

Using EPOSTL as a self-reflection tool for improving pre-service and in-service teachers' competences

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Abstract

The main issue being investigated is related to identifying specific areas of teaching practice that help prospective teachers of English to become more self-reflective and more autonomous in the development of their teacher competences. The research focused on determining specific areas in the EPOSTL document that were used by student teachers throughout their teacher preparation in several methodology courses. The teacher educator aimed for determining the most rewarding or the least rewarding practices in their teaching with the support of the EPOSTL tool as a self-reflection practice. More specifically, one of the main goals in the investigation was related to the selection of specific segments in the teaching practice of pre-service and in-service teachers, within the areas of *Methodology*, *Lesson planning* and *Conducting a lesson*, and by using the descriptors from the EPOSTL tool in the spirit of a self-reflective approach in order to identify the most critical segments for improvement.

Keywords

In-service teacher education, EPOSTL, self-reflection tool, teacher competences, teacher development

Rationale

What was the reason for your interest in this issue?

The use of the EPOSTL tool in language teaching pedagogy courses is seen as a positive measure in different countries and different teaching and learning contexts. This action research is in its second phase of the research initiated in Graz, (10-11 November, 2016) as part of the seminar entitled "Action Research for Language Teachers Communities". The representatives of pre-service

English language teacher education programmes from Estonia and Bosnia and Herzegovina, along with a colleague representing the in-service language teacher education in Greece, developed a small-scale international research project launched in November 2016, and planned to be finished in March 2018.

The teacher educator from Bosnia and Herzegovina decided to develop this idea further and contextualise it for her own specific teaching context. EPOSTL has previously been used at the teacher education programme of the English Department in Sarajevo, since 2010, but no systematic approach has been developed to incorporate this tool as a part of the clearly articulated methodology framed within the research elements. The proposed research will aim at determining the scope of effectiveness and the applicability of the Portfolio at the Teacher Education Programme of the Faculty of Philosophy of the University of Sarajevo.

What did you want to change and why?

As a teacher educator, I wanted to introduce the EPOSTL document to my students at the teacher education programme in order to see to what extent this approach is useful for developing teacher competences of pre-service teachers of English and to determine whether tools like this one are stimulating the growth of independence in my students.

What was your research question?

The main research question was to investigate what are some specific areas of teaching practice that are based on reflection which help prospective teachers of English to become more self-reflective and more autonomous in the development of their teacher competences. The research also focused on determining specific areas in the EPOSTL document that were used by student teachers throughout their teacher preparation in several methodology courses. The teacher educator aimed for determining the most rewarding or the least rewarding practices in their teaching with the support of the EPOSTL tool as a self-reflection practice.

What were your assumptions underlying the question? (your theoretical assumptions).

The Self-Assessment section of EPOSTL includes a wide range of competences and topics. The focal point in the course in 2017-2018 that I chose to relate to our AR project is within the field of Pedagogical practice 1 and 2, and Intercultural Communicative Competences and Intercultural Approach to Teaching EFL, during which my 9 students, in their final year of the MA Teaching Programme, are expected to develop their own ICC workshop for different levels of language and culture competences. As the final assignment in this practice teaching/ICC workshop planning and teaching, I gave students the instructions to develop a self-assessment reflection paper (within three areas of competences: Methodology, Lesson Planning and Conducting Lessons) of their own teacher development at the beginning of the course, but also during the planning process and right after they complete their teaching. Each student was also asked, with the help of the descriptors, to identify the skills they would like to focus on in their teaching.

Describe the setting(s)

Institutional setting(s)

The research took place at the Faculty of Philosophy of the University of Sarajevo, at the Department of English language and literature, in the MA programme for teacher development that provides professional education for pre-service English teachers who are prepared to work in primary and secondary schools.

Classroom or group situation(s)

The research was conducted in three different classes as part of the following courses: *Pedagogical practice 1*, *Pedagogical practice 2*, and *Latest Trends in EFL Methodology (Intercultural Approach to Language Teaching)*, in the period from spring 2017 and aimed to be completed by the end of the summer 2019. There were two groups of students in 2017, one comprised of 14 and the other comprised of 9 students. In 2018 there were two groups of students involved in this research, one comprised of 14 and the other comprised of 15.

Describe the action research process

Step-by-step: What did you do?

