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Promoting reflective practice through using portfolios as an innovative tool for English language teacher trainees

تعزيز الممارسة الانعكاسية من خلال استخدام المحافظ كأداة مبتكرة لأساتذة اللغة الإنجليزية المتدربين

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Abstract

Reflective practice is a challenging aspect of language teaching/learning that demands competence in thinking about personal experiences. The purpose of this study is to determine the role of portfolios in promoting reflective writing practice through examining 34 English language teacher trainees' reflective development along the three phases of the Practical Teaching Course. The design of analysing reflectivity is drawn from the framework developed by Hatton and Smith (1995). They suggest that reflection develops through technical, practical and finally critical level. The results indicated that the majority of these trainees developed from a technical towards a more practical understanding of teaching/learning. Few trainees were able to demonstrate a critical awareness of teaching/learning. Teaching portfolios provided a kind of stimulus for reflective practice; however, this study has revealed that reflection did not reach critical levels. Eventually, portfolios made trainees engage better in their teaching practice through reflective writings.

Keywords: Reflective Writing Practice, Teaching Portfolios, Teacher Education, Teacher Training Course.

ملخص

تعد الممارسة الانعكاسية جانبًا صعبًا في تدريس أو تعلم اللغة، لأنها تتطلب كفاءة التفكير في التجارب الشخصية. الغرض من هذه الدراسة هو تحديد دور المحافظ في تعزيز ممارسة الكتابة الانعكاسية من خلال فحص التطور الانعكاسي لـ34 متدربًا من معلمي اللغة الإنجليزية خلال المراحل الثلاث لدورة التدريس العملي. تم اعتماد تصميم تحليل الانعكاسية من الإطار الذي طوره هاتون وسميث (1995)، اللذان يقترحان أن التفكير الانعكاسي يتطور معالمستويات: التقني، العملي، والانتقادي. أشارت النتائج إلى أن غالبية هؤلاء المتدربين تطوروا من الفهم التقني إلى الفهم العملي للتدريس أو التعلم. القليل من المتدربين تمكنوا من إظهار وعي نقدي للتعليم أو التعلم. قدمت محافظ التدريس نوعًا من الحافز للممارسة العاكسة؛ ومع ذلك كشفت هذه الدراسة أن المتدربين لم يصلوا إلى المستويات الانتقادية بالتفكير الانعكاسي. في النهاية، جعلت المحافظ المتدربين ينخرطون بشكل أفضل في ممارساتهم التعليمية من خلال الكتابات العاكسة.

الكلمات المفتاحية: ممارسة الكتابة الانعكاسية، محافظ التدريس، تدريب المعلمين، دورة تدريب المعلمين.

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1. INTRODUCTION

Reflection has an important role to play in teacher education. It is proved in the literature to be a genuine means to teacher professional development. Teachers can be thoughtful and critical about their actions when they become reflective and thus effective. It was introduced into education by Dewey (1933) who insisted on "reflective" and "thoughtful" actions of teachers instead of habitual ones in order to foster change and improve from their own experience. According to his stance, reflective thinking is an important aspect of learning from experience. No doubt, the concern on how to develop reflective thinking in teacher education has been a critical issue by many researchers and educators.

Reflective writing practice; meanwhile, occurs when teacher candidates are given chances to think critically about their learning/ teaching and to write about their practices. They need to develop an understanding of reflective writing practices, which bridge between theory and practice. In teacher education, reflective writing is an ongoing and developmental process, performed before and after the act of teaching. It is argued that finding effective means to make teacher candidates write reflectively would lead them to develop reflective 'habit of mind' for their future teaching (Pasternak & Rigoni, 2015). Pasternak & Rigoni (2015) continue to emphasise that developing a framework for reflective writing would shift teacher candidates to rather a reflective mode. Hoover (1994), on the other hand, contents that through writing, teachers can articulate their rationales for actions, uncover their beliefs, and examine their actions in light of those assumptions, thus engage in inquiry or knowledge-generating.

Recently, portfolios have gained significant prominence as a tool for reflective practice in teacher education (Zeichner and Liston, 1996; Wolf & Dietz, 1998; Wray, 2001; Takona, 2003; Ocak, & Ulu, 2009). Many theoretical underpinnings of portfolios are thought to stimulate teachers to think more carefully about their teaching and subject matter (Darling-Hammond and Snyder, 2000). In pre-service teacher education programmes; however, the teaching portfolio offers opportunities for student teachers' experiences, thoughts, actions, and consequent learning about teaching to be recorded. In other words, they are required to reflect on various aspects of their teaching practice.

