



Understanding Pre-Service Teachers' Perceptions of The EPOSTL as a Tool for Reflection, Self-Assessment, and Professional Development

Özlem Khan* ^a, İsmail Hakkı Mirici ^b,

^a *PhD Candidate, Graduate School of Educational Sciences, Hacettepe University, Ankara, 06800, Turkey*

^b *Professor, Department of English Language Teaching, Hacettepe University, Ankara, 06800, Turkey*

Abstract

This study investigates pre-service English language teachers' perceptions of the European Portfolio for Student Teachers of Languages (EPOSTL) as a tool for reflection, self-assessment, and professional development. Using a sequential mixed-methods design, data were collected from 166 participants enrolled in an English Language Teaching (ELT) program through the EPOSTL Student Perception Questionnaire (ESPQ) and five open-ended reflective questions. The findings revealed that participants generally held positive perceptions of the EPOSTL's purpose and reflective value, particularly in promoting learner autonomy and self-regulated learning. However, a clear perception–practice gap emerged: while students conceptually appreciated the EPOSTL, many expressed uncertainties about its practical implementation. Perceptions varied across grade levels, indicating that the portfolio's relevance becomes more evident with increased teaching experience. Notably, the study identified a significant gender difference: female participants reported more positive perceptions of EPOSTL's reflective and developmental functions. The study concludes that scaffolded guidance, mentor training, and phased implementation are essential for maximizing the EPOSTL's potential as a framework for mentored reflection and professional growth in teacher education.

Keywords: EPOSTL, self-regulated learning, self-assessment, reflection, pre-service language teachers, teacher education

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1. Introduction

1.1. The Conundrum of Pre-service Teacher Education

Teacher education programs universally face a persistent challenge in preparing future educators for the multifaceted complexities of the classroom (Jones et al., 2023). A central issue is the long-standing “theory-practice divide,” a chasm between the academic

* Corresponding author: Özlem Khan. ORCID ID: <https://orcid.org/0000-0003-0547-0020>
E-mail address: ozlem.khan@gmail.com

knowledge acquired in university courses and the dynamic, real-world realities of teaching and learning in schools (Aykut-Kolay & Mirici, 2024; Korthagen, 2011; Ulferts, 2021). This disconnect often leaves novice teachers ill-equipped to apply theoretical understanding to authentic pedagogical situations, leading to difficulties and a sense of disconnection from their training (Jeram & Davids, 2020; Whitehead & Arslan, 2025). The imperative to bridge this gap through structured, reflective professional development is a widely acknowledged and critical priority in teacher education today (Li, 2025).

One of the most effective ways to address this divide is by fostering self-regulated learning (SRL) skills in pre-service teachers. SRL is a theoretical framework that defines learning as a cyclical process of planning, doing, and reflecting (Zimmerman, 1990, 2008). Self-regulated learners are proactive in their efforts to understand and self-reflect on their increasing effectiveness, which enhances their motivation to continue refining their learning methods. They are also active participants in their own learning, constructing knowledge rather than being passive recipients (Brenner, 2022).

The EPOSTL serves as a response to this critical need by functioning as a tool for “scaffolded reflection” and “mentored reflection” (Kasumagić-Kafedžić & Đuliman, 2024; Pegulescu, 2017; Schaubert, 2015). This aligns with the EPOSTL's design, which emphasizes that reflection is not merely an individual, contemplative act but a “dialogic, social role” that should involve dialogue between students, their educators, and their school-based mentors (Newby, 2012, p. 210). The use of EPOSTL can mimic the structured framework of SRL, lending itself to a cyclical process where pre-service teachers can set goals (forethought/planning), monitor their progress (performance/monitoring), and critically analyze their performance to identify areas for improvement (self-reflection/evaluation) (Cosido García, 2021). This process helps students become more proactive in their learning and fosters metacognitive skills—the ability to plan, monitor, and evaluate one's own learning—which are crucial for developing independent, lifelong learners. Ultimately, by integrating the principles of self-regulated learning into teacher education through tools like the EPOSTL, it is possible to better equip pre-service teachers to bridge the theory-practice divide and succeed in their professional careers.

1.2. The European Portfolio for Student Teachers of Languages (EPOSTL, 2007): A Tool for Bridging the Divide

In response to this critical need, particularly in language teacher education, and recognizing the compelling need for high-quality continuous professional learning in today's fast-moving world (Rodriguez-Gomez et al., 2024), the European Portfolio for Student Teachers of Languages (EPOSTL) was developed as a joint initiative of the Council of Europe and the European Centre for Modern Languages (ECML) (Newby, 2007b). Commissioned in 2004 and completed in December 2006 by an international

team of teacher educators, the EPOSTL is a structured document intended for students in their initial teacher education (Newby, 2007a) and designed to serve as a framework for professional growth. Its primary purpose is to encourage critical reflection on the didactic knowledge and skills required for effective language teaching, promote dialogue among student teachers and their educators, and facilitate systematic self-assessment of individual competencies. More specifically, its aims are to make didactic competences explicit and transparent, to promote discussion, to facilitate self-assessment, and to provide an instrument that helps chart progress (Newby, 2012, p. 208). It was designed to identify 'core competences' for teaching and embed them within a portfolio structure to help students reflect on their knowledge, skills, and values with the overarching goal of contributing to the 'harmonization' of teacher education in Europe (Newby, 2007b, p. 23).

A comprehensive analysis reveals that the EPOSTL is conceptualized as a “theory and practice-driven” tool that acts as a “delivery system of core pedagogical skills and knowledge” for pre-service teachers and their mentors (Aykut-Kolay & Mirici, 2024; Mirici et al., 2015; Velikova, 2013). This conceptualization of the EPOSTL as an active assessment mechanism, rather than a passive instrument, highlights its potential to shape the teacher learning process actively (Aykut-Kolay & Mirici, 2024). This underlying philosophy, which views teacher preparation as an organic process growing from dialogic reflection centered on constructive mentoring relationships (Cosido García, 2021), underpins its function as a “process tool” for continuous self-evaluation and sustained development (Mirici, 2019), thereby enhancing autonomous learning over time (Cosido García, 2021) in a functional, economic, and feasible way (Mirici & Hergüner, 2015, p. 1).

1.3. Statement of the Problem and Research Focus

Recognizing the need for greater insight into how the European Portfolio for Student Teachers of Languages (EPOSTL) is used in practice by conducting this study, the researchers aim to establish a long-term self-assessment behavior that will contribute to the future success of pre-service teachers in their vocation (Newby, 2007a, 2011)

Figure 1 provides a practical example of how this integration might occur within teacher education, illustrating Orlova's (2011, p. 28) cyclical model.

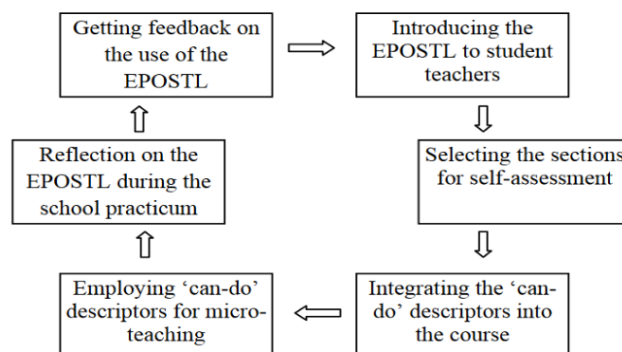


Figure 1. Integration of the EPOSTL into English Language Methodology Courses (Orlova, 2011, p.28).

