

Promoting reflection in initial foreign language teacher education: The use of the EPOSTL revisited.

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The present text presents a longitudinal study on the promotion of reflection in foreign language teacher education. The report comprises work in progress. The research design was iterative in that each of the cycles shaped the following one. The research context was an undergraduate seminar course taught in the years 2014, 2017 and 2019 with the objective to promote students' reflection in their practicum semester (in total 61 students). The European Portfolio for Student Teachers of Languages (EPOSTL) was used and activities had been planned for its integration in the course. At the same time, research was undertaken in order to investigate the optimal ways to serve the purpose of reflection. Based on the identified shortcomings, changes to the course were made and conclusions were drawn concerning the improvements undertaken. The present paper outlines the rationale and research methodology of the project and discusses the interim results of the first two cycles. These, although far from final, indicate ways in which teacher education for reflection can be improved. Some thoughts on the expected final results of the project and the way forward conclude the paper.

Keywords: EPOSTL, initial teacher education, foreign language teachers, reflection

1 Using the EPOSTL for reflection

For almost 15 years prior to the beginning of this project students' reflection had been one of the main objectives in my foreign language teaching methodology courses. The overall impression I had gained was that student teachers struggled with reflection and their thinking was vague and mainly descriptive most of the time. This impression led me in 2014 to the decision to conduct a longitudinal iterative research project in order to explore how the European Portfolio for Student Teachers of Languages (EPOSTL) can be integrated in a course and used in order to promote student teachers' reflection. It was my intention to create an alternative space within the teacher education program of my university (Russell and Martin 2017: 42).

The EPOSTL was chosen for several reasons. First, because it is known that one of its main aims is the encouragement of student teachers' reflection along with the development and exploration of their didactic competences and knowledge (Newby et al. 2011: 7-8). Second, because of its European validity and its strong ties to European language education policies, since the EPOSTL "builds on existing documents already developed by the Language Policy Division of the Council of Europe— Common European Framework of Reference (CEFR) and the European Language Portfolio (ELP) as well as the European Commission-financed project European Profile for Language Teacher Education—A Frame of Reference (European Profile)" (Newby 2011: 2). Finally, my previous positive experience with using learning portfolios in higher education (Papadopoulou 2015) further strengthened my decision to use the EPOSTL in my course.

The research context for this study was an undergraduate seminar course for student teachers of German as a foreign language in their practicum semester. In total 61 student teachers participated

in it. The course was taught in three iterations (cycles), in the years 2014, 2017 and 2019, and its main objective was, as mentioned above, to support student teachers' reflection. Aims of teacher education linked to reflection, were to be operationalized and achieved by means of the EPOSTL as well as a series of accompanying activities designed by me for this course. The course was planned so that students would familiarize themselves with the concept, nature and practice of reflection.

First, there would be plenary discussions and brief theoretical introductions to the concept and merits of reflection, which would help students become aware of the fact that their thinking about their teaching ought to be systematically stimulated, documented, and analyzed as well as that it should inform, improve and interact with their practice.

In order to operationalize the course's aims student teachers would be introduced to and start practicing the triangle of self-observation—self-assessment—reflection, since knowing how to observe and assess themselves over a longer period was crucial and a necessary condition for their reflection.

Student teachers in this course were, to a great extent, familiar with classroom observation and analyzing teaching processes (including their own teaching), since they had practiced both in other courses of the program. Hence, during their practicum they would be asked to use a series of protocols in order to observe teaching and analyze it. This material would, on the one hand, be part of their portfolio's Dossier and, on the other, form a basis for their reflection in their written assignments.

Unlike the observation processes, during which they would focus on both other teachers (fellow students and mentors) and on themselves, student teachers' use of the EPOSTL would aim solely at their self-assessment. Following a slightly modified sequence of the aims of the EPOSTL (Newby et al. 2007) student teachers would be encouraged to: reflect on the competences that they strive to attain and on the underlying knowledge which feed these competences; chart their progress; and develop awareness of their strengths and weaknesses related to teaching. They would be asked to assess themselves twice with the help of the EPOSTL, at the beginning and at end of the semester.

In parallel with lesson observation and self-assessment students would keep a reflective diary throughout their practicum semester. In it they would single out and comment upon the most striking aspects of the lesson observed or taught and discuss them in detail focusing on the(ir) teaching and the(ir) learners.

