

TEACHER TRAINING IN DESIGNING PROFESSIONAL E-PORTFOLIO

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Abstract

Introducing technologies through teacher training qualifications is a widely used means for further professional development. This work presents a course designed for teachers of English as a Foreign Language to train them in using available technologies in preparing an electronic version of their teacher portfolio. The paper discusses the topics covered by such training, the tasks designed to be realized as blended learning, and the preliminary results of the pilot training.

Key words: teacher training, blended learning, teacher qualification, e-portfolio

INTRODUCTION

Introducing technologies in all aspects of education is widely recognized as a leading tendency, as a reflection to the rapid advances and impact they have in all aspects of life today. At the same time, providing an easily accessible, well-organized portfolio in teaching profession is an inseparable part of teaching practice, professional development and attestation process. In order to provide flexible support for teachers to effectively employ adequate technologies for designing, storing and presenting artefacts to provide compelling proof of their practice and development, a training in E-Portfolio as an Attestation Instrument (for teachers of a foreign language) was designed and piloted. The training is part of the initiative for in-service qualifications featuring the Regulations of the Ministry of Education of Republic of Bulgaria (Bulgarian Ministry of Education and Science, 2016), introduced in 2016. This paper presents the design of such a course, targeting teachers of a foreign language and aiming at clarifying the structure, possible contents and appropriate technologies to be used for a language teacher professional portfolio. The focus is on designing an electronic version of such a portfolio in compliance with Decree 12 "on the status and professional development of the teachers, headmasters, and other pedagogical specialists" [ibid.], in particular, and following the general directions in respective EU documents in the field (such as EPOSTL (Newby, et al., 2007) (Newby, et al., 2010)).

1. THE TRAINING

The qualification training was especially designed to support schoolteachers of foreign languages, in order to provide them with relevant competencies to select and present proofs for their professional portfolio taking into consideration the specifics of language teaching. As the focus is on the principles of matching the description of the competencies (app 24 of the Decree) with suitable documents and products, which in turn to be presented in an appropriate electronic form, the course could be useful for teachers of other humanity subjects as well. The goal is gaining practical skills in analyzing own practice and presenting appropriate evidence for the achievements by using technology efficiently, through interactive training. The expected products are a portfolio in a chosen electronic form, e.g. a presentation or website. The following criteria for completion are set: the portfolio to have all required elements, including a teaching philosophy, and the design to be adequate to the technology used.

The 16-hour training is designed for two types of delivery: a face-to-face one and a blended learning one (divided into two parts: 8 hours to be delivered as face-to-face sessions, and 8 - as self-paced work to be completed within 2 weeks after the face-to-face delivery, realized via e-mail). Current article focusses on the latter one, as it provided the data for the pilot study, presented in the second part of this work. The training is delivered in Bulgarian, as the target audience is teachers of different foreign languages (different from Bulgarian) who share common language of instruction (Bulgarian); all examples here are translated. The pedagogical design of the training encompasses four general areas, believed to be of significance, each delivered as a separate session: the respective legislation, its relation

to the required competencies, the choice of artefacts for adequate proof of each competency, and the most appropriate technology to present these artefacts in an electronic form (table 1). The topics in the table represent four 2-hour face-to-face sessions for blended learning delivery. Each session features a theoretical part, followed by activities for practice, as well as further reading and self-paced activities for out-of-class individual work.

Table 1. E-portfolio training course: topics and activities

	Session	Activities	Materials
1	Teacher competencies, national and EU standards. Attestation and career development.	Analysis and sharing: SWOT analysis, good practices, formulating teaching philosophy	Decree 12/01.09.2016 Presentation Handouts EPOSTIL Needs analysis (questionnaire)
2	Professional pedagogical portfolio: structure (elements), contents, functions. Planning career development.	Self-assessment: against the competencies (Decree 12), matching competencies and portfolio elements, planning further development using the portfolio	Presentation Handouts
3	Technologies for presenting portfolio elements (affordances)	Designing own portfolio: choosing presentable artefacts, meeting the requirements	Presentation Handouts
4	Practice: draft portfolio, presentation and discussion	E-portfolio: choosing suitable technology for presenting the portfolio (draft)	Samples Handouts
5	Self-paced training	Digitalizing the portfolio elements Informed choice of technology to present the elements Informed choice of technology to compile and present the portfolio	Instructions and external links Course evaluation

