

Raising Students' Awareness of Teaching Competences by Means of the *European Portfolio for Student Teachers of Languages*

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Abstract

The paper presents the results of an investigation into the use of the European Portfolio for Student Teachers of Languages (EPOSTL) as part of the ELT methodology courses which are part of the Integrated Undergraduate and Graduate University Programme of Study of Primary Education and the English Language at the Faculty of Teacher Education in Zagreb. The EPOSTL is a self-assessment and reflection tool designed by the Council of Europe for students undergoing initial teacher education and thus includes teaching competences relevant for language teachers in the whole European area of education. Its use should contribute to raising awareness of both generic and specific teaching competences and of the necessity to link initial teacher education and continuous professional development. The EPOSTL has been applied in the Programme within the framework of ELT methodology courses since the 2009/10 academic year.

The authors also present the findings of the analysis of students' feedback on the use of the EPOSTL. The feedback revealed aspects of the EPOSTL which proved to be problematic for student. Having conducted such a study gives teachers involved the opportunity to modify and improve particular aspects of the use of the EPOSTL in order to reach the aims set.

Key words: *ELT methodology courses; reflection; self-assessment; teaching competences; the EPOSTL.*

Introduction: Student Teachers' Self-Awareness

A new paradigm of teacher education includes a series of competences that should be developed during initial teacher education. These include: creating a safe and

attractive school environment; teaching effectively in heterogeneous classes of pupils from diverse social and cultural backgrounds and with a wide range of abilities and needs; working in close collaboration with colleagues, parents and the wider community; developing new knowledge and being innovative through engagement in reflective practice and research; and becoming autonomous learners throughout their professional development (see Gordon et al., 2009, p. 156).

Vizek Vidović and Domović (2013, p. 226) also emphasize the change in teacher role and the increasing complexity of teacher competences which include a shift “from managing subject content to the management of the learning process in the classroom and to responding effectively to the learning needs of individual learners“. An important set of competences thus includes the commitment to continuous personal professional development, reflection skills on own practice as well as teacher involvement in the creation of educational policy and implementation of new practices (OECD, 2005; ETUCE, 2008).

According to Freeman (1989, p. 28), “how we define language teaching will influence, to a large extent, how we educate people as language teachers.” Freeman seeks to improve language teacher education, which he perceives as “fragmented and unfocused”, by proposing an approach in which language teaching may be viewed “as a process of decision making based on the constituents of knowledge, skills, attitude, and awareness”. Awareness as a constituent integrates and unifies the previous three constituents—knowledge, skills, and attitude. It, therefore, can account for why teachers grow and change. That is why self-awareness is an essential prerequisite for teacher development. Critical reflection, which involves examining one’s own teaching experiences, can help student teachers understand how they teach and what exactly happens in the classroom. Accordingly, student teachers become aware of aspects of their teaching which are successful but also of those in which they might need support and guidance.

In today’s pre-service language teacher education we seek to embrace Freeman’s proposal and consider reflection and self-evaluation skills leading to self-awareness as some of the most relevant learning outcomes of ELT methodology courses. On completion of the courses students are expected to critically evaluate the attitudes and beliefs about teaching and learning, which inform and guide their professional practice, to think critically, analyse and solve problems, as individuals and members of a team, and to reflect critically on their practice on an ongoing basis.

The European Portfolio for Student Teachers of Languages (EPOSTL)

One of the self-assessment and reflection tools that can be used in the course of teacher education within the framework of ELT methodology courses is the EPOSTL (Newby et al., 2007). It is a tool designed by the Council of Europe for students undergoing initial teacher education, which encourages them to reflect on their didactic knowledge, competences and skills necessary to teach foreign languages

and facilitate their self-assessment. The EPOSTL builds on insights from three other European publications: the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages (CEFR, 2001) as it represents a systematic tool for introducing the underlying principles stated in the CEFR, the European Language Portfolio, and the European Profile for Language Teacher Education (EPLTE) (Kelly et al., 2004). The EPOSTL may, according to Grenfell (2012), be used in a complementary fashion in the curriculum design of teacher education. Not only student teachers but also teacher educators, curriculum designers and actual teachers can make use of the EPOSTL to improve the quality of teacher education. In a European study on language teacher education conducted by Ziegler (2013), a group of stakeholders and language teacher educators (N=106) including curriculum planners, managers and directors of institutions providing language teacher training, and policy makers employed by ministries or EU institutions were asked to rank a set of themes and topics according to their priority for the advancement of language teacher education facing multilingualism and related challenges. The CEFR, the EPOSTL and the European Language Portfolio (ELP) were ranked among the eight most relevant elements of language teacher education with a respective score of 4.64, 4.50 and 4.45 (on a scale from 1 to 6, where 1 indicated the lowest rank and 6 the highest rank). The stakeholders valued the need of a common framework of teaching competences such as the EPLTE, but also pointed at the pitfalls of a common European perspective on syllabi of language teacher education in the light of multilingualism and plurilingual repertoires.