Figure 1 presents an ideal framework for using the EPOSTL as a dynamic, reflective tool. However, the effectiveness of this entire cyclical process—from self-assessment to micro-teaching and reflection—hinges directly on the teacher trainees' willingness to engage with it. This is precisely why investigating their perceptions is so critical. If trainees perceive the EPOSTL as merely a bureaucratic hurdle, an irrelevant theoretical exercise, or overly complex, they are unlikely to engage authentically with the reflective cycle depicted in the figure. Their lack of conviction would render the model ineffective, regardless of how well-structured it is. Therefore, understanding their perceptions is essential for predicting the model's viability, identifying potential barriers to its adoption, and informing how the tool should be introduced to ensure trainees see its value and are motivated to use it to become the reflective practitioners the model aims to create.

Building on the theoretical frameworks and the existing literature, the following research questions are proposed to guide the analysis of the collected data.

RQ1: What are pre-service teachers' overall perceptions of the EPOSTL's purpose, benefits, and challenges in their teacher training?

RQ2: Is there a statistically significant difference in pre-service teachers' perceptions of the EPOSTL based on their university grade level?

RQ3: Is there a statistically significant difference in pre-service teachers' perceptions of the EPOSTL based on gender?

RQ4: How do pre-service teachers perceive the EPOSTL's role in fostering learner autonomy, reflection, and the development of specific language teaching skills?

RQ5: To what extent does the EPOSTL facilitate collaboration and communication between pre-service teachers and their lecturers/mentors?

RQ6: What are pre-service teachers' intentions regarding the future use of the EPOSTL in their professional careers, and what support materials and resources do they find most useful for its implementation?

2. Literature Review

2.1. *The Structure of the EPOSTL*

The EPOSTL document is structured into three main sections, a design which is loosely based on the European Language Portfolio (CoE, 2011) (Newby, 2012, 2007b). The first is a personal statement section designed to prompt initial reflection on general teaching-related questions at the beginning of a teacher's education. The second, and most extensive, is a self-assessment section containing lists of “can-do” descriptors that relate to specific didactic competencies, totaling 195 in the final version (Newby, 2007b). These descriptors are grouped into seven general categories, including Lesson Planning, Conducting a Lesson, Independent Learning, and Assessment of Learning.

While the EPOSTL adopts the “can-do” descriptor format from the Common European Framework of Reference (CEFR, 2001), it adapts its focus on language proficiency to the competencies required for language teaching. As Newby (2007b, p. 24) explains, the rationale was adapted: while the CEFR describes what language learners must do to communicate, the EPOSTL describes what language teachers must learn to do to teach communication effectively. A third, the dossier section, which allows students to document their progress and provide tangible evidence of their professional development (EPOSTL, 2007).

To emphasize the reflective nature of the portfolio, it can be stated that the “can-do” descriptors are the practical core of the portfolio, serving as a means to translate broad didactic competencies into specific, actionable statements that student teachers can reflect upon and work toward. These descriptors, such as “*I can vary and balance activities to include a variety of skills and competences*” (Lesson content B.2, p. 35) or “*I can create a supportive atmosphere that invites learners to take part in speaking activities,*” (Speaking/Spoken Interaction A.1, p. 21) convey “procedural know how” and establish a direct link between theoretical principles and tangible practice. The descriptors transform the abstract process of reflection into a concrete, scaffolded exercise. For a novice teacher, this provides a mental model and a shared vocabulary for reflection, which is crucial for bridging the theory-practice divide. This structured nature is a key reason for the EPOSTL's effectiveness, as it provides a common ground for students and mentors to discuss lesson planning and debriefing sessions.

2.2. *The Role of Self-Assessment*

Self-assessment is a core practice in professional development that empowers individuals to evaluate their own skills, strengths, weaknesses, and goals (Ross & Bruce, 2007; Benson, 2006). In teacher education, a self-assessment is a tool a teacher uses to measure their performance against their goals by answering questions about their teaching methods and their impact on student learning. The process involves critical reflection and honesty, with teachers using specific criteria to judge their own practice objectively. The EPOSTL's can-do descriptors serve this exact purpose, providing a structured framework for teachers to reflect on their didactic competencies. In the EPOSTL, this self-assessment is not numerical; rather, students mark their perceived competence on a simple, ungraded bar and add the date. This method provides a clear, visible record of progress over time (Newby, 2012). Self-assessment encourages self-awareness and accountability, enabling teachers to take ownership of their professional journey.

2.2.1. *Self-Assessment and Self-Regulated Learning (SRL)*

Self-regulated learning (SRL) is not a mental ability but rather the self-directive process by which learners actively transform their mental abilities into academic skills (Zimmerman, 2002). It is defined by ‘the self-generated thoughts, feelings, and behaviors that learners use to attain their personal goals’ (Zimmerman, 2002: 65).

This framework provides a powerful lens for understanding the EPOSTL's function. The EPOSTL facilitates this cyclical process in pre-service teachers through its structure:

- **Forethought/Planning:** Pre-service teachers can use the portfolio's descriptors to set clear, attainable goals for their lessons and overall professional development.
- **Performance/Monitoring:** As they teach, students can use the EPOSTL to monitor their progress and evaluate their performance.
- **Self-Reflection/Evaluation:** After a lesson or practicum, the EPOSTL provides a structured way for students to analyze their performance critically, judge how well they met their goals, and identify areas for improvement.

This cyclical process helps students become less reactive and more proactive in their learning, leading to improved performance and a greater sense of self-efficacy. The EPOSTL fosters these metacognitive skills—the ability to plan, monitor, and evaluate one's own learning—which are crucial for developing independent, lifelong learners.

The EPOSTL can be directly linked to the principles of self-regulated learning (SRL), as it guides pre-service teachers through a cyclical process of goal setting, self-monitoring, and reflection. In line with Zimmerman's (2002) SRL model, the EPOSTL encourages learners to engage in forethought by setting clear teaching goals using its

“can-do” descriptors, to engage in performance and monitoring through classroom application and observation, and to engage in self-reflection and evaluation by analyzing their progress and identifying areas for development. In doing so, the EPOSTL transforms reflection from an abstract concept into a structured, evidence-based process that promotes metacognitive awareness, self-efficacy, and professional autonomy. Moreover, as effective self-regulation requires guidance and modeling, the EPOSTL’s design for scaffolded, mentored reflection ensures that pre-service teachers receive the support they need to internalize reflective habits and sustain lifelong professional learning.

2.2.2. Coaching and Guidance

While self-assessment is an individual process, it is not an innate ability (Li, 2025). Instructors and mentors play a crucial role in guiding students to engage effectively in self-assessment. They can provide guidance, feedback, and model how to use assessment tools to strengthen metacognitive skills. This mentorship is essential for the EPOSTL to function as a tool for “scaffolded reflection” and “mentored-reflection” (Kasumagić-Kafedžić & Đuliman, 2024; Pegulescu, 2017), where mentors help students connect the portfolio’s descriptors to real-world teaching scenarios.

