

An Application of the EPOSTL: Focus on Culture

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Abstract

Although Turkey is not a member state of the EU, educational and curricular documents produced by the EU such like the CEFR, the European Language Portfolio (the ELP) and the European Portfolio for Student Teachers of Languages (EPOSTL) have been examined by Turkish researchers and curriculum makers whose work seem to affect the curriculum of teacher education programs and curricula of all levels. The EPOSTL, which aims to improve the pedagogical progress of Turkish teachers of English, is currently studied and applied in many different contexts in Turkey although research on its potential use is still needed. Hence, in this study, we applied the culture-related self-assessment scale with seven pre-service teachers of English who were taking a practicum course. In the EPOSTL there are eleven culture-related self-assessment descriptors and all of them were answered by the participants both in numbers as well as in words. Results showed that items five, six and eleven were given the lowest scores. These suggest that future teachers of English found selecting materials related with “otherness” and “stereotypes” and assessing learners’ ability in acting appropriately in target-culture situations.

Keywords

EPOSTL, self-assessment, culture

I. INTRODUCTION

The European Portfolio for Student Teachers of Languages (EPOSTL) is a document prepared for prospective teachers of foreign languages which specifically focuses on developing prospective teachers’ “didactic knowledge and skills necessary to teach languages” in a reflective manner through “193 descriptors of competences” with which prospective teachers can assess their own development [1, p. 5]. Formatted in a way to include six main sections, namely, a personal statement, a self-assessment section, a dossier, a glossary, an index, and a users’ guide, the main aims of the EPOSTL are itemized in the document as follows:

1. to encourage to reflect on the competences a teacher strives to attain and on the underlying knowledge which feeds these competences;

2. to help prepare for future profession in a variety of teaching contexts;
3. to promote discussion between peers and between prospective teachers and teacher educators and mentors;
4. to facilitate self-assessment of prospective teachers’ developing competence;
5. to provide an instrument which helps chart progress [1, p. 5].

The document is argued to be a flexible tool which can be shaped within the context in which it is used. As stated in the document;

Although the descriptors provide a systematic way of considering competences, they should not be regarded as a checklist! It is important that they act as a stimulus for students, teacher educators and mentors to discuss important aspects of teacher education which underlie them and that they contribute to developing professional awareness [1, p. 7].

The descriptors are grouped into seven general categories which have the following headings:

- Context
- Methodology
- Resources
- Lesson planning
- Conducting a lesson
- Independent learning
- Assessment of learning [1, p. 85].

Although Turkey is not a member state of the EU, educational and curricular documents produced by the EU such like the CEFR, The European Language Portfolio (the ELP for students) and the European Portfolio for Student Teachers of Languages (EPOSTL) have been examined by Turkish researchers and curriculum makers whose work seem to affect the curriculum of teacher education programs and curricula of all levels. Much of the recent literature on the EPOSTL rallies around issues of autonomy and reflection [2] and the studies conducted on it suggest that prospective

teachers of English regard it as a beneficial self-reflective tool. However, it is rightly stated that although researchers see “a high value in the use of the EPOSTL for professional development” they voice some criticism in the document such as having “the lack of a system of reference or the sole focus on didactic competences” [3, p. 238]. Therefore, in its current form the EPOSTL must be considered as the first step and it needs adjustment and re-organization, and it does not provide a complete list of skills that teachers must acquire or develop [3]. Although there are some, but not widespread applications of the EPOSTL in Turkey especially through such projects like EFUESTE [4], much applications and reports are needed to develop the effectiveness of this tool in Turkish teacher education programs. This need is even more pressing when the case of a specific research study is considered. In that particular study, the researchers argued that prospective teachers of English already had opinions about the EPOSTL as a document even before their study was conducted which seems to be confusing because their paper already stated that the first step in their study was to introduce the EPOSTL to the student teachers [5].

II. METHOD

We applied the culture-related self-assessment scale with eight pre-service teachers of English who were taking a practicum course in the spring of 2015-2016. This self-assessment scale consisted of eleven items all of which were answered by the participants both in numerical terms, to answer the scale, as well as in words, in order to emphasize to what extent the item spoke for themselves. The items were as follows:

1. I can evaluate and select a variety of texts, source materials and activities which awaken learners’ interest in and help them to develop their knowledge and understanding of their own and the other language culture (cultural facts, events, attitudes and identity etc.)
2. I can create opportunities for learners to explore the culture of target language communities out of class (Internet emails etc).
3. I can evaluate and select a variety of texts, source materials and activities which make learners aware of similarities and differences in sociocultural ‘norms of behavior.
4. I can evaluate and select activities (role plays, simulated situations etc.) which help learners to develop their socio-cultural competence.
5. I can evaluate and select a variety of texts, source material and activities which help learners to reflect on the concept of ‘otherness’ and understand different value systems.
6. I can evaluate and select texts, source materials and activities to make the learners aware of stereotyped views and challenge these.
7. I can evaluate and select activities which enhance the learners’ intercultural awareness.

