Reflective teaching: Voices from Vietnamese pre-service EFL teachers

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Reflective teaching (RT) is widely encouraged for pre-service teachers (PSTs) as a facilitating tool in learning to teach. Despite a large body of literature on RT, little empirical evidence sheds light on PSTs' perceptions of RT in the English as a foreign language (EFL) teacher education context in Vietnam. This study, thus, aims to examine Vietnamese EFL PSTs' insights into RT and their perceptions of RT's benefits and challenges. A mixed-method approach was adopted to collect data from thirty-two PSTs through a questionnaire and semi-structured interviews. The findings indicate that most of the teacher participants were aware of RT's aims, activities, and form of practice; however, most of them were not able to identify the process and tools for performing RT. In addition, most of the PSTs perceived that RT brought them numerous benefits in enhancing their teaching competence and personal development; meanwhile, a few challenges in RT were also reported related to their inadequate knowledge of RT and language teaching, and insufficient skills in critically evaluating their teaching and self-studying. Accordingly, several pedagogical implications are proposed to enhance PSTs' knowledge and skills of RT and to optimise the effectiveness of training and self-training English language teachers through RT.

Introduction

Learning to teach has been regarded as a requisite task for teachers, particularly pre-service teachers (PSTs). Their learning can be implemented in various forms, including formal training courses, seminars, workshops, and experience-based learning activities (Richards & Lockhart, 2007). Among these activities, reflective teaching (RT) is a form of learning from experience (Çimer et al., 2013; Motallebzadeh et al., 2018) that should be incorporated into language teacher education programs (Farrell, 2019).

RT has been proven to promote teachers' professional and personal development (Farrell, 2018). It helps teachers recognise their beliefs, strengths, and weaknesses (Akbari et al., 2010; Gungor, 2016; Hojeij et al., 2021), promote their critical thinking skills (Alsuhaibani, 2020; Çimer et al., 2013), enrich their pedagogical competence (Hojeij et al., 2021; Rozimela & Tiarina, 2018; Sabgini & Khoiriyah, 2020), and build plans for further professional development (Alsuhaibani, 2020; Farrell, 2018). In addition, RT enables teachers to become lifelong learners (Çimer et al., 2013; Finlay, 2008) as through reflective activities, teachers can constantly construct their educational perspectives, gain new insights, and develop strategies to reform their teaching practices (Çimer et al., 2013; Fakazli, 2021; Shukri, 2014).

Given the significance of RT, studies have been conducted in various contexts to unravel PSTs' learning to teach via RT. A few studies analysed PSTs' aspects and levels of reflection during their internships (e.g., Albakri et al., 2017; Yaacob, et al., 2014), while

others examined the effects of implementing reflective tools, particularly reflective journals (e.g., Alsuhaibani, 2020; Hojeij et al., 2021; Kim, 2018), or evaluated the impacts of RT on their teaching performance (e.g., Rozimela & Tiarina, 2018).

Nonetheless, the existing studies were inclined to scrutinise the effects of RT from the perspectives and evaluations of researchers or teacher trainers rather than the self-perceptions of PSTs who directly perform RT, and few have expanded on exploring their insights of the RT concept as an aspect of their perceptions. Furthermore, the incorporation of RT into language teacher education programs may vary across contexts; thus, it is imperative to furnish more empirical evidence on how PSTs of English as a foreign language (EFL) perceive RT in their teacher education program in Vietnamese context, which has been under-researched.

Accordingly, our study investigates Vietnamese pre-service EFL teachers' perceptions of RT, including their conceptualisation of RT and their perceptions of its benefits and challenges. Serving the major aims, this study aims to address three research questions:

1. How do pre-service EFL teachers conceptualise reflective teaching?
2. What benefits of reflective teaching are perceived by pre-service teachers?
3, What challenges of reflective teaching are perceived by pre-service teachers?