We thought it is essential to examine changes in reflective writing of student teachers' teaching practice during the whole Practical Teaching Course (PTC) because it is a challenging task involving time and effort. We explore the process of portfolio development aimed at developing reflection during trainees' classroom experiences. Thus, portfolios formed a

challenging element of the requirements for PTC. Trainees in the PTC were encouraged to use portfolios as a tool for reflecting on their teaching practices. They were also encouraged to go beyond mere reporting of their experiences as they used to do in their training reports to a deeper level of interpretation and analysis. Because of the aforementioned reasons, the aim of this study is to determine the role of portfolios in promoting reflective practice and to examine 34 teacher trainees' reflective development along the three phases of the PTC. It also focuses on analysing reflectivity in teacher trainees' portfolios during their PTC. We expect that portfolios would give trainees a means of conversing with themselves and others as attempting to develop strategies that enable them to monitor, analyze and improve their teaching.

2. Theoretical framework

2.1.Reflective writing practice in teacher education

Reflective writing is one kind of academic writing; it is an evidence of reflective thinking. By reflecting, we are likely involving our past experiences through feelings, thoughts and behaviours. Burton (2005, p.3) reports that writing reflectively has two main roles: "(1) Documentation: It records activity and thought, thus assisting future reflection by preventing loss of information; (2) Analysis: It acts as a form of analysis when the decisions about what to document and how to represent activity and thought are also recorded." He insists that both documenting and examining teaching experiences and beliefs promote professional development.

Moreover, Tan (2013) reports that reflective writing helped the pre-service TESOL teachers to reflect on planning and teaching and further understand and see the perspectives of the others. Miller and Shifflet (2016), on the other hand, analyzed pre-service teachers' written reflections on their meaningful elementary-school memories in combination with the course material and found both positive and negative influences of previous experiences on teachers' current and future teaching and learning. In their review of empirical research focusing on reflection activities, Risko, Vukelich and Roskos (2002) reveal many students reflecting at lower levels of thinking, such as factual and technical levels. Also, Davis states that pre-service teachers need support and practice in reflective writing, or to write "integrative reflections", because they write "unproductive reflections", mainly descriptive, without much analysis; i.e.: "listing ideas rather than connecting them logically." (Davis, 2006, cited in Cohen-Sayag & Fischl,

2012, p. 22)

Recently, reflection in teacher education contexts has been gaining a great importance and widespread interpretations in the literature (e.g., Hatton and Smith 1995; Boud and Walker 1998; Williams 2001; Peltier et al. 2005; Loughran, 2006; Loan, 2019). Hatton and Smith's framework (1995), for instance, identifies four types of writing; three of which are considered reflection. First, descriptive writing, not typically considered reflection, describes events that occurred with no attempt of providing justifications or reasons about the event. Second, descriptive reflection describes the event and attempts to provide justification and to recognize alternate viewpoints. Third, dialogic reflection engages in a form of analytical discourse with oneself, stepping back from the event and allowing for a discourse with self and exploration of the experience using qualities of judgment and possible alternatives for explanation and hypothesis. Forth, critical reflection demonstrates awareness that actions and events are located in and influenced by multiple historical and socio-political contexts.

Loughran (2006, p. 4), furthermore, views reflection in education as "a process that may be applied in puzzling situations to help the learner make better sense of the information at hand, and to enable the teacher to guide and direct learning in appropriate ways." This process involves questioning what has happened. He emphasises on the fact that reflective practice enables practitioners to develop self-awareness about their performances, which in turn develops professional growth (2002). Student teachers are expected to engage in reflection in its both forms: a process and product, during their teacher education. From this standpoint, Pasternak and Rigoni (2015, p.94) think that "it is through the act of reflection that teacher candidates begin to realize which instructional practices support critical thinkers, persuasive writers, confident speakers, independent readers, and discriminating researchers."