8. I can evaluate and select a variety of texts and activities to make learners aware of the interrelationship between culture and language.
9. I can assess the learners’ knowledge of cultural facts, events etc. of the target language communities.
10. I can assess the learners’ ability to make comparisons between their own and the culture of target language communities.
11. I can assess the learner’s ability to respond and act appropriately in encounters with the target language culture.

III. FINDINGS

Results showed that items five, six and eleven were given the lowest scores. These suggest that these future teachers of English found it difficult to selecting materials related with “otherness” and “stereotypes” and assessing learners’ ability in acting appropriately in target-culture situations. The lowest three mean values are shown with an asterisk (Table 1).

TABLE I. MEAN VALUES AND STANDARD DEVIATIONS

Item Number	St. Dev.	Mean
1	0.534	8
2	1.505	7.375
3	0.925	7.5
4	1.807	6.875
5*	2.618	5
6*	2.725	6
7	1.069	8
8	1.281	7.25
9	1.414	7
10	1.125	7.125
11*	1.281	6.25

As can be seen in the table above, items 1, 7, and 3 are regarded as the items in which pre-service teachers of English find themselves stronger in their knowledge and perception. Hence, for these participants, they can evaluate and select a variety of resources, activities and materials that can awaken learners’ interest in their own and the other language culture while enhancing learners’ intercultural awareness. They also believe that they are good at evaluating and selecting materials, activities and texts which make learners aware of similarities and differences in sociocultural norms of behavior. Participants’ rating of their potential in evaluating and selecting these culture-related materials and activities suggest that although they find themselves knowledgeable in general terms, as cultural concepts become more specific, their rating of their own abilities decrease. This alone shows that when this self-assessment activity is considered, it can be claimed that pre-service teachers are unsure about certain, yet specific cultural concepts.

When the hand-written accounts of the participants are considered, following results can be seen:

Although items 1, 7 and 3 seem to have been understood best by the per-service teachers of English, the hand-written accounts showed that they actually were not simply because these items, just like most of the other ones, try to assess a lot of things at a time. Besides, it can be inferred from the accounts given by the per-service teachers that there are not any specific examples given for these items. Student D who scored himself/herself 9 for item 1 stated that *"if I use a supplementary coursebook or material, cultural items from different cultures can be hard for my students to understand"*. As for item 7, it can be inferred from the written accounts that intercultural awareness and how to enhance it were not clearly understood by the per-service teachers of English. For example, Student D who scored him/herself 8 for that item stated that *"I can reach many sources and materials to enhance the learners' intercultural awareness"* lacking specific examples or explaining how to do so. On the other hand Student E for the same item stated that *"I use different cultural examples from different English speaking countries and other countries"*. Student F who scored him/herself 9 for the same item stated that *"I can evaluate activities to enhance the learners' intercultural awareness by organizing some trips or museum tours"*. It can be seen from the hand-written accounts for item 7 that intercultural awareness was not clearly understood by the pre-service teachers of English. That is simply because of the complex and sophisticated nature of the phenomenon, which makes intercultural awareness hard to be assessed by just a single item. As for item 3, although the mean value of this item is 7.428, the hand-written accounts showed that it was not clearly understood by the pre-service teachers of English. Student G, for instance, stated that *"I want to be careful about this topic and I think I can realize the similarities and differences in selecting material"*. Obviously s/he misunderstood the item and thought that realizing similarities and differences in sociocultural norms of behavior was his/her task. Similarly, Student B stated that *"I can evaluate socio-cultural norm of behavior by giving my students a project work showing similarities and differences between them"*. Just as Student G did, Student D misunderstood the item and thought that s/he was supposed to assess students' awareness about sociocultural 'norms of behavior by assigning students a project work.

The quantitative results showed that items 5, 6 and 11 were given the lowest scores mainly because these items include some difficult terms such as "otherness" and "stereotypes" with which these pre-service teachers of English are most probably unfamiliar. For these items most of the pre-service teachers either did not write an explanation or simply stated that they could not do it appropriately or they were not sure if they could. For item 5, Student D stated that *"I am not sure if I can show different value systems in my lesson"*. Likewise, for the same item, Student G stated that *"I do not know if I can do it"*. For item 11, Student F stated that *"I cannot assess*

these abilities, because I do not want to assess the things that I cannot do".

