

## Introducing Teaching Portfolios in Pre-service English Language Teacher Education in the Teachers' Training School of Constantine

### Abstract

This article reports on a research project that describes the experience of English language trainees with using teaching portfolios to report and present their learning/teaching experiences during the Practical Training Course (PTC). It aims to illustrate the process of the development of teaching portfolios as a reflective tool for the trainee's learning/teaching aiming to replace the current training reports used at the Teachers' Training School of Constantine (TTSC). A procedural study of how the trainees presented the materials and reflected upon them was carried out over a four-month period, as well as their perceptions about the portfolios. Findings from content analysis, reflections and the questionnaire reveal that the teaching portfolio would be a good alternative to report trainees' learning/teaching experiences and a productive tool to promote reflection and career development.

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### ملخص

تقدم هذه المقالة تقريراً عن مشروع بحث يصف تجربة متدربين لمعلمي اللغة الإنجليزية مع استخدام المحافظ التعليمية وتقديم خبرات التعلم / التدريس خلال دورة تدريب عملي. الهدف هو توضيح عملية تطوير المحافظ التعليمية كأداة للتفكير في التدريب على التعلم / التدريس من أجل استبدال تقارير التدريب المستخدمة حالياً في مدرسة تدريب المعلمين قسنطينة. أجريت دراسة لكيفية تقديم المتدربين لأدوات التدريس وطريقة التفكير فيها على مدى فترة أربعة أشهر، وكذلك تصوراتهم حول المحافظ. النتائج المستخلصة من محتوى التحليل، التفكير والاستنباط توضح أن محفظة التعليم يمكن أن تكون بديلاً جيداً لتقديم خبرات التعلم / التدريس للمتدربين وكذلك أداة منتجة لتعزيز التفكير والتطوير الوظيفي.

### Introduction

Many teacher education institutions all over the world, including that of Constantine in Algeria, have a major goal of a better preparation of teachers, especially English Language teachers. For this reason, TTSC recognizes the importance of the PTC as an essential step for the trainees' professional development. It is considered as a transitional stage that would enable trainees to articulate their theoretical background into practice.

Learning to reflect while practising teaching is an important component of many teacher education programmes. Promoting reflective thinking has been the centre of attention [1,2]. According to Longayroux et al.[3], pre-service teachers are required to reflect on their practice through portfolios since it enables them to steer their own development

as professionals. When trainees reflect on their practice in portfolio themes, they will ask the 'why' questions and this will lead them to improve their understanding and promote further discussions with their supervisors about their own experiences as beginning teachers. A recent study by Hismanoglu [4] has shown that among the effective professional development strategies that English language teachers prefer are teaching portfolios. They can be very helpful for them in terms of lesson planning and preparation, actual teaching presentation, evaluation and feedback provision (Seldin, 1993 cited in [4]).

Ever since portfolios are being used for the purpose of promoting pre-service teachers' reflection. A number of studies have found that it is during the process of constructing the portfolio that they reflect on their development as novice teachers and establish learning objectives [5, 6, 7, 8, 9, 10]. In addition, teaching portfolios are considered to be a comprehensive form of performance-based assessment and are used to assess the readiness of pre-service teachers to receive the initial teaching license [11, 9]. When developing portfolios, trainees are involved in different assessment tasks which according to Sarivan [12] consist of a set of experiential problem solving activities that the trainees perform in order to practise the very basics of teaching.

As we know, good teachers need to be made. Algerian society is expecting qualified teachers in what they perform and the skills they need to master. Adequate education needs adequate teaching, thus good teachers. However, learning to teach is the essence in teacher training institutions. Trainees need practice in the classroom and need to have that practice guided and monitored by both a training teacher and a supervisor. In fact, both *Training Copybook* and *Training Report* give little information about trainees teaching performance; they rather provide narrative description of three phases in the PTC which most of the time contribute a little in providing evidence of the trainee's reflective practice. Thus, the purpose of this research is to explore the introduction and use of teaching portfolios in the PTC to reflect English language trainees' teaching practice and to identify their perceptions when constructing portfolios as part of the training course.