The EPOSTL contains a personal statement section, which helps student teachers to reflect on general questions related to teaching, a self-assessment section, consisting of 'can-do' descriptors to facilitate reflection and self-assessment, a dossier, to provide evidence of progress, and a users' guide, which gives detailed information about the EPOSTL. The self-assessment section consists of 193 descriptors of competences related to language teaching grouped into seven categories representing areas in which teachers require knowledge and a variety of competences: Context, Methodology, Resources, Lesson planning, Conducting a lesson, Independent learning and Assessment of learning. Each descriptor is accompanied by a bar, which helps student teachers to chart their growing competences. Student teachers colour in the bar at different stages of their teacher education and add the date on which they carry out self-assessment, which helps them visualise their progress.

The competences listed in the EPOSTL are those which are found to be relevant for language teachers throughout Europe, but have recently also been applied in teaching contexts beyond the borders of Europe (e.g. Egypt, Japan) (Newby, Fenner, & Jones, 2011). By filling in the EPOSTL, students think about their knowledge and skills which are necessary for teaching a foreign language; they assess their pedagogical competences and monitor their progress by noting their teaching experiences which they later discuss. It is strongly believed that it contributes to the development of autonomy as a reflection tool in foreign language teacher education and to enabling

student teachers to develop an awareness of their own teaching practice (Burkert & Schwienhorst, 2008). Its use should contribute to raising awareness of both generic and specific teaching competences (see Mihaljević Djigunović, 2008; Mihaljević Djigunović & Mardešić, 2009) and of the necessity to link initial teacher education and continuous professional development (cf. Vizek-Vidović & Domović, 2013). The EPOSTL does not serve as a grading tool for teacher trainees. It should be seen as a reflection tool that enables teachers and teacher trainees to evaluate themselves in terms of certain competences.

Background for Current Study

The *Integrated Undergraduate and Graduate University Programme of Study of Primary Education and the English Language* (further in text Programme of Study, Programme), which was introduced in 2005 at the Faculty of Teacher Education in Zagreb, offers a balanced ratio of theoretical and practical courses and makes use of all the possibilities to apply theory to the teaching practice, thus formally meeting the standards set in the European Profile of Language Teacher Education (see Kelly et al., 2004). Accordingly, ELT methodology plays an important role in the process of teacher education, providing a continuous and systematic teaching methodology training which is centred around various courses dealing with different aspects of teaching English to young learners. This pre-service teacher education spreads almost throughout the five-year syllabus in which ELT methodology has been taught through the courses presented in Table 1.

Table 1
Distribution of ELT methodology courses throughout the Programme of Study

Course title	Semester	Hours	ECTS
<i>Creative Teaching Activities 1</i>	2	30	2
<i>Creative Teaching Activities 2</i>	3	30	2
<i>Introduction to ELT Methodology</i>	5	60	4
<i>Teaching English to Young Learners</i>	6	75	4
<i>Content-based Language Teaching</i>	7	30	2
<i>Assessment in ELT</i>	8	30	2
<i>Classroom Practice 1, 2, 3, 4, 5</i>	4, 5, 6, 7, 8	150	5
<i>Culture in Teaching Young Learners</i>	9	30	2
<i>Teaching Practice Course</i>	9, 10	105	7

The first courses in which students are introduced to teaching methodology are *Creative Teaching Activities 1* and *2*, offered in semester 2 and 3. Through those courses students acquire a substantial corpus of rhymes, songs, chants, stories and games which, together with strategies and approaches on how to teach, provide students with a sound foundation for teaching young language learners. Courses which give a theoretical foundation regarding ELT methodology (*Introduction to ELT Methodology*, *Teaching English to Young Learners*, *Content-Based Language*

Teaching) are offered in the subsequent semesters of the Programme of Study. The theory that is being covered in such courses is balanced with the practical part of the Programme, and as such, students are required to take *Classroom Practice* as early as semester 4 (and continuing in semesters 5, 6, 7 and 8. The function of that course is to introduce students to various types of classroom and school environments, such as international school setting, foreign language school setting, one-on-one work in the classroom, content-based teaching in primary school or assessment and assessment tools that the teachers use in their classrooms. The course is the first opportunity for practical experience in the course of 5 semesters. Each semester students spend a number of hours in school during which time they carry out structured observation according to the instructions they receive from the course leader. They actively participate in class activities, assisting the teacher in preparing materials and in the teaching process itself.

