

EUROPEAN PORTFOLIO FOR STUDENT TEACHERS OF LANGUAGES AND ITS BENEFITS FOR PRE-SERVICE TEACHER TRAINING

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Abstract: The author of the article describes the experience of piloting the European Portfolio for Student Teachers of Languages. She underlines the importance of having such a document in pre-service training for the development of reflective teaching. However, she points to the fact that this document can be of benefit only if it is a part of a day-to-day teaching experience within the sufficient time. The author compares the experience of pre-service students who piloted the portfolio during their two-week teaching practice and students who had a chance to work with this document in the wider context, which allowed them to exploit the portfolio's potential deeper. The data the author gained from both groups 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 so that it does not become just another administrative burden for the teachers.

Key words: European Portfolio for Student Teachers of Languages, pre-service training, teaching practice

Introduction

Reflective skills in teaching enable practitioners to develop as professionals using themselves as a primary source of learning. Reflection helps in discovering strengths of the lesson as well as potential space for improvement. "Experiential learning is a process of constructing knowledge that involves a creative tension among the four learning modes that is responsive to contextual demands. This process is portrayed as an idealized learning cycle or spiral where the learner "touches all the bases" experiencing, reflecting, thinking, and acting in a recursive process that is responsive to the learning situation and what is being learned. Immediate or concrete experiences are the basis for observations and reflections. These reflections are assimilated and distilled into abstract concepts from which new implications for action can be drawn. These implications can be actively tested and serve as guides in creating new experiences." (Kolb, A., Kolb, D., 2008)

Pre-service teacher training offers the first opportunities to start developing reflective skills with trainees and thus equip them with an experience they can build on in their pedagogic practice. Methodology courses at the Department of English language and literature at Prešov University in the past offered students several opportunities to develop their reflective skills through reflections on their own lessons be they the micro-lessons taught in the seminars or the lessons taught at schools during their teaching practice. Trainees were asked to conduct self-reflections after each lesson they taught, however, the experience disclosed that those reflections were rather superficial and descriptive. Dissatisfaction with the outcomes of reflections of our trainees directed us to search for more effective tools for the development of reflection.

1 European Portfolio for Student Teachers of Languages (EPOSTL)

The Modern Centre for European Languages in Graz designed a project aimed at producing a tool for guiding trainees' understanding of reflection. The decision to start a project with this aim was made in December 2004 (Vojtková, 2007, p.129) and the process of designing took two more years. The main objectives of the EPOSTL were stated as follows:

1. *to encourage you to reflect on the competences a teacher strives to attain and on the underlying knowledge which feeds these competences;*
2. *to help prepare you for your future profession in a variety of teaching contexts;*
3. *to promote discussion between you and your peers and between you and your teacher educators and mentors;*
4. *to facilitate self-assessment of your developing competence;*
5. *to provide an instrument which helps chart progress.*

EPOSTL, p. 5

These aims seem to be highly relevant for pre-service teacher training especially for promoting the development of autonomy in teacher education. In the past it was quite common for trainees to receive ready-made recipes for how to teach and purely keeping to these principles should ensure success in teaching. The situation today, however, is rather different. It is no longer possible to offer only one appropriate approach towards teaching English and trainees are encouraged to discover what works best in the context where they are going to operate. This brings about the need to be able to reflect on what is happening around them in the class and learn from concrete experience. The portfolio, thus, seems to be a unique tool for enabling trainees to notice in details of what teaching and learning is about. The content of EPOSTL is focused around three main parts:

1. *A personal statement section to help you, at the beginning of your teacher education, to reflect on general questions related to teaching*
2. *A self-assessment section, consisting of ‘can-do’ descriptors, to facilitate reflection and self-assessment*
3. *A dossier, in which you can make the outcome of your self-assessment transparent, to provide evidence of progress and to record examples of work relevant to teaching.*

EPOSTL, p.5

The second part of the portfolio, in which trainees can measure up to a set of ‘can-do’ descriptors, seems to be the most beneficial for the development of reflective skills in trainees. These descriptors are grouped around the following areas:

- *Context* – e.g., I can understand the requirements set in national and local curricula.
- *Methodology* – e.g., I can create a supportive atmosphere that invites learners to take part in speaking activities.
- *Resources*– e.g., I can select those texts and language activities from coursebooks appropriate for my learners.
- *Lesson Planning*– e.g., I can plan specific learning objectives for individual lessons and/or for a period of teaching.
- *Conducting a Lesson*– e.g., I can start a lesson in an engaging way.
- *Independent Learning*– e.g., I can help learners to reflect on and evaluate their own learning processes and evaluate the outcomes.
- *Assessment of Learning*– e.g., I can identify strengths and areas for improvement in a learner’s performance.

EPOSTL, p. 15 – 53

2 Piloting EPOSTL and the results of the study

For the above mentioned reasons a decision was taken to pilot the European Portfolio for Student Teachers of Languages at the department and investigate whether it can generate a more profound approach of trainees to the insight of teaching and learning process.

The EPOSTL was piloted in two phases. The first phase started in 2006 and lasted for two semesters in which trainees went for two periods of two-week teaching practice. They used the portfolio in preparation for their teaching as well as a tool for self-reflection. The dossier was used for documents such as lesson plans, worksheets used in the lessons, feedback from the learners, etc.

The feedback phase was conducted after completing both parts of the teaching practice. The feedback data were collected from both questionnaires as well as from focus group interviews.

