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The Use of the European Portfolio for Student Teachers of Languages (EPOSTL) to Foster Teacher Autonomy: English Language Teaching (ELT) Student Teachers' and Teacher Trainers' Views

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Abstract: It was the aim of this pilot study to investigate ELT student teachers' and teacher trainers' views on the use of the EPOSTL in pre-service language teacher education of a Turkish state university. Upon the implementation of the EPOSTL as a reflection tool for the second semester of 2010, 25 student teachers and 4 teacher trainers were interviewed through the questions prepared and piloted. The findings indicated that both student teachers and teacher trainers found the use of the EPOSTL beneficial in terms of reflection, self-assessment and awareness. In the light of the findings, it is proposed that the EPOSTL should not only be integrated into teacher education programmes but also be converted into an online format to make it more convenient for the student teachers.

Introduction

Learner autonomy, through a focus on teacher/learner reflection and taking responsibility for one's own teaching/learning processes has become a central concern in the recent history of second language learning/teaching (Barfield & Brown, 2007; Benson, 2007; Lamb & Reinders, 2007; Burkert & Schwienhorst, 2008). The idea that learners need to be able to take control over their own learning to be successful not just in class but also to learn independently without a teacher outside the class has become widely accepted in mainstream language teaching (Benson, 2001). There is a common belief that learner autonomy is a prerequisite for effective language learning (Benson, 2001, 2007; Little, Ridley, & Ushioda, 2003). There seems to be a general consensus that "...it is the teacher's responsibility to develop learner autonomy in class" (Dam 1995, p. 79). There are possible links between teacher and learner autonomy in language learning/teaching (Shaw, 2002; Usma & Frodden, 2003; Little, 2007; Cotterall & Crabbe, 2008). As Little stated (1995), the development of learner autonomy depends on the development of teacher autonomy in two senses. First, it is unreasonable to expect teachers to foster the growth of autonomy in their learners if they themselves do not know what it is to be an autonomous learner. Second, in determining the initiatives they take in the classroom, teachers must be able to exploit their professional skills autonomously, applying to their teaching the same reflective and self-managing processes that they apply to their learning. More than ten years later, Little (2007, p. 27) added yet another requirement that "...teachers must learn how to produce and manage the many varieties of target language discourse required by the autonomous classroom". He raised the question of how teacher educators can achieve this. In addition to the requirements mentioned above, Smith (2001, p. 43) maintained that "...teachers need to reflect constantly on their own

teaching role in the classroom, monitoring the extent to which they constrain or scaffold students' thinking and behaviour". Furthermore, language teachers are expected to develop the flexibility to use the most appropriate teaching approaches for their own contexts. Smith (2001, 2003) and later (Smith & Erdo an, 2008) took a further step towards teacher autonomy and believed that "...one of the privileged conditions for the promotion of pedagogy for autonomy with language learners" and "...an important goal in its own right" constitute the very basics of autonomy in foreign language teacher education contexts.

In recent years, the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages (CEFR, Council of Europe, 2001) has been extensively used in language teaching not just in the EU (European Union) but far beyond its borders. The CEFR describes in a comprehensive way what language learners have to learn to do in order to use a language for communication and what knowledge and skills they have to acquire so as to be able to act effectively (CEFR, Council of Europe, 2001). CEFR encourages learner autonomy in language classrooms so that language learners can take responsibility for their own learning (CEFR, Council of Europe, 2001). One possible way of promoting learner autonomy in language classrooms is the use of language portfolios as they "...promote reflection, help learners to take responsibility for their own learning, and enable learners to see gaps in their learning and to take risks" (Ekbatani 2000, p. 6-7). According to Little (2005), the European Language Portfolio (ELP), as it is defined by Council of Europe, can be employed as an effective tool to develop the idea of learner autonomy in language classrooms because it gives students opportunities to keep track of their own language development and more importantly to support them on their path to planning, monitoring and evaluating their own progress. The importance of autonomy may lie partly in recent international educational policy underlining autonomy as an educational outcome, which has a strong effect on the attainment level in language education. Lamb (2008) and Trebbi (2008) report accounts of second language education policies with a focus on autonomy including constructivism, active learning and learner-centred pedagogical approaches in eight countries. This comprises, among others, reflection on the role of the teacher as opposed to that of the learner; "...reflection on working methods and resources; reflection on classroom practice and lesson planning, all supporting a language teacher on her path to planning, monitoring and evaluating her own practice" (Burkert & Schwienhorst 2008, p. 2). Teacher education may have a crucial role to play in preparing student teachers to implement pedagogical strategies for reflective practice in their own future classroom environments.