This experience prepares students for the *Teaching Practice Course* in semesters 9 and 10. The fundamental role of the course is to give students an opportunity to apply to the classroom situation the previously acquired theory and knowledge base, to significantly raise their self-awareness as a basis for future development, and to encourage them to take greater responsibility for their professional development. On completion of the course students should be able to independently plan, prepare and teach English in primary school. In order to achieve the learning outcomes to the full, throughout the course, students are encouraged to engage in critical self-observation and self-assessment. They examine in a number of ways all aspects of their teaching, along with their attitudes and beliefs. Students are required to keep practice logs, and use them as reflective diaries and record regularly their experiences and ideas, which they can eventually analyse and reflect on. Also, after each of the lessons taught, students fill in self-assessment forms in which they evaluate the extent to which they have been successful in achieving the aims of the lesson, how satisfied they are with the atmosphere in the class and rapport they established with the pupils, and what aspects of the lesson they are especially happy or unhappy with. Besides, throughout their teaching practice, students carry out self-assessment of their own achievements, reflect on different aspects of their teaching practice, assess their own teaching competences and skills and chart their progress by means of the EPOSTL. Having a tool such as the EPOSTL which offers self-assessment descriptors has a twofold function: the reflection function (through which students think about and discuss specific competences and consider what being competent in a specific area entails) and a self-assessment function which requires students to make qualitative judgement about their developing competences and to chart their growth and progress (Newby, Fenner, & Jones, 2011).

However, as personal reflection enables students to draw only on their own experience, and the value of engaging in reflection is increased if carried out in association with peers, in addition to encouraging students' personal reflection, explicit

descriptive feedback is given during the lessons' analyses, so that what the observers have noticed about the way of teaching during lesson observation is added to personal reflection. In this way, developing student teachers' self-awareness and accordingly their teaching competences and skills is brought into focus throughout the course.

The EPOSTL has been part of the *Teaching Practice Course* since the 2009/10 academic year. After the first year of implementing the EPOSTL, in 2010, an initial investigation was conducted with the first generation of fifth-year students studying by the Bologna standards in order to establish the extent to which the *Teaching Practice Course* fulfils its role in developing teaching competences and student teacher self-awareness. The research focused, among other, on students' self-assessment made on the basis of the EPOSTL. As of its introduction into the course, the EPOSTL had been discussed in detail during the initial session, and the students offered suggestions for correct continuous use. Accordingly, throughout their teaching practice, students carried out self-assessment of their achievements, reflected on different aspects of their teaching practice, assessed their own teaching competences and skills, and charted their progress in their copies of the EPOSTL.

A qualitative analysis of the EPOSTL focused on the self-assessment sections and the descriptors accompanied by a bar which had been coloured in and dated by student teachers at different stages of their teaching practice, illustrating their judgement of developing competences. Such self-assessment had required not only students' critical reflection about all aspects of their own teaching, but also taking into account explicit descriptive feedback offered by their peers during the lessons' analyses.

The analysis of self-assessment sections revealed that the majority of students believed that they had significantly developed all competences during the course. The majority of students performed self-assessment at two or three stages during the *Teaching Practice Course*, and their assessment bars indicated a substantial development of all competences. However, all of these students left part of the bars blank, apparently led by the belief that there was still room for improvement. Thus, it could be assumed that the students not only developed their teaching competences but also significantly raised their self-awareness in the course of their teaching practice.

Considering the results of the research, and the students' rather positive reactions to the EPOSTL, it was decided that it would be introduced in other ELT methodology courses of the Programme of Study. In 2014, the authors carried out a continuation of the research on the use and function of the EPOSTL. Some results of the research are presented in the following chapter.

Methods

Aims, Problems and Hypotheses

The aim of the second (consecutive) research was to obtain students' feedback on the use of the EPOSTL as a self-assessment and reflection tool, i.e. establish whether at present students find it as beneficial and to what extent. The authors assumed that raising students' awareness of the competences a teacher needs to develop in order to

become a reflective practitioner would contribute to their ability of self-reflection. In accordance with the aim of the research, the following problem questions were posed:

- 1) According to students' estimates, does the EPOSTL help student teachers identify their strengths and weaknesses regarding teaching competences?
- 2) Is there a relationship between length of use of the EPOSTL and students teachers' perceived usefulness of the EPOSTL sections at this point and for future teaching?

In accordance with the aim of the research and the problems set, the following hypotheses were put forward:

H1 Senior students, who had used the EPOSTL for a longer period of time, will show a higher level of awareness regarding the development of teaching competences.

H2 Senior students will display higher levels of perceived usefulness of the EPOSTL at the present time and for the future.

The information obtained would establish grounds for rethinking the implementation of the EPOSTL, and, if necessary, for modifying and improving particular aspects of the use of the EPOSTL in order to reach the aims set. Relating to that, the qualitative aspect of the research also gave an insight into students' suggestions related to the use of the EPOSTL.

