

Insights into the European Portfolio
for Student Teachers of Languages
(EPOSTL)

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Edited by

David Newby

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P U B L I S H I N G

Insights into the European Portfolio for Student Teachers of Languages (EPOSTL),
Edited by David Newby

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INTRODUCTION

The content of this book focuses on a recent publication of the Council of Europe, the *European Portfolio for Student Teachers of Languages*, usually referred to under the acronym *EPOSTL*. While it is not necessary for readers to have detailed knowledge of the *EPOSTL*, it is useful to have a general idea of its aims and content. The first part of this introduction will therefore acquaint the reader with the most essential information about the *EPOSTL*. Following this, the aims and content of this book, *Insights into the European Portfolio for Student Teachers of Languages*, will be outlined.

What is the *EPOSTL*?

The *European Portfolio for Student Teachers of Languages (EPOSTL)* is a document intended for students undergoing their initial teacher education which encourages them to reflect on the didactic knowledge and skills necessary to teach languages, helps them to assess their own didactic competences and enables them to monitor their progress and to record their experiences of teaching during the course of their teacher education.

The *EPOSTL* consists of three main sections:

- a **Personal Statement** section, to help students at the beginning of their teacher education to reflect on general questions related to teaching
- a **Self-Assessment** section, which contains lists of ‘can-do’ descriptors relating to didactic competences
- a **Dossier**, in which students can document progress and record examples of work relevant to their teacher education and their future profession.

The *EPOSTL* was developed for the European Centre for Modern Languages of the Council of Europe (ECML) by a team of teacher educators from five different countries (Armenia, Austria, Norway, Poland, UK). It arose from a project initiated by the ECML, “A Framework for Teacher Education”, which had the overall aim of

addressing the broad question of harmonising teacher education across Europe.

The *EPOSTL* builds on existing documents already developed by the Language Policy Division of the Council of Europe - the *Common European Framework of Reference for Languages (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)*.

The main aims of the *EPOSTL* are:

- to encourage students to reflect on the competences a teacher strives to attain and on the underlying knowledge which feed these competences
- to help prepare students for their future profession in a variety of teaching contexts
- to promote discussion between students and between students and their teacher educators and mentors
- to facilitate self-assessment of students' competence
- to help students develop awareness of their strengths and weaknesses related to teaching
- to provide an instrument which helps chart progress

At the heart of the *EPOSTL* are the 195 descriptors of competences relating to language teaching which comprise the self-assessment section. These descriptors may be regarded as a set of core competences which language teachers should strive to attain.

The *EPOSTL* is a flexible resource which can be integrated in a variety of ways into existing teacher education courses and programmes. The *EPOSTL* is the property of the student teacher and is an instrument to promote professional growth through reflection and dialogue.

The *EPOSTL* is widely used in many European countries and beyond. It has been translated into 13 languages and a Japanese version is currently being produced.

Insights into the European Portfolio for Student Teachers of Languages

The title of this book has been chosen by analogy with one which has similar aims: *Insights from the Common European Framework of Reference* (Morrow 2004), a collection of articles which explains the content of the CEFR and gives examples of how it is implemented in various teaching

contexts. Whereas the title of that publication contains the preposition “from”, since it seeks to explain theoretical aspects of the CEFR, the preposition in the title of the present volume is “into”. In this case, one of the main aims is to outline theoretical areas of knowledge which are important for those who intend to make use of the *EPOSTL* in teacher education.

This book is intended principally for two groups of readers: teacher educators involved in the training of teachers of foreign languages and student teachers. However, it will be of interest to anyone involved in language education. The book is divided into three parts:

Part I: The theoretical basis of the *EPOSTL*

This section focuses on theoretical insights relevant to the use of the *EPOSTL*. In chapter one, David Newby discusses some of the issues which arose in the design of the *EPOSTL* and in its implementation. The most important function of the *EPOSTL* is as a tool for reflecting on the competences which teachers strive to attain. In the second chapter Anne-Brit Fenner therefore considers the role of reflection in education, looks at different theoretical approaches to reflection and indicates the role that it plays when the *EPOSTL* is used. A further aim of the *EPOSTL* is to support an autonomous mode of learning, both on the part of student teachers and their learners. In chapter three, Hanna Komorowska discusses the concept of learner autonomy and its place in education. In the last chapter of this section, Michael Byram presents a model of culture and analyses to what extent this model is represented in the descriptors of the *EPOSTL*.

