

A DIGITAL EUROPEAN SELF-ASSESSMENT TOOL FOR STUDENT TEACHERS OF FOREIGN LANGUAGES: THE EPOSTL

Ismail Hakki Mirici

*Hacettepe University Ankara/TURKEY
Corresponding Author: hakkimirici@gmail.com*

Sinem Hergüner

Gazi University Ankara/TURKEY

ABSTRACT

The acronym “EPOSTL” stands for the “European Portfolio for Student Teachers of Languages”, which is a digital self-assessment tool for students in foreign language teacher training programs across Europe. It builds on insights from the *Common European Framework of Reference (CEFR)* and the *European Language Portfolio (ELP)* as well as the *European Profile for Language Teacher Education*. It also helps student teachers of foreign languages to monitor and reflect on their experiences, performance and progress in the course of teacher education in a purposeful way. This study discussed and put forward some practical suggestions on the functions and the effectiveness of the EPOSTL in English Language Teaching (ELT) and German Language Teaching (GLT) departments in a state university in Turkey. The results of the study revealed that the use of the EPOSTL is helpful in developing student teachers’ metacognitive strategies as autonomous learners, which is a key factor in becoming teachers of foreign languages adopting the CEFR and the ELP principles in their classes.

Keywords: CEFR, ELP, EPOSTL, self-assessment, student teachers of foreign languages

INTRODUCTION

Self-assessment is one of the key practices to develop self-awareness in the educational process, and consequently is an effective method to promote autonomous learning procedure and metacognitive strategies both inside and outside of the classroom context (Vygotsky 1978; Wallace 1991; Kumaravadivelu, 2006). Functional and pragmatic methods may provide student teachers with a self-assessment tool comprising purposeful and well-developed common criteria for continuously monitoring, recording and assessing their own educational progress. Student teachers of languages may get regular feedback from instructors concerning their academic success through their achievement based self-reflection.

The European Center for Modern Languages (<http://www.ecml.at/>) and the Language Policy Division of the Council of Europe (<http://www.coe.int/t/dg4/linguistic/>) coordinate foreign language learning, teaching and assessment practices, projects, and related events and activities across Europe (Mirici, 2014). The Council of Europe introduced the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages (CEFR) as a European reference resource (CoE, 2001). Likewise, the European Language Portfolio (ELP) was developed as a standard European self-assessment tool for language learners (Little, 2005); and the European Portfolio for Student Teachers of Languages (EPOSTL) was created as a self-assessment tool for students in foreign language teacher training departments in European higher education system. Furthermore as a personal documentation system the Europass was introduced to keep record of and to reflect on individuals’ linguistic and professional proficiency levels in accordance with the European standard in a consistent manner.

The EPOSTL is based on a self-assessment system resembling the system in the ELP, which is based on the CEFR. The CEFR describes foreign language proficiency levels as A1- A2 (Basic users), B1- B2 (Independent users), and C1 - C2 (Proficient users). Each level has verbal descriptors in the form of can-do statements relating to five language skill areas; listening, reading, spoken interaction, spoken production and writing (Mirici, 2000; North, 2000; Little, 2005). The EPOSTL comprises 193 descriptors presented as can-do statements for the holder’s self-assessment of his/her core competences as a prospective language teacher. All these European materials are standardized and are user friendly and flexible enough to use in any educational system across Europe.

An effective teacher education program prepares aspirant teachers to seek higher knowledge through continuous self-reflection and research (Esau, 2013), This study aimed to provide information on how to adapt the EPOSTL effectively to the education system of a particular country in order to promote the standardization of the foreign/second language teacher programs through self evaluation of the student teachers in a functional, economic and feasible way .

WHAT IS THE EPOSTL?

The EPOSTL is a standard self-assessment tool developed by the European Centre for Modern Languages (ECML) that enables student teachers of languages to analyze and reflect on the knowledge and skills needed to teach a foreign language (Krišjāne et al 2009, Newby 2012). The EPOSTL is accessible on the ECML website: <http://epostl2.ecml.at/> in most European languages. The main aims of the EPOSTL are as follows (<http://epostl2.ecml.at/>):

1. to encourage student teachers to reflect on the competences a teacher strives to attain and on the underlying knowledge which feeds these competences;
2. to help prepare student teachers for their future profession in a variety of teaching contexts;
3. to promote discussion between student teachers and their peers and between student teachers and teacher educators and mentors;
4. to facilitate self-assessment of student teachers' developing competences;
5. to provide an instrument which helps chart progress.