At the end of the semester, students would write an assignment, in which, based on their self-observation, self-assessment and reflection they would explore their teaching and its progress in relation to both their teaching profiles and the relevant teaching methodology literature. Their focus would be on their change as well as on frequent and dominant themes in their data.

2 Exploring the use of the EPOSTL

In the present project it was intended to explore the support of student teachers' reflection in a course using the EPOSTL. Hence, of research interest were, on the one hand, the ways of improving teacher education for reflection and, on the other, students' reflection itself, concerning its stimuli, foci, contents and forms as well as instances of success or failure. The following research questions were formulated:

1. Is student teachers' reflection promoted in the course using the EPOSTL?
 - a. Do students assess their teaching and chart their progress in order to reflect and self-improve?
 - b. Do the working methods, activities and the progression of the course support students' reflection, and if so, in what ways?
2. How should the course using the EPOSTL be improved?

After the initial plan for the course had been completed (see Section 1), research was carried out in a cyclical manner and in three steps: a) identifying strengths or shortcomings of the course as well as difficulties in students' reflection, b) deciding upon the changes to the course's pedagogical strategies for the next cycle, and c) trying out these changes and examining their effect on the students' reflection.

The cyclical nature of the research as well as the fact that it was longitudinal were expected to contribute to its validity and trustworthiness.

There were two sources of data in the present study. First, my research journal, which included lesson plans, material and activities as well as field notes about the conduct of each lesson and the overall progress of the project. There was a constant interplay between data gathering and analysis by means of my research journal throughout the course, which fed into my teaching and addressed research questions 1a and 1b. In addition, data resulting from the research journal were analyzed at the end of each cycle of the project in order to address research question 2. In relation to the second research question data were also analyzed from the students' work for the course, i.e., their observation schedules, diary entries, portfolios and assignments. The analysis of such data was conducted at the end of each cycle of the project and its aim was not to assess the students but to provide an answer to the study's research questions in combination with the findings from the journal's data and the relevant literature on reflective teacher education. Overall it can be concluded that interim analysis served two aims: first, to assess the pedagogical strategies used in the course and their effect on students' reflection, and second, to guide the improvements of the course and the refinement of the project's research questions and methodology.

Data were numerical and non-numerical and so both quantitative and qualitative analytical processes took place. Statistical as well as content analysis were undertaken to produce results, which varied from frequencies, scores or duration to feelings, perceptions, justifications, interpretations and intentions. Data were analyzed separately depending on their source but also comparatively so that common themes and patterns could emerge when separate sets of data were triangulated. In addition, it was considered important to examine data for each student separately but also across them to synthesize an overall picture of students' reflection in the course. There were interesting conclusions drawn at the end of each cycle of the project, which will now be discussed.

3 Interim findings and improvements

3.1 *First cycle of the project*

Analysis confirmed that students were able to observe their teaching and to chart their progress by using the EPOSTL. Consequently, they succeeded in focusing on their competences, observing and assessing them. Reflection, on the other hand, was not unproblematic for the student teachers, it did not occur automatically, spontaneously or easily. Interim results indicated that successful reflection instances were not as dominant as expected in a course focusing on reflection. The main problems identified were the following: organizational unclarities, need for better scaffolding of the students' work, students' lack of in-depth and focused reflection on their teaching and absence of reflection for self-improvement. Based on the identified difficulties the following changes to the course were decided upon.

All categories and descriptors of the EPOSTL were numbered in order to ease their analysis and discussion. At the same time, students were given more detailed guidelines on how to use the EPOSTL descriptors for their self-assessment. In this way, they could be led to gradually discover, understand and try out working with them. For similar reasons, PowerPoint presentations were planned to precede the student teachers' assignments. By presenting their work before writing about it, students' reflective voice could be heard and collective reflection before their written, individual reflection could take place.

The concept of critical incidents (see Brandenburg 2008) was introduced. The descriptors in the EPOSTL still provided the general framework of our work, but students were asked to specifically focus on descriptors because of their individually perceived importance or because they referred to recurring and dominant themes in their self-assessment. Their self-assessment was to be analyzed in terms of whether their two entries, (at the beginning and at the end of the semester) when compared, expressed progress, stillstand, deterioration, or irrelevance to their practicum and teaching.

