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PERSPECTIVES ON THE EPOSTL
BY STUDENT TEACHERS OF ENGLISH

Submitted in partial fulfilment of the requirements for the M.A. in English
Language and Literature and Informatics at the University of Rijeka

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Abstract

This Master's Thesis explores the benefits and challenges of the use of the *European Portfolio for Student Teachers of Languages* (EPOSTL), as part of the pre-service English teacher training programme at the Faculty of Humanities and Social Sciences of the University of Rijeka. The data for this study have been collected by means of an online questionnaire administered to student-teachers enrolled in the final year of the Master's of Arts in Teaching English as a Foreign Language (MA in TEFL) Programme, The aims of the research are to examine whether the EPOSTL is an effective tool for monitoring and promoting the development of student-teachers' language teaching skills and competences and to identify their perceptions regarding the strengths and weaknesses of the EPOSTL. The findings show numerous benefits and challenges student-teachers faced while using this self-reflection tool, and also offer guidelines for implementing the Portfolio in language teaching education.

Key words: EPOSTL, pre-service teacher training programme, student-teachers, MA in TEFL

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List of Abbreviations

CEFR .... Common European Framework of Reference for Languages

CLT .... Communicative Language Teaching

ECML .... European Council of Modern Languages

EFUESTE ..... Effective Use of the EPOSTL by Student Teachers of English

ELP .... European Language Portfolio

ELT .... English Language Teaching

EPOSTL .... European Portfolio for Student Teachers of Languages

J-POSTL .... Japanese Portfolio for Student Teachers of Languages

MA .... Master of Arts

TEFL .... Teaching English as a Foreign Language

1. Introduction

In the last few decades, the fields of language teaching and learning have been under great impact of the development of socio-political, economic and cultural conditions (Burkert, 2009). Mostly this refers to the increase of social mobility and the ability to communicate across linguistic and cultural borders. Therefore, a need to promote language learning, with a focus on communicative language teaching (CLT)[1], has risen (ibid).

Due to this, the complexity of teacher competences has increased, thus changing the role of the teacher (Vizek Vidović & Domović, 2013), who now has to be ready for continuous personal professional development, with the focus on improving reflection and self-evaluation skills (Cindrić et al, 2015).

This idea has also been embraced in today's pre-service language teacher education. Foreign language student-teachers are expected to be able to "critically evaluate the attitudes and beliefs about teaching and learning, which inform and guide their professional practice" (Cindrić et al, 2015, p. 118). In order to be able to do this, they need to be encouraged to use standardised tools for continuously monitoring and assessing their academic progress and, thus, become autonomous teachers (Mirici & Hergüner, 2015).

It has to be noted that in Europe, the development of foreign language teaching and learning has been accomplished by the collaboration of the Council of Europe Language Policy Division and the Council of Europe Center for Modern Languages (Mirici & Demirbas, 2013; Mirici & Hergüner, 2015). This collaboration led to the development of several tools important for language teaching, learning and assessment, in accordance with the standard reference framework – the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages (Council of Europe, 2001).

One of these tools is the European Portfolio for Student Teachers of Languages (EPOSTL), "a document for students undergoing their initial teacher education" (Newby et al., 2007, p. 5). It represents an instrument for reflection and assessment of the didactic knowledge and skills necessary to teach modern languages, which enables students to

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[1] Communicative language teaching (CLT), or the communicative approach, is an approach to language teaching with an aim to develop students' communicative competence through interaction in the target language (Nunan, 1991, in Swathi, 2014).

monitor the progress of those competences and to record their experiences of teaching during their teacher education courses (Newby et al., 2007; Newby, 2012). The use of the EPOSTL and the effect it has on language teaching education has been explored since its publication in 2007. Since then, it has been translated into thirteen languages (Newby, 2012), thus representing a standardised tool for culturaly diverse societies.

It is important to find out if the EPOSTL is still in line with the evolving needs of language teaching and how to adjust it to the specific needs of certain culture. Currently, a project, entitled Effective Use of the EPOSTL by Student-Teachers of English (EFUESTE), is held. It aims to train university lecturers and student-teachers how to effectively implement the EPOSTL in their language teaching programme.

As the project group member and as a student-teacher of English language, who has used the Portfolio for monitoring the development of language teaching competences, I have been acquainted with the features of the EPOSTL. I have also encountered both benefits and challenges while using the Portfolio, which mostly correlate with the observations expressed by my colleagues in the study, which will be explained in the paper.

Therefore, for the aim of this study, the thesis will concentrate on the extent to which the EPOSTL promotes self-reflection and self-assessment. Furthermore, it will examine language teaching competences that it helps to develop, benefits it has regarding language teaching education and challenges that students encounter while using the EPOSTL for tracking the development of their knowledge and skills.

In line with these aspects, the paper is organised as follows:

Chapter 1 will present a short introductory chapter on the new trends in language teaching education. Mostly it will focus on the importance of self-reflection and self-assessment in foreign language teaching programme. This will serve as a theoretical basis for the analysis of the EPOSTL, in chapter 2, and for the subsequent research.

Chapter 2 will give a detailed overview of the EPOSTL as a tool for tracking development of students' didactic knowledge and language teaching skills. Its history and background will be presented, followed by its aims and format. In addition, other studies on the effectiveness of the use of the EPOSTL, with a focus on its benefits and challenges, will be discussed in detail.

Chapter 3 will report on the study carried out among English language student-teachers at the Faculty of Humanities and Social Sciences in Rijeka, Croatia. This section provides an account of the methodology and describes the aims, research questions, contexts and participants. The overall aim of the study is to determine to what extent the EPOSTL is found to be effective for promoting reflection and recording the development of students' language teaching skills and competences. The findings reveal that student-teachers' perspectives on the Portfolio are under a great influence of its numerous benefits and challenges. Those features are going to be thoroughly examined in the Discussion.

Chapter 4, which is the last chapter of this thesis, will be concerned with the question of how the EPOSTL might be implemented in foreign language teaching programme. Finally, some concluding remarks are offered, with a recommendation for future research that could reveal the direction in which the EPOSTL could be further developed, and, thus, contribute to the improvement of the quality of initial teacher education.

2. About the EPOSTL

2.1 The EPOSTL: History and Background

The EPOSTL project was established in 2005 by the Governing Board of European Council of Modern Languages (ECML), whose aim was to improve the quality of the training of language teachers in Europe (Newby, 2012). Initially, members of the project wanted to set up a common teacher education curriculum, but soon realised that this is impossible because of differences in teacher education programmes throughout countries. Therefore, their new task was to develop a portfolio for use in teacher education. The project, entitled "A Framework for Teacher Education", was coordinated by six teacher educators from the following European countries: the UK, Norway, Austria, Poland and Armenia (Newby et al., 2011; Newby, 2012).

The authors worked on the EPOSTL for two years. They based their writing on existing documents developed by the Language Policy Division of the Council of Europe, such as the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages (CEFR) and the European Language Portfolio (ELP), as well as the project European Profile for Language Teacher Education – A Frame of Reference (European Profile), financed by the European Commission (Burkert & Schwienhorst, 2008; Newby, 2012).

Before finalising the EPOSTL, it went through two draft versions which were evaluated by student-teachers and teacher educators from all 34 member states of the ECML at two workshops in Graz (Newby, 2012). After reviewing and taking into consideration their critical voices and creative suggestions, the final version was published by the ECML in English and French in 2007, and in German in 2008. Since then, it has been translated into thirteen European and Asian languages (ibid). It was translated into Croatian in 2009 (Newby, et al., 2007/2009) and in the same year it was introduced in Croatian foreign language teacher programme, at the Faculty of Philosophy in Osijek (Bagarić, 2012) and at the Faculty of Teacher Education in Zagreb (Cindrić et al., 2015).

2.2 Aims and Format of the EPOSTL

As stated above, the general purpose of the EPOSTL is to help language student teachers reflect on and assess the development of their knowledge and skills. As such, it pursues to fulfil the following aims, which are defined in the *User's Guide* section of the EPOSTL (Newby et al., 2007):

1. to encourage students to reflect on the competences a teacher strives to attain and on the underlying knowledge which feeds these competences;
2. to help prepare students for their future profession in a variety of teaching contexts;
3. to promote discussion between students and between students and their teacher educators and mentors;
4. to facilitate self-assessment of students' developing competence;
5. to help students develop awareness of their strengths and weaknesses related to teaching;
6. to provide an instrument which helps chart progress;
7. to serve as the springboard for discussions, topics for term papers, research projects etc.;
8. to provide support during teaching practice and assist in discussions with mentors; this will help mentors to provide systematic feedback. (p. 83-84)

In order for student-teachers to be able to fulfil all of the abovementioned aims, the EPOSTL is designed to be both comprehensive and systematic. In other words, it is divided into three main sections (Burkert & Schwienhorst, 2008; Newby, 2011; Velikova, 2013):

- a *Personal Statement*, comprising students' personal data, general questions related to teaching and expectations about the teacher education programme;
- a *Self-assessment section*, consisting of the 193 "can-do" descriptors which represent core didactic competences and enable reflection and self-assessment at different stages of teacher education;
- a *Dossier*, serving for recording examples of work relevant to teaching, such as lesson plans and scripts, lesson observation notes, post-lesson evaluations, etc.

The other less comprehensive sections of the EPOSTL are (Newby et al., 2007):

- an *Introduction*;
- a *Glossary of Terms* used in the EPOSTL;

- an *Index* of terms used in the descriptors;
- a *User's Guide*, which provides information about the EPOSTL.

From this division it is obvious that the self-assessment descriptors represent "the heart of the EPOSTL." (ibid, p. 5). They are grouped into seven general categories: Context, Methodology, Resources, Lesson planning, Conducting a Lesson, Independent Learning and Assessment of Learning (Newby et al., 2007). These areas cover all aspects of language teaching. In each section, a list of specific competences is provided. They are written in the form of "can-do" statements followed by a bar to provide visual display of student development in the respective competence. Student-teachers are supposed to colour in the bars at different stages of their education and teaching (practice) according to their own assessment. In this way student-teachers reflect on their strengths and weaknesses, and chart the progress of their didactic competences (Burkert & Schwienhorst, 2008).

