Magdalena Urbaniak

University of Wrocław

The *EPOSTL*[1] as an Innovative Tool in Language Teacher Education

1. Introduction

Six years after the publication of the first *European Language Portfolio* (*ELP*) the version for future teachers of foreign languages was accomplished. *The European Portfolio for Student Teachers of Languages* (*EPOSTL*), as it is called, is the final effect of the cooperation of experts who within the European Centre for Modern Languages (ECML) project prepared the reflection tool to be used in language teacher education with the underlying goal of making teacher education in Europe comparable and more transparent. Providing the list of teaching competences desired for a language teacher, not only does the publication strive to facilitate students' self-assessment and progress observation, but it is also supposed to provoke the reflection and discussion on the aspects significant in teaching profession. The article aims at presenting the origin, structure and aims of the EPOSTL with the main focus on its use as an innovative tool in teacher education.

2. Background information

The EPOSTL is the result of the work of experts within the ECML project *From Profile to Portfolio: A Framework for Reflection in Language Teacher Education*. Since the authors come from different backgrounds: David Newby (Austria) – project coordinator, Rebecca Allan (UK), Anne-Brit Fenner (Norway), Barry Jones (UK), Hanna Komorowska (Poland) and Kristine Soghikyan (Armenia), the

---

[1] Short for the English title of the publication: D. Newby et al., *European Portfolio for Student Teachers of Languages. A Reflection Tool for Language Teacher Education*, Graz 2007. Polish title: *Europejskie portfolio dla studentów – przyszłych nauczycieli języków. Narzędzie refleksji w kształceniu nauczycieli języków*, Warszawa 2007.

insight into wide variety of education cultures was guaranteed. The contributions were also made by two central workshops' participants (both student teachers and teacher educators) representing 33 ECML member states. Their evaluation of the document was the valuable source of ideas for improvement during the formulation of the final version of the EPOSTL.

3. The structure of the document

The EPOSTL is divided into three sections:

Personal statement – the section serving as the space to respond to some general questions related to teaching, students' expectations and their attitude to different aspects of learning and teaching foreign languages. The part concerning personal details of the user is limited only to the name, affiliation and the starting date of using the document. Although originally intended as a passport (similarly to the ELP), this part was later changed into Personal statement. With this decision the intention to present the user's qualifications related to teaching was abandoned. Such limited scope of the first part seems to direct the attention to Self-assessment section, which emphasises its significance.

Self-assessment – the most extended part presenting 'can-do' descriptors connected with foreign language didactics, encouraging students to reflect on competences the teacher strives to achieve; 193 descriptors, presenting core competences in language teaching, are divided into seven general categories which are ordered in such a way to reflect the sequence in which the teacher faces certain aspects of teaching process. These categories are as follows:

- Context;
- Methodology;
- Resources;
- Lesson Planning;
- Conducting a Lesson;
- Independent Learning;
- Assessment of Learning.

Each category, listing various competences required from the teacher, starts with a short introduction which provides a brief overview of a given topic area. Each category is further subdivided. For instance, the category Independent Learning is divided into following subheadings: Learner Autonomy, Homework, Projects, Portfolios, Virtual Learning Environment, Extra-curricular activities.

It is worth noticing that can-do descriptors presented within the subgroups (e.g. *I can evaluate and select a variety of activities which help learners to reflect on their existing knowledge and competences*, *I can set homework in cooperation with learners*) are not supposed to be perceived as pure checklists of items to be achieved. They should be regarded rather as a trigger for in-depth reflection, more

detailed analysis and encouragement to ask deeper questions. In that way they support a reflective mode of teacher education. This continuous character of descriptors is also manifested in the open form of self-assessment bar which enables the student to mark the level to which, according to self-assessment, he/she mastered certain skill. Indicating the date, besides colouring the part of the bar, may help chart progress, plan and set goals for the future. The arrow seems to suggest that competences can be developed continuously during the initial training as well as throughout teaching career.

