Using the EPOSTL for Dialogic Reflection in EFL Teacher Education[1]

El Uso de EPOSTL para la Reflexión Dialógica en la Educación de los Docentes de Inglés como Lengua Extranjera

Holli Schauber[2*]

University of Geneva, Switzerland

Abstract

For many pre-service English as a Foreign Language (EFL) teachers and their mentors, the theory and practice driven European Portfolio for Student Teachers of Languages (EPOSTL)[3] occupies a prominent and practical role in their preparation programs as a delivery system of core pedagogical skills and knowledge. Interest in the role that dialogical reflection plays in this process is studied in an EFL teacher education program at a Swiss university that relies heavily on the EPOSTL for the professional development awareness-raising. While the EPOSTL contributes valuable core knowledge to the processes of dialogic and mentored-reflection, certain program components provide more opportunities for scaffolded reflection than others.

Keywords: English as a Foreign Language, EPOSTL, Dialogic reflection

118

Resumen

Para muchos docentes en formación de inglés como segunda lengua extranjera y sus mentores, la teoría y la práctica guiada por el Portfolio Europeo para Futuros Profesores de Idiomas – EPOSTL, ocupa un papel importante y práctico en sus programas de preparación, al ser el núcleo fundamental para el desarrollo de conocimiento y competencias pedagógicas. La importancia del papel que juega la reflexión dialógica en este proceso, es analizado en un programa de formación de docentes de inglés como lengua extranjera en una Universidad suiza, el cual se basa en gran medida en EPOSTL para la sensibilización de los programas de desarrollo profesional docente. A pesar que EPOSTL contribuye de manera valiosa al conocimiento fundamental de los procesos de reflexión dialógica orientada, ciertos componentes del programa proporcionan más oportunidades para generar una reflexión andamiada en comparación con otras.

Palabras clave: Inglés como lengua extranjera, EPOSTL, reflexión dialógica

Resumo

Para muitos docentes em formação de inglês como segunda língua estrangeira e seus mentores, a teoria e a prática guiada pelo Portfolio Europeu para Futuros Professores de Idiomas – EPOSTL ocupa um papel importante e prático nos seus programas de preparação, ao ser o núcleo fundamental para o desenvolvimento de conhecimento e competências pedagógicas. A importância do papel que joga a reflexão dialógica neste processo é analisada em um programa de formação de docentes de inglês como língua estrangeira em uma Universidade suíça, o qual se baseia em grande medida na EPOSTL para a sensibilização dos programas de desenvolvimento profissional docente. Apesar de que o EPOSTL contribui de maneira valiosa ao conhecimento fundamental dos processos de reflexão dialógica orientada, certos componentes do programa proporcionam mais oportunidades para gerar uma reflexão em comparação com outras.

Palavras clave: Inglês como língua estrangeira, EPOSTL, reflexão dialógica

119

Introduction

The ongoing interest in reflective practices in EFL teacher preparation remains widespread in recent research and teacher education materials (Belvis, Pineda, Armengol, & Moreno 2013; Burkert & Schwienhorst, 2008; Cakir & Balcikanli, 2012; Farrell, 2012; Harmer, 2015; Velikova, 2013; Yesilbura, 2011). Reflective practices have become so commonplace in the discourse associated with teacher education that the notion is often included without a clear definition of the role it should play in shaping the professional development process (Farrell, 2012). What we do know, however, is that we want trainees to engage in copious amounts of reflection so that they no longer need us after they exit our programs.

Reinforcement of this trend towards reflection in professional development can be found in the introduction of the EPOSTL into the European discourse and educational policy initiatives on foreign language teacher preparation and learning (Newby et al., 2007). Developed by the European Council on Modern Languages (ECML) in response to the search for practice and reflection-driven innovative approaches to foreign language teaching and learning, the EPOSTL is one of several practical guides serving the English as a foreign language (EFL) teaching and learning community. Recognition of its value to teacher development and effective practice has meant a surge in its application internationally. Newby (2012b) equates the EPOSTL with seven categories of good practice in teacher preparation that include: promoting teacher autonomy, fostering a reflective mode, reinforcing the rationales and approaches to learning and teaching, making the scope and aims of teacher education transparent, rendering the competences explicit, facilitating self-assessment and promoting coherence in classroom practice.