## **1. Theoretical background**

### **1.1. Teaching portfolios in pre-service teacher education: An overview**

A teaching portfolio is defined as a collection of evidence in relation to learning that provides evidence of someone's knowledge, skills, and dispositions [9]. In this sense, portfolios can be used as a way of encouraging trainees to document and describe their skills and competences as a teacher, and to reflect on their own learning about teaching. The value of teaching portfolios as a divergent learning task is highly recognized in pre-service teacher education. Loughran and Corrigan [7] identified two components of the portfolios, as a *process* and a *product*. The former constitutes the trainee's involvement in different activities, teaching and learning experiences and presentations during the year, while the latter includes all the materials that the trainee produces to present his understanding of all the experiences to be a teacher. It is a mirror that reflects both the professional growth and competency of the trainee; it resembles a document of artifacts as an evidence of achievement.

In pre-service teacher education, portfolios serve a broad range of applications. Zeichner and Wray [9] identified three kinds of applications: 1) A *learning portfolio* with the purpose to engage student teachers in inquiry about their teaching and to document growth in teaching over time; 2) A *credential portfolio* which serves as a form of performance-based assessment to determine whether student teachers have shown certain level of proficiency on a set of teaching standards; and 3) A *professional portfolio* developed for the purpose of recruitment use, consisting of a sample of assignments and documents representing the trainee's best work. In these terms, the present portfolio model which interests our research purpose mainly encompasses the three types.

It has also been argued that the use of teaching portfolios influences trainees' reflection upon teaching and subject matter content, awareness of theories and assumptions that guide instructional practice to enable them make a statement about their personal philosophy of teaching, and increased self-confidence about their practices (ibid). Wolf (1994 cited in [9]) reviewed the areas that affect the influence of teacher portfolios on teacher learning and development: 1) the portfolios development process, 2) opportunities for mentoring and collaboration, and 3) the quality of feedback on the completed portfolio.

Recently, teaching style has changed with the integration and use of Information and Communication Technology (ICT) tools. The widespread use of the internet has brought many advantages in terms of rapid access and sharing of information and experiences. Since their beginning use for educational purposes in the 1990's, a bulk of research has shown that e-portfolios could enhance language teachers' ICT skills and professional development [13, 14]; it could function as a bridge between education and working life and support the formation of the lifelong learning idea in learners [15]. It may also serve as a suitable assessment tool for pre-service teachers' project-based evaluation [16]. In sum, e-portfolios are considered as important documents that assist pre-service teachers to develop pedagogical and technological skills and abilities.

Eventually, teaching portfolios are gaining prominence as important tools for promoting reflection in teaching and learning. Since their beginning use in US pre-service teacher education programmes in the 1980's with the work of Shulman at Stanford, portfolios have been expected to contribute to the development and growth of prospective teachers and to the improvement of the teaching profession in general [9]. Furthermore, there is a direct transfer of some evaluation tools used in the American teacher education, among them the teaching portfolio that has been recently incorporated to the different European teacher education systems [17].

## **1.2. Teaching portfolios and pre-service teacher training**

One important goal within language teacher education is *training*. According to Richards and Farrell [18]:

Training refers to activities directly focused on a teacher's present responsibilities and is typically aimed at short-term and immediate goals. Often it is seen as preparation for induction into a first teaching position or as preparation to take on a new

teaching assignment or responsibility. Training involves understanding basic concepts and principles as a prerequisite for applying them in the classroom, usually with supervision, and monitoring and getting feedback from others on one's practice.

