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Teachers' Perspectives on the Use of Digital Portfolios in EFL Teaching Context

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Introduction

Teacher education in Vietnam has undergone radical reform in the last decade. This is partially the result of the determination of the Vietnamese government to improve education quality nationwide at all levels. In particular, the training of teachers of English as a Foreign Language (EFL) has received significant consideration. This is shown in many policy documents issued by the government that focus on increasing both quantity and quality of EFL teachers (Government of Vietnam, 2008; Ministry of Education and Training, 2014). Among the quality standards of EFL teachers, ICT competence has recently received considerable attention and investment (Government of Vietnam, 2017; Ministry of Education and Training, 2016, 2017). In order to upgrade this competence, investment in ICT training and facilities for institutions and schools nationwide has been a major concern for the government.

Despite such innovative policies and investment, a large number of English teachers in Vietnam do not meet the requirements of ICT competence set by the government (Le, 2015). In a couple of studies, Vietnamese teachers were found to be skilled in performing basic ICT operations which were restricted to word processing and using presentation software and web browsers only (Dang, 2013; Peeraer & Van Petegem, 2011). In another study, Vietnamese EFL teachers were found to have made little or no use of computers provided for their schools by the government (Dang, 2011). In a large-scale empirical study with more than 200 participants, the use of ICT in language teaching at the tertiary level was also limited due to some major barriers including a lack of ICT guidelines, ICT training, specific support and motivation (Dang, Nicholas, & Lewis, 2012). Further training and innovative ideas on how to make the best use of the government's investment and support are needed to improve EFL teachers' ICT competence in Vietnam.

In order to assist teachers in developing technology competence and promoting professional development, e-portfolios have been used in several countries with both pre-service and in-service teachers and at different levels (Montgomery, 2003; Oakley, Pegrum, & Johnston, 2014; Shepherd & Hannafin, 2008). E-portfolios have been proved to be effective in helping teachers to refine their professional practice, reflect on their successes as well as failures, improve multimedia technology skills, and hence help teachers adjust their professional practice accordingly (Adams-Bullock & Hawk, 2005; Barrett, 2000; Montgomery, 2003). A small number of studies involving e-portfolios have been recently conducted in Vietnam but almost all of them used e-portfolios as learning portfolios for students (Loan & Tin, 2016; Nguyen & Ikeda, 2015; Nhi, 2018). Empirical studies regarding the use of e-portfolios to assist EFL teachers in Vietnam in reflecting on their professional development and improving their ICT



competence are difficult to find. Thus, this study was conducted in Vietnam with a group of EFL teachers in order to investigate their perspectives based on their real-life experience of designing and using e-portfolios in their teaching practice.

Literature Review

Overview of E-portfolios

Simply defined, a traditional portfolio “is a collection of evidence, usually in written form, of both the products and processes of learning” (McMullan et al., 2003, p. 288). E-portfolios are the digital formats of the traditional portfolios. They are also called by different names like electronic portfolios, digital portfolios, or web-folios (i.e., web-based portfolios). For teacher use, “a teaching portfolio is a collection of information about a teacher’s practice” (Wolf, 1996, p. 34). The evidence may include lesson plans, student assignments, videotapes of instruction, formal evaluation by supervisors, teachers’ written descriptions, etc. However, a portfolio is not a collection of miscellaneous items but an organised collection of evidence aiming to demonstrate performance that meets intended instructional outcomes (Wolf, 1996) and it provides a critical analysis or reflection of its contents (McMullan et al., 2003). A portfolio is seen as both a measure and a reference to one’s learning or professional accomplishment (Dinham & Scott, 2003). Depending on the purposes of use, portfolios have different functions. They can be used for reflective practice, assessment, employment, achievement showcase of personal and professional growth, individual growth plans, and so on (Dinham & Scott, 2003; McMullan et al., 2003; Montgomery, 2003; Oakley et al., 2014; Wolf, 1996).