Part II: The *EPOSTL* and other European instruments

As stated above, the *EPOSTL* builds on insights from three other European publications, each of which is the focus of a chapter in this part. In chapter five, David Newby examines the relationship between the *EPOSTL* and the *Common European Framework of Reference*, focusing on the correspondences between their respective competence descriptors. In chapter six, Hanna Komorowska explains the rationale of the *European Language Portfolio* and examines similarities and differences between the *ELP* and the *EPOSTL*. In chapter seven, Mike Grenfell, one of the co-authors of the *European Profile for Language Teacher Education*, presents its aims and content and indicates how the two documents may be

used in a complementary fashion in the curriculum design of teacher education.

Part III: Implementing the *EPOSTL*

In the final part, three case studies are presented, illustrating how the *EPOSTL* can be used in practice. In chapter eight, in the first of these studies, Barbara Mehlmauer-Larcher describes how the *EPOSTL* is used in the training of future English teachers at the University of Vienna and also discusses theoretical aspects of her approach. The context she describes represents the ‘mainstream’ use of the *EPOSTL*; in the last two chapters, case studies are presented which show additional uses to which the *EPOSTL* can be put. Barry Jones describes a “bi-lateral” teacher education programme between the University of Cambridge and the Institut Universitaire de Formation des Maîtres at Antony in France, in which the *EPOSTL* played a key role. He further discusses reactions of the English and French students to using the *EPOSTL*. In the last chapter, Rita Kupetz and Hannah Ruhm give an account of how the *EPOSTL* was used in a short training course for German exchange assistants who were about to begin a period of teaching in the United Kingdom.

Further Information on the *EPOSTL*

The *EPOSTL* can be downloaded free of charge in several languages – English, French, German, Greek, Hungarian, Italian, Lithuanian, Polish, Russian and Spanish - from the following website:
<http://EPOSTL2.ecml.at/> (resources).

An additional publication consisting of case studies describing the use of the *EPOSTL* in eight European countries is also available from the European Centre for Modern Languages: Newby, D., Fenner, A-B., Jones, B. (Eds.) (2011) *Using the European Portfolio for Student Teachers of Languages*. Strasbourg/Graz: Council of Europe publishing. It can be downloaded at <http://EPOSTL2.ecml.at/> (publication).

Further information on the ECML and downloadable versions of its many publications are available from <http://www.ecml.at/>.

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- Council of Europe (2001). *Common European Framework of Reference for Languages: Learning, teaching, assessment*. Strasbourg: Council of Europe, Modern Languages Division/Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

SECTION I:

THE THEORETICAL BASIS OF THE *EPOSTL*

CHAPTER ONE

THE *EUROPEAN PORTFOLIO* FOR STUDENT TEACHERS OF LANGUAGES: BACKGROUND AND ISSUES

DAVID NEWBY

1 The Council of Europe and Modern Languages

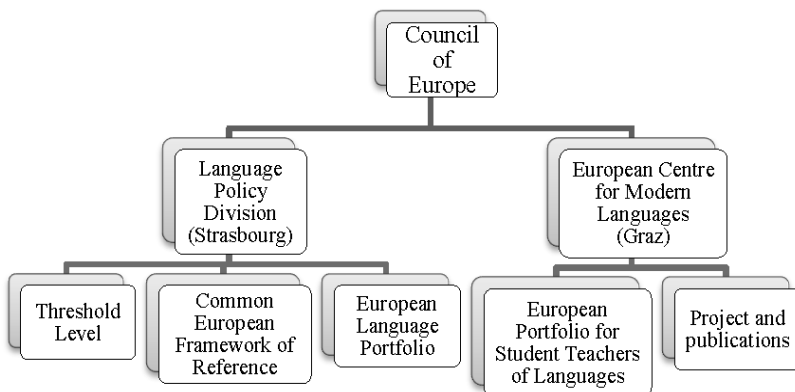
Since the 1960s the Council of Europe has played a major role in language teaching methodology and research throughout Europe (see Trim 2007 online). Based on educational and political aims its Language Policy Division (LPD), formerly the Modern Languages Section, has made a significant contribution to the development of language education policies and to promoting linguistic diversity and plurilingualism. Some of its best-known contributions are “tools and standards to help member states elaborate transparent and coherent language policies” (Council of Europe 1 online). From 1975 onwards the categories of communication found in its *Threshold Level*, revised in 1991 (see van Ek 1980; van Ek and Trim 1990), not only served as a basis for curriculum design in many European countries but its notional and functional categories provided essential theoretical input to the Communicative Approach to language teaching.

