

EFL student-teachers' teaching competency self-development during English language teaching methodology courses: How much does their agency account for?

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ABSTRACT: *English as a foreign language (EFL) student-teachers' teaching competency (TC) development can be affected by different factors, one of which is student-teacher agency which can play a decisive role in shaping their TC self-development. This mixed methods study aims at scrutinising how EFL student-teachers enacted their agency to facilitate their TC self-development during English language teaching (ELT) methodology courses at a higher education institution context in Ho Chi Minh City, Vietnam. A cohort of 118 student-teachers majoring in ELT methodology got involved in answering the closed-ended questionnaires, and 15 student-teachers in semi-structured interviews. The data analysis was based on the direct approach in which the quantitative data were processed by the SPSS in terms of descriptive statistics, and the qualitative data were analysed using the content analysis approach. The findings revealed that EFL student-teacher agency played a pivotal role in their TC self-development. Student-teachers allocated much of their effort to self-leveraging their ELT knowledge and positive attitudes towards ELT more than their ELT skills and English language skills. Such preliminary findings can shed light on the further research on the role of student-teacher agency in TC self-development in tandem with other factors of teacher trainer and learning environment.*

KEYWORDS: Agency; English language teaching; mixed methods design; student-teacher; teaching competency.

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1. Introduction

Teacher agency plays a vital role in shaping teachers' professional growth (Calvert, 2016). It undergoes "a complex interplay of a teacher's qualities" (Schon, 2018, p. 3), "becomes the site through which power is not transcended but reworked, replayed, and restaged in productive ways" (Giroux, 2004, p. 34), and is reflected in the power at the core of practices that generate action. As such, it is noticed that the research on teacher agency has been significantly growing in the field of education in general and English language teaching in specific. Likewise, it is observed that a burgeoning number of scholars and researchers (e.g., Chaaban & Sawalhi, 2020; Hernández Varona & Gutiérrez Álvarez, 2020; Turnbull, 2005) have examined different aspects of student-teacher agency, one of which

is relevant to the teaching competency (TC) development across educational ecologies.

Developing student-teachers' TC is one of the ultimate goals set by teacher education programs as those teacher education programs aim at preparing student-teachers with professional knowledge and skills and shaping their pedagogical beliefs critically (Chan, 2016). Among a variety of factors affecting student-teachers' TC development, student-teacher agency deems to play a critical role in shaping and reshaping their TC (e.g., Chaaban & Sawalhi, 2020). TC refers to teacher's capability, ability and skills to conduct the teaching effectively (Sekar, 2016; Tran & Huynh, 2020), and it can function as a direction for professional development (Alqiawi & Ezzeldin, 2015). Therefore, conceptualising the TC development through the lens of agency

can capture how student-teachers map out their routes of identity construction.

Within the context of a higher education institution in Vietnam, EFL student-teachers majoring in English language teaching (ELT) methodology have to take five main courses (Teaching methodology 1, Teaching methodology 2, Teaching English to Young Learners, Classroom Language and Management, and Teaching Practicum) in ELT methodology, apart from other specialised courses, to obtain their bachelor's degree. It is observed that although EFL student-teachers have to struggle with a number of challenges (e.g., English language skills, teaching skills, professional knowledge and attitudes) to develop their TC during ELT methodology courses, they have tried hard on their own. Nonetheless, it is untransparent to see the extent to which student-teacher agency can contribute to the process of their TC development. To advance this knowledge, this study aims at seeking the understanding of how EFL student-teachers enact student-teacher agency in their TC self-development during ELT methodology courses at a higher education institution context in Vietnam.

2. Literature review

2.1. Definition of teaching competency and its components

The term TC is understood as the teacher's capability, ability and skills to create an effective and productive teaching and learning environment aiming at achieving the educational goals (e.g., Alqiawi & Ezzeldin, 2015; Sekar, 2016; Tran & Huynh, 2020). Koster and Dengirnk (2008) pinpoint that TC can help teachers to fulfill their teaching tasks professionally and appropriately under different circumstances. TC encompasses components of knowledge, practical skills, motivation, belief, qualities and emotion which empower teachers to perform their teaching tasks (Rychen & Salganik 2003). In a similar way, TC is understood consisting of teachers' knowledge, skills as well as attitudes, which are not simply postulated but can be observed and assessed (Deakin-Crick, 2008; European Commission, 2013). In a general sense, TC includes three

