

UNDERSTANDING THE EUROPEAN PORTFOLIO FOR STUDENT TEACHERS OF LANGUAGES; A TOOL FOR THE PREPARATION OF FUTURE TEACHERS

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Abstract

This paper is about knowing the European Portfolio for Student Teachers of Languages (EPOSTL): its content, the target group, its use and some advantages that derive by its use.

First there will be an explanation of what EPOSTL is, how it was created, and its integral parts. It will also give some information on experiences of implementing it with students of languages, the contribution on teaching practice considering it fundamental on preparing future teachers. The purpose of EPOSTL is bringing together methodologists, mentors and student-teachers, considering it as a linking bridge with multiple benefits for every one of them and make them all aware of the responsibilities of preparing new teachers. EPOSTL underlines reflection and self-assessment as two essential aspects of becoming a teacher. This is very important as self-assessment can be considered as something that has been missing in Albanian tradition, pointing that it is hard for Albanians to evaluate themselves or their friends and making the students believe that the teacher is the only one able to do the evaluation. EPOSTL will add a stone on the foundation of preparing future teachers, making them aware and able to assess not only the students but also themselves. What makes EPOSTL more interesting is that there are no precise instructions how to do things, there is not a key that answers every question, but it

pushes the students to search, explore, debate with peers, involve them in student-teacher discussions in order to find the answers they are looking for.

Through observations and reflection sessions held with 43 student-teachers using EPOSTL during their teaching practice, this paper aims to highlight some benefits that derive from using EPOSTL, some recommendations how to use it and how to get the best from it. It will also try to answer some of the most frequent questions asked by student-teachers when they first start to use EPOSTL.

Key words: *EPOSTL, ECML, teaching practice, reflection, self-assessment*

What is EPOSTL?

The European Council, where Albania is a member, has organized a special structure: European Center of Modern Languages (ECML), with the purpose of helping education systems of countries that participate in it. This institution is focused on creating a connecting bridge between the theory of language politics and the real practice in class. In a period of continuous movements and changes ECML offers concrete measures related with causes and challenges that come across because of the social diversities and cultures of Europe. The goal of the center is to improve teaching process by:

- Promoting innovation in teaching
- Upgrading the quality of teaching and learning process
- Supporting language policies
- Building a dialogue between policymakers and teachers

Albania is one of the 34 members of this Center and as a result has earned many profits from it and its valuable projects, some of which include: Common European Framework of Reference for Languages (CEFR), European Language Portfolio (ELP) and EPOSTL. EPOSTL did not come out as *a tabula rasa*, but was created based on CEFR, ELP and European Profile for

Language Teacher Education as part of the project “A framework for Teacher Education” which took place from 2005-2007.

EPOSTL may be considered as a linking bridge of universities, where future teachers acquire the foundations of teaching methods and schools, where they apply their knowledge. The purpose of EPOSTL is to assist student-teachers by helping them reflect their didactic competences that are needed through teaching process. The use of this document intends to reinforce the collaboration between the actors (students-teachers and mentors) through dialog, exchange of experience or consultations in order of having a successful teaching process. According to Newby (2011) experience has shown that EPOSTL is more effective when used systematically by everyone involved in the training process, both university-based lectures and school-based mentors, and when it accompanies student –teachers throughout their teacher education. It also allows future teachers to monitor their process and reflect over their experiences. In addition this document attempts to help future teachers complete their pedagogic skills.

This document is translated in more than 14 European languages and is used by student-teachers not only in Europe.

What does EPOSTL contain?

Designed to help student teachers reflect and fulfill their didactic competences, EPOSTL contains the:

- Personal statement
- Self-assessment
- Dossier
- Glossary of terms
- Users' Guide

The personal statement section is the first contact of student- teachers with this document. In this stage students need to reflect on several general questions that relate with their personal experiences as students and their expectations as future teachers. It is known that many new

teachers tend to follow with loyalty methods that their teachers always used. What this section tends to do is to make student- teachers reflect on these experiences and evaluate them, so they can succeed.