In the Turkish educational context, there have been a lot of attempts to integrate the reflective practice into language learning curriculum through the implementation of European Council Resolutions related to language teaching. One of the most influential publications of the Council, the CEFR, has served as the main conceptual framework for the teaching of foreign languages in Turkey. In this regard, ELT in Turkey has witnessed three drastic changes, namely the preparation of the new curricula for the instruction of foreign languages, the preparation of textbooks based on these curricula, and finally the in-service training across the country to familiarize language teachers with the pedagogical innovations put forward in the CEFR. The Turkish Board of Education, the highest authority in determining educational policies in Turkey, has been organizing seminars as part of their in-service training programs in order for English language teachers to keep abreast of the new language policies, innovations and practices in accordance with the principles expressed in the CEFR. In 2009 a group of seminars entitled "Training of English Teachers" was conducted across Turkey. The aim is to train almost 48000 English language teachers working for the Ministry of Education in the light of the principles of the CEFR. So far English language teachers in 48 cities in Turkey have participated in these seminars. The topics covered during seminars include the CEFR, new English language curricula, integrated language teaching, portfolio assessment in language learning, and materials adaptation within the framework of the CEFR (Ministry of Education, 2011). It goes without saying that pre-service teacher education should also

introduce the new guidelines of the CEFR to student teachers. Although there have been several studies focusing on CEFR in teacher training faculties, they are far from being systematic in that individual universities have different practices in introducing these new principles. As of 2012, 10 Ph. D. and 4 MA theses have been published on CEFR in Turkey. A systematic tool for introducing the underlying principles stated in CEFR, the EPOSTL is strongly believed to contribute to the development of autonomy as a reflection tool in foreign language teacher education and to enable student teachers to develop an awareness of their own teaching practice (Burkert & Schwienhorst, 2008). At this point, this qualitative study investigates Turkish ELT student teachers' and teacher trainers' views on the use of the EPOSTL as a reflection tool in language teacher education.

Teacher Autonomy: Reflection, Awareness and Self-assessment

Since researchers view the concept of teacher autonomy from a multidimensional perspective, it is difficult to provide an exhaustive definition of the term. There is no definite understanding of what teacher autonomy means in pre-service teacher education (Aoki, 2002; Einolf, 2002; Huang, 2005; Smith, 2008). As a result, it is not only natural but also inevitable that one encounters a great number of definitions varying from person to person, one insight to yet another. In the autonomy literature, for more than 15 years, the concept of teacher autonomy has been frequently connected to language learner autonomy, yet virtually all attempts to define the concept clearly have failed to do so. It was Street and Licata (1989) who first described teacher autonomy as the teacher's feelings of independence from the institution in making instructional decisions with the classroom. This definition shows that teacher autonomy is viewed as a kind of independence from the institution when instructional decisions are taken in matters such as choosing the textbook to follow, teaching strategies to employ and classroom rules to obey. Pearson and Hall (1993, p. 172) view teacher autonomy as "...the right of teachers to manage themselves and their job environment". Shaw's definition of teacher autonomy is (2002, p. 2) "...the capacity to take control of one's own teaching". Unlike the first two definitions proposed above, Shaw's seems to exclude the school factor and puts the emphasis on the teacher. Before moving on to defining teacher autonomy more specifically in the context of ELT, it would be wise to refer to Little (1995) who states that "...genuinely successful teachers have always been autonomous in the sense of having a strong sense of personal responsibility for their teaching" (p. 179). That is to say, successful teachers are autonomous teachers most of the time. McGrath (2000) defines teacher autonomy in a more comprehensive way. He mentions two discrete dimensions of teacher autonomy: a) "...teacher autonomy as a self-directed professional development" b) "...teacher autonomy as freedom of control by others" (McGrath 2000, p. 101-102). Here the difference between the two is that the former is more concerned with the psychological perspective, while the latter is more political. Following McGrath, Aoki (2002, p. 111) defines teacher autonomy as "...the capacity, freedom, and/or responsibility to make choices concerning one's own teaching" even though she herself finds this definition a bit problematic because of the limited scope of the definition. Smith (2003; 2006) and later Smith and Erdo an (2008) prefer to use the term teacher/learner autonomy. According to Smith and Erdo an (2008, p. 83), teacher/learner autonomy is "...the ability to develop appropriate skills, knowledge and attitudes for oneself as a teacher, in cooperation with others". Huang (2005, p. 206) focuses on three terms namely willingness, capacity, and freedom in order to formulate his own working definition of teacher autonomy "...teachers' willingness, capacity and freedom to take control of their own teaching and learning". Jimenez Raya, Lamb and Vieira (2007, p. 1) define autonomy as "...the competence to develop as a self-determined, socially responsible and critically aware participant in (and beyond) educational environments, within a vision of education as (inter) personal empowerment and social