2.3 Uses of the EPOSTL

After publication, the EPOSTL has been used in different teaching education contexts, such as the pre-service teacher training, teaching practice and in-service teacher training (Newby, 2011), and included in methodology courses as a means for raising awareness of the complexity of teaching, reviewing and monitoring students' academic progress (Orlova, 2011).

The use of the EPOSTL has also sparked research on the topic, and several studies have investigated its use in practice. Mostly, they were concerned with exploring the fulfilment of the EPOSTL's general aim: whether it enables student-teachers to reflect on their teaching knowledge and skills (Okumus & Akalin, 2015). These studies investigated the use of the EPOSTL in different contexts, such as teaching practicum (Strakova, 2009; Fenner, 2011; Ingvarsdottir, 2011; Nihlen, 2011; Orlova, 2011; Velikova 2013; Okumus & Akalin, 2015), methodology courses (Bagarić, 2011; Makinen, 2011; Mehlmauer-Larcher, 2011; Bagarić, 2012; Çakır and Balçıkanlı, 2012; Cindrić et al., 2015) and bilateral teacher education programme (Jones, 2011; 2012).

Overall, the findings suggest that the EPOSTL is an effective tool for student teachers of languages. For example, Okumus & Akalin (2015) found that student teachers believe that

the EPOSTL improves reflective teaching skills and increases self-assessment. The findings indicate that meta-cognitive reflection[2] is one of the most important benefits of the EPOSTL.

Similarly, studies have shown that both student teachers and their mentors consider the EPOSTL to be a useful tool for supporting self-reflection and self-assessment, and raising awareness of student teachers' strengths and weaknesses in teaching (Fenner, 2011; Çakır & Balçıkanlı, 2012; Velikova, 2013; Mirici et al., 2015a; Strakova, 2015). In other words, the EPOSTL has been found to a) direct reflection of teaching and learning skills, b) increase awareness of teaching components, and c) encourage students to develop didactic competences (Strakova, 2009).

Regarding another related benefit of the EPOSTL, it has been also found to contribute to training autonomous teachers, since self-assessment and self-reflection are related to the concept of learner autonomy (Burkert & Schwienhorst, 2008; Strakova, 2009; Kiliańska-Przybyło, 2014). Furthermore, one of its significant benefits is that it aids student-teachers to bridge the gap between theory and practice by helping them to discover links between the two (Burkert, 2009; Urbaniak, 2010; Fenner, 2011) and raising their awareness of the role of autonomy, not only in teaching, but in the learning process as well (Komorowska, 2012).

Studies have also shown that the EPOSTL is not beneficial only for student-teachers, but for teacher educators and mentors as well (Fenner, 2011; Bagarić, 2012). Specifically, it serves as a guide and helps them make teaching competences more transparent to students. At the same time, it enables teacher educators and mentors to plan, implement and evaluate teacher education programme, which can lead to its improvement (Bagarić, 2011; Jones, 2011). In addition, due to the structural aspects of the EPOSTL, "the focus on the EPOSTL in general, and specific descriptors in particular, (it) provides a common language for all parties involved in teacher education" (Newby, 2011, p. 15) and, thus, narrows the gap between students, mentors and university lecturers (Ingvarsdóttir, 2011). Therefore, it is of great significance to introduce the EPOSTL to school mentors and to encourage them to use it in their work with student teachers (Mehlmauer-Larcher, 2011).

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[2] Meta-cognitive reflection, or metacognition, involves monitoring, assessing and improving students' performances and thinking (Burke, 1994). In this case, it refers to knowledge of teaching.

2.3.1 Use of the EPOSTL in other language contexts.

Although the majority of abovementioned studies focused on student-teachers of English, it should be noted that the EPOSTL is intended for use by student-teachers of all languages. Likewise, these studies confirmed that the EPOSTL is a beneficial tool for monitoring and promoting the development of self-awareness by student teachers of other European languages, such as German (Rückl, 2011; Bagarić, 2012; Mirici & Hergüner, 2015), French (Jones, 2011; Schallenberg, 2011; Jones, 2012; Mokraja; 2012), Spanish (López & Urbán Parra, 2012) and Italian (Arcuri, 2012).

In addition, due to its well-organised and comprehensive structure, the EPOSTL has also been adapted to foreign language education in Japan under a document called J-POSTL (the Japanese Portfolio for Student Teachers of Languages) (Kiyota et al., 2011; Hisamura et al., 2013; Hisamura, 2014; Takagi, 2015). This adaptation started in 2009 with the outcome of three versions of the portfolio – J-POSTL Full Version for English Teacher Education, J-POSTL for Pre-service English Teacher Education[3] and J-POSTL for In-service English Teacher Education[4] (Hisamura, 2014; Seewald, 2014).

2.3.2 Guideliness for implementing the EPOSTL.

Due to the abovementioned benefits of the EPOSTL on pre-service EFL teacher training, it's use as an integral part of courses related to foreign language teacher programme is recommended (Okumus & Akalin, 2015). According to Orlova (2011), this implementation should pass six stages:

Stage 1: The EPOSTL should be introduced to the student teachers and the tasks in the Personal statement section should be set.

Stage 2: Self-assessment sections should be selected.

Stage 3: Descriptors should be integrated into the course.

Stage 4: Descriptors should be employed for micro-teaching tasks.

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[3] J-POSTL for Pre-service English Teacher Education consists of 100 descriptors elaborated by modifying 113 out of 195 descriptors from the EPOSTL - some descriptors from the EPOSTL, which were considered difficult for EFL Japanese student-teachers, were deleted, some of them were modified and some new descriptors were added (Hisamura, 2011; Kiyota et al., 2011; Hisamura, 2014).

[4] J-POSTL for In-service English Teacher Education consists of modified descriptors from the remaining 62 descriptors from the EPOSTL that were not included in J-POSTL for Pre-service English Teacher Education. They were designed specifically for English teachers in their in-service training program (Hisamura et al., 2013; Hisamura, 2014).

Stage 5: Student teachers should use the EPOSTL during their school practicum.

Stage 6: Students' opinions of the EPOSTL should be surveyed.

In the first stage of implementation, students need to be acquainted with the meanings of the words "European" and "portfolio" in a way that emphasizes the connection of these words with students' teaching practicum (ibid). They should be encouraged to use the EPOSTL by explaining their expectations from teacher education, which can be filled in the Personal statement section (Burkert, 2009; Makinen, 2011; Orlova, 2011).

In the second stage, the most important competences which are going to be assessed and reflected on should be determined (Orlova, 2011). This can be done in several ways. For example, Nihlen (2011) printed the descriptors on cards, which were pulled one at a time, and thus engaged all students in discussions about the relation between the competences and the descriptors. This way, the most important descriptors could be selected. Therefore, it should be made clear to students that not all of the descriptors are going to be covered in the course of their teacher education. They should start with the ones that are dealt mostly in the beginning of their practicum (e.g. descriptors from the Methodology section) and continue with others as they arise (Jones, 2011; Newby, 2011).

In the third stage of implementation, the descriptors should be connected with theoretical knowledge that students have in order to avoid abstraction and ambiguity (Orlova, 2011). For example, Newby (2011) gave his students a video recording of a lesson and their task was to provide feedback. In order to do this, they must first look at the categories diagram in the EPOSTL, p. 6, and choose the ones which they consider to be the most useful for analysing the lesson. This way they become familiar with both the overall categorisation of the descriptors and with the content of the individual ones.

In the fourth stage, these descriptors serve students to identify the skills they would like to focus on in their micro-teaching assignments (Orlova, 2011). This contributes to their progress and serves as a frame for follow-up discussions (Nihlen, 2011; Orlova, 2011).

In addition, it prepares them for the use of the EPOSTL during their pre-service training, which happens in the fifth stage (Orlova, 2011). It is very important that they understand the connection between the self-assessment descriptors and the Dossier in order to use it for self-reflection and self-assessment appropriately (Nihlen, 2011).

This can also be checked in the last stage where student teachers' opinions about their use of the EPOSTL should be surveyed (Orlova, 2011). Nihlen (2011) achieved this by

giving instructions for her students to prepare short individual oral presentation; they had to give an overview of the Methodology section in their EPOSTL, focus on the areas they had worked with the most and prepare one discussion question for others based on the descriptors. Only after these presentations did students realise that they should ask their school mentors for written feedback in order to be able to include it in their EPOSTL. They also realised how open the descriptors are to individual presentation. Therefore, it can be said that this stage does not lead only to the improvement of the use of the EPOSTL, but that it also has a large impact on the development of foreign language teacher programme.

2.3.3 The challenges of using the EPOSTL.

Mention has been made of the numerous benefits of the EPOSTL; however, studies have also pointed to the challenges faced by student-teachers.

For example, Velikova (2013) found that the greatest problem lies in student-teachers' initial uncertainty to set their own learning goals and think about self-assessment. If they are not used to these concepts, they can find them demanding which can lead to decreased motivation and build negative attitudes towards the use of this type of tools (Cindrić et al., 2015).

Another complaint frequently voiced deals with the format of the EPOSTL. Çakır & Balçıkanlı (2012) found that the printed document is not a user-friendly tool for student-teachers who live in a digital age (Thomas, 2009; Kidd, 2010; Guofang & Gut, 2011; Thomas, 2011, in Çakır & Balçıkanlı, 2012). It should be pointed out that the EPOSTL has 92 pages and 193 descriptors and the paper-based version does not allow for searching according to key words or category of descriptors. In addition, it can be easily lost or damaged which can disable student-teachers in tracking development of their teaching skills within a longer period of time. Using the EPOSTL in this format is also environment unfriendly and unpractical to be carried around.