The first and second areas choice was motivated by the new legislation requirements, in force since 2016, which include 16 Decrees, see (Bulgarian Ministry of Education and Science, 2016). The focus in presenting the topics here is on analysis of the related documents and on discussion regarding possible implications they may have for each trainee's individual context. This is done by dealing with carefully picked parts of the documents to be discussed, as well as by introducing the participants to a standard SWOT analysis chart for personal and institutional use. In addition, a handout for checking on competencies and planning development is presented, based on EPOSTIL (Newby, et al., 2010). Furthermore, demonstration of the link between the formal requirements and the competencies is drawn, based on examples, in order to guide teachers in means of providing evidence of their professional work achievements. Special attention is given to developing practical skills for reflection on own practice, achievements and desired direction of professional development, self-assessment and choosing appropriate artifacts to soundly prove these achievements against the requirements. These skills are of crucial importance for each educator as the required competencies listed as application to the Decree are part of their attestation process, thus they influence their position, development and payment. Therefore,

the third area is envisioned to provide insights as to how to practically choose relevant artefacts illustrating a particular competency, as well as how to make the most of the available artefacts. In addition, the clear presentation of the artefacts in terms of choosing appropriate media to make the most efficient evidence of each artefact is also discussed. The forth group of topics includes brief presentation of easy-to-use, freely available and accessible tools to present these artefacts, as well as criteria to be applied to making informed choice of a technology. The design of the training is grounded in the documents mentioned above, which ensures its currency and relevance to the language teacher needs. It also takes into consideration the specifics and tendencies of Bulgarian education, found in literature as preliminary research was conducted (Kremenska, 2017) (Dimitrova & Tashevsk, 2007) (Hadjiali & Kolarova, 2007). In addition, it builds upon own practice in training foreign language teaching professionals in different contexts (Kremenska, 2013) (Kremenska, et al., 2013) (Yaneva, et al., 2011).

Two types of activities were prepared: the first were to be done during the face-to-face sessions, and the second were for self-paced study, listed in a handout as 5 activities, with 3 tasks each. The former included brainstorming, discussions, group work, reflections on own practice, sample SWOT analysis of own practice, as well as practice using different technologies. The latter featured instructions for step-by-step work with prepared in advance online resources. Figure 2 shows a sample activity, Activity 1, for analysis and sharing good practices. Task 1 is to be done during the face-to-face session and requires performing the previously mentioned SWOT analysis, taking into consideration the requirements Decree 12 poses, as well as the ones listed in EPOSTIL. Task 2 is for individual work after the session and involves writing a 300-word reflection, based on the previous task results, as to how to make the most of the strengths and minimize the weaknesses, as well as what competencies have to be improved in order to do this. For each task, the required product is identified: a file (using a template) and a file of text, respectively. Another sample activity, aiming at making a correspondence between the elements of the portfolio and the competencies they prove, is given in table 2.

ACTIVITY 1 ANALYSIS AND SHARING GOOD PEDAGOGICAL PRACTICES

Assessing own pedagogical practice, the capabilities we have and challenges we encounter, is the foundation of effective planning of improvement of the practice, as well as of adequate choice of professional development. In order to do this, let us analyze our practice and share our solutions to particular challenges we have had.

Task 1. SWOT analysis

Handout 1 presents a map of the strong and weak sides of our teaching practice, the so-called SWOT analysis (**S**trengths, **W**eaknesses, **O**pportunities, and **T**hreats). Please fill the chart, and be honest: this information is for your own use only.

It is imperative to consider the competencies expected of a language teacher (according to decree 12, EPOSTIL and Appendix 2) while filling in the form.

Product: MSWord file (template)

Task 2. Analysis and sharing

Based on the resulting chart from the previous task, write about 300 words (1 page) a reflection on:

- how to minimize the effect of the weak sides and how to use the opportunities to their best, e.g. which good practices of your own teaching situation could be shared;
- how to minimize the potential threats: e.g. which competencies should be improved to help you cope with possible future problems.