transformation". After a rigorous examination of the definitions in the literature, Ling (2007, p. 96) offers his own understanding of teacher autonomy as "...an insight, a positive attitude, a capacity for reflection in teaching, and a readiness to promote the learner to be more independent and to take control over his/her own teaching". Many and varied as they may be, the definitions of teacher autonomy emphasize certain common notions. They are "willingness", "capacity", "freedom", "control", "responsibility", and "independence". It is evident that the term "teacher autonomy" is used in a variety of ways, each emphasizing a different dimension or component.

The literature on teacher autonomy has a number of accounts of teacher education practices (Lamb, 2000; McGrath, 2000; Smith, 2000; Aoki, 2002; Vieira, 2003; Munoz, 2007; Ratnam, 2007; Usma, 2007, Vieira, Paiva, Marques, & Fernandes, 2008). Whereas certain educators take the term from a strict political viewpoint (Einolf, 2002), others have a more psychological account (Parr, 2006; Smith, 2006). Various researchers have done a great many research studies that scrutinize autonomy by specifically looking at variables such as school policies (Hara, 2006), decision making processes (Friedman, 1999), instructors' perspectives (Garvin, 2007), work environments (Pearson & Moomaw, 2006), organizational climate (LaCoe, 2006), and curriculum (Dymoke & Harrison, 2006). In the field of language learning/teaching, teacher autonomy surprisingly enough is not given as much weight as it should be by teacher educators. As for autonomy researchers, they have produced only a few studies on teacher autonomy (Smith, 2003; Smith & Erdo an, 2008) as far as autonomy is considered in relation to pre-service teacher education programs. Little (1995, p. 180) believes that "language teachers are more likely to succeed in promoting learner autonomy if their own education has encouraged them to be autonomous". Language teachers without any previous autonomy-oriented training may experience difficulties in creating a classroom culture that fosters autonomy. Hence, the earlier prospective language teachers are made aware of the importance of learner autonomy, the more easily they will be able to implement this approach in their own future classrooms. Several researchers (Burkert & Schwienhorst, 2008; Huang, 2005; Little, 1995; Sert, 2006) provide evidence that teachers who are not autonomous learners themselves may have a negative influence on the development of autonomy in their students. This requires that teacher autonomy should be seen as a legitimate goal of teacher education programmes. According to Smith (2003, p. 8), there are two basic reasons for this. First, reflective teaching is closely associated with "a capacity for self-directed professional action". Second, it allows student teachers "to gain better abilities and a greater willingness to learn for themselves in developing an appropriate expertise of their own" (Smith 2003, p. 8). Tschirhart and Rigler (2009) tried to develop learner/teacher autonomy through action research in line with technological innovations like LondonMet e-packs. Their research concluded that the students tended to be able to exercise autonomy in different ways and degrees even though they suffered from technological drawbacks experienced with the online study. In a similar fashion, action research (Benson 2001), self-observations (Gebhard & Oprandy, 2005), peer observations (Dymoke & Harrison, 2006; Harmer, 2001), collaborative teacher-support groups (Schwienhorst, 1999), and teaching portfolios (Richards & Schmidt, 2002) are often employed for this purpose. Tort-Moloney (1997, p. 50) indicates that it is essential to "...allow teachers to develop autonomous relationships of dialectical dependence on and independence from variables such as curriculum, research and classroom discourse, among other variables". In other words, fostering teacher autonomy is an issue that is not merely confined to teacher education they receive. It is of vital importance that teachers become aware of "why, when, where, and how pedagogical skills can be acquired and used in the self-conscious awareness of teaching practice" (Tort-Moloney, 1997, p. 51). Teacher educators, at this point, need to develop an awareness of teacher trainees' teaching practice as well as possible constraints on their navigation of professional action/development, which plays a key role in the development of teacher autonomy at pre-service teacher education.

The EPOSTL

The EPOSTL is a document intended for students undergoing their pre-service 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 (Newby, Allan et al., 2007). The EPOSTL was developed for the European Centre for Modern Languages (ECML) of the Council of Europe by a team of teacher educators from five different countries (Austria, Armenia, Norway, Poland, and the UK). It arose from a project initiated by the ECML, 'A Framework for Teacher Education', which had the overall aim of addressing the broad question of harmonizing teacher education across Europe (Newby, Allan et al., 2007). This document is now available in various languages (English, German, French, Polish, Turkish (in progress) (http://www.ecml.at/mtp2/Fte/html/FTE_E_Results.htm). Not only student teachers but also teacher educators, curriculum designers and actual teachers can make use of the EPOSTL to improve the quality of teacher education. The EPOSTL does not serve as a grading tool for teacher trainees. It should be regarded as a kind of "process tool" rather than "show case" portfolio. That is to say, the EPOSTL should be seen as a reflection tool that enables teachers and teacher trainees to evaluate themselves in terms of certain competencies.