In sum, viewing the EPOSTL through the lens of self-assessment and self-regulated learning provides a robust framework for analyzing why and how pre-service teachers engage with the portfolio.

2.3. Empirical Research on the EPOSTL: A Thematic Review

Research investigating the implementation and impact of the EPOSTL has expanded considerably since its publication. A thematic analysis of this literature, which has progressed from initial pilot studies to in-depth investigations, reveals consistent findings across diverse national settings—from Turkey (Şentürk et al., 2024; Atay, 2007) and the Czech Republic (Orlova, 2011) to Albania (Hoxha & Tafani, 2015), Croatia (Bagarić, 2011; Cindrić et al., 2015), Romania (Pegulescu, 2017), and Japan (Takagi, 2015). A chronological timeline of the key EPOSTL research cited in this review, detailing each study’s authors, publication year, and primary focus, is presented in Table 1 in Appendix A.

2.3.1. Core Benefits: Fostering Reflection and Bridging the Theory-Practice Gap

The most consistently reported benefit of the EPOSTL is its role in fostering and structuring reflection and self-assessment. Pre-service teachers, often new to formal reflection, find the EPOSTL’s detailed descriptors provide a necessary “structure” (Mehlmauer-Larcher, 2011) or “guide” (Sasa, 2024; Çakır & Balçıkanlı, 2012) for this

complex process. Studies overwhelmingly report that the EPOSTL is effective in helping student teachers identify their specific strengths and weaknesses (Bergil & Sarıçoban, 2018; Seitova, 2018; Strakova, 2016; Takagi, 2015). This awareness moves students beyond “impressionistic” reflections (Orlova, 2011) or superficial descriptions (Papadopolou, 2020) toward a more analytical and critical stance on their own teaching.

Another primary theme is the EPOSTL's function as a bridge across the “theory-practice divide” (Mehlmauer-Larcher, 2011). The tool is often implemented within methodology courses (Okumuş & Akalın, 2015) or practicum tutorials (Shauber, 2015) to help students connect academic knowledge with classroom reality. The EPOSTL descriptors provide a “common framework” and “common language” that can be shared by student teachers, university lecturers, and school-based mentors (Ingvarsdóttir, 2011; Jones, 2011). This shared understanding facilitates more focused and productive “dialogic reflection” (Shauber, 2015; Velikova, 2013).

2.3.2. Impact on Teacher Efficacy and Autonomy

Several studies link the EPOSTL's use to the development of teacher self-efficacy and autonomy. Conceptually, the tool is seen as a way to foster the teacher autonomy necessary for promoting learner autonomy (Burkert & Schwienhorst, 2008; Pegulescu, 2017; Yüce, 2019b). The reflective process it encourages is reported to build confidence and a stronger sense of professional self-efficacy (Atay, 2007; Şentürk et al., 2024). This aligns with broader research showing that practical field experiences, such as those structured by the EPOSTL, are critical for enhancing pre-service teacher efficacy (Chiang, 2008; Şahin & Atay, 2010). However, the link may not always be statistically significant; Sasa (2024) found that while students qualitatively felt the EPOSTL fostered autonomy, this did not translate to a statistically significant quantitative change, possibly due to a lack of practical experience.

2.3.3. Common Implementation Challenges

Despite positive perceptions, the literature identifies significant and recurring challenges. A primary issue is that pre-service teachers with no prior teaching experience find it difficult to self-assess (Orlova, 2011; Sasa, 2024). This leads to the “*present vs. future*” paradox identified by Cindrić et al. (2015), where students find the tool “too demanding” in the present, rating its usefulness for their future careers much more highly than for their current pre-service studies. This gap suggests that student perceptions of the tool may not be linear, with novice students (who focus on the future) and experienced students (who have completed their practicum) potentially holding more positive views than those in the middle of their training.

Another major challenge is the sheer size of the EPOSTL, with its 195 descriptors. Students can feel “overwhelmed” (Nihlén, 2011), and both students and practicing teachers often describe it as “time-consuming” or “lengthy” (Dropulja, 2015; Önal, 2017). This can lead to superficial “checklist” use or trainees seeing it as just another “administrative task” if its reflective purpose is not properly scaffolded (Strakova, 2016). Finally, a critical barrier to success is the lack of mentor “buy-in”. School-based mentors are often unfamiliar with the EPOSTL, untrained in its use, or unwilling to adopt it, preferring their own methods (Fenner, 2011; Hoxha & Tafani, 2015; Ingvarsdóttir, 2011).

2.4. Methodological Trends and Key Findings in EPOSTL Research

The research on the EPOSTL is methodologically diverse and has produced findings that can be classified into several key categories.

2.4.1. Research Designs, Questions, and Participants

A large portion of the literature employs a mixed-methods design (e.g., Bergil & Sarıçoban, 2018; Chacón, 2005; Chiang, 2008; Cindrić et al., 2015; Mehlmauer-Larcher, 2011; Mirici & Hergüner, 2015; Sasa, 2024; Yümsek, 2014). Alongside this, qualitative case studies are prevalent, often taking the form of “action research” (Orlova, 2011; Papadopoulou, 2020) or “reflective practice reports” (Nihlén, 2011; Velikova, 2013).

When explicit research questions are posed, they most frequently investigate student teachers' views, perceptions, and attitudes toward the EPOSTL (e.g., Çakır & Balçıkanlı, 2012; Hoxha & Tafani, 2015; Okumuş & Akalın, 2015; Şentürk et al., 2024). A second common category uses pre/post-test designs to measure the EPOSTL's effect on a specific construct, such as “self-evaluation” (Seitova, 2018), “teaching autonomy” (Sasa, 2024), or “needs” and “gains” (Bergil & Sarıçoban, 2018).

The participant pool is heavily concentrated on pre-service (student) teachers (e.g., Mehlmauer-Larcher, 2011; Orlova, 2011; Strakova, 2016), most frequently from English Language Teaching (ELT) programs (Bergil & Sarıçoban, 2018; Ogeyik, 2009; Şentürk et al., 2024).

2.4.2. Classification of Research Findings

The findings from the EPOSTL literature can be broadly classified:

1. **Perceptual Findings:** This is the most extensive body of findings. Overwhelmingly, studies conclude that participants hold positive views of the EPOSTL, finding it “useful,” “beneficial,” and “motivating” (Mehlmauer-Larcher, 2011; Şentürk et al., 2024; Yümsek, 2014).

2. **Diagnostic Findings:** This category consists of research where the EPOSTL is used to identify specific strengths and, more often, weaknesses in pre-service teachers' competencies. Commonly identified weak areas include “Assessment of Learning” (Bagarić, 2011; Seitova, 2018), “Classroom Management” (Chiang, 2008), and teaching specific skills like “Culture” (Nicolás Martínez et al., 2021). An important finding here is the “illusion of confidence,” where students' high quantitative self-ratings are contradicted by a qualitative lack of conceptual understanding (Arikan & Zorba, 2016).

3. **Developmental Findings:** These findings seek to track change in students over time, including longitudinal studies showing statistically significant improvement in self-perceived competence after using the EPOSTL (Bagarić, 2011; Yümsek, 2014) and qualitative reports of reflection becoming deeper and less superficial (Papadopoulou, 2020; Osaki, 2024).