While these are good reasons to introduce the EPOSTL into a teacher preparation program, our initial decision to adopt the EPOSTL in 2008 stems from several additional pedagogical objectives. We sought to anchor our mentoring, supervision, practicum, and teaching processes to a theory and practice-driven tool that could deliver essential EFL knowledge in ways that complemented our program model and in particular the dialogic reflection dimension it nurtures. Our decision was further motivated by our view that effective EFL teacher preparation grows organically out of dialogic reflection that is centered on constructive mentoring relationships that deliver and build teacher knowledge that is explicit and contextually driven, which we associate with significant teacher learning. It is likewise our view that the pedagogical conversations the EPOSTL nurtures contribute to reducing the theory-practice divide that is so often a barrier to student-teacher buy-in during the induction process.

120

At the macro level, this article is concerned with innovation and best practices in EFL teacher education, while at the micro level with how the EPOSTL introduces a steady flow of dialogic reflection, and through that process, the didactic knowledge that enhances situated EFL teacher learning and development. These concerns form the conceptual foundation for the view adopted in this article that the EPOSTL and the dialogical reflection process it feeds represent a shift in how theory driven practical information should and can be delivered in practicum experiences and supervision initiatives.

The purpose of the present reflection on EFL teacher preparation is to examine where and how the EPOSTL mediates and supports dialogic reflection in the six core components of our program: 1) methods classes and related research assignments; 2) lesson planning and teaching/learning objectives; 3) student and teacher observations and reports; 4) debriefing through dialogic reflection after observations; 5) independent reflection and goal setting; and 6) assessment criteria for certification meetings. After a descriptive overview of the EPOSTL and the research it has generated, a review of the literature on dialogic reflection is provided followed by a discussion of the specific ways in which the EPOSTL shapes the dialogic reflective dimension of our EFL program model.

The EPOSTL as a Tool for Dialogic Reflection

What is the EPOSTL?

The EPOSTL is a teacher-learning didactic tool that is organized around seven foreign language teaching and learning themes (see Appendix 1 for the list of themes or use the following link to access the EPOSTL[4]). Each category has its own set of principled descriptors that are expressed as can do statements and which function as self-assessment and reflection opportunities for monitoring the understanding and use of the descriptors at various intervals in the teacher education process. Each of the 195 descriptors conveys procedural *know how* and establishes a link between theory and practice. Darling-Hammond & Bransford (2005) have suggested that getting teachers to analyze and theorize about their teaching as part of reflection can reduce the theory-practice divide.

A primary goal of the EPOSTL is to support teacher learning in different program components at the pre- and in-service levels. The EPOSTL is sufficiently well-rounded that it acknowledges the types of teacher knowledge put forth by Shulman (1987): 1) content; 2) general pedagogy; 3) curriculum;

121

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[4]   http://archive.ecml.at/mtp2/fte/pdf/C3_Epostl_E.pdf

