

The European Portfolio for Student Teachers of Languages

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Project aims

In the summer of 2004 a team of teacher educators was approached by the European Centre for Modern Languages to carry out a project which would focus on the content of teacher education with the overall goal of make a contribution to the 'harmonisation' of teacher education within Europe. Unlike other ECML projects, which are the result of proposals by experts from member states, the impulse for this project had come directly from the Governing Board of the ECML. The project team, consisting of David Newby (Austria), Rebecca Allan (UK), Anne-Brit Fenner (Norway), Barry Jones (UK), Hanna Komorowska (Poland), Kristine Soghikyan (Armenia) set itself three general tasks:

- to address the content of teacher education with a view to identifying 'core competences';
- to formulate corresponding didactic competence descriptors relating to language teaching;
- to embed these in a portfolio to help student teachers reflect on their knowledge, skills and values.

The implementation of these aims resulted in the compilation of the *European Portfolio for Student Teachers of Languages* (EPOSTL). Whilst the EPOSTL was in the development stage important contributions to its content were made by participants at two central workshops held at the ECML in Graz: the first was attended by student teachers; the second by teacher educators from member states. Their suggestions provided valuable input to the project and were incorporated in the final version of the EPOSTL, which was completed in December 2006.

EPOSTL in a European context

From the outset, the authors of the EPOSTL were very much aware that the intended portfolio did not constitute a *tabula rasa* but would be able to build on three notable contributions that had already been made to language learning and teaching in Europe. These were the *European Profile for Language Teacher Education: A Frame of Reference*, a project commissioned by the European Union and implemented by a project team from the University of Southampton and the two well-known tools developed by the Council of Europe, the *Common European Framework of Reference for Languages: Learning, Teaching, Assessment* and the *European Language Portfolio*.

The *European Profile* is a document intended primarily to facilitate curriculum design for teacher education institutions. It describes its content as follows:

The Profile presents a toolkit of 40 items which could be included in a teacher education programme to equip language teachers with the necessary skills and knowledge, as well as other professional competencies, to enhance their professional development and to lead to greater transparency and portability of qualifications.

The Profile is designed as a source of expert advice and good examples in the field of teacher education. It could be used as a checklist for institutions with longstanding strengths in language teacher education, and as a reference document providing guidance to institutions with plans to develop their language teacher education programmes (Kelly & Grenfell, online).

In some ways, the *European Profile* follows a similar direction to that taken by the *EPOSTL* in that it aims at providing a framework in which decisions relating to teacher education can be taken. It differs, however, in certain important respects. Principal of these is that the *Profile* targets teacher educators in general and teacher training curriculum developers in particular. It thus takes a top-down view of teacher education, which includes not only specific competences but structural aspects of teacher education programmes. The *EPOSTL*, on the other hand, takes a bottom-up view, targeting student teachers and focusing on specific didactic competences which trainee teachers need to develop.

The overall rationale of the *EPOSTL* derived to some extent from the *Common European Framework of Reference (CEFR)*. This can be illustrated by examining a statement taken from the introduction to the *CEFR* (p1):

The Common European Framework (...) describes in a comprehensive way what language learners have to learn to do in order to use a language for communication and what knowledge and skills they have to develop so as to be able to act effectively.

This statement can be adapted to show what the *EPOSTL* aims to do, as follows:

The European Student Portfolio (...) describes in a comprehensive way what language teachers have to learn to do in order to teach a language for communication and what knowledge and skills they have to help learners to develop so as to be able to act effectively.

By comparing these two statements it can be seen that the core aim is common to both documents, the difference consisting in the fact that the former focuses on language *learning*, whereas the latter focuses on language *teaching*. A further important similarity is that both seek to describe competences – be it linguistic or didactic - in the form of can-do descriptors.

Two features of the *European Language Portfolio* which will be clearly recognisable in the *EPOSTL* are the important roles that reflection and accompanying self-assessment play in both documents and the formulation of competences in terms of ‘I can’ descriptors. Also, the *EPOSTL* adopts a three-part structure, which is loosely based on the *ELP*.