On the other hand, Burton (2005, p.14) in his research on reflective writing states four reasons, widely acknowledged among teachers, behind their reluctance to write about teaching: (1) Lack of time; (2) Lack of support to write; (3) Lack of confidence in their abilities to write; (4) Lack of reward or recognition as teachers when they do write. In fact, Beed, et al. (2005, p.165) believe that "The power of reflective writing to help pre-

service teachers become thoughtful practitioners is evident when they engage in written reflection about lesson plans, common readings, experiences related to internships, and their own education classes." We can conclude that reflective writing allows teachers to: (1) examine personal reactions to experiences; (2) identify and explore new associations; and (3) make connections to different experiences and events (Kennison & Misselwitz, 2002).

2.2. Portfolios as a reflective tool in teacher education

To emphasise on teaching practice, attention has been shifted to documenting teaching practices and to improving fundamental issues of practice. This movement to emphasise on teaching practice has motivated higher education to search ways to document, to improve, and to reward teaching. This focus on classroom teaching has contributed to the growth of the teaching portfolio which is recently used as alternative performance assessment tool of pre-service teachers aimed at enhancing T/L.

Foote and Vermette highlight the importance of portfolios for pre-service teacher education:

> The function of the pre-service teaching portfolio is highly influenced by the stage of teacher preparation of the student. As the pre-service teacher nears graduation, the portfolio necessary takes on an employment function. It is the goal of the student at this level to secure a teaching position. The student who is embarking upon student teaching must demonstrate the skills and abilities to take on this new challenge. (2001, p. 32)

A teaching portfolio is often framed by a reflective statement in which the teacher speaks about his teaching philosophy/practice and on-going development. It documents teacher's evidence of teaching performance collected at different teaching contexts throughout the professional career with its potential to allow reflection (Wolf & Dietz, 1998). Teaching portfolios can demonstrate student teacher's efforts, progress, and achievement during the course of their pre-service teacher education as well as evidence of self-reflection. Foote and Vermette (2001, p.34) maintain that "the process of reflection is what makes the portfolio a tool for life-long learning and professional development instead of merely a collection of works." It can also facilitate discussion among teacher candidates and with

educators or mentors.

The purpose of the portfolio in teacher education is to document growth in the acquisition of knowledge and/or to show increased proficiency (skills) in a particular area over a period of time. The teacher candidate is responsible for developing a portfolio because he must exhibit pedagogical knowledge and teaching skills. It is thought that portfolios stimulate teachers to think more carefully about their teaching and subject matter (Darling-Hammond and Snyder, 2000), raise teachers' self-confidence, regulate classroom performances, and make teachers aware about being a professional (Moss, Schutz and Collins, 1998). Thus, an important outcome of portfolio assessment is that faculty members find that the process of collecting materials and crafting their portfolios help them learn about themselves and their teaching (self-assessment). In pre-service teacher education programmes; however, the teaching portfolio offers opportunities for student teachers' experiences, thoughts, actions, and consequent learning about teaching to be recorded.

3. Research method

The present case study employed a qualitative approach for data collection and analysis. Data collected included English language student teachers' teaching portfolios. It enabled the researcher to describe, compare, evaluate, and interpret information reflective of the participants' knowledge, beliefs, and experiences.

The study took place during a single semester lasting four months fieldwork teaching. It presents a discussion of the trainee's portfolios analysis, and mainly their reflective writing development along the whole PTC related to the research questions that guided this case study:

- To what extent teaching portfolios act as a tool for trainees to engage in and develop their reflective writing?
- What are the different types of reflection that English language trainees engage in when reflecting on their PTC?

The findings would provide teacher-educators, in Teacher Training School of Constantine and in other educational settings, who plan to develop reflective writing through portfolios for pre-service teachers, more insights into the strategic development of promoting reflective future teachers.

During the PTC, English language trainees experience four months fieldwork teaching which evolves from classroom observation to alternate teaching and finally full-lesson teaching, putting into practice and evaluating elements from previous teaching methodology courses. Trainees are expected to become aware of their abilities in teaching practice, write the final report, self-evaluate their teaching experiences, and then comes a final evaluation by both the supervisor and the training teacher.