Sample of Participants and Instrument

The research was carried out in the winter semester of the 2013/14 academic year on a sample of 36 third, 26 fourth, and 15 fifth-year students (totalling 77 students) attending the Programme of Study. The instrument, in the form of a four-part questionnaire (see Appendix), was constructed for the purpose of this research, and the students were asked to complete it during the final sessions of the ELT methodology courses they were attending at the time. All groups were given equal instructions and the survey was anonymous. The first part (items 1 and 2) provided information regarding the year of study and the frequency of EPOSTL use. The second part (items 3-8) yielded qualitative data regarding the following: sections of the EPOSTL that were not used by students, students' opinions regarding the EPOSTL design, changes that could be introduced, the effect that the EPOSTL had/has on students, areas to work on and suggestions for improving the use of the EPOSTL. In the third part (item 9) the student teachers were asked to estimate the usefulness of the various sections of the EPOSTL **at that particular point** of their studies on a scale from 1-5 (1=not at all; 2=little use; 3=can't tell; 4=rather useful; 5=really useful). Finally, in the fourth part (item 10) the students were asked to estimate (on the same scale) the perceived usefulness of the various sections of the EPOSTL for **their future teaching**. The dependent variable used in parts 3 and 4 was the usefulness of the respective sections of the EPOSTL as the authors wanted to investigate whether they were estimated as equally relevant by student teachers with respect to the length of time they spent working with the EPOSTL.

Results

The research questions yielded both quantitative (items 1, 2 and 7, 9, 10) and qualitative data (items 3-8). As data provide complementary information, a combination of qualitative and quantitative methods is used in the research. The quantitative analysis includes frequency analysis as well as descriptive statistics and comparisons of means, done using the SPSS statistical program. On the other hand, a qualitative approach is used to analyse student teachers' answers to the open-ended questions posed.

Data that was analysed quantitatively focused on providing answers to the problem questions: Does the EPOSTL help student teachers identify their strengths and weaknesses regarding teaching competences?; Is there a correlation between length of use of the EPOSTL and student teachers' estimates of the usefulness of the EPOSTL?

According to the analysis of items 1 and 2, the average use of the EPOSTL per semester for third-year students was 2.2 times ($M=2$), for fourth-year students 2.73 times ($M=3$), and for students in the fifth year 2.9 times ($M=3$).

Item 7 in the questionnaire asked students if the EPOSTL helped them identify specific areas that they could work on more. As can be seen in Figure 1 (below), 37.66% of the total number of participants in all three years reported that the EPOSTL did not help them much in identifying areas that they could improve in. 32.47% of the students responded that the EPOSTL helped them in identifying areas for improvement whereas 22.06% responded that it has not helped them at all in identifying areas to work on more. Only 2.6% responded that it has helped a lot in identifying areas that they could improve in their work as student-teachers. A small number of students did not provide an answer to this question (3.9%).

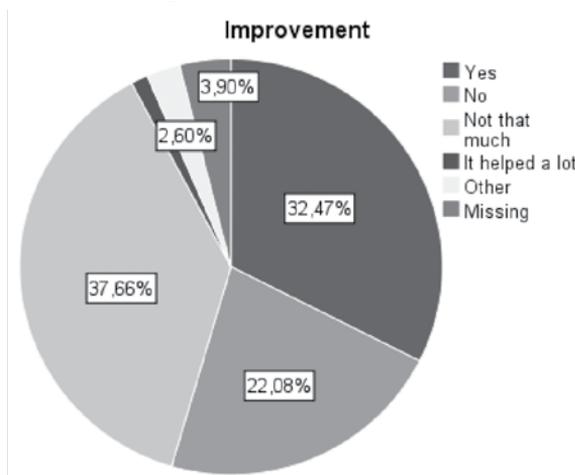


Figure 1. Students' perceived usefulness of EPOSTL for identifying specific areas for improvement

The breakdown of students' responses according to the year of study is presented in Table 2 (below). Almost half of the students in Year 3 reported that they were able to identify specific areas, one third of them were unable to do so, and another third of

the students were not as confident in identifying such areas. In Year 4 about a quarter of the students identified areas for improvement, and in Year 5 only 3 students out of 15, or about a fifth of them.

Table 2

Students' ability to identify areas for improvement while using the EPOSTL- breakdown by year of study

Identified areas for improvement	Frequency of responses		
	YEAR 3 (36 students)	YEAR 4 (26 students)	YEAR 5 (15 students)
Yes	16	6	3
No	9	6	2
Not that much	9	12	8
A lot		1	
Other	1	1	1
Total	35	26	14

The 3rd and 4th part of the questionnaire focused on student teachers' opinions regarding the usefulness of particular sections of the EPOSTL at the present time and their estimates of the usefulness of the same sections at a future time. Based on student teachers' estimates it would be possible to find the answer to whether there is a relationship between the length of EPOSTL use and students' perceived usefulness of the EPOSTL sections.