Thanks to the technological advancement, the development, maintenance and presentation of portfolios has become much easier. Compared to traditional portfolios, digital portfolios have three major qualities (Oakley et al., 2014). Instead of paper-based artefacts, e-portfolios have various digital types of evidence like digital images, audio, video, animation, and/or webpages. Thanks to the digital components, e-portfolios are easier to organize and cross-reference with internal and external hyperlinks. Hence, e-portfolios are easier to share on a wider networks of online platforms like forums, discussion boards or social networks (Oakley et al., 2014). Therefore, e-portfolios are more advantageous than traditional portfolios because of their convenience, interactivity, and connectivity.

E-portfolios, ICT Competence and Professional Development

With a specific regard to the teaching career, a teaching portfolio has the function of demonstrating a teacher’s capabilities and accomplishments manifested through documents, artefacts and empirical evidence that are carefully presented and linked together in a theoretically relevant and coherent way (Dinham & Scott, 2003). Systematically, Adams-Bullock and Hawk (2005) classify portfolios into three main types based on their various functions: process, product, and showcase portfolios. They are basically different in terms of the purpose, the types of evidence, and how the evidence is collected. A process portfolio is used to improve something or evaluate a teacher’s progress, while a product portfolio serves a particular goal or a desired outcome. The last type, a showcase portfolio, is a collection of the best evidence for certain purposes like job interviews, competitions, or a teaching award.

The components and organisation of a teaching portfolio may vary depending on its purposes. Whatever the purpose is, Wolf (1996) suggests that the heart of a portfolio should be the combination of teaching artefacts and written reflections. In his viewpoint, the introduction should describe the teaching philosophy and goals of the owner. The artifacts need to be framed with explanations. The reflective commentaries not only describe the portfolio contents but also reflect on what the teacher and students have learned. The concluding section, in Wolf’s opinion, should include “evidence of ongoing

professional development” (1996, p. 35). Apart from these components, Adams-Bullock and Hawk (2005) add one more component – the audience, the viewers that a portfolio purposefully targets.

The use of e-portfolios helps to develop teachers' technology skills (Barrett, 2000). The process of designing and constructing digital evidence is a great opportunity for teachers to improve and demonstrate their skills of using various types of hardware, software, audio/video editing, web-design, and the like (Adams-Bullock & Hawk, 2005). Particularly for teachers, a digital teaching portfolio can “enable both novice and accomplished teachers to make sense out of a myriad of professional experiences and bring into focus a clear picture of themselves as growing, changing professionals” (Montgomery, 2003, p. 175). Adams-Bullock and Hawk (2005) summarise the benefits of keeping digital portfolios which include “accessibility, ease of duplication, increased technology skills, learner-centeredness, long shelf life, minimal storage space, multiple linkage, and portability” (p. 145, 146).

With such potential benefits of e-portfolios for teacher professional development and ICT competence enhancement, there have recently been more studies using e-portfolios to investigate different aspects of reflecting on teaching practice and professional development. Trent and Shroff (2013) conducted an exploratory qualitative investigation in Hong Kong to examine preservice teachers' perspectives on how their teacher identities were shaped by engaging in digital teaching portfolios. The results of in-depth interviews revealed that pre-service teachers appreciated the positive contribution of e-portfolios to the construction of their teacher identities. Oakley et al. (2014) investigated the challenges and limitations of using Wi-Fi-based developmental e-portfolios for reflection for 23 pre-service teachers in a Master's program in Early Childhood and Secondary Education at a university in Australia. The results showed that most participants had technology barriers and difficulties in achieving the multiple purposes of e-portfolios. Roberts (2018) conducted an action and design-based research to investigate how e-portfolios could help pre-service teachers at a university develop reflection skills and abilities via using PebblePad as a platform. The results showed promising outcomes of using e-portfolios for scaffolding reflection but also revealed necessary adjustments for similar studies in the future. Despite the availability of various studies on teachers' e-portfolios around the world, the use of e-portfolios in EFL teaching contexts similar to that in Vietnam were rarely found.