Another difficulty of using the EPOSTL lies in the self-assessment descriptors. Student teachers consider that some of them are ambiguous and need further explanation (Latkovska & Rutka, 2009; Jones, 2011; Cindrić et al., 2015). Some are vague, while others are too similar, for example descriptors dealing with error analysis "*I can deal with errors that occur in class in a way which supports learning processes and communication.*" and "*I can deal with errors that occur in spoken and written language in ways which support*

learning process and do not undermine confidence and communication." (Newby et al., 2007, pp. 57) are probably going to be answered in the same way due to their similarity. In addition, student-teachers claim that it is time consuming to fill in the large number of descriptors in their current order and format (Latkovska & Rutka, 2009; Nihlen, 2011). Another point worth mentioning is that they are not ranked according to the level of importance; namely, not all the descriptors are equally significant for teaching. Furthermore, it is confusing to present competences by colouring bars since there is no indication as to how the space on the bar corresponds to student-teacher achievement (Burkert, 2009).

There can also be a problem regarding perception of the EPOSTL. For instance, some teacher educators may think it represents a complete list of skills to be attained by the fully developed teacher, whereas others may have different priorities for student-teachers (Burkert & Schwienhorst, 2008). As for the use of the EPOSTL by mentors at schools, not all of them are willing to use it, since most of them have already developed their own criteria for assessing student-teachers' teaching (Fenner, 2011). Doubts about its usefulness are even expressed by some student-teachers who claim that it cannot help them identify their teaching strengths and weaknesses when used only in one semester, and that it is probably more sufficient when more teaching experience is gained (Rückl, 2011; Cindrić et al., 2015).

Drawing on the strengths and weaknesses of the EPOSTL, a study to explore the benefits and issues in its use by student teachers of English language of the master level teacher education programme that is carried out at the Faculty of Humanities and Social Sciences in Rijeka, Croatia, was made. It is going to be thoroughly explained in the next chapter.

3. The Present Study

3.1 Aim and Research Questions

The overall aim of the study was to obtain insight into student-teachers' perspectives on the use of the EPOSTL. It was important to find out whether student-teachers consider the EPOSTL to be an effective tool for promoting reflection and recording the development of their language teaching skills and competences.

In line with this aim, the study focused on the following questions:

RQ1: To what extent does the EPOSTL promote self-reflection and self-assessment?

RQ2: How does the EPOSTL foster the development of language teaching competences?

RQ3: What are the strengths and weaknesses of using the EPOSTL?

3.2 Context and Use of the EPOSTL

The context where the study took place is the Faculty of Humanities and Social Sciences in Rijeka. The Faculty comprises eleven departments, the majority of which (eight) are double major studies. All the study programmes are designed according to the two-tier system comprising a Bachelor's Degree and a Master's Degree (primarily in teaching). Students who have completed the Bachelor's level study programme can continue their education by taking the two-year Master's level study Programme in Teaching English as a Foreign Language (TEFL). After finishing this programme, they are fully qualified to teach English as a foreign language in educational institutions at all levels.

This MA in TEFL programme mostly consists of specialised courses, which are pedagogically oriented. They can be divided into general education courses that are common to all teacher training study programmes (such as Didactics, Pedagogy, Developmental Psychology, Education Psychology, etc.) and courses in English applied linguistics and English language teaching (ELT) (such as First and Second Language Acquisition, Introduction to Learning and Teaching English, Introduction to Psycholinguistics, etc.).

These courses deal with the theories of learning and/or teaching English as a foreign language.

A specialized course in ELT methodology, called Methodology of Teaching English as a Foreign Language, is also offered. This course is connected to university-based practicum tutorials, held by methodology teacher, where students learn how to write lesson plans, how to prepare themselves for teaching different language skills[5] and how to teach them as short microteaching tasks.

Methodology of Teaching English as a Foreign Language also serves as a pre-requisite for Pre-service Training Course in Teaching English as a Foreign Language, which carries a weighting of 4 ECTS and is offered to students in the last semester of the programme. This course includes school practice in both elementary and secondary schools during which student-teachers observe lessons of school mentors[6], do six microteaching tasks and hold six independent lessons. They are also required to observe classes taught by peers and provide peer feedback.

The EPOSTL has been used in the Pre-service course since 2010 for three main purposes: a) as a reflection tool, b) as a self-assessment instrument and c) as a means of obtaining information on student-teacher competences, strengths and weaknesses in teaching English as a foreign language. The EPOSTL is included in the course as follows:

- At the beginning of the Pre-service Training Course in Teaching English as a Foreign Language, student-teachers get familiar with the structure of the EPOSTL. They are asked to think about the questions from the Personal Statement section and note their answers individually in the EPOSTL.

- While observing mentors' lessons in the Pre-service course, student-teachers take detailed notes which account for the activities observed in class, such as the four skills, grammar, error treatment, interaction patterns, etc. The observation sheets are art of the materials added to the Dossier section of the EPOSTL.

- While observing peers' lessons, they are encouraged to provide both oral and written feedback about the lesson structure, communication with learners, time

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[5] Four English language skills are listening, writing, reading and speaking. Students are also trained to teach English grammar and vocabulary (Celce-Murcia, 2001).
[6] School mentors serve as advisors by providing student-teachers support in lesson planning, giving them feedback on lessons and monitoring and evaluating their progress. Their opinion is also relevant at the end of the course when methodology teacher evaluates the development of student-teachers' teaching skills.

management and materials. Both good points and bad points of the lesson are highlighted. After receiving written feedbacks from colleagues, student-teachers attach them in the Dossier.

- While holding microteaching tasks and lessons, they are encouraged to evaluate the development of their own teaching skills by reflecting on the descriptors from the Self-Assessment section. In addition, student-teachers are motivated to evaluate their teaching after each lesson through post-lesson evaluation reflections, which include both retrospective and anticipatory types of reflection[7]. In other words, they think about the most/least successful parts of the lessons held, about the success of fulfilling lesson objectives and about alternative teaching methods that could improve this success in future. Written post-lesson reflections, along with lesson plans and materials, are attached in the Dossier section of the EPOSTL.

- Throughout the Pre-service training in schools, student teachers are encouraged to reflect once again on their teaching skills and colour the self-assessment descriptors. This way they can notice the process of development of each teaching competence. They also need to repeat the self-reflection of the descriptors they emphasised as the most important ones or the most challenging ones. In addition, they need to make sure that all of the required lesson plans, materials, observation sheets, peer-feedback forms and post-lesson evaluation reflections are attached in the Dossier.

Therefore, it is obvious that student-teachers of English language at the Faculty of Humanities and Social Sciences in Rijeka are encouraged to constantly use the EPOSTL as a means for reflecting on the development of their own teaching competences, which is supported by assessing materials and sheets used in the pre-service training.

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[7] Retrospective reflection is the one that relies on the memory of past actions, while anticipatory reflection looks forward to a future time in teaching (Beauchamp & Thomas, 2010, in Bagarić, 2012).

3.3 Participants

The study comprised of 46 participants. All of them were student-teachers who attended the course Practicum in Teaching English as a Foreign Language held in the last semester of the two-year double major MA in TEFL programme in 2014/2015. As for the participants' other major, 11 (23.9%) studied Computer Science, 10 (21.7%) of them studied Croatian Language, 8 (17.4%) of them studied History, 8 (17.4%) of them studied Art History, 6 (13%) of them studied Pedagogy, 2 (4.3%) of them studied Philosophy and 1 (2.2 %) of them studied German Language.

If we look at the distribution between sexes, it is unequal as 33 (71.7%) of student-teachers are female and only 13 (28.3%) are male. However, this is characteristic of the foreign language student-teacher population in Croatia (Bagarić, 2012) and, presumably, in many other countries as well.

When it comes to the distribution between ages, there were five generations of student-teachers who participated in the study. There were 23 (50%) of participants who used the EPOSTL in academic year 2014/2015, 9 (19.5%) of them who used it in academic year 2013/2014, 12 (26.1%) of them who used it in academic year 2012/2013, 1 (2.1%) who used it in academic year 2011/2012 and 1 (2.1%) who used it in academic year 2010/2011. The details of the distribution of the participants' subgroups are given in Table 1.

Table 1: Background information of the participants

Student-teachers who studied in academic year	2014/ 2015	2013/ 2014	2012/ 2013	2011/ 2012	2010/ 2011	TOTAL
English and Computer Science	8	1	2			**11**
English and Croatian	7	3				**10**
English and History	2		5		1	**8**
English and Art History		3	4	1		**8**

Student-teachers who studied in academic year	2014/ 2015	2013/ 2014	2012/ 2013	2011/ 2012	2010/ 2011	TOTAL
English and Pedagogy	5	1				**6**
English and Philosophy	1	1				**2**
English and German			1			**1**
TOTAL	**23**	**9**	**12**	**1**	**1**	**46**

Source: Made by the student according to the research analysis

3.4 Research Method

The data were collected by means of an anonymous questionnaire, which was available in both printed and online versions. The printed version was handed to 18 student-teachers during their English classes in June 2015, whereas the survey link was sent to a sample of 97 current and former English student-teachers via e-mail in June and July 2015. The return rate was rather low as 28 of them filled in the questionnaire. It took participants about 10 minutes to complete it.

The questionnaire comprised four parts. The first part, consisting of four questions, enquired into the respondents' background information, such as gender, other major and student generation. The students were also asked about the frequency of use of the EPOSTL during the Pre-service Training Course in Teaching English as a Foreign Language. The second part, comprising four questions, investigated the respondents' opinion about the most useful section of the EPOSTL and attitudes toward the portfolio as an effective tool for: (1) self-reflection, (2) self-assessment and (3) identifying teacher competences that needed to be further developed. The third part, consisting of Likert-type questions, elicited information about the extent to which the participants found the EPOSTL useful in the development of 32 teacher competences, which correspond to the 32 categories of the Portfolio's self-assessment descriptors. They had to rate these competences on a scale 1-5, where 1 means "Not useful at

all" and 5 means "Very useful". The fourth part of the questionnaire, comprising four open-ended questions, investigated the respondents' attitudes towards the strengths and weaknesses of the EPOSTL and the challenges they faced while using it in practice. Finally, they were also asked to provide suggestions for the improvement of the portfolio.