As can be seen from Table 3 (above) at the present stage students found sections such as the *Introduction*, *Personal statement*, *Reflection grid*, *Glossary of terms*, *Dossier and User's guide* of little use. It is interesting that students could not seem to find significance in sections such as the ones mentioned considering that their purpose and usefulness for a proper use of the EPOSTL would seem obvious. For the remaining sections of the EPOSTL, *Methodology*, *resources*, *Lesson plan*, *Conducting a lesson*, *Independent learning* and *Assessment of learning* all of the students estimated that at the present time they could not tell whether the sections are useful or not in terms of improving their skills and competences.

In terms of students' perceived usefulness of the sections of the EPOSTL for their future teaching, for the majority of sections, students could not tell whether they would be useful or not. A change was observed for the section *Conducting a lesson* where students estimated that that section could be rather useful for future teaching.

By means of the paired-samples t-test we calculated whether there was a statistically significant difference in student teachers' responses for the usefulness of EPOSTL sections at present and perceived usefulness for the future. Statistically significant differences were observed for sections *Methodology* ($p=0.000$), *Resources* ($p=0.000$), *Lesson planning* ($p=0.001$), *Conducting a lesson* ($p=0.000$); *Independent learning* ($p=0.000$), *Assessment of learning* ($p=0.000$); *Reflection grid* ($p=0.000$); *Dossier* ($p=0.000$); *User's guide* ($p=0.000$). The mentioned sections seem to be more significant for future use.

Table 3

Students' perceived usefulness of EPOSTL sections at present and in the future

EPOSTL Sections		Mean	N	Std. Deviation	Std. Error Mean	t	df	p
Introduction	Present	2.79	76	1.215	.139	.336	75	.738
	Future	2.74	76	1.204	.138			
Personal statement	Present	2.92	77	1.189	.136	-1.474	76	.145
	Future	3.09	77	1.172	.134			
Context	Present	3.13	77	1.043	.119	-1.806	76	.075
	Future	3.32	77	1.094	.125			
Methodology	Present	3.08	76	1.105	.127	-4.997	75	.000
	Future	3.66	76	1.250	.143			
Resources	Present	3.15	75	1.147	.132	-5.127	74	.000
	Future	3.75	75	1.220	.141			
Lesson plan	Present	3.22	74	1.264	.147	-4.026	73	.000
	Future	3.77	74	1.277	.148			
Conducting a lesson	Present	3.29	76	1.315	.151	-5.604	75	.000
	Future	4.00	76	1.200	.138			
Independent learning	Present	3.20	76	1.244	.143	-4.226	75	.000
	Future	3.74	76	1.269	.146			
Assessment of learning	Present	3.24	76	1.106	.127	-5.351	75	.000
	Future	3.79	76	1.192	.137			
Reflection grid	Present	2.97	76	1.222	.140	-4.001	75	.000
	Future	3.47	76	1.301	.149			
Glossary of terms	Present	2.96	75	1.224	.141	-1.955	74	.054
	Future	3.20	75	1.103	.127			
Dossier	Present	2.83	76	1.182	.136	-4.642	75	.000
	Future	3.38	76	1.070	.123			
User's guide	Present	2.54	76	1.183	.136	-3.670	75	.000
	Future	3.01	76	1.137	.130			

Qualitative data was obtained from items 3-8 of the questionnaire and is presented in a table (see Table 3). The analysis provided information about student teachers' opinions of the EPOSTL as a document (e.g. design, possible changes, its effect on student teachers, suggestions for use).

According to responses of students in all three years, the only section not used was the *Dossier* as it was not obligatory. Nevertheless, students were confused regarding which sections to fill in at what time and regarding the purpose of some sections.

We attribute this to students being overwhelmed with the number of sections and content i.e. the statements in sections which they were unfamiliar with, situations that they had not experienced at that particular point and therein perhaps the difficulty in understanding what was asked of them. This was particularly evident with third-year students, who had only started their teaching methodology courses.

With respect to the design (item 4), they found it to be good enough, even though a number of students in all three years reported that it was colourless, boring, without illustrations and monotonous.

Of the changes students wanted to see in the EPOSTL (item 5), third-year students mentioned more writing space, colour, and suggested it was too difficult to fill in. Fourth-year students mentioned that the questions were complex and that the approach in using the EPOSTL should be changed rather than the EPOSTL itself. Further on, they would like to see more examples from practice and a little more colour in the EPOSTL. As for fifth-year students, they found it hard to measure progress with the EPOSTL, stating that the questions were difficult and that pictures would be a welcome addition.