basic components such as knowledge, skills and attitudes (e.g., Feiman-Nemser, 2001; McDiarmid & Clevenger-Bright, 2008). *Attitude* refers to commitment, confidence, belief and respect in teaching, and it can be positive and negative. It is a connection between knowledge and skills which helps teachers to carry out teaching tasks to meet the common educational goals and maximize learners' learning competence (Council of Europe, 2008; Feiman-Nemser, 2008). *Knowledge* refers to teachers' profound pedagogical and professional knowledge which can help them to teach effectively in different educational environments (e.g., McDiarmid & Ckevenger-Bright, 2008; Krauss, et al. 2008). *Skill* refers to the ability to teach flexibly to meet learners' learning needs (Hatano & Oura, 2003; Vogt & Rogalla, 2009). Teachers' teaching skills are demonstrated by curriculum design, classroom management, teaching strategy use and learner testing and assessment (Scheerens, et al. 2007). The three abovementioned components are three pillars of TC which are closely interconnected and support one another. Nonetheless, TC within this study context is understood to encompass four components, viz. English language skills, attitude, knowledge and skill. English language skills refer to ability to use English discursively in transmitting the knowledge to the learners.

2.2. Previous studies

Prior studies have indicated that the place of TC development among EFL student-teachers has been examined in different parts of the globe. In Vietnam, Vu and Dudzik (2019) explored the strengths and weaknesses of the English teacher training program from the perspective of teaching competence by conducting a case study on 132 teachers in a training center. The results collected from the survey and a group interview for 8 students, 3 teachers and 2 program managers were analyzed based on the Vietnam's English teacher competencies framework. Thereby, the student-teachers' strengths in terms of content knowledge, culture and technology are obviously shown in the training process. In a similar study, Tran (2020) examined the perspective of 85 TESOL students on TC which was evaluated

based on FASTETC (Framework for assessing student-teacher's English TC) at a Vietnamese university. Students were asked to rate their own awareness and understanding of TC for four criteria: knowledge, skills, attitudes and language proficiency when participating in micro-teaching. Findings revealed that in the TC development process, knowledge and skills were probably two components that students allocated more time for accumulating and practicing than the rest. Tran and Huynh (2020) conducted a study on the factors affecting the TC development of student teachers at a university in three aspects: the student-teachers, the instructors and the internship environment. Data from the questionnaire from 102 students and semi-structured interviews from 14 teaching students highlighted that the TC development was mostly influenced by student-teachers, followed by instructors. The internship environment, in fact, did not have a significant impact on TC development. The instructor was a contributing factor, promoting the student-teachers' TC by sharing teaching experiences and guiding the teaching process. In international contexts, Nzilano (2013) assessed the teaching effectiveness of students through classroom management activities. Findings from survey questionnaires, semi-structured interviews, student portfolio analysis, and classroom observations, concluded that internships exposed a loose link between theory and practice. In particular, teachers had difficulty designing teaching methods, teaching strategies, and teaching resources to cater students' needs. In Yüksel's (2014) research, 40 English student-teachers at a Turkish university were asked to rate their own TC and anticipate their teaching role in the future through the teaching competencies self-assessment tool and student-teachers' papers on teaching philosophy. Qualitative results indicated the students' TC in the aspects: teaching content, teaching methods, teaching strategies, classroom management. It was found out that the competence of teaching content was most highly rated while that of teaching strategy and classroom management turned out to be the lowest. Students also realized that the

TC development was essential for the teaching career. A case study by Sumani and Arifin (2018) on the application of the instructional approach in the microteaching model to help students develop their teaching methods. Data obtained from questionnaires, observations, and interviews with 53 English-teaching majored students at an Indonesian university. After a period of participation in the micro-teaching model with the support of various teaching methods, these students had a significant improvement in teaching competence of teaching methods, assessment ability, classroom management, individual/group teaching.