Methodology

Research Setting

Participants in this study were 20 graduate students taking the course “ICT in Foreign Language Teaching”, a selective component in a Master's program at a public university in Vietnam. They were EFL teachers working at different institutions in different provinces in the north of Vietnam. Eight of them were high school teachers, six secondary school teachers, one elementary school teacher, one kindergarten teacher, and the rest were teachers at colleges and universities. The main purpose of the course was to introduce a number of technology tools potentially useful for language teaching purposes. At the end of the course, participants were given the assignment of designing a web-portfolio for their professional development. Because of their various backgrounds, participants were free to choose the purposes or functions of the e-portfolios that they designed. Weebly, a free website builder, was selected as the main tool. They were also required to write their reflection journals on what they had built. Because the specific type of e-portfolio that participants were introduced to was web-based portfolios, the terms “web-portfolio” and “e-portfolio” are interchangeably used in the rest of this report

Research Design

The study followed a mixed-method design which included different ways of collecting and interpreting data. The main data collection instruments were an online survey, teachers' reflection

journals, and a qualitative evaluation of their web-folios. An online survey was conducted at the end of the course to explore participants' perspectives on using web-folios as a form of professional development. The survey included four parts: demographic information and personal experience with portfolios as well as web-folios, teachers' perspectives on the benefits of web-folios, barriers of keeping web-folios, and finally teachers' attitudes towards keeping web-folios. A five-point Likert scale was used to examine teachers' perspectives. All of the web-based portfolios designed by participants were evaluated based on the component guideline of a teaching portfolio proposed by Wolf (1996, p. 35). Teachers' reflection journals, which basically described the contents of their e-portfolios, what they liked most about them and what they wanted to do to improve their e-portfolios were also analysed descriptively to gain more insight into their web-based portfolios.

Findings

Demographic Information

Demographic questions revealed that two-thirds of the participants had less than five years of English language teaching experience and the remaining had more than 10 years of teaching experience. Regarding their personal experience of using portfolios and e-portfolios for their teaching job, 60% of the participants responded that they had never kept a portfolio before and nearly 79% of them had never created an e-portfolio before they took the course. The other 21% who said "yes" to e-portfolios reported that they often kept e-portfolios in the form of images, clips or a Facebook page. It can be inferred that most of them were new to portfolios and e-portfolios. When asked further about their web design experience before taking the course, 85% of the respondents reported that they had never created a website before and about 80% had never used Weebly – a free and user-friendly web design tool.

Teachers' Perspectives on the Benefits of Keeping a Web-folio

Table 1 shows the results of teachers' perspectives on the benefits of keeping web-folios in their teaching career. The mean range of 1 - 2.5 indicates no level or a low level of agreement with the given statements, 2.6 - 3.5 an average agreement level, and 3.6 - 5 a moderately high to high level of agreement. In general, all teachers had positive views on the benefits of keeping web-folios in their teaching practice. Among the other items in the survey, feedback from students and colleagues ($M = 4.60$) appeared to be the most beneficial feature of having a web-folio as perceived by the participants. Followed by feedback provision was the opportunity to develop technology skills via designing web-folios ($M = 3.95$). Showing one's own strengths ($M = 3.05$) and capacities ($M = 3.10$) via web-folios were not highly appreciated by the participants. These two benefits were confirmed at an average level.