Training, in this sense, and mainly pre-service teacher training consists of both theoretical training during which trainees are being exposed to philosophies and theories of learning and teaching, human development, multicultural education, and field experiences which allow trainees to make connections between course work and the practice of teaching. The practical training is considered as the bridge between educational theory and practice. This training, either theoretical or practical, provides the trainee with the necessary abilities, skills and competences to be articulated in the PTC when placed within the school environment in order to be familiar with classroom management, direct teaching situations under the monitoring of skilful trainers. In general, Richards and Farrell (ibid) have illustrated seven training goals for language teachers: 1) learning how to use effective strategies to open a lesson; 2) adapting the textbook to match the class; 3) learning how to use group activities in a lesson; 4) using effective questioning techniques; 5) using classroom aids and resources (e.g., video); and 6) using techniques for giving learners feedback on performance.

In the TTSC, however, the PTC is integrated at the end of the trainees' graduation for a period of sixteen weeks. It consists of three phases: the observation phase, the alternate phase, and the full time phase<sup>2</sup>. Each phase has specific objectives; the observation phase, for example, aims at introducing the trainees to the profession of teaching and allows them to be acquainted with classroom environment. During this phase, the trainee is required to fill the observation grid recording observations about the training teacher's lesson presentation, behaviour, and feedback during four weeks. The alternate phase lasts nine or ten weeks and aims at involving alternatively trainees in the various pedagogical activities of the training teacher. During the final phase, trainees experience two weeks sole teaching, taking the full responsibility to prepare, present the different lessons and activities or assignments and their evaluation.

Besides, trainees have to attend seminars with their supervisors along the whole training to discuss and evaluate the phases and report their experiences in a descriptive and narrative style in the *Training Report* which should be submitted to the department for assessing the trainee, and the *Training Copybook* which remains with the trainee after assessment. Additionally, trainees have to complete a research project in a group work aimed at developing trainees' research skills by allowing them identify learning and teaching problems and suggest solutions and evaluate them.

Since teacher education is a process that takes place over time rather than an event that starts and ends with formal training or graduate education, the need to make reflective teachers seems necessary. "Teaching should be accompanied by collecting information on one's teaching as the basis for critical reflection, through such procedures as self-monitoring, observation and case studies." This is how Richards and Farrell [18] have defined *reflective teaching*. These procedures or strategies mentioned by the authors can help, especially student teachers to become more aware of the

problems they confront in the classroom and how these can be resolved with the help of supervisors and mentors. For this reason, the need for richer pre-service teachers' assessment had led to the acknowledgement of the importance of teaching portfolios. In pre-service teacher education, portfolios take on three primary functions: learning, assessment, and employment [10]. Hence, portfolios in this case can focus on prior knowledge based upon years of being a student as well as on kinds of experiences and responsibilities they faced when practising teaching that emphasize reflective practice and continual development.

## **2. The study**

The study was conducted during the last semester before graduation of the 2012/2013 academic year at the department of English of the TTSC as a case study. It consists of two main procedures: a qualitative method using survey questionnaire that measure English language trainees' perceptions about the contribution of the teaching portfolio development in promoting their reflective teaching and as a better tool with the potential to represent trainee's performance and teaching experiences. The second method was designed to gather and analyse descriptive data using teaching portfolios.

The sample group of this study consisted of 50 English language trainees at the TTSC. They were randomly selected from two levels; baccalaureate + 4 years graduation (B4) and baccalaureate + 5 years graduation (B5) supposed to certificate in order to teach respectively in colleges and secondary schools in eastern Algerian towns. From the sample of trainees, 7 did not complete the study and only 43 trainees completed their portfolios and answered the questionnaire.

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, writing the final report, self-evaluation of their teaching experiences, and final evaluation by both the supervisor and the training teacher. Since the concept of a portfolio is new to the trainees, they were firstly introduced to the concept through a seminar organized before the PTC onset by the researcher that gives a thorough rationale and guidelines about its uses and the process of developing it. Added to that, trainees were provided by a model teaching portfolio developed by a Canadian English language trainee to better illustrate and inspire the trainees.