3. Research methodology

3.1. Research context and participants

This mixed-methods study adopted a pragmatic perspective, and it employed both quantitative and qualitative methods to delve into the participants' perceptions of their selves in self-developing their teaching competency (Creswell, 2014; Creswell & Creswell, 2018). It was carried at a Ho Chi Minh City based higher education institution which offers a variety of training programs to both undergraduate and graduate students. The English language program consists of three sub-majors, namely Business English, English for translation and interpretation, and English language teaching (ELT) methodology. All students in the English language program are required to take the same courses within the three years, and students opt for their sub-major in the fourth year. Regarding the sub-major of ELT methodology, students are required to take three main courses (Teaching methodology 1, Teaching methodology 2, Teaching English to young learners, Classroom language and management) and teaching practicum.

The conveniently sampled participants were a cohort of 118 student-teachers majoring in ELT methodology, and they took all ELT courses and underwent a teaching practicum. Of 118 participants, 101 (85.6%) participants self-reported that their English proficiency was at intermediate level, while 17 (14.4%) participants believed they had an advanced level of English proficiency. Most of the participants (82%)

had experience in teaching English as tutors (22.6%), teaching assistants (72%) and full-time teachers (4%). Additionally, there were 16 (13.6%) out of 118 participants having taken a course of ELT methodology before. Among 118 participants answering the questionnaires, there were 15 participants invited for semi-structured interviews on a voluntary basis.

3.2. Research instruments

Two research instruments (questionnaire & semi-structured interview) were deployed to garner the information. The closed-ended questionnaire, which was designed based on the literature review and research purpose, includes two main parts: Part A collects participants' background information; Part B is the main questionnaire content seeking for EFL student-teacher agency in TC development during the ELT methodology courses. The main content consists of 25 five-point scaled items (from *strongly disagree* to *strongly agree*) divided into four sub-parts: English language skills (4 items), attitudes towards ELT (5 items), ELT knowledge (7 items) and ELT skills (9 items). The questionnaire was designed in English and then translated into Vietnamese to ensure that participants did not have any trouble in answering the questionnaire. The Cronbach's alpha of the questionnaire was .81, which indicates that its reliability was rather high. Regarding the semi-structure interview whose main purpose of the interview is to verify and triangulate the gained data from questionnaires, four main questions were designed based on the questionnaire and research purpose. The research instruments were first designed in English and then translated into Vietnamese.

3.3. Procedures for data collection and analysis

This study adopted the sequential procedure for data collection (Creswell, 2014; Creswell & Creswell, 2018). Prior to collecting the data officially, the research instruments were piloted with 10 students who shared similar characteristics with the research participants. After the revision, the instruments were then employed to collect information. The Google formed questionnaire was administered to

participants via email, and the total valid answers were 118 after one week. After the preliminary data analysis of the questionnaires, online semi-structured interviews were conducted with 15 participants. All interviews were performed in Vietnamese and recorded for later analysis with the participants' consent.

The direct approach was adapted for quantitative and qualitative data analysis (Nykiel, 2007). SPSS was employed to process the questionnaire data in terms of descriptive statistics (Mean: M; Standard deviation: SD). The interval scale was interpreted as 1.00-1.80: Strongly disagree; 1.81-2.60: Disagree; 2.61-3.40: Neutral; 3.41-4.20: Agree; 4.21-5.00: Strongly agree (Kan, 2009). Meanwhile, the qualitative content analysis approach was deployed to analyse the interview data. The interviewees were given codes as S1, S2 to S15. The recordings were first transcribed, then the transcripts were translated into English, read and re-read to identify the key concepts based on the research purposes. The found concepts were categorized into themes. In order to assure the trustworthiness as well as validity and reliability of the data analysis, transcripts and findings were sent back to the interviewees for the content check-up, and the intra-rating method was applied to double-check both quantitative and qualitative data analysis.

4. Results and discussion

4.1. Results

EFL student-teacher agency in TC development during ELT methodology courses

Table 1 shows that the average mean score of EFL student teacher agency in developing their TC is 3.85 out of 5 (SD=.15). Specifically, the mean scores of four TC components are relatively similar (English language skills: M=3.79, SD=.29; Attitude enhancement towards ELT: M=3.86, SD=.31; ELT knowledge enhancement: M=3.88, SD=.20; ELT skill enhancement: M=3.85, SD=.19). This can be understood that ELF student teachers in this study believed that they could play a vital role in enhancing their English language skills, attitudes towards ELT, and ELT knowledge and skills.