4) pedagogical content; 5) learners and their characteristics; 6) educational contexts; and a more recent type of teacher knowledge focusing on 7) technological pedagogical content knowledge (Koehler & Mishra, 2009). These are reinforced and recycled through a core body of EFL knowledge found in the extensions of the EPOSTL's seven categories. See Figure 1.
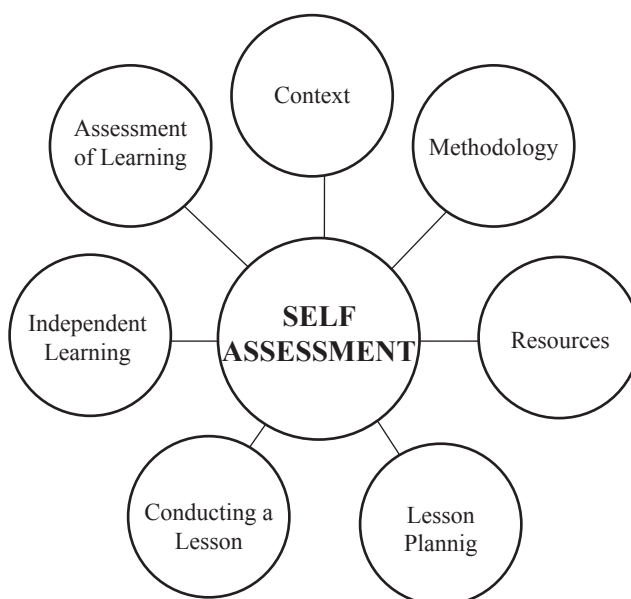

Figure 1. EPOSTL's Seven Categories (http://archive.ecml.at/mtp2/fte/pdf/C3_Epostl_E.pdf)

The following are several example descriptors taken from three of the above sections of the EPOSTL. Each descriptor signals a language learning principle and tells teachers what to consider and how to teach.

- **Methodology:** Speaking and Spoken Interaction: "I can create a supportive atmosphere that invites learners to take part in speaking activities" (EPOSTL, descriptor 1, p. 21).

- **Resources:** "I can locate and select listening and reading materials appropriate for the needs of my learners from a variety of sources, such as literature, mass media and the internet" (EPOSTL, descriptor 3, p. 31).

- **Conducting a lesson:** Lesson content: "I can vary and balance activities to include a variety of skills and competences" (EPOSTL, descriptor 2, p. 35).

122

- **Assessment of learning:** Portfolios: "I can assess portfolios in relation to valid and transparent criteria" (EPOSTL descriptor 4, p. 48)

The EPOSTL provides several access routes to the development of EFL teacher pedagogical knowledge. It raises awareness about the ideas and views that are valued in EFL teaching and learning while providing a practical expression of the language learning principle upon which each descriptor is based. The portfolio is set up to be used in light of the individual pre-service teacher's areas of needs and objectives and as an outgrowth of core program content.

Johnson (2009) argued that language teacher preparation should give teachers the tools to interpret their instructional experiences in light of the prevailing theory about language learning and teaching. Re-tooling professional development requires that trainees become managers and apprentices of the learning process. Student teachers require a voice in the direction, planning, execution, and assessment of their teaching in concert with more seasoned professionals. Through dialogic reflection, zones of proximal (teacher) development are created (Johnson, 2009; Warford, 2011). When these elements are present, teachers are more likely to consider their professional development relevant and authentic; this in turn makes teacher learning and improved teaching practice more likely.

In our program model, the descriptors are explained and explored in methods classes, during mentoring, debriefing, or peer tutoring sessions, and through assigned readings. The student teacher may select a relevant descriptor as part of lesson planning, for independent reflection and self-monitoring after teaching, or it may be raised by the teacher educator in class, or by the field supervisor in a report to highlight its presence or absence in the lesson observed. It may also be raised in a debriefing session after an observation through dialogic reflection to set objectives for follow-up instructional planning or as criteria to evaluate teacher competence and development.

EPOSTL and Reflection

Much of the recent literature on the EPOSTL rallies around issues of autonomy and reflection. Many existing models of EFL teacher preparation organize teacher learning around the core paradigms of socially-mediated, reflective, and practice-driven processes (Ball & Forzani, 2009; Grossman, Hammerness & McDonald, 2009; Johnson, 2009). These processes rest on the idea that they help pre- and in-service teachers approach their instruction more proactively and in more informed and autonomous ways. Within this framework, teacher educators and mentors present novice teachers with

123

resources and learning opportunities that promote dialogue through which reflection is modelled and cultivated with an eye toward developing situated and complex pedagogical knowledge.