4. Results and discussion

4.1. Evidence of reflective writings in the portfolios

One trainee tried to define good teaching in his **philosophy of teaching**: *"My old conception that good teaching is a matter of mastering the subject matter has changed now. The way of simplifying things to pupils and understanding their potential needs and personalities is actually what makes up a good teaching."*

According to another trainee's philosophy of teaching, what it means to teach and the role of both the teacher and the learner are: "*In fact, teaching is a process of instructing and education at the same time. The teacher's task is directing and guiding learners to the right way of acquiring knowledge. Learners, in their turn, play an essential role in their learning because they are considered the centre of the teaching/learning process."*

In the section **Statement of the training goals**, trainees provided varying reflections upon the goals of the practical training they have put forward. One trainee revealed. *"Training for me has the following goals: to help trainees get accustomed to the realm of their future profession; to put into practice some of the teaching methods and strategies; to have a direct contact with experienced teachers."*

Another trainee expressed the competences he would like to acquire at the end of the training in his portfolio. *"I really expect from this training to achieve a set of competences: (1)professional competence to demonstrate enthusiasm for the subject matter and make learners work collaboratively; (2) pedagogical competence to introduce a writing task and materials for language work that meets learners' needs, encourages them to communicate, and increases their autonomy; (3) disciplinary competence to master the use of language forms, vocabulary, grammar, and conventions in writing; (4) cultural and technological competence to provide learners with*

rich and relevant information and convince them about a particular cultural situation."

Another student teacher illustrated how her beliefs documented in her **Summary of the training experience** paper had changed when she did her training. *"The practical training was of crucial importance to us as trainees. It helped us enjoy the noble profession through interacting with learners. It also prepared us for the workplace in the sense that we went frequently to the training school. More importantly, it taught us how to be responsible for our behaviour in front of the learners. Throughout the three phases of the training, we got a lot of benefits which are worth mentioning. First, the observation phase helped us to be acquainted with the real T/L environment. Second, the alternate phase enabled us to be practical teachers and experience teaching for the first time. Finally, during the last phase, we had all the responsibility to take in charge the training teacher's classes. Personally, I benefited more from the full time phase than the other phases. The training we undertook this year made us really aware of the complexities and difficulties that might be faced by the fresh teacher."*

Viewing trainees' written reflections was a concrete evidence to help explore various and opposing expressions, differing and interrelating commentaries. The following section presents the analysis of the levels of reflection in the trainees' teaching portfolios.

4.2. Analysis of reflective writings in the portfolios

The design of analyzing reflectivity is drawn from Van Manen's theory of reflective development (1977) and compared with the framework developed by Hatton and Smith (1995). Both suggest that development begins at **the technical level**. At this initial state, trainees could describe events in the classroom from a layperson's perspective. This level was rather observational because trainees were only aware of the physical events occurring in the classroom. They could observe a classroom situation and report on what they had seen. This awareness is described by Van Manen as the initial step for reflective development.

At **the practical level**, based on the initial level and with more exposure to practical teaching, trainees became more egocentric; they started to link teaching practices to their own teaching experiences. It is the ability to reflect using personal experiences when they engaged in teaching which

correspond to the second and third phases of the PTC.

Eventually, with a larger scope of personal experiences, trainees developed to a conceptual or **critical level** of reflection. In that, the trainee was more able to express how the classroom should be managed with regards to some teaching theories and principles. Therefore, reflective development progresses over time and with experience. It is conceived that the more exposure to diverse teaching experiences, the greater opportunity for trainees to gain larger basis for reflection.

The process of analysing the data followed Patton's procedure for content analysis (Patton, 1990, pp. 381-427). All portfolios' commentaries were coded for all the three levels of reflection. The researcher read through all the portfolios and coded all the instances in the texts where trainees referred to personal responses to their own teaching on each level. In order to facilitate the process, a coding list (see Table 1) demonstrates the kinds of text appropriate for each level.

Table 1: Descriptions and evidence at the three levels of reflection

Levels	Description	Evidence	Comments
Technical	Descriptive elements of practice as gathered from observation.	<u>I believe</u> that an effective <u>learning environment must have very specific standards</u> for student behaviour. Without this, the <u>learning environment will be difficult to guide learners in active learning.</u>	It is pure description with no reflection.
Practical	Descriptive elements of practice grounded in personal experience.	<u>I established realistic goals</u> for my pupils and <u>planned my instruction</u> to help them reach these goals.	It reflects on effective lesson plan drawing from personal teaching experience.

