

Analysis and Discussion of the Content of Pre-Service Teachers' Chinese Language Teaching Methodology Learning Portfolios

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Abstract

The greatest difficulty in educating pre-service teachers is cultivating their ability to reflect on the learning in course work and apply this reflection in their teaching. Many academic articles have shown that organised learning portfolios can help pre-service teachers reflect and improve their teaching. This study focused on 20 pre-service teachers who studied the Chinese Language Teaching Methodology I module of the Postgraduate Diploma in Education (PGDE) at The Education University of Hong Kong (EdUHK). They were asked to develop organised learning portfolios for use in their study programme (the first phase) and during field experience when they practise teaching (the second phase). The aim of the study was to explore the content of pre-service teachers' learning portfolios. The research methodology focused on document analyses of artefacts and reflection reports in the portfolios. The study found that the learning portfolios could help teacher educators understand what the pre-service teachers had learnt in the lessons and the problems they encountered. In teaching reading, most pre-service teachers grasped how to help students understand the content of the passages, vocabulary, and sentence structure. However, they still lacked confidence in teaching different writing skills and rhetoric, and helping students deepen their understanding of

passages. The study also found the pre-service teachers' reflections were generally limited to analysing the strengths and weaknesses of lessons and seldom included suggestions for improving future practice.

Keywords: Chinese language teaching methodology, learning portfolios, pre-service teachers, reflection

Introduction

The Chinese Language Teaching Methodology I module offered by EdUHK teaches pre-service teachers to use different methodologies to teach the Chinese language, emphasising a learner-centred approach. Pre-service teachers need to develop lesson plans that are suitable for their pupils' needs and interests. Pre-service teachers generally do not find it difficult to understand the theories and concepts of teaching methodology. However, they often find it difficult to put the theories into practice. Only when pre-service teachers are able to develop their own constructs of the methodologies, through reflecting on their practice and knowledge, are they able to achieve a deep understanding of Chinese language teaching. Many research studies have shown that requiring teachers to develop portfolios can facilitate reflection (Dietz, 1995; Loughran & Corrigan, 1995; Smith, 1998), helping them to relate the theory to practice. The use of portfolios appears to have the potential to help pre-service teachers deepen their understanding of teaching. To test the potential benefits of portfolios, pre-service teachers learning the Chinese Language Teaching Methodology I module were asked to develop portfolios to find out what they documented and reflected on in their learning and teaching practice.

1 The Concept of Reflection

The concept of reflection can be interpreted in various ways, and has not been used consistently by theorists, researchers or teachers. It can be viewed as a means for solving problems, for engaging in professional activity, or for enhancing learning.

Dewey (1933) described reflection as a way of solving problems, involving active engagement and careful consideration of practice. According to Dewey, reflection is the 'active, persistent, and careful consideration of any belief or supposed form of knowledge in the light of the grounds that support it and the

future conclusion to which it tends' (p. 6). Some researchers (e.g. LaBoskey, 1994) have built on this conception, suggesting that the immediate purpose of reflection is to resolve problems, and Cheung and Hew's (2004) study has demonstrated that student teachers were better able to assess alternative solutions through reflection.

Other theorists, such as Schön (1987), regard reflection as a means for engaging in professional activities. He challenged the traditional technical rationality in professional development and argued that professionals should look more to the 'competency and artistry already embedded in skilled practice' (Schön, 1987, p. ix). He pointed out that reflection is an important vehicle for the acquisition of professional knowledge and used the term 'professional artistry' for the kinds of competence practitioners sometimes display in unique, uncertain situations. For Schön (1983), the reflective practitioner is one who can think while acting or practising and can exercise 'reflection-in-action'.

Some other researchers (e.g. Boud *et al.*, 1985; Kemmis, 1985; Bruner, 1990) consider reflection to be a means for enhancing learning. Boud *et al.* (1985) regard reflection as an important human activity in which people recapture their experience, explore their feelings, and think about and evaluate them in order to lead to new understanding. Kemmis (1985) stresses the meta-thinking that helps one to become more aware of one's experience, to learn from it and to reflect in order to direct further action. In Hartman's (2001) view, metacognition is another word for meta-thinking, which is a theoretical construct of an individual's conscious awareness of his or her own thought processes.

