

**Teaching Culturally and Linguistically Diverse International Students in Open and/or
Online Learning Environments: A Research Symposium**

**Digital Critical Literacy Development and Intercultural Awareness
Raising ‘In’ Action, ‘On’ Action and ‘For’ Action in ELT**

Marina Orsini-Jones
School of Humanities,
Faculty of Arts and Humanities,
Coventry University, Coventry, United Kingdom
Email: m.orsini@coventry.ac.uk

Abraham Cerveró-Carrascosa
Didàctica de la Llengua i la Literatura
Unitat d'Educació
Florida Universitària, Valencia, Spain
Email: acervero@florida-uni.es

Kyria Finardi
Department of Languages, Culture and Education,
Post Graduate Programme of Education,
Federal University of Espirito Santo / UFES, Vitória, Brazil
Email: kyria.finardi@gmail.com

Abstract

This paper reports on project Blending MOOCs (Massive Open Online Courses) into English Language Teaching Education (ELT) with Telecollaboration (BMELTET), the latter which aims to foster reflection on ELT with a COIL (Collaborative Online International Learning) MOOC blend that promotes the engagement of international students based in the UK and studying towards a master's degree (MA) in ELT, with a global community of ELT practice, with students and staff based in universities in Brazil, China, and Spain, and with the participants on the MOOC from all over the world. BMELTET aims to debunk the myth of the 'native speaker' as the ideal teacher of English language, thus decolonizing ELT through dialogic, online intercultural exchanges. A mixed-method approach was adopted for the data analysis and data was collected via two online surveys. The analysis of the live ZOOM exchanges and focus groups with the self-selected groups of students was then examined. The results illustrate a positive, changed attitude towards online learning and digital literacy facilitated by BMELTET, but also show that there still are challenges to be overcome.

Keywords: ELT, COIL, intercultural, global Englishes, reflection

Introduction and Literature Review

This paper reports on project BMELTET 2020 (Blending MOOCs, Massive Open Online Courses, for English Language Teacher Education with Telecollaboration) in its September 2020 to December 2020 cycle (Orsini-Jones et al., 2018; Orsini-Jones & Cerveró-Carrascosa, 2019; Orsini-Jones et al., 2020). Its participants were students and staff involved in teacher education in four higher-educational institutions (HEIs) in Brazil, China, Spain, and the UK. In BMELTET 2020, the FutureLearn MOOC: Understanding Language: Learning and Teaching (designed by the University of Southampton in collaboration with the British Council) was repurposed and incorporated into existing teacher education curricula at both undergraduate and postgraduate levels, as in previous action-research cycles of the project, in a blended learning model of MOOC-COIL (Collaborative Online International Learning) curricular integration, as discussed by De Lima Guedes (2020).

On BMELTET, students reflected on ELT topics in the Third Space of a COIL project, also known as Virtual Exchange (VE) and/or telecollaboration, or online intercultural exchange (O'Dowd, 2020; Lewis & O'Dowd, 2016). At the same time, they also engaged with a global English-language-teaching community of practice on a MOOC that had over 200,000 participants from all over the world (FutureLearn, 2020). BMELTET aimed at providing international students studying in the UK on an MA in English-language teacher education with different perspectives on ELT, to debunk the myth of the native speaker as the ideal teacher of English language; it aimed to decolonize ELT (Kumaravadivelu, 2006; Rubdy, 2015; Finardi, 2019) through dynamic and dialogic online exchanges that included a discussion on global Englishes.

As well as developing a critical awareness of their right to teach English in BMELTET, students meta-reflected on technical aspects of teaching and learning English online 'in' action, 'on' action, and 'for' action (Mann & Walsh, 2018) through live intercultural dialogues. This also aimed at supporting the development of their digital critical literacy and equip them with the digital skills necessary to teach the English language in a pandemic (and post-pandemic) scenario (Moorehouse et al., 2021).

The research questions were:

RQ1. Can BMELTET support English-language teachers to adopt a holistic approach to the integration of technology into their practice?

RQ2. Can BMELTET promote intercultural awareness in the field of English-language teacher education?

RQ3. Can BMELTET support the identification of troublesome areas in English-language teacher education with particular reference to digital critical literacy development?

RQ4. Can BMELTET support reflection on practice?

RQ5. Can BMELTET support the integration of international students in an overseas learning setting?

A mixed-methods' approach was adopted for the data analysis and data was collected via two surveys (online surveys). The ZOOM exchanges and focus groups, with self-selected groups of students, were then analyzed after an ethics' clearance was obtained through the ethics governance at Coventry University.