The EPOSTL consists of three components – a personal statement, self-assessment and a dossier. These components are also supplemented by an introduction, glossary of terms, an index and a user's guide (<http://epostl2.ecml.at/>).

In the personal statement section student teachers reflect on their experiences of teaching, focusing attention on questions that are important at the beginning of teacher education. Student teachers consider and analyze their own teacher education courses, their experience and expectations, and thus draw an overall picture of a good language teacher.

In the self-assessment section there are 196 'can-do' statements in seven categories such as context, methodology, resources, lesson planning, conducting a lesson, independent learning, assessment and reflection grid in order to raise awareness on planning and organizing the teaching and learning process as well as to help student teachers reflect on their achievements.

In the dossier part student teachers consider and reflect on their progress and development during teaching courses or practice through such evidence as lesson plans, lesson observations and evaluations, checklists, comments, objectives, case studies or action research, reflections, videos, examples of tasks, activities, and so on.

The glossary of terms is a tool for defining words used in the EPOSTL according to the specific content. **The index** is organized in the form of table where the EPOSTL student teacher can easily find the location of terms used in the descriptors. **The user's guide** is a helpful tool for introducing oneself to the EPOSTL, since this chapter contains information on the background of the EPOSTL, content, aims and brief overview of the content. In other words, it acts as a summary of the EPOSTL.

PRACTICES IN THE TURKISH EDUCATION SYSTEM

Reflective and professional learning from a lifelong learning perspective plays a significant role in the future professional life of student teachers (Holmes, 2005; Hunt, 2006; Eryaman, 2007; Idalvichi, 2007; Molander, 2008). In the course and speed of everyday life, most educators do not have much time to pay attention to or notice the details of their area of practice. However, over time and with effort the picture can become clearer (Richardson, 2002). It is widely agreed that the best teachers are those who realize just how much they still have to learn (Hatton and Smith, 2005). When the purpose and the functions of the EPOSTL supporting English language teacher training programs are considered, it can be seen that ongoing assessment gives rise to personal reflections in the educational process which can serve as a key to autonomous learning for prospective teachers (Benson and Huang, 2008). These reflections occur both during and after experience of learning situations. Consequently student teachers' EPOSTL-based reflections can be called 'Reflection-in-action', 'Reflection-on-action', and as a guide to future actions they are 'Reflection-for-action' (Schön, 1983). This reflection is complex, rigorous, demanding and challenging. It is not a mere matter of sitting down and chatting about practice. Therefore, the EPOSTL serves as a good practical tool for student teachers' real reflection on their teaching practice (Fish, 2001).

As a member state to the Council of Europe since 1949, the Turkish Ministry of Education was a signatory to the treaty at the 20th Session of the Standing Conference of the Ministers of Education of the Council of Europe, Krakow, Poland, 15-17 October 2000. The CEFR is the reference framework adopted by the Ministry of Education for foreign language education curricula both in state and private schools throughout the country <http://ttkb.meb.gov.tr/www/ogretim-programlari/icerik/72>. Two ELP models, one for students aged 10-14, the other for students aged 15-18, have been validated by the CoE ELP Validation Committee on behalf of the Ministry of Education, and both are accessible free of charge via the Ministry website at <http://adp.meb.gov.tr>. The Vocational Qualifications Institution spreads EPOSTL use throughout Turkey http://www.europass.gov.tr/index_en.html. It is therefore a necessity to introduce the use of the EPOSTL to students in foreign language teacher training departments in Turkey <http://epostl2.ecml.at/>.

A CASE STUDY IN A TURKISH UNIVERSITY

It is generally felt that people need to be competent speakers of at least two languages other than their native language to be able to access international resources as members of today's globalized society. Such plurilingual identity may be an important advantage to be able to communicate with the representatives of different cultural contexts. It is of great importance that all variables in foreign/second language programs be considered, planned, created and supplied accordingly. One of the permanent variables of language teaching programs is the teacher. Hence, the procedure in foreign/second language teacher training programs gains a significant role in every education system regardless of the language or the location in the world.