Product: MSWord file (text)

Fig. 1. Activity and tasks for teacher training in designing e-portfolio - example

Table 2. Matching E-portfolio elements and the competencies they prove

Portfolio element	Availability	Related competencies	Form (modality)	Media for presentation
General data				
name, education				
qualifications				
specializations				
school				
subjects				
classes (age of the students, number, etc.)				
teaching philosophy				
Documents (Dossier)				
Achieved by the students				
Medals, awards, prizes				
Letters of appreciation				
Teaching				
Lesson plans				
Reflections				
Cases, action research				
Team work				
Justification of the choice of textbooks				
Non-teaching activities				
Conferences				
Publications: articles, essays				
Books, pictures, other				
Research				
Contribution to the material and technical amenities and equipment				
Physical environment				
Information and bibliographic facilitation				

The delivery of the training is based on presentations, documentation and specially designed handouts (with examples, hands-on materials and activities for both face-to-face and self-paced work). The materials used are hard-copy handouts (on paper), PowerPoint presentations for each session, a list of bibliography and resources, containing examples of different technologies used for teacher portfolio,

available online. In addition, 10 handouts were prepared to support the activities, such as a SWOT analysis chart, competencies self-check, matching competencies and portfolio elements chart, lesson plan template, etc. Figure 2 shows a snapshot of one of the handouts, presenting a competency self-check grid: the left-hand columns contain the respective group, competency and criteria, while the right-hand ones give a scale of assessing own development. The scale features the following statements: does not apply to my practice; I do not know about this competency; I know about this competency and plan on developing it in future; I know about it and have planned to start developing it soon; I would like to improve this competency; I am confident I have mastered it and can share my experience. Separate handouts contain the bibliography and the instruction for the activities (both face-to-face and out-of-class ones). In addition to these, two questionnaires for assessing participants' background computer literacy and teaching context, and their satisfaction with the training. These are presented in more detail in part 2 of the article.

Група компетентности			неприложимо	не съм запознат	Запознат съм, планирано в по-далечна перспектива	Запознат съм и съм планирал развитие скоро	Мога, но искам да развия още	Мога добре и мога да споделя опит
II. Педагогическа компетентност	1. Планиране на урок или на педагогическа ситуация	Познава ДООС и учебната програма						
		Ясни образователни цели, междупредметни връзки и очаквани резултати						
		Индивидуализиран подход						
		Знания и умения за работа с деца със СОП, в риск, с хронични заболявания и изневени						
		Иновативни методи за преподаване и оценяване						
	2. Организиране и ръководене на образователния процес	Отчита индивидуални особености						
		Подбира и прилага иновативни методи, средства и материали, вкл. изработени от учителя						
		Обратна връзка за напредък						
		Използва ИКТ						
		Знания и компетентности по предмета и „меки“ умения						
		Индивидуализирано развитие на потенциала и подкрепа						
		Книжовни норми на българския език						
		Безопасни условия, вкл. в интернет						
		Презентационни умения						
	3. Оценяване на напредъка на децата/учениците	ДООС за оценяване и инструменти за прилагането им						
		Критерии и показатели за индивидуален напредък						
		Своевременна и обективна информация и подкрепа						
		Знания и умения за самооценка у учениците						

Кремненска, 2017

Компетентности на учител – самооценка

2

Fig. 2. Handout for teacher training in designing e-portfolio - example

2. RESULTS OF A PILOT TRAINING

The pilot training was conducted in the beginning of 2017, with 23 teachers of English as a Foreign Language from Burgas region schools. In order to triangulate the results, the data were collected by two questionnaires (an entry and course evaluation ones), informal interviews and the products received (e-portfolios). The questionnaires were presented with simple online tools, allowing anonymous responses, quick access and immediate visualization of the results. The open-ended questions and the interviews were analyzed by categorizing and grouping the answers, and the portfolios were assessed by especially designed criteria to cover both the requirements for the content, posed by the Decree cited above and the use of technology to present it.

2.1. Entry questionnaire: level of computer literacy and background

The entry needs analysis questionnaire aimed to provide a snapshot of the current computer literacy level and professional context of the participants in order to ensure more effective work and support with technologies. As each participant in the training represents a different school, such an analysis is

considered of critical importance. The data were collected by questions in four groups: bio data ones, identifying the teaching context in terms of using technology ones, concerning computer skills ones, and open ended ones to identify the expectations. The bio data ones include name, school and town. The teaching context ones inquired on the use of equipment for teaching (computer/laptop, beamer, tape recorder, interactive whiteboard, mobile devices, other); the type of software used (e.g. versions of MS Word and PowerPoint), availability of a school website, virtual learning environment, SMS communication with parents, e-mail communication with parents, electronic record and register book.