At the beginning of the 21st century the *Common European Framework of Reference (CEFR)* built on the rationale but extended the scope of the *Threshold Level*. Not only did its “action-oriented” view of language use enable human communication to be described explicitly in terms of user competences, but its categories of “general competences,” which included both the ability to learn languages and various types of “cultural competence” (*CEFR* p. 6), went beyond the language-based taxonomies which had previously been drawn up by applied linguists, for example by Canale and Swain (1980). The specification of learner/user competences, opened the door to what has become the best-known part of the *CEFR*: its scaling of language competences by means of the now widely-adopted levels A1 – C2.

An important “sister instrument”, the *European Language Portfolio*, reinforced the reflective mode of language learning advocated in the *CEFR* and provided a means for learners to self-assess their language competence and to reflect on and provide evidence of both linguistic and cultural competences and experiences.

In the year 1994 the work of the Language Policy Division was complemented by the establishment by the Council of Europe of the European Centre for Modern Languages (ECML) in Graz, Austria. Since that time, the Graz centre has carried out and supervised projects aimed at implementing innovation in the organisation, learning and teaching of modern languages. It further aims to train multipliers, develop expert networks and to disseminate good practice (European Centre for Modern Languages online). Currently 34 states are members of the ECML and therefore participate in its activities. Projects that take place under the its auspices are the result of project proposals submitted by language experts – teacher educators, applied linguists, teachers, educational stakeholders etc. - and respond to the foreign language educational needs of member states. With their practical orientation, they seek to bridge the gulf between theory and practice. It was within the framework of an ECML project that the *European Portfolio for Student Teachers of Languages (EPOSTL)* was developed. The Language Policy Division and the European Centre for Modern Languages in Graz work in close cooperation. Various projects have had the specific aim of supporting the implementation of policies and documents that have been developed in Strasbourg. Figure one shows some of the main publications of the respective institutions.

Figure 1: The Council of Europe – examples of instruments that have been developed



2 The Origins of the *EPOSTL*

The *EPOSTL* project was instigated in 2005 by the Governing Board of the ECML, which comprises representatives of all member states. It was the wish of the Board that a project should be initiated which would contribute to the “harmonising” of teacher education in Europe. In initial discussions with an invited group of 10 language experts from a variety of European countries, various ways of approaching this rather abstract task were considered. What soon became clear was that any attempts to set up a structural, top-down framework – for example, a common teacher education curriculum – would prove futile since both the structures and rationales of teacher education programmes differ widely from country to country. It was eventually decided that a more reasonable task would be to develop some sort of portfolio for use in teacher education, which would on the one hand aim at a harmonisation of teacher competences, but on the other would take into account the diversity of different national contexts. The resulting project was entitled “A Framework for Teacher Education” and was coordinated by teacher educators from five European countries: David Newby (Austria), Anne-Brit Fenner (Norway), University Barry Jones (UK), Hanna Komorowska (Poland), Kristine Soghikyan, Brusov Linguistic University (Armenia) and Rebecca Allan (UK). The project group identified the following specific tasks:

- to address the content of language teacher education with a view to identifying “core competences”;
- to formulate corresponding didactic competence descriptors relating to language teaching;
- to embed these in a portfolio to help student teachers reflect on their knowledge, skills and values.

During the two years of developing the *EPOSTL* the authors had the benefit of having draft versions evaluated by participants at two workshops held at the European Centre for Modern Languages in Graz. At the first of these, a workshop entitled *Back to the Future*, held in September 2005, student teachers from the 34 member states of the ECML were confronted with the first draft version of the *EPOSTL*. Their critical voices and creative suggestions made from their student perspective led to considerable changes being made to the *EPOSTL*, particularly in the wording of its descriptors. In April 2006, a further workshop was held, attended by 30 teacher educators, who evaluated and suggested revisions of the second draft version. The fact that the project team worked in a

wide variety of teaching cultures and that the *EPOSTL* was evaluated by students and teacher educators across Europe provided a justification for including the “European” label in the title. The final version of the *EPOSTL* was published by the ECML in English and French in 2007 and in German in 2008. It has in the meantime been translated into 13 languages.

3 The *EPOSTL* in a European context

From the outset, the authors of the *EPOSTL* were very much aware that the intended Portfolio did not constitute a *tabula rasa* but would be able to build on three notable contributions that had already been made to language learning and teaching in Europe. These were the *European Profile for Language Teacher Education: A Frame of Reference*, a project commissioned by the European Union and drawn up by a team from the University of Southampton, and the two well-known instruments developed by the Council of Europe, the *Common European Framework of Reference for Languages: Learning, Teaching, Assessment* and the *European Language Portfolio*. These documents will be briefly described and their relationship with the *EPOSTL* indicated. A full discussion will follow in section II of this publication.