In terms of the effect that it had on students (item 6), third-year students (36%) commented that it had no effect, three (8%) said that it had yet no effect, while fifteen (41.6%) of them said that it raised awareness of some issues regarding teaching. In Year 4, nine students (34%) said that they had not felt any effect from its use, while thirteen students (50%) felt that it had helped raise awareness of the skills to be improved, i.e. they were able to see what they know and do not know. Fifth-year students responded in the following way: two (14%) said that it had no effect, three (21%) that they were yet to see and nine students (63%) reported that it helped raise awareness of teaching.

The following question (item 7) dealt with identifying areas to work on. As for third-year students, approximately one third of them felt that they could not identify areas to work on, while the others reported that it made them aware of particular areas in which they showed weaknesses. In Year 4, a number of students actually identified the sub-sections that were problematic, such as *Classroom management*, *Independent learning*, *Culture*, *Lesson aims*. Similarly, fifth-year students mentioned the sub-sections *Materials*, *Techniques* and *Classroom management*.

Finally, students were asked to offer suggestions for better use of the EPOSTL. Third-year students reported that it should be introduced even earlier and used more in class. They also wanted more explanations regarding work with it. Year 4 students suggested using it more in class and reported that working with the EPOSTL required better understanding of it in the first place. Two students found it to be useless. Year 5 students reported that it should be used more often, and according to three students, introduced earlier. These students also observed that the EPOSTL would probably be more efficiently used once they start teaching. They also mentioned that it required better explanation for its use and benefits.

Table 4
Students' opinions of the EPOSTL regarding particular features

FEATURES	YEAR 3	YEAR 4	YEAR 5
Sections not used	Dossier ; tasks they did not understand	last section, non-obligatory sections	Dossier
Design	well-designed, easy to follow , colourless, boring	good; not good-boring ; (no pictures, illustrations, monotonous)	good; dull
Changes	space, colour , too difficult	complex questions, change usage - not the portfolio, examples from practice, more colour	hard to measure progress; difficult questions, add pictures
Effect	no; not yet, raised awareness	no effect; awareness of skills to be improved, what they know/do not know	no effect ; yet to see; awareness
Areas to work on	no ; not yet, awareness	areas to work on: classroom management, independent learning, culture, lesson aims	materials, techniques, classroom management ; no
Improvement in using the EPOSTL	introduce earlier ; in class , better explained	use more in class ; better understanding ; useless	more often , earlier ; used when they start teaching, better explained , awareness of the benefits

Discussion

One of the aims of the EPOSTL is to make students aware of whether it has affected their didactic knowledge, teaching competences and skills. Fifth-year students reported having become more aware of particular issues, however, students in years 3 and 4 (apparently, due to a lack of teaching experience) still could not tell what effect the EPOSTL has had on their awareness of teaching and their competences. Similarly, when the students were asked to identify areas in which they could improve, due to inexperience in teaching, only half of the students in Year 3 could name those sections with some certainty, whereas the number of identified sections/areas which could be improved increased with Year 4 and Year 5 students. The EPOSTL therefore did not contribute, as desired, in helping all of the students identify their strengths and weaknesses. Thus, H1 has been confirmed as senior students show higher awareness regarding the development of teaching competences. At the same time, this indicates that not all students could benefit from the EPOSTL in terms of helping them identify their strengths and weaknesses (e.g. students in Y3). In other words, as students move to a higher year, the awareness of the usefulness of sections of the EPOSTL becomes more evident, in line with the first part of our second hypothesis. For this reason, when using the EPOSTL initially (with the third- and fourth-year students), sections which are considered to be important for students should be discussed in a comprehensive and descriptive way so that the students can anticipate future benefits of their work.

In terms of sections that the students found useful at the present stage and compared to the perceived usefulness at a future time, statistically significant difference in their responses was observed for the majority of sections (see Table 3). For all of the sections mentioned students anticipate that they will be more useful in the future which relates to their inexperience in practical class work and their anticipation that these sections will probably be more relevant in the future, once they start teaching. Since the students fail to realize the usefulness of sections such as the *Introduction* and *Personal statement* and seem not to demonstrate sufficient willingness to work independently, these sections might be dealt with through in-class work, as the first gives initial information for the use of the EPOSTL and the second helps students to reflect on general questions related to teaching as an appropriate introduction to ELT methodology courses. Also, students seem not to be aware of the usefulness of both the *Reflection grid*, the function of which is to help students to record their reflections on the descriptors, and the *Dossier*, in which the students can make the outcome of their self-assessment transparent by providing evidence of progress and recording examples of work relevant to teaching. Apparently, a lack of teaching experience at this stage, and accordingly, a paucity of materials to be included in the *Dossier*, can account for that.

Similarly, the *Glossary of terms* and *User's guide* do not seem to be relevant regardless of the fact that students stumble with understanding concepts and with how to use the EPOSTL, leading us to conclude that students lack initiative and independence in seeking out clarifications and explanations. Considering that students are just starting out with the EPOSTL in Year 3, it is important that the students and their instructors get acquainted with the *Glossary of terms* together through in-class work so as to familiarize students with concepts and make it easier for them to go through the EPOSTL independently at a later stage of use.

