INCORPORATING EPOSTL (EUROPEAN PORTFOLIO FOR STUDENT TEACHERS OF LANGUAGES) INTO METHODOLOGY COURSE

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ABSTRACT

This study tries to determine the pre-service teachers' views on the role of the EPOSTL (European Portfolio for Student Teachers of Languages) in increasing the effectiveness of Methodology course. Methodology course is crucial at English Language Teaching Departments as its main goal is to fill the gap between theory and practice. However, it is arguable that it is successful in filling this gap. Therefore, a way- the EPOSTL that could help improve the course was suggested by determining the views of the student teachers in this study. In order to determine these views, firstly a pilot study in which the EPOSTL was used was carried out in Methodology course for 16 weeks. After the pilot study, semi-structured interviews were conducted with 8 student teachers. The qualitative data gathered from the interviews were analyzed by using content analysis. The results showed that student teachers had positive attitudes towards using the EPOSTL in the Methodology course. The student teachers believed that the EPOSTL increased the effectiveness of this course as it provided more feedback, self-assessment and reflection. And Methodology course with the EPOSTL was much closer to filling the gap between theory and practice.

Key Words: EPOSTL, Methodology courses, pre-service teacher education, English Language Teaching, student teachers.

INTRODUCTION

In recent years, foreign language teacher education has aroused great interest both in academic studies and in language education policies in Turkey as all over the world. Pre-service teacher education that is the first step of teacher education is at the center of this interest. Pre-service teacher education focuses on the preparation of student teachers to their future profession. And the question of how to prepare student teachers to their future profession is one of the most discussed subjects in academic studies and policies related to teacher education. Relating theory to practice is one of the most addressed answers to this question. Thus, the last pre-service foreign language teacher education program that was introduced in 2006 in Turkey had a more stress on teaching methodology and practice than the previous program (Karakaş, 2012). However, it is arguable that this stress is sufficient as of 175 hours, only 32 of one are concerned with practice. Of these 32 hours, 8 of them belong to Methodology courses as called also Special Teaching Methods. Being one of the courses that relate theory to practice, Methodology courses are important in field education. Hence, it is crucial that these courses be effective in practicing English language teaching. In order to contribute to the effectiveness of these courses, this study tries to use a new technique-which is EPOSTL. The purpose of this study to determine the student teachers' opinions on the use of the EPOSTL in Methodology course.

EPOSTL (European Portfolio for Student Teachers of Languages)
The EPOSTL is a kind of portfolio which was introduced by ECML (European Center for Modern Languages) in 2007 with the aim of helping student teachers to be prepared for their future profession. Newby (2012), one of the creators of the EPOSTL, defines the EPOSTL as:

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"A document intended for students undergoing their initial teacher education which encourages them to reflect on the didactic knowledge and skills necessary to teach languages, helps them to assess their own didactic competences and enables them to monitor their progress and to record their experiences of teaching during the course of their teacher education" (p.1).

EPOSTL is a didactic portfolio which helps student teachers to assess their own teaching knowledge and skills. With this feature, it differs from ELP (European Language Portfolio). EPOSTL is different from ELP but it bases on ELP. ELP focuses on learner's linguistic abilities whereas EPOSTL is concerned with student teachers' didactic skills. Apart from ELP, EPOSTL also bases on CEFR (Common European Framework Reference) and European Profile for Language Teacher Education. CEFR is a guideline that helps language learners learn to communicate in this language and the knowledge and skills related to the language. The European Profile for Language Teacher Education "deals with the initial and in-service education of foreign language teachers in primary, secondary and adult learning contexts and it offers a frame of reference for language education policy makers and language teacher educators in Europe" (Kelly and et al, 2004).

The EPOSTL consists of six sections which are P*ersonal Statement, Self-Assessment, Dossier, Glossary, Index and Users' Guide*. *Glossary* includes the most important terms related to language learning and teaching in the EPOSTL. *Users' Guide* gives detailed information on the use of the EPOSTL. *Index* helps student teachers locate terms in the descriptors. Personal Statement, Self-Assessment and Dossier are main sections. In the section of *Personal Statement*, student teachers answer some questions about their experiences and expectations related to teaching. These questions are about student teachers' own experiences that influence their teaching, aspects of teaching, expectations of teacher education course and some features of a language teacher. The most important part of the EPOSTL is *Self-Assessment* as the main function of it is providing assessment. Self-Assessment section "identifies a core of 195 didactic competences expressed as 'can-do' descriptors, which enable reflection and self-assessment at different stages of teacher education" (Newby, 2011, p.6). According to Newby (2011), Self-Assessment has two functions: reflection and self-assessment. Newby maintains that reflection function enables student teachers to think about and discuss specific competences and to review the requirements of being competent in a specific field. And the self-assessment function encourages student teachers to make qualitative judgments about their competences and to chart their development and progress by coloring the bars under each descriptor. Descriptors are the 'can-do' statements located in Self-Assessment section of the EPOSTL. Student teachers complete them in order to evaluate themselves by coloring some bars that are under the descriptors. They also write dates in columns of these bars, which helps them see their improvement. Dossier "encourages the student to provide evidence of progress and to record examples of work relevant to teaching" (Newby, 2011, p.6). Dossier is the same with a teaching portfolio as it is a collection of evidence of the works that have been accomplished.