The underlying aim of the EPOSTL is to provide student teachers with a tool for reflection and self-assessment during their initial teacher education. In a general sense, the purpose of the EPOSTL is twofold. To increase transparency of education programmes, to encourage a reflective mode in teacher education (Akbari, 2007) and to offer aid to make the comparison of teacher education programmes across Europe possible. More specifically, the EPOSTL aims to encourage students to reflect on the competences a teacher is expected to attain and on the conceptual framework which feeds these competences, to promote discussion between students, and between students and their teacher educators and mentors, to facilitate self-assessment of students' competence and to help students develop awareness of their strengths and weaknesses related to teaching practice (Newby, Allan et al., 2007). Exclusively designed for student teachers, the EPOSTL is crucial in that it guides them through their practicum with clear instructions. The EPOSTL contains three main sections: a) a personal statement, asking student teachers to make comments on their own previous experiences related to language teaching/learning, b) a self-assessment section, consisting of the 196 descriptors to facilitate reflection and self-assessment, and c) a dossier, helping student teachers to keep any work done relevant to teaching (e.g. lesson plans, lesson scripts, observation notes) and thus provide evidence of progress and make the outcome of self-assessment transparent. The other sections available in the EPOSTL are: An introduction, a users' guide, a glossary of terms used in the EPOSTL related to language learning and teaching and an index of terms used in the descriptors. There are several underlying principles that shape the descriptors such as the concept of teacher/learner autonomy, CLT (Communicative Language Teaching), interdependence of language and culture, ICT (Information and Communication Technologies), and independent learning. The descriptors are grouped into seven categories, each of which has also subcategories. To illustrate, the category "Methodology" includes seven subcategories: a) Speaking/Speaking Interaction, b) Writing/Written Interaction, c) Listening, d) Reading, e) Grammar, f) Vocabulary, and g) Culture. For instance, the subcategory "Speaking/Speaking Interaction" has several descriptors such as *I can evaluate and select a range of meaningful speaking and interactional activities to develop fluency (discussion, role play, problem solving etc.)*". Under each statement is a blank where student teachers are expected to fill in with their comments.

Methodology

Research Questions

There are two main research questions in this study:

- 1) How do student teachers perceive their experience with the EPOSTL?, and
- 2) How do teacher trainers evaluate the use of the EPOSTL with student teachers? In order to answer these research questions, this study was carried out in the ELT Department of a Turkish university.

Setting

The ELT department is the most populous ELT department in Turkey and offers one of the most prestigious ELT programs (OSYM, 2011). The program provides students with a four-year education on teaching English as a foreign language. The first year of the program mainly focuses on teaching language skills and grammar to students, while the following years concentrate on training them as language teachers. The methodology courses student teachers take are *Approaches in ELT, English Teaching Methodology II, Teaching Foreign Languages to Children, Testing and Evaluation in ELT, Evaluation and Adaptation of Textbooks and Other Materials*. Furthermore, students in this program are required to take applied courses such as School Experience and Teaching Practice. The teacher trainers are all aware that these courses should be in line with the principles proposed in CEFR. However in their present practice they cannot make sure that everything has been covered by the end of the course. To overcome this shortcoming the present training program is supplemented by the EPOSTL.

Participants

The researchers employed the convenience or opportunity sampling method. The number of participants was kept limited to comparatively 25 student teachers (juniors) and 4 teacher trainers who were not the researchers of the current study. Dörnyei (2007, p. 99) describes convenience or opportunity sampling as “a kind of sampling where an important criterion of sample selection is the convenience of the researcher”.