Last, but by no means least, the project benefited from the accumulated expertise of project coordinators and project participants at ECML events. The fact that the project team work in a wide variety of teaching cultures (Armenia, Austria, Norway,

Poland, UK) and that the *EPOSTL* was evaluated by participants from all 33 member states at two ECML workshops provided a justification for including the 'European' label in the project title.

The rationale of the EPOSTL

The EPOSTL is a document which strives to promote reflection and dialogue among student teachers and between students and their educators. Some of the specific aims of the EPOSTL are the following:

1. to encourage students to reflect on the competences a teacher strives to attain and on the underlying knowledge which feeds these competences;
2. to facilitate self-assessment of students' competence;
3. to help students develop awareness of their strengths and weaknesses related to teaching;
4. to provide an instrument which helps chart progress.
5. to serve as the springboard for discussions, topics for term papers, research projects etc.
6. to provide support during teaching practice and assist in discussions with mentors; this will help mentors to provide systematic feedback.

The content part of the *EPOSTL* is structured into three sections. These are:

- A **personal statement** section, to help students about to begin their teacher education to reflect on general questions related to teaching.
- A **self-assessment** section, consisting of 'can-do' descriptors, to facilitate reflection and self-assessment by student teachers.
- A **dossier**, for students to make the outcome of self-assessment transparent, to provide evidence of progress and to record examples of work relevant to teaching.

These are supplemented by:

- An **Introduction**, which provides a brief overview of the *EPOSTL*.
- A **glossary** of the most important terms relating to language learning and teaching used in *EPOSTL*.
- An **index** of terms used in the descriptors.

At the heart of the *EPOSTL* are the 196 'can-do' descriptors of didactic competences which the self-assessment section consists of. These descriptors may be regarded as a set of core competences which language teachers will wish to attain. However, they should be not be regarded as comprising a prescriptive list: they do not represent a fixed qualification profile, but are rather to be seen as competences that both student teachers and practising teachers will strive to develop continuously during their education and throughout their teaching career.

In order to make the descriptors both more coherent and more user-friendly they are grouped into seven general categories, which have the following headings:

- Context
- Methodology
- Resources
- Lesson Planning

- Conducting a Lesson
- Independent Learning
- Assessment of Learning

The seven categories represent areas in which teachers require a variety of competences and need to make decisions related to teaching. At the beginning of each section is a brief introductory text which discusses some of the issues relating to the respective topic area. Each general category is further divided into sub-topics. For example, 'Conducting a Lesson' includes the sub-headings: 'Using Lesson Plans', 'Content', 'Interaction with Learners', 'Classroom Management', 'Classroom Language'.

Three examples of descriptors, in this case for 'Methodology: Speaking and Spoken Interaction', are:

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

One difficult decision that the project group faced was whether to include some form of scaling for descriptors. At first sight a system in line with the A1 – C2 scales of the *CEFR* and the *ELP* seemed to be appropriate and had the obvious appeal of linking the *EPOSTL* with the other two Council of Europe publications. However, it emerged from discussions within the project group that there are essential differences between the nature of *language* descriptors and *didactic* descriptors. Didactic descriptors proved extremely difficult to scale and to assess in a quantitative fashion. Whilst a student studying to become a language teacher might be expected to progress steadily concerning his or her language development and, on completing university, to achieve a level of C2 with regard to language skills, with didactic skills the picture is more complex. It is by no means the case that didactic competences will reach a certain exit level which corresponds to the completion of teacher education. Indeed, some competences might only be fully acquired as the result of many years of teaching experience. In general, the project group felt that didactic competences do not develop in a linear fashion and are difficult to quantify. Moreover, to some extent at least, it is the process of competence development which is important in teacher education rather than the product of this education. A decision was therefore taken to reject any numerical quantification. However, in order for students to be able to assess their progress, what is termed an 'open bar' is added to each descriptor; these can be coloured in by student whenever they wish to carry out a self-assessment, as shown below:

1. I can create a supportive atmosphere that invites learners to take part in speaking activities.

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In the above example the student has made a self-assessment at three stages of her teacher education but does not feel completely confident in her ability and has left part of the bar blank. She has also added the date on which the self-assessment was carried out. The arrow at the end of the bar indicates that acquiring competences is a life-long process and will extend beyond teacher education.