Metacognition is an important concept related to reflection. It refers to both metacognitive knowledge and metacognitive awareness. When individuals reflect with metacognitive knowledge, they are essentially thinking about what they know (Hacker, 1998). This may also engage them in metacognitive awareness, which predisposes them to learn how, when and why to use cognitive strategies (Hartman, 2001) to learn more successfully. Self-questioning about what one has learned (i.e. 'inner dialogue') is an important process leading to self-reflection (Costa, 1991).

The basic question during reflection is: ‘What am I doing and why?’ (Wenzlaff, 1994). Reflection is considered to be a process involving the exploration of experiences, including looking back on them, reconsidering views, decisions and actions, and exploring possible alternatives. Through such reflection, people can imagine seeing themselves from the outside and thus can analyse situations and re-assess how they should react. Reflection therefore becomes a means for learning.

2 Reflection and Teacher Development

Reflection is important for student teachers. Some researchers have argued that reflection enhances various skills of student teachers, including problem-solving (Bratcher, 1998; Doty, 2001), organisation and co-operation. Klenowski (1998) said reflection can help student teachers become more self-reliant and independent, which, according to Anderson & DeMeulle (1998), will encourage them to be responsible for their own learning. Several studies (e.g. Green & Smyser, 1995; Nettles & Petrick, 1995; Ferraro, 2000) have also shown that fostering reflection in student teachers leads to personal and professional growth.

In the past, it was assumed that pre-service teachers were similar to technicians in that they just listened to and received theory, and then practised accordingly (Zeichner & Liston, 1996). From this perspective, teachers are not expected to develop their own theory and self-reflection has less importance. However, based on more progressive assumptions about teacher development, Cole & Knowles (2000) suggested that teachers’ practice requires both inquiry and professional development. By studying their own practice through systematic self-reflection and analysis, teachers can take charge of their professional development. They can use personal judgement and problem-solving skills to improve their teaching. Teachers can articulate practical theory and develop new ideas of practice from their personal perspective on teaching — which cannot be obtained from an outsider (Zeichner & Liston, 1996). To achieve this, teachers should constantly evaluate their practice through reflection.

The value of reflection is explained by Lyons (1998) as teachers thinking about what has worked better, and then considering how to improve their teaching and develop their own knowledge of teaching. Reconceptualisation begins and teachers' practice is dramatically improved (Costantino and De Lorenzo, 2002; Tucker *et al.*, 2002).

Many research studies (Hopkins, 1986; Bartlett, 1990; Wenzlaff & Cummings, 1996; Ferraro, 2000; Wood, 2000) show that reflection helps teachers to become more aware of their own practice and the beliefs that underpin it. When teachers encounter difficulties in their practice, they begin to be aware of their feelings and thoughts; and when they view the situation as problematic, a reflective process starts (Lo, 1998). They then attempt to solve the problems by reviewing and reflecting on their practice, developing new insights (Wade & Yarbrough, 1996) for improvement and changing their instructional approach (Edwards, 1996; Ghaye & Ghaye, 1998; Thomas, 1998). In this way, the reflection process helps teachers develop their personal and professional knowledge (Wood, 2000; Grossman & Williston, 2001).

Reflection is especially important for teachers in learning how to develop their teaching methods. Only when they start to review and analyse their current teaching practice and relate this to the theory underlying new teaching approaches will they be able to assess the difference and attempt to change the ways in which they teach. However, although teachers are expected to be reflective practitioners, not all of them always are. Darling-Hammond *et al.* (2005) argued that only teachers with a high level of metacognitive awareness are capable of being reflective.

3 Portfolios as Tools for Facilitating Reflection

Dictionary definitions of portfolios, such as The American Heritage Dictionary and The Oxford Dictionary, refer to them as portable cases for carrying loose papers. Portfolios have a long history in art, business and architecture for

use by artists and professionals to keep records of their work and show what they have achieved throughout their careers. In recent years, the idea of portfolios has been adopted in education, initially among university teachers, and later in teacher education programmes.

Paulson *et al.* (1991) defined a portfolio as ‘a purposeful collection of student work that exhibits the student’s efforts, progress and achievement in one or more areas’ (p. 61). In the process of developing their portfolios, learners should collect, select, organise, and reflect on the artefacts which illustrate their learning experience. Requiring students to demonstrate their learning ensures they become more actively involved and can evaluate their own work.