For the purpose of this research, the researcher has designed a prototype portfolio that fits the PTC. Trainees are required to fill and organise it each in his own way according to their teaching materials and resources with the help of the supervisor's instructions after each workshop meeting. These are the suggested portfolio contents designed for this research:

1. Trainee as Person
  - a. Biodata (CV)
  - b. Statement of philosophy of teaching
  - c. Statement of training goals
2. Trainee as Professional
  - a. Exemplary lesson plans

- b. Training workshop reports
- c. Summary of training experience
- d. Videos of lessons & photographs
3. Trainee as lifelong learner
  - a. Career goals
  - b. Training teacher's & supervisor's feedback
4. Appendices

During that period, trainees were required to write their own reflection about their experiences in a weekly reflection checklist which provides reflections of classroom activities, the problems and difficulties encountered and their own evaluation of these experiences. Supervisors and training teachers have access to the portfolios without formally grading them. After completing the PTC, content-analysis of the data was carried out. Finally, the trainees answered a survey questionnaire completed at the end of the course so that to be able to gather their perceptions about their engagement with the portfolios.

### **3. Findings and discussion**

The findings obtained from the study can be divided into two subsections: 1) introducing the teaching portfolios promotes trainees' reflection on the teaching practice, 2) introducing teaching portfolios develops trainees' professionalism.

#### **3.1. Promoting trainees' reflection on teaching**

The introduction of teaching portfolios should be considered as a developmental process since each step in the portfolio activities makes them proficient. Trainees first observe and search relevant teaching materials; then, plan, document, and organize the content which enables them to gain more skills from each activity. Besides, making them reflect on their practices in the following reflections show how they evaluate their own teaching.

In her portfolio reflection journal, B5 trainee described a specific lesson and how it went.

**Trainee #1:** "I worked on unit 3 'Schools: Different and alike', during this class, I was unable to motivate my learners. I failed to raise their interests and attract their attention. I was not successful in delivering the lesson, maybe because I was afraid that day and not well prepared."

**Trainee #2:** "The main discovery I made from teaching this week is the right way to teach the writing skill is to ask pupils to write their first draft, then to read it loudly, then to exchange each other's draft for mistake correction, then to write their final draft."

**Trainee #3:** "When I think about my teaching, I am most concerned about classroom management, time management, lesson content, and motivation."

Foote and Vermette [19] 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 work.” By means of teaching portfolios, trainees can reflect upon the strengths and weaknesses of their teaching. They can show evidence of how and why their actions worked or did not work well for their pupils or class.

When comparing the trainees’ training reports, we find a total absence of the trainees’ reflections on their teaching practice, only lesson plans. What can be noticed in the training reports and copybooks is the prevailing descriptions of how the trainees taught the lessons and what they observed the training teachers and their peers’ teaching situations and experiences.

However, when analysing the teaching portfolios, most trainees teaching activities can vary between trainees’ descriptions of their experiences; judgements and evaluations of their selected teaching methodology and material; and opinions about whether they have achieved their objectives. They also include sections where trainees examine what went well and difficult, and what factors played a role in the situation. Hence, we can say that trainees tend to focus on their teaching practices and how to improve them by writing their own reflective comments in the portfolio.

### **3.2. Developing trainees’ professionalism**

In this section, we present findings from responses to questionnaires provided by 43 of the participants in this research who have completed their portfolios and 7 who left without completing their portfolios. The questionnaire was designed to report trainees’ perceptions of their practical training experience with developing teaching portfolios. Trainees were reassured that their identity would be kept anonymous. The main part of the questionnaire [Experience with portfolios] had been constructed as Likert-type scales with a five-point format ranging from “strongly agree” to “strongly disagree”, and with the 20-item statements. The items are organized to address the following themes or categories:

Trainees’ motivation and interest about portfolio construction (e.g. “I was interested in developing my portfolio at the beginning”; “I enjoyed the process of developing my teaching portfolio”), a reflective tool (e.g. “the portfolio helped me to reflect on my learning experiences in the PTC”; “the portfolio helped me to become a reflective thinker”), developing personal growth and development (e.g. “the portfolio helped me to be aware of whom I am as a beginning teacher”), and using the portfolio as an assessment tool (e.g. “I valued the portfolio as an authentic assessment tool”; “portfolios should be a requirement in teacher education programme completion”). Data collected from the portfolio process and experience is presented in table 1 below with statistics of frequencies, mean values, and standard deviations.