The Self-assessment section is the heart of Portfolio and it includes 193 descriptors that start with the expression "I can..." and are related with students' individual abilities. As A.B Fenner (2011) mentions, descriptors help student-teachers discover what is expected of them in the classroom and in this way they can be better prepared for their teaching practice in advance. These descriptors are grouped in seven categories that are considered fundamental for successful teaching. These categories are: context, methodology, resources, lesson planning, conducting a lesson, independent learning and assessment of learning. Each one of these categories has its own sections. Every descriptor is accompanied by a bar that helps students visualize and chart their competences. These bars may be colored depending on every student self evaluation and can be colored, added, reviewed or fulfilled any time.

One completed bar may look like this:

1. I can choose and evaluate many activities that help students learn new words

6.3.15	24.10.15	18.01.16
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This bar is completed in different times based on the feelings that the student has had about his/her abilities to fulfill the requirement. It has to be pointed out that based on the different education systems of every country member of ECML not all the descriptors need or have to be completed. Also it is not necessary that all descriptors be completed by the end of the study, because it is known that teaching and being a good teacher is a process that does not end. EPOSTL is built as a lifelong document that will follow the teacher throughout his career. The purpose of completing all these descriptors is to stimulate students, teachers and mentors to discuss the different aspects of teaching.

One of the student-teachers working with EPOSTL paraphrased it as "a personal diary of the future teachers." This implies that the portfolio is formulated in order to help students, not to

correct them. This means that it depends on the student if he/she desires to share his/ her thoughts and reflections with colleagues, teachers, mentors, methodologists or professors.

The Dossier has two major functions. At first it intends to support reflections and claims given from future teachers on the first two sections. This can be done by building the dossier of evidence, then it depends on the future teachers to decide what to include in it. Some documents that might be included in the dossier are: materials that future teachers have used in class, notes taken from their observations, materials from their own studies, exercises, projects, diagrams, pictures, lesson plans and activities.

The other function of the portfolio is as important as the first one because it tends to encourage students to progress. For example students can review any time materials saved in the dossier, can reevaluate them which will help students meliorate.

The dossier can be used in different ways: as a reflection tool, as a diary where every progress is documented and as a document ready to be presented to colleagues, teachers, mentors, methodologists and employers.

The Glossary of terms contains terms used in the portfolio. These are language terms that are related with the teaching and learning process.

This glossary is essentially important for students of Albanian universities because they do not study teaching terminology during their Bachelor studies. This glossary will help them better understand and make an objective conclusion on the self-assessment session.

Summary section includes general information related to this document: the way of how and when it can be utilized, who can use it and what benefits derive from it.

What makes this portfolio more interesting is that there are no standard instructions or answers. It depends on student-teachers to formulate questions while working with it and present their own answers.

How to practically use EPOSTL?

One interesting fact that emerged in the course of EPOSTL2 project is that in many European countries the practicum, or teaching practice, is seen for various reasons as a problematic area. In particular, communication and co-operation between university-based lectures and school-based mentors are commonly felt to be in need for improvement (Newby, 2011)

This issue is found openly even in our country. It appears to be caused by the way the practicum is organized; where lessons and practice work separately without interaction between lecturers and mentors. Based on the reflection sessions with students that attend teaching practices in middle schools and high schools of our town, was found out that students rarely got feedback from their mentors. Student-teachers also said that they miss post- practicum debates where they can exchange their experiences, discuss in groups between colleagues, mentors or methodologists. As a result students are left to make assumptions regarding their progress, solving many problems that they encounter while teaching and ways how they have to react in different circumstances.

In order to fill this emptiness it is recommended taking concrete actions. First of all to create a way of communication between methodologists and mentors. This way actions made from them will be up to date and helpful for teaching practices. Second it is very important to reinforce connections between mentors and future teachers. How can this be done? This goal can be achieved by setting sessions of discussions between students and mentors. The point of the sessions should be reflecting, debating and analyzing teaching process in order to have better results in the future. This sessions can be planned on every fourth class in order to have an intensive and continuous contact. This sessions may include questions, evaluations from students and mentors, advices and debates about what can be different and what can be done better.

Mentors' role at this point is very important because he is the connection point between his students and future teachers, he knows teaching process and is obligated to lead and help future teachers. At this point EPOSTL might be a very effective tool to help both mentors and student-teacher strengthen their collaboration by discussing the descriptors of the self-assessment session. They can also use it as a tool during the reflection sessions in order to encourage

dialogue between them. The student-teachers who participated in the reflection sessions suggest that using EPOSTL and discussing it with mentors may lead towards constructive debates and help them understand more about the teaching and learning process.