Many researchers (e.g. Wade & Yarbrough, 1996; Wolf, 1996) argue that reflection is the heart and soul of portfolios. Typical artefacts to be included in portfolios include logs, diaries and journals, records of oral dialogues and group discussions; and all these are instruments commonly used to promote teacher reflection. Therefore, the process of developing portfolios fosters reflection by providing a context for writing reflections (Freeman, 1998), documenting teachers’ practice and thoughts (Snyder *et al.*, 1998) and engaging them in analysing what they and their students do (Shulman, 1988). When teachers write reflections to support the artefacts selected (such as students’ work samples and videotapes of their teaching), they are undertaking ‘the constructivist process of recognition, evaluation and revision of personal views’ (Bredo, 1993, p. 13).

The development of a learning portfolio during the course encourages teachers to think about the course content in relation to their experiences (Pleasant *et al.*, 1998); what they have applied in their teaching and how they did so; and how effective their teaching has been in achieving the intended goals (Richert, 1990). These outcomes can be achieved both by selecting (Berry *et al.*, 1991; Olson, 1991; Painter, 2001) and arranging (Wade & Yarbrough, 1996) the artefacts for the portfolios. Reflection is enhanced if opportunities for discussion — both formal and informal — are provided during portfolio development (Huebner, 1997).

Formal discussion refers to portfolio interviews between the course tutor/lecturer and the teachers when the portfolio is submitted, while informal discussion relates to interaction and consultation among peers and between teachers and the course tutor/lecturer during the development process. Ghaye & Ghaye (1998) regarded informal discussion as 'reflective conversations'. However, whether discussions can lead to teacher reflection depends on the quality of the conversations — for example, whether the feedback and conversations allow teachers to relate current learning to existing practice — and whether they are motivated to evaluate their prior conceptions and beliefs.

Many empirical studies (e.g. Huebner, 1997; Borko *et al.*, 1997; Lyons, 1999; Klenowski, 2000) have indicated that teachers have developed important skills such as critiquing, reflection and self-evaluation to improve teaching and learning as a result of creating portfolios. However, other research studies have queried whether reflection can really occur in the portfolio development process. For example, Hayes (1994) conducted a study on an adult education programme and found that some learners did not develop reflective skills simply through keeping portfolios. Findings by Wade and Yarbrough (1996) also indicated that not all student teachers found portfolios useful in promoting reflective thinking and personal growth.

Some researchers (Zeichner & Wray, 2001; Lo, 2002; Delandshere & Arens, 2003) have also queried the quality of the reflection teachers document in their portfolios. For example, Lo (2002) found in many cases the written reflections of teachers were not critical at all, but rather focused on technical and practical aspects. Delandshere & Arens (2003) also pointed out that on the evidence from the portfolios they analysed, some teachers were unable to write reflectively. So, merely asking teachers to develop portfolios cannot guarantee that there will be genuine reflection.

Even when teachers engage in genuine reflection in the process of developing portfolios, and make recommendations for change in the future,

it is still uncertain whether they will change their actual classroom behaviour accordingly (Huebner, 1997).

The research studies cited above show that although portfolios have often been considered to be tools for reflection, the extent to which they really foster critical reflection still needs further exploration.

4 Background and Aims of the Study

Traditionally, pre-service teachers completed assignments in the Chinese Language Teaching Methodology I module before having teaching practice. The teacher educator who taught this module would not necessarily know how the pre-service teachers performed during teaching practice in schools because they might be supervised by other educators. Therefore, the teacher educator (also the researcher of this study) of this module in 2016 asked the pre-service teachers of the fulltime course of the Postgraduate Diploma in Education (PGDE) at EdUHK to develop portfolios in order to better understand how they related learning to practice.

This study involved two phases. Phase one related to the period when pre-service teachers studied Chinese Language Teaching Methodology at EdUHK and developed their portfolios. In Phase two the pre-service teachers continued to develop their portfolios in teaching practice. In Phase one, pre-service teachers were required to develop their own portfolios. They collected evidence to document their learning through the lectures, workshops, and discussion sessions organised by the teacher educator during the course. They were also required to reflect on what they had learned in these different processes and to record their reflections, which could be included in their learning portfolios. Portfolios did not carry any marks. After completion of the module, in Phase two they were invited to maintain portfolios to document their teaching practice in schools. All pre-service teachers taught in primary schools and their students were primary two to five pupils. This study will analyse the portfolios in both phases.