This study investigated the contribution of EPOSTL-based self-assessment practices to student teachers' self-awareness and academic achievements in the English Language Teaching (ELT) and the German Language Teaching (GLT) departments of Gazi University, in Turkey.

The research questions of the study were as follows:

- 1) Is there a difference between the student teachers' appreciation of the EPOSTL use as a standard self-assessment tool in ELT and GLT departments?
- 2) Is there a difference between the student teachers' self-assessment scores in ELT and GLT departments in terms of their foreign language teaching methodology skills?

Based on these two main research questions the following sub-problems are of the other concerns of the study:

1. Is there a difference between the academic success scores of student teachers in ELT and GLT departments?
2. Is there a difference between the self-evaluation scores of student teachers in ELT and GLT departments?
3. Is there a correlation between academic success and self-evaluation scores of ELT and GLT student teachers?
4. Is there a difference between the self-evaluation scores about teaching language skills (speaking, writing, listening, and reading) of ELT and GLT student teachers?
5. Is there a difference between the self-evaluation scores about teaching grammar and vocabulary of ELT and GLT student teachers?
6. Is there a correlation between the sub-scales of ELT and GLT student teachers?

METHOD

Sixty student teachers, thirty from the English Language Teaching (ELT) department and thirty from the German Language Teaching Department (GLT) department participated in this study in the 2012-2013 academic year. They were all third grade students in a four year teacher training program in a leading university in Ankara, Turkey.

In the study student teachers in the ELT and GLT departments used the EPOSTL-based self-assessment checklist to record and reflect on their achievements in the methodology courses such as Teaching Language Skills, and Approaches in Teaching English/German as a Foreign Language.

Quantitative data were collected through a self-assessment checklist with 49 statements derived from the methodology section of the EPOSTL as a five-point Likert scale (see Appendix), and the qualitative data were collected via face to face interviews with randomly selected student teachers who participated in the research.

The data were analyzed with SPSS 15 for Windows. The differences between the academic success of student teachers at ELT and GLT departments were examined by independent sample t-test and correlations for each sub-scale were calculated using Pearson Product-Moment Correlation Coefficient.

RESULTS

Student teachers participating in the research interview reported that the use of the EPOSTL is quite interesting and motivating since they have the opportunity to track their progress regularly and to determine individual goals for their own learning situations. The students also stated that they created a Europass CV and Europass Language Passport as a result of their awareness of European standardization concerning vocational and linguistic competences. Findings based on the student teachers' EPOSTL-based self-assessment were given below:

Table 1
Results of the independent samples T-test of the academic successes of student teachers by department

Department	N	\bar{X}	SD	Df	T	P
ELT	30	71.80	6.93	58	.07	.943
GLT	30	71.93	7.50			

As seen above in Table 1 academic success of the student teachers between departments was not significantly different.

Table 2
Results of the independent samples t-test for the self-evaluation Scores of student teachers by department

Department	N	\bar{X}	SD	Df	t	P	η^2
ELT	30	199.73	17.88	58	2.55	.013	.10
GLT	30	209.97	12.82				

Above, Table 2 shows that the self-assessment score of the ELT student teachers was significantly lower than those of the GLT student teachers.

Table 3
Results of the Independent Samples t-Test for Speaking Scores by Department

Department	N	\bar{X}	SD	df	t	P
ELT	30	45.70	5.51	58	.24	.808
GLT	30	46.10	7.10			

In Table 3 it is illustrated that the speaking scores did not differ significantly between the departments.

Table 4
Results of the independent samples t-Test for Writing Scores by Department

Department	N	\bar{X}	SD	Df	t	P	η^2
ELT	30	48.13	6.38	58	2.30	.025	.08
GLT	30	51.50	4.85				

Table 4 shows that the writing scores of ELT student teachers were significantly lower than those of GLT student teachers.

There was a non-significant positive correlation ($r=.22$; $p>.05$) between academic success and self-evaluation scores of ELT student teachers. Similarly, the correlation between academic success and self-evaluation was positive and non-significant ($r=.008$; $p>.05$) for GLT student teachers.

Table 5
Results of the Independent Samples t-Test for Listening Scores by Department

Department	N	\bar{X}	SD	Df	t	P
ELT	30	33.53	4.38	58	1.53	.131
GLT	30	35.07	3.30			

In Table 5 it is shown that listening scores did not differ significantly between departments.