CEFR & EPOSTL (see chapter five)

The overall rationale of the *EPOSTL* derived to some extent from the *Common European Framework of Reference (CEFR)*. This can be illustrated by examining a statement taken from the introduction to the *CEFR* (p. 1):

The Common European Framework (...) describes in a comprehensive way what language learners have to learn to do in order to use a language for communication and what knowledge and skills they have to develop so as to be able to act effectively.

This statement can be adapted to show what the *EPOSTL* aims to do, as follows:

The European Portfolio for Student Teachers of Languages describes in a comprehensive way *what language teachers have to learn to do* in order to teach a language for communication and what knowledge and skills they have to help learners to develop so as to be able to act effectively.

By comparing these two statements it can be seen that both documents share a core aim, the difference consisting in the fact that the former focuses on language *learning*, whereas the latter focuses on language *teaching*. A further important similarity is that both seek to describe competences – be it linguistic or didactic - in the form of “can-do” descriptors.

ELP & EPOSTL (see chapter six)

The *European Language Portfolio* is a document in which learners can record and reflect on their language learning and cultural experiences. Like the *EPOSTL* it contains lists of “can-do” competence descriptors, which serve the purpose of reflection and self-assessment. However, whereas the *ELP* descriptors describe language competences, the *EPOSTL* descriptors describe didactic competences. Also, the *EPOSTL* adopts a three-part structure, which are loosely based on the *ELP*.

European Profile for Language Teacher Education & EPOSTL (see chapter seven)

The *European Profile* (Kelly and Grenfell online) is a document intended primarily to facilitate curriculum design for teacher education institutions. It describes its content as follows:

The Profile presents a toolkit of 40 items which could be included in a teacher education programme to equip language teachers with the necessary skills and knowledge, as well as other professional competencies, to enhance their professional development and to lead to greater transparency and portability of qualifications.

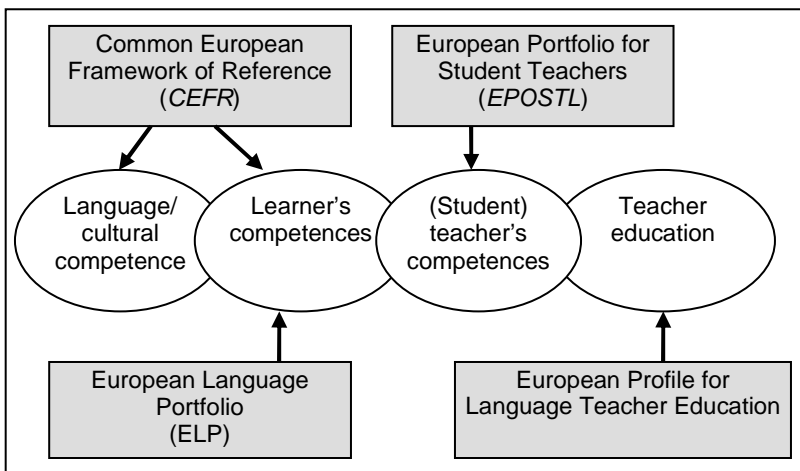
(...) It could be used as a checklist for institutions with longstanding strengths in language teacher education, and as a reference document providing guidance to institutions with plans to develop their language teacher education programmes (Kelly & Grenfell, online).

In some ways, the *European Profile* follows a similar direction to that taken by the *EPOSTL* in that it aims at providing a framework in which decisions relating to teacher education can be taken. It differs, however, in certain important respects. Principal of these is that the *Profile* targets teacher educators in general and teacher training curriculum developers in particular. It thus takes a *top-down* view of teacher education, which includes not only specific competences but structural aspects of teacher education programmes. The *EPOSTL*, on the other hand, takes a *bottom-*

up view, targeting student teachers and focusing on specific didactic competences which trainee teachers need to develop.

It could be argued that the *EPOSTL* has filled a gap among previously existing European instruments by providing a focus on the (student) teacher – as opposed to the learner or to language itself. How coverage is given to different aspects of these instruments is illustrated in figure 2. The arrow represents the main, though not the only, focus of each.

Figure 2: Competences and European instruments



4 Issues in designing the *EPOSTL*

It goes without saying that an instrument such as the *EPOSTL* is not a “neutral” document but its content reflects the results of decisions taken by the authors in consultation with teacher educators and students. This raises a number of issues, which fall within three general areas:

- rationale and approach, as reflected in the content of the *EPOSTL*
- design – the scope and wording of the self-assessment descriptors
- use of the *EPOSTL* in teacher education

In the following, issues commonly raised by teacher educators during the piloting phase of the *EPOSTL* will be discussed with reference to each of these three areas.