3.5 Results

The findings of the analysis of the first part of the questionnaire show that half of the respondents (47.8%) used the EPOSTL once a month, while 19.6% of them used it only at the end of the semester. The minority of the participants (15.2%) used it once in two weeks, 10.9% of them used it once a week and 4.3% used it two times in the semester.

The analysis of the second part of the questionnaire indicates that the majority of the respondents (78.3%) think that the self-assessment descriptors are the most useful part of the EPOSTL, as opposed to 10.9% who think it is the Glossary, 8.7% who think it is the Personal Statement section and 2.2% of the respondents who think the Dossier is the most useful part of the portfolio.

The respondents largely (71.7%) consider that the EPOSTL is an effective tool for self-reflection. They highlight that the portfolio helps them to monitor the development of their teaching skills, and identify their strengths and weaknesses in TEFL, which leads to the improvement of teaching competences. Reflection was identified as a key benefit of using the EPOSTL.

> You can always reflect on your work and make way for improvement. Reflecting helps introducing new ideas and making lesson activities more interesting. (29)

Because the EPOSTL is well structured and comprehensive, they also consider it to be a great tool for highlighting all the details involved in the process of teaching, which would otherwise pass unnoticed.

It is a good guideline for teachers in training. By giving a simple, yet comprehensive overview, and by asking specific self-assessment questions it reminds us of all the little things we need to be aware of as teachers, as well as giving a working grid in which to work and through which we can grow and prosper. (5)

Opponents to these opinions (28.3%) state that it is overly subjective and does not provide a benchmark for teaching. They underscore the importance of being capable to objectively reflect on one's own teaching competences.

When you self- reflect you need a objective point to which you can compare yourself. In my opinion it was too subjective to be an effective tool. (9)

They also highlight some problems while using the EPOSTL for self-reflection, such as the large number of descriptors, pointing out the time it takes to fill them out. They express a problem to find a connection between the descriptors and the competences that can be achieved in real teaching situations. Due to this, a doubt about the usefulness of the EPOSTL is expressed.

It is too long, too detailed. I had problems with assessing my pre-service knowledge to my post-service knowedge. I find it all too vague and unuseful. (3)

It needs to be more practical. You usually don't have enough time when you come home to use EPOSTL. (25)

The majority of respondents (78.3%) share the opinion that the EPOSTL is an effective tool for self-assessment. Most of them explain that it is because of the well-formed and detailed questions that cover a wide range of language teaching skills and, thus, help them to identify areas for improvement.

The different elements of the EPOSTL help you in detecting changes and development of your teaching competencies. If you devote a fair amount of time to it and are meticulous in taking notes, you can get a clear picture which helps in your self-evaluation. (4)

It made me think about my classes and the questions had good key words which were kind of triggers of realizing you did not do as well as you thought you did. (6)

In addition, the respondents emphasize the characteristic of the EPOSTL to encourage peer-to-peer discussion in a way that improves one's self-confidence.

It doesn't make you feel inferior when comparing the results to others, while at the same time it improves on your self confidence by allowing you to reflect on everything that is involved in organising classes. (10)

The rest of the participants (21.7%) do not agree that the EPOSTL is an effective tool for self-assessment primarily due to the length of the portfolio, i.e. the number of descriptors and the time it takes to go through the process of self-assessment. Student-teachers express a need to receive some form of evaluative external feedback regarding their development stage on the descriptors.

I could not force myself to be consistent and self-evaluate after each experience. Too many questions. (3)

It is very difficult to estimate what are your good and bad sides when it comes to teaching without any exterior feedback. (13)

Some respondents even highlight the problem of the EPOSTL being not applicable in Croatian pre-service training programme, which does not necessarily cover all the skills and competences described in the EPOSTL.

It is too long. A lot of factors in it were not even addressed in our demonstration classes. (44)

It pointed certain areas (portfolio, project work, etc.) that wasn't addressed in my pre-service training. (45)

In addition, the vast majority of respondents (76.1%) consider that the EPOSTL did help them in identifying areas that need improvement. These areas mostly deal with the following categories of teaching competences:[8]

1. Context, such as organising lesson plans according to the curriculum.
2. Methodology, such as teaching the four skills, grammar and English culture;
3. Lesson planning, such as planning specific types of lessons and time-management;
4. Conducting a lesson, such as classroom language and teaching according to lesson plans;
5. Independent learning, such as the importance of taking long term learning habits of learners into consideration;

The rate between these categories is represented in Figure 1.

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[8] The categories are defined according to the sections of the EPOSTL's self-assessment descriptors.
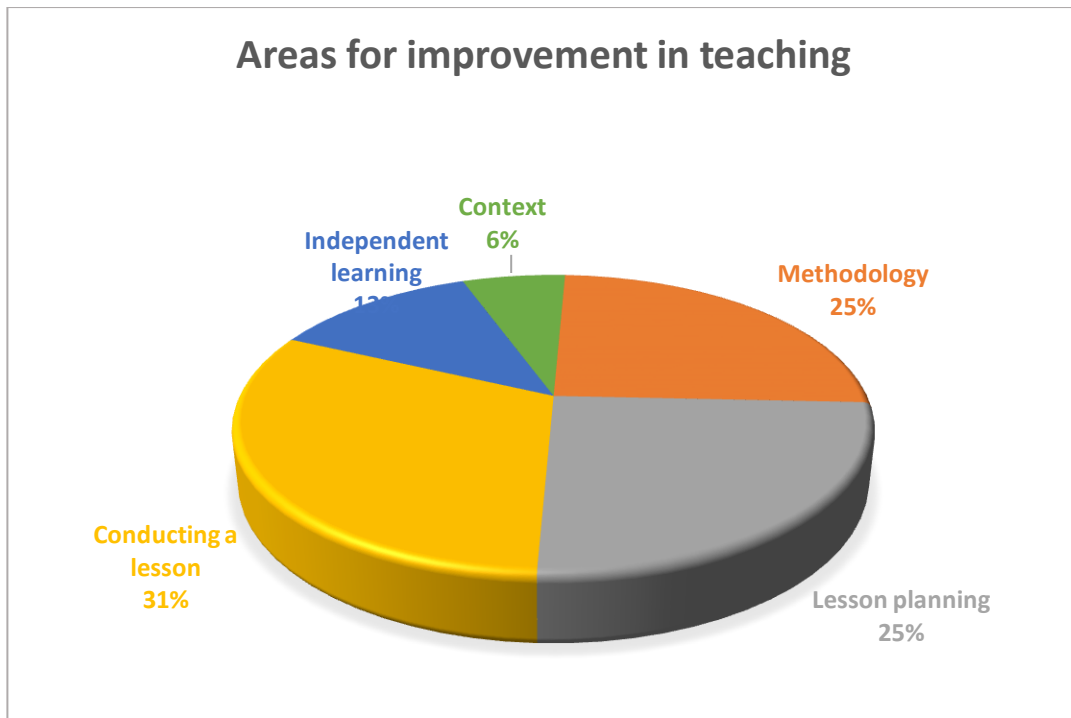
Figure 1: Identified areas for improvement in teaching

Source: Made by the student according to the research analysis

On the other hand, the opponents (23.9%) think that assessment of teaching competences should not be done primarily by means of a self-assessment tool, but rather through feedback from mentor-teachers. Therefore, they consider the EPOSTL to be useless, i.e. inadequate for determining one's strengths and weaknesses in teaching.

> I think I was quite aware of my weak areas without it. I knew I had a bit of a problem with time management (always having 5 - 7 min of extra time by the end of the lesson and needed to invent things on the spot) and I would have known it without EPOSTL. (7)

> It is useful, however, it is not enough for the student teacher – mentor's feedback is necessary. (32)

When it comes to the extent to which the respondents find the EPOSTL useful in the development of teaching competences, the analysis of the third part of the questionnaire provided answers to these questions. Since for the purpose of this study the student-teachers rated the self-assessment categories on a scale 1-5, where 1 is "Not useful at all" and 5 is "Very useful", it was possible to quantify the usefulness of the seven sections and sub-sections of the self-assessment descriptors. Table 2 below presents the results of descriptive analyses of the data elicited by these sections and sub-sections. The capitalized terms (CONTEXT, METHODOLOGY, RESOURCES, LESSON PLANNING, CONDUCTING A LESSON, INDEPENDENT LEARNING, ASSESSMENT OF LEARNING) show the results for this section of the EPOSTL as a whole, while the others (curriculum, aims and needs, etc.) are sub-categories, i.e. specific competences of the respective general sections.