The aims of the study are as follows:

- (1) To find out what pre-service Chinese language teachers documented in their portfolios.
- (2) To explore what pre-service Chinese language teachers reflected in their portfolios.

5 Methodology

In Phase one a total of 20 participants submitted portfolios at the end of the module. Twenty portfolios were analysed and were labelled Teacher A, Teacher B, Teacher C etc. This was convenience sampling because the participants were volunteers. These volunteers continued to develop their portfolios after in Phase two when they selected artefacts that could best represent their work in their teaching practice. All 20 portfolios were analysed.

In both phases, artefacts from the portfolios were analysed in two ways:

- (1) The types of evidence collected in the participants' portfolios were counted to give a general picture of the types of artefacts pre-service teachers used to document their learning and teaching.
- (2) All reflections documented by the pre-service teachers were analysed.

6 Findings in Phase One

6.1 Types of learning evidence

Various kinds of artefacts were collected by teachers in the portfolios as evidence of their learning, such as articles about Chinese language teaching methodology, lesson plans, and their written reflections on learning. Some of these items were materials provided by the teacher educator (researcher) during the course, and some were either materials teachers had obtained from other sources or were their own products. The categories and number of items are presented in Table 1.

Table 1
Types of items collected in portfolios in Phase one

Types of items collected in portfolios	No. (%) of teachers (N=20)
Articles about Chinese language teaching methodology:	
Distributed by tutor during class	17 (85%)
Obtained by pre-service teachers from other sources	2 (10%)
Lesson plans:	
Distributed by tutor during class	16 (80%)
Obtained from the resource centre	8 (40%)
Obtained from websites	4 (20%)
Designed in the workshop (group work)	7 (35%)
Designed by individual teachers	20 (100%)
Written reflections	20 (100%)

The majority of the teachers (85%) included articles distributed by the teacher educator (researcher) in their portfolios as learning evidence, and only 10% collected articles from other sources. This indicates a need to better encourage pre-service teachers to do more independent study because only a minority took the initiative to search for more readings to enhance their learning.

As for the lesson plans collected as evidence of learning, again a high percentage included examples provided by the teacher educator (80%). Only 40% of the teachers collected the plans they obtained from the resource centre and 20% included items from web sites.

Some factors might explain why a relatively small proportion found articles and lesson plans from other sources. Pre-service teachers had to attend other modules and have many assignments. They may have preferred to use the time available to complete the assignments rather than develop the portfolios, which did not carry any marks. Had the teachers been eager to develop their portfolios, they would not have relied so much on the teacher educator to provide them with the learning materials. Overall, this group of pre-service teachers had not yet developed into independent learners through building portfolios. The need for independent learning should perhaps have been emphasised more at the beginning of the module.

Some of the pre-service teachers (35%) put the language tasks their groups designed in the workshops into their own portfolios and all included their individual lesson plans. This shows they believed the lesson plans would be useful when they had their teaching practice. Finally, all teachers included written reflections in their portfolios to explain why they chose to include particular artefacts in their portfolios and to reflect on what they had learnt in the module.

6.2 Written reflections

All the 20 portfolios included written reflections. Using analytic induction (Maykut & Morehouse, 1994), three categories were identified, namely:

- Evaluating practice, where the teachers identified the strengths and weaknesses of their lesson plan designs and/or the language tasks they developed or collected from other sources;
- Identifying problems, where they reviewed the problems in their previous teaching practice or considered potential teaching difficulties; and
- Deliberating on future practice, where they expressed how they could improve their learning.

Table 2 shows the number of statements in pre-service teachers' written reflections grouped into the above categories with illustrative examples of each category. Table 2 indicates that a very large percentage (87.7%) of pre-service teachers' reflections were focused on evaluating lesson plans.