EPOSTL enables student teachers to reflect on their teaching skills, which is the main aim of the EPOSTL. There are some studies that showed that the EPOSTL served this aim; in other words, provided reflection. For example, Velikova (2013) found that the EPOSTL was a useful tool in fostering self-reflection and raising awareness of student teachers' strengths and weaknesses in teaching. Similarly, Fenner (2011) who piloted the EPOSTL to find its effectiveness in providing reflective practice found that the EPOSTL encouraged student teachers to plan and critically reflect on the important task of planning lesson based on learning aims and objectives. Strakova (2009) also found that the EPOSTL was a good way of fostering reflective teaching skills of student teachers in her pilot study that lasted for two years. Strakova also found that the EPOSTL a) deepened the insight on learning and teaching process, b) encouraged students to be more aware of the teachers' work, and c) enabled students to develop competence.

EPOSTL contributes also to training autonomous teachers as self-assessment and reflection are related to autonomous learning. Çakır and Balçıkanlı (2012) showed this contribution by piloting the EPOSTL with 25 student teachers and 4 teacher trainers. The findings emphasized that the student teachers gained a more autonomous perspective thanks to the EPOSTL. Although the findings do not show that the student teachers became more autonomous after the EPOSTL, they indicate that the student teachers became aware of teacher autonomy.

The prior studies highlight that the EPOSTL provides professional development by engaging student teachers in self-assessment, autonomy and reflection. In these studies, the EPOSTL was used in different contexts: in teaching practicum, (Orlavo, 2011; Nihlen, 2011; Ingvarsdottir, 2011), in the courses related to the teaching (Makinen, 2011; Bagaric, 2011; Çakır and Balçıkanlı, 2012) and also in a bilateral teacher education program (Jones, 2011). Moreover, it is also possible to see the studies that the EPOSTL was used in both in lectures at university and at the same time in teaching practicum (Fenner, 2011; Velikova, 2013). In this study, The EPOSTL was incorporated into Methodology (Special Teaching Methods) course that was given at the Department of English Language Teaching of Turkish universities. And it was tried to identify student teachers' ideas on this incorporation by interviewing 8 student teachers.

METHODOLOGY

This study aimed at learning the student teachers' views on using EPOSTL in Methodology course. Hence, qualitative research design was used in this study, as qualitative research design "focuses on the voices of the participants" (Auerbach and Silvrestein, 2003, p.126). This study tries to give voice to student teachers to express their ideas on the effectiveness of the EPOSTL use in Methodology courses. In order to learn these student teachers' opinions on the EPOSTL, interviews were done. When the aim is to understand the experience of people involved in education, it is necessary to use interview as this technique is a road to inquiry (Seidman, 2006). The interview form had originally 7 questions, but as the interviews were semi-structured, extra questions were also asked.

Participants
The subjects of this study consisted of 8 undergraduate students (juniors) that had education at English Language Teaching Department at Atatürk University. Of the 8 students, 4 students were female and 4 were male. 3 students had education at evening class and the rest had education in day-time. The age of participants varied between 22 and 29.

The procedure of the implementation and data collection
EPOSTL was needed to be used by the student teachers in order to identify their views on using the EPOSTL in Methodology course. After the participants had been selected, two meetings where the EPOSTL and the process were explained were held. Then, the student teachers began to make their microteachings. Each student teacher who did his/her microteaching watched and evaluated the video-recording of his/her microteaching with the researcher. A month after the microteachings were done, macro-teachings were launched. Again, each student teacher watched and evaluated his/her macro-teaching with the researcher. During this process, an online group that would serve as dossier was opened on the social media. The student teachers uploaded some teaching evidences such as their plans and video-recordings of microteachings and macro-teachings to this group. After macro-teachings had been also over, the descriptors were completed. Each student teacher completed the descriptors of Self-Assessment section of the EPOSTL in the fields that s/he did her/his micro and macro teachings. After the implementation had been completed, the interviews were held with 8 student teachers one by one. Each interview lasted between 10-15 minutes. The interviews were conducted in the native language of the participants, Turkish, in order to decrease the speaking anxiety that may stem from using a foreign language and get more valid data as language blocks might influence the accuracy of the data. After completing all the interviews, the recordings were listened, transcribed and translated into English by the researcher. Two colleagues did proof-reading the translated version of the interviews' transcriptions.

