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# How an ECML publication can make a difference – case study on the European Portfolio for Student Teachers of Languages

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## Introduction

EPOSTL<sup>1</sup> (PEPELF in French, EPOSA in German) was developed in response to a request in 2003 from the Governing Board that the ECML undertake projects to contribute to improving the quality of the training of language teachers in Europe. The authors David Newby (Austria), Rebecca Allan (UK), Anne-Brit Fenner (Norway), Barry Jones (UK), Hanna Komorowska (Poland) and Kristine Soghikyan (Armenia) produced, first, an overview of the competences required by language teachers, and a comprehensive set of « can do » statements of didactic competences, to be used as a basis for teacher reflection and self-assessment. These were integrated into a European Portfolio for Student Teachers of Languages.

It was thought that a portfolio would be an ideal tool for professional development. The main reason for this was that combining descriptors of competences with a personal document for recording progress and encouraging self-reflection reproduces the approach used in the Common European Framework of Reference (CEFR) and the European Language Portfolio (ELP). These have been the most influential factors in enhancing standards of language teaching in Europe.

The Portfolio was 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
- a self-assessment section
- a dossier
- a glossary of the most important terms used in the EPOSTL
- a users' guide

The relevance and value of EPOSTL was widely recognised. At the initiative of different countries more than 10 translations into other languages were authorised by the Council of Europe.

Following the EPOSTL publication in 2007 studies on the use and dissemination of the EPOSTL were carried out in the context of an ECML follow-up project from 2008-2011. As a result the booklet *Using the European Portfolio for Student Teachers of Languages*<sup>2</sup> with an explanation of the theoretical background to the portfolio and with contributions from 8 different countries on how it has been integrated into teacher education programmes was published by the ECML.

During the same period two further publications have been produced. One is an account of different implementations of the EPOSTL in teacher education programmes, and the second one is a book, *Insights into the European Portfolio for Student Teachers of Languages*<sup>3</sup>, which explores the theoretical background to the work. This publication links EPOSTL to approaches to learning theory, to methodology, to inter-cultural communication, to autonomy and self-assessment, as well as giving accounts of different ways in which the EPOSTL is being used. It also describes how EPOSTL is connected closely to the principles of the CEFR and other European initiatives.

The wide range of documented contexts in which EPOSTL is being used is a good indicator of the impact it has generated.

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<sup>1</sup> Newby, D., Allan, R., Fenner, A.-B., Jones, B., Komorowska, H. and Soghikyan, K. (2007). *European Portfolio for Student Teachers of Languages. A Reflection Tool for Language Teacher Education*. Strasbourg/Graz: Council of Europe Publishing, <http://epostl2.ecml.at>.

<sup>2</sup> Fenner A-B., Jones, B, Newby, D. *Using the European Portfolio for Student Teachers of Languages (EPOSTL)* Council of Europe Publishing 2012. <http://epostl2.ecml.at>.

<sup>3</sup> 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.

## The Impact of the publication

To judge the impact of a project we need to consider:

- its dissemination – how widely and in what depth it is known
- how it is being used – is it still at the stage of innovation, or is it already institutionalised as part of normal practice?
- its flexibility – can it be adapted to meet local specificities? does it generate new innovations ?
- its effectiveness – has it led to tangible improvements in the field?

## Dissemination

### Translations

EPOSTL is now available on the ECML website in 12 different versions: English, French, German, Hungarian, Spanish, Polish, Italian, Lithuanian, Greek, Croatian, Russian, Arabic. Also, an adaptation of the publication in Japanese has been recorded. All the translated versions except the English, French and German ones of the project were undertaken at the request of the countries concerned, which is a measure of the way in which it is seen as a tool to be integrated into the teacher education systems of the countries concerned. It is especially interesting that its influence has extended beyond Europe in Arabic and Japanese contexts.

### Presence on the Internet

The EPOSTL is the publication which is the most frequently downloaded from the ECML website. A web search shows the extent of its impact, with links to seminars and presentations of the project in many European countries, in Turkey, in Japan, in the United States, in North and South Africa. The breadth of its applications illustrates how far it is a generative and flexible instrument. A small sample of training courses and articles posted on the web would include its implementation as a tool for developing teacher autonomy (Germany), as a yardstick for measuring how ICT can be used to innovate in teacher education (Spain), as an example of good reflective practice (UK), in a study of the attitudes of teachers in training towards microteaching (Turkey). It is also mentioned as a tool for self-assessment in language learning (France), as « potential springboard for a paradigm shift of English language teacher education » (Japan), and as an example of how synergy between projects of the European Union and the Council of Europe can be achieved (Czech Republic). The Institute Cervantes announces courses on the EPOSTL in New York, and a number of graduate students have posted questionnaire on its use, as part of their research studies.