The reflections 'on' action delved into how online classes could benefit teacher education and how MOOCs could support it. The students were appreciative of feeling part of a global ELT

village, where it became evident that the majority of English-language teachers are L2 speakers. Finally, ‘for’ action discussions allowed pre-service and in-service teachers to envisage future actions based on the promotion of creativity, the role of digital tools in classes, or the blending of MOOCs in professional development. There were visible ontological (becoming an English-language teacher in the digital age) and epistemological (learning new literacies, acquiring new knowledge and ‘linguaging’ relating to the ELT online dimension) shifts facilitated by the participation in BMELTET, in line with what Thorne (2016) argues. However, the troublesome nature of the project for some students also emerged. Some students felt taken out of their comfort zone, at a time in which said zone was also being put to the test by the pandemic. The conclusion will illustrate the lessons learned from this cycle of the project.

Methods

The research design was mainly qualitative. Data was collected and safely stored in secure and password-protected areas. Explicit informed consent was sought from all participants. As from the previous cycles of BMELTET, participants' consent forms were coded, and all data was treated anonymously.

Participation in BMELTET involved:

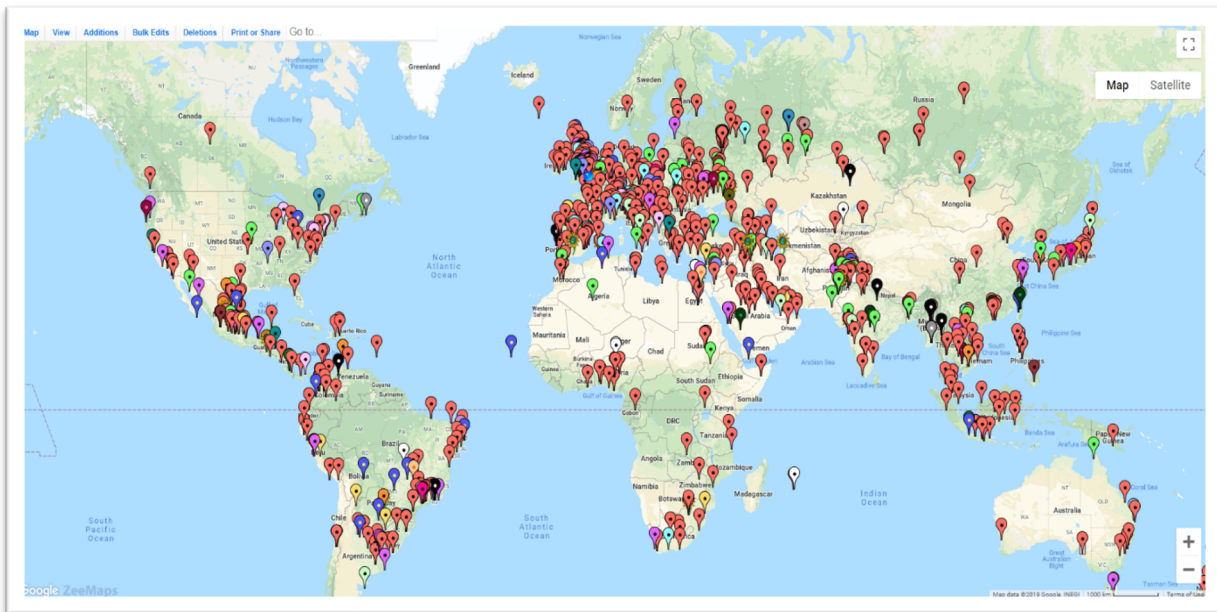
- Registration on the FutureLearn MOOC [*Understanding Language: Learning and Teaching*](#). (The MOOC opened on 12/10).
- Around two hours of engagement per week, with the MOOC’s set activities for the four weeks of their duration.
- Reflection on individual beliefs on online and blended learning through:
 - A pre-BMELTET and a post-BMELTET survey designed with Online Surveys (formerly Bristol Online Survey) consisting of Likert-scale type statements and open-ended questions
 - COIL engagement through Zoom meetings (synchronous task-based discussions) and Padlet tasks
 - COIL engagement through synchronous discussions with the partners through Microsoft Teams/Zoom/WeChat (small group)
 - Completion of specific collaborative tasks in small groups by students from the three universities involved
- Participation in focus-group interviews at the end of the project (self-selected participants).