Data Analysis
In order to analyze the data gathered through interviews, content analysis was carried out. Themes were formed by the researcher. A month after first analyses, the researcher reviewed the themes again. And an inter-coder who was an expert also reviewed the themes.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The student teachers evaluated the use of the EPOSTL by comparing their two courses one of which included EPOSTL implementation during the interviews. The data gathered from the interviews showed that all of the student teachers believed that EPOSTL should be incorporated into Methodology course. The student teachers thought that knowing methods only theoretically was not useful; practice was also necessary in learning methods. And they stated that the EPOSTL provided this chance of practice. Furthermore, some of the student teachers were opinion of that the EPOSTL was a continual process that provided professional development as it had some important benefits such as improving reflective teaching skills and increasing self- assessment and feedback. They believed that these benefits made Methodology course more effective. Being the most addressed benefits, reflection and self-assessment formed the themes of this qualitative study. The other benefits were gathered under one another theme. These theme will be discussed below by benefiting from extracts of interviewees. In the presentation of these extracts, numbers were given for each interviewee (1-8).

Self-Assessment

Self- assessment is one of the key terms of learning. Boud and Falchikov (1989) define self-assessment as "the involvement of learners in making judgments about their own learning, particularly about their achievements and the outcomes of learning" (p.529). Self-assessment is important as it provides autonomous learning and helps learners to see their own learning process. Portfolios are one of the techniques that are most used in providing self-assessment. In this study, a didactic portfolio-the EPOSTL- is used as a technique that fosters self-assessment. Self-assessment is one of the main aims of the EPOSTL. Hence, the most comprehensive section of the EPOSTL is the 'Self-Assessment' section. In this study, the student teachers completed the descriptors of this section, which they regarded helpful for their teaching. And it was found that this section served its aim as student teachers believed that the EPOSTL enabled them to evaluate themselves. The story of one of the interviewees exemplify this:

"…Evaluating ourselves has not been possible so far. I wish we could have more opportunities, more presentations, studies like this. The most important benefit is how we see ourselves as teachers from our eyes-we teach as teachers in the classroom but while teaching we do not see our mistakes-when we watch ourselves, then we can say easily that 'mm look why did I not do this'. It is good in this respect." (Interviewee 3)

The student teachers agreed that they did not use to evaluate themselves before the use of the EPOSTL. They stated that thanks to the EPOSTL, they became aware of their strengths and weaknesses in their teaching. They believed that descriptors that they completed enabled them to see their weaknesses. The following extracts can be given examples for this contribution of the EPOSTL:
"It provided me to see what our previous weaknesses were and how I could eliminate them" (Interviewee 7).

"I think evaluating ourselves was very effective here. Because, firstly I should see and accept my fault then I can understand that I have made a mistake when somebody tells about it…" (Interviewee 6).

Jones (2011) who used the EPOSTL in a bilateral teacher education program also found that the EPOSTL provided self-assessment. The participants of his study stated that they did not know what the self-assessment actually meant. They learned what self-assessment actually was thanks to the EPOSTL. It is seen that EPOSTL is successful in fostering self-assessment which is one of the crucial parts of learning.

Reflection

"Reflection is a thinking process more than simple memorization and comprehension, and involves a variety of cognitive processes, such as summarization, identifying general principles, exploring various situations, reconciling options, monitoring progress, and so on" (Wang, 2009, p. 453). It is a kind of thought that helps individuals assess and criticize themselves and then correct their mistakes and support their strengths. Due to this characteristics, it is seen a key term in professional development. Hence, reflection or reflective practice or reflective teaching has been seen necessary in teacher education in recent years. In order to promote reflection, many tools such as observation, action research, journal writing and portfolios have been suggested.

All of these techniques play an important role in fostering reflection. EPOSTL which is defined briefly as 'a reflective tool' is another technique that was tried to be incorporated into Methodology in this study. The findings of this study showed that EPOSTL promoted reflection in this course. The participants of this study believed that with the EPOSTL they began to think more reflectively. *Interviewee 7* stated this as follows:
"I did not use to think reflectively before that. I saw myself at the end of this process. I saw how I had done, how I had done teaching and how I should."