### Articles published and presentations

The widespread interest that has been generated by the EPOSTL is evident in the large number of articles in which it is either the main topic or is mentioned. These are too numerous to list in detail, but some sample titles will indicate the Europe wide and worldwide influence it is having.

- EPOSTL as a Stimulus for Reflective Teaching (Orlova, the Czech Republic)<sup>4</sup>
- Self-Assessment of Professional Activity of Student Teachers of Languages. (Latkovska, Rutka, Latvia)<sup>5</sup>
- EPOSTL as an innovative tool in language teacher education.(Urbaniak, Poland)<sup>6</sup>Rénovation de l'enseignement-apprentissage des langues étrangères au Vietnam –l'apport des outils du Conseil l'Europe. *Renovation of teaching-learning of foreign languages in Vietnam – the contribution of the Council of Europe's instruments* (Normand- Marconnet, France / Vietnam)<sup>7</sup>
- A Comprehensive Study on the Framework of English Language Teachers' Professional Development in Japan (Jimbo et al. Japan)<sup>8</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> Orlova, N. (2012). EPOSTL as a Stimulus for Reflective Teaching. In Haase, C. (Ed.). *English for Academic Purposes: Practical and theoretical approaches*. Göttingen: Cuvillier. (accepted for publication)

<sup>5</sup> Latkovska, E., Rutka, L. (2010) *Self-Assessment of Professional Activity of Student Teachers of Languages*. The ATEE Spring University: Changing Education in Changing Society, 61.-68.lpp., Lithuania: Klaipeda University (ISSN 1822-2196)

<sup>6</sup> M. Urbaniak. 2010. EPOSTL as an innovative tool in language teacher education. *Anglica Wratislaviensa*, 46, 183-192.

<sup>7</sup> *Rénovation de l'enseignement-apprentissage des langues étrangères au Vietnam: quels apports et quelle contextualisation pour le CECR et ses dérivés (PEL, PEPELF) dans ce contexte spécifique ?* <http://tainguyenso.vnu.edu.vn/jspui/handle/123456789/7625>

<sup>8</sup> A Comprehensive Study on the Framework of English Language Teachers' Professional Development in Japan

- Using the EPOSTL within a bi-lateral Primary Modern Languages Teacher Training Programme (Jones UK)<sup>9</sup>

It has equally been presented in Conferences and training events worldwide, as a central topic in the Semlang (Université d'été Semlang, CIEP, Sèvres 2009) and Forlang (ForLang 2011 - A European approach to language teacher training, CIEP Sèvres 2011) and in Forlang at the [Università per Stranieri di Siena](#) as a workshop topic at the Sixth International Conference on Language Teacher Education in Washington in 2009 and at countless other regional and local events across Europe and beyond. It has been the subject of a number of doctoral theses and will be mentioned as a matter of course in Master's memoirs on teacher education. Hanna Komorowska comments that in Poland « EPOSTL categories are so popular now that many directors of studies or mentors would not know they are using EPOSTL categories, perhaps would not even quote EPOSTL thinking that these are basic categories everybody interested in FLT methodology should know. »

## How the EPOSTL is being used

### Applications in initial teacher training

The main applications of the EPOSTL are – as it was intended to – in pre-service courses for the training of language teachers. The report<sup>10</sup> (Newby & Horak, 2011) on its use in Austrian universities gives a good overview of how flexibly it can be exploited. At the University of Graz it accompanies the whole of the teacher education course – as an introduction to teacher competences, as a springboard for reflection in the input on methodology, as a record for self-assessment of teaching performance in the teaching practice sessions. At the University of Vienna<sup>11</sup>, it is used to complement other approaches, as a tool to develop the autonomy of teachers in training and to stimulate reflection during peer teaching. In Salzburg<sup>12</sup> it is used to focus discussions on methodology and as a central feature of student teachers' self-assessment. In other settings the focus has been on the Dossier part of the Portfolio as a way of assembling reflective evidence of teaching practice and progress (Gothenburg); and the Personal Statement has been used in Finland to help students to achieve a fuller understanding of the process of reflection. In all the applications the detailed descriptions of competences and of how these are realised in learning teaching methodology is a practical enrichment of the content of the courses.

