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1. EPOSTL
2. Turkey
3. Prospective
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5. Pre-service

An Examination of the EPOSTL's Potential Practical Use in Turkey¹

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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 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, I critically look at the EPOSTL which is a guide for prospective teachers of foreign languages who are enrolled in their initial teacher education or teacher preparation programs. The document works within five specific domains that are aimed to be realized through 193 descriptors which are categorized under seven major areas. In this study, the value of the EPOSTL as a document in relation to its possible use in teacher education programs in Turkey is discussed with a focus on the probable challenges associated with applying it in English language teacher education programs in Turkey. By citing some research-based evidence on some theoretical, pedagogical, curricular and structural problems surrounding our programs in which we research and teach, I will try to show the problems associated with the document especially when its possible applications in Turkey are considered.

INTRODUCTION

The European Portfolio for Student Teachers of Languages (EPOSTL) is a document pre-pared 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 (Newby, et al., 2007, p. 5). Formatted in a way to include six main sections, namely, a personal statement, a self-

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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 (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 (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 (p. 85).

Much of the recent literature on the EPOSTL rallies around issues of autonomy and reflection (Schauber, 2015) and the studies conducted on it suggest that prospective teachers of English regard it as a beneficial self-reflective tool. However, Burkert and Schwienhorst (2008) rightly state that although they 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” (p. 238). Although there are some, but not widespread applications of the EPOSTL in Turkey especially through such projects like EFU-ESTE (Mirici, 2015), 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 research study by

Çakır and Balçıkınlı (2012) is considered because as they argued, prospective teachers of English had already developed their opinions about the EPOSTL as a document even before their study was conducted which seems to be self-refuting because their paper states that the first step in their study was to “introduce” the EPOSTL to their student teachers. Taking this and similar problems as the basis of this short study, I would like to present my personal evaluation of the document with the hope that its future editions will consider such points so as to make it a more practical and helpful tool that can be used in Tur-key. To be more exact, in this study, I critically look at the EPOSTL as a document by con-templating on its application-based shortcomings rather than philosophical ones. I used multiple reading of the document as my data analytical tool and to ensure that my findings and conclusions make sense.

Critical Evaluation of the Document

The core team

The EPOSTL was developed by a team from five countries, namely, Armenia, Austria, Nor-way, Poland, and the UK with “an overall aim of addressing the broad question of harmonizing teacher education across Europe” (Newby, 2012, p. 1). However, an educational tool aiming to harmonize teacher education practices across Europe should have been prepared by means of participatory processes during which as many members from different countries as possible should help developing the tool. Hence, as is, the document seems to have excluded, in its core team, researchers and educators from more than 30 countries that make up the European education system as a whole.

Excluding non-secondary schools

The document works via descriptors of competences related to language teaching which “maybe regarded as a set of core competences which language teachers should strive to attain” (p. 85). Furthermore, as the document states, the document is prepared for the use of “future school teachers in secondary education (ages 10-18)” (p. 85). As stated in the document, “other descriptors might be needed for other contexts; for example, for primary school teachers (i.e. young learners), for CLIL, for adult education etc.” (p. 85). When these statements are considered, we can see that 10 year olds are counted as secondary school students although 10 year olds do not make up secondary school learners in many parts of Europe. Hence, similar to the CEFR, the document should be inclusive of all levels of learners since although there are slight differences, competencies that language teachers should possess are more similar at all levels than they are different. This

superficial categorization should be dealt with in the upcoming editions of the document so as to be more inclusive.

Nature of the descriptors

It is stated that “the descriptors list didactic skills and competences that need to be acquired” (p. 87). However, the fundamental problem of teachers’ level of readiness in terms of whether or not they are competent language users remains unmentioned in the document. In my opinion, prospective teachers’ competence in using the language they are to teach should have been a fundamental part of a self-assessment tool. It should be accepted that without accurate content knowledge including the knowledge and practice of correct (clear) pronunciation, use of the grammar and the lexis and other language skills, delivering poor content through highly developed system of instruction will result in unexpected and unwanted consequences such as students’ internalization of faulty use of the language they are aiming to attain. Similar problems have been raised by researchers from other countries who underline the importance of teachers and prospective teachers’ communicative abilities. For example, a Japanese national survey in 2006 focused on secondary school EFL teachers’ English proficiency and “revealed that the percentage of junior-high-school EFL teachers who had passed STEP pre-1st grade, or obtained at least a score of 550 and 730 on TOEFL (PBT) and TOEIC, respectively, was 24.8 % whereas that of senior-high-school teachers 48.4 %” (Hisamura, 2011, p. 107). This result underlines the importance of future teachers’ competence in English language skills rather than their didactic skills.

Hence, a self-assessment section should focus on such language skills that must be acquired by prospective teachers. The need for English language teachers who are competent in their language skills is of great importance since, in “people need to be competent speakers of at least two languages other than their native language to be able to access international re-sources as members of today’s globalized society” (Mirici, 2015: p. 3). However, research has also shown that ELT student teachers have problems in their own grammar and speaking skills which makes it “more difficult for them to articulate English statements accurately and fluently” (Mirici, 2015).