All participants of the pilot training responded. The results showed that more than 90% of the participants used computers in their teaching practice, and about half of them also use beamers and tape-recorders (fig. 3). Obviously, apart from the electronic technology, significant part of the teaching requires using analogue equipment, such as tape recorders. About 15% of the respondents mentioned interactive whiteboards and mobile phones and tablets. (Percentage is more than 100 as the respondents could choose more than one answer). 20 participants (87%) noted that their school had a website, and the other 3 noted, that it is in process of development (fig 4). It is evident, that all schools either actively use (the majority), or are in process of introduction of this electronic means of information and communication. However, a virtual learning environment was reported by only 2 of them (about 11%), which they did not use. The software usage showed that less than $\frac{1}{4}$ use presentations, and only 2 colleagues design own audio or video content. The overall picture shows that technology is used widely in the schools under investigation (although at a relatively low level). Therefore it can be expected, that these schools can provide appropriate equipment for implementation of e-portfolio for their teachers, which is the training goal.

The expectations for the course could be grouped in two categories. The first group naturally featured practice on designing teacher portfolio (11 instances), but it also appeared to include student's portfolio (2 cases), as well as general information regarding the portfolio (5). The second group was related to training about innovative methods in teaching (3 cases) and exchange of good practices and materials (3). The question about desired training outcomes elicited 10 responses about interactive whiteboard, 4 about Moodle, 3 about mobile learning, and 3 about using multimedia.

It can be concluded that the digital literacy of the colleagues varies, but all are well-acquainted with commonly used technologies (email, searching engines) and most use presentations and technical equipment for teaching. It also is evident, that all participants appeared informed about the course goals and their expectations were for practical solutions regarding designing professional e-portfolio, yet more than half of them also expected training in innovative methods and working with particular software and equipment. Noteworthy, half of the respondents expected training with interactive whiteboards, which, although not a goal of the training under discussion, can be considered for designing future trainings.

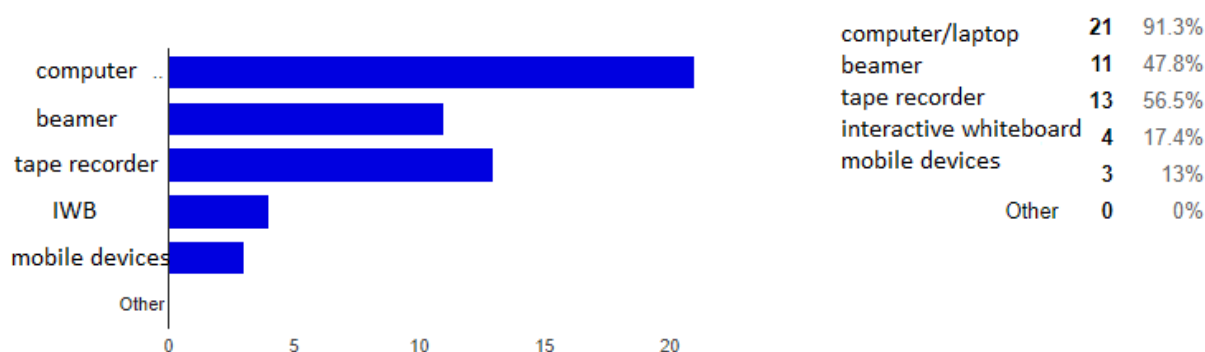


Fig. 3. Entry questionnaire: what equipment do you use in your teaching practice?