The range and flexibility of these uses has led to it being widely adopted in teacher education courses around Europe.

### Other uses of the EPOSTL

#### As a tool for mentors

One of the challenges of teacher education programmes is to ensure that teaching practice is effective and that teacher mentors in the schools are able to give constructive feedback to student teachers. The « can do » statements of the Portfolio provide a conceptual and practical framework which can focus the dialogue between mentor and the student and can incidentally provide professional development for teachers who have not been able to follow recent trends in teaching methodology and approaches. At the University of Bergen it was found that mentors who had been introduced to the EPOSTL and received training in using it with their trainees were more effective and seen as more

<sup>9</sup> Jones B. (2012) Using the EPOSTL within a bi-lateral Primary Modern Languages Teacher Training Programme in Newby D., ed (2012) *Insights into the European Portfolio for Student Teachers of Languages* Newcastle Cambridge Scholars Publishing

<sup>10</sup> Newby, D. and Horak, A. (eds) (2011). *Die Implementierung des Europäischen Portfolios für Sprachlehrende in Ausbildung (EPOSA) in der Lehrer/innenbildung in Österreich*. Graz: Österreichisches Sprachen-Kompetenz-Zentrum.

<sup>11</sup> Die Implementierung des EPOSA am Fach didaktischen Zentrum Englisch der Universität Wien (Barbara Mehlmauer-Larcher) in Newby, D. and Horak, A. (eds) (2011). *Die Implementierung des Europäischen Portfolios für Sprachlehrende in Ausbildung (EPOSA) in der Lehrer/innenbildung in Österreich*. Graz: Österreichisches Sprachen-Kompetenz-Zentrum.

<sup>12</sup> Erfahrungen mit EPOSA im Fachbereich Romanistik der Universität Salzburg (Michaela Rückl, Isolde Seeleitner) in Newby, D. and Horak, A. (eds) (2011). *Die Implementierung des Europäischen Portfolios für Sprachlehrende in Ausbildung (EPOSA) in der Lehrer/innenbildung in Österreich*. Graz: Österreichisches Sprachen-Kompetenz-Zentrum.

constructive by their trainees.

### **In in-service teacher development**

Although the EPOSTL is primarily designed for initial teacher training, it can also be used as a tool for the continuous professional development of teachers; in a summer university for practising teachers in San Sebastian different categories of competence were used as tools for, first self-assessment, then reflection on present practice and then as a guide to lesson preparation and micro-teaching. The self-assessment pages can be used either individually or in an institution as a tool for quality assessment and for gauging training and developmental needs.

### **As a tool for curriculum development in teacher education**

An incidental use of the EPOSTL has been as a tool for designing curricula for teacher education programmes. The overview and the description of the 195 competences provide checklists which can be used to decide on the comprehensiveness of the coverage of teachers' skills. David Newby reports that in its implementation at the University of Graz it has led to greater harmonisation of approaches to the training of teachers of different languages – sometimes there is little contact among the different language departments and EPOSTL is a "trans-language" instrument for doing this, covering the teaching of any language.

### **For evaluation of teachers in training**

The main intention of the EPOSTL is to be a positive tool for self-assessment rather than as a prescriptive instrument for assessment, where the risk is that the emphasis would be on « can't do » rather than « can do ». Nevertheless where mentors have to grade students on their teaching practice this would be more meaningful if based on coherent description of competences rather than on less systematic impressions or prejudices. David Newby comments on this proposal: « 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. »<sup>13</sup>

### **For policy-making and organisational development**

The existence of a comprehensive, standardised description of teacher competences makes it possible to use the EPOSTL in issues where harmonisation is required. A common reference shared by students, tutor and mentors helps enhance communication between students, schools and universities. The detailed performance criteria can improve collaboration between universities and partnership schools in developing common (self) assessment procedures and models for tutors, mentors and students. It has been used in international exchange programmes to compare progress of student teachers in different countries, and in planning teacher training programmes as a basis for detailed curriculum content and assessment procedures in pre- and in-service programmes.