Table 2: Descriptive statistics for the usefulness of the EPOSTL in developing student-teachers' teaching competences

Variables (sections and sub-sections)	Average	Standard deviation
CONTEXT	**3.33**	**1.07**
Curriculum	3.15	1.04
Aims and needs	3.52	1.10
The role of the language teacher	3.76	1.00
Institutional resources and constraints	2.87	1.15
METHODOLOGY	**3.54**	**1.12**
Spoken interaction	3.85	1.06
Written interaction	3.57	1.06
Listening	3.63	1.19
Reading	3.59	1.17
Grammar	3.26	1.09
Vocabulary	3.52	1.17
Culture	3.35	1.07
RESOURCES	**3.54**	**1.06**
LESSON PLANNING	**3.74**	**1.04**
Identification of learning objectives	3.80	0.97

Variables (sections and sub-sections)	Average	Standard deviation
Lesson content	3.70	1.04
Organisation	3.72	1.10
CONDUCTING A LESSON	**3.51**	**1.17**
Using lesson plans	3.54	1.16
Content	3.54	1.19
Interaction with learners	3.46	1.23
Classroom management	3.43	1.06
Classroom language	3.57	1.19
INDEPENDENT LEARNING	**3.24**	**1.17**
Learner autonomy	3.48	1.17
Homework	3.07	0.91
Projects	3.48	1.10
Portfolios	3.61	1.37
Virtual learning environments	3.24	1.16
Extra-curricular activities	2.59	1.31
ASSESSMENT OF LEARNING	**3.34**	**1.11**
Designing assessment tools	3.28	1.26
Evaluation	3.43	1.14
Self- and peer assessment	3.28	1.15
Language performance	3.41	1.01
Culture	3.17	1.07
Error analysis	3.48	1.04

Source: Made by the student according to the research analysis

According to the results presented in Table 2, student-teachers perceive that the EPOSTL was the most useful for developing teaching competences that deal with spoken interaction, identification of learning objectives and the role of the language teacher. On the other hand, they think that it was less helpful for developing competences that deal with extra-curricular activities, institutional resources and homework. When it comes to the sections of teaching competences, the EPOSTL is found to be the most useful in the development of lesson planning and the least useful in the development of independent

learning. To make this even more transparent, Figures 1 and 2 summarize the usefulness of the EPOSTL in the development of seven sections of teaching competences and thirty-two sub-sections.
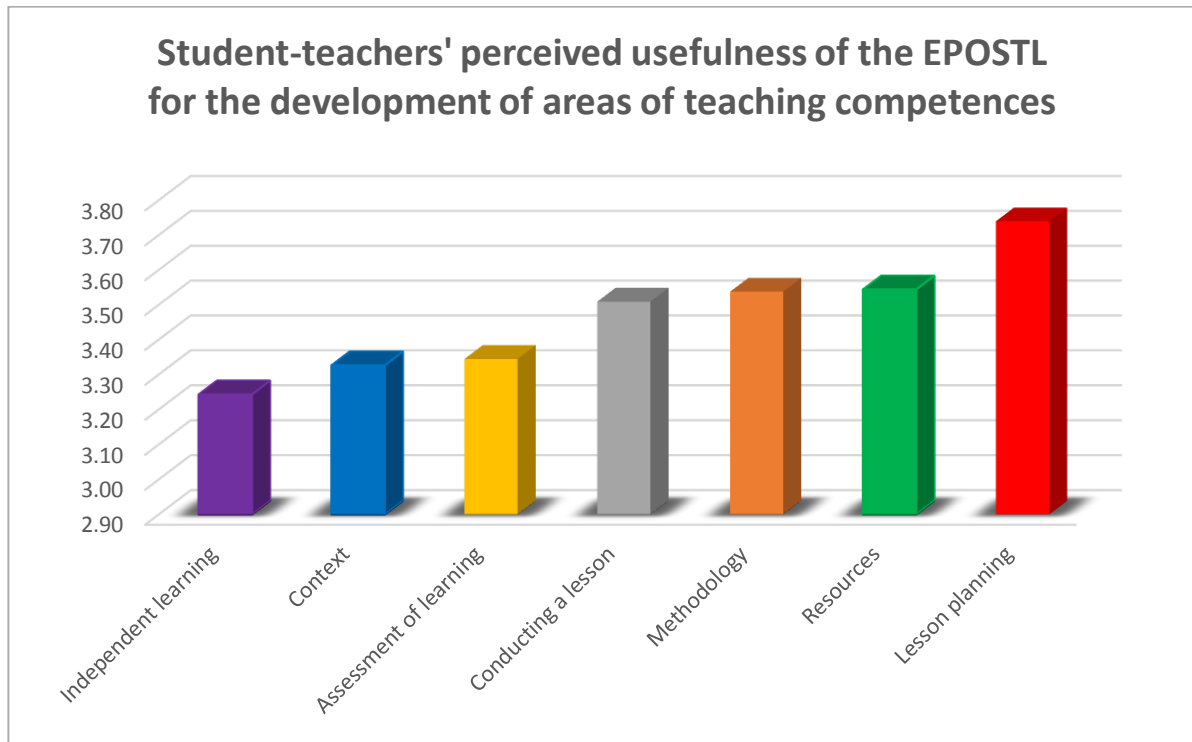
Figure 2: Student-teachers' perceived usefulness of the EPOSTL for the development of areas of teaching competences

Source: Made by the student according to the research analysis
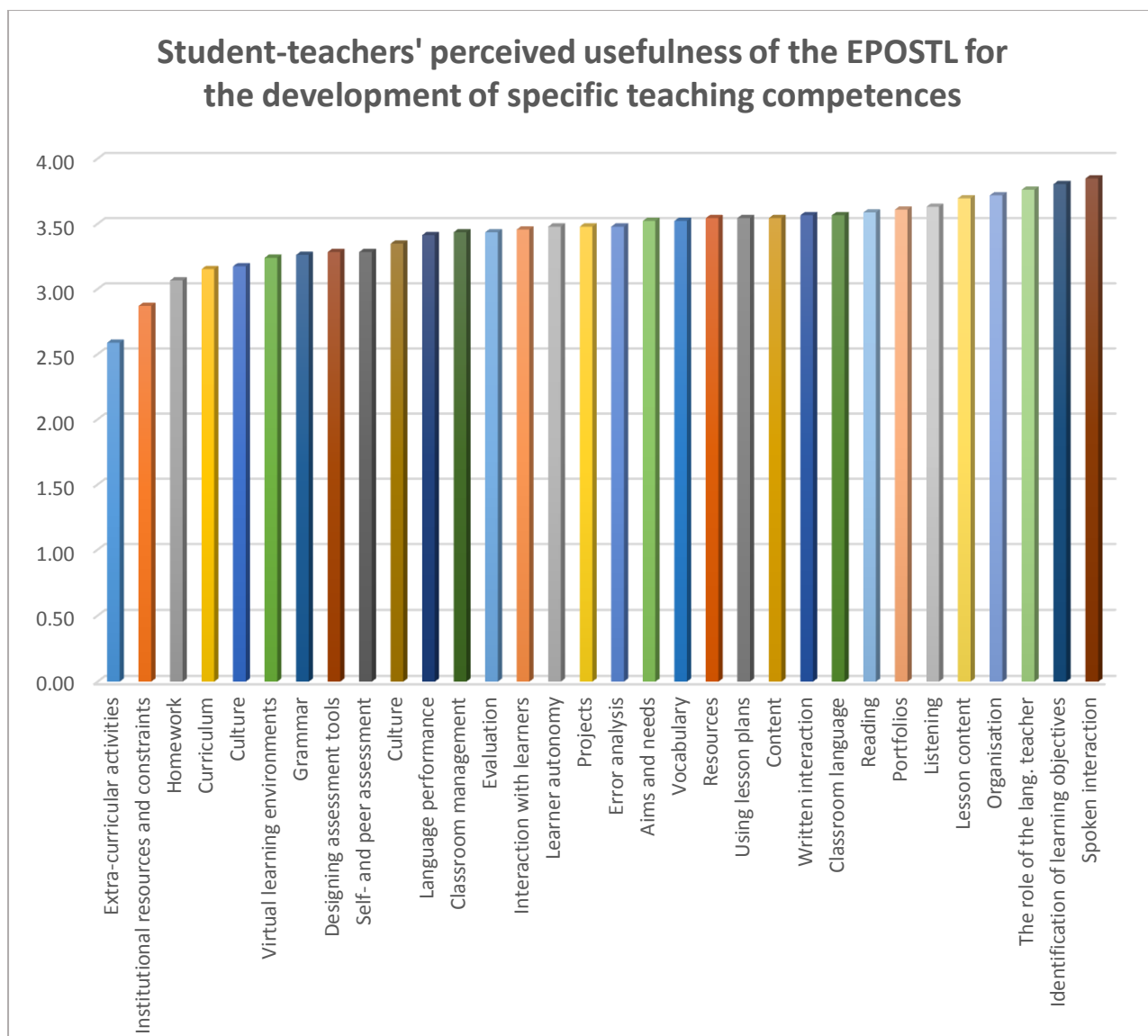
Figure 3: Student-teachers' perceived usefulness of the EPOSTL for the development of specific teaching competences

Source: Made by the student according to the research analysis

When it comes to the analysis of the last part of the questionnaire, it should be noted that the respondents ascribe numerous benefits of the EPOSTL. For example, the majority of student-teachers (62.5%) claim that it motivates them to self-reflect and self-evaluate their teaching competences and knowledge, which leads not only to raising awareness of all the details incorporated in the process of teaching, but also to the improvement of those competences.

It structures all the knowledge about teaching. It gives you a chance to really self-reflect about your teaching knowledge. (1)

In addition, half of the respondents (47.8%) highlight the systematic organisation of lessons, strategies, teaching methods and styles as an important benefit of the EPOSTL. Due to this, student-teachers have a comprehensive overview of all language teaching skills, which account for personal differences and learners' individual needs, suitable in any teaching context. As such, it guides them through the processes of self-reflection and self-assessment.

The possibility of the systematic organization of lessons, strategies, methods and styles, following your own development. (4)

It is a comprehensive overview of all the skills a language teacher needs to work in almost any teaching context (public school, online class, individual instruction etc.). (5)

The EPOSTL addresses individual needs of the learners, it is focused on all important aspects of teaching. Also, the aspect of teaching the target culture is well represented. (17)

Some respondents (12.5%) also emphasise the role of the Dossier section of the EPOSTL, i.e. the possibility to attach self-assessment materials in the portfolio. Evaluation sheets collected from either peers, mentors or from their post-lesson self-evaluations provide constructive feedback, not only to students in their teaching practicum, but also to their mentors and teacher educators.

It can provide support to teaching practice and assist in discussions with mentors. It helps mentors to provide systematic feedback. It helps student teachers to chart progress and growth. It provides autonomous view of both learning and teaching. It is

useful for professional development. It helps you develop an awareness of your own teaching. (11)

As for the perceived challenges, time to fill out the EPOSTL has been identified by half of the respondents (52.2%) as the central issue, caused by a large number of the self-assessment descriptors and pages. This could lead to a lack of motivation for continuous tracking of one's language teaching skills development.