According to the students' answers, the purpose of the EPOSTL and the population targeted is rather unclear. They find independent work too demanding due to the large number of complex statements and the unfamiliar vocabulary (although the EPOSTL contains a handy glossary of terms), resulting in decreased motivation, sometimes even frustration, and building a negative attitude towards its use. The concepts of self-awareness and self-assessment are recognized by half of the participants. Some students, mostly fifth-year students who attended the Teaching Practice Course, identified areas to work on. Presently, it seems that students do not see the usefulness of the majority of sections, but seem to anticipate that the sections will be useful in the future. Regarding the design of the EPOSTL students' opinions are mostly favourable with some occasional comments (no pictures, not enough space, etc.).

The second hypothesis (H2) is therefore partially confirmed indicating that senior students display higher awareness regarding the usefulness and benefits of the majority of sections of the EPOSTL at the present time (as opposed to students in Year 3 and 4). However, students in all three years (Y3, Y4 and Y5) estimate that the sections of the EPOSTL will be much more useful in the future, i.e. during in-service work than during their pre-service teacher education.

The design of the EPOSTL was found to be good overall, although a number of students' responses indicated that it could have some pictures, that space for writing was insufficient and that it was simply plain. Considering that the students encountering the EPOSTL are future primary school teachers, they are generally motivated and encouraged to be creative in their work (homework, presentations, art classes, seminar work) which might be the reason why they found the EPOSTL as a document that did not provide them the space for being creative or artistic. This puts forward the question of whether the EPOSTL could become even more personalized in, for example, allowing for more creativity within particular sections, and in such a way becoming more appealing to students.

It is evident from students' answers that the frequency of use of the EPOSTL through in-class work is regarded as insufficient by the majority of students – participants. When the EPOSTL is used in in-class work only two or three times per semester, the students seem to encounter difficulties as they are unable to relate course content with the statements in various sections of the EPOSTL. Accordingly, students become uncertain of the purpose of the EPOSTL and particularly question whether the EPOSTL is appropriate for their use.

With respect to offering suggestions for better use of the EPOSTL, students' suggestions such as 'use more often and more in class' clearly suggest that independent work on the EPOSTL is not something that they deal well with in all study years. This is an indicator that more guidance is necessary for working on the EPOSTL through in-class work and on a more frequent basis. It is most likely that through giving small scale tasks for independent work students can become more autonomous and competent for self-assessment, and overcome difficulties that might arise due to the length and complexity of the EPOSTL.

Conclusion

Surely, the introduction of a new self-assessment tool such as the EPOSTL can be a demanding task for both teacher trainers and students. As a matter of fact, it can even be overwhelming to the point that younger student teachers find it inappropriate to use as their familiarization with the teaching profession is only in the initial stages. There are reports similar to our findings that speak of the initial viewing the EPOSTL with scepticism on the part of students due to its length, the open-ended wording of the descriptors, which often ask questions but do not give answers, and the daunting task of self-assessment which it brings (Newby, Fenner, & Jones, 2011). As already mentioned, there are three types of use of the EPOSTL in teaching contexts: 1) pre-service or initial teacher education programme of a university, within lectures or seminars; 2) practicum or teaching practice; 3) in-service teacher development (Newby, Fenner, & Jones, 2011). In that respect, the context mentioned in this paper is justified and appropriate, however according to the students' responses and the issues they mention, certain changes need to occur in order to embrace and use the

EPOSTL to its fullest extent. As a result, there are suggestions for improvement that can be made in order for this form of reflective education to become successful.

The authors suggest the following:

- 1) The role of the EPOSTL should change if we want students to accept it as part of their programme of study. The EPOSTL should have a place in the syllabi, and the learning outcomes regarding the EPOSTL should also be made clear. Courses which deal with teaching and teaching methodology should with their specificities find place for the EPOSTL and in that way make it easier to relate its content to students.
- 2) Students should be reminded of the purpose and target population of the EPOSTL. A standardized procedure for marking the self-assessments should be defined and implemented, particularly in seminar work or after the completion of a certain topic in different courses.
- 3) The results of our study have shown that students lack autonomy and have not sufficiently developed skills for independent work. As that is the case, it is the teacher's duty to work on developing those skills. In other words, making small steps in taking responsibility and becoming autonomous means taking small steps in dealing with the EPOSTL (statement by statement, section by section). Also, more frequent use of the EPOSTL in class could encourage students to befriend themselves with its content and lead to more enjoyable and more frequent independent work.
- 4) Students should be encouraged to work with the *Glossary of terms* and consult it whenever applicable. Its role in promoting independent use of the EPOSTL should be made clearer to students.
- 5) Other ways of using the EPOSTL could be explored, such as using statements from particular sections for research purposes which implies writing final graduation theses, for writing seminar papers and presentations, focusing on particular statements in the classroom during teaching practice, and for discussion during lectures in different courses.