Implementation of the EPOSTL

The study was carried out in the following four steps: 1) introducing the EPOSTL to the student teachers, working with selected descriptors, 2) collecting their expectations through open-ended questions, 3) implementing the EPOSTL for a semester under the guidance of teacher trainers, 4) interviewing both student teachers and teacher trainers upon the completion of the EPOSTL. First of all, one of the researchers introduced the EPOSTL to student teachers with a PowerPoint presentation. During the presentation, the researcher explained the underlying principles of the EPOSTL along with some of its descriptors. 25 student teachers who participated in the study took an interest in the EPOSTL because they realized that this experience would lead them to develop an awareness of their own teaching practice. In the mean time, the teacher trainers were informed about the EPOSTL. As a second step, the student teachers' expectations about the use of the EPOSTL were gathered through open-ended interviews just after the presentations. Third, the student teachers were asked to open an account in Ning, a social networking site (<http://www.ning.com>), to follow the process online. Before the study commenced, the researcher made sure that the EPOSTL was uploaded on Ning so that student teachers could comment on the document. After teacher trainers covered teaching techniques/strategies related to reading and speaking skills with the participation of the student teachers, the student teachers did microteaching about these skills. They were videotaped during their microteaching. Then they watched the videotapes of their microteaching individually before writing down their reflections. Finally, the teacher trainers had the student teachers refer to the EPOSTL descriptors related to the specific language skills covered in their own microteaching and make comments on them. To exemplify, when the student teachers covered classroom management in their methodology classes, they were asked to write their reflections on this particular area of the EPOSTL. The teacher trainers also provided clarifications and guidance as to what is really expected since the student teachers had some difficulties in using the EPOSTL as a reflection tool during this process. First of all, they did not know how to evaluate their own teaching skills according to the EPOSTL descriptors. Secondly, they had little experience with the use of Ning, which sometimes caused frustration. Therefore, the researchers stood by to help them overcome these difficulties. Fourth, the researcher interviewed both student teachers and teacher trainers soon after the completion of the EPOSTL.

Data Collection

The interview questions had been prepared and piloted earlier than the beginning of the actual study. Fifteen questions were formulated on the basis of student teachers' experiences. Dörnyei (2003) believes that in the process of writing questions some external feedback is indispensable when an initial item pool is prepared. With this in mind, these questions were sent off to two experts on teacher autonomy and reflective practice to get their suggestions for content validity. In the light of the suggestions made by the experts, it was decided that ten questions would be employed in the first place. Field-testing, which is an integral part of questions writing is "Piloting the questions at various stages of their development on a sample of people who are similar to the target sample for which the questions have been asked" (Dörnyei, 2007, p. 112). Thus, these ten questions were piloted with the five student teachers that were actively participating in the activity. After the implementation of the questions, it turned out that some interview questions were not clear enough for participants to respond properly. The questions that could be considered to be vague were deleted. There were four questions left to collect students' experiences with the EPOSTL (See Appendix). These same four questions were reformulated to be used with the teacher trainers to collect the data regarding their evaluations. The analysis of qualitative data

was mostly based on categorizing the data collected immediately. As with most data, there are several steps that need to be considered during the analysis of qualitative data. These steps include transcription, coding, and description of data, as well as data analysis (Gass & Mackey, 2000).

Data Analysis

The interviews were conducted with one participant at a time, between 40 minutes and 50 minutes. All interviews were audio taped and transcribed verbatim. The interview sessions were completed in Turkish and in three weeks during April 2011. The qualitative data were analyzed by the researchers. The constant comparative method, which derived from the grounded theory (Glaser & Strauss, 1967; Strauss & Corbin, 1990), was used for the analysis of data. Glaser and Strauss (1967) state that the constant comparison method is made up of four distinct stages: (1) comparing incidents applicable to each category, (2) integrating categories and their properties, (3) delimiting the theory, and (4) writing the theory. In this study, though, the first two were used. In this process, the data were repeatedly read by two researchers until some underlying themes emerged. According to Lincoln and Guba (1985) there are four criteria for the trustworthiness of the qualitative research designs. Credibility refers to the extent to which the findings of the research are credible to the population. Continuing data collection over a long enough period of time is a way of establishing credibility of the qualitative findings (Mackey & Gass, 2005). Transferability refers to whether the findings or the design is applicable in another similar context. Dependability refers to the use of triangulation and constant comparison (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Confirmability is about the availability of the research process like field notes, journals, and various coded data to another researcher or observer. Another researcher should be able to examine the data and confirm, modify or reject the first researcher's interpretation" (Mackey & Gass, 2005, p. 180). To exemplify, the following extract was examined by two researchers so as to determine what aspects emerged as the findings of the study. As seen below, "the ability to show one's own weakness and strength" is one of the aspects emerged during the interview. Both researchers came to realize that this aspect was repeated by many of the participants, which allowed the researchers to regard this aspect as the finding of the study.

"It was a kind of a mirror that showed my weaknesses about a specific point. When I did something during my teaching practice, it contributed to my performance a lot (Student Teacher H)".