The compilation of the list of descriptors, covering all the areas significant in teacher education in the 21st century, from planning the lesson according to the national curriculum to assessment procedures, was facilitated by the fact that the authors could make reference to the *European Profile for Language Teacher Education. A Frame of Reference* (see 4.3. The EPOSTL and the Profile), which already selected and organized the issues significant for language teacher education. In spite of that, it was not an easy task, as the project team had to face many problems (Newby 2007). Firstly, while formulating descriptors, they had to solve the dilemma whether to comply with the CEFR postulate to remain 'non-dogmatic.' Easy with some descriptors neutral in their nature (e.g. *I can identify and evaluate a range of coursebooks/materials appropriate for the age, interests and the language level of the learners*), it was impossible in case of the others which bear the authors' commitment to certain theories and practices. The general approval of communicative approach to learning and teaching, the support given to certain aspects of autonomy and the attention paid to issues connected with mutual relationship between language and culture can be easily recognised in the descriptors (e.g. *I can evaluate and select meaningful speaking and interactional activities to encourage learners of differing abilities to participate*, *I can guide and assist learners in setting their own aims and objectives and in planning their own learning*, *I can evaluate and select activities which enhance the learners' intercultural awareness*). One may doubt, however, whether the decision to include only didactic descriptors is right. Should not the pedagogical and language competences, constituting integrated part of teacher student education, be also incorporated? Although the ELP might be employed in case of language competences, it seems doubtful that any student teacher would be eager to use both documents during the course, at least for practical reasons. Hence, including in the document the sections concerning linguistic skills, might be worth considering.

Dossier – the section enabling the student to collect the examples confirming the validity of the self-assessment stated on the bars. To help student gather the proper evidence, the ideas of what can be included in the Dossier are enclosed. Lesson plans, lesson observation notes, case studies, action research projects, logs, mentors' comments are mentioned among many others. The EPOSTL Dossier is not primarily supposed to fulfil presentational function. It can be used as the source of information for mentors or employers, but in principle it was thought out as

the encouragement to reflection and its user was projected as the main addressee. The selection of the materials to be included and their comparison in the course of time can certainly serve this purpose.

Each of the parts, as well as the whole document, is preceded by the thorough *Introduction* which accompanied by *Glossary of Terms* and *Users' Guide* constitutes an in-depth description of the document and the ways of working with it.

4. The EPOSTL and other documents – comparison

As stated by Newby (2007: 23) – a project coordinator – "From the outset, the authors of the EPOSTL were very much aware that the intended portfolio did not constitute a tabula rasa." *The Common European Framework of Reference for Languages* (*CEFR*)[2], *The European Language Portfolio* (*ELP*)[3] and *The European Profile for Language Teacher Education: A Frame of Reference* (*Profile*)[4] undeniably provided a valuable input to the development of the EPOSTL.

4.1. The EPOSTL and the CEFR

In his article *The European Portfolio for Student Teachers of Languages*, Newby (2007: 24) rightly notices that "The overall rationale of the EPOSTL derived to some extent from the Common European Framework of Reference (CEFR)." He adopts the excerpt of the introduction to the CEFR:

> 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.

substituting certain elements:

> 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.

to prove that both documents share the underlying goal, with the only difference that the CEFR refers to language learning and the EPOSTL to language teaching.

Another element of the CEFR clearly recognisable in the EPOSTL is the presence of descriptors, formulated as can-do statements, with a difference, however,

---

[2] *Common European Framework of Reference for Languages: Learning, Teaching, Assessment*, Strasbourg-Cambridge 2001. Polish title: *Europejski system opisu kształcenia językowego: uczenie się, nauczanie, ocenianie*, Warszawa 2003.

[3] *European Language Portfolio*, Council of Europe 2000. Polish title: *Europejskie Portfolio Językowe*, Warszawa.

[4] M. Kelly and M. Grenfell, *European Profile for Language Teacher Education*, University of Southampton 2004. Polish title: *Europejski profil kształcenia nauczycieli języków. Materiał pomocniczy – zarys treści kształcenia*, Warszawa 2006.

that the descriptors in the CEFR are linguistic in their character, while the ones in the EPOSTL describe teaching competences. Moreover, as mentioned earlier, the didactic descriptors in the latter do not constitute a fixed qualification profile but are more reflection-oriented in their nature. What is more, as opposed to the CEFR, they are not grouped according to scales (A1-C2), which is perceived by some as a disadvantage. Burkert and Schwienhorst (2007: 240) claim, for instance, that the EPOSTL "fails to provide levels, thus progress will potentially be perceived as a very subjective assessment." True as it may be, it seems impossible to group teaching competences, like for example: *I can vary and balance activities to enhance and sustain the learners' motivation and interest*, or *I can involve learners in lesson planning*, into the CEFR levels. While the student teacher can be expected to achieve certain level of language competences (e.g. C2) till the end of the training, it would be unfeasible to define exit level in case of many teaching competences, especially as many of them cannot be fully acquired without experience and can be attained only beyond teacher education. Hence, the conclusion drawn by the project team, that didactic descriptors, as opposed to language ones, are not object of quantification, seems to be convincing (Newby 2007).