Only 8.6% of reflections in Table 2 were focused on problem identification, mainly related to helping students understand the writing skills, rhetoric and the main theme of the passage, and 3.7% focused on considering future practice. It is also noted that the percentage of reflections focused on 'future deliberations' was the lowest. Yost *et al.* (2000) pointed out that thinking critically requires teachers to examine a situation from multiple perspectives and then identify a rationale for alternative solutions. The above results suggest that pre-service teachers were generally not critically considering solutions.

The results suggest that additional class discussions and workshops should be made more challenging — for example, by posing more problems to stimulate the teachers to look for solutions and become more active in their learning.

Table 2
Teachers’ written reflection in Phase one

Categories	Total Number (%) of statements (N=815)	Examples
Evaluating the lesson plans.	715 (87.7%)	‘I think that my lesson plan is well designed. (Teacher F).
Identifying problems	70 (8.6%)	‘It is difficult for me to design the lesson plan to help students learn the form of study, rhetoric, and the main theme of the passage.’ (Teacher D)
Deliberating on future practice	30 (3.7%)	‘Since the Chinese lesson is very dull, I shall give more activities for students in order to arouse their interest in learning Chinese language.’ (Teacher L)

7 Findings in Phase Two

7.1 Teaching artefacts collected in the portfolios

There were different types of artefacts in the portfolios which included lesson plans, teaching aids, samples of pupils’ work, reports on lessons and reflection sheets (see Table 3).

Table 3
Types of items collected in portfolios in Phase two

Types of artefacts	No. (%) of teachers (N=20)
Lesson plans	20(100%)
Teaching aids	12(60%)
Samples of pupils’ work	11(55%)
Reports on lesson observations	4(20%)
Written reflections	20 (100%)

All the pre-service teachers included lesson plans and written reflections in their portfolios. Some (60%) had teaching aids and 55% used samples of pupils' work. Only four teachers (20%) included lesson observation reports from their peers. It showed that pre-service teachers were not very active in analysing the samples of pupils' work and lesson observation reports. Perhaps pre-service teachers genuinely did not have enough time to include many artefacts in portfolios during about five weeks of teaching practice.

7.2 Analysis of pre-service teachers' reflections

In the analysis of the content of teachers' written reflections, three categories emerged, which were similar to those in the learning portfolios developed during the methodology course. Table 4 shows the frequency of each category of reflection with illustrative examples.

Table 4
Teachers' written reflections in Phase two

Categories	Total Number (%) of statements (N=1208)	Examples
Evaluating the practice	633 (52.4%)	'Pupils enjoy my lessons, they can easily comprehend the passages. They learn vocabulary, sentence structure. I think I am quite successful in teaching Chinese language. (Teacher A).
Identifying problems	410 (33.9%)	'It is difficult for me to design activities for the students because they are too noisy.' (Teacher C)
Deliberating on future practice	165 (13.7%)	'I think I shall prepare more tasks for my students because their foundation of Chinese language knowledge is not so good.'" (Teacher P)

Evaluating the lesson plans

Among the 1208 statements in the written reflections, more than half (52.4%) indicated that pre-service teachers had evaluated their teaching. They were satisfied with their teaching because they noted that their pupils enjoyed the lessons, and these positive reactions enhanced their confidence in teaching.

Identifying problems

Some statements (33.9%) indicated problems pre-service teachers encountered. These related mainly to their own difficulties, such as managing the class and a lack of confidence in being able to help students understand the theme of the passage. They tended to have an awareness of their weaknesses in teaching.

Deliberating on future practice

Only some statements (13.7%) indicated that teachers gave serious consideration to ways of improving their future practice. As in Phase one, the lowest percentage of reflections focused on 'future deliberations'. Kemmis (1985) stressed that critical reflection helped one to become more aware of one's experience, to learn from it and to use it to devise future action. However, pre-service teachers were not critical enough to deliberate about future practice, implying that some suggestions are needed to enhance pre-service teachers' reflections. After their teaching practice, some tutorials and discussion could be arranged. Huebner (1997) said reflection was enhanced if opportunities for discussion were provided during portfolio development.

8 Implications of Overall Findings: Documentation of Learning and Teaching Using Portfolios

The results from both phases of the study showed that portfolios are a useful tool for pre-service teachers to document their learning and teaching. The process of selecting artefacts to represent their learning and teaching encouraged pre-service teachers to think through their learning and teaching processes. This is a good strategy for professional development. Evidence in portfolios gives teacher educators a better understanding of pre-service teachers' learning and allows them to keep track of their work in studying the module and how they apply what they learnt in teaching practice.