Literature review

Conceptualisation of reflective teaching

The concept of reflection in education was initially introduced by Dewey (1933), who emphasised active and persistent learning from experience through perceiving and interpreting actual practices rather than following routine actions (as cited in Li & Ye, 2016; Rozimela & Tiarina, 2018). Through this form of experiential learning, teachers aim to trigger new insights into teaching drawn from their practices (Motallebzadeh et al., 2018), and subsequently apply those insights to improve their teaching performance and students' learning (Al-Ahdal & Al-Awaid, 2014).

Being aligned with those aims of RT and putting forward a more comprehensive concept, Farrell (2015) defined RT as a cognitive process in which teachers "systematically collect data about their practice, and, while engaging in dialogue with others, use the data to make informed decisions" (p. 123) to improve both their outside and inside classroom practice. By the same token, Farrell's (2015) definition depicted various types of RT activities in which teachers can perform RT, such as collecting data about the teaching experience, consulting others' opinions, and drawing on lessons to enhance practice. The RT activities suggested by Farrell (2015) go in line with those in the RT process proposed by Albakri et al. (2017), Çimer et al. (2013) and Islam (2015), indicating that RT can be implemented individually or collaboratively (Finlay, 2008; Richards & Lockhart, 2007).

Regarding the "who" of reflection, Schön (1983) and Killion and Todnemadded (1991) suggested three types of reflection (as cited in Fakazli, 2021; Rozimela & Tiarina, 2018),

including reflection-in-action, reflection-on-action, and reflection-for-action. Reflection-in-action occurs along with lesson delivery to understand the phenomena and adjust immediately. Teachers perform reflection-on-action to look back on their past teaching experiences and propose possible implications to improve the upcoming teaching. The third type, reflection-for-action refers to preparing and planning future actions and anticipating possible situations based on the analysis of their teaching practices. These typologies suggest that teachers can perform RT at any moment, including during, after, and before their teaching practices, and for immediate and long-term improvements in their teaching profession.

Teachers can follow a systematic and continuous process of RT involving four fundamental stages in each cycle (Islam, 2015), as illustrated in Figure 1.
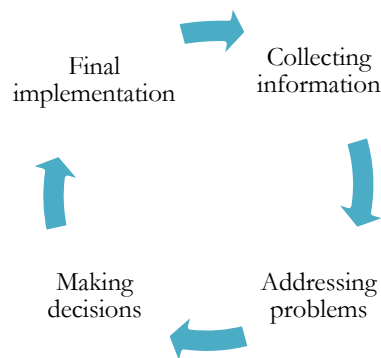

Figure 1: Reflective teaching cycle (Islam, 2015, p. 85)

The first stage is to collect information about the teaching experiences, events, feelings, and attitudes. This is followed by addressing the problems when teachers analyse and evaluate their performance by themselves and by seeking their colleagues' and students' opinions. The next stage is to make informed decisions to tackle issues by pondering alternatives of thinking and acting, finding possible solutions, and making necessary changes. The final step occurs when teachers apply new insights into practice, such as implementing alternative teaching methods or reforming their teaching practice. The cycle continues as teachers maintain their RT by analysing the result of the activity implemented in the final steps in the previous cycle. In exercising RT, teachers can employ various tools and strategies, namely, reflective journals or diaries, lesson reports, video recordings, classroom observations, feedback, surveys, and action research (Fakazli, 2021; Farrell, 2018; Islam, 2015; Richards & Lockhart, 2007).

Benefits of reflective teaching

RT benefits teachers, specifically pre-service teachers, in various ways. First, RT enables teachers to understand the "who" they bring to teaching (Akbari et al., 2010; Farrell, 2018; Tran, 2022). Through numerous self-questioning experiences to assess themselves, teachers become aware of their personal beliefs, values, philosophy, and images, and

reconstruct their identity, which is likely to influence their teaching performance (Farrell, 2018; Robinson et al., 2001).