TABLE 1
Teachers' Perspectives on the Benefits of Keeping a Web-folio

Items	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>Level</i>
Creating a web-folio helps me in developing my technology skills.	3.95	1.46	High
Keeping a web-folio helps me in planning my teaching job.	3.55	1.27	High
Keeping a web-folio helps me realize my strengths and weaknesses.	3.05	1.31	Average
My web-folio helps me show my best abilities and capacities.	3.10	1.37	Average
Having a web-folio increases my desire for further professional development.	3.50	1.27	High
My web-folio helps me become more organized in my work.	3.45	1.31	Average
My web-folio helps me get feedback from my students and colleagues.	4.60	1.23	High

Likert scale: 1 = Strongly disagree, 2 = Disagree, 3 = Undecided, 4 = Agree, 5 = Strongly agree

Teachers’ Attitudes towards Keeping a Web-folio

Table 2 shows the results of participants’ attitudes towards web-folios. The sense of self-achievement in ICT skills and feeling proud of being able to create one’s own teaching web-folio was the most popular feeling among the participants ($M = 4.25$). Following this opinion was the self-confidence of showing web-folios to other people ($M = 3.75$). Intention to continue using web-folios and preference of using web-folios for teacher assessment were also positively perceived by the teachers with high levels of agreement, $M = 3.70$ and $M = 3.55$ respectively.

TABLE 2
Teachers’ Attitudes towards Keeping a Web-folio

Items	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>Level</i>
I feel proud being able to create a web-folio and having my own web-folio.	4.25	1.37	High
I find web-folios useful and will continue to develop my web-folio for my teaching job.	3.70	1.30	High
I am confident to show my web-folios to my colleagues and students.	3.75	1.41	High
I feel more comfortable with assessing my performance through my web-folio than through traditional ways of teacher assessment.	3.55	1.35	High

Likert scale: 1 = Strongly disagree, 2 = Disagree, 3 = Undecided, 4 = Agree, 5 = Strongly agree

Overall, teachers expressed positive attitudes towards enhancing their digital technology competence from designing web-folios. They also showed their confidence of continually developing them and using them in their teaching practice, both for teacher assessment and for interacting with students and colleagues.

Teachers’ Perspectives on the Barriers of Keeping a Web-folio

Table 3 illustrates the findings about the barriers for maintaining a teaching web-folio from the teachers’ perspectives. Institutional support ($M = 3.70$), institutional requirement ($M = 3.60$) and time ($M = 3.60$) seemed to be the most common barriers among teachers. Device ownership ($M = 2.15$) and the usage of Weebly ($M = 2.25$) were reported not to be major problems by most of the participants.

TABLE 3
Teachers’ Perspectives on Barriers of Keeping a Web-folio

Items	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>Level</i>
I did not receive enough training to create a web-folio.	2.95	1.31	Average
I do not have enough technology skills to create a web-folio.	2.95	1.35	Average
I do not have enough time to design a web-folio.	3.60	1.23	High
Weebly is too difficult for me to use to design my own web-folio.	2.25	1.33	Low
I do not have access to a laptop or devices to maintain a web-folio.	2.15	1.31	Low
E-portfolios are not a requirement of my school.	3.60	1.95	High
My school does not offer an e-portfolio platform.	3.70	1.45	High

Likert scale: 1 = Strongly disagree, 2 = Disagree, 3 = Undecided, 4 = Agree, 5 = Strongly agree

ICT training and ICT skills were averagely perceived to be barriers for the teachers but not the main hindrance. Weebly was also perceived to be easy to use and not a major technical barrier for the teachers in designing their web-folios.

Teachers’ Practices of Creating Teaching Web-folios

In general, all teachers in the study managed to design their own web-based portfolios using Weebly despite the fact that e-portfolios were new to most of them before they took the course. They were all able

to include images, videos, games, and other external resources and multimedia to their websites. It can be said that all teachers had achieved one aim of the course, which was to design a web-portfolio. This was also the supporting evidence of their enhanced ICT competence.

In view of using e-portfolios for teaching purposes, of all web-portfolios designed by the participants, four were off topic because the content was not related to teaching but to teachers' personal hobbies. The rest were showcases of classroom activities, supplementary learning resources for students, quizzes, extra exercises for students, samples of national exams, teaching materials (e.g. texts, videos, web links), lesson plans, and work management like reports, projects, or meeting schedules. Based on the core content of a teaching portfolio as suggested by Wolf (1996, p. 35), all of the web-portfolios designed by the teachers have not progressed much beyond the collection of the essential ingredients - teaching artifacts. They still fell short on the reflection part and concluding section, which were supposed to describe what teachers and students learned and indicate ongoing professional development.