Table 6
Results of the Independent samples t-Test for Reading Scores by Department

Department	N	\bar{X}	SD	Df	t	P
ELT	30	38.30	5.01	58	1.98	.053
GLT	30	40.40	2.97			

As Table 6 shows above there was no significant differences between the departments in terms of the reading scores.

Table 7
The Results of the Independent Samples t-Test for Grammar Scores by Department

Department	N	\bar{X}	SD	Df	t	P	η^2
ELT	30	20.67	3.04	58	4.02	.000	.22
GLT	30	23.23	1.72				

Table 7 shows that the grammar scores of the student teachers in the ELT department were significantly lower than those of the GLT department student teachers.

Table 8
Results of the Independent Samples t-Test for Vocabulary Scores by Department

Department	N	\bar{X}	SD	df	t	P
ELT	30	13.07	1.48	58	1.30	.198
GLT	30	13.67	2.04			

Table 8 shows that vocabulary scores did not differ significantly between departments.

For all the sub-scales, ELT student teachers gave themselves lower scores in the self- evaluation scale. However, the correlation was higher for ELT student teachers in terms of their academic success and overall self-evaluation, which indicated a higher awareness of their strengths and weaknesses in the field of methodology.

Table 9
Descriptive statistics of sub-scales concerning the self-evaluation scores of ELT student Teachers

Sub-scales	N	Minimum	Maximum	\bar{X}	SD	\bar{X} /Maximum
Speaking	30	37.00	60.00	45.70	5.51	76.17
Writing	30	29.00	60.00	48.13	6.38	80.22
Listening	30	23.00	39.00	33.53	4.38	83.83
Reading	30	28.00	45.00	38.30	5.01	85.11
Grammar	30	13.00	25.00	20.67	3.04	82.68
Vocabulary	30	10.00	15.00	13.07	1.48	87.13

Table 9 shows that ELT student teachers had the highest mean score from the sub-scale of vocabulary and the lowest mean score from the sub-scale of speaking. This can be explained by the fact that English is a foreign language for these learners and it has always been more difficult for them to articulate English statements accurately and fluently. This difficulty probably leads to a professional challenge in teaching speaking skills.

Table 10
Correlation of Sub-scales Concerning Self-evaluation Scores of ELT Student Teachers

Sub-scales	Speaking	Writing	Listening	Reading	Grammar	Vocabulary
Speaking	1.000					
Writing	.487**	1.000				
Listening	.321	.576**	1.000			
Reading	.083	.220	.631**	1.000		
Grammar	.450*	.104	.234	.448*	1.000	
Vocabulary	.091	.276	.499**	.577**	.303	1.000

* p<.05, ** p<.01

Table 10 shows that there were significant correlations between writing and listening; between reading and listening; between vocabulary and listening and between vocabulary and reading. In addition significant correlations were found between grammar and speaking and grammar and reading. No negative correlations were found between sub-scales.

Table 11
Descriptive statistics of sub-scales concerning the self-evaluation scores of GLT student Teachers

Sub-scales	N	Minimum	Maximum	\bar{X}	SD	\bar{X} /Maximum
Speaking	30	26.00	57.00	46.10	7.10	76.83

Writing	30	44.00	60.00	51.50	4.85	85.83
Listening	30	28.00	40.00	35.07	3.30	87.68
Reading	30	35.00	45.00	40.40	2.97	89.78
Grammar	30	19.00	25.00	23.23	1.72	92.92
Vocabulary	30	8.00	15.00	13.33	1.95	88.87

Table 11 shows that GLT student teachers had the highest mean score from the sub-scale of grammar and the lowest mean score from the sub-scale of speaking just like the ELT student teachers.

Table 12
The Correlation of Sub-scales Concerning the Self-evaluation Scores of GLT Student Teachers

Sub-scales	Speaking	Writing	Listening	Reading	Grammar	Vocabulary
Speaking	1.000					
Writing	.201	1.000				
Listening	-.174	.605**	1.000			
Reading	.155	.283	.455*	1.000		
Grammar	-.373*	.135	.314	-.019	1.000	
Vocabulary	-.308	.378*	.595**	.321	.130	1.000

* p<.05, ** p<.01

Table 12 shows that there were significant correlations between writing and listening at a significance level of .01 and there were significant correlations between grammar and speaking; between vocabulary and writing; and between reading and listening at a significance level of .05. Correlations between the other sub-scales were low. Negative (reverse) correlations were found between the sub-scales of listening and speaking, grammar and speaking, vocabulary and speaking, and grammar and reading. The rise in one of these variables caused a decrease in the other variable.

