors. The remaining 82 EPOSTL descriptors have been unexplored but regarded as the base on which J-POSTL for in-service teachers should be built.

Theoretical-analytical papers discuss the EPOSTL from different viewpoints. For instance, Newby (2012) draws on the experiences of users of the EPOSTL, both teacher educators and students, illustrates what ‘good practice’ might mean and indicates seven ways in which the EPOSTL can play this supportive role.

There are also many research papers, in which the EPOSTL plays substantial role. In 2009, Ogeyik evaluated the attitudes of student teachers towards microteaching experiences within the curriculum based on the EPOSTL. Using a Likert type scale, the findings revealed that the ELT students at Trakya University in Turkey in general held positive attitudes towards microteaching applications with regard to its effectiveness for professional development, self-assessment, self-confidence, material production, and teaching experiences in various courses in which students are of different ages and linguistic levels. The study of Strakova (2010) compares the experience of Slovak pre-service students who piloted the portfolio during their two-week teaching practice and students who worked with this document in the wider context. The data gained in the form of questionnaire as well as a focus group discussion support the author’s hypothesis about the space needed to benefit from the document. In 2012, Cakir and Balcikanli examined the use of the EPOSTL to foster teacher autonomy in Turkey. Using the method of interview, the findings in his pilot study indicated that both student teachers and teacher trainers found the use of the EPOSTL beneficial in terms of reflection, self-assessment and awareness. Mirici & Demirbas (2013), investigate the procedure for the transfer of the EPOSTL into the E-EPOSTL and define the transformation through some visual e-materials. Mirici & Hergüner (2015) discuss and put forward some practical suggestions on the functions and the effectiveness of the EPOSTL in English Language Teaching (ELT) and German Language Teaching (GLT) departments in a state university in Turkey.

4. The study

4.1. The aim of the study

This study aims to find out how “The European Portfolio for Student Teachers of English (EPOSTL)” promotes professional development of in-service teachers of English. Research questions of the study are:

1. How does the EPOSTL promote professional development?
2. How do in-service teachers perceive their experience with the EPOSTL?

4.2. Methodology

The study adopted a qualitative research methodology. The most suitable instrument for data collection seemed to be an interview as it is a tool that can obtain reliable and valid measures in the form of verbal responses from one or more respondents. Cannel and Kahn (1968) state that an interview is “two-person conversation, initiated by the interviewer for the specific purpose of

obtaining research-relevant information, and focused by him on contents specified by research objectives of systematic description, prediction, or explanation”.

4.2.1. Setting

The study was conducted in the English Language Teaching department at Faculty of Philology, International Kazakh-Turkish University, Kazakhstan. The study programmes are designed according to the two-tier system comprising Bachelor’s Degree and a Master’s Degree (primarily in teaching). Students who have completed the Bachelor’s level study programme can continue their education by taking two-year Master’s level study programme. After finishing this programme, they are fully qualified to teach English as a foreign language in educational institutions at all levels.

4.2.2. Participants

The study included seven participants. All of them were in-service teachers of the English Language Teaching department at the International Kazakh-Turkish University, Kazakhstan. All the participants were female.

4.2.3. Implementation of the EPOSTL

7 in-service teachers of the department participated in the research. The EPOSTL was used in the academic years of 2016-2017.

The EPOSTL is implemented as follows:

- At the beginning, in-service teachers get familiar with the structure of the EPOSTL.
- Before using the EPOSTL, in-service teachers did the self-assessment part of the EPOSTL to see their strengths and weaknesses.
- While using it, in-service teachers take detailed notes which account for the activities observed in class, such as the four skills, grammar, error treatment, interaction patterns, etc.
- While observing peers’ lessons, they are encouraged to provide both oral and written feedback about the lesson structure, communication with learners, time management and materials. Both success and failure of the lesson were defined.
- While holding lessons, they are encouraged to evaluate the development of their own teaching skills by reflecting on the descriptors from the self-assessment section.
- Then, in-service teachers are encouraged to reflect once again on their teaching skills in terms of the EPOSTL self-assessment descriptors to see whether they made progress.
- Finally, the in-service teachers were interviewed.

4.2.4. Data collection

The data of the research were collected by an interview. The interview consisted of four questions which lasted for 5-10 minutes with each respondent. The first question is aimed at finding the in service teachers’ attitudes towards the concept of the EPOSTL in teacher education. The second and third questions addressed the questions of respondents’ strengths and weaknesses in terms of the EPOSTL self-assessment descriptors. And the last question focused on how the use of the EPOSTL contributes to the professional development.

4.2.5. Data analysis

The thematic analysis was conducted to analyze the data obtained via interview. The thematic analysis is used in qualitative research and focuses on examining themes within data. The ultimate purpose of conducting qualitative research is to recognize how the existence of themes and organization of data are connected with a particular topic or the development of a line reasoning. Thematic analysis therefore shapes, adjusts or reforms these objectives (Holliday, 2007).

5. Findings and discussions

The interview conducted to 7 in-service teachers had 4 open-ended questions. As to the results of the analysis of these open-ended questions, 5 themes were obtained. The themes are generally related to the use of the EPOSTL. The themes are explained below with some extracts from the interview. The number of the respondents in the presentation was given (from respondent 1 to respondent 7).

Theme 1: The EPOSTL is very useful as a self-assessment tool in teacher education.

The findings of the analysis of the interview show that all respondents think that the EPOSTL is very necessary in teacher education. They indicate that the portfolio helps them to monitor the development of their teaching skills and identify their strengths and weaknesses in TEFL, which leads to the improvement of teaching competences.