The obtained results were encouraging for it was clear that trainees managed to get into a more profound analysis of individual aspects of teaching since the descriptors guided them sufficiently. In general, the idea of EPOSTL was accepted very positively: *„I thought it would be just a boring document ... but actually, I found it very important during my teaching practice. There are a lot of useful and meaningful things I would have never thought of...“* (c.f. a trainee's feedback). The trainees appreciated the guidelines for reflection they were offered by EPOSTL especially as inexperienced teachers. Some of them highlighted the usefulness of the descriptors even for the planning process since it made clear which areas they should take into consideration. This part of EPOSTL also, thus, influenced the way they started to think about teaching and so it became the most useful part for them.

On the other hand the feedback also disclosed the limits of regular teaching practice since it became clear a lot of aspects of teaching remained underdeveloped or even not tried out at all. A two-week experience did not allow any development in such areas as e.g. independent learning, or assessment, etc.

The feedback data generated a discussion about possible modifications in the Methodology Course which would allow more space for using the full potential of EPOSTL. As a result, several enrichment activities were proposed and incorporated into the course and it was expected that they would enable the trainees to overcome such limits as lack of experience and lack of opportunities to try out teaching techniques.

The second phase of piloting was conducted in academic year 2007/2008 and trainees used EPOSTL during the whole two semesters; not only during the two-week teaching practice but also during the enrichment activities.

There were two main enrichment activities – seminars with in-service teachers and seminars for students conducted in a school context. Seminars with in-service teachers took place in the In-service Teacher Training Institute in Prešov and were focused around such topics which were supposed to be relevant for both target groups (e.g. CLIL, Evaluation and Assessment of the Learning Process). The idea to put pre-service and in-service teachers together in one training slot was based on the premise that each group is stronger in one area, however, weaker in some other area, though for an understandable reason. While pre-service trainees might be strong in the theoretical understanding of what it takes to be a teacher, the real, experienced teachers could go much deeper in clarification of the classroom reality. This combination could provide a reasonable and balanced solution to the tasks given in the training.

The background premise can be summarized as follows:

TRAINEES:

- 1 have knowledge of the latest trends but miss the empirical experience;
- 2 know the principles but lack opportunities to apply them;
- 3 knowledge seems to take priority in their context.

TEACHERS IN PRACTICE:

- 1 have the empirical experience but do not follow the latest trends;
- 2 can apply activities in concrete situations but are no longer good at reasoning why they do it, what the underlying principle is;
- 3 experience seems to take priority in their context; knowledge is of secondary importance.

The feedback received after conducting the joint seminars was very positive. Trainees appreciated this experience which they considered as much more enriching in comparison to most seminars in pre-service training. They had a chance to connect what they read about teaching with what teachers said from their own experience. “... *I found out that a lot of {the} things I read about in EPOSTL the teachers actually use in their classrooms...*” (c.f. a trainee’s feedback). However, they started to realize that theory and practice cannot be separated since only this genuine connection of trainees and in-service teachers can build a complex and clear picture of what is, or what should be, happening in the classroom and why. They had a chance to appreciate their theoretical background which enabled them not only to understand more but to articulate the principles in practice. This experience was supported also by other studies, e.g. Jones (2007, p.53): „ *Without an adequate bank of professional lexis and theoretical input from teacher educators, teachers find it difficult to express via reflection their thoughts, feelings, concerns and desires about their teaching experiences which can therefore inhibit their development and understanding of their teaching.*”

Seminars in the school context lasted for one or two semesters – depending on the trainees’ choice. They were placed in small groups (three or four trainees) in the classroom with a class teacher. The trainees’ role was to function as teaching assistants and they were responsible for a small group of learners – usually four or five children. The lessons were prepared together with the class teacher so the trainees could experience the entire teaching process – planning, teaching and reflecting in the long term.

The premise on which this enrichment activity was based is as follows:

- trainees will learn more about teaching English in a concrete setting and they will be able to see and understand the complexity of the learning process
- trainees will experience teacher-learner interaction and realize those aspects of language learning and teaching which they did not notice during the short-term TP

The feedback received after completing the seminars proved that the idea of placing trainees into a school context for a longer period enabled them to understand those aspects of teaching and learning which they had no chance to realize during the two-week teaching practice. They claimed they had more time for reflecting and noticing, for planning and trying out and their view of the pedagogic process became more plastic and realistic:

- „... *I had time to learn more about children –in two weeks it would be impossible ...*,”
- „ *I could see not only children’s progress but also my own in EPOSTL...* “
- „*I had a chance to try out more things and evaluate it better...* “
- „*At first I thought it would be just another fill-in-whatever-it-takes duty but as I worked with the portfolio for a longer time I realized that I’m also learning myself about aspects of teacher’s (sic) I should be thinking about.* “

(cf trainees’ feedback).

Conclusion

The European Portfolio for Student Teachers of Languages as a means for developing reflective skills proved to be a good tool for pre-service teacher training. The benefits of the Portfolio became clear already after the first phase of piloting:

- it directs the reflective process
- it deepens the insight into the teaching and learning process
- it enables one to become aware of the details of a teacher's work
- it encourages trainees to develop competence

This tool opens the dimensions which might have been left un-noticed in the development of teachers-to-be. Furthermore, if pre-service teacher trainers enrich the regular experience of trainees and their contact with the teaching reality, the potential of trainees to learn from experience will grow. Teacher trainers certainly have at their disposal a useful device for helping their trainees to gain more already in the pre-gradual preparation and enter the reality of teaching better equipped for their professional development.

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