4.2. The EPOSTL and the ELP

The thorough analysis is not required to notice similarities between the EPOSTL and the ELP. The structural division of the document into three parts reflects three parts of the ELP: *Personal Statement* resembles *Language Passport*, *Self-assessment – Language Biography* and the third part, *Dossier* is present in both publications. As mentioned before, the Personal statement section is more limited and of a bit different character as compared to the Language Passport. The user of the EPOSTL filling in the Personal statement is encouraged more to reflect than to record. As the descriptors are not levelled here, there is also no place for general, overall self-assessment, which was the case with the ELP. As far as the EPOSTL Dossier is concerned, it does not serve its presentational function. As opposed to the ELP Dossier, where users are encouraged to gather pieces of work which they would like to present to others, here the focus is more on collecting evidence which would convince the user him/herself that conducted self-assessment was relevant. That is coherent with the intention that the EPOSTL should solely constitute an awareness-rising instrument ('process portfolio'), deprived of its reporting function ('showcase portfolio'). Although two publications might differ in some aspects, what they have in common is the emphasis put on reflection. In both cases the section devoted to self-assessment plays the pivotal role. Despite the fact that descriptors in the ELP concern language competences and in the EPOSTL teaching competences, the underlying idea is the same. Hence, the EPOSTL has a great potential not only to provide a valuable tool in language teacher education but also to contribute to success of the ELP dissemination, at least in Polish educational context.

Polish version of the EPOSTL is the coping stone of long standing effort to prepare the *Portfolio* for all age groups. Nevertheless, its significance is not purely symbolic. In my opinion, it can serve as a key factor in promoting and popularising the ELP. The possibility to use the Portfolio at all educational levels, from nursery school to university, is of great importance, but is not enough to ensure the success of the ELP. These who are needed are the teachers convinced that the work with the ELP makes sense. What can convince them more than their personal experience?

Using the EPOSTL within teacher education programme, the student has at disposal a concrete tool that makes theoretical knowledge real. Not only does it give him/her a chance to come across, study and understand theoretical terms, as for example: autonomy, alternative forms of assessment, intercultural awareness, but it also allows to experience them all in practice. Due to the fact that the document allows observing the progress in acquiring language teaching competences, encourages frequent reflection, develops self-assessment skills contributing to student's increasing autonomy, the student learns about those theoretical issues experiencing them, while filling in the EPOSTL.

As the EPOSTL and the ELP share the underlying goal, have similar structure and function, the future teacher using the EPOSTL can be easily persuaded of the advantages of employing the ELP in the process of foreign language learning. Going through all the phases of the work with the document him/herself, the teacher can perfectly predict the difficulties and prevent the potential problems and areas of difficulty for future students working with the ELP. In other words, he/she is introduced to the same processes into which he/she will introduce the pupils. Such a teacher will not have to be persuaded that pupils need to be encouraged to use the ELP or other self-assessment tools. Such a teacher will be aware that such practices constitute added value in the process of learning and teaching. What is more, a convinced teacher is the necessary condition to have a convinced student. In order to motivate the student, the teacher must be motivated, full of enthusiasm and confident of the value of what he promotes. Otherwise, s/he will not be able to inspire the students to fully engage their talent and energy in certain activity (Csikszentmihalyi 1997).

4.3. The EPOSTL and the Profile

The name of the project: From Profile to Portfolio explicitly stresses the significance of the Profile for the preparation of the EPOSTL. Since the Profile constitutes the source of expert advice and good examples to be used as a guideline for institutions involved in language teacher education, it played an important role in the development of the EPOSTL. Both documents, aiming at presenting a framework for teacher education, differ, however, as far as their recipients are concerned. As pointed by Newby (2007: 24):

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.

It seems as though the EPOSTL was the tool to implement the ideas presented in the Profile. In that sense both documents appear complementary.