It can also be inferred from the accounts given by the pre-service teachers that most of them considered teaching the target language culture along with teaching other cultures as a fundamental aspect of teaching English:

Student G

"Learning a new language means learning the culture of that language. I think this is so important about selecting material."

Student F

"Language and culture are integrated to each other so while teaching the target language, culture must be paid attention..."

However, one of the pre-service teachers considered it as burden because coursebooks included adequate activities that also taught the target culture along with other cultures:

Student D

"There is no need to give such materials to develop learners' knowledge of different cultures because the MEB coursebooks are based on learners' culture."

As for selecting culture-related activities, the hand-written results showed that most of the pre-service teachers counted on the Internet and online resources:

Student A

"We have a lot of opportunities. Thanks to the internet, it is easy to find a variety of texts which show the differences and similarities between cultures."

Student D

"Thanks to the Internet, I can reach a lot of sources and prepare materials to support my learners' learning process."

Student F

"By using the Internet I can select and manipulate different texts, materials and activities that will be useful for my students".

Most of the pre-service teachers of English considered that assessing culture-related areas was a significant and necessary aspect of language teaching due to the close relationship between language and culture. Most of them preferred alternative assessment, yet they had different views on how to assess these aspects:

Student A

"I can assess my students' ability to respond and act appropriately in encounters with the target language culture by observing in the classroom."

Student D

“I think role plays, videos and dialogues are the best way to make comparisons between learners’ own culture and the culture of target language community.”

Student B

“I can assess the learners’ knowledge of cultural facts, events etc. of the target language communities by giving them project work. I can assess the learners’ ability to make comparisons between their own and the culture of target language communities through essay writing about the subject.”

Student E

“To show my students language and culture relation, I can prepare a role play activity and as for assessing my students’ ability to respond and act appropriately in encounters with the target language culture I can prepare a role play activity and I also take part in it as an observer or guidance provider.”

IV. DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

Previous research has shown that the EPOSTL has some shortcomings in regards to its content. In order for descriptors to assess what they aim to assess, clarity and concreteness are of utmost importance. However, many items in the document are too vague to be contextualized such as:

“I can evaluate and select a variety of texts, source material and activities which help learners to reflect on

the concept of ‘otherness’ and understand different value systems.”

Although this item is also loaded with different realities, what make it difficult to conceptualize are the concepts of “otherness” and “value systems” which are too vague to be understood or reflected upon in simple terms. It often is the case that teacher education programs do not include courses in which prospective teachers learn and interrogate concepts such as “otherness” and “value systems.” Hence, because the EPOSTL does not inform us about what these terms actually mean in educational contexts, using such descriptors will most probably reveal little of what we actually aim to gather.

References

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APPENDIX

PRE-SERVICE TEACHERS' SELF-ASSESSMENT SCORES & MEAN VALUES

ITEMS	St. A	St. B	St. C	St. D	St. E	St. F	St. G	St. H
1. I can evaluate and select a variety of texts, source materials and activities which awaken learners' interest in and help them to develop their knowledge and understanding of their own and the other language culture (cultural facts, events, attitudes and identity etc.)	7	8	8	9	8	8	8	8
2. I can create opportunities for learners to explore the culture of target language communities out of class (Internet emails etc).	8	8	7	4	7	9	8	8
3. I can evaluate and select a variety of texts, source materials and activities which make learners aware of similarities and differences in sociocultural 'norms of behavior.	7	7	8	8	9	6	7	8
4. I can evaluate and select activities (role plays, simulated situations etc.) which help learners to develop their socio-cultural competence.	7	7	6	10	6	5	9	5
5. I can evaluate and select a variety of texts, source material and activities which help learners to reflect on the concept of 'otherness' and understand different value systems.	6	2	8	7	7	6	3	1
6. I can evaluate and select texts, source materials and activities to make the learners aware of stereotyped views and challenge these.	8	3	7	6	9	8	6	1
7. I can evaluate and select activities which enhance the learners' intercultural awareness.	7	6	8	8	8	9	9	9
8. I can evaluate and select a variety of texts and activities to make learners aware of the interrelationship between culture and language.	7	7	8	5	6	8	8	9
9. I can assess the learners' knowledge of cultural facts, events etc. of the target language communities.	6	6	8	8	9	5	8	6
10. I can assess the learners' ability to make comparisons between their own and the culture of target language communities.	6	6	8	8	7	6	9	7
11. I can assess the learner's ability to respond and act appropriately in encounters with the target language culture.	6	5	7	7	7	4	8	6
INDIVIDUAL MEAN VALUES	6.818	5.909	7.545	7.272	7.545	6.727	7.545	6.181