Table 1. EFL student-teacher agency in TC development

Components of TC	N=118	
	M	SD
English language skills	3.79	.29
Attitudes towards ELT	3.86	.31
ELT knowledge	3.88	.20
ELT skills	3.85	.19
Average	3.85	.15

As for EFL student-teacher agency in developing their TC in terms of English language skills, the results in Table 2 indicate that participants thought they could self-develop their four English language skills in different ways. They practiced listening to English (item 1: M=3.82, SD=.38), reading English materials (item 2: M=3.79, SD=.28), speaking English (item 3: M=3.95, SD=.28), and writing in English (item 4: M=3.64, SD=.72) on a regular basis. This can imply that EFL student teachers were aware of the importance of mastering good English language skills in ELT.

Table 2. EFL student-teacher agency in TC development in terms of English language skills

I develop my English language skills by...	N=118	
	M	SD
1. listening to English regularly.	3.82	.38
2. reading English materials regularly.	3.79	.44
3. speaking English regularly.	3.95	.28
4. write in English regularly.	3.64	.72

This finding is supported by the qualitative findings. It was found that interviewees shared that they allocated their time to developing their English language skills. Nonetheless, they spent time on speaking skill more than other skills although they had to do a lot of reading, listening, speaking and writing in English in ELT classes. Some following extracts are disclosed:

"...I have to read, speak, listen and write in English a lot in ELT classes, but I often set time

to improve my speaking skill because teachers have to use this skill a lot in their teaching." (S3)

"I think a teacher with a good speaking skill can attract students' attention to the lesson, so I always try to practice my speaking skill." (S12)

With respect to EFL student-teacher agency in developing their TC in terms of attitudes towards ELT, the results in Table 3 reveal that participants tried to enhance their positive attitudes towards ELT by different ways. The two common modalities are talking to their teachers who were devoted to teaching (item 9: M=4.04, SD=.02) and their friends who loved ELT jobs (item 8: M=4.00, SD=.58). Besides, participants also self-enhanced their positive attitudes towards ELT by "participating in social networks for English language teachers" (item 7: M=3.82, SD=.63), "reading interesting facts about ELT jobs" (item 6: M=3.77, SD=.61), and "looking for information about ELT jobs" (item 5: M=3.68, SD=.64). This can be interpreted that EFL student teachers in this study were cognizant of how to enhance their positive attitudes towards ELT which can be part of TC self-development.

Table 3. EFL student-teacher agency in TC development in terms of attitudes towards ELT

I try to develop my positive attitudes towards ELT by...	N=118	
	M	SD
5. looking for information about ELT jobs.	3.68	.64
6. reading interesting facts about ELT jobs.	3.77	.61
7. participating in social networks for English language teachers.	3.82	.63
8. talking to friends who love ELT jobs.	4.00	.58
9. talking to English language teachers who are devoted to their teaching.	4.04	.20

This finding quantitative is in alignment with the qualitative one. Interviewees mentioned that they often had talks to their teachers and friends for more information about ELT jobs apart from seeking for information about ELT on the Internet. They explained:

"I often talk to my teachers of English and

friends about the ELT issues as I can learn from their teaching and learning experiences." (S5)

"I discuss with my friends and talk to my teachers about diverse ELT issues more often than reading news or information about ELT because I am quite inspired by what they share with me." (S8)

Furthermore, some participants added that they talked to their family members and relatives who were teachers of English. A typical extract is:

"My sister is teaching English at a secondary school, so I often talk to her about ELT issues. That is why I am motivated in what I am trying to study." (S11)

In respect of EFL student teacher agency in developing their TC in terms of ELT knowledge (Table 4), respondents agreed that they could enhance their ELT knowledge by joining various activities inside and outside classroom. They "[get] engaged in learning activities actively" (item 14: M=4.01, SD=.22), "[do] the exercises/assignments seriously" (item 15: M=3.94, SD=.28), "[pay] close attention to the ELT lessons" (item 12: M=3.92, SD=.26), and "[participate] in discussions actively" (item 13: M=3.77, SD=.41) in ELT classes. They also "[participate] in all ELT workshops organized by [their] university" (item 16: M=3.83, SD=.43), and "[read] materials of ELT theories" (item 10: M=3.87, SD=.33) and "ELT techniques / approaches" (item 11: M=3.84, SD=.36).