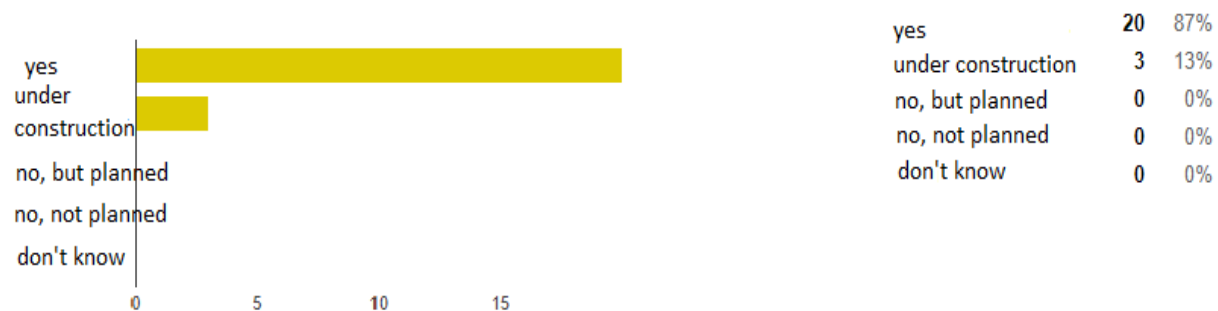


Fig. 4. Entry questionnaire: does your school have a website?

2.2. End-of-course evaluation questionnaire

The evaluation questionnaire aimed to elicit feedback on course efficiency after the course ended. 9 answers were received (of 23 participants), which can be considered as a good response rate as they were voluntary and anonymous. The questionnaire consists of 22 closed questions on course feedback, using 5-grade standard Likert scale (agree, slightly agree, neutral, slightly disagree, disagree), and 3 open-ended questions about three most effective, three less effective aspects of the training, and suggestions for future training. The answers vary widely, therefore the trends they suggest are presented descriptively below.

The answers to the questions concerning the general appreciation of the course (fig. 5) show that the overall satisfaction is above the neutral point (in black) for most of the respondents (the number of respondents is given on the x-axis). Most appreciated were the clear course goals, which were achieved, the participants' needs can be considered met, and most of the trainees would recommend the course. Meeting the expectations, the assessment and clarification of the goals evidently score a wide range of responses and there are even answers to disagree. This can be due to the totally different expectations a great portion of the participants had had, as commented above, e.g. 10 expected to be trained in using interactive whiteboards.