Second, RT makes substantial contributions to the development of pedagogical knowledge and skills of teachers in various contexts. Teachers' inquiry into teaching theories and their actual practice can result in their enlightenment or emancipation, facilitating them to address differences and gaps between espoused theory and teaching practice (Farrell, 2019; Robinson et al., 2001). In the context of PST education in Vietnam, the findings from Tran's (2022) study indicated that PSTs, who were engaged in collaborative reflections guided by their trainer in a 15-week teaching practice course, developed their own principles of teaching, adopting the communicative approach in their English pronunciation lesson. Rozimela and Tiarina (2018) and Sabgini and Khoiriyah (2020) conducted empirical studies in various contexts in Indonesia and revealed consistent findings on the improvement of EFL PSTs' teaching knowledge and skills through reflective journal writing and video recordings, in terms of their teaching techniques, materials, teaching media, classroom management, and language use. Likewise, Gungor's (2016) action research suggested that Turkish PSTs better understood their strengths and weaknesses, improved their teaching skills, and knew how to put teaching theories into practice. In a related study focusing on the field of early childhood teacher education, Hojeij et al. (2021) confirmed that Emirati PSTs could cultivate their pedagogical skills and classroom management strategies through reflective journal writing during their practicum.

RT promotes teachers' critical thinking skills through analysing and evaluating various teaching and learning issues (Çimer et al., 2013), which enables them to better understand their teaching practice, the subject matter, and students' characteristics and needs. Using evidence-based analysis of their teaching, teachers can also make necessary transformations in their teaching, which avoids the routine circle (Farrell, 2018; Malmir & Mohammadi, 2018). Supporting these merits, Alsuhaibani's (2020) findings highlighted that through RT, Saudi Arabian PSTs could clarify their thoughts, deal with their teaching problems, and make plans for professional development. In the same vein, Rozimela and Tiarina (2018) unraveled that Indonesian PSTs were able to critically analyse their teaching performance regarding classroom management, interaction, and material use.

Furthermore, RT promotes teachers' collaboration in learning to teach through various reflective activities, such as sharing teaching journals, participating in critical friend groups, and classroom observations (Farrell, 2018; Richards & Lockhart, 2007). Hence, they foster collegial or peer interaction and gain multidimensional perspectives about their work (Richards & Lockhart, 2007).

Challenges in reflective teaching

Despite the numerous benefits of RT, teachers inevitably encounter challenges in performing RT that stem from their internal and external factors. One noticeable set of barriers to RT for teachers is primarily attributed to their deficient knowledge of RT, specifically not grasping the feasible RT process (Pekkarinen & Hirsto, 2017). Remarkably,

many PSTs fail to do RT because neither do they have the motivation to carry out this activity nor have a strong sense of autonomous learning to teach (Kuswandono, 2012). Additionally, teachers' reluctance to contemplate their teaching performance and shortage of time also prevents them from performing RT (Al-Ahdal & Al-Awaid, 2014; Pekkarinen & Hirsto, 2017). Kuswandono (2012) claims that RT is so "time-consuming" that "many teachers would avoid" and "not want to ruminate themselves on past experiences" (p. 151). In the same vein, Alsuhaibani (2020) found that Saudi Arabian PSTs regarded reflective writing as a tedious process in the long run.

Having limited inquiry skills was explored in extensive empirical research as another internal hindrance to exercising RT for PSTs. To be specific, it was found that reflections of Indonesian and Malaysian PSTs in the studies by Rozimela and Tiarina (2018) and Yaacob et al. (2014) tended to be descriptive rather than critical, and focused mainly on classroom practices, but little on moral or contextual teaching aspects. Additionally, the findings from Koc and Ilya's (2016) and Erdemir and Yeşilçınar's (2021) studies on Turkish PSTs indicated that their collaborative reflection was ineffective due to their use of undetailed, insufficient, and subjective peer feedback.

Another set of obstacles for teachers in carrying out RT is associated with the institution and working environment. According to Pekkarinen and Hirst (2017), insufficient appreciation of teaching and the lack of support from academic managers and peers have been identified as factors that discourage reflective activities. Kuswandono (2012) also claimed that the hindrance to RT for teachers is also derived from inadequate RT modules in many teacher education programs.