Ultimately, the goal is to use reflection to move teachers toward positions of autonomy in their own classroom practices. This naturally has the best chance of occurring through contact with varied and valued sources of expertise, such as mentors. This does not negate the value of experiential knowledge nor the sanctioned literature to which they are exposed to in the coursework and the practicum experience. Recent EFL implementation studies have explored how to introduce new elements into a program to enhance the teacher learning process without corrupting or completely overhauling it (Troyan, Davin & Donato, 2013). As a relatively new program element, the EPOSTL, and the dialogic reflection it generates, operates in tandem with and as an outgrowth of the myriad ways that trainees are exposed to in the profession, whether they be the contextualized challenges of classroom practice, or the review of the principles behind certain theoretical assumptions being explored. The dialogic interaction around the EPOSTL is both a proactive and reactive process about the essential practical elements necessary for effective EFL teaching.

In their review of the literature on practice-driven teacher education, Hlas and Hlas (2012) argue for the need to make visible those core practices that are quintessentially identifiable as foreign language teaching and those that novice practitioners are less likely to learn independently. While the EPOSTL is not the unequivocally sanctioned list of core practices, its coverage and range is complex and relevant. While there is no present consensus about what (theory-driven) tools may improve the process of EFL teacher preparation, or what ratio or type of mentoring, dialogic reflection or practicum experience may be necessary for teacher learning to occur, there is growing consensus about the value of specifying and discussing the micro-practices (strategies, routines, and moves) that can enhance pedagogical understanding and teaching. Recently however, some have called for a more dialogically driven approach to raise awareness of these practices during the pre- and in-service stages to facilitate deeper understanding of the complexities of language teaching and learning (Edge, 2011).

Dialogic Reflection as Mentoring

The practice of mentored reflection is a highly valued and encouraged practice in EFL teacher preparation, and has been understood through several explanatory prisms: that of rational thought, and as a creative and intuitive process (Bean & Patel Stevens, 2002; Dinkelman, 2003; Loughran, 2002; Yusko, 2004; Dewey, 1933; Schön, 1983). More recent views invoke the cognitive and affective dimensions involved in making sense of practical teaching experiences to promote professional development (Osterman & Kottkamp, 2004). Mentored reflection on the professional development

124

process and on the specific and general content and criteria takes teacher-learners through several stages and levels of practice. Rodgers (2002) refers to the reflection as a cycle that includes experience, description, analysis and action. She further argues that reflection that leads to change begins with resistance, and is followed by dialogue about making changes, then mimicry, and finally, implementation of the change. The competencies of pre-service practitioners are often intertwined with the competencies of the expert mentor and the References (EPOSTL) examined through "dialogic engagement" (Bakhtin, 1981).

Initiatives to improve teacher preparation and instructional practice tend to focus on either independent reflection or mentored-interaction rather than a combination of both, which underestimates the value of the combined force of the two. Promoting reflection is key toward what is a necessary part of future EFL teaching. Despite the prevailing view of reflection as a solitary act, the EPOSTL facilitates expert modelling of reflection for teacher-learners through dialogue around the issues that need attention in order for improvement and understanding to occur. Schön (1988) describes teacher supervision as those activities that promote reflective practice. Chief among these are modelling, prompting, inquiring, and mentoring that occur during reflection in and on action (Schön, 1983). While pre-service teacher reflection has become commonplace in many teacher preparation programs, various distinctions exist. A distinction has been made between descriptive reflection, which is a detailed account of events; analytic reflection, which tries to explain the events and to suggest alternative options as part of the evaluation of instruction, followed by critical reflection on the socio-cultural and socio-political influences operating in the classroom, the institution and the community (Marcos, Sánchez & Tilleman, 2008).

In their case study research on the transformational outcomes of varied contexts of reflective inquiry, Lyons, Halton and Freidus (2013) found that mentored reflection was crucial to learning and changes in stance and frames of reference. Dialogic teaching, which stems from Vygotsky's emphasis on socially-mediated cognitive development, has become synonymous with pedagogical innovation and with being among the most beneficial approaches for learning (Alexander, 2006; Lyle, 2008).