In Phase one the written reflections showed pre-service teachers had a good

grasp of how to teach Chinese language in terms of comprehension, vocabulary and sentence structure. However, their reflections revealed they lacked confidence in teaching the writing skills, rhetoric and the main theme of the passage. This suggested to the teacher educator a need to put more effort into arranging activities to help pre-service teachers understand these aspects.

The results also suggested some other improvements could be made to teaching the Chinese Language Teaching Methodology I module. In both phases of the study, most of the artefacts submitted were lesson plans and written reflections. However, there was no documentation of academic discussions or debates on Chinese language teaching.

More effort is required to help pre-service teachers appreciate the value of reading more widely on the theoretical aspects of Chinese language teaching and to encourage them to develop into independent learners. In the portfolios submitted at the end of Phase one, the pre-service teachers did include some articles on Chinese language teaching, but most had been distributed by the teacher educator during the course. Also, they did not record any comments or personal views on the articles or note what they had learnt from them. The fact that they did not include any articles other than those provided to them probably meant that they had made no effort to look for other readings, although they were expected to do so in the independent study time allocated in the course. As a start to encouraging more independent study, the teacher educator should be better equipped with references on the theoretical and practical aspects of Chinese language teaching and exemplars of teachers' practice (lesson plans). The teacher educator could encourage pre-service teachers to explain their concerns and problems and then direct them to relevant references and lesson plan exemplars. Pre-service teachers with specific questions in mind would then be more motivated to read articles related to their queries. In addition, at the beginning of the course the tutor could help the teachers to organise themselves into study groups and act as a discussion facilitator during independent study periods. Gradually, with the teacher educator's assistance, the pre-service

teachers could identify group leaders and become more proactive in organising activities during the times allocated for independent study.

Opportunities should be provided for pre-service teachers to share their reflections through discussion in both phases. All the pre-service teachers in the study recorded their reflections on their learning in Phase one and teaching in Phase two and included these in their portfolios. However, most of these reflections were rather brief, were limited to the practical aspects of Chinese language teaching and failed to demonstrate sufficient critical thinking about how teaching could be improved. The written reflections showed that, though they had attempted to evaluate their own learning and teaching, they did not think through the processes in depth and examine issues from various perspectives. The teacher educator could act as a facilitator or mediator for discussions about the pre-service teachers' reflections. The teacher educator could pose stimulating questions in the discussion sessions and provide a framework for pre-service teachers to reflect in greater depth and make suggestions for improvement. Helping teachers to reflect and record their reflections will need to be improved if portfolio development is to be the main learning strategy for this pre-service course in future.

The research participants in this study were selected by convenience sampling and this inevitably restricts the generalizability of the findings. In this study, pre-service teachers developed portfolios to demonstrate their learning and teaching process, and further studies could involve in-service teachers from the refresher course. These could lead to a better understanding of both the pre-service and in-service Chinese language teachers' learning experiences. Further research studies should also focus on how the university designs the teacher education program and makes use of resources to support the use of portfolios as a learning strategy to help the professional growth of pre-service teachers.

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析論準教師「中國語文教學法」學習檔案的內容

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摘要

教師培訓課程最大的困難是培養準教師如何將課堂所學應用在實際教學中，如何幫助他們從反思中學習。很多文獻指出組織學習檔案能幫助準教師反思，改善教學。本研究的研究對象是 20 名在香港教育大學修讀「中國語文教學法 I」的中文科準教師，他們須在大學課堂（第一階段）和實習其間（第二階段）建立學習檔案。研究旨在分析和探討準教師的學習檔案內容。研究方法採用文件分析，分析檔案中的顯證和反思報告。研究發現學習檔案能幫助導師瞭解準教師的課堂所學和實踐教學時遇到的問題。準教師能掌握讀文教學中的理解課文，釋詞和句式的教法，但部分準教師對形式和內容深究教學仍欠信心。研究又指出準教師的反思只側重分析教學的優點和不足，較缺乏提出改善的建議。

關鍵詞：中國語文教學法 學習檔案 準教師 反思