Some frequent questions about EPOSTL

Even though this document has been applied at several universities of Europe it is little-known in Albanian universities. First steps at University "Aleksander Xhuvani" Elbasan date back to 2008. Because of changes of curricula an interruption occurred on implementing this document. Lately we have examples of implementing this document at our university. Because it may be considered an innovation for most of the student-teachers there are many questions to answer about it. The questions listed below are frequently asked by student-teachers when they first start to use EPOSTL.

Why should this document be used?

This document is purposely build for a special group: future teachers of foreign languages. EPOSTL is for the student-teachers a tool that makes possible documenting the work and the progress of future teachers.

By completing and reviewing constantly the sessions of this document future teachers reach towards critical reflection. This way they become able to make an objective assessment, discover problems, progress and what is more important: critical reflection that leads toward changes and improvements.

Even though this document is basically for student-teachers of languages it can very well be used from teachers and mentors. An adoption of it would make possible for this document to be utilized from student teachers of other majors.

Are all the actors prepared to use this portfolio?

When students of "Aleksander Xhuvani" University were presented to the portfolio for the first time there were many different reactions. At first this document appeared very intense,

especially the self-assessment session. Meanwhile, even though this document is designed for future teachers it is better that it be known from teachers, mentors and methodologists also. This can be achieved by organizing seminars, trainings and workshops, where all participants are included. This makes future teachers' work easier, because they can get orientated easier and also collaborate in a very constructive way with all participants but especially with mentors.

What do we obtain by using it?

Benefits that come from using EPOSTL in a wide range are numerous. This document implies pedagogical abilities and progress of future teachers, improves education process, strengthens collaboration between participants, creates communication ways, and brings updates in Albanian education system leading it toward European standards.

Among everything that we listed above there is another advantage that comes by using this document. As a result of our country history: dictatorship governing and many years of transition in Albania we encounter an obstacle regarding using this document: self-assessment. Because of all the reasons that we mentioned above objective self-evaluation is considered a cultural issue in Albania. We encounter this issue mostly on the self-assessment section. In a study with a group of 35 students, they were asked to color the bars "I can..." in a few different categories. After analyzing the results of the study, came up that almost 80% of the students had fully colored the bars. It is not easy to estimate and accept our limits, and this is exactly the obstacle that this document is meant to clear off. Because EPOSTL is a personal document of future teachers it will make possible for the students and all its users to develop a realistic self-evaluation.

From European experiences and our own experiences we get to know that sometimes students over color the self evaluation indicator because of the feelings of the moment, but later while working they realize that the evaluation is not realistic so they try to do it over by erasing a part of it. This is a well-known practice and is exactly what this document tends to accomplish: direct future teachers toward realistic reflection and self-evaluation.

Who else can use EPOSTL?

As we mentioned European Portfolio of Student Teachers of Languages is a document used in different countries of Europe regardless to their different education systems. This brings out some issues of using the portfolio, issues that are related with curriculums. For this reason it would be appropriate to remodel and to adopt this document to the Albanian curriculum from specialist of this field. This adjustment will make possible for parts of this document to be used from student teachers of other majors.

How can we use EPOSTL?

One of the advices for those using EPOSTL is to use it systematically. Systematic work can make it easier for the student-teachers to get the best from it. EPOSTL doesn't have answers. This is not its goal. EPOSTL tries to make students ask questions about different aspects of the teaching and learning process. In order for the students to answer these questions EPOSTL suggests dialoguing and discussing with peers, mentors and methodologists to answer them.

Conclusions

European Portfolio for Student-Teachers of Languages is an innovation in Albanian education system. Operating this Portfolio will develop pedagogic practices and improve future teachers professionally toward European standards. It is a strong connection between universities and elementary- middle- high schools pointing student-teachers, interlace University theories with practice in real classes. This document encourages future teachers to reflect, self-assess, research and document their progress aiming to improve their performances. Its usage will bring closer future teachers, mentors and methodologist by strengthening their collaboration.

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