4. **Institutional Findings:** This highlights the EPOSTL's utility as a program evaluation tool. Bagarić (2011) provides a key example, using quantitative data from student self-assessments to identify systemic weaknesses in the university's teacher education curriculum. The finding that students rated themselves low on “Assessment of Learning” and “Grammar” led directly to curricular changes, demonstrating the EPOSTL's power as a diagnostic tool for program improvement.

2.4.3. Specific Contexts and Adaptations

Research has also explored the EPOSTL in various specific contexts. This includes its adaptation into the J-POSTL in Japan, which has been studied for its role in promoting reflection during microteaching (Kiyota, 2015; Osaki, 2024;) and team-teaching practicums (Yoneda, 2015). Studies have also focused on specific sections of the portfolio, such as the Dossier (Nihlén, 2011) or its descriptors for Culture (Nicolás Martínez et al., 2021). The EPOSTL framework has also been evaluated for new audiences, such as generalist primary teachers (Dhiorbháin, 2019) and in-service teachers (Önal, 2017; Önal & Alagözlü, 2018). To address usability challenges, a key development has been the suggestion to create a digital “E-EPOSTL” (Mirici, 2019; Mirici & Hergüner, 2015).

3. Methodology

3.1. Research Design and Instrument

This study employed a sequential mixed-methods approach, utilizing a researcher-made questionnaire (EPOSTL Student Perception Questionnaire (ESPQ), which is available in Appendix B) to collect quantitative data on pre-service teachers' self-perceptions and attitudes toward the EPOSTL, followed by open-ended qualitative questions to elicit deeper explanatory insights. The quantitative section consisted of a 10-

item Likert-scale component that measured participants' perceptions and self-reported understanding of the EPOSTL's structure, purpose, and application. The qualitative section included five open-ended questions designed to capture students' specific strengths, areas for development, and steps for improvement.

3.1.1. Pilot Study and Instrument Validation

Before its official administration, the ESPQ underwent a crucial pilot study to ensure the clarity, comprehensibility, and reliability of the items. The instrument was first distributed to a convenience sample of 39 pre-service teachers enrolled in the English Language Teaching (ELT) Department at a major university in Turkey. This sample included students from various university grade levels, ranging from freshmen to seniors, ensuring the instrument's relevance and readability across different stages of the teacher education program.

The primary objectives of the pilot study were to:

1. Identify any ambiguous or confusing language in both the Likert-scale statements and the open-ended questions.
2. Perform an initial assessment of the instrument's internal consistency (reliability) and construct validity.

3.1.2. Statistical Results of the Pilot Study

The results of the pilot study confirmed the ESPQ's suitability and robust statistical properties.

Reliability Analysis: The internal consistency of the 10-item scale was assessed using Cronbach's Alpha. The analysis yielded a very high coefficient of $\alpha=0.932$. As this value is significantly above the conventional threshold of 0.70, the instrument was deemed highly reliable.

Construct Validity (Factor Analysis): A factor analysis was performed to examine the underlying factor structure of the 10-item scale. All ten items demonstrated statistically significant factor loadings onto a single latent factor (Factor 1), with estimates ranging from 0.425 (Q2) to 1.108 (Q4), all with $p<.001$. This single-factor structure suggests that the questionnaire measures a coherent, single construct related to the pre-service teachers' self-perception of EPOSTL knowledge.

Based on these favorable results for both reliability and construct validity, no significant revisions to the questionnaire were necessary, with minor wording changes, confirming its suitability for the main study.

3.2. Participants and Data Collection

The main study sample consisted of 166 pre-service teachers recruited from the English Language Teaching (ELT) Department at the same university. Participants were selected to ensure representation across all university grade levels and gender (which were collected as demographic variables).

Data were collected using an online survey methodology via *Google Forms*, conducted in two distinct stages to maximize data quality for both the quantitative and qualitative sections:

1. Stage 1 (Quantitative Data): The 10-item Likert-scale component of the ESPQ was administered first to all 167 participants. This component collected the core self-perception data, along with the demographic information (gender and grade level).
2. Stage 2 (Qualitative Data): The five open-ended reflection questions were administered to the same group of participants approximately one day after the completion of Stage 1, also via *Google Forms*. This separation was implemented to encourage deeper, more thoughtful reflective responses, avoiding response fatigue that can occur when mixing Likert-scale and intensive open-ended items in a single sitting.

3.3. Data Analysis

The collected data were subjected to both quantitative and qualitative analysis procedures.

3.3.1. Quantitative Data Analysis

The Likert-scale data (Q1-Q10) were analyzed using descriptive and inferential statistics via the *Jamovi* (version 2.6) software package. Descriptive Statistics (means, standard deviations) were calculated for all items to address the primary, non-comparative objectives of the study, which include Research Questions 1, 4, 5, and 6. The reliability coefficient is also calculated.

To address the comparative objectives of the study, inferential statistics were employed:

Research Question 2 (Grade Level): One-Way Analysis of Variance (ANOVA) was utilized to determine if there were statistically significant differences in the mean perceptions of participants across the various university grade levels.

Research Question 3 (Gender): Independent Samples T-tests were conducted to examine if there were statistically significant differences in the mean perceptions between male and female participants.

3.3.2 Qualitative Data Analysis

The qualitative responses from the five open-ended reflection questions were analyzed using Thematic Analysis. The primary goal of the qualitative analysis was to provide context and elaboration for the quantitative findings, following the sequential mixed-methods design to formally establish and explore the linkage between the qualitative and quantitative findings.

4. Findings

This section presents the study's key findings, organized according to the six research questions guiding the investigation. The results provide a comprehensive picture of how pre-service English language teachers perceive and engage with the EPOSTL within their teacher education context.

4.1. Quantitative findings

RQ 1: What are pre-service teachers' overall perceptions of the EPOSTL's purpose, benefits, and challenges in their teacher training?

The first research question found that pre-service teachers hold a “moderately positive” overall perception of the EPOSTL, with mean scores for all items ranging from 3.04 to 3.79 on a 5-point scale. This quantitative finding, however, revealed a clear “perception-practice gap” that was strongly mirrored in the qualitative data. Participants' positive perceptions were linked to a conceptual “buy-in,” with high scores on items like “potential benefits” ($M = 3.79$) and “learner autonomy and reflection” ($M = 3.78$). It is important to note that the instrument demonstrated high internal consistency, as shown in Table 3. The Cronbach's alpha coefficient was 0.93, indicating excellent reliability across the ten items of the questionnaire. This suggests that the scale consistently measures a coherent construct — in this case, pre-service teachers' perceptions of the EPOSTL. The standard deviation for the scale ($SD = 0.871$) further supports the conclusion that the responses were relatively homogeneous, with limited variability across participants.

RQ2 asks “Is there a statistically significant difference in pre-service teachers' perceptions of the EPOSTL based on their university grade level?”

To explore whether students' perceptions of the EPOSTL varied by year of study, a one-way ANOVA was conducted using the total perception scores of four grade levels (first, second, third, and fourth-year students).