In my opinion the EPOSTL is very useful as a self-assessment tool in teacher education. It helps us to identify the areas we should develop ourselves. We can focus more on our weaknesses since the EPOSTL displays our strong and weak competences we have the chance and time to work on. Also we can do it autonomously without anybody's help. (respondent 1)

It is a good guideline for teachers in training. We can find our weak competences and work on them to improve them. It is a mirror that reflects our strengths and weaknesses. (respondent 5)

The usefulness of the EPOSTL is seen in various aspects such as assessment, awareness and teaching. The respondents claim that it was useful as it helped them with teaching.

Theme 2: In-service teachers' strengths in terms of the EPOSTL.

The findings of the interview consider that the respondents are good at grammar and speaking skills.

Well, I find myself well in teaching grammar because rules make teachers feel safe. When a student comes up and asks a grammar question, there is a certain answer to give. Moreover, after you teach grammar, it is easy to see if the students grasped it or not so as a teacher I can see the results of my teaching. (respondent 3)

I feel myself confident in teaching speaking and interacting with students. Since I directly see the output and efficacy of my teaching. I can also teach them in different ways. I do not feel myself incompetent in other areas but I prefer speaking to them. (respondent 2)

The respondents state that the identification of their strengths in terms of the EPOSTL wake their self-confidence in teaching.

Theme 3: In-service teachers' weaknesses in terms of the EPOSTL.

The analysis of the interview indicates that the majority of the respondents have difficulties with writing and reading skills.

I think I need more development in teaching writing. Writing needs more expertise and time. I have not focused on writing as closely as I have focused on listening. (respondent 2)

I can create new things, new materials, and even activities in speaking, pronunciation and listening. But when it comes to reading and writing all my ideas go away. (respondent 4)

The results show that the respondents have different weaknesses in different domains of teaching. It is normal to have some drawbacks in these or other aspects even for in-service teachers. Being a teacher is a life-long process. The main point here is giving effort to realize and eliminate those lacks, which is vital in reflective teaching.

Theme 4: The EPOSTL promotes professional development.

The findings show that the majority of teachers agree that the EPOSTL promotes professional development, since it helps in monitoring the development of their didactic knowledge, teaching competences and skills. Its comprehensive and clear structure is found to be the main benefit of the portfolio.

For sure, I can say that it contributed to my professional development about teaching with activities, materials, etc. While using the EPOSTL, I realized some important points which I had to improve and also I had chance to distinguish pros and cons after experiencing EPOSTL. It is very effective in the way that by doing the self-assessment part of the portfolio, I can see my weak points and improve them. (respondent 7)

The EPOSTL promotes professional development because it reflects main points of the teaching and learning strategies. It helped me to express my own way of teaching better than before using the EPOSTL. It is very practical because the main criteria and tasks of a teacher are given in one portfolio, and by completing the self-assessment charts, you can develop yourself the day by day. (respondent 3)

It is also stated that the professional development is an ongoing and continuous process and the EPOSTL can be a guidebook for pre-service and in-service teachers.

Theme 5: Suggestions to the use of the EPOSTL.

The findings show that the participants believe that the including of the EPOSTL in university course is appropriate for suggestion.

It would be good if this portfolio can be placed in some courses at the university with the aim of educating language teachers about learning strategies in a detailed way. (respondent 6)

It was a great experience for me and I was lucky to participate in the study. But, I can honestly say it would be better for the other ELT teachers and student teachers to benefit from it by being a part of this process. (respondent 5)

The results suggest that the EPOSTL should be more common.

6. Conclusion and Implications

The present study has provided data on the efficacy of the EPOSTL as an instrument for promoting professional development of in-service teachers. It targets on the views in-service teachers have regarding the EPOSTL advances the development of their competences and what benefits and difficulties they have while using it.

The results show that the EPOSTL helps teaching student teachers to relate experiences to theoretical principles, thus narrowing the gap between theoretical knowledge and teaching practice, as has been found in some studies previously mentioned in the paper (Burkert & Schwienhorst, 2008; Fenner, 2011; Ingvarsdóttir, 2011). Another point of the EPOSTL is that it serves as a model of constructive feedback and fosters peer-to-peer discussion. It also guides users to develop realization of their strengths and weaknesses related to language teaching.

However, the findings indicate that this employs only to some in-service teachers and areas of language teaching competences because of the lack of the capability to analyze all of the parts suggested by the EPOSTL in a semester. Therefore, it would be effective for the Methodology lecturer to point on the EPOSTL aspects such as interaction with learners, classroom management and learner autonomy. In order to achieve this, it would be good to include the EPOSTL into Methodology courses and use the six-stage implementation proposed by Orlova (2011). The six-stage implementation of the EPOSTL can be achieved as follows:

1. At the beginning of the Methodology course, the aims and format of the EPOSTL should be introduced to student-teachers;
2. After general overview of the EPOSTL, student teachers should be familiar with the skills needed for teaching. This could be done by discussing the categories diagram, presented in the EPOSTL on page 6 (Newby et al., 2007);
3. After being acquainted with the descriptors, the Methodology lecturer should check and clarify understanding of the descriptors;
4. Employing 'can-do' descriptors for micro-teaching tasks;
5. Encouraging students to work with the EPOSTL during their school practicum;
6. Surveying students' opinions of the EPOSTL (Orlova, 2011, p.20).

This six-stage implementation of the EPOSTL in teacher education would be very useful in terms of competitive teacher preparation. As the result of the research, it shows that the in-service teachers had some drawbacks while completing self-assessment descriptors. Also, the participants claim that if they were taught about the EPOSTL during their Bachelor's or Master's study programs it would be very helpful in their teaching life. Along with it, it is said that the EPOSTL promotes professional development, by completing the self-assessment section the user can reflect his or her success and failure and can develop it autonomously.

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