In short, the empirical findings from previous studies have shed light on the effects of RT on PSTs' process of learning to teach, yet few have explored their insights into RT, particularly in the Vietnamese EFL teacher education context. Multi-faceted merits and challenges of RT could vary across the settings with teachers of diverse training backgrounds, teaching experience, and teaching practices. Empirical evidence on how Vietnamese EFL PSTs pre-service teachers perceive and exercise RT would make significant contributions to the theory on how PSTs in a specific context can perform RT in their learning process to gain its full credits and minimise its obstacles. Besides, there is a dearth of evidence on RT from the voices of pre-service teachers who are the insiders of the RT process. These gaps would be fulfilled by this mixed-method study on Vietnamese EFL PSTs' perceptions of RT, including their insights of RT, and their perceptions of RT's benefits and challenges.

Research method

A mixed-method design, incorporating both qualitative and quantitative approaches, was adopted to collect data about PSTs' perceptions of RT. The mixed-method approach is fundamentally favourable in gaining a detailed and more thorough understanding (Creswell & Creswell, 2018; Dörnyei, 2007) of Vietnamese EFL PSTs' perceptions of RT as it allows for "comparing different perspectives drawn from quantitative and qualitative

data" and "explaining quantitative results with a qualitative follow-up data" (Creswell & Creswell, 2018, p. 298) of the same group of participant PSTs.

Research context and participants

Thirty-two Vietnamese EFL PSTs, fourth-year students in an EFL teacher education program at a public university in Vietnam, were recruited on a voluntary basis for this study. The group includes twenty-eight females (87.5%) and four males (12.5%) who self-rated their English proficiency at B2 (75%) and C1 (25%) levels based on the *Common European Framework of Reference for Languages* (Council of Europe, n.d.). The teacher participants were taking a 30-period practicum course for fifteen weeks in the penultimate semester of the program. In the first ten periods of the course, they reviewed the skills of classroom management and lesson planning that they had learned in the previous TEFL courses and learned how to observe and give feedback on their peers' micro-teaching. In the next twenty periods, they delivered their micro-teaching, observed and gave feedback on their peers' teachings, and wrote two reflective journals by the end of the course.

By the time of being recruited in this research, the teacher participants had enrolled in seven (out of ten) TEFL methodology courses in their teacher training program, through which they were equipped with fundamental TEFL knowledge and skills to Vietnamese secondary school students. In these TEFL courses, they were guided by their teacher trainers to perform a few RT activities when delivering their micro-teaching, including observing their peers' micro-teachings, and giving and receiving feedback from their peers and trainers. However, no specific module about RT theory was explicitly incorporated into those TEFL courses.

Data collection and analysis

This study employed a questionnaire and semi-structured interviews as data collection tools to explore Vietnamese EFL PSTs' perceptions of RT. Being a useful tool to yield data about a large number of respondents' perceptions in a readily processable form (Dörnyei, 2007), the questionnaire included twenty-seven closed-ended items on a Likert-style scale (1 = totally disagree, 2 = disagree, 3 = no idea, 4 = agree, 5 = totally agree), which were grouped into three clusters, namely, PSTs' insights of RT, their perceptions of RT's benefits, and challenges. These questionnaire items were self-developed by the researchers specifically for this study, drawing on the research aims, research context, and existing relevant literature on RT as reviewed earlier. The collected data were, then, analysed through descriptive statistics using the software *Statistics Package for Social Sciences* (version 25). The internal consistency reliability of the twenty-seven items was measured via Cronbach alpha coefficient of 0.818, while that of each cluster was recorded at 0.792, 0.819, and 0.828, respectively, indicating that the questionnaire is reliable (Cohen et al., 2018).