Table 1. Descriptive Statistics for Total Scores by Grade Level

	Grade	N	Mean	SD	SE
Total Score	1	26	3.75	0.631	0.124
	2	25	3.15	0.855	0.171
	3	67	3.38	0.921	0.112
	4	48	3.84	0.811	0.117

As shown in Table 1, fourth-year students reported the highest overall mean score ($M = 3.84$, $SD = 0.81$), indicating the most positive perceptions of the EPOSTL. First-year students reported the highest perceptions ($M = 3.75$, $SD = 0.63$), whereas second-year students reported the lowest perceptions ($M = 3.15$, $SD = 0.85$). Third-year students' mean score ($M = 3.38$, $SD = 0.92$) fell between these two groups, suggesting that appreciation of the EPOSTL increases with progression through the program, peaking in the final year. Before interpreting the ANOVA results, the assumption of homogeneity of variances was tested and met, as indicated by Levene's Test ($F(3,162) = 1.66$, $p = .177$). This confirmed that the variance among groups was sufficiently equal to proceed with the ANOVA.

The one-way ANOVA results demonstrated a statistically significant effect of grade level on total perception scores, $F(3, 70.5) = 5.29$, $p = .002$, indicating that pre-service teachers' overall perceptions of the EPOSTL differed according to their year of study.

Post hoc comparisons using Tukey's HSD test (see Table 5) revealed that second-year ($p = .006$) and third-year ($p = .022$) students had significantly lower perception scores than fourth-year students. However, there was no significant difference between first-year and fourth-year participants ($p = .968$). These findings indicate that while perceptions improve steadily across the program, they are comparably strong at both the entry and exit points of teacher education.

Detailed one-way ANOVA results for each individual questionnaire item are presented in Table 6 in Appendix C. These analyses examined whether perceptions of the EPOSTL differed significantly across grade levels, item by item. As summarized, statistically significant differences emerged for Items 1, 2, 3, 5, 6, 9, and 10, indicating that students' understanding of the EPOSTL's purpose, reflective function, pedagogical value, and implementation challenges varied according to their year of study. In each case, fourth-year students reported higher mean scores than those in lower years, particularly when describing the EPOSTL's structure, benefits, and supporting

resources. By contrast, sophomore students consistently obtained the lowest scores, suggesting lower engagement and limited familiarity with reflective and self-assessment practices at this stage of training. No significant grade-level differences were found for Items 4, 7, and 8, indicating broadly similar perceptions across cohorts regarding the EPOSTL's benefits for collaboration and future professional use.

RQ 3: Is there a statistically significant difference in pre-service teachers' perceptions of the EPOSTL based on gender?

To examine whether gender influences pre-service teachers' perceptions of the EPOSTL, independent-sample t-tests were conducted on both total perception scores and individual questionnaire items.

As shown in Table 2, female participants (N = 110) reported higher overall mean perception scores (M = 3.64, SD = 0.82, SE = 0.078) than male participants (N = 56, M = 3.33, SD = 0.94, SE = 0.126). An independent samples t-test confirmed that this difference was statistically significant, $t(164) = 2.19$, $p = .030$. Welch's t-test, which adjusts for unequal variances, yielded consistent results: $t(97.9) = 2.09$, $p = .039$, reinforcing the robustness of the finding (see table 8). These results indicate that female pre-service teachers hold significantly more positive overall perceptions of the EPOSTL than their male counterparts.

Table 2. Descriptive Statistics for Total EPOSTL Perception Scores by Gender

	Group	N	Mean	Median	SD	SE
Total Score	Female	110	3.64	3.70	0.817	0.0779
	Male	56	3.33	3.40	0.943	0.126

Table 3. Independent Samples T-Test of X questionnaire.

		Statistic	Df	P
Total Score	Student's t	2.19	164	0.030
	Welch's t	2.09	97.9	0.039

Note. $H_a: \mu_{\text{Female}} \neq \mu_{\text{Male}}$

At the item level significant gender differences were found for Items 3, 4, 5, and 6 ($p < .05$), all favoring female participants. These items correspond to statements addressing the EPOSTL's role in promoting reflection and learner autonomy (Item 3), highlighting pedagogical benefits (Item 4), developing teaching skills (Item 5), and monitoring learner progress (Item 6). No significant differences were found for the remaining items ($p > .05$), indicating that while both groups share similar understandings of the EPOSTL's purpose and structure, females tend to place greater value on its reflective and developmental dimensions.

RQ4: How do pre-service teachers perceive the EPOSTL's role in fostering learner autonomy, reflection, and the development of specific language teaching skills?

To address this question, descriptive statistics were analyzed for questionnaire items focusing on the EPOSTL's role in reflection, learner autonomy, and professional skill development. These correspond to Items 3, 5, and 6 of the instruments.

As displayed in Table 2 (Descriptive Statistics of ESPQ), participants expressed moderately positive perceptions of the EPOSTL in these areas. The highest mean score was observed for "I can describe how the EPOSTL promotes learner autonomy and reflection" ($M = 3.78$, $SD = 1.15$, $SE = 0.089^*$), followed by "I can explain how the EPOSTL can help pre-service teachers develop their language teaching skills" ($M = 3.67$, $SD = 1.11$, $SE = 0.086^*$) and "I can identify ways in which the EPOSTL can be used to assess and monitor student progress" ($M = 3.67$, $SD = 1.11$, $SE = 0.086^*$). These results suggest that while participants generally value the EPOSTL as a reflective and developmental tool, their confidence in applying it for assessment purposes remains moderate.

RQ 5: To what extent does the EPOSTL facilitate collaboration and communication between pre-service teachers and their lecturers or mentors?

This research question was explored through descriptive statistics for the item addressing the EPOSTL's collaborative dimension (Item 7: "I can discuss how the EPOSTL can facilitate collaboration and communication between my lecturers/teachers and me."). Participants reported moderately positive perceptions of the EPOSTL's capacity to enhance collaboration and dialogue between students and teacher educators. The mean score for this item was $M = 3.61$ ($SD = 0.93$, $SE = 0.072^*$), suggesting that while students recognize the EPOSTL's potential for communication and mentoring, their experiences with active collaboration may still be somewhat limited.

RQ 6: What are pre-service teachers' intentions regarding the future use of the EPOSTL in their professional careers, and what support materials and resources do they find most useful for its implementation?

This question aimed to explore participants' views about the sustainability of EPOSTL use beyond their teacher education program and their perceptions of available or desired support resources. Two questionnaire items addressed this domain:

- Item 8: "I can explain how I would use the EPOSTL in my future teaching career."
- Item 9: "I can identify resources and support materials that can help me implement the EPOSTL effectively."

As shown in Table 2, pre-service teachers expressed moderately positive intentions to use the EPOSTL in their future careers ($M = 3.40$, $SD = 1.17$). However, their confidence in identifying support resources and materials for implementation was notably lower ($M = 3.04$, $SD = 1.12$), suggesting limited familiarity with available tools and institutional supports.

Regarding the EPOSTL's function as a collaborative tool (Item 7), participants' perceptions were "moderately positive," with a mean score of 3.61 ($SD = 0.93$). This finding suggests that while students generally recognize the EPOSTL's potential to facilitate dialogue, their active, practical collaborative experiences utilizing the tool may be limited.