Although I found its extensiveness to be a positive feature, at the same time it discouraged me to use it on regular bases. (19)

Too much descriptors and colouring. Too much papers that I will probably never look at again. (37)

When it comes to the Self-Assessment section, the respondents (20.7%) emphasize that the descriptors are not applicable in Croatian pre-service teacher training context. They mostly refer to the Independent Learning section and its sub-sections, such as Projects, Portfolios and Virtual Learning Environments, which are not covered in their pre-service training. On the other hand, the descriptors related to teacher authority, are not mentioned at all in the EPOSTL. As such, they do not cover all real language teaching situations.

As a teacher in training, I wasn't always aware of all the facets of teaching EPOSTL focuses on, and some of them weren't always applicable (e.g. using IT in my elementary school was out of the question) which made self-assessment in some areas difficult. (5)

It doesn't address discipline in class, or the authority of the teacher. (17)

In addition, student-teachers (16.3%) consider that some of the descriptors are ambiguous and need further explanation, while others are too similar.

Questions found in EPOSTL aren't always straightforward and clear. (1)

I found it hard to figure out the difference between some of the descriptors (in every section!). (30)

Another issue lies in the method used, i.e. colouring in the bear below each descriptor. The respondents (16.3%) mention that it is hard to assess one's competences by colouring in open bars since they cannot gauge precisely with how much space on the bar corresponds to a specific level of achievement.

In my opinion, the main weakness of this project is the complicated data entering system. Students need an introduction in how to work in this project. (9)

The last challenge addressed deals with the design and structure of the EPOSTL. Some of the respondents (7.6%) claim that its design is not interactive and appealing to student-teachers. In addition, they consider that it is hard to assess oneself with no reference to available descriptions of levels for each competence, lesson plan templates or lesson materials, among others.

Too long. Not helpful in designing the lesson or conducting it. It doesn't offer useful materials. (38)

However, the respondents have provided useful suggestions for improving the abovementioned weaknesses of the EPOSTL. Half of the respondents (50%) suggest that the

number of descriptors should be reduced by either grouping similar ones into a smaller number of descriptors or excluding some sections of the descriptors.

It could be shorter, i.e. some statements are very similar, so they can be summed up. (28)

I would exclude parts that deal with organising extra-curricular activities, project work and similar. (46)

They also consider that the descriptors dealing with teacher authority should be included in the EPOSTL since they are of a great significance for Croatian student-teachers.

The EPOSTL should address discipline in class and the authority of the teacher. (17)

Half of the respondents (47.8%) also suggest another form of the EPOSTL, i.e. a digital version, which could be easily filled immediately after classes. As such, the EPOSTL could be structured in a way that it is divided in smaller parts, with hyperlinks to useful lesson plans and materials, containing more sections for peer and mentor feedback.

Digitalized, connected to the sites or databases providing resources. (12)

Organization: self assessment is a major part of it and in my opinion it should be only a minor part whereas feedback from others – colleagues and mentors should definitely be a crucial part of it. I personally consider feedback from others most useful when reflecting on my own teaching skills. (13)

Include links to examples of great lesson plans or videos about motivating yourself to motivate the students. That was the hardest part of teaching. (23)

29

In order to clarify abstract descriptors, the respondents (41.3%) suggest that the EPOSTL should be introduced earlier in methodology classes, with practical tips and examples how to use it. In addition, together with methodology lecturer, student-teachers should discuss which descriptors from the EPOSTL are the most important for their pre-service teacher training and select only them for self-assessment, thus adapting the portfolio to their needs. As such, the EPOSTL should be used for a whole year, after which tracking the development of competences should be continued during in-service training.

> Start learning about EPOSTL sooner, as well as using it in teaching the whole year round, as opposed to just one semester. (8)

> An introduction into the project, then an example and a show on how to enter data into the form. (9)

> It could be modified according to the country/culture it is used in (specific curricula, students' needs etc.) and some of its parts should be modified for pre-service training. (19)

To make the analysis of the results of the last part of the questionnaire more accessible to the reader, Table 3 summarizes all of the abovementioned weaknesses of the EPOSTL, with suggestions for their improvement.

Table 3: Weaknesses of the EPOSTL and suggestions for their improvement identified by student-teachers

	Weaknesses of the EPOSTL	Suggestions for improvement
1.	Large number of descriptors and pages	Group similar descriptors
		Exclude some sections of descriptors
2.	Lack of motivation for continuous self-assessment	Divide sections of the EPOSTL into smaller parts

	Weaknesses of the EPOSTL	Suggestions for improvement
3.	Not applicable in Croatian pre-service teacher training context	Select the most important descriptors from the EPOSTL for self-assessment
		Use the EPOSTL for a longer period of time (possibly during in-service training, too)
4.	Lack of descriptors that should address teacher authority	Include descriptors dealing with teacher authority
5.	Ambiguous and similar descriptors	Introduce the EPOSTL earlier, with examples how to use it
6.	Descriptors don't reflect real language teaching situations	Increase section for peer and mentor feedback
7.	Means of self-assessment (colouring open bars)	Develop digital form of the EPOSTL
8.	Unattractive design of the EPOSTL	
9.	Lack of links to useful materials	Include hyperlinks to useful lesson plans and materials

Source: Made by the student according to the research analysis

3.6 Discussion

The findings show that the majority of student-teachers agree that the EPOSTL promotes self-reflection and self-assessment, since it helps in monitoring the development of their didactic knowledge, teaching competences and skills. Its comprehensive and clear structure is found to be the main benefit of the Portfolio. This is not surprising since student-teachers, who are rather new in the practical world of teaching, need guidance through the complexity of language teaching. In other words, they need a tool, which will help them bridge the gap between theoretical knowledge and practical skills. Due to the comprehensive overview of lessons, strategies, teaching methods and styles, the EPOSTL does accomplish this aim. It presents, not only a comprehensive overview of all language teaching components, but also different levels of each competence that one could reach at a certain

point of teaching. Presumably, this could motivate student-teachers to improve their teaching skills and gain the highest levels of each competence, thus continuing with self-reflection and self-assessment.

The findings also indicate that the possibility to attach self-assessment materials in the EPOSTL has been of great value for student-teachers. Evaluation sheets collected from peers and mentors provide constructive feedback and encourage discussions among students, teacher educators and mentors about improvement of one's teaching skills. Student-teachers can compare these observations with their post-lesson self-evaluations and think about how to improve their teaching performances, and thus encourage meta-cognitive reflection, similar to what is found in the study by Okumus & Akalin (2015).

Moreover, the findings show that the EPOSTL raises awareness of particular areas for improvement, such as conducting a lesson, lesson planning and methodology. In these sections, competences dealing with spoken interaction, identification of learning objectives, role of the language teacher, lesson organisation and lesson content are mostly highlighted. On the other hand, it is found that student-teachers lack the ability to identify their weaknesses in other areas of competences, such as assessment of learning, independent learning, resources and context. Here, they mostly refer to competences dealing with extra-curricular activities, institutional resources, homework and curriculum. These findings are not surprising since student-teachers cannot be acquainted with these competences during a one-semester pre-service teacher training programme. Their university lecturers and mentor teachers in schools are more focused on guiding them through processes of lesson planning and conducting a lesson in order to be able to teach the four skills. The competences related to dealing with resources, independent learning and assessment of learning are not developed as extensively. This is not surprising as the four skills, grammar and vocabulary are the fundamentals of language teaching.

It is also important to notice that student-teachers express a great need to work on the development of competences dealing with teacher authority. They report that they worked with less motivated students during their pre-service training, which they found to be challenging. Therefore, they would benefit from more insights into how to establish and maintain teacher authority in the classroom. The development of these competences is also important for the future work as a language teacher, and, therefore, will be helpful if they are included in the Self-Assessment section of the EPOSTL.

If we briefly compare these results with the results obtained from the study about the effective use of the EPOSTL among English teacher mentors in Croatia (Dropulja & Smrekar, 2015), we see that teacher authority and discipline are listed among the greatest challenges faced by student-teachers during their pre-service teacher training at schools. Findings of this study also confirm that school mentors are focused more on developing competences dealing with methodology, lesson planning and conducting a lesson, and pay less attention to the ones dealing with resources, context, independent learning and assessment of learning. These findings have also been confirmed by other studies about the use of the EPOSTL in Croatian foreign language teaching programme (Bagarić, 2012; Cindrić et al., 2015). However, the findings of these studies indicate that language teaching competences improve after a year of use of the Portfolio. Therefore, it is important to adapt the EPOSTL to the context in which it is used. In other words, methodology lecturers should consider educational and social context of their student-teachers and focus more on those aspects of language teaching that need greater attention. They should then guide their students to reflect on those descriptors in the Portfolio that are in accordance with the underlined language teaching competences. Implications for implementing the EPOSTL in teacher education are going to be offered in the next chapter.

The findings also point to other challenges that student-teachers encountered while using the EPOSTL. The most fundamental one can be found in the lack of student-teachers' ability to objectively reflect on their own language teaching knowledge and competences. The participants of the study claim that they are not used to the concept of self-assessment and, thus, find it demanding to evaluate their skills only by means of self-assessment tools. Therefore, their initial motivation to use the EPOSTL is depleted.

Another highlighted issue of the EPOSTL is the time needed to fill it out for the simple reason that there are numerous descriptors. In view of the fact that the Portfolio comprises 92 pages and 193 descriptors, it is not surprising that student-teachers express a lack of motivation to go over the descriptors regularly and use it continuously as a self-reflection tool.