4.1 Rationale and approach

4.1.1 Does the *EPOSTL* reflect any particular approaches?

It is one of the claims of the *Communication European Framework of Reference* that it is un-dogmatic and that it is “not irrevocably and exclusively attached to any one of a number of competing linguistic or educational theories or practices” (p. 8). However, an examination of the content reveals a clear rationale which reflects certain recent trends in linguistic, cultural and didactic theory. This rationale is shared to a large extent by the *EPOSTL* and is seen in its descriptors in various ways. In chapter four, Michael Byram refers to the “model of competence implicit” in the *EPOSTL*. If there is a model underlying the *EPOSTL*, then it is the same model of competence which underlies the *CEFR*, as shown by the common terminology that is used. Four theoretical approaches can be identified as providing the rationale of both the *CEFR* and the *EPOSTL*.

A “communicative” view of language

The *CEFR* commits itself to an “action-oriented” (p. 9) view of language, in which interlocutors communicate within “communicative events” (p.50). In doing so, it is following the “communicative” view which could already be found in the *Threshold Level* (van Ek 1980; van Ek and Trim 1990) and which is at the heart of Communicative Language Teaching. A glance at the methodology section of the *EPOSTL* will immediately reveal the kind of approach to the four skills, now expanded to five to include spoken and written interaction, which has been in the mainstream of language teaching since the 1980s and which still holds sway in teacher education programmes across Europe (see Fenner & Newby 2006). Two descriptors from the Methodology – Speaking/Spoken Interaction section will serve as examples which clearly reflect Communicative Language Teaching:

I can evaluate and select a range of meaningful speaking and interactional activities to develop fluency (discussion, role play, problem solving etc. (no. 4, p. 21).

I can evaluate and select activities which help learners to participate in ongoing spoken exchanges (conversations, transactions etc.) and to initiate or respond to utterances appropriately (no. 7, p. 21).

A cognitive, constructivist view of language use and learning

This is an aspect of the *CEFR* which tends to receive little attention, but which, with the growing influence of Cognitive Linguistics, is likely to be given a stronger focus in the future. It can be seen in discussions of the “language processes” (p. 10) and of “mental context” of language users and learners (p. 50) and its reference to cognitive terms such as “schemata, frames, hypothesis testing” (p. 72) as well as in its focus on both communication and learning strategies (p. 10). In the *EPOSTL*, this approach can be seen in descriptors such as:

I can take into account the cognitive needs of learners (problem solving, drive for communication, acquiring knowledge etc.) (Context – Aims and Needs, 4, p.16).

I can encourage learners to use their knowledge of a topic and their expectations about a text when listening. (Methodology – Listening, 3, p. 25)

I can vary and balance activities in order to respond to individuals learners’ learning styles. (Planning a Lesson – Lesson Content, p.36)

Learner autonomy

It is in the nature of a catalogue of teacher competences that the focus of the descriptors is on the teacher and what he or she “can do”. In this, it differs from the focus of the *European Language Portfolio*, which is on what the learner “can do”. In various sections of the *EPOSTL*, however, descriptors can be found which show a learner-centred view of pedagogy and, as in the *CEFR*, there is a commitment to the development of autonomous learning. This is most clearly apparent in the section “Independent Learning – Learner Autonomy” (p. 45). One example from this is:

I can guide and assist learners in setting their own aims and objectives and in planning their own learning (no. 3).

However, descriptors showing a learner orientation can be found in other sections too. For example:

I can involve learners in lesson planning (Lesson Planning – Lesson Content, 12, p. 36).

I can negotiate with learners how their work and progress should best be assessed (Assessment – Designing Assessment Tools, 2, p. 52).

Cultural competence

The belief in the importance of culture as an integral part of language teaching and the coverage of various facets – intercultural awareness, socio-cultural competence etc. – is clearly apparent in the *EPOSTL*. This can be seen not only in the methodology section on culture but in other individual descriptors spread across other sections (see index, p.81). Examples of these are:

I can appreciate and make use of the value added to the classroom environment by learners with diverse cultural backgrounds (p17); and

I can plan activities to emphasise the interdependence of language and culture (p35).