It was, also, decided to introduce two time points: At time point 1 (t1) students were asked to either identify an issue that they perceived as problematic or to choose a way of teaching that was new to them and they wished to try out. Students were then asked to work on an action plan. This plan would focus either on an alternative teaching route in order to address the problem or on the preparation of the new way of teaching they wanted to try out. At time point 2 (t2) students were asked to research either whether the problem was solved or how their teaching went. In both cases they would investigate their change.

3.2 Second cycle of the project

Analysis at the end of the second cycle of the project shed light to a series of strengths of the improved course. The PowerPoint presentations undertaken by the students did in fact provide them the opportunity to voice their reflection. In addition, the discussions which followed these presentations were experienced by the students as good opportunities for collective reflection. A second encouraging finding was that the introduced sharper focus (critical incidents) and the more detailed analysis (t1/t2) led to deeper and more meaningful reflection and, perhaps even more importantly, to the students' personal satisfaction and sense of achievement. A third very interesting finding that emerged related to the twofold importance of the students' feelings concerning both how frequently they expressed them and the importance they themselves attributed to them. Their thinking in relation to teaching and their practicum experience were to a great extent shaped by their feelings, whether feelings of anxiety or feelings of joy and fulfillment.

On the other hand, difficulties and shortcomings in the course were identified which needed to be addressed. Analysis indicated that the types and the progression of the activities needed to be improved in order to support students' reflection. Students' diary entries were often descriptive rather than reflective. In addition, many of them had problems linking information from their lesson plans and observation protocols (part of the Dossier) to aspects of their teaching to be assessed and reflected upon. Finally, students did not have enough opportunities and time for actual reflection in the course and not enough opportunities to express their expectations, experiences and needs in the course, i.e., provide meaningful feedback.

In order to address these shortcomings and difficulties, a series of new activities were planned for the course including: a) preparatory activities for the students' entries in the reflective diary (concerning frequency, form, objectives) to break down the process of how to recall and reflect upon teaching in small, consecutive steps; b) practice activities with detailed guidelines in the form of questions to help students write entries in their reflective diaries; c) activities that were up to that point dealt with by the students at home were planned as class activities to prevent confusion and lack of motivation, for example focusing on the Dossier and its links to self-assessment; d) activities for guided reflective group discussions in class. Time and work allocated to oral reflection activities were increased using the EPOSTL as a helpful stimulus for such discussions. Time was planned to allow for narratives to develop, first orally in the group and then in written form both in class and as part of the students' assignments; and, finally, e) activities focusing on students' feelings. Because of this shift in focus, a new seating arrangement was planned to promote eye contact and group communication.

In order to obtain detailed feedback from the students two questionnaires were developed and administered at the beginning and the end of the semester. The first questionnaire explored student teachers' expectations of the practicum and the course as well as their personal aims for the semester, their previous competences in relation to observation, reflective writing and the use of any portfolio as well as their concepts of reflection and self-assessment. The second questionnaire had, in order to draw comparisons, many questions in common with the first one, for example as far as students' concepts were concerned. Also, a series of questions elicited the students' comments on the expectations and aims they had expressed at the beginning of the semester as well as on their progress in general. A last important aim of the second questionnaire was to assess the use of the portfolio and all the other course activities.

4 The way forward

The present study is not yet completed, the detailed and systematic interim analysis of data has, however, proven to be enlightening. It seems that data to a large extent provide a valid and trustworthy picture concerning what works best in a course for reflection and the process of reflection per se. The interim results of the present project indicate ways in which teacher education for reflection could develop and improve. The necessity of scaffolding and gradual progression and the role feelings play stand out. Also, creating and ensuring space for the students' thinking, voice and feed-back appear to be central. However, the results gained so far, and discussed here, are far from final.

The third cycle of the project finished a few months ago and data analysis and interpretation are now in progress. In a similar manner to the first two cycles of the project the first analytical goal will be to assess the effect the course's improvements had on students' reflection. It will, secondly, be aimed to explore the aspects of reflection that emerged in the last cycle of the project. Finally, it will be attempted to bring together the data, the interim findings and the undertaken changes of all cycles of the study. By means of the comparison and synthesis of data, their analysis and interpretation of my research on the alternative space I had hoped to create will be concluded. For such an objective to be satisfactorily met it is necessary to move to the next level, that of theorizing. For this, establishing links with the relevant literature and research in the field is necessary. One example would be to analyze all data against categories provided by the literature like content/process/premise reflection (Kreber and Granton 2000). Such data interpretation and theory development would reflect the very essence of the project.

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6 Biography

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