The findings in Tables 9 and 11 show that from all the sub-scales, GLT student teachers had higher mean scores for self-evaluation than ELT department student teachers.

CONCLUSION AND SUGGESTIONS

Classroom practices are mostly conducted by means of teachers’ skill and knowledge of coordination, cooperation, organization and motivation. Teacher educators need to create opportunities and facilitate experiences that will develop the pre-service teacher’s capacity to reflect on his/her practice (Frick, Carl & Beets, 2010). This can be considered as a key factor to promote learner autonomy, self-directed learning, and thus to facilitate developing metacognitive learning strategies. In many educational contexts evaluating student teachers’ academic achievements is unlikely to be provided through standardized self-assessment descriptors. In most cases individual trainers have their own distinctive criteria to evaluate the success of their students based on their personal understanding of “priorities” for a good foreign language teacher.

In this study the result of the data analysis has revealed the facts that;

- a. student teachers of languages are in need of space and time to reflect on their achievements so that they personally experience self-directed learning as autonomous learners, and become teachers who can also provide autonomous learning facilities for the students in their future classes,
- b. the EPOSTL is a useful self-assessment tool to help student teachers reflect on the progress and potential of their learning and teaching,
- c. student teachers of languages can familiarize themselves with the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages and the European Language Portfolio oriented foreign language teaching practices when they personally experience using the EPOSTL as a standard European self-assessment tool,
- d. as the EPOSTL holders, student teachers of languages become efficient users of the Europass documentation system, and create their own Europass CV, Europass Language Passport and the supplementary documents even before they graduate from their department.

It can also be suggested that besides educating student teachers of languages in the higher education system in accordance with the principles and the guidelines developed by the Council of Europe, teachers in the system should be trained to use the CEFR and the ELP-based foreign language teaching practices in their classes by valuing autonomous learning, self-assessment and cultural diversity in a lifelong learning perspective. For this purpose it is also possible to develop a

“Professional Portfolio for Teachers of Languages” through which foreign language teachers can reflect on and self-evaluate their linguistic, communicative, intercultural and language teaching skills during their professional life. This will enable them to become autonomous teachers who are aware of their personal and professional strengths and weaknesses as well as to avoid the risk of becoming “slaves of the bureaucratic system”. Additionally, there is research evidence to show that the impact of ICT on educational activities gives rise to success in a variety of contexts (Aristovnik, 2012; Agostinho, 2005). Although the EPOSTL can be downloaded and printed out as a hard copy document, it is a fact that the use of the EPOSTL descriptors in digital form can save time and be economical and easily accessible for the students. It could also be a convenient way for student teachers or teachers in schools to keep records of self-observation and evaluation in their computers as a digital file, allowing them to see their own progress within a particular period of time. It could therefore be practical and environmentally friendly to make use of an online version of the portfolios as an E-EPOSTL for student teachers, and to develop a similar tool for teachers of foreign languages as well.

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APPENDIX

Please mark (X) your department and reflect your level of agreement for each descriptor below.

A. English Language Teaching (ELT) B. German Language Teaching (GLT)

A. Speaking/Spoken Interaction

B. Writing/Written Interaction

Number	Descriptors	1	2	3	4	5
1	I can evaluate and select meaningful activities to encourage learners to develop their creative potential.					
2	I can evaluate and select a range of meaningful writing activities to help learners become aware of and use appropriate language for different text types (letters, stories, reports etc).					
3	I can evaluate and select texts in a variety of text types to function as good examples for the learners' writing.					
4	I can evaluate and select a variety of materials to stimulate writing (authentic materials, visual aids etc.).					