4.2. Results of the Qualitative Data Analysis

4.2.1. Qualitative Data Source

The qualitative data were gathered from responses to five open-ended questions:

1. Specify and explain the items for which you felt not competent enough.
2. What are the ways you can use to make yourself more competent?
3. What are your strengths in terms of EPOSTL knowledge?
4. What areas do you need to develop further in your use of EPOSTL?
5. What steps can you take to improve your understanding and use of EPOSTL?

Table 4. Themes derived from the open-ended questionnaire responses

Theme	Number of Positively Coded Answers	Number of Negatively Coded Answers	Total
1. Knowledge/Skill Level	1	31	32
1A. Full Understanding of EPOSTL	12	56	68
1B. Partial Understanding of EPOSTL	56	42	98
1C. Teaching Skills	24	76	100
1D. Practical Experience	5	17	22

1E. Language Competence	5	24	29
1F. Using Resources	5	26	31
2. Self-Efficacy / Confidence	16	7	23
3. Problem-Solving Approach	99	1	100
3A. Solving Problems with Resources	74	-	74
3B. Solving Problems with People	74	1	75
4. Career Motivation & Growth	64	16	80
5. Attitude Toward EPOSTL	2	20	22
6. Other / Unclear Response	76	-	76

4.2.2. Overview of Thematic Findings

The thematic analysis of students uncovered a wide range of insights into their comprehension, reflection, and engagement with the EPOSTL. Fourteen distinct yet interrelated codes were identified, showing various aspects of the pre-service teachers' awareness and development. This coding framework was intentionally designed to capture the nature of each comment by assigning a positive (+) or negative (-) indicator to each code. This approach enabled a balanced interpretation of both positive and negative comments, ensuring that the study would concentrate on conceptual topics rather than subjective assessments.

The majority of the replies were focused on “Teaching Skills,” “Problem-Solving Approach,” and “Partial Understanding of EPOSTL,” indicating that students frequently reflected on their teaching competency, awareness of pedagogical improvement, and strategies for addressing their learning obstacles regarding EPOSTL. High frequencies in “Career Motivation & Growth” also demonstrated that students are strongly committed to their professional development and ongoing improvement as language teachers. Categories such as “Full Understanding of EPOSTL” and “Self-Efficacy / Confidence” showed growing awareness and self-belief, though some responses still conveyed uncertainty about successfully implementing EPOSTL in practice. The other codes such as “Attitude Toward EPOSTL”, “Language Competence”, and “Practical Experience” showed that fewer students focused on linguistic proficiency, real teaching experience, or mixed attitudes toward the portfolio itself. Lastly, the “Other / Unclear Response” category included general or ambiguous responses that demonstrated participation in the self-assessment process but had no direct connection to the usage of EPOSTL or teacher competency.

The detailed thematic analysis revealed a complex spectrum of engagement, moving from a Full Understanding (Theme 2) of the tool's goals to a more common Partial Understanding (Theme 3). This was reflected in a mixed Attitude (Theme 13), with one participant admitting, “*I don't really get the meaning of having a book-structured*

portfolio, and I don't have a clear idea how it will actually benefit me". Others felt they needed *"to study more about technical parts... considering that I struggle a little in explaining and clarifying certain terms"*. This uncertainty impacted perceptions of Teaching Skills (Theme 4), with one student feeling *"less competent in areas such as classroom management, adapting materials... and assessing students' progress effectively"*. While the process boosted Self-Efficacy (Theme 8) for some, participants consistently identified two significant barriers: a lack of Practical Experience (Theme 5), as one noted, *"As I am still a student, I can not be sure whether my critical approach... would be good"*, and a widespread difficulty in Using Resources (Theme 7), confirmed by the direct statement, *"I need to develop in identifying resources and support materials"*.

Despite these practical challenges, participants were highly proactive, driven by a strong sense of Career Motivation & Growth (Theme 12). One student saw their strength as *"...knowing that using EPOSTL will help me be more aware of my own learning... which is crucial in my career"*. This translated into a robust Problem-Solving Approach (Theme 9), with participants creating concrete action plans, such as, *"I need to create a routine to check and improve my EPOSTL periodically"*. These plans involved both Solving Problems with Resources (Theme 10), with strategies like *"I could read some research papers and I found a video... I will watch it"*, and Solving Problems with People (Theme 11), by *"asking for my professor's or my friends' help"* or *"ask[ing] my mentors"*. A final Other & Unclear (Theme 14) category captured non-substantive responses like *"I don't know"*.

4.2.3. *Synthesis of Quantitative and Qualitative Findings*

The findings reveal a significant "perception-practice gap," which links the quantitative data on perceived weaknesses (Q9, Q10) to the qualitative analysis of Q11 and Q14. Quantitatively, participants reported their lowest confidence in practical, implementation-focused items: Q9 (*"I can identify resources and support materials,"* M=3.04) and Q10 (*"I can discuss the potential challenges,"* M=3.27). This statistical gap is explained by the qualitative themes "Partial Understanding of EPOSTL" (98 total responses) and "Using Resources" (26 negative responses). Participants' qualitative statements confirmed they "need to develop in identifying resources and support materials" and still "struggle a little in explaining and clarifying certain terms," providing a clear rationale for their low quantitative scores in these practical domains.

Conversely, participants' perceived strengths (Q13) map directly onto the highest-scoring quantitative items, which were all conceptual. The highest Likert-scale scores were for Q4 (*"Potential benefits,"* M=3.79), Q3 (*"Promotes learner autonomy and reflection,"* M=3.78), and Q1 (*"Purpose and overall structure,"* M=3.74). The qualitative "Career Motivation & Growth" theme (64 positive responses) explains *why* these scores were high. Participants' "strengths" were not technical skills but their conceptual "buy-

in.” As one participant stated, their strength was “*knowing that using EPOSTL will help me be more aware of my own learning... which is crucial in my career*”. This demonstrates that participants' confidence is rooted in the EPOSTL's philosophical value rather than its practical application.

Finally, the analysis of future improvement (Q12, Q15) provides a clear action plan that triangulates with the quantitative data on reflection (Q3), collaboration (Q7), and future use (Q8). The “Problem-Solving Approach” theme was almost universally positive (99 positive responses) and was primarily composed of two sub-themes: “Solving Problems with People” (74 positive) and “Solving Problems with Resources” (74 positive). These qualitative themes give concrete meaning to the moderate quantitative scores for Q7 (“Collaboration,” $M=3.55$) and Q8 (“Future use,” $M=3.40$). Participants' explicit plans to “*ask... my professor's or my friends' help*” and “*read some research papers*” show they view collaboration and autonomous research as the primary strategies to bridge the “perception-practice gap”.

5. Discussion

The findings of this study, when analyzed through the theoretical lens of Self-Regulated Learning (SRL) (Zimmerman, 2002), provide a nuanced understanding of pre-service teachers' perceptions of the EPOSTL. The results confirm several key themes prevalent in the existing literature while also identifying a novel variable for future research.