Further investigation into participants' reflection journals revealed more significant findings. Regarding their self-evaluation, most of them were not happy with the content of their web-portfolios. They still found their web-portfolios "boring" (as described by one of the teachers) and in need of upgrading with deeper content. The main reasons for these shortcomings were listed by them as shortage of time, limited technology skills and indecisiveness of selecting what to include in the web-portfolios. However, they all stated their wishes of adding more multimedia content, interaction features, and using them more widely in reality so that they could reflect on the effectiveness of their web-portfolios for their professional development. Finally, all of the participants expressed their satisfaction with learning a new skill and initially achieving a goal that they have never achieved before. "This is new to me but very useful and interesting... I could not believe that I would have a website of my own one day", a teacher commented in her journal. A few other teachers commented that they wished they had had more time in the course so that they could learn to use Weebly more professionally. These opinions somehow agreed with the survey results which revealed that teachers' limited time was a barrier to develop and maintain their web-based portfolios.

Discussion and Conclusion

The findings of the study indicate that EFL teachers had positive perspectives towards designing and maintaining e-portfolios but the outcomes of creating their own teaching portfolios still needed improvement. E-portfolios were found to help them improve their technology competence and to be beneficial for their professional development. However, despite the high awareness and positive attitudes towards keeping e-portfolios in their teaching practice, the teachers' products in reality had not included enough information for a teaching portfolio. To justify this shortcoming, the collected data revealed some major reasons: shortage of time, limited advanced technology skills, and weak institutional support. The teachers' reflections revealed that they were aware of the poor content of their web-based portfolios. However, their plans to develop them still focused more on the technical design and presentation rather than improving the core components of a teaching portfolio. In general, the findings helped to partially reveal certain evidence of ongoing professional development including ICT competence among the participants of the study.

The obstacles in designing and maintaining an e-portfolio discussed in this study are not new. They have been discovered and synthesized in many other studies around the world (Adams-Bullock & Hawk, 2005; Oakley et al., 2014; Roberts, 2018). However, this is the first time it is found to be true for the context of Vietnam and specially for EFL teachers. To master the technology of designing a professional teaching web-portfolio requires a lot of time and effort as well as facilities (Adams-Bullock & Hawk, 2005). Despite such barriers, the study findings helped to confirm that EFL teachers in Vietnam are highly aware of the benefits of e-portfolios and that designing a teaching web-portfolio is achievable within their capacity. The initial experience of creating web-based portfolios had a strong impact on teachers' sense of self-

achievement and confidence in interacting with students and others. This is the motivation for them to continue to develop their digital teaching portfolios which are important for their professional development in 21st century education.

The study results recommend that the use of e-portfolios should be promoted among teachers because of their many benefits. In order to help teachers create professional digital portfolios and use them in their teaching practice, they need more support from their schools in terms of policies, training and technical investment in the use of e-portfolios for professional development. Designing and maintaining e-portfolios should also be formally considered in their work load so that they do not feel under time constraints and have a greater impetus to develop professional teaching e-portfolios.

The first limitation of the study was that it was carried out with a small number of teacher participants yet in a large range of teaching level positions, from kindergarten to tertiary level. Future research could extend the study with further investigation in the differences among different groups of EFL teachers. In addition, the study has not yet covered the issue of privacy and copyright in making teaching materials and resources available on the web-based portfolios (Adams-Bullock & Hawk, 2005). Particularly in the era where digital citizenship has highly emphasized (Hoang, Tran, Nguyen, & Nguyen, 2020), future studies need to cover the issues of ownership or privacy when digital portfolios created by participants are made public on the Internet.

The Author

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