According to the findings presented in the table above, the portfolio development by trainees in the PTC contributed to raise their motivation and interest. The response rate likely indicates that approximately half the respondents 47% (13.9 & 34.8) were favourable and comfortable towards the use of teaching portfolios and appreciate and benefit from their involvement with portfolios. About 34% (between strongly disagree and disagree) of trainees expressed that they were less enthusiastic with portfolios

mainly because the portfolio is a new tool to them as well as workload. Most of the trainees, about 20.9%, strongly agreed and 39.5% agreed even that they felt proud of completing their portfolios and highlighted that portfolios presented themselves. Also, trainees noted that portfolio experience encouraged them to discuss their teaching performances with their supervisors and training teachers.

Second, most of the respondents underlined that through portfolio development, they learned how to reflect on their learning and teaching and develop the reflective skills (16.2% strongly agreed and 51.1% agreed). In other words, their reflections helped them to gain deep understanding of their learning experiences. Fewer trainees, approximately 11.6% indicated that they didn't learn how to reflect on their performances. In this case; trainees highlight the need for learning how to reflect, a research conducted by Al-Issa and Al-Bulushi [20] suggests for trainers some approaches and strategies to help trainees develop as reflective teachers.

Another valuable feature highlighted by the majority of trainees (20.9% strongly agreed and 48.8% agreed) is its potential to facilitate professional development. They noted that it is a tool for supporting teacher learning over time; i.e., to life-long learning and that portfolio construction contributed to their growth as teachers. However, a relatively few trainees disagreed with this reality.

Finally, approximately 72% of the trainees (25.5% strongly agreed and 46.5% agreed) considered that portfolios would be a useful authentic assessment tool for their teaching training course and suggest to integrate it in teacher education programme. Trainees allude that by self-evaluating their teaching performances, they can improve their teaching skills. In sum, most responses indicate that trainees unanimously find the portfolio a useful tool for professional development, supporting self-reflection and raising awareness of their strengths and weaknesses in teaching.

#### **4. Conclusion**

In conclusion, this research sheds light on the fact that developing teaching portfolios promote trainees' reflection on their teaching practice, and enhance their professional development. It is important to recall that the portfolio as a tool for learning and teaching is new to all participants in this study; thus the results are partly due to their lack of experience.

The analysis of the portfolios also revealed that through the process of developing portfolios, trainees described what they have performed, the areas they had developed, how they dealt with the different teaching situations and experiences, and what they learned from them. All these achievements contributed to structuring their practical knowledge to improve their performance in teaching and gain professionalism.

The results of this study correlate with many other research findings which focus on the importance of using portfolios in teacher education. Portfolios, as Nichol and Milligan [21] assert, involve student teachers in the direct monitoring and regulation of their own learning as they reflect on their achievements making judgements about the quality of their work in relation to specific professional standards. In order to reinforce reflective practitioners among pre-service teachers, teacher education programmes



should introduce the portfolio process in introductory courses [19]. Portfolios reveal the pre-service teachers' reflections and provide insights into their decision-making processes so their growth as professionals can be traced and documented. Shulman [22] demonstrates that teaching portfolios are carefully selected collections of coached and mentored accomplishments verified by samples of student work and fully realized only through reflective writing, deliberation, and serious conversation.

Trainees would better have enough opportunities and time to apply what they have learned in the PTC, so that they can have follow-up information on portfolio writing and have adequate mentoring or supervision during portfolio development. Also, they can improve reflection and precisely undertake the appropriate action in order to make them link between the relevant theory and practice. As suggested by Okhremtchouk, Newell & Rosa [23], when addressing the issue of timing, "Delaying the exit assessment will result in more skilled authentic portfolios and a more accurate evaluation of teaching skills."