Stage 1: Introducing EPOSTL to student- teachers. Setting the tasks in the Personal Statement

Course: Methodology of Teaching EFL, Spring 2017

Lecture related to Teacher Development

The students will critically analyse, and discuss the key concepts and ideas related to the use of this tool. They will discuss the very term “portfolio” and will recall all other learning experiences with the use of different types of portfolios. At this stage, the students will be invited to reflect on the questions from the Personal Statement, which will be followed by in-class discussion. The students will also learn that this document will be used throughout the lessons in Pedagogical practice 1 and Pedagogical practice 2.

Stage 2: Selecting the sections for self-assessment for the peer-teaching class

Course: Pedagogical practice 1, Fall 2017

The Self-Assessment section of EPOSTL includes a wide range of competences and topics. The focal point in the Pedagogical practice 1 should be Methodology, Lesson Planning and Conducting a Lesson. The students should perform a self-assessment of their competences in the beginning of the course, and should reflect on some self-selected topics within those three major themes as they are planning their practice teaching classes, and right after they complete the teaching.

To facilitate the students' reflection on the “can-do” statements from the Portfolio, the students will be invited to integrate them into the planning of their peer-teaching assignment. Each student will be asked, with the help of the descriptors, to identify the skills they would like to focus on in their peer teaching. The following is the list with the tasks the students may be invited to fulfill (adapted from Orlova, 2010):

1. Select the area in the suggested topics of the EPOSTL (Methodology, Lesson Planning, and Conducting a Lesson) that you would like to focus on.
2. Look through the statements. Identify the skills you would like to practice and focus on.
3. If you think that the list is not inclusive of all the skills, expand on them. Note them down in your notes and reflections.
4. Articulate the goals and objectives (which is an integral part of the lesson plan). Prepare the materials.
5. Teach the lesson/or a sequence of a lesson (you will be video recorded).
6. The classmates will be invited to identify your primary focus in terms of the “can-do “descriptors”. Compare them with your evaluation and notes.

Watch the video and analyse your teaching according to the descriptors (individually or with a partner).

7. The video is viewed with the instructor in the final reflection stage and critical reflection is developed in the discussion and analysis.

Stage 3: Selecting the sections for self-assessment for the final practice teaching class in school

Course: Pedagogical practice 2, Spring 2018

The Self-Assessment section of EPOSTL related to the topics of Context, Independent Learning and Assessment of Learning should be the primary focus of this stage of self-assessment and reflection. As the students are preparing for independent lesson planning and lesson teaching, they should integrate those topics into the reflection log during the planning stage and after the lesson is completed. Each student should include the reflection notes, comments from the instructor, photos from the field and, if possible, some videos recording the most important segments of their teaching and present them in the format of the poster presentation.

Stage 4: Having the second cycle with the students enrolled in 2018-2019 academic year in all three courses, Fall 2018, Spring 2019

Stage 5: Focus group interviews on students' attitudes and opinions regarding EPOSTL in their teacher development programme

The instructor should make 2 focus groups with students after each student has filled out the questionnaire submitted to them at the end of the semester, in May 2019. The primary goal of the survey and the focus group interviews is to better understand the use of this tool in profiling language teachers and improving the development of teaching competences.

When was the action research project carried out?

The action research project was carried out from Spring 2017 and is planned until Summer 2019.

Who were your participants?

The participants are the students from the Department of English language and literature, Teacher Education Programme of the Faculty of Philosophy of the University of Sarajevo.

How did you collect your data?

With the use of the critical reflection papers, descriptors from EPOSTL and by focus groups.

Which action research tools (e.g. questionnaires, interviews etc.) did you use?

Interviews, Questionnaires, Critical reflection papers with closed ended and open-ended questions.

Why did you choose these tools?

They best suited the work with my students and could naturally be integrated as a part of the teaching and assessment process. Each student produced up to three-page long reflection papers which incorporated the research goals. The papers were reflective of their insights into teaching and areas for improvement.

At which points in the process did you implement action research tools?

During the process of teaching, from the very beginning of the research framework.

How did you analyse your data?

What did you find out and how did you adapt your action research process? (Which action-strategies did you develop?)

I have not fully analysed the data yet, and I am planning to do so during 2019, after I complete the second cycle of my research. Going through the critical reflection papers and facilitating the discussion after the first cycle with my students I was encouraged to carry out the same approaches with my second group of students. The final analysis in 2019 will bring a deeper insight into the very understanding of the research questions I posted in the beginning stage of the research process.