Critical	Descriptive elements of practice related to personal experience and grounded in principles and theories of teaching and learning.	When I planned lessons for my pupils, I have learnt that I cannot rely on the same method to work for all of them. I adopted Gardner's theory of multiple intelligences to motivate my pupils.	It relates the development of the lesson plan to Gardner's theory of multiple intelligences.

There were 34 portfolios in which reflective entries were coded and identified as supporting evidence for trainees' reflective development along technical, practical, and critical reflection. A total of 99 entries were gathered during the initial phase of the PT, the observation phase; 136 reflective entries during the alternate phase; and 192 entries during the full time phase all over the three levels of reflection. Table 2 represents the summative scores for all levels of reflection over the three phases of the PTC.

**Table 2:** Summative coded data for all the three levels of reflection

	Observation	**Alternate**	**Full time**
Technical	99	64	76
Practical	0	67	108
Critical	0	5	8
Total	*99*	*136*	*192*

4.3. Discussion

Overall results represented in the tables above suggest that for the majority of trainees, the observation phase demonstrates technical reflection (99 reflective entries); the alternate and full time phases illustrate mainly practical reflection (67 entries) and (108 entries) respectively. Trainees provided evidence of their practice and examined their development over time through written commentaries. Few trainees could use their written

commentaries to connect them to theories and principles of teaching and learning in both alternate and full time phases with (5 entries) and (8 entries) in that order. Figure 1 shows the rate of reflection levels in all phases of the PTC.

Fig.1: Rate of Reflection Levels in the PTC
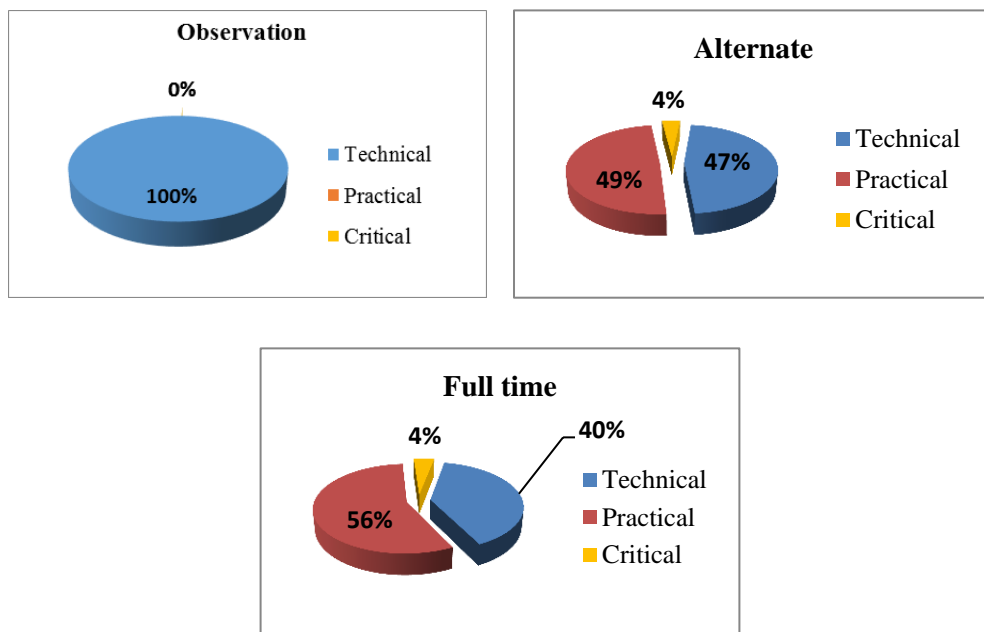
4.3.1. Levels of reflection during the observation phase

All the reflective entries during the observation phase illustrate a technical level (100%). Trainees wrote in their commentaries descriptions of classroom environment, the training teachers' actions in the classroom and about what they would do without any rationale for their responses. A representative example is:

B4 trainee: "*From my training teacher's teaching performances, I have come to believe that the most successful learning occurs within the framework of a student-centred curriculum and the most important thing for the teacher to do is to establish a trusting and respectful relationship with the learners.*"

In this excerpt, B4 trainee believes in implementing a student-centred curriculum in order to make the classroom more active and make learners interact better. She also drew from workshop meetings that the most

important role for the teacher is to create and maintain an effective learning environment. It is simply a statement of what has been observed; a rather contextual recollections of classroom events.