Effective Professional Development and EFL

125

A brief overview of the studies of effective professional development, not specific to EFL contexts, but still of particular relevance to them, has yielded a wide range of criteria. Professional development is effective and meaningful when it considers the daily needs, concerns, and interests of individual teachers, promotes reflection and goal setting over an extended period of time,

provides trainee teachers with access to external resources and opportunities for collaboration with experts, and attempts to bridge the gap between theory and practice (Darling-Hammond, 1997; Richardson, 2003).

Professional development that is effective also needs to be classroom-embedded, and instructionally driven in order for teachers to view it as relevant and authentic. According to Hunzicker (2011, p. 179), this requires changing tactics from a 'one shot', 'sit and get' model to one where teacher learning is an ongoing process. Teachers approach contextualized professional development more seriously because it brings practice into focus and draws it closer to theory. The particular knowledge associated with EFL professional development includes second language acquisition theory, knowledge of the language as a communication and linguistic system, methods for teaching EFL, content area instruction, cooperative learning, and the socio-cultural dimensions of teaching a second language. Part of the explanation for the gap between theory and practice lies in part on the absence of context in the discourse on practice and in part on the inability to render the theory in applicable terms, like the EPOSTL descriptors do.

In addition to Guskey's (2000) notion of effective professional development as "ongoing, intentional, and systematic" (p. 16), most of the literature on effective professional development cites reflection as essential, both independently and with a mentor, and dialogue as deliberation, discussion and negotiation. Teacher preparation becomes interactive when trainees can reflect on their practice during dialogue with a mentor to identify problems, exchange ideas and collaborate toward solutions. Hunzicker's (2011) checklist serves as a guide for determining the most effective professional development practices. When professional development is supportive, job-embedded, instructionally-focused, collaborative and ongoing, teachers are more likely to consider it relevant and authentic, which is more likely to result in teacher learning and improved teaching practice.

Using the EPOSTL

The efforts using the EPOSTL described in this article were recorded naturally as part of our day–to-day use of it in our teaching, supervision activities, observation reports and students' reliance on it. We realized the dialogic thrust and potential of the EPOSTL and sought to examine where in our program dialogic reflection was most prevalent and what the implications might be for our student teachers.

This reflection is based on a two-year EFL teacher preparation program at a public university in Switzerland. The EPOSTL was introduced into

126

the program in 2008 and operates as a stable element across all program components: didactic or methods classes, student observation reports and projects, lesson planning, field supervisor reports, debriefing sessions, working sessions, and mid-term and final written exams, and mid-term and final certification meetings. In the 2014-2015 academic year of the program, there were 13 first-year and 27 second-year students. In addition to coursework, only second-year students have a practicum experience in the public schools, while first-year students conduct a prescribed number of observations along with their coursework. Students are exposed to the EPOSTL in the first year and dialogic reflection goes into high gear in the second year as each student is paired with a field supervisor. Two faculty members run and teach the program supported by seven field supervisors.

By shifting assumptions about teacher education research and practice and the increasing attention being paid to the role of experience in the learning process, this paper attempts to contribute to the knowledge base in the field of EFL teacher preparation. It recognizes that (dialogic) reflection, which involves returning to and recasting instructional experiences results in unforeseen insights, rendering the complexities of the teacher education and teacher learning process visible. This study refers to Schön's (1987) call for student–teachers' reflection-in-action, constructing new ways to conceptualize their practicum experience, and hypothesizing about ways to mediate the instructional process through ongoing reflection on their experiences and feelings. The analysis and interpretation of our use of the EPOSTL is organized around the themes of dialogic reflection present and recycled in the six professional development events listed below. The order is based on when student teachers first encounter the EPOSTL.

1   Methods class: in class video and case study tasks, projects, observation assignments, and written exams.

2   Methods class and mentored dialogue: discussion about principles and relevance of the descriptors and the theories they represent.