After the questionnaire data had been analysed, semi-structured interviews were conducted with nine of the thirty-two participants, online via *Zoom* for their convenience, to obtain in-depth data (Cohen et al., 2018; Dörnyei, 2007) on how they perceived the RT

concept as well as to clarify their responses to the benefits and challenges of RT. The recording of each interview in Vietnamese was transcribed and returned to the participants for their confirmation, translated into English, and analysed thematically using emerging codes and subcodes under two major themes, namely PSTs' insights of RT and perceived benefits of RT. In particular, the theme of PSTs' insights into RT had such main codes as definition, activities, forms of practice, and their prior learning experiences of RT. The theme of perceived benefits of RT encompassed main codes concerning self-awareness, teaching competence development, and collaboration; meanwhile, the main codes of perceived challenges of RT included limited knowledge, limited skills, and contextual factors. Pseudonyms (Mila, Maya, Cara, Allison, Nolan, Rose, Elle, Sadie, and Paige) were used to refer to the interviewees for confidentiality. Various techniques suggested by Cohen et al. (2018) were employed to maximise the reliability and validity of interview data, namely applying two piloted interviews to build a suitable protocol, explaining the interview purposes clearly, giving clear and understandable questions in Vietnamese, and sending audio records and transcripts for participant verification.

Findings

Vietnamese pre-service EFL teachers' insights of reflective teaching

The Vietnamese EFL PSTs' insights concerning RT were explored through their prior training in RT and conceptualisation of RT.

Table 1: Vietnamese pre-service EFL teachers' prior training in reflective teaching

Statements	Range	Mean	SD
PSTs have learned about the concept of RT.	2-4	2.72	0.63
PSTs have learned about different models of RT.	1-3	2.38	0.79
PSTs know various activities in each stage of the RT process.	1-4	2.91	0.96
PSTs know various tools and ways of RT.	1-3	2.84	1.02
Total		2.71	0.85

The findings presented in Table 1 indicated a majority of the Vietnamese EFL PSTs in this study had deficient training in RT and were not equipped with theoretical knowledge about RT (with a low average mean value of 2.71 and low SD=0.85). Noticeably, a low proportion of them reported having learned about RT models (M=2.38; SD=0.79). Slightly higher means were found for their knowledge of RT tools and activities (M=2.84; 2.91; SD=1.02; 0.96, respectively).

In addition to the findings on Vietnamese EFL PSTs' learning experiences, their insights were also explored through their conceptualisation of RT (Table 2).

It could be seen from Table 2 that Vietnamese EFL PSTs demonstrated a high level of conceptualisation of RT with the cluster mean score of 4.22 and a relatively low standard deviation of 0.71. This indicates that despite the lack of theoretical input of RT provided in their TEFL methodology courses (Table 1), most of the teacher participants could be

aware of RT through the prompts provided in the questionnaire. Many PSTs perceived RT as a form of experience-based learning (M=4.34, SD=0.79) with specific types of activities that teachers are expected to perform in a cyclical process (M=4.44, SD=0.62). At a slightly lower rate, the teacher participants agreed that RT with critical analysis of teaching incidents enabled them to better their teaching, but they needed to be open-minded, responsible, and wholehearted (M=4.00, 4.09, SD=0.72, 0.69, respectively).

Table 2: Vietnamese pre-service EFL teachers' conceptualisation of reflective teaching

Statements	Range	Mean	SD
RT is a form of learning from teaching experience.	2-5	4.34	0.79
RT is a cyclical process, in which teachers monitor, evaluate and revise their practice continuously.	3-5	4.44	0.62
In the RT practice, teachers decide on ways to improve their teaching based on evidence-based analysis and evaluation.	2-5	4.00	0.72
RT requires teachers' attitudes of open-mindedness, responsibility, and wholeheartedness.	2-5	4.09	0.69
Total		4.22	0.71

The questionnaire findings presented in Table 1 and Table 2 were supported by the interview findings. All the interviewed Vietnamese EFL PSTs could identify the RT concept, its aims, forms of practice, and principal activities. To be specific, being asked about the concept of RT, they similarly defined RT as "looking back on the teaching performance" (Mila, Cara, Paige), "analysing the strengths and weaknesses" (Allison, Nolan, Rose, Elle), "drawing the lessons from that experience" (Mila, Sadie, Maya), and "improving teaching performance" (Mila, Allison, Rose). Interestingly, most of the interviewees emphasised that it would be better to collaborate with others in implementing RT because they could "get multi-dimensional viewpoints" of the teaching performance (Allison, Paige). Notwithstanding, all the interviewed teachers reported that they were not able to identify the process and tools of RT and lacked theoretical knowledge of RT as they "did not learn specifically about the theory of RT" (Cara).