Number	Descriptors	1	2	3	4	5
1	I can create a supportive atmosphere that invites learners to take part in speaking activities.					
2	I can evaluate and select meaningful speaking and interactional activities to encourage learners of differing abilities to participate.					
3	I can evaluate and select meaningful speaking and interactional activities to encourage learners to express their opinions, identity, culture etc.					
4	I can evaluate and select a range of meaningful speaking and interactional activities to develop fluency (discussion, role play, problem solving etc.).					
5	I can evaluate and select different activities to help learners to become aware of and use different text types (telephone conversations, transactions, speeches etc.).					
6	I can evaluate and select a variety of materials to stimulate speaking activities (visual aids, texts, authentic materials 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.					
8	I can evaluate and select various activities to help learners to identify and use typical features of spoken language (informal language, fillers etc.).					
9	I can help learners to use communication strategies (asking for clarification, comprehension checks etc.) and compensation strategies (paraphrasing, simplification etc) when engaging in spoken interaction.					
10	I can evaluate and select a variety of techniques to make learners aware of, discriminate and help them to pronounce sounds in the target language.					
11	I can evaluate and select a variety of techniques to make learners aware of and help them to use stress, rhythm and intonation.					
12	I can evaluate and select a range of oral activities to develop accuracy (grammar, word choice etc.).					
5	I can evaluate and select activities which help learners to participate in written exchanges (emails, job applications etc.) and to initiate or respond to texts appropriately.					
6	I can help learners to gather and share information for their writing tasks.					
7	I can help learners to plan and structure written texts (e.g. by using mind maps, outlines etc.).					
8	I can help learners to monitor, reflect on, edit and improve their own writing.					
9	I can use peer-assessment and feedback to assist the writing process.					
10	I can use a variety of techniques to help learners to develop awareness of the structure, coherence and cohesion of a text and produce texts accordingly.					
11	I can evaluate and select a variety of techniques to make learners aware of and use spelling patterns and irregular spelling.					
12	I can evaluate and select writing activities to consolidate learning (grammar, vocabulary, spelling etc.).					

C. Listening

Number	Descriptors	1	2	3	4	5
1	I can select texts appropriate to the needs, interests and language level of the learners.					
2	I can provide a range of pre-listening activities which help learners to orientate themselves to a text.					
3	I can encourage learners to use their knowledge of a topic and their expectations about a text when listening.					
4	I can design and select different activities in order to practise and develop different listening strategies (listening for gist, specific information etc.)					
5	I can design and select different activities which help learners to recognise and interpret typical features of spoken language (tone of voice, intonation, style of speaking etc.).					
6	I can help learners to apply strategies to cope with typical aspects of spoken language (background noise, redundancy etc.).					
7	I can help learners to apply strategies to cope with difficult or unknown vocabulary of a text.					
8	I can evaluate and select a variety of post-listening tasks to provide a bridge between listening and other skills.					

D. Reading

Number	Descriptors	1	2	3	4	5
1	I can select texts appropriate to the needs, interests and language level of the learners.					
2	I can provide a range of pre-reading activities to help learners to orientate themselves to a text.					
3	I can encourage learners to use their knowledge of a topic and their expectations about a text when reading.					
4	I can apply appropriate ways of reading a text in class (e.g. aloud, silently, in groups etc.).					
5	I can set different activities in order to practise and develop different reading strategies according to the purpose of reading (skimming, scanning etc.).					
6	I can help learners to develop different strategies to cope with difficult or unknown vocabulary in a text.					
7	I can evaluate and select a variety of post-reading tasks to provide a bridge between reading and other skills.					
8	I can recommend books appropriate to the needs, interests and language level of the learners.					
9	I can help learners to develop critical reading skills (reflection, interpretation, analysis etc.)					

E. Grammar

Number	Descriptors	1	2	3	4	5
1	I can introduce a grammatical item and help learners to practice it through meaningful contexts and appropriate texts					
2	I can introduce, and help students to deal with, new or unknown items of grammar in a variety of ways (teacher presentation, awareness-raising, discovery etc.).					
3	I can deal with questions learners may ask about grammar and, if necessary, refer to appropriate grammar reference books.					
4	I can use grammatical meta-language if and when appropriate to the learners' needs.					
5	I can evaluate and select grammatical exercises and activities, which support learning and encourage oral and written communication.					

F. Vocabulary

Number	Descriptors	1	2	3	4	5
1	I can evaluate and select a variety of activities which help learners to learn vocabulary.					
2	I can evaluate and select tasks which help learners to use new vocabulary in oral and written contexts.					
3	I can evaluate and select activities which enhance learners' awareness of register differences.					