Table 4. EFL student-teacher agency in TC development in terms of ELT knowledge

I try to enhance my ELT knowledge by...	N=118	
	M	SD
10. reading materials of ELT theories.	3.87	.33
11. reading materials of ELT techniques / approaches.	3.84	.36
12. Paying close attention to the ELT lessons.	3.92	.26
13. Participating in discussions actively in ELT classes.	3.77	.41
14. Getting engaged in learning activities actively in ELT classes.	4.01	.22

I try to enhance my ELT knowledge by...	N=118	
	M	SD
15. Doing the exercises/assignments seriously in ELT classes.	3.94	.28
16. Participating in all ELT workshops organized by my university.	3.83	.43

Regarding the qualitative findings garnered from interviewees, it was found out that many interviewed participants had a strong determination to learn the ELT knowledge. They shared that they attempted to gain ELT knowledge from taking part in-class activities.

"It is quite challenging to take the ELT courses, but I find it necessary to get involved in learning activities actively so that I can understand what I am learning. Or else, I may fall behind what I am supposed to learn." (S9)

"Apart from reading materials before class, I always tell myself not to neglect the learning activities such as lectures, discussions, exercises, peer teaching demonstration and etc. because through such activities I can construct my knowledge of ELT." (S15)

Additionally, few interviewees reported that they took extra courses such as courses of TESOL and teaching pedagogy to deepen their teaching knowledge as well as prepare for their future ELT jobs.

"I know that some schools and English language centers require job applicants to have a TESOL certificate, so I am taking a course of TESOL at my university. I can learn more about ELT and have a certificate for job application later on." (S2)

As regards EFL student teacher agency in developing their TC in terms of ELT skills, participants self-reported that they got engaged actively in activities self-developing their ELT skills. They participated in "observing English teaching classes" (item 17: M=3.72, SD=.70), "watching clips of English teaching classes" (item 19: M=3.82, SD=.48), and "practicing teaching individually" (item 19: M=3.83, SD=.48) and with their peers (item 20: M=3.88, SD=.43). After that, they joined in other activities such as "asking [their] peers to give comments on [their] teaching

demonstration” (item 21: M=3.80, SD=.57), “giving comments on [their]peers’ teaching demonstration” (item 22: M=3.95, SD=.53), and “self-evaluating my teaching demonstration” (item 23: M=3.84, SD=.44) to improve their ELT skills. Furthermore, participants also considered their teaching practicum (item 24: M=3.90, SD=.41) and working experience (e.g., teaching assistant, part-time teacher) (item 25: M=3.76, SD=.52) as serious chances to enhance their ELT skills.

The qualitative findings resonate with the quantitative ones. Many interviewees shared that they paid much attention to their ELT skills since they reckoned that good teachers are often evaluated by their teaching skills. Therefore, they allocated much time to practicing their ELT skills.

"I am aware that being able to teach English well, I have to practice my teaching skills a lot. It is not always easy at all." (S14)

"I watch the teaching clips on the YouTube, and write good teaching approaches and techniques from those clips in my notebook. Then, I use such approaches and techniques when I practice ELT skills with my peers." (S7)

Participating in the practicum is one of the chief ways to leverage their ELT skills. Interviewees shared that observing experienced teachers’ real teaching classes was very meaningful for their ELT skill development. Additionally, having a chance to teach in real classes and getting feedback from mentors were

"During the practicum, I have observed different classes from experienced teachers, both native teachers and Vietnamese teachers of English. It is so real and I can see and learn different ways to manage and teach the class effectively." (S2)

"...I have chances to teach real classes, and my mentor give me comments on my teaching. I remember that the first teaching class I did not do very well, but I could adjust my teaching weaknesses based on my mentor’s comments on my first teaching class." (S8)

Some added that they also peer-assessed their ELT skills as they opined that by giving comments on peers’ teaching demonstration could enhance their ELT skills. The example is as follows:

"My friends and I often work in groups and have a simulation class to practice our teaching skills. It is kind of fun and meaningful as it seems practical for us. We give comments on our teaching. I think we can improve our teaching skills." (S6)

Apart from ways mentioned in the questionnaire, few participants mentioned that they self-recorded their teaching demonstration and self-evaluated it to improve their ELT skills. One said:

"I practice teaching on my own and record it. Then, I watch it to see if it is OK or not. By doing this way, I can recognize how I should improve my teaching skills." (S11)