5.1. Overall Alignment with Existing Research

The study's findings are broadly consistent with, and serve to substantiate, a significant body of existing research on the EPOSTL's implementation. The first key finding, the “perception-practice gap,” confirms the persistent disconnect between the tool's theoretical value and its practical application, a central theme in the literature (e.g., Dropulja, 2015; Orlova, 2011; Strakova, 2016). The second finding, the “experience-value gap,” provides empirical support for the widely-held conclusion that the EPOSTL's value is contingent upon practical experience, aligning directly with research that identifies a “usefulness gap” between early-stage students and those with practicum experience (e.g., Cindrić et al., 2015; Orlova, 2011; Sasa, 2024) and those who frame it as a tool for use *during* the practicum (e.g., Mehlmauer-Larcher, 2011; Papadopoulou, 2020). Finally, the third finding regarding gender differences is identified as a novel contribution, as this variable has not been the focus of prior studies in the provided literature.

Each finding is discussed in greater detail below, first by aligning it with these specific studies and then by interpreting it through the SRL framework.

5.2. Finding 1: The Perception-Practice Gap

This study's primary finding is a “perception-practice gap,” wherein participants demonstrated a strong appreciation for the EPOSTL's reflective purpose but expressed low confidence in its practical implementation. This is evidenced by high mean scores on items related to reflective and developmental benefits (Q3, Q4) coexisting with low scores on practical application (Q9, Q10).

This disconnect is a dominant theme in the EPOSTL literature, mirroring the “responsibility gap” identified by Strakova (2016), who noted that students held positive attitudes but demonstrated low autonomous use. This challenge with practical implementation is echoed in studies that identify the EPOSTL as prohibitively “time-consuming” (Dropulja, 2015; Önal, 2017) and in research highlighting specific “probable challenges” in its integration (Arikan, 2016; Orlova, 2011). Furthermore, the gap is compounded by a critical lack of mentor buy-in (Ingvarsdóttir, 2011), which removes a key support structure. The significant, multi-country push to create a digital “E-EPOSTL” (Mirici, 2019) can be seen as an implicit acknowledgment of these persistent usability and implementation challenges.

Theoretically, this gap can be interpreted as a critical breakdown within Zimmerman's (2002) SRL cycle. Participants' high scores show they value the Self-Reflection phase. However, their low confidence in implementation (Q9, Q10) suggests they feel ill-equipped to *execute* the Performance/Monitoring phase. The EPOSTL is intended to be the “scaffolded reflection” (Kasumagić-Kafedžić & Đuliman, 2024) that connects these phases. But if that scaffold is perceived as too time-consuming or lacks the “mentored reflection” (Schauber, 2015) that comes from mentor support, the cycle halts. This leaves students with positive intentions (valuing reflection) but no clear process (executing monitoring), perfectly capturing the “perception-practice gap.”

5.3. Finding 2: The Experience-Value Gap

The second key finding is a case of an “experience-value gap”: 2nd-year students perceive the tool as abstract and demanding, while 4th-year students, post-practicum, hold the most positive perceptions. This finding strongly illustrates *why* the EPOSTL's value is contingent on practical experience.

This result directly substantiates the work of Cindrić et al. (2015), who identified a significant “gap between low perceived present usefulness and high perceived future usefulness.” This maps perfectly onto this paper's findings of a 2nd-year slump (low present value) followed by a 4th-year peak (high future/practical value). The literature provides a broad consensus that the EPOSTL's value is unlocked *by* practical experience. This is precisely why it is so often framed as a tool for reflection *during* a practicum tutorial (Mehlmauer-Larcher, 2011), *during* teaching practice (Hoxha & Tafani, 2015), to

measure self-efficacy *during* the practicum (Atay, 2007), or to promote reflection *during* the practicum (Papadopoulou, 2020). The low scores of the 2nd-year students in this study are a direct reflection of the difficulty of self-assessment without practical experience, a challenge previously identified by both Orlova (2011) and Sasa (2024).

A particularly noteworthy finding from the grade-level analysis (RQ2) was not just the 'sophomore slump', but the fact that 1st-year students ($M = 3.75$) reported perceptions as high as 4th-year students ($M = 3.84$), with no statistically significant difference between these two groups. This seemingly contradictory result—where novices and experienced seniors share a positive view, while 2nd-year students are significantly more negative—can be illuminated by the 'present vs. future' paradox identified in the EPOSTL literature.

Cindrić et al. (2015) found a significant “gap between low perceived *present* usefulness and high perceived *future* usefulness”. Our data appears to capture this paradox in action:

- 1st-Year Students: As novices, their perceptions are likely based on EPOSTL's conceptual value and its high *future* usefulness. They appreciate its theoretical promise for their future careers but have not yet encountered the practical difficulties of its implementation.
- 2nd-Year Students: This group is experiencing low *present* usefulness. As noted in our discussion, they find the tool “abstract and demanding” and, lacking practicum experience, they struggle with self-assessment, causing their perceptions to drop.
- 4th-Year Students: This post-practicum group has successfully bridged the gap between theory and practice. Their practical experience has confirmed the tool's value, aligning its *present* usefulness with the high *future* usefulness that the 1st-year students also perceive. Thus, the high scores of freshmen and seniors are not contradictory; rather, they represent two different kinds of positive perception—one based on promise and the other on proven practice.

Viewed through the SRL framework, this finding is a powerful illustration of the EPOSTL's dependence on the complete cycle. Zimmerman (2002) defines SRL not as an abstract ability but as a *process* of turning mental abilities into practical *skills*. The 2nd-year students, lacking the practical teaching experience of a practicum, are being asked to engage in Self-Reflection (the open-ended questions in this study) without a corresponding Performance to evaluate. Conversely, the 4th-year students' peak in positive perceptions reflects their engagement in the full cycle. Having had a “Performance” (their practicum), they can now use the EPOSTL's “can-do” descriptors as a concrete tool for Self-Judgment and Causal Attribution (the goals of the study's open-ended questions), effectively completing the cycle and finding immense value in the process.

5.4. Finding 3: The Gender Difference

Finally, this study's third key finding—that female participants hold significantly more positive perceptions of the EPOSTL's reflective functions than their male counterparts (Q3-Q6)—is confirmed as a novel contribution relative to the provided literature. A comprehensive review of the provided studies reveals a thorough investigation of numerous variables, including pre-service teachers' self-efficacy (Atay, 2007; Chacón, 2005;), the development of teacher autonomy (Burkert & Schwienhorst, 2008; Sasa, 2024), the tool's use in program evaluation (Bagarić, 2011), and the deepening of reflective skills (Osaki, 2024; Papadopoulou, 2020). However, none of this research explicitly includes gender as a primary variable. This finding, therefore, has direct theoretical implications. The significantly higher scores from female participants on items related to reflection, autonomy, and skill development may indicate a difference in predisposition toward or appreciation for the metacognitive processes of Self-Evaluation that the EPOSTL scaffolds. This suggests that factors influencing a student's engagement with the SRL cycle may be more varied than previously assumed in the EPOSTL literature, presenting a new and unexamined avenue for research.

6. Conclusion

6.1. Pedagogical Implications

The findings of this investigation, particularly the “perception-practice gap” and the “experience-value gap”, offer several direct and actionable pedagogical implications for teacher education programs seeking to maximize the effectiveness of the EPOSTL. The data suggest that the portfolio's value is not inherent but is, instead, highly contingent upon the specific strategies used for its implementation.