Problems and issues

In developing the EPOSTL the authors were required to make important decisions relating to a variety of issues. Some of these are listed below.

Should EPOSTL reflect any particular approaches? Whilst it is the claim of the CEFR to be 'non-dogmatic' in that it is 'not irrevocably and exclusively attached to any one of a number of competing linguistic or educational theories or practices' (CEFR, p8), the formulation of didactic descriptors inevitably means committing oneself to some extent to certain theories and practices; after all, a descriptor lays down what the authors consider desirable with regard to teaching. Whilst many descriptors are value-neutral (e.g. I can understand the requirements set in national and local curricula.), others are not. A reading of the descriptors will reveal the authors' commitment to a generally 'communicative' approach to language learning and teaching, an advocacy of certain principles of autonomous learning, an acceptance of the interdependence of language and culture.

How many descriptors should there be? In the first version of the self-assessment of the EPOSTL drawn up by the authors approximately 400 descriptors relevant to teaching languages were formulated. However, it was felt that reflection on such a large number would go well beyond the time scale available in most teacher education programmes. These 400 were subsequently reduced to 196.

What level of detail should descriptors aim at? It is part of the rationale of the formulation of descriptors that each one should have a 'single focus'; that is to say, there should not be a mixture of two or more competence components in ONE descriptor. It was for this reason that a set of descriptors which began with the formulation 'I can design and select materials ...' were reformulated into 'I can evaluate and select materials ...': it was felt that 'designing' and 'selecting' represent different competences, whereas 'evaluating' and 'selecting' represent complementary aspects of a single process. It will, however, become apparent to readers that even if descriptors have a single focus, the level of detail which they refer to differs considerably. For example, the five descriptors relating to the teaching of grammar are formulated in a very general way; a descriptor such as 'I can evaluate and select grammatical exercises and activities, which support learning and encourage oral and written communication' will require a complex and extensive response. On the other hand, a descriptor in the section on writing skills, 'I can help learners to plan and structure written texts (e.g. by using mind maps, outlines etc.), enables a much more focused answer.

Should the EPOSTL be used purely for reflection or as external evidence too? The European Language Portfolio provides the potential to act both as a 'process portfolio', in which the aim of reflection is in the foreground, and as a 'showcase portfolio', in which documented information may be made available, for example to

potential employers to indicate the user's level of achievement. As far as the EPOSTL is concerned, it is not intended that it should have any showcase function. It remains throughout its use the property of the user and has the sole function of reflection and dialogue. This also applies to the dossier section, in which students are invited to collect samples of their work – lesson plans, essays etc. The purpose of this is 'to help support claims that your self-assessment of the 'can do' statements is an accurate reflection of your specific skills and abilities' (p59).

Expected outcomes of the EPOSTL

It is hoped that the EPOSTL will make a useful contribution to teacher education in the following ways:

- it will provide greater transparency of aims and didactic competences in student education for both students and educators;
- it will support a reflective mode of teacher education;
- it will aid harmonisation of bottom-up, need-based objectives and top-town curriculum planning;
- it will aid comparison of teacher education programmes.

As far as the first two of the outcomes listed are concerned, these could be classified as 'project-intensive' since they form an inherent part of the whole rationale of the EPOSTL. The latter two, however, are 'project-extensive': that is to say, they are by-products of the EPOSTL.

Further steps

The EPOSTL will continue to play a role in the activities of the ECML beyond the second medium-term programme. A follow-up project will be launched in 2008, which will focus on the one hand on disseminating and piloting the EPOSTL and on the other on collecting examples of 'good practice' from teacher educators using the EPOSTL in the member states of the ECML.

References

Council of Europe (2001). *Common European Framework of Reference for Languages: Learning, teaching, assessment*. Strasbourg /Cambridge.
Kelly, M. and Grenfell, M. (Project directors). *European Profile for Language Teacher Education: A Frame of Reference*. <http://www.lang.soton.ac.uk/profile/index.html>
[accessed 18 July 2007]

The EPOSTL is available from the ECML in English, French and German and can be downloaded from the following website: <http://epostl2.ecml.at/>.