In terms of the frequency of use, student-teachers stated that they used the EPOSTL approximately once a month, which means that they went through the 193 descriptors three times per semester. However, those participants who used the Portfolio in former academic years and now work as novice teachers in schools claim that it cannot help them identify their teaching strengths and weaknesses when used only in one semester, similar to what is found

in studies of Rückl (2011) and Cindrić et al. (2015). They think that it will be more helpful to continue to use the EPOSTL during the in-service teacher training programme. However, this indicates the replacement of current standardised tools for monitoring the development of novice teachers' language teaching competences, which requires a change in other areas of teacher education programme.

The participants also highlighted the issue of charting the progress of their competences by colouring the bars. Not only does this require additional time for self-assessment, but also time for resolving how much space on the bar corresponds to what level of their achievement. It might be easier if there were numbers instead of the bar with the arrow; however, if this were the case, it would be difficult to show progress in a certain competence at a given point of time.

In addition, student-teachers pointed out that it would be necessary to clarify certain descriptors which are found to be ambiguous. For example, the descriptor "*I can observe my peers, recognise different methodological aspects of their teaching and offer them constructive feedback.*" (Newby et al., 2007, p. 17) refers to three different competences dealing with the role of the language teacher. Therefore, students can feel uncertain how to fill the space on the bar – whether to take into consideration all three competences at once or one competence at a time. In addition, some descriptors are found to be similar and, thus, harden the process of self-assessment even further.

Although the EPOSTL does provide definitions of the concepts related to language learning and teaching[9], which should provide help in understanding certain descriptors, and instructions on how to use the Portfolio[10], the findings indicate that only a minority of student-teachers use sections other than the *Self-Assessment section*. Therefore, an additional help is needed while using the EPOSTL. It can be provided either orally, by "an educated person who carries the responsibility to assess and help new teachers" (16), or in the form of "links to examples of great lesson plans or videos" (23).

The participants also proposed another solution for making the EPOSTL user-friendly and easier to use for self-reflection. They suggest a digital version of the Portfolio, which would solve, not only the abovementioned challenges, but also the problem of

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[9] These terms refer to the concepts used within the context of language, language teaching and learning, such as assessment, classroom management, communicative language competences, etc. They are explained in the *Glossary of Terms* (Newby et al., 2007, pp. 73-79).
[10] The instructions are offered in the *User's Guide* (Newby et al., 2007, pp. 83-88).

environmentally unfriendly layout (with a lot of blank spaces) and waste of paper in general. In this format, the design of the EPOSTL would be more appealing to "digital natives"[11], who could easily search the descriptors by key words, regardless of their number. Important feature of the electronic version is interactivity, which could be achieved by hyperlinks to other useful materials, such as lesson plan templates, lesson materials, etc. It could be accomplished even further by allowing users to group descriptors according to the frequency of use or add ones that are characteristic for their culture and context in which they are used, which, in our case, refer to designing language courses around the requirements of both national and international documents, promoting the value of language learning among learners, parents and society, managing a classroom with the focus on teacher authority and providing real learning opportunities for students beyond the classroom. The electronic version of the EPOSTL could also simplify the issue of colouring the bars. For example, it could be replaced by entering numbers from 1-100, which represent the level of achievement of each competence. However, values entered in previous stages of self-assessment should be recorded and presented to users next to the newest numbers. Another proposal is to replace it with an interactive self-assessment scale, which would be coloured automatically when a place on the scale is marked. On this scale, a percentage of acquired competence and dates of charting could also be automatically presented. Illustration of the proposed scale for charting progress of one's competences is demonstrated on Figure 4.
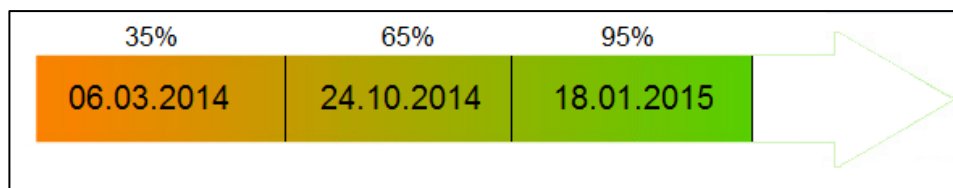
Figure 4: Self-assessment scale that could be included in the digital version of the EPOSTL

Source: Made by the student

This type of assessing the development of one's language teaching competences would save time and increase students' motivation for self-evaluating their language teaching skills. It

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[11] The term "digital natives" refers to new generations of students who have grown up surrounded by and using computers, videogames, Internet and other digital technology (Prensky, 2001; Mirici & Demirbas, 2013).

would lead to closing the gap between students' theoretical knowledge and practice. Therefore, they could become autonomous teachers with knowledge of methods and approaches that could be used for supporting their future learners on their way to learner autonomy.

It is important to notice that an electronic version of the EPOSTL has been developed by EFUESTE (Effective Use of the EPOSTL by Student-Teachers of English) team and has been available online[12] since October 2015 (EFUESTE, 2015). It is divided onto three sections: *Personal Statement*, *Self-Assessment* and *Dossier*. Other sections of the paper-based version, such as *Introduction*, *Glossary of Terms*, *Index* and *User's Guide*, are presented as hyperlinks to web sites containing their descriptions, with an additional hyperlink to a video called "Understanding EPOSTL"[13]. The *Self-Assessment section* is divided into the same categories and sub-categories as the printed version of the Portfolio. However, the means of self-assessment is different – colouring bars is replaced by entering numbers from 1-100, preceded by an illustrative demonstration of which number corresponds to what level of achievement. This is an attempt to simplify its use; however, what is not clear here is what happens when users want to change this number, i.e. how they can compare their previous results in order to track development of their language teaching competences. For example, the E-EPOSTL offers an ability to upload a survey that has to be previously saved (i.e. before submitting). However, when finishing the survey, it allows the user only to submit it, without the option to save it. Therefore, it is not clear whether this functionality, which currently is not active, is planned to be operative in near future, and what happens when a previously finished survey is uploaded – are old values saved and presented in the Portfolio or are they overwritten by new numbers?

If we briefly compare features of the E-EPOSTL with suggestions made by the participants, i.e. student-teachers in the study, we can see that it saves paper and is more practical to use. Also, it resolves the issue of unclear instructions for charting the development of one's competences. However, it is evident that interactivity is not fully achieved, since the current online version of the Portfolio does not allow the user to search, group or add descriptors, thus limiting the possibility of its adjustment to the teacher's personal needs. It also does not offer hyperlinks to other materials connected to processes of conducting a lesson and lesson planning, which would be extremely useful in particular for

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[12] The electronic version of the EPOSTL is available on http://epostl.com/
[13] Video presents an introductory explanation of how to use the EPOSTL, and is available on https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=jow9aJWlZO4&feature=player_embedded

novice teachers. However, in order to find out whether this electronic version presents an effective tool for tracking the development of one's language teaching skills, research on student-teachers' perspectives on the use of the E-EPOSTL should be carried out. It would be useful if teacher mentors and supervisors could be involved in the study, since student-teachers and novice teachers need support and guidance through processes of self-reflection and self-assessment. In addition, this could resolve a problem regarding different perception of the EPOSTL among teacher educators and school mentors (Burkert & Schwienhorst, 2008; Fenner, 2011).

4. Implications and Concluding Remarks

The present study has provided data on the effectiveness of the EPOSTL as a tool for monitoring and promoting student-teachers' reflection and assessment of their didactic knowledge and language teaching competences. It focuses heavily on the beliefs student-teachers have regarding how the EPOSTL fosters the development of their competences and what benefits and challenges they encounter while using it.

The results suggest that the EPOSTL does completely fulfil the aim "to encourage students to reflect on the competences a teacher strives to attain and on the underlying knowledge which feeds these competences" (Newby et al., 2007, pp. 83). On the positive side, it seems that the EPOSTL helps student-teachers to relate concrete teaching experiences to theoretical principles, thus narrowing the gap between theoretical knowledge and teaching practice, as has been found in some other studies previously mentioned in the paper (Burkert, 2009; Urbaniak, 2010; Fenner, 2011). Another identified strength of the EPOSTL is that it serves as a form of constructive feedback and promotes peer-to-peer discussion. It helps students to develop awareness of their strengths and weaknesses related to language teaching.

However, the findings indicate that this applies only to some areas of language teaching competences due to the lack of the ability to explore all of the facets proposed by the EPOSTL in a one-semester pre-service teacher-training programme. Therefore, it is precisely important for the methodology lecturer to focus on aspects that would need greater attention, such as educational and social context in which student-teachers will work, interaction with learners, classroom management and learner autonomy. In order to achieve this, it is recommended to follow the six-stage implementation proposed by Orlova (2011). In our context, i.e. on the English Department of Faculty of Humanities and Social Sciences, the Portfolio could be implemented in two ELT courses: Methodology of Teaching English as a Foreign Language and Pre-service Training Course in Teaching English as a Foreign Language. According to the aims of these two courses, the six-stage implementation of the EPOSTL could be achieved as follows:

Stage 1: At the beginning of the Methodology course, the aims and format of the EPOSTL should be introduced to student-teachers. Their expectations from teacher education should be filled in the *Personal Statement* section.

Stage 2: After general overview of the Portfolio, in the Methodology course student-teachers should be acquainted with the knowledge and skills needed for language teaching. This could be achieved by discussing the categories diagram, presented in the EPOSTL on p. 6 (Newby et al., 2007), thus connecting language teaching competences with the Portfolio's descriptors. This could be followed by a discussion about the applicability of each self-assessment section in certain teaching context. In other words, the methodology lecturer, together with student-teachers, should select descriptors for self-reflection, which are deemed to be highly relevant for TEFL and which are going to be elaborated during the methodology and pre-service training courses. The benefits of this approach would be twofold. First, it would be made clear to student-teachers that not all of the descriptors are equally important. Second, it would be emphasised that not all descriptors have to be used for self-assessment.