6.1.1. Addressing the “Perception-Practice Gap” with Explicit Scaffolding and Mentor Training

The finding that pre-service teachers value the EPOSTL's reflective purpose (high scores on Q3, Q4) but lack confidence in its practical application (low scores on Q9, Q10) is a critical pedagogical signal. This gap aligns with existing research identifying the EPOSTL as “time-consuming” or an “administrative task” if its purpose is not clear. It implies that simply providing the EPOSTL is insufficient.

- For Teacher Educators: Programs must move beyond merely introducing the EPOSTL as a document. Educators should actively and repeatedly *model* its use. This includes “think-aloud” protocols demonstrating how to connect a “can-do” descriptor to a specific lesson planning objective, followed by a post-lesson reflection on that single descriptor. This explicit

scaffolding is necessary to provide the “mentored reflection” needed to bridge the gap between valuing reflection and possessing the skills to perform it.

- For Program Coordinators: The literature reviewed and the low confidence scores in this study underscore the need for formal mentor training. School-based mentors are a critical link in the reflective cycle, but are often “unfamiliar with the EPOSTL” or “unwilling to adopt it”. Studies from Iceland (Ingvarsdóttir, 2011), Norway (Fenner, 2011), and Albania (Hoxha & Tafani, 2015) all highlight this challenge. Programs should provide mentors with concise guides or workshops on how to use the EPOSTL's descriptors as a “common language” for observation and feedback, transforming it from a “superficial checklist” (Strakova, 2016) into the “dialogic, social” tool it was designed to be (Newby, 2012).

6.1.2. Phased Implementation of the EPOSTL

The pattern identified in the present study—where first- and second-year students reported the lowest perceptions of the value of the EPOSTL, while fourth-year students reported the highest—suggests that the value of professional development tools is not immediately apparent to novice teacher candidates. These findings suggest that students may need sufficient pedagogical knowledge, classroom experience, and professional maturity before they can fully appreciate its relevance and benefits. This interpretation is consistent with previous research showing that students with limited or no teaching experience often find it difficult to engage meaningfully in self-assessment and reflection (Orlova, 2011; Sasa, 2024), and that the perceived usefulness of professional development frameworks tends to increase as teacher candidates gain practical experience (Cindrić et al., 2015). In the present study, first- and second-year students—whose programs primarily focus on foundational theoretical knowledge and who have had little opportunity to connect these concepts to authentic teaching contexts—reported significantly lower perceptions than fourth-year students, who had completed extensive school-based experiences. This suggests that the appreciation of developmental tools such as the EPOSTL evolves gradually throughout their teacher education. While novice students may recognize the tool's potential future value, they often lack the experiential basis needed to understand its practical significance. As students progress through their programs and encounter the complexities of teaching firsthand, the EPOSTL becomes more meaningful as a framework for reflection, self-assessment, and professional growth.

This finding strongly reinforces the pedagogical need for a 'phased implementation'. The pedagogical implication is that the tool should not be introduced as a single, overwhelming document in the early years.

- A Phased Approach: We recommend a “staged” implementation.
- Years 1-2 (Methodology Courses): Introduce a *curated subset* of EPOSTL descriptors that align directly with methodology courses (Okumuş & Akalın, 2015) or micro-teaching assignments (as in Orlova's 2011 model). This allows students to build familiarity and see the tool's relevance in a controlled, low-stakes environment, preventing them from feeling “overwhelmed” (Nihlén, 2011).
- Years 3-4 (Practicum): Deploy the *full* EPOSTL as the central, structured tool for self-assessment and mentor dialogue during the practicum. By this stage, students have the practical experience necessary to find the descriptors meaningful, transforming the EPOSTL from an abstract “theory” tool into a practical “reality” tool, as suggested by its use in practicum tutorials (Shauber, 2015; Mehlmauer-Larcher, 2011).

6.1.3. *Acknowledging and Investigating the Gender-Based Perceptual Difference*

The novel finding that female participants held significantly more positive perceptions of the EPOSTL's reflective and developmental functions (Q3-Q6) warrants pedagogical consideration. While this study does not explain why this difference exists, educators should be mindful of it. It may be necessary to diversify the “framing” of EPOSTL's benefits. For students who may be less inclined toward its introspective aspects, educators could explicitly frame the EPOSTL as a pragmatic, analytical tool for problem-solving and enhancing professional efficacy, in addition to its role in “scaffolded reflection” (Kasumagić-Kafedžić & Đuliman, 2024).

6.2. *Limitations and Future Research*

While this study provides valuable insights into pre-service teachers' perceptions of the EPOSTL, it is important to acknowledge several limitations that also frame clear directions for future research.

First, the study's findings are derived from a sample of 166 pre-service teachers within a single English Language Teaching (ELT) department at one university in Turkey. This specific institutional and cultural context may limit the generalizability of the findings. Perceptions of the EPOSTL, as well as the specific implementation strategies might differ significantly in other contexts, given the wide range of national settings where the EPOSTL has been studied—from Croatia (Bagarić, 2011) and the Czech Republic (Orlova, 2011) to Japan (Takagi, 2015) —future research should aim to replicate these findings in multi-institutional and cross-cultural settings to validate their broader applicability.

Second, the study's methodology relies entirely on self-reported data. The ESPQ is designed to measure pre-service teachers' perceptions, understanding, and evaluations of

the EPOSTL rather than their objective teaching competence. As noted in the literature (e.g., Arikan & Zorba, 2016), an “illusion of confidence” can arise, in which a qualitative lack of understanding contradicts students' high self-ratings. Future studies could employ a more robust mixed-methods design, a common approach in the EPOSTL literature (e.g., Cindrić et al., 2015; Sasa, 2024), to triangulate this self-perception data with observational data or a qualitative content analysis of students' reflective entries, similar to existing “reflective practice reports” (Nihlén, 2011; Velikova, 2013).

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Appendix A. An EPOSTL Student Perception Questionnaire (ESPQ)

	I can't do this (1)	I can do this with a lot of difficulty (2)	I can do this with some difficulty (3)	I can do this with a little effort (4)	I can do this easily (5)
1. I can explain the purpose and overall structure of the EPOSTL.					
2. I can identify the key components of the self-assessment sections of the EPOSTL (e.g., context, methodology, resources, etc).					
3. I can describe how the EPOSTL promotes learner autonomy and reflection.					
4. I can discuss the potential benefits of using the EPOSTL in language teacher education.					
5. I can explain how the EPOSTL can help pre-service teachers develop their language teaching skills.					
6. I can identify ways in which the EPOSTL can be used to assess and monitor student progress in language learning.					
7. I can discuss how the EPOSTL can					

facilitate collaboration and communication between my lecturers/ teachers and myself.					
8. I can explain how I would use the EPOSTL in my future teaching career.					
9. I can identify resources and support materials that can help me implement the EPOSTL effectively.					
10. I can discuss the potential challenges and limitations of using the EPOSTL in my training.					

Part II. Open-ended questions

1. Specify and explain the items for which you felt not competent enough.
2. What are the ways you can use to make yourself more competent?
3. What are your strengths in terms of EPOSTL knowledge?
4. What areas do you need to develop further in your use of EPOSTL?
5. What steps can you take to improve your understanding and use of EPOSTL?