Findings and Discussion

Before the study started, the researchers collected student teachers' expectations from the EPOSTL about their professional development. Among the positive remarks made by the participants concerning the use of the EPOSTL, the following points stood out. The responses from the overwhelming majority of the students (95%) emphasized the EPOSTL as a reflective tool much in line with the findings of Akbari's research (2007). More specifically, the EPOSTL proved to be an ideal instrument for the promotion of awareness raising and reflection (Freeman & Richards, 1996; Richards, 1998). The student teachers clearly stated that the use of the EPOSTL would make them realize the competencies they need to improve for the creation of effective teaching environments. The other expectation expressed by the majority of the participants (75%) was the regulatory power of the EPOSTL. They were convinced that the use of the EPOSTL would shape their teaching skills/styles/competencies and monitor them as language teachers, increase their sense of accomplishment, and self-regulation.

I expect that this education (through the EPOSTL) improves my perspective and makes me a perfect teacher because I can develop an awareness of my own teaching specifically skills/strategies I employ. The education I take will sometimes be difficult but this will help me be a distinguished teacher (Student Teacher F).

It may be a great opportunity to monitor ourselves as student teachers. Especially, the step-by-step evaluation will enable us to construct the building properly (Student Teacher E).

The student teachers seem to have positive views regarding the use of the EPOSTL in their pre-service teacher education. Three days after a three-month EPOSTL experience/application, the student teachers were interviewed through the questions mentioned in the methodology section. Most participants were highly positive about the effectiveness of the EPOSTL in the pre-service teacher education context. The statements like the following showed their approval of the use of the EPOSTL.

It is a chance that we used EPOSTL because it showed us our development in teaching. I managed to see my mistakes as well as strengths. I really found it useful (Student Teacher A). I am pretty sure EPOSTL provided good progress for me because I was given the opportunity to observe, evaluate my own teaching (Student Teacher C).

Much in line with Burkert and Schwienhorst's (2008) suggestion that the EPOSTL should be used as an instrument for helping student teachers to reflect on their knowledge, skills and values, participants' evaluation of the EPOSTL practice similarly underlined the function of the EPOSTL as a guide that showed their development in teaching by offering them a golden opportunity to observe their own teaching skills and by making them realize their weaknesses and strengths. In terms of professional development, the respondents found the EPOSTL practice no less useful.

I think it was a good step to take for us to assess our future profession. As I become more aware of the phases of my training, I can develop myself getting more benefits from EPOSTL (Student Teacher D).

The EPOSTL helped me see my process of becoming a teacher, a successful one. I also believe it contributed to my professional development to a great extent (Student Teacher B).

As is easily seen in their remarks, the student teachers also made use of the EPOSTL as a self-assessment tool in their pre-service teacher education. By doing so, they were able to recognize the phases of their professional development as a reflective language teacher. The participants believed that the EPOSTL expanded their horizon by providing them with alternative ways of thinking frames as regards their teaching practices.

Concerning the contribution of the EPOSTL to student teachers' teaching performances, the participants seemed to agree that their experiences with the EPOSTL helped them find the missing links in their teaching contexts. The student teachers had the following views.

It was a kind of a mirror that showed my weaknesses about a specific point. When I did something during my teaching practice, it contributed to my performance a lot (Student Teacher H).

After we went over the various topics concerning teaching English, I looked back at how much I really understood them critically (Student Teacher I).

First of all, they stated that the EPOSTL improved their teaching performances by showing them their weaker sides such as creating an effective speaking atmosphere in class, and giving instructions effectively. Secondly, the EPOSTL led them to view their past teaching practices with a critical eye and develop a better justification of the theories behind what they really did during their teaching. In other words, they were given a chance to criticize their teaching actions against the theories behind them. Thirdly, the student teachers were able to find ways to compensate for what they failed to do in their teaching. That is to say, they were more enlightened about the areas they have to develop specifically. In terms of the EPOSTL as tool for self-evaluation, most student teachers reported that it offered them an opportunity to assess their own competencies in teaching processes, which is in line with "the

overall aim of the EPOSTL: to provide a tool for reflection and self-assessment for student teachers during their initial teacher education” (Burkert & Schwienhorst, 2008), which was clearly observed in the following statements.

It enabled me to see my weak points such as speaking interaction, how to manage large classes effectively (Student Teacher B).

I should say I did have a chance to evaluate myself about how good I was teaching. A long way to go, though (Student Teacher K).

One outcome of their self-assessment was that they were able to recognize where they actually were and where they needed to be in relation to their teaching practice as suggested in the theory of zone of proximal development (ZPD) (Williams & Burden, 1997). ZPD is described as “the layer of skill or knowledge which is beyond that with which the learner is currently capable of coping” (Williams and Burden, 1997, p. 40). As an inevitable consequence of this development, the student teachers capably identified their weak points like speaking interaction and how to manage large classes effectively with the help of the leading descriptors of the EPOSTL. In relation to whether the EPOSTL helped the participants identify any specific areas they needed to work on more, it was mostly (85%) agreed that the EPOSTL was crucial in that it led the student teachers to recognize their weaknesses as mentioned above.