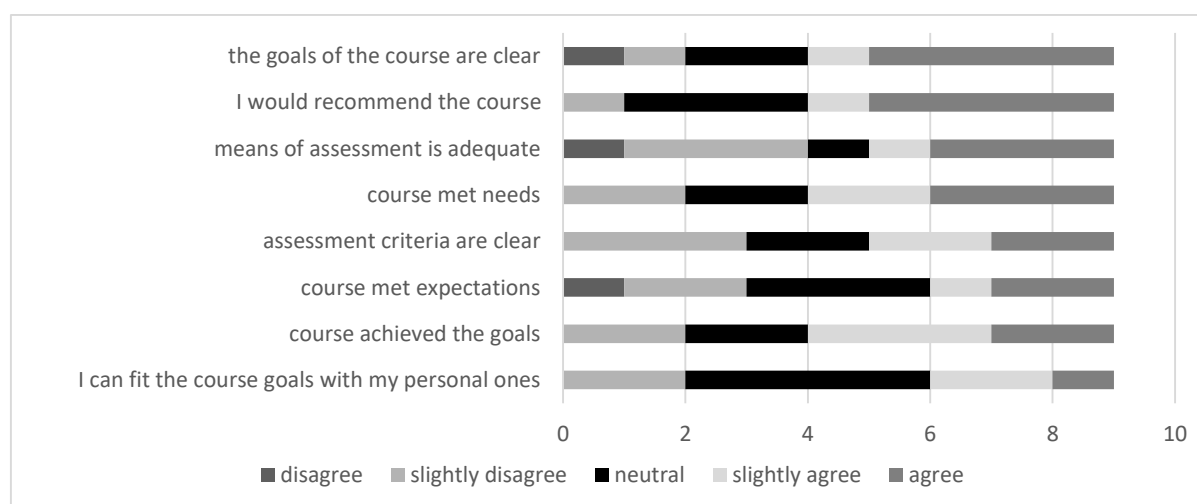


Fig. 5. Courses evaluation: feedback results

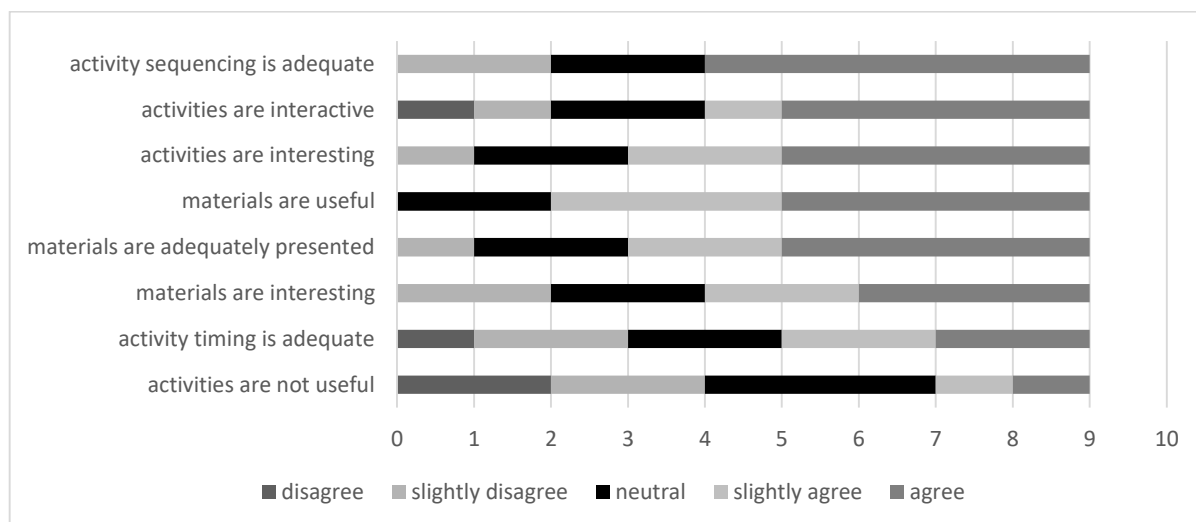


Fig. 6. Feedback on training activities and materials

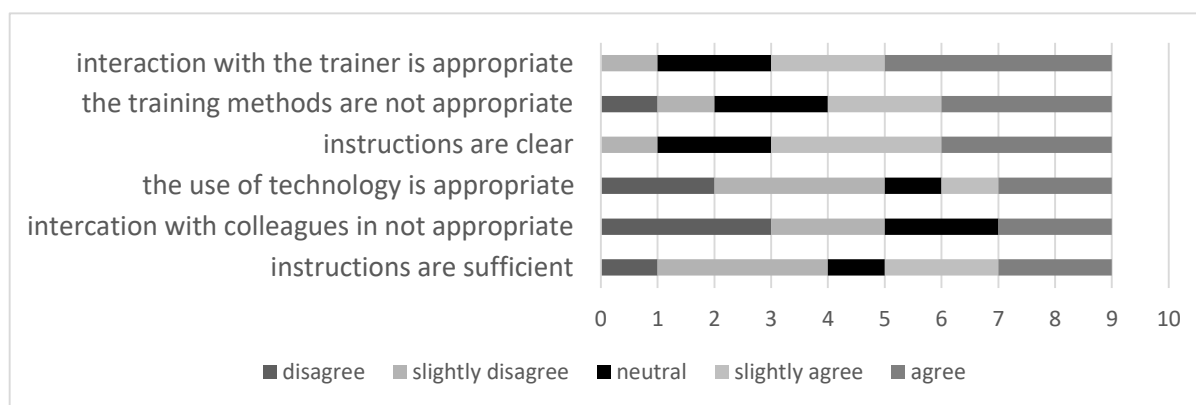


Fig. 7. Feedback on training methodology

The results for the materials and activities, on the other hand, show much higher overall appreciation, as shown on fig. 6. Clearly the sequencing, interactivity and interest to activities are most valued, with highly useful, interesting and adequately presented materials. The timing gained varied and undecisive opinions, and the negatively asked question about activity usefulness – more neutral answers.

The training process itself gained obvious positive reaction regarding interaction with the teacher and colleagues (the latter was asked in negation) and instruction appropriateness (fig. 7). The training methods (negation) and the technologies used achieved more negative responses, instructions were perceived as insufficient, with about half of the respondents not satisfied. It can be concluded that more instructions are needed, and the training should use more personalized approach.