3   Mentored-dialogical reflection and student teacher lesson preparation: practicum lesson planning and objectives.

4   Debriefing and mentored dialogic reflection: based on observation and goal setting for improvement and follow-up teaching.

127

5   Observation reports: Student teachers attach EPOSTL descriptors to the elements of the lesson sequences they observe.

6   Certification assessment meetings and mentored dialogic reflection: Candidates are assessed in light of a percentage of EPOSTL descriptors they have demonstrated in their teaching apprenticeship; in light of those that remain as objectives for continued professional development; and in

light of additional practical teaching ideas raised as extensions of those descriptors.

Our EPOSTL narrative begins by meeting with student teachers to discuss the objectives and purposes associated with using the EPOSTL, its contexts of use, and the dialogic, reflective and self-evaluative nature of the tool. Each of the program components is approached through a process of mentored reflection much like a zone of proximal teacher development (Warford, 2011). Use of the EPOSTL involves an ongoing process of deconstructing and reconstructing elements of practice both independently and through dialogue with more expert school and university-based mentors. The mentors or field supervisors are all familiar with the content of the methods courses and the readings.

Methods Classes

Guiding theoretical principles are cornerstones of EFL methods classes and the variables around which class content is organized. The EPOSTL descriptors serve as a complimentary means of exposing learners to the specific didactic knowledge being explored. Relevant EPOSTL descriptors are introduced related to the given theme of the class. If the class is on listening, the EPOSTL descriptors for listening are presented and a video of a listening sequence may be presented with a task asking students to match the descriptors to what was observed. A dialogue about which descriptors are relevant and what language teaching and language learning principles they express ensues. Students are free to argue for their own choice of descriptor(s) to reflect a certain element in the sequence.

Within the methods classes there are also written tests and assignments that require students to consult the EPOSTL as a reference for what they have observed in their practicum and also for what they have identified as the teaching and learning objectives in their project sequence.

Lesson Planning

During the practicum experience, students are expected to rely on the EPOSTL to support their lesson planning. As part of lesson planning, trainee teachers identify descriptors that are relevant to the objectives set for the lesson. In many cases, the descriptors escort the lesson planning rather than follow it. When trainees plan lessons with their mentors, the EPOSTL descriptors become an integral part of the mentored dialogue about the lesson objectives, content and organization.

128

Student Observations

When students conduct their observations, the EPOSTL stands as a reference for evaluating, assessing and analyzing what they have observed regarding the teacher's objectives and execution of those goals.

Mentor Reports after Observations

After each of the 10-12 lesson observations which mentors are required to conduct, reports are written and relevant EPOSTL descriptors are highlighted in light of the contributions their presence or absence made to the lesson. In the reports, mentors set goals in terms of EPOSTL descriptors, which the trainees see after the debriefing session. The identification of EPOSTL descriptors launches the debriefing dialogue that follows every observation.

Debriefing after Observations or during Information Sessions

When mentors and beginning practitioners debrief, the EPOSTL descriptors and the praxis elements they specify may be at the core of their discussion. During these debriefings, areas of need are identified and solutions are sought against the backdrop of the EPOSTL. Mentors encourage teacher-learners to reorient their practice guided by EPOSTL descriptors. Consciousness-raising occurs to promote awareness of the areas that need improving and to promote understanding of the principles that the relevant EPOSTL descriptors represent. The mentored dialogue promotes a reflective stance and gets the teacher-learner to take responsibility for the lesson elements they implemented or not in light of the lesson plan and the EPOSTL descriptors, included as objectives. To help students identify areas of strength and need, the mentor prompts the teacher-learner to engage in a process of reflection either by modelling the practice or by helping the learner select EPOSTL descriptors that represent areas for improvement. Objectives are set as part of the dialogue between the learner and the mentor for the follow-up observation.

Certification Assessment

The ability to act on those goals lies at the heart of the teaching evaluation process. The EPOSTL is used both as a summative tool with exit and certification criteria and as a formative tool for setting goals and evaluating ongoing classroom-based teaching performance. Trainees are expected to have demonstrated competence in 70% of two separate sets of descriptors halfway through and at the end of the practicum experience. Failure to demonstrate competence, understanding or implementation of the descriptor's core principle can lead to denial of certification and/or failure.