Vietnamese pre-service EFL teachers' perceptions of the benefits of reflective teaching

Perceptions of the benefits of RT were explored through the next ten items in the questionnaire (Table 3) and follow-up interview data.

As shown in Table 3, the teacher participants highly approved of the RT's benefits with low variance in their responses (total M=4.12; SD=0.67). The most significant advantage perceived was making plans for professional development (M=4.44; SD=0.62), followed by the merit in developing skills of making critical inquiries about their teaching practice (M=4.41; SD=0.56). The interview findings revealed the similar trend about RT's merits as they reported that RT benefited them in "observing, giving feedback, examining and evaluating teaching activities" (Allison).

Moreover, most of the Vietnamese EFL PSTs in this study also shared similar perceptions of the advantages in identifying their strengths and weaknesses in their performance (M=4.28, 4.38; SD=0.63, 0.55, respectively). They also agreed on the advantages of enhancing their theoretical knowledge and practical skills of teaching methods with the same mean score of 3.84 and standard deviation of 0.72. Supporting these findings, the interview data showed that RT could facilitate the teachers to "know what has been done well and not well in the lesson" (Maya), and "learn from the experiences to avoid making the same mistakes again" (Mila). It was also perceived that RT could foster the Vietnamese EFL PSTs' peer collaboration in their learning to teach (M=4.06; SD=0.72), enabling them to "observe and learn effective teaching techniques from other teachers" (Allison, Nolan), as well as "share the experience and lesson with each other" (Cara, Maya).

Table 3: Vietnamese pre-service EFL teachers' perceptions of
the benefits of reflective teaching

Reflective teaching helps PSTs to:	Range	Mean	SD
Better realise personal values and beliefs in teaching.	3-5	3.75	0.62
Identify personal strengths in English language teaching.	3-5	4.28	0.63
Identify personal weaknesses in English language teaching.	3-5	4.38	0.55
Enhance their theoretical knowledge of teaching and learning (e.g., methods and approaches in language teaching).	3-5	3.84	0.72
Use teaching techniques in practice effectively.	2-5	3.84	0.72
Record changes and improvements in their teaching.	3-5	4.31	0.64
Make critical inquiry in analysing, evaluating, and solving issues in their teaching.	3-5	4.41	0.56
Be more aware of their learners' characteristics (e.g., their difficulties, styles, interests, …).	1-5	3.91	0.89
Boost collaboration among their peers in learning to teach English.	2-5	4.06	0.72
Plan future learning opportunities to improve their teaching competence.	3-5	4.44	0.62
Total		4.12	0.67

Vietnamese pre-service EFL teachers' perceptions of challenges in reflective teaching

The challenges that Vietnamese EFL PSTs perceived in performing RT could be classified into three groups, namely, their limited knowledge of RT and teaching methods, underdeveloped soft skills, and contextual constraints, as presented in Table 4.

Overall, the most significant group of challenges perceived by the Vietnamese EFL PSTs was their limited knowledge of RT and teaching methods (M=3.79, SD=0.88), which was slightly more radical than the obstacles related to their limited skills (M=3.61, SD=0.89). Meanwhile, the contextual constraints were perceived as the least challenging despite a large variance in their responses (M=3.41, SD=0.95).

Table 4: Vietnamese pre-service EFL teachers' perceptions
of challenges in reflective teaching

RT may be challenging because teachers:		Range	Mean	SD
PSTs' limited knowledge	Lack theoretical knowledge of RT.	2-5	3.91	0.69
	Do not know suitable tools for RT.	2-5	3.59	0.91
	Have insufficient knowledge of English language teaching methods.	1-5	3.88	1.04
	Total		3.79	0.88
PSTs' limited skills	Have underdeveloped English language teaching skills.	2-5	3.41	0.91
	Have limited skills in critically evaluating and analysing issues in English teaching.	2-5	3.91	0.78
	Do not know how to carry out RT activities effectively.	2-5	3.53	0.98
	Total		3.61	0.89
Context-related challenges	Do not have enough time to do RT.	2-5	3.66	0.87
	Do not receive support and collaboration from peers.	1-5	3.06	1.11
	Are not trained with knowledge and skills of RT in the related courses.	1-5	3.50	0.95
	Total		3.41	0.95
Total			3.61	0.92