Portfolios would also encourage discussion and collaboration among trainees about portfolio development (process and product) and their action plan. Through workshops, trainees examine and discuss materials that will eventually be included in their teaching portfolios. Supervisors too are involved in the process of constructing the portfolio with their trainees as well as training teachers would play an active role in the process and product of portfolio development and assessment.

Another implication is the integration of teaching portfolios in teacher education programmes to assess and promote learning and, even later, employment purposes. As Darling-Hammond and Snyder [6] note:

By giving assessors access to teachers' thinking as well as evidence of their behaviours and actions (e.g. through lesson plan, assignments, statement of teaching philosophy), portfolios permit the examination of teacher deliberation, along with the outcomes of that deliberation in teacher's actions and student learning.

It is important for the success of the portfolio introduction or implementation that supervisors give the trainees enough time to construct the portfolio and provide them with the appropriate constructive feedback otherwise trainees are likely to perceive it as ineffective.

This research is delimited to English pre-service teacher education department. In order to obtain detailed results, the same study should be replicated with other pre-service teacher education institutions in Algeria in order to have deeper understanding of teaching portfolios and their contribution in promoting reflective practice and professionalism.

1 Training Copybook and Training Report are usually used as an exit requirement to assess trainees during the PTC at the Teachers' Training School of Constantine.

2 Practical Training Guide: Teachers' Training School of Constantine. Edited by the Department of Training, 2010.

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Table 1: Percentage of English language trainees' perceptions of teaching portfolios experience.

Table 1

Statements	SA (%)	A (%)	Undeci (%)	DisA (%)	SDisA (%)	Mean	SD
I was interested in developing my portfolio at the beginning.	6.9	44.1	11.6	20.9	16.2	2.95	2.00
I was comfortable to complete the assignments in my teaching portfolio.	13.9	34.8	16.2	27.9	6.9	2.79	1.99
I enjoyed the process of developing my teaching portfolio.	13.9	46.5	18.6	20.9	0.0	2.47	1.93
I was proud of my teaching portfolio.	20.9	39.5	27.9	11.6	0.0	2.30	1.87
I felt personalizing the teaching portfolio.	20.9	48.8	30.2	0.0	0.0	2.09	1.78
Supervisor and training teacher in the training were willing to help me in developing my portfolio.	18.6	46.5	16.2	6.9	11.6	2.47	1.93
The portfolio helped me be open-minded to share my learning experience with others.	16.2	60.4	16.2	6.9	0.0	2.14	1.81
I learned sufficient reflective skills to develop my portfolio.	16.2	51.1	18.6	9.3	4.6	2.35	1.89
The portfolio helped me to reflect on my learning experiences in the training period.	25.5	44.1	18.6	11.6	0.0	2.16	1.82
I learned how to use reflection to enhance my teaching and learning.	13.9	58.1	27.9	0.0	0.0	2.14	1.81

The portfolio helped me to become a reflective thinker.	20.9	44.1	34.8	0.0	0.0	2.14	1.81
The teaching portfolio helped me to be aware of whom I am as a beginning teacher.	27.9	51.1	20.9	0.0	0.0	1.93	1.69
The portfolio helped me to see my progress throughout the whole training period.	20.9	48.8	18.6	11.6	0.0	2.21	1.84
I acquired sufficient performance skills to help my teaching.	23.2	65.1	11.6	0.0	0.0	1.88	1.66
The portfolio presents my best capabilities as a beginning teacher.	16.2	44.1	20.9	18.6	0.0	2.42	1.91
The instructions of portfolio completion helped me develop my portfolio.	13.9	46.5	32.5	6.9	0.0	2.33	1.88
I learned how to create a portfolio in the future.	32.5	51.1	16.2	0.0	0.0	1.84	1.63
Portfolios should be a requirement in teacher education programme completion.	20.9	41.8	20.9	16.2	0.0	2.33	1.88
I valued the portfolio as an authentic assessment tool.	25.5	46.5	13.9	13.9	0.0	2.16	1.82
The portfolio was an important aspect of the practical training experience.	20.9	39.5	23.2	16.2	0.0	2.35	1.89

Number of participants: N = 43.