129

The EPOSTL, mediated by a mentor, contributes to a process of socially-constructed teacher knowledge that ensues in part from scaffolded and dialogic reflection. The experienced mentor moves the novice practitioner along the continuum of professional development by identifying EPOSTL descriptors that represent areas for improvement. Change in the dialogue occurs when trainees act on their reflections and newfound awareness, and demonstrate the capacity to select and use the descriptor in class. That transformation is marked by the selection of different EPOSTL descriptors for the next event of mentored and dialogic reflection. A review of the six components of the program reveals that three professional activities present the best opportunities for copious amounts of mentored and dialogic reflection.

The first of these three events is the debriefing session after an observation. The trainee and field supervisor meet for a 60-120 minute session to review and evaluate the lesson. The EPOSTL descriptors selected for the lesson plan are discussed and evaluated for their relevance and appropriateness, and the mentor poses questions, which may refer to other possible descriptors to prompt reflection on finding alternatives to improve or modify the lesson observed. Micro-strategies, ideas and techniques are presented as part of the consciousness-raising process and References to EPOSTL descriptors mark the dialogue. Student teachers are exposed to contextually relevant support, which increases their ability to link the EPOSTL descriptors to their practice and develop the complex professional knowledge that EFL practitioners are expected to demonstrate.

The second event is a one-to-one working session between the mentor and the student-teacher. Working sessions can be requested by the student-teacher or recommended by the field supervisor in place of an observation. In a working session the focus of the session is typically decided beforehand because a conceptual or practical problem has been identified either by the mentor or the student-teacher. For example, one candidate was struggling with summative assessment for interactive speaking activities and was seeking help with the development of the criteria for an assessment grid. Other candidates needed help with lesson planning and objectives and the mentor provided a framework for considering these through dialogic reflection. Referring to the EPOSTL was one of the organizing modes for addressing both these challenges. In their article on professional development design and its impact on outcomes, Lauer, Christopher, Firpo-Triplett & Buchting (2014) report that teacher preparation programs that emphasize how to teach the target subject confer more benefits than those providing generic strategies.

130

The final event where considerable amount of interactive reflection occurs is during the certification assessment sessions. Dialogic reflection and mentored-awareness raising are equally present in the certification

assessment sessions that candidates and their mentors hold twice a year. In these sessions, review of the EPOSTL descriptors takes place to determine which of the descriptors have been demonstrated in the practicum experience. If a sufficient number has been covered, then the candidate is awarded either an interim attestation or a final attestation to mark successful completion of the practicum. In these sessions, the students provide examples from their teaching linked to descriptors. A process of dialogic reflection ensues and practical ideas that spring from the practicum experiences are introduced. This is followed by an oral report from the mentor and field supervisor.

The three teacher-learning events described above are not suggestive of a finite set of professional development possibilities. The EPOSTL is a flexible tool because its shape grows organically out of the individual teacher using it. Moreover, it can be configured for a number of developing teacher profiles as a theoretical and practical departure point of reference and integrated into the dialogue with mentors. In each of the contexts discussed above, the EPOSTL initially exposes the trainee teacher to the descriptor's underlying concept and then reinforces it through repeated exposure in follow-up encounters. In each case the EPOSTL in concert with dialogic reflection functions as a delivery system of core pedagogical skills and knowledge for situated EFL practice.

Conclusions

There is an acknowledged shift in how the EPOSTL's varied components prompt the planning, observation, reflection, discussion and assessment of teacher learning and practice. That shift appears to have long tentacles. To borrow a term from management, it permits trainee teachers to deep dive into the criteria underlying effective EFL teaching and to develop a repertoire of objectives and competence-driven expertise. Dialogic reflection around the EPOSTL communicates what gets valued and what is expected in effective EFL teaching (Newby, 2012a). The EPOSTL operates much like a GPS wherein destination coordinates are plugged in and a roadmap appears in the form of descriptors with intermittent stops along the way to review the route and the final destination. Recalculating and reviewing the route to the destination occurs through socially-mediated processes.