Stage 3: After selecting the descriptors for self-reflection, the methodology lecturer should check and clarify understanding of abstract and ambiguous ones. In order to achieve this, the "can-do" descriptors should be connected to student-teachers' theoretical knowledge. This could be integrated into the Methodology course in form of a video (Newby, 2011), pulling cards (Nihlen, 2011), or other means that would encourage discussion about the meaning and usage of descriptors. Here, the methodology lecturer should also refer to *Glossary of Terms* and *User's Guide* sections to encourage students to use them continuoulsy in the process of self-assessment. This way, teacher autonomy could be increased.

Stage 4: Since in the Methodology course student-teachers have to prepare short micro-teaching tasks and thus become acquainted with characteristics of teaching different language skills, the descriptors could serve for setting personal aims that could be accomplished when teaching each skill. In other words, when preparing for a micro-teaching task, student-teachers should set not only goals for the learners, but also their personal goals that relate to achieving different levels of competences dealing with a particular language skill, such as speaking, listening, writing, etc.

Stage 5: After reflecting on the competences covered in the Methodology course, student-teachers should continue with this process during the Pre-Service

Training course. Here, it is very important that they understand the connection between the self-assessment descriptors and the *Dossier* section. Since this study confirmed the importance of the ability to attach assessment materials in the EPOSTL, the methodology lecturer should bear in mind to give clear instructions on how to prepare and use those materials, not only for raising awareness of the importance of self-assessment, but also for promoting discussions between students and teacher mentors. Another key point is that the methodology lecturer should find a way to ensure that the Portfolio is used continuously during the course.

Stage 6: At the end of the Pre-Service Training course, students-teachers' opinions of the EPOSTL should be surveyed. It could be done in the form of individual oral presentations (Nihlen, 2011), written feedback or some other form that would ensure the improvement of the use of the EPOSTL. As stated before, this also has a large impact on the development of foreign language teacher programmes.

All things considered, these six steps for implementation of the EPOSTL in teacher education programme could resolve many of the weaknesses of the EPOSTL and the identified challenges, which are encountered while using the Portfolio, such as a large amount of descriptors, ambiguity of meaning, adjustment to certain language teaching contexts and irregular (i.e. rare) usage of some sections of the EPOSTL. However, the proposed six-stage model does not address all of the issues identified in this study. Specifically, it has no implications on the following weaknesses of the EPOSTL: means of filling out the self-assessment descriptors, environmentally unfriendly layout, unattractive design, lack of links to exterior materials and the initial problem of student-teacher's inability to objectively reflect on their own language teaching knowledge and competences. Some researchers (Mirici & Demirbas, 2013; Mirici & Hergüner, 2015) maintain that a solution to these problems lies in the digital version of the Portfolio, called the E-EPOSTL. However, this format of the EPOSTL has been available only for few months. Therefore, in order to find out whether the E-EPOSTL "fits ideally into the concept of a reflective teacher education programme" (Mehlmauer-Larcher, 2011, pp. 31), further research into its strengths and weaknesses needs to be carried out in different contexts.

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Appendix

Questionnaire on the Use of the EPOSTL

1. Gender:

    ◯   Male   ◯   Female

2. Other major:

    ....

3. When did you use the EPOSTL?

    ◯   This year

    ◯   Last year

    ◯   Two years ago

    ◯   Other: ....

4. How regularly did you use the EPOSTL?

    ◯   Once a week

    ◯   Once in two weeks

    ◯   Once a month

    ◯   Other: ....

5. Which section of the EPOSTL was the most useful?

    ◯   The Personal Statement

    ◯   The self-assessment descriptors

    ◯   The Dossier

    ◯   The Glossary

6. In your opinion, is the EPOSTL an effective tool for self-reflection?

    ◯   Yes

    ◯   No

7. Please, explain why.

    ....

    ....

8. In your opinion, is the EPOSTL an effective tool for self-assessment?

    ◯   Yes

    ◯   No

9. Please, explain why.

    ....

    ....

10. Did the EPOSTL help you identify any specific areas you need to work on more?

    ◯   Yes

    ◯   No

11. Please, explain why.

    ....

    ....

Competences scale

On a scale 1- 5, where 5 stands for very useful, please rate the extent to which you find the EPOSTL useful in the development of the following competences:

1. Design language courses around the requirements of the national and local curricula.

<p align="center">1 2 3 4 5</p>
<p align="center">Not useful at all ○ ○ ○ ○ ○ Very useful</p>

2. Take account of overall, long-term aims based on learners' needs and expectations.

<p align="center">1 2 3 4 5</p>
<p align="center">Not useful at all ○ ○ ○ ○ ○ Very useful</p>

3. Adjust teaching according to constructive feedback of others (peers, colleagues, mentors, etc.).

<p align="center">1 2 3 4 5</p>
<p align="center">Not useful at all ○ ○ ○ ○ ○ Very useful</p>

4. Adjust teaching according to resources available at school.

<p align="center">1 2 3 4 5</p>
<p align="center">Not useful at all ○ ○ ○ ○ ○ Very useful</p>

5. Select meaningful speaking activities to encourage learners to participate in oral communication.

<p align="center">1 2 3 4 5</p>
<p align="center">Not useful at all ○ ○ ○ ○ ○ Very useful</p>

6. Select meaningful writing activities in order to develop skills necessary for learners to write different text types.

<p align="center">1 2 3 4 5</p>
<p align="center">Not useful at all ○ ○ ○ ○ ○ Very useful</p>

7. Select different activities in order to develop different listening strategies (listening for gist, specific information etc.).

1 2 3 4 5

Not useful at all ○ ○ ○ ○ ○ Very useful

8. Provide a range of activities in order to develop different reading strategies according to the purpose of reading.

1 2 3 4 5

Not useful at all ○ ○ ○ ○ ○ Very useful

9. Introduce new or unknown items of grammar in a variety of ways.

1 2 3 4 5

Not useful at all ○ ○ ○ ○ ○ Very useful

10. Select a variety of activities which help learners to use new vocabulary in oral and written context.

1 2 3 4 5

Not useful at all ○ ○ ○ ○ ○ Very useful

11. Create opportunities for learners to explore the culture of target language communities.

1 2 3 4 5

Not useful at all ○ ○ ○ ○ ○ Very useful

12. Use available materials and activities in the classroom which are appropriate for the learners.

1 2 3 4 5

Not useful at all ○ ○ ○ ○ ○ Very useful

13. Formulate lesson objectives in terms of skills, topics, situations and linguistic systems.

1 2 3 4 5

Not useful at all ◯ ◯ ◯ ◯ ◯ Very useful

14. Structure lesson plans to ensure the interdependence of listening, reading, writing and speaking.

1 2 3 4 5

Not useful at all ◯ ◯ ◯ ◯ ◯ Very useful

15. Plan a variety of organisational forms (frontal, individual, group work) when appropriate.

1 2 3 4 5

Not useful at all ◯ ◯ ◯ ◯ ◯ Very useful

16. Be flexible when working from a lesson plan.

1 2 3 4 5

Not useful at all ◯ ◯ ◯ ◯ ◯ Very useful

17. Present language content (new and previously encountered items of language, topics, etc.) in ways which are appropriate for learners.

1 2 3 4 5

Not useful at all ◯ ◯ ◯ ◯ ◯ Very useful

18. React supportively to learner initiative and interaction.

1 2 3 4 5

Not useful at all ◯ ◯ ◯ ◯ ◯ Very useful

19. Create opportunities for and manage individual, partner, group and whole class work.

1 2 3 4 5

Not useful at all ◯ ◯ ◯ ◯ ◯ Very useful

20. Encourage students to use the target language in their activities.

<div align="center">

1 2 3 4 5

Not useful at all ○ ○ ○ ○ ○ Very useful

</div>

21. Help learners to reflect on their existing knowledge and competences.

<div align="center">

1 2 3 4 5

Not useful at all ○ ○ ○ ○ ○ Very useful

</div>

22. Select tasks most suited to be carried out by learners independently at home.

<div align="center">

1 2 3 4 5

Not useful at all ○ ○ ○ ○ ○ Very useful

</div>

23. Plan and manage project work according to relevant aims and objectives.

<div align="center">

1 2 3 4 5

Not useful at all ○ ○ ○ ○ ○ Very useful

</div>

24. Structure portfolio work.

<div align="center">

1 2 3 4 5

Not useful at all ○ ○ ○ ○ ○ Very useful

</div>

25. Advise learners on how to find and evaluate appropriate ICT resources (web sites, search engines, computer programmes etc.).

<div align="center">

1 2 3 4 5

Not useful at all ○ ○ ○ ○ ○ Very useful

</div>

26. Organise extra-curricular activities (school trips, exchanges, international cooperation programmes etc.).

<div align="center">

1 2 3 4 5

Not useful at all ○ ○ ○ ○ ○ Very useful

</div>

27. Select valid assessment procedures (tests, portfolios, self-assessment, etc.) appropriate to learning aims and objectives.

1 2 3 4 5

Not useful at all ○ ○ ○ ○ ○ Very useful

28. Identify strengths and areas for improvement in a learner's performance.

1 2 3 4 5

Not useful at all ○ ○ ○ ○ ○ Very useful

29. Help learners to set personal targets and assess their own performance.

1 2 3 4 5

Not useful at all ○ ○ ○ ○ ○ Very useful

30. Assess learner's ability to understand, interpret and produce a spoken or written text according to certain criteria.

1 2 3 4 5

Not useful at all ○ ○ ○ ○ ○ Very useful

31. Assess learner's ability to respond appropriately in encounters with the target language culture.

1 2 3 4 5

Not useful at all ○ ○ ○ ○ ○ Very useful

32. Deal with errors that occur in class in a way which supports learning processes and communication.

1 2 3 4 5

Not useful at all ○ ○ ○ ○ ○ Very useful

Characteristics of the EPOSTL

1. What are the strengths of the EPOSTL?

....

....

2. What are the weaknesses of the EPOSTL?

....

....

3. What challenges did you face when using the EPOSTL?

....

....

4. Please, provide some suggestions how the EPOSTL could be improved.

....

....