Regarding theoretical knowledge, the predominant challenge in RT perceived by the Vietnamese EFL PSTs pertained to their inadequate knowledge of RT theory (M=3.91; SD=0.69). A less concerning hindrance was found in their limited knowledge of RT tools with high variance (M=3.59; SD=0.91). Lack of English language teaching knowledge was also perceived as the limitation in their RT (M=3.88) though the wider distributions in their responses could be noticed (SD=1.04). In the interviews, while Nolan, Rose, and Elle acknowledged their deficient pedagogical knowledge as the hindrance in assessing the teaching performance thoroughly and figuring out feasible solutions, Paige confidently expressed that "I feel quite confident in self-evaluating and giving feedback because I have grasped a good knowledge of teaching methods."

The Vietnamese EFL PSTs' limited skills in RT were identified as critically evaluating and analysing their teaching (M=3.91; SD=0.78), carrying out RT activities (M=3.53; SD=0.98), and English language teaching skills (M=3.41; SD=0.91). The interviewed participants also shared the same responses: "I cannot identify all of my shortcomings." (Noland, Mila) and "my feedback is sometimes biased." (Allison).

Regarding context-related challenges, the PSTs reported that they did not have adequate time for RT in their training courses (M=3.67; SD=0.87). Most of the interviewed teachers confirmed the challenge, for example, "there was no specific module about RT in the courses." (Maya, Cara), "time for feedback on microteachings was very limited." (Elle) and 'there was no time for further teaching practice after reflection." (Mila).

Remarkably, lacking peer support and collaboration was perceived at a moderate level despite a broad distribution in their response for this item (M=3.6; SD=1.11). In the interviews, Maya, Allison, Nolan, and Elle shared that they could collaborate with their peers, especially their close friends by observing and giving feedback to each other before and after their micro-teaching in class. Cara and Paige realised that being "too subjective" in their comments and "easily vulnerable" upon receiving their peer's feedback might prevent them and their peers from practising RT as they expected to because they did not want to "criticise others or be criticised by the classmates" and "admit their weaknesses".

Discussion

Our findings indicated that the Vietnamese EFL PSTs received deficient training in RT and were not equipped with theoretical knowledge about RT. Nonetheless, through observations, teacher and peer feedback, and journal writing in their training courses, the majority of the Vietnamese EFL PSTs in our study were able to make sense of the RT aims, activities, and forms of individual and collaborative practice. These findings indicated that the Vietnamese EFL PSTs in this study could construct their knowledge of RT through actual experiences in their training courses. This aligns with the central concept of experience-based learning as a crucial contributor to teachers' learning processes, as suggested by Andresen et al. (2020). The teachers self-constructed their insight and practical knowledge of RT by actively analysing and reflecting on their teaching experiences via teacher and peer feedback and writing journals in the practicum course and other TEFL courses in their teacher training program.

In addition, it was found from the current study that with their self-constructed practical knowledge of RT, most of the Vietnamese EFL PSTs perceived the multifaceted merits of RT in their process of learning to teach. The teacher participants considered RT to be beneficial in analysing the strengths and weaknesses of their teaching performance, thereby improving their teaching knowledge and skills. This finding is consistent with the merits suggested in previous works on RT (Al-Ahdal & Al-Awaid, 2014; Çimer et al., 2013; Karnieli-Miller, 2020; Rozimela, 2015). Likewise, the advantages of RT in improving pedagogical knowledge and skills perceived by the Vietnamese EFL teachers also align with the perceptions of pre-service EFL teachers explored by Alsuhaibani (2020), Gungor (2016), and Rozimela and Tiarina (2017) in Saudi Arabian, Turkish and Indonesian contexts.