5. The objectives of the EPOSTL

The experience gained during implementation and dissemination of the earlier documents revealed the need to prepare the concrete tool that would allow realising important issues in language education. Therefore, the document was designed:
  • to harmonize language teacher education in Europe enabling the comparison of teacher education programmes;
  • to provide transparent list of teaching competences desired for a language teacher;
  • to be used as a reflection tool for initial language teacher education;
  • to facilitate self-assessment of competences and underlying knowledge;
  • to make students aware of their stronger and weaker sides connected with teaching;
  • to make progress observable;
  • to record experience related to learning and teaching;
  • to serve as resource for curriculum development and syllabus design;
  • to stir up the discussions, encourage research.
  All the above-mentioned goals strive to prepare the student for his/her future profession. However, although the document was intended, as suggested in the title, for initial teacher training, it seems its use can be further spread to in-service teacher education. Undoubtedly, in line with the attitude that learning is a lifelong process, the EPOSTL might appear an excellent awareness-rising instrument also for qualified teachers.
  The significance of the EPOSTL in the process of learning and teaching foreign languages seems to be unquestionable, as the benefits from its use have two-fold character. Not only is it the user – the student teacher – who gains from it, but also the future student learning a foreign language with the supervision of such a teacher.
  As far as the former is concerned, having the chance to make use of the document in the course of teacher education, the student teacher is accompanied by the innovative awareness-rising tool. Thematically grouped descriptors listed in the document can provoke discussions among students and among students and their tutors and mentors and, consequently, can be successfully used during didactic

classes or feedback sessions. The EPOSTL can also provide support during teaching practice, directing students' attention to aspects significant for preparation and conducting the lesson, as well as serving as the basis for the analysis of already conducted lessons. What is, however, of greatest significance is the role of the document in engaging students in systematic self-assessment. It gives them the chance to reflect on all the areas of modern language didactics, which constitutes the core element of language teacher training. The fact that the EPOSTL is drawn on the European Profile for Language Teacher Education guarantees the fullness of its scope, and hence, the possibility for teacher trainee to explore all the aspects of teaching profession. Moreover, the encouragement to make constant effort and self-assess one's skills (also after gaining qualifications) contributes to the creation of one's own picture as a teacher. It seems extremely important, as among all the judgments, none is as fundamental as one's own opinion about oneself (Wosik-Kawala 2007). Therefore, the habit to reflect on one's own achievements, facilitated by the self-assessment bars, is of great significance for professional development of the student teacher who, coming back to the same descriptors after a certain amount of time, can easily observe the progress made. Self-assessment here is not, however, limited only to the evaluation of one's own skills. It also encompasses the ability to assess the effectiveness of using certain techniques, strategies and materials and to draw conclusions from this assessment in order to plan further development (Wilczyńska 2002). Certainly, the document with its about 200 descriptors and parts promoting reflection on working methods and resources; reflection on classroom practice and lesson planning, makes the development of self-assessment skills possible. As emphasised by Dickinson (1987) and Oskarsson (1988), self-assessment is crucial when learning is to become autonomous. Such procedures, as those described above, support the teacher in planning, monitoring and evaluating his/her own practice, which is the foundation for the development of teacher autonomy. This, in turn, is directly linked to the development of learner autonomy, which leads us to the learner – the second beneficiary of the EPOSTL.

It would be hard not to agree with the opinions of, among others, Breen and Mann (1997), Voller (1997) or McGrath (2000) who claim that only autonomous teacher can provide the learner with proper conditions for the development of learner autonomy. In that sense the EPOSTL supports the goal of promoting autonomy in language learning and teaching. Without the acquaintance with similar practices, the teacher would not be able to support the learners on their way to autonomy. "Language teachers are more likely to succeed in promoting learner autonomy if their own education has encouraged them to be autonomous" (Little 1995: 180). Yet, being autonomous is not an inborn feature for both teachers and learners. As one is not automatically ready to accept responsibility for one's own learning, to be convinced about its value and to convince the learners, the teacher needs first hand experience. The EPOSTL seems to give such a chance. Teacher training with the use of this awareness-rising tool guarantees gaining such

experience. Only then can the teacher be expected to implement the ideas of self-assessment and autonomy.

To sum up, as presented above, the EPOSTL is of utmost significance as it has potential to contribute to student teachers professional development and at the same time, to train them how to foster an exploratory and evaluative approach to learning in their students.

6. Conclusions

All in all, the EPOSTL is a tool directed to student teachers preparing to teach foreign languages. It was designed as a reflection tool whose main aim is to encourage students to reflect on the competences a teacher strives to attain and on the underlying knowledge which feeds these competences. Since reflection in the process of teaching is regarded by many (Dakowska 2001, Gebhard i Oprandy 1999, Pearson 1994, Schön 1983) as a crucial element deciding about its effectiveness, the value of the document seems to be unquestionable. As rightly noticed by Wysocka (2003), in order to develop teachers' professional competence within reflective model, it is necessary to start with the assessment of the level of one's professional competences. Therefore, reflective teachers must start with and constantly conduct self-assessment (Paris and Ayres 1997). It is possible in case of the EPOSTL due to the thoroughly gathered descriptors. Students are encouraged to make the effort to evaluate one's own competences, which certainly helps them develop the ability to self-assess. This effort is rewarded because the systematic work with the EPOSTL provides the user with the register of the progress made, which can be really motivating.