The open ended question answers regarding the three most valued aspects of the training confirm the results of the respective closed questions: 6 (out of 9 respondents) believe, that the materials were good; 5 distinguished the presented information, 4 mentioned the interactive methods used, 1 - the structure of the portfolio, 1 – the clear goals, and 1 – the collaboration with colleagues. Least effective was judged the technical support and organization (noted by 5 respondents), and the related practice, which was judged insufficient (2). In addition, it was mentioned that the information about the course was not given in advance (1). The suggestions (the third open-ended question) concerned mainly the preparation of the equipment (5), and changes in the contents towards more examples (1), practice (1) and sharing of good practices (1). It is clear that the participants in the training liked the materials best, and would like better equipment and technical support. The latter can be judged as a naturally characteristic, considering the

main goal of the training; however, it could be considered to ensure back-up equipment, such as mobile internet, own laptops or mobile devices, virtual learning environment for the materials, etc.

2.3. Training results: products and informal interviews

The analysis of the informal feedback is based on comments and questions received by the participants between and during the face-to-face sessions. These could be divided into two categories: training-process related and organizational. Most of the former concerned the struggle with particular task and working with the equipment (e.g. finding an online resource). The management-related comments mainly focused on class arrangements, information about the course and administrative issues.

The analysis of the products (e-portfolios) received from 14 participants by the 2-week deadline period shows that all of them comply with the requirements listed in the documents. A closer look to the chosen technology for the presentation of the portfolio proves that two trainees used a new one (Prezi), two used websites, all the rest relied on classical PowerPoint presentations. As for the content, it features a lot of text (facts), pictures (an average of 2 – 3 per portfolio), and virtually no documents or artefacts. These results can be explained by the different levels of computer literacy, as evident from the entry questionnaire. Another factor inevitably was the fact that there were technical issues during the face-to-face session, which prevented trainees from experimenting with some of the suggested technologies. Notably, it also became apparent that some of the colleagues used a common template, changing the facts, but with same wording of the essayistic parts, such as teaching philosophy, for example. It can be concluded, that the teachers would be greatly facilitated if given ready-made templates using different technologies, with more practice and hands-on solutions during the face-to-face sessions, and a strong point about personalizing the contents should be made.

3. SUGGESTED IMPROVEMENTS

Based on the analysis above, several adjustments were introduced for the next run of the training. The first issue to be addressed was the workload: the theoretical discussions were reduced to half of the initial length, with interactive tasks to immediately practice on the ideas introduced. Respectively, the tasks for the face-to-face sessions were redesigned to fit within the theoretical part. Next, the tasks for the self-paced work were also reduced to three: preparing a teaching philosophy, completing own portfolio using a template, justifying the choices of artefacts in the portfolio and the technologies used to present them. In addition, templates are under construction (e.g. <https://www.slideshare.net/akremenska/ss-73951742>), to further facilitate the choice of a technology to be employed in the particular context.

4. CONCLUSIONS AND FUTURE WORK

The article presents an in-service training course for school teachers of a foreign language in Bulgaria, designed to support them by introducing technology in presenting their achievements. To this end, specially designed training tasks and activities are presented, which aim to develop practical skills for matching the required professional competencies, the specific requirements for language teaching as proposed by EPOSTIL, and the elements of the professional portfolio. An integral approach to the field was adopted, combining analysis on the respective legislation, self-assessment techniques and tools towards compiling a professional portfolio of adequately chosen and presented artefacts for professional development and attestation. The training is designed for both face-to-face and blended learning, and is based on interactive, individualized delivery.

The overall positive reaction to the training in introducing technology in presenting teaching portfolio shows that such training meets real needs for implementing contemporary technologies for proving professional development. The main challenges faced were the diversity of computer literacy, which as inevitable as it is, is to be considered for each run of the course, and the insufficient technical support. In order to address these issues, adjustments in the course contents and delivery methods were made, concerning simplification of the tasks and preparation of templates to be used as a basis of the e-

portfolios. The templates were especially designed to meet the requirements of Decree 12, App 2 and 24, and feature a presentation and a website e-portfolio templates.

Future work includes also providing a virtual learning environment for the training, e.g. Moodle, to ensure improved monitoring and feedback during both face-to-face and self-paced off-premises training. In addition, a process of designing and providing access and instructions for using simple e-portfolio templates for different technologies is currently undergoing. Furthermore, handouts could be prepared and printed as a trainee's guidebook prior to the course to ensure availability of instructions and reference.

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