In the past few years a variety of complementary terms have arisen to refer to facets of cultural competence – inter-, pluri-, multi-, trans-, socio-, are some of the suffixes that are used with the adjective “cultural”. Clearly, each term has its own specific meaning and will need explaining in the context of a teacher education course. And this leads to a problem which sometimes crops up when teacher educators and methodologists read the *EPOSTL* for the first time, though it should be added that this usually ceases to be a problem when the *EPOSTL* is actually used in a university course. In presentations and workshop, questions not infrequently arise about terms that occur, such as “What does the *EPOSTL* mean by “intercultural awareness”?”, or about the interpretation of words in descriptors such as “meaningful” in statements like “*I can evaluate and select a range of meaningful speaking and interactional activities*”: “What is meant by “meaningful”?” Answers to these questions will not be found in the *EPOSTL* since it is not a manual of methodology but seeks to raise questions which are relevant to methodology. It does not attempt to take over what is the task of teacher educators and student teachers themselves: to explore such issues and come to their own conclusions.

In summary, it can be said that the rationale underlying the descriptors reflects current trends in language learning and teaching, which are also clearly apparent in the *CEFR*. The choice of descriptors represents a consensus view of teacher educators from across Europe. Whilst channelling students’ attention in certain directions, it does not commit them to specific theories. It thus attempts to be, as the *CEFR* puts it, “context-free and context-relevant” (*CEFR*: 21).

4.1.2 Is the *EPOSTL* a prescriptive document, indirectly imposing content on teacher education curricula?

The descriptors in the *EPOSTL* list core competences which teachers *may strive to attain* in the course of not only their teacher education but of their professional lives. In this, it differs from being a fixed qualification profile which student teachers *have to* adhere to. This distinction is important since the former allows a degree of flexibility both in the choice of competences and in the degree of competence that may be attained. It is unlikely that all descriptors of the *EPOSTL* will be dealt with in a teacher education course. It is up to teacher educators and students which sections they will focus on and which descriptors will be given prominence.

As stated in the Introduction to this volume, the *EPOSTL* has been translated into several languages and is used in a wide variety of countries, both inside and outside Europe. One question that sometimes arises is whether the *EPOSTL* may be adapted or shortened to suit the contextual conditions of a particular country. Permission to do so has not been granted since the authors hold the view that, for reasons of cross-institutional and cross-national dialogue, it is valuable to have a common document for all European countries which wish to use it.

At my own institution, Graz University in Austria, *EPOSTL* has been incorporated into the teacher education curriculum for modern language. However, this has been done in a very general way by means of statements such as “the competences to be developed [in a particular course] will be in accordance with descriptors in the *European Portfolio for Student Teachers of Languages*”. Teacher educators therefore have the freedom to select which descriptors will be dealt with and when.

One interesting use of the *EPOSTL* descriptors is as a tool for both evaluating and re-designing existing curricula. Bagarić (2011) provides an interesting account of a project at Osijek University in Croatia in which the results of questionnaires given to student teachers concerning their self-assessed progress were used to draw conclusions on the effectiveness of the teacher education curriculum.

4.1.3 Does the *EPOSTL* lead to a “reductionist” view of teaching?

One objection that is sometimes levelled at the *EPOSTL* is that presenting students with a list of competences can give the impression that teaching can be reduced to a finite set of skill-based competences, in much the same way that certain short teacher training courses sometimes seem to reduce teaching to a bag of methodological tricks.

In their book *The European Language Teacher*, Grenfell et al. refer to different models of teacher education, one of which they term “The Competence Based Teacher Education Model Approach” (CBTE), the starting point of which “is the drawing up of a list of *competencies*. In other words what any individual needs to do, or can be shown to be doing in order to meet the professional definition of ‘teacher’” (2003: 28). They go on to identify various objections to this approach, principal of which is that view that “we see professional competence as something that can be reduced to a series of discrete items” (2003: 29). They further claim that such an approach “commits the behaviourist fallacy of only recognising what is observable” (ibid).

It is one of the aims of this volume to counteract this claim. Were the *EPOSTL* merely a checklist of skills to be ticked off by students in an unreflected way, or were it to be used by examiners or school inspectors when visiting a classroom, this claim may have some justification. Reports from teacher educators who use the *EPOSTL* overwhelmingly suggest, however, that its use in teacher education should rather be located in a “Reflective Practitioner Model Approach” (Wallace 1991; Grenfell et al. 2003) rather than within a Competence Model. In actual use, the competence descriptors prove to be the tip of an iceberg of theoretical considerations and fulfil the function of acting as springboards for reflection and dialogue. They thus serve to provide a clear focus on underlying knowledge and values which lead to the development of skills, just as much as the skills themselves.

It should be added that while the majority of the *EPOSTL* descriptors are of a skill-based nature – “*I can create a supportive atmosphere that invites learners to take part in speaking activities*” etc. – others are of a more abstract, cognitive nature. Examples from the section “Role of the Teacher” illustrate this:

I can draw on appropriate theories of language, learning, culture etc. and relevant research findings to guide my teaching (no. 4, p. 17).