Table 5. EFL student-teacher agency in TC development in terms of ELT skills

I try to enhance my ELT skills by...	N=118	
	M	SD
17. observing English teaching classes.	3.72	.70
18. watching clips of English teaching classes.	3.93	.42
19. practicing teaching individually.	3.83	.48
20. practicing teaching with my peers.	3.88	.43
21. asking my peers to give comments on my teaching demonstration.	3.80	.57
22. giving comments on my peers’ teaching demonstration.	3.95	.53
23. self-evaluating my teaching demonstration.	3.84	.44
24. participating in teaching practicum seriously.	3.90	.41
25. working as a teaching assistant / part-time teacher at an English language center / school to learn teaching experience.	3.76	.52

4.2. Discussion

Some significant findings in this study were unraveled. Within this study, EFL student teachers' TC encompasses four components, namely English language skills, attitudes towards ELT, ELT knowledge and ELT skills, and EFL student teachers were found to have a significant role in leveraging their TC during ELT methodology courses. Overall, research participants were likely to boost their ELT knowledge and attitudes towards ELT more than their English language skills and ELT skills. This finding is partially corroborated with that from Tran's (2020) study which unraveled that student-teachers spent time on ELT knowledge and ELT skills more than the other two components. One of the plausible explanations for this finding could be that research participants may find their ELT knowledge and attitudes towards ELT less difficult to develop than their English language skills and ELT skills.

Regarding English language skills, it was found out that research participants allocated much time to their English language skill development. Although research participants paid much attention to enhancing their different English language skills, they devoted much more time on English speaking skill than the other ones. This finding may result from the fact that more than 80% of research participants had experience in ELT as different roles (e.g., tutor, teaching assistant, full-time teacher), so they may become aware of the importance of the English speaking skill in ELT. Additionally, research participants may be knowledgeable that teachers can be considered as providers of comprehensible input (Hammer, 2007). Therefore, this may underscore the belief that teachers who possess a good English speaking skill can attract their learners' attention in the learning process. As for EFL student teachers' attitudes towards ELT, research participants were found to tailor their attitudes towards ELT during their ELT training. Among different ways of shaping their positive attitudes towards ELT, they admitted that they sought for talks with friends in the field of ELT and devoted teachers much more than others. As research participants were in the ELT community and

gained some preliminary teaching experience while still being student-teachers, they may know better channels to explore the values of becoming teachers. Gradually, they could build up their commitment, confidence, belief and respect in ELT, which can link their ELT knowledge to ELT skills (Council of Europe, 2008; Feiman-Nemser, 2008).

With respect to the ELT knowledge, research participants got engaged in knowledge constructed learning activities for their TC self-development. Most of learning activities they got involved in were class-based activities. The reality was that research participants were determined to become teachers of English as they had opted to take the sub-major of ELT methodology instead of the sub-majors of Business English or English for translation and interpretation. That may be the reason why they were concerned about how to enhance their ELT knowledge. As regards to ELT skills, student-teachers in this study committed to a variety of practical activities to gain hands-on experience in ELT. Although they were aware that being skillful in ELT was not always easy, they tried their best to acquire their ELT skills. They focused more on such activities as giving comments on their peers' teaching, watching teaching clips, participating in teaching practicum seriously and practicing teaching with my peers. As mentioned above, most of student-teachers in this study had experience in ELT, they may realise the importance of ELT skills and know how to self-develop their ELT skills. From such realistic cognition, student-teachers may have clear pathways to self-enhance their ELT skills.

5. Conclusions

The study has revealed that EFL student teachers played a pivotal role in self-developing their TC in terms of English language skills, attitudes towards ELT, and ELT knowledge and skills during ELT methodology courses. EFL student teachers believed that their agency could self-develop their ELT knowledge, followed by attitudes towards ELT, ELT skills and English language skills.

Some pedagogical implications can be suggested. It can be seen that different factors (e.g., learner-related factors, trainer-related factors, and learning environment-related factors) can affect student-teachers' TC development, and learner-related factors seem to play a key role in developing TC. Therefore, it is advisable that the ELT teacher training course should concentrate much on the student-teachers' role and assist them to get aware of their role in self-enhancing their TC. In addition to that, teacher trainers should facilitate the student-teachers'

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