Well I don't know, for instance, it's also this reflection on how good am I at [teaching] speaking or writing. Somehow listening seems to be some kind of a feared opponent of mine, for whatever reason, I haven't quite got the hang of this [...] (Student Teacher J).

To be more specific, the participants singled out teaching listening as the most challenging area. Another area they felt they had difficulty in was giving instructions in setting the real like teaching activities. Failing to give the instructions properly, they believed, resulted in the failure of the learners to fully understand what to do and to accomplish the task.

Though invaluable in terms of reflection and self-assessment, the use of the EPOSTL was found challenging by the majority of prospective teachers (90%) for two main reasons. First, they found themselves in an awkward position when they were expected to assess themselves by filling in the certain descriptors.

I found filling in the descriptors a bit difficult because it's hard to assess yourself. I mean nobody got a 100% obviously, but it's difficult to find out where you really are (Student Teacher L).

Particularly at the beginning I found it extremely difficult to assess competences with the help of can-do-descriptors. I still feel I haven't got enough practical experience to do so (Student Teacher C).

Such a finding should not come as a surprise since Turkish learners are not traditionally supposed to have skills such as taking responsibility for their own learning and evaluating themselves, which was clearly revealed by research studies on the behaviors of Turkish learners (Yumuk, 2002; Karabıyık, 2008). The other point that emerged as a challenging aspect of the use of the EPOSTL was the amount of work required to be completed by the student teachers.

The EPOSTL looks like a good one, but I think using EPOSTL may be hard work. We need to work a lot (Student Teacher M).

That is to say, most of them (95%) complained that they had to answer as many questions as they had never done before. For example, they mentioned that the number of the descriptors to be filled in was too big and that they had to spend too much time on the EPOSTL. Since this was the first EPOSTL experience bringing extra work on the student teachers' part, such complaints were understandable.

Teacher Trainers' Views

As regards the perceptions of the teacher trainers about the EPOSTL in preservice teacher education, all of them were of the opinion that the EPOSTL was an effective tool for enabling them to develop student teachers' teaching awareness. They stated that the EPOSTL was a useful instrument for professional development in that it enhanced student teachers' teaching practices through reflection, which is regarded as an indispensable component of modern teacher training.

It is very useful for professional development, enhances their teaching through reflection and they can do their own evaluation & assessment, how far and how much they can do, they can get feedback from their peers (Teacher Trainer B).

These practices led to an awareness of how far and how much the student teachers progressed during their preservice teacher education. The teacher trainers agreed that another important use of the EPOSTL was that it provided the teacher candidates with matchless opportunities for cross-fertilization. It enabled them to freely exchange ideas and insights concerning their teaching applications.

It enables students to do their own jobs, share their opinions (Teacher Trainer C).

In relation to the possible contributions of the EPOSTL to student teachers' performance, all of the teacher trainers expressed that the EPOSTL helped the student teachers to analyze their capabilities and weaknesses. It also presented a complete overview of all the seemingly disconnected aspects of language teaching and thus helping them to view the whole picture. This helped them to realize how different courses in the ELT program served the same purpose as complementary elements.

It encourages views about language teaching; student teachers can gain some insights about language teaching (Teacher Trainer D).

As for the suggestions made by the teacher trainers, two stood out. First, they strongly believed that the use of the EPOSTL should begin in the 2nd year because they become concerned about language teaching issues as they take methodology classes in this year. Second, acting on the idea that the student teachers were not equipped with the ability to reflect and evaluate themselves, the teacher trainers underlined the necessity for the provision of sessions where the use of the EPOSTL was clarified in detail. In other words, in order to prevent the student teachers from feeling insecure and desperate during their initial use of the EPOSTL, the teacher trainers suggested that regular guidance and support be provided, which was associated with the idea of the dialogue between teacher trainer and the student teachers as mentioned in the aims of the EPOSTL (Newby, Allan et al., 2007).