I can locate relevant articles, journals and research findings relating to aspects of teaching and learning. (no. 9, p. 18).

I can identify and investigate specific pedagogical/ didactic issues related to my learners or my teaching in the form of action research. (no. 10, p. 18).

4.2 Issues in designing the self-assessment descriptors

4.2.1 Classification

A question that arose in the early stages of designing the *EPOSTL* was what form of categorisation to choose. Neither the structure and categories of the *Common European Framework of Reference* nor of the *European Profile* seemed appropriate. It was decided to approach categorisation in terms of categories which represent, to some extent, the sequencing of a teacher's activities and decision making processes. It was on this basis that the seven general categories of the *EPOSTL* were formulated:

1. **Context** – curriculum, aims and needs of learners, the role of the language teacher, institutional resources and constraints;
2. **Methodology** – speaking/spoken interaction, writing/written interaction, listening, reading, grammar, vocabulary, culture;
3. **Resources** – teaching materials, ICT;
4. **Lesson Planning** – identification of objectives, lesson content, lesson organisation;
5. **Conducting a Lesson** – using lesson plans, content, interaction with learners, classroom management, classroom language;
6. **Independent Learning** – learner autonomy, homework, projects, portfolios, virtual learning environments, extra-curricular activities, supporting learning outside of the classroom and developing learner independence etc.;
7. **Assessment** – designing assessment tools, evaluation, self- and peer-assessment, language performance, culture, error analysis.

First teachers have to understand the **context** in which they are teaching, which includes aspects such as recognising institutional constraints, identifying expectations of learners, parent, stakeholders etc.; understanding national curricula; setting long-term objectives etc. In order to operate within these contextual constraints teachers will need to know and be able to apply a wide range of **methodological options**. These options will have to be matched to **resources** which are either available or are to be designed, such as textbooks, ICT materials etc. The complementary categories of methodology and resources then make specific **lesson planning** possible. Once a lesson has been planned, it can be **conducted**. Of course, learning is only partly classroom-based and teacher-directed. For this reason the category of **independent learning** is

included. Finally, at various points in the learning process learning and teaching will need to be **assessed**.

It should be added that this sequence does not necessarily correspond to the order in which these sections will be dealt with in a teacher education course. However, they do help student teachers to obtain a coherent overview of various competences. Information on how teacher educators select certain of the *EPOSTL* for particular courses and other aspects of implementation can be found in Newby et al. (2011).

4.2.2 The scope of the descriptors

As stated above, the guiding principle of the authors in formulating descriptors was to attempt to produce a list of “core competences” for language teachers, which could, like the *Common European Framework*, be regarded as fulfilling the criterion of being “comprehensive”. However, it soon emerged that comprehensiveness was a double-edged sword, which could equally cause students to be overwhelmed by the sheer volume of descriptors.

In fact, the first round of descriptor writing produced a stock of over 400 – more than twice the number of those that actually made it into the published version of the *EPOSTL*. It was felt by the authors, all of whom are teacher educators themselves, that such a large number would be likely to intimidate student teachers about to embark on their training. This was confirmed by those students who provided valuable feedback at the *Back to the Future* workshop at the European Centre for Modern Languages. The number of descriptors clearly needed to be reduced considerably.

In some European contexts, a distinction is made in teacher education between general education or pedagogy on the one hand, and subject-specific didactics on the other, the two areas sometimes being taught by different university institutes. One way of reducing the number of descriptors was to target those competences specifically required by a future teacher of languages, as opposed to other school subjects. However, whilst this would, in principle, be possible, a very strict separation and subsequent exclusion of general pedagogical descriptors would lead to a rather patchy set of competences. It was decided, therefore, that, although the main focus would be on competences required by language teachers, in the interests of cohesion some descriptors relating to general competences would be retained. Examples of these are:

I can take into account the affective needs of learners (sense of achievement, enjoyment etc.) (Context, B5).

I can vary and balance activities in order to respond to individuals learners” learning styles (Lesson planning, B10).

I can settle a group of learners into a room and gain their attention at the beginning of a lesson (Conducting a Lesson, C1).

In the meantime, experience has shown that the number of descriptors is about right. It is usually the case that, after an initial phase of feeling somewhat overwhelmed, once students begin to use the *EPOSTL*, they seem to find the overview of competences that it provides beneficial and its size manageable. Criticism sometimes comes from methodologists who specialise in a particular area that their field of interest is underrepresented: those working in the field of grammar would like more grammar descriptors; those working in cultural theory would like more on culture and so on. In such cases, it is quite possible for teacher educators to add additional descriptors of their own choice.

