

Case study 2: Applying quality assurance in a Bulgarian teacher training context

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Summary of the case study

The Pedagogical Portfolio for Foreign Language Teacher Trainees has helped us assure and improve the quality of the pre-service teacher education that we offer by:

- empowering our students to make sense of their learning and teaching experience and become autonomous reflective practitioners capable of initiating and capitalising on change while managing their own professional growth;
- enhancing the validity and reliability of the assessment of their professional competence and performance;
- providing for an effective partnership with school mentors;
- giving faculty staff an insight into the quality of the training that teacher trainees receive and use the feedback into programme planning and development.



Description of context

The Pedagogical Portfolio for Foreign Language Teacher Trainees was designed and developed by a team of FLT experts at the Department of Applied Linguistics (now Department of Foreign Languages and Literature) of the New Bulgarian University (NBU), Sofia, Bulgaria, to facilitate the education of pre-service FL teacher trainees enrolled in the BA and MA teacher training programmes. It was officially published in 2004 but the materials in the portfolio had been previously piloted and refined over a period of more than eight years.

What we needed to do and why we did it

We needed a tool which would help trainees structure, document and make sense of their learning and teaching experience, as well as a reliable hermeneutic method of authentically assessing their acquired professional competence and performance. In addition, we needed a manual which would guide the mentors of our trainees into the kind of training they had received and the expectations we had of them, thus strengthening our partnership in the preparation of future teachers. We needed a system of quality assurance and programme evaluation which would provide us with regular feedback to incorporate in the process of programme planning for change and improvement.

Main purpose (what we wanted to achieve)

To assure and improve the quality of the training that we offer to our student teachers of foreign languages.

Action taken (stages and procedures)

The development of the pedagogical portfolio began back in 1994-05 and went through the following stages:

- needs analysis and identification of weaknesses in the training programme;
- deliberation over the possible solutions and alternatives for action (the portfolio was only one of a set of actions taken, another one was the unique – for Bulgaria – initiative to set up a one-year MA mentor training programme at the university as well as run shorter mentor courses for qualified skilled FLT practitioners; there was also trainer training for university methodologists, inclusion of an action research component in the programme, extending the teaching practice period to include all four years of training and diversifying the experience offered, attracting funds and foreign expertise, establishing an FL Resource Centre at the library and a professional network (PRENET) for all interested in improving the quality of pre-service teacher training, etc.);
- reviewing both literature and various examples of good practice;
- careful planning and drafting of the materials for the portfolio;
- piloting the materials across the country in various contexts and using the feedback to re-draft and refine the documents;
- producing the Teaching Practice Handbook for student teachers of English and the Mentor Manual (1998, mimeograph copies);
- further piloting and re-drafting in the light of the feedback received, and promoting its use in and outside NBU;

- designing the Pedagogical Portfolio for English Language Teacher Trainees (2001-02, mimeograph) and introducing it formally to the wide professional community as a tool for enhancing reflective practice and self-managing the lifelong learning of the teaching profession, as well as an instrument for quality control in job employment, tenure and promotion;
- producing and publishing the Pedagogical Portfolio for Foreign Language Teacher Trainees (2004, Sofia, NBU) – the file contains an English and Bulgarian version of the documents and serves as a basis for unifying the requirements for all NBU FL teacher trainees;
- forthcoming: versions in German, French, Spanish, Italian and Russian (the languages offered at NBU) are in the process of development;
- forthcoming: a generic version of the pedagogical portfolio (as the present one is in some respects tailored to the NBU programme context).

Description of content

The pedagogical portfolio is organised in two parts – main body and appendices. The first part offers some advice on the logistics of FL teachers' preparation and provides guidelines for documenting a trainee's professional biography and structuring the multiple sources of evidence of their professional competence and performance in the dossier in the following three sections:

1. nature and content of the pursued and/or obtained pedagogical degree(s) or qualification(s);
2. university-based professional training;
3. school-based professional training and work and/or experience as a school practitioner.

Some of the highly valued resource materials for training and self-development in this part include:

- the "Practical teaching objectives" which outline clear goals based on professional standards for "good" classroom teaching;
- the practical "Advice on planning and evaluating lessons", which enables trainees to critically reflect on their experience and gradually take the responsibility for their own learning;
- the "Assessment criteria" for (self-)evaluating trainees' pedagogical skills.

The second part (Appendices) comprises a wide range of photocopiable support materials – various sample structured classroom observation sheets, a lesson plan template with a checklist to help the trainee's self-evaluation and action planning, mentor feedback forms, a more global self-assessment framework, a questionnaire inviting trainees' comments on their relationship with their mentor, etc. These reflect the basic theoretical principles translated into specific classroom behaviours and are directly applicable in practice.

Illustration of content

“Practical teaching objectives” (extract):

Category	Comments
Instructions and explanations	Trainees should be able to give clear and easy to follow instructions and explanations. They should be able to state more complicated instructions and make sure that they check students’ understanding. They should be able to notice when there is confusion and react to this. The use of Bulgarian should be limited to necessary instances, rather than being a generally applied technique for explaining procedures
Use of mother tongue	Bulgarian should be used justifiably by the trainee, to help or check understanding, to avoid the use of more complicated and/or unfamiliar language and to save time

“Assessment criteria” (extract):

Category	Distinction	Satisfactory	Attention needed
Clarity of explanations/ instructions	Explanations and instructions are clear and easy to follow; students always know what is going on	Explanations and instructions are usually clear; the teacher notices when there is confusion and reacts to this	Explanations and instructions are confused/contradictory/unclear; students often do not know what to do
Use of Bulgarian	Bulgarian is used justifiably to help or check understanding and save time	Bulgarian is not over-used; switching does not confuse students	Bulgarian is used unnecessarily or is not used when needed

Main outcomes

The implementation of the pedagogical portfolio has led to:

- increasing the effectiveness of FL teacher education (including the quality of FL teaching done by student teachers during teaching practice);
- contributing to the growth of autonomous, reflective practitioners, capable of continuous professional development;
- increasing the validity, reliability and transparency of assessment through introducing measurable standards of work and unified assessment criteria of professional competence and performance for the (student) teachers of different foreign languages;
- improving the relationship between the university and the TP schools through better informing the mentors about the requirements to the student teachers, the stages and methods of their education and assessment of the acquired professional skills, as well as through involving mentors in the evaluation of the trainees' competence and classroom performance;
- optimising trainees' mobility and employability through informing possible future educators and employers about the content and the quality of the professional qualification of prospective teachers and their potential for professional development;
- empowering faculty staff to take informed decisions about programme development and improvement, drawing on feedback from portfolio analysis;
- contributing to the development of criteria for assessing quality in FL teaching (QIFLT) to be used by ministry of education experts at a national level.

Main conclusions

The figure of a puzzle can be a good metaphor of the complex construct of the FL teacher's professional competence, as well as of the pedagogical portfolio as a tool for its formation and reflection. In other words, teaching competence and performance are difficult to adequately illustrate and/or evaluate only through the observation of a single lesson, a certificate for the respective qualification, or a paper from a professional forum. However, when all the evidence has been collected and arranged together, revealing the critical thinking of the reflective practitioner, as in the pedagogical portfolio, the mosaic of various components begins to acquire more complete and tangible dimensions, presenting the multifaceted character of this evasive entity – pedagogical competence – in a fuller and clearer picture. The puzzle is also a metaphor of the ongoing process of professional development and improvement, of the open-ended system of the pedagogical competence in which the newly acquired professional knowledge and skills integrate with the teaching experience gathered to make a difference in the quality of teaching.

The puzzle of professional competence