Concluding Remarks

The study set out to shed light on the EFL student teachers' and teacher trainers' perceptions of the use of the EPOSTL following a one-semester EPOSTL application. There were two main research questions that this study sought to answer, one covering areas regarding the student teachers' experiences with the EPOSTL, while the other focusing mainly on the teacher trainers' evaluations about the use of the EPOSTL in pre-service language teacher education. The findings revealed that the two parties viewed the EPOSTL as a reflection tool for enabling the student teachers to evaluate their teaching practices from various angles. Furthermore, both groups agreed that the EPOSTL was viewed as an efficient tool for self-assessment, which happily resulted in students' assessing themselves more critically. Finally, the EPOSTL seemed to form a platform where the student teachers were encouraged to become more aware of their weaker points related to their teaching. Teacher educators are known to have difficulty in stimulating and encouraging student teachers to learn, to construct their practical knowledge, to develop an attitude of reflective inquiry and to experiment with ideas and teaching skills (Tilemma, 1997). New conceptions of professional

development and the acquisition of professional teaching skills such as being independent, responsible, and aware have necessitated restructuring teacher education programmes. To this end, above-mentioned components of learner autonomy have become an indispensable part of the new teacher education programmes (Lamb, 2008; Trebbi, 2008). However, such a change would be incomplete without the teacher trainers setting good examples for the student teachers. It is often pronounced that the development of highly desired learner autonomy as an educational goal is closely associated with teacher autonomy (Shaw, 2002; Smith, 2003; 2006; Usma & Frodden, 2003; Sert, 2006; Little, 2007; Cotterall & Crabbe, 2008; Smith & Erdo an, 2008). That is to say, in order for language learners to take responsibility for their own learning, language teachers themselves should display autonomous skills. As a consequence of this, teacher autonomy has gained considerable traction as such autonomy is believed to produce learners who take more responsibility for the planning, monitoring and evaluation of their own learning. The components often claimed to be necessary for teachers to be autonomous are often cited as reflection, self-assessment and awareness. It is these very same findings that the student teachers and teacher trainers have come up with after their experience with the EPOSTL. In other words, the student teachers mostly report that they have been going through the stages that lead them to adopt a more autonomous perspective for their own teaching. This does not necessarily mean that the student teachers have actually become autonomous, rather they have developed an awareness of autonomy as future teachers through the implementation of the EPOSTL. This improvement specifically emerged as an increase in the student teachers' ability to take charge of their own teaching.

This short experience with the EPOSTL suggests that two points be taken into account in pre-service teacher education programmes. First, just as the Common European Framework for Languages provides a common basis for the elaboration of language syllabuses, curriculum guidelines, examinations, textbooks etc. across Europe (Council of Europe, 2001), the EPOSTL provides a common basis for the specification and discussion of competences and teacher education curricula across Europe (Newby, Allan et al., 2007). The EPOSTL, thus, can serve as a benchmarking tool uniquely suited to compare the contents of teacher education programmes nationwide and across Europe bringing about a unity in pre-service language teacher education, which also overlaps with one of the mayor aims of the Eurydice: to make it possible to do comparative thematic studies devoted to specific topics of Community interest (Eurydice). Second, the EPOSTL can be employed as an online tool because it may not be feasible for a student teacher to carry around this 92-page document. Considering the fact that we live in a digital age (Thomas, 2009; Kidd, 2010; Guofan & Gut, 2011; Thomas, 2011) student teachers who are themselves digital natives (Prensky 2001) are often more competent at digital technologies than their trainers. In this regard, the EPOSTL can be converted into the "E-EPOSTL" in which the student teachers can utilize the tool online.

The use of the EPOSTL supplements the already existing teacher training program rather than replacing it since the present program does cover the topics we underline such as speaking and writing skills etc. but rather unsystematically. The EPOSTL offers a systematic collection of these topics and serves as a reflection tool through the descriptors covering each topic. This small scale study of 25 ELT student teachers and 4 teacher trainers could be repeated with more participants including a control group to generalize the findings. Nor can we reach any definite conclusions as regards the impact of this pilot implementation on student teachers' performance in the practicum. This point, also being worth investigating, could be the topic of another study.

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Appendix: Interview questions

Student teachers

- 1- How useful did you find the use of the EPOSTL as a whole?
- 2- To what extent and in what respects did the EPOSTL contribute to your professional development?
- 3- Did the EPOSTL help you in any way to reflect about your own teaching practice?
- 4- Was the EPOSTL of any use in your deliberate identification of the areas you needed to improve in relation to your teaching skills?

Teacher trainers

What are your impressions about the use of the EPOSTL regarding the following points?

- 1- How useful was it for the student teachers when evaluated as a whole?
- 2- To what extent and in what respects did the EPOSTL contribute to your professional development of the student teachers?
- 3- Did the EPOSTL help the student teachers in any way to reflect about their own teaching practice?
- 4- Was the EPOSTL of any use for the student teachers to identify consciously their weaker sides related to their teaching skills?