The most notable benefits of RT which the Vietnamese EFL PSTs in this study strongly approved were cultivating their critical thinking skills and planning professional development. This parallels the perceptions of Saudi Arabian PSTs in the study by Alsuhaibani (2020) that RT enabled them to clarify their thoughts and evaluations of their performance as well as to figure out possible solutions to improve their teaching. Kim's (2018) study also confirmed that Korean EFL PSTs perceived their enhancement in critically analysing and assessing their strengths and weaknesses in their teaching performance. The merits of RT reported by Vietnamese PSTs in this study contribute further empirical evidence to the limited body of previous works on the use of RT for

Vietnamese pre-service teachers (e.g., Tran, 2022) and in-service teachers (e.g., Huynh & Phan, 2024).

Although valuable merits were reported, our findings indicate that the Vietnamese EFL PSTs perceived numerous challenges in RT, including their insufficient knowledge and skills and context-related constraints. These challenges are consistent with those identified by Moghaddam (2019) and Pekkarinen and Hirsto (2017). The Vietnamese EFL PSTs' insufficient skills in evaluating their teaching practices were also pointed out by Astika (2014), Rozimela and Tiarina (2018), and Yaacob et al. (2014) across various Indonesian and Malaysian contexts.

The lack of theoretical input on RT in the teacher training program was reported as a notable challenge for the Vietnamese EFL teachers in performing RT in this study. In this sense, Kuswandono (2012) argued that challenges in RT for teachers are due to the improper integration of RT in the teacher education curriculum. In-service Indonesian teachers in the study of Sunra et al. (2020) also reported a similar challenge stemming from their deficiency in RT knowledge as they had not been equipped with sufficient RT knowledge and skills in their pre-service stage. These findings, therefore, necessitates integrating reflective teaching into teacher education programs by offering PSTs earlier and continuous opportunities to engage in theoretical readings on RT and reflecting on their learning-to-teach experiences (Korucu-Kis & Demir, 2019) and by providing PSTs with specific guidelines for how to exercise RT individually and collaboratively (Farrell, 2015; Tran, 2022) in their process of learning to teach.

Despite the challenges reported above, it is apparent that the PSTs tended to regard RT as an effective tool to facilitate their learning-to-teach journey.

Conclusion and implications

Through qualitative and quantitative data, this study has unraveled Vietnamese EFL PSTs' perceptions of RT. We found that the teachers were able to identify the aims and fundamental activities of RT and perceive benefits of RT in improving their teaching competence and personal development. However, they were not equipped with adequate theoretical knowledge and skills of teaching methods and RT, which were perceived as major challenges for them in practising RT, along with issues in time spent on RT.

With reference to these findings, some implications for both teacher trainers and PSTs are put forward. Regarding teacher trainers, modules of RT could be integrated into the teacher training curriculum and TEFL courses' syllabi to provide the PSTs with sufficient theoretical and practical knowledge of RT. Seminars or workshops on RT could be held for the sake of developing the teachers' RT knowledge and skills. Practical guidelines for RT practice could be suggested to PSTs, specifically what reflective activities to conduct or which tools to use so that they could make sense of strategies to exercise RT effectively.

Several activities could be recommended for PSTs to promote their process of learning to teach through RT. To nurture their knowledge of RT, PSTs could invest time and effort in learning about RT by further reading related materials and discussing them with their peers or trainers. Moreover, they could exercise RT constantly following the process of self-recalling their practice and peer observation, analysing and evaluating all teaching factors and aspects, finding possible solutions, and making necessary changes. In that process, various tools and strategies could be implemented, such as keeping journals or diary entries, receiving feedback, and recording their teaching. Lastly, by collaborating with their close peers, PSTs could discuss their teaching issues in an open manner, thereby enabling them to enhance their skills for analysing their own and peers' teaching and to propose appropriate solutions for their existing problems.

Within the scope of this study, certain limitations remain and thus suggest further directions for future research on RT. A similar study could be conducted on a larger scale with a comsiderable number of PSTs as participants and in similar contexts to increase the generalisability of the findings. In addition, PSTs' perceptions of specific tools or activities in RT could be investigated to suggest further refinements for RT procedures.

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