4.2.3 The wording of descriptors

As with the *CEFR*, an essential feature of the design of descriptors is that they should be transparent for the user. The critical voices of workshop participants in the piloting phase showed that many of the descriptors of the first *EPOSTL* draft version did not fulfil this criterion. Clearly, this was a problem: if students did not understand what was meant by a descriptor, how were they to reflect on it? As a result of this feedback, many descriptors were shortened and simplified.

One principle that was applied to each descriptor was that of a “single focus”: each one should refer to only one competence component. As a result, it is usually possible to underline a specific “head concept”, to use a linguistic term, in each descriptor. This is important since, at first sight, there may appear to be overlap between pairs of descriptors, as in the pair from the Methodology – Speaking/Spoken Interaction section, quoted earlier:

*4. I can evaluate and select a range of meaningful speaking and interactional activities to **develop fluency** (discussion, role play, problem solving etc.).*

*7. I can evaluate and select activities which help learners to **participate in ongoing spoken exchanges** (conversations, transactions etc.) and to **initiate or respond to utterances appropriately**.*

However, the focus of each is different, as indicated in the bold words. In 4. the focus is on general spoken fluency development whereas 7. refers to specific aspects of spoken language and strategies which need to be acquired.

The adherence to transparency does not, however, preclude the fact that many descriptors require discussion and interpretation on the part of student teachers. Certain somewhat vague terms have been used deliberately to promote discussion and reflection. Examples are:

*I can evaluate and select a range of **meaningful** speaking and interactional activities to develop fluency (discussion, role play, problem solving etc.)* (Methodology, Speaking, 4.).

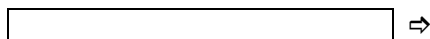
*I can assess homework according to **valid and transparent criteria**.* (Independent Learning, Homework, 4.)

*I can select texts appropriate to **the needs, interests and language level of the learners*** (Methodology, Listening, 1).

The highlighted words will need reflection and discussion so that students can come to their own interpretations of what they might mean. This reflection will be a pre-requisite for self-assessment.

4.2.4 Mapping progress

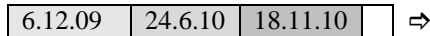
One difficult decision to be made when compiling the *EPOSTL* was the question of how students should quantify their competences when carrying out a self-assessment. Our solution was to provide an open, uncalibrated bar with a forward pointing arrow below each descriptor, as follows.



The issue of whether and how competences might be quantified or scaled was discussed at various points in the development of the *EPOSTL*, in particular during the workshops held at the European Centre for Modern Languages. Various systems of mapping progress were considered. Of initial, but short-lived, appeal was the idea to adopt the *CEFR* scales of A1 – C2. However, it soon became apparent that, whilst this system might work well for language competences, it is extremely difficult to quantify didactic competences in this systematic way – even more so if such scaling carries with it an international validity, as is the case with the *CEFR* levels. Various other numerical or symbolic forms were considered

– emoticons, a ladder, segments of a circular pie etc. – but finally the open arrowed bar was chosen.

Students use these bars as follows: whenever they self-assess a particular competence, they colour in a portion of the bar below it and add the date of the assessment. When, at a later stage of their teacher education, a further self-assessment is made, the same procedure will be followed. In this way, students can chart their progress over a period of time. An example is shown below.



The purpose of the forward-pointing arrow is to indicate that a teacher’s competences are never perfect: improving competences is a life-long process.

4.3 Issues in the use of the *EPOSTL*

4.3.1 Should *EPOSTL* have a reporting function?

As is well known, the *European Language Portfolio* fulfils a dual function: a pedagogic function and a documentation and reporting function (Council of Europe online 2). As far as the second function is concerned, the Council of Europe website states:

There are many occasions to present a Language Portfolio which is up to date, for example a transfer to another school, change to a higher educational sector, the beginning of a language course, a meeting with a career advisor, or an application for a new post. In these cases the *ELP* is addressed to persons who have a role in decisions which are important for the owner of the Language Portfolio.

In theory, these two functions could also be fulfilled by the *EPOSTL*; however, it is the view of the authors, shared by many teacher educators, that it should be limited to the “pedagogic” function: that is to say, as a instrument to promote learning through reflection, self-assessment and discussions among students and between students and teacher educators.

There are several reasons which speak against using the *EPOSTL* as a means of external documentation. Principal of these is related to the rationale of the *EPOSTL*. As with the *European Language Portfolio*, the *EPOSTL* is seen as the personal property of the student: allowing external access to self-assessments would clearly impinge upon the integrity of the document and might also call into question the validity of the process of