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Appendix

Questionnaire

Questionnaire - opinions of students in the Integrated Undergraduate and Graduate University Programme of Study of Primary Education and the English Language regarding the use of the *European Portfolio for Student Teachers of Languages* (Newby et al., 2007).

Dear students, please take a moment to fill in this questionnaire.

- 1) You are currently attending year _____ of your studies.
- 2) How often have you used the Portfolio? (✓ the appropriate option; if *other* please describe)
In year 3:
____ weekly; ____ monthly; ____ other _____
In year 4:
____ weekly; ____ monthly; ____ other _____
In year 5:
____ weekly; ____ monthly; ____ other _____

3) Was/Were there (a) section(s) of the Portfolio you **did not use**? Why? _____

4) What is your opinion of the design of the Portfolio?

5) Do you think anything should be changed in the Portfolio itself? If yes, suggest what.

6) In what way, if any, has the Portfolio affected your didactic knowledge, teaching competences and skills?

7) Did the EPOSTL help you identify any specific areas you want to work on more? (please ✓ the appropriate option)

_____ Yes; _____ No; _____ Not that much; _____ It helped a lot;

Other _____

Please, give some examples in case the EPOSTL did help you.

8) Give your suggestions for improving the use of the Portfolio (e.g. used more often, introduced earlier, used more in class, in different courses – which?...)

9) On a scale from 1-5 (1= not at all; 2= little use; 3= can't tell; 4=rather useful; 5= really useful) mark how useful you have found the sections of the Portfolio **at this point** of you studies?

Introduction	1	2	3	4	5
Personal statement	1	2	3	4	5
Self-assessment					
Context	1	2	3	4	5
Methodology	1	2	3	4	5
Resources	1	2	3	4	5
Lesson planning	1	2	3	4	5
Conducting a lesson	1	2	3	4	5
Independent learning	1	2	3	4	5
Assessment of learning	1	2	3	4	5
Reflection grid	1	2	3	4	5
Glossary of terms	1	2	3	4	5
Dossier	1	2	3	4	5
User's guide	1	2	3	4	5

10) On a scale from 1-5 mark how useful do you think the sections of the Portfolio will be **in your future teaching?**

Introduction	1	2	3	4	5
Personal statement	1	2	3	4	5
Self-assessment					
Context	1	2	3	4	5
Methodology	1	2	3	4	5
Resources	1	2	3	4	5
Lesson planning	1	2	3	4	5
Conducting a lesson	1	2	3	4	5
Independent learning	1	2	3	4	5
Assessment of learning	1	2	3	4	5
Reflection grid	1	2	3	4	5
Glossary of terms	1	2	3	4	5
Dossier	1	2	3	4	5
User's guide	1	2	3	4	5

THANK YOU FOR YOUR COOPERATION IN THIS RESEARCH!

Razvijanje svijesti studenata o učiteljskim kompetencijama uz pomoć *Europskog portfolija za obrazovanje učitelja jezika*

Sažetak

Rad prikazuje rezultate istraživanja upotrebe Europskog portfolija za obrazovanje nastavnika jezika (EPONAJ) kao dijela metodičkih kolegija poučavanja engleskog jezika u okviru Integriranog preddiplomskog i diplomskog sveučilišnog studija primarnog obrazovanja i engleskog jezika na Učiteljskom fakultetu u Zagrebu. EPONAJ je alat za samoprocjenu i promišljanje koji je Vijeće Europe osmislilo za studente buduće učitelje jezika pa stoga sadrži učiteljske kompetencije koje su važne za učitelje jezika u cjelokupnoj sferi obrazovanja u Europi. Njegova upotreba trebala bi pridonijeti ne samo razvijanju svijesti studenata o generičkim i specifičnim učiteljskim kompetencijama već i osvještavanju potrebe povezivanja početnog obrazovanja učitelja s trajnim stručnim usavršavanjem. EPONAJ se u studiju koristi u okviru metodičkih kolegija poučavanja engleskog jezika od 2009./2010. godine.

Autorice nadalje prikazuju rezultate analize studentskih upitnika o upotrebi EPONAJ-a, koja je ukazala na neke njegove aspekte koji su se pokazali problematičnima za studente. Provođenje istraživanja pruža voditeljima kolegija priliku da promijene i poboljšaju određene aspekte upotrebe EPONAJ-a kako bi se u potpunosti ostvarili postavljeni ciljevi.

Ključne riječi: *Europski portfolio za obrazovanje nastavnika jezika; metodički kolegiji poučavanja engleskog jezika; promišljanje; samoprocjena; učiteljske kompetencije.*