The EPOSTL allows the trainee teacher to move through a zone of proximal teacher development during the induction and apprenticeship phase. A zone of proximal *teacher development* (ZPTD) is the distance between what trainee teachers can do independently and a proximal level they can achieve through dialogically-mediated support from more expert sources, including but not limited to the EPOSTL. Teacher knowledge does not develop solely through the transfer of facts, but rather by appropriating and configuring

131

meanings nurtured in part through the process of dialogic reflection (Golombek & Johnson, 2004, cited in Warford, 2011). Pre-service teachers determine what resonates with their understanding of the contextual challenges they face. Here, situated learning is meshed with the EPOSTL through the mediating role of the mentor.

Trainee teachers and their mentors build pedagogical knowledge through the use of a mediated tool. The EPOSTL allows teachers to systematically anchor their instruction to a set of principled statements by merging those scientific concepts with local understandings and practices. The EPOSTL merges theory with practice by front-loading and back-loading descriptors onto the experiential dimension of teacher preparation.

The EPOSTL tool should support trainee teachers in their analyses, planning, reflection, and self-assessment. The preparation of a learning autobiography sets the stage for a lifetime of professional growth, offering a diagnostic of directions toward which the candidate's affective-volitional disposition might be most profitably directed and where they might benefit from sensitive, intensive mediation from the teacher-educator.

While the EPOSTL has oriented trainees and their mentors in a worthwhile direction, several shortcomings have been identified. Concerns have been raised about the number of descriptors (195) and their connection to identifiable outcomes and the lack of any globally referenced benchmarks (Burkert & Schwienhorst, 2008). Parallel criticisms can be made about the finite set of descriptors that ultimately restrict the kinds of claims that can be made about what the candidate has or still needs to acquire. Second, the descriptors are often expressed in very general terms, which may fail to make important contextual distinctions regarding different EFL learner profiles. Third, there is an uneven distribution of descriptors across the different sections of the EPOSTL with some categories containing far fewer descriptors than others. For example, vocabulary contains only three descriptors whereas speaking contains more than 10. This 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. A further shortcoming is the non-standardized manner in which EPOSTL users chart their progress and declare (in) progress, achievement (success), or failure. As such, the reliability of the tool as a formative assessment system or basis for certification may be limited. Since EPOSTL descriptors are stated as can do statements evidence of the ability to do something is not always presented through repeated trials and confirming observations. Much of the self-assessment is on the honour system. A final drawback of the EPOSTL in our program is the sheer number of descriptors and the limited timeframe in which to cover them. That combination has necessitated paring down the tool, in a hierarchical way, to descriptors

132

deemed essential for certification. The selection of the essential descriptors are discussed and voted upon, that means that those descriptors left out of the final list become marginalized and deemphasized. There is a coercive element to the EPOSTL despite its flexibly adaptable nature. Attempts to place them into a hierarchy may be counterintuitive because it may contribute to emphasizing one aspect more than another without knowing what the final impact will be from the unequal emphasis.

Research on how the EPOSTL is used in other teacher preparation settings would further the discussion about its reliability as a training and reflection tool and contribute to harmonizing its use. Further study might also lead to the development of a guide on how it can best be used across the different contexts identified in this article. A validation study could provide much needed reinforcement for statistically significant claims about the different micro-practices contained within the EPOSTL. Survey research would likewise prove worthwhile in contributing information about tendencies, frequencies, and profiles of EPOSTL-using communities and the descriptors that are prioritized.

133

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134

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136

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Author

* **Holli Schauber** holds a Doctorate in Education and teaches in the Institute for Teacher Education at the University of Geneva, Switzerland. Her research and teaching are conducted as related activities and focus on teacher preparation, second language learning and use, and writing in a second language.

137