Another B5 trainee expresses his conception about how the classroom environment should be managed without referring to any personal experience or any rationale.

B5 trainee: "In order to motivate learners and make them *participate in classroom activities, the teacher should provide feedback to all the pupils and establish clear guidelines and expectations so that learners feel comfortable and lead them to active learning*."

4.3.2. Levels of reflection during the alternate phase

Trainees' reflective commentaries in the alternate phase demonstrate an overall development from a technical to a practical level of reflection. The portfolio data suggest that trainees who started off writing at a technical level in the observation phase (100%) moved towards a practical level (49%) in the alternate phase. With actual but limited teaching experience, many reflective commentaries in this phase have been changed towards a more practical standpoint and would convey classroom conditions that lead to effective teaching and learning. As in the following examples:

B4 trainee: "*I learned from my training teacher to vary teaching strategies to reach more learners. When dealing with the lesson about simple past and continuous, the learners were getting bored. When varying activities and materials using dialogues and games through pictures and flash cards, pupils were more interesting[sic], involved and enjoyed the activities*."

This trainee recognized and learned from personal teaching experiences the benefit of varying teaching strategies and approaches to make the classroom active and learners involved and interested.

B5 Trainee: "*I thought about the rules that would ensure a secure and enjoyable classroom. With the collaboration of pupils, we set a list of rules were very successful. I realized then that disciplinary problems occur when the learners feel confused and frustrated about specific teaching strategy or unclear teacher's behaviour, but not of their distressing attitude*."

The B5 trainee's instructional approach has changed with personal teaching. Her reflective thinking shifted towards classroom management skill because as a student teacher, classroom management is a demanding

task. Her reflection comment was mainly on how classroom rules can be effective in case of behavioural problems.

4.3.3. Levels of reflection during the full time phase

Few trainees however moved towards a critical level (4%) of reflective entries by the previous and last phase in the PTC. These trainees show high level of critical thinking with concrete evidence from teaching theories and principles. Moreover, during this phase there is a noticeable increase of practical reflection (56%) and a reasonable decrease in the technical level of reflection (40%).

B4 trainee: "*I learned that active and effective learning means encouraging learners to participate, varying classroom activities and tasks that make them all involved even the less interested ones. This follows Dörnyei's Motivational Framework including the learning situation level which in turn encompasses course-specific motivational components associated with teaching methods and learning tasks as well as teaching materials.*"

B5 trainee: "*When I planned lessons for my pupils, I have learnt that I cannot rely on the same method to work for all of them. I adopted Gardner's theory of multiple intelligences to motivate my pupils and involve them in learning.*"

Both of these examples seem to be significant teaching experiences for the two trainees. Their reflective writings show a clear connection between their practice and theories of teaching and learning. Although scarce reflections corresponding to critical level were drawn from trainees' portfolios, few of them related their reflective commentaries to some educational theorists like Bloom, Gardner, Dörnyei, and Vygotsky.

5. CONCLUSION

This study analyses the trainees' reflective development along the three levels of reflection during the overall PTC. The majority of the trainees developed from a technical understanding of teaching and learning towards a more practical understanding of teaching and learning. Few trainees were able to demonstrate a critical awareness of teaching and learning. The teaching portfolio provided for the trainees a kind of stimulus for reflective writing and encouraged them to avoid merely describing teaching events as they did in their Training reports; however, this study has revealed that their reflection did not reach critical levels.

The study confirmed the hypothesis that introducing teaching portfolios would promote pre-service English language teachers' reflective practice along the PTC, and would act as a tool for trainees to engage in and develop their reflective writing. In fact, teaching portfolios proved to be a better tool with the potential to document trainees' teaching performances and experiences. We come up with three main conclusions that reflective writing needs practice; the context of the practical training is a powerful factor in writing reflective journal and there can be an improvement in reflective writing if teacher candidates think critically.

As a result, our challenge as researchers is to test appropriate methodological tools that can guide the development of reflective writing. We are also required to develop a detailed analysis of portfolio presentations to understand better the development of teachers' professional knowledge along teacher education and even beyond. This study contributes to the literature on using teaching portfolios in pre-service teacher education programme in TTSC to enhance reflection and professional growth and endeavours to offer a framework for future implementation of the teaching portfolio within the TTSC.

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