The student teachers believe that they had a chance to reflect on their practices thanks to the EPOSTL. They reflected on their practice by firstly watching their own micro and macro teachings and then completing the descriptors of the EPOSTL. One of the interviewee reported this as follows:
"After practice, I can ask reflective questions such as what I taught, how I can evaluate myself or how I contributed to the students and to myself." (Interviewee 8)

The results showed that the EPOSTL was effective especially in meta-cognitive reflection. Meta-cognitive reflection, briefly, refers to knowledge of teaching. In this study, the participants believed that they became aware of their teaching thanks to the EPOSTL. They were of opinion that this was the one of the most important benefits of the EPOSTL. Furthermore, the EPOSTL helped student teachers to show cognitive and practical components of reflection. They made conscious efforts (cognitive) to develop professionally and practiced reflection (practical). Cognitive dimension is also about learning new things theoretically. Although the EPOSTL seems that it focuses on practice, the student teachers of this study stated that they also learned new things theoretically. The following extract exemplifies this well:
"I did reading and vocabulary teaching in the process of the EPOSTL. And I learnt what I needed as teaching reading. Before the EPOSTL, we regarded teaching reading as a simple reading activity, but I learnt it had many procedures. Teaching vocabulary is also same. It was a field that I had not been familiar with. I can say I learnt new things also theoretically…" (Interviewee 1)

The previous studies on the EPOSTL show parallelism with the findings of this study in terms of benefits of the EPOSTL in reflection. Velikova (2013) found that EPOSTL was a self-reflective tool that raised awareness of the participants' strengths and weaknesses in teaching. Similarly, Çakır and Balçıkanlı (2012), Strakova (2009), and Fenner (2011) found that the EPOSTL was a good way of reflecting on teaching practices. Providing reflection on teaching practices of student teachers, the EPOSTL made the Methodology course more effective. And as the student teachers learn new things both theoretically and practically, a course with the EPOSTL is closer to filling the gap between theory and practice in foreign language teacher education.

Other Contributions
The interviewees uttered some other changes that emerged with the use of the EPOSTL. One of them was about getting feedback. Feedback is crucial for enhancing learning and motivating students to improve by facilitating reflection and self-evaluation, as well as highlighting errors, deficiencies and problems (Case 2007). Hence, feedback should be provided in Methodology course in which students are very active as they do many practices. However, the student teachers participated in this study believed that they did not get enough feedback in the course in which the EPOSTL was not used. They used to get feedback only from their friends. The student teachers did not find peer-feedback sufficient as they regarded it subjective. They believed that as they were their friends they did not evaluated their friends objectively. Hence, they needed another form of feedback such as teacher or self. The following extract illustrates this as follows:
"We did presentations but these evaluations were done. Only presentation, there was no evaluation as good or bad. As there was no feedback on what our weaknesses were, the presentations were useless for us" (Interviewee 2).

Another change was in their practices. The student teachers believed that their second practice was better than the first one, as they realized their weaknesses in the first one and eliminated them in the second one. They also stated that they overcame their shyness thanks to the implementation including EPOSTL.

These contributions made student teacher think positive things about the EPOSTL. They believed that the Methodology course with the EPOSTL was better than the previous one. They believed that the EPOSTL should more common and used. The extracts of *Interviewee 5* and *Interviewee 8 are in the form of summarization of the findings.*

"…, I think it (EPOSTL) should be implemented by all teachers and teacher candidates."
"I think the EPOSTL is necessary in teacher education…"

CONCLUSION

This study aimed at determining the student teachers' opinions about using the EPOSTL in Methodology course. In order to achieve this aim, 8 student teachers were surveyed through semi-structured interviews. The results have shown that these student teachers were quite positive about incorporating the EPOSTL into Methodology course. They believed that the EPOSTL provided them to see their strengths and weaknesses as they assessed themselves. The EPOSTL helped them to be aware of their teaching. The student teachers who were aware of themselves and acted in their practice as to this awareness were reflecting on their practice. It is expected that a practical course that presents the chance of self-assessment and reflection is more effective. The student teachers also believed that Methodology course with EPOSTL is more effective due to these contributions. Given these contributions of the EPOSTL, it is suggested that EPOSTL be incorporated into Methodology course. However, the number of participants in this study is so limited that it is not true to generalize the results. Hence, it is suggested that the study be replicated with more participants.

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