Using the EPOSTL the student teacher is given a concrete tool which puts into practice the theoretical knowledge gained in the course of the studies. Therefore, didactic classes incorporating the EPOSTL will provide the student teachers with the opportunity not only to understand theoretical issues, but also to experience them all in practice, developing students' reflectivity and ability to self-assess, which are so important in the struggle to become more and more autonomous.

References

Breen, P. and S. Mann 1997. "Shooting Arrows at the Sun: Perspectives on a Pedagogy for Autonomy." In: P. Benson and P. Voller (eds.). *Autonomy and Independence in Language Learning*. London: Longman, pp. 132–149.

Burkert, A. and K. Schwienhorst 2007. "Focus on the student teacher: The European Portfolio for Student Teachers of Languages (EPOSTL) as a tool to develop teacher autonomy." *Innovation in Language Learning and Teaching*. Vol. 2, Issue 3, 2008, pp. 238–252. http://www.multilingual-matters.net/illt/AoP/pdf/illt051.pdf.07.08.2008. 10 April 2009.

Common European Framework of Reference for Languages: Learning, Teaching, Assessment. 2001. Strasbourg-Cambridge: Council of Europe.

Csikszentmihalyi, M. 1997. *Finding Flow: The Psychology of Engagement with Everyday Life*. New York: Basic Books.

Dakowska, M. 2001. *Psycholingwistyczne podstawy dydaktyki języków obcych.* Warszawa: PWN.

Dickinson, L. 1987. *Self-Instruction in Language Learning.* Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

European Language Portfolio. 2000. Strasbourg: Council of Europe.

Gebhard, J.G. and R. Oprandy. 1999. *Language Teaching Awareness. A Guide to Exploring Beliefs and Practices.* Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Kelly, M. and M. Grenfell 2004. *European Profile for Language Teacher Education*. University of Southampton.

Little, D. 1995. "Learning as dialogue: The dependence of learner autonomy on teacher autonomy." *System* 23.2, pp. 175–181.

McGrath, I. 2000. "Teacher Autonomy." In: B. Sinclair, I. McGrath and T. Lamb (eds.). *Learner Autonomy, Teacher Autonomy*. London: Longman.

Newby, D. 2007. "The European Portfolio for Student Teachers of Languages." *Babylonia* 3/2007, pp. 23–26. http://www.babylonia-ti.ch/BABY307/PDF/newby.pdf. 06 June 2008.

Newby, D., R. Allan, A.B. Fenner, B. Jones, H. Komorowska and K. Soghikyan 2007. *European Portfolio for Student Teachers of Languages. A Reflection Tool for Language Teacher Education*. Graz: European Centre for Modern Languages.

Oskarsson, M. 1988. "Self-Assessment of Communicative Proficiency." In: J.L.M. Trim (ed.). *Evaluation and Testing in the Learning and Teaching of Languages for Communication*. Strasbourg: Council of Europe, pp. 46–58.

Paris S.G. and L.R. Ayres 1997. *Stawanie się refleksyjnym uczniem i nauczycielem*. Warszawa: WSiP.

Pearson, A.T. 1994. *Nauczyciel. Teoria i praktyka w kształceniu nauczycieli.* Warszawa: WSiP.

Schön, D.A. 1983. *The Reflective Practitioner.* New York: Basic Books.

Voller, P. 1997. "Does the Teacher Have a Role in Autonomous Language Learning?" In: P. Benson and P. Voller (eds.). *Autonomy and Independence in Language Learning*. London: Longman, pp. 98–113.

Wilczyńska, W. 2002 (ed.). *Autonomizacja w dydaktyce języków obcych. Wokół autonomizacji. Badania i refleksje*. Poznań: Wydawnictwo Naukowe UAM.

Wosik-Kawala, D. 2007. *Korygowanie samooceny uczniów gimnazjum.* Lublin: Wydawnictwo UMCS.

Wysocka, M. 2003. *Profesjonalizm w nauczaniu języków obcych*. Katowice: Wydawnictwo Uniwersytetu Śląskiego.