Descriptors’ load

A general rule of thumb regarding testing and assessment procedures is that one item tests or assesses only one belief, fact, point or practice. When the items (descriptors) in the EPOSTL are reviewed, it can be seen

that many items seem to assess more than one belief or practice. For example, the following descriptor “I can evaluate and select tasks which help learners to use new vocabulary in oral or written contexts” (p. 28) is loaded with different dimensions of teaching of the lexis which makes accurate assessment rather difficult. The problem with this descriptor is that it demands from prospective teachers to assess their own potentials within one descriptor all at once. Hence, prospective teachers who are supposed to reflect upon this descriptor will have to evaluate their potential in the following areas:

- Prospective teachers can evaluate,
- Prospective teachers can select,
- New vocabulary in oral contexts,
- New vocabulary in written contexts.

One of the problems associated with the EPOSTL is the imbalances in the number of descriptors assigned for specific skills and domains. As stated by Schaubert (2015) although “vocabulary contains only three descriptors whereas speaking contains more than 10” such “imbalance does not reflect current thinking about what gets valued in EFL teaching, the materials that support practice, and the curricular goals upon which both are predicated” (p. 132).

Vague descriptors

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 “other-ness” 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.

Physical limitations

Limitations surrounding our teacher education contexts also hinder our applications of the EPOSTL in our programs. In many Faculties of Education, average weekly teaching load of academics is around 20 hours, which makes giving feedback to prospective teachers extremely difficult especially when the number of

students per class is considered. In many schools, there are 50 to 80 prospective teachers per class and this makes, first of all, following the development of individual prospective teachers almost impossible. Similarly, many academics lack personal offices and/or office spaces to keep the records of prospective teachers' development throughout their four year education. All these realities show that the EPOSTL, because it is a reflective tool, is somehow difficult to apply in our schools because of such physical limitations. However, practicum courses, if the number of prospective teachers who take these courses is small, may give us a chance to invite our trainees to fill-in these descriptors after which we can discuss their development in face-to-face or online environments. Also, curricular changes should spare courses in which prospective teachers can reflect on their progress through such tools like the EPOSTL. While doing that, the content of the EPOSTL should be taken into account since it, for example, asks prospective teachers to assess their knowledge of the national curriculum in Turkey which has not been a topic of study in the current curriculum followed by prospective teachers of English.

CONCLUSION

The European Commission advocates for standardization throughout teacher education and development processes in member countries (Commission, Common European principles for teacher competences and qualifications, 2014). As can be seen in the content of the EPOSTL, the document focuses on self-reflection which problematizes prospective teachers' didactic development. So far, applications of the EPOSTL have shown that prospective teachers who have used them regarded it as a useful document as shown by a limited number of studies such as those by Hoxha and Tafani (2015). However, this critical reading of the document has shown that changes are needed in the content of this tool so as to make it a more beneficial one within the context of Turkey. Although The Common European Framework of Reference for Languages: Learning, Teaching, Assessment (CEFR) is advised to be used to measure one's language skills prior to or during all classroom communication and teaching, it should be accepted that a self-reflective tool such as the EPOSTL should entail helping future teachers to see to what extent they are competent in using the foreign language they are going to teach.

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EPOSTL'nin Türkiye'de Uygulanma Potansiyelinin İncelenmesi

Arda Arikan

Özet

Anahtar Kelimeler:

1. EPOSTL
2. Türkiye
3. Bir aday
4. Müfredat
5. Hizmet öncesi

Türkiye Avrupa Birliği üyesi bir ülke olmamasına rağmen, CEFR ve EPOSTL gibi eğitsel ve müfredata ait belgelerin, yaptıkları çalışmaların her düzeydeki öğretmen eğitim programları ve müfredatları üzerinde etkisi olan Türk araştırmacı ve müfredat geliştiricileri tarafından incelendiği görülmektedir. Türkiye'de İngilizce öğretmenlerinin pedagojik gelişimlerini artırmayı hedefleyen EPOSTL, üzerinde hala araştırılma yapılması gerekmesine rağmen, Türkiye'de detaylı bir şekilde incelenmekte ve farklı bağlamlarda kullanılmaktadır. Bu çalışmada da öğretmenlik giriş eğitimi almakta olan ve öğretmen hazırlama programlarında kayıtlı olan geleceğin yabancı dil öğretmenleri için bir rehber mahiyetindeki EPOSTL eleştirel bir şekilde incelenmektedir. Belge, yedi genel alanın altında yer alan 193 gösterge yoluyla gerçekleştirilmesi amaçlanan beş boyutta kullanılmaktadır. Bu çalışmada, EPOSTL'nin öğretmen eğitim programlarında olası kullanılışı tartışılmakta ve Türkiye'deki İngilizce öğretmenlik programlarında kullanılabilmesi ile ilişkili bazı zorluklara odaklanılmaktadır. Araştırma yaptığımız ve öğrettiğimiz programlarımıza dair kuramsal, pedagojik ve müfredata dair sorunlara ilişkin araştırma sonuçları sunulurken özellikle belgenin Türkiye'deki kullanılışı önündeki muhtemel sorunlar anlatılacaktır.