Final findings

This was a very productive process for my students and a lot of them spoke highly of the overall process and greatly appreciated the journey of the reflection itself. I once again got a firm confirmation that this approach to teaching and learning at the university level is also very rewarding and worth the effort. The interactive pedagogy aimed at developing a self-reflective teacher practitioner is a crucial component for teacher education within the initial teacher education programme. After the overall process, what I would change would be to use the poster-presentation of their reflections for a more in-depth analysis and discussion, which I will implement in my next course of the teaching practice in the spring of 2019, so that students can benefit within the group sharing and group dynamics and once again get some feedback.

In their response papers, in the part of their final conclusions, some of them mentioned:

For me, it was not too difficult to select the segments to focus on in my self-reflection assignment because the above mentioned things are some issues that I need to work on and that have represented a challenge for me for quite some time. I do not find these types of self-reflection useless or time-consuming at all. It is rather the opposite. They are very convenient in tracking our progress in becoming dutiful, conscientious, and effective teachers. I would definitely use this method of self-reflection even when already working as a teacher because I truly believe we should never stop questioning ourselves whether some things could be improved and how, and because one should never stop working on being his/her best self and developing in every possible sense.

I was definitely satisfied writing this self-reflection but I have to admit that it took some time for me to really concentrate and observe my workshop in a more detailed way, a way that I have never done before. It is very useful in tracking our progress regarding our teaching. I think that we should always use this method, even when we start our teaching at schools because teachers should be prepared and accept lifelong learning as normal and the most important segment. We should always question ourselves whether our teaching could have been better and what the steps we need to follow to develop even more should be.

Not only would I like to use this method of self-reflection again, but I feel obliged towards my future profession to keep learning, as I believe that being a teacher is being a lifelong participant in a lifelong education project. The sections given for this assignment to reflect on were relevant for me during my planning and after the workshop had finished, and are most relevant when it comes to any lesson planning. I did not have any difficulties following the instructions and answering the questions, as I am aware of their relevance for my future work.

Within the reflection papers the students also recognized a whole range of different points to improve and integrate in their teaching, and some of them also recognized the complexity of a challenge to assume the responsibility to be self-critical in your approach to teacher development.

When I think of this self-reflection, I can say that it was a bit difficult to select segments to focus on, because all of the segments were really interesting and helped me to evaluate and reflect on my workshop. Since I am not an experienced teacher or moderator, it was a bit difficult to keep the selected aspects of teaching in my mind while preparing and conducting the workshop, but I did my best to fulfill everything that I planned and to follow these instructions as well. After the workshop, it was quite easy to reflect on my performance in terms of the selected aspects of teaching, because I remembered my workshop very well and I think I am competent enough to reflect on my performance and to be self-critical while doing it. This self-reflection did not require much extra effort but it surely affected the way I was preparing my workshop, because I would probably forget many of these segments if I had not read about them before I started preparing the workshop. Once again, I am not an experienced teacher and I easily forget about finishing off a lesson in a focused way or ensuring smooth transitions or timing the activities to reflect learners' attention spans etc., and EPOSTL really helped me to stay focused and on the right track. This experience helped me to realise that lesson planning or any other planning is not an easy task and it includes much more than just choosing and timing the activities. It raised my awareness about the importance of many different aspects of planning. I learned that my activities and materials should enhance the learners' intercultural awareness, that they should help learners to understand different value systems, that they should be coherent, balanced, varied, that I should be flexible, able to identify time needed for specific activities and topics, ensure smooth transitions, adjust my time schedule, take care of the learners and their interests and many other things as well. When I start working as a teacher, I would really like to use this method of self-reflection and I am pretty sure that I will use it. Teaching means lifelong learning and one of the best ways to learn is to detect one's own mistakes and flaws and try to correct them. Teaching means always striving to do better and be better.

Conclusions & Outlook

One of the supporting activities for this long-term research framework is another initiative I undertook after the AR Seminar in November, and this was to apply with the project for the Training and Consultancy in ECML, for which the approval has been granted, and the EPOSTL Training for in-service and pre-service teachers was implemented in Sarajevo, in October 2017. All

of my students attended this two-day long conference and this opportunity gave them additional insight into the understanding of the role and structure of the EPOSTL document.

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