### **Experiences of using the EPOSTL**

*« Getting to know the EPOSTL was really interesting! When I first skimmed through the EPOSTL I thought that there is so much that I still have to learn. Of course I still think that I have to learn a lot, but I realized that there is already a lot I CAN DO! I'm sure that it will be very interesting to go over the EPOSTL at the end of the year and see where I will have improved. »*<sup>14</sup>

This comment from an Austrian student is typical of the reactions of those who have used it. The Portfolio provides teachers in training with a coherent, comprehensive description of what their teacher training course is aiming at. It gives a framework for thinking about the different steps in learning to be a teacher, and a stimulus to positive, encouraging self-assessment of progress in doing this. It provides a common understandable language for dialogue with the different stakeholders in the training process – the universities and the practice schools – and among tutors, trainee teachers and mentors. Systematic questionnaires by different institutional users in many countries have indicated a generally overwhelmingly positive response to using it. There have been some questions on how to

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<sup>13</sup> In Fenner A-B., Jones, B, Newby, D. *Using the European Portfolio for Student Teachers of Languages (EPOSTL)* Council of Europe Publishing 2012. <http://epostl2.ecml.at>.

<sup>14</sup> Quoted in *Der Einsatz von EPOSA an der Pädagogischen Hochschule Steiermark* (Angela Horak) in Newby, D. and Horak, A. (eds) (2011). *Die Implementierung des Europäischen Portfolios für Sprachlehrende in Ausbildung (EPOSA) in der Lehrer/innenbildung in Österreich*. Graz: Österreichisches Sprachen-Kompetenz-Zentrum.

use it – for example, « how can we know whether we can do something when we haven't tried yet? » - but no fundamental objections.

Its practicality and usability have led to it being increasingly a feature, sometimes as a central part, sometimes as a complement to teacher education programmes across Europe and around the world.

### **Why is EPOSTL so successful?**

Frank Heyworth, ECML programme consultant documenting the impact of the EPOSTL publication, highlights a number of reasons for its success:

- It is based solidly within the policy and achievements of the Council of Europe in language education. The formulation of the can do statements reflects those that are already familiar to teachers and learners using the Common European Framework of Reference ; the three parts of EPOSTL – the personal statement, the self-assessment checklists, the dossier – have the same structure as the European Language Portfolios.
- It is based on coherent theories of learning and teaching. In the publication « Insights into the EPOSTL » there are descriptions of how its principles are linked to ideas of learner autonomy, to reflective practice, to social constructivist approaches to learning, to inter-cultural understanding.
- At the same time, it is closely based on practice. The descriptors are recognisably close to the practical methodological issues that teachers meet – how to introduce topics, establish a positive atmosphere, deal with a reading text, devise an appropriate test. And all of this is framed in clear understandable language.
- It is the result of a long-term commitment to the development of the project – 8 years of work in ECML projects, continued development generated by its usefulness, so that a body of experience, expertise and research has been built up around it.

It is in harmony with general developments in education, and brings language teaching more closely into the mainstream of education in the way in which the Council of Europe *Languages in Education* is directed. Heinz Gaderer<sup>15</sup> comments:

*Portfolio and self-assessment in schools and colleges will be the single most important contribution toward learner autonomy – portfolio and self-assessment in teacher education, and teachers becoming aware of the advantages and feeling comfortable with the new tools, will be the condition for ... (the development of learner autonomy in schools and colleges).*

The EPOSTL is a significant contribution to this.

### **References:**

Kelly, M. and Grenfell, M., *European Profile for Language Teacher Education – A Frame of Reference*, [www.lang.soton.ac.uk/profile/index.html](http://www.lang.soton.ac.uk/profile/index.html).

Fenner A-B., Jones, B., Newby, D. *Using the European Portfolio for Student Teachers of Languages (EPOSTL)* Council of Europe Publishing 2012. <http://epostl2.ecml.at>.

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.

Newby, D., Allan, R., Fenner, A.-B., Jones, B., Komorowska, H. and Soghikyan, K. (2007). *European Portfolio for Student Teachers of Languages. A Reflection Tool for Language Teacher Education*. Strasbourg/Graz: Council of Europe Publishing, <http://epostl2.ecml.at>.

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<sup>15</sup> EPOSTL – integraler Bestandteil von communication@work (Heinz Gaderer) in Newby, D. and Horak, A. (eds) (2011). *Die Implementierung des Europäischen Portfolios für Sprachlehrende in Ausbildung (EPOSA) in der Lehrer/innenbildung in Österreich*. Graz: Österreichisches Sprachen-Kompetenz-Zentrum.

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### **Note**

This study of the impact of the EPOSTL is based on the following evidence:

- The published documents – (see above for references)
- Discussions and e-mail correspondence with David Newby, the project coordinator, and the members of the project teams
- A questionnaire sent to the representatives responsible for disseminating the EPOSTL in the ECML member countries
- A search of the Internet