Most students enrolled in the MA in English Language Teaching and Applied Linguistics at Coventry University were international: three Chinese, two British, one Polish, one French, four Pakistani, one South African/Belgian, one Cypriot, and two Romanian. Due to the COVID-19 pandemic, some were still based in their own countries and learning in fully online mode. The students based in Spain, studying for an MA in TEFL for Secondary Education & BA in Primary Education (TEFL students), were all Spanish but one, dual Spanish/British nationality (25), and all the students in China, on a degree with the same name, as the one taken by students in Coventry, where there are nine Chinese students. The sessions on BMELTET were delivered by an international team of tutors from the UK, Spain, Brazil, China, and Italy.

The location of the participants on the MOOC is illustrated in the figure below, used with permission, and it well illustrates the global community of ELT practice (over 200,000 participants) students on BMELTET.

Figure 1

Location of the Participants on the MOOC Understanding Language, Learning and Teaching (used with permission)



Action Research (AR) was used to implement the BMELTET cycle and reflect on the data collected. AR is an expression first coined by the social psychologist, Kurt Lewin, in 1946. It is problem-focused, context-specific, and future-oriented. It involves a change intervention and a cyclic process in which research, action, and evaluation are interlinked. It aims at improvement and involvement, and is underpinned by the adoption of a will to embrace transformation and change on a continuous basis.

The AR model utilized here is Kemmis and McTaggart’s ‘participatory action research’ (2005) that is inspired, in turn, by educational research principles proposed by Argyris and Schön (1974) and Schön (1983). This AR model is seen as a ‘classic’ in AR literature (Burns, 2010, p. 8) and is, according to Burns (*ibid.*) also the best known one, as it succinctly summarizes all the phases of the action research cycles:

- A problematic issue is identified.
- Change is planned collaboratively to address the issue.
- The change process is implemented: ‘acted out.’
- All agents involved in the change process reflect upon its outcomes, both while it is happening, and at the end of the first phase of implementation.
- A new cycle starts.

In the AR cycle that preceded this one, it was agreed that the following would be implemented, in view of the results (Orsini-Jones et al., 2020):

- An element of gamification would be added to BMELTET.
- The use of Open Moodle as asynchronous repository would be discontinued (difficult to access from overseas).
- Padlet would be used for both synchronous and asynchronous reflections on the project.
- Zoom and its breakout rooms would be used for synchronous exchanges instead of Skype (N.B. Zoom was not yet available at an institutional level at the time of the October 2019-Feb 2020 exchange).
- The project would be linked to summative assessment in each country.

The data collected in this cycle illustrated both positive and negative positioning of students towards BMELTET, which will be discussed below.

Results

Results suggest that some participants declared negative attitudes towards online learning and teaching at the beginning of the project, but by its end, 80% of all participants found it motivating.

Participants also declared to have learned about different ELT and EFL (English as a foreign language) traditions, practiced the English language meaningfully, and were more aware of areas of development, in terms of their digital literacy and intercultural communication needs. BMELTET encouraged participants to engage in ‘in’ action with reflection on the themes contained in the MOOC, such as CLIL (Content and Language Integrated Learning) or TBLT (Task-Based Language Teaching) by posting comments on a Padlet, while in breakout rooms in Zoom. The intercultural discussion related to the applicability of certain ELT approaches in the contexts of the international students’ country of origin. Some of them found implementing CLIL programs appealing, but also complex, particularly in Asia.

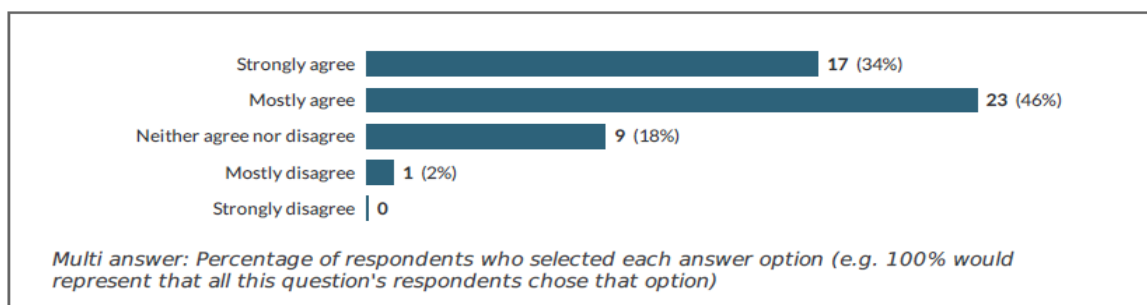
As for the specific research questions, here is a summary of the findings:

RQ1. Can BMELTET support English language teachers to adopt a holistic approach to the integration of technology into their practice?

It seems like the pandemic has modified teachers’ and pre-service teachers’ perceptions on the use of digital devices for teaching and learning. Eighty percent of the participants agreed that online teaching could be motivating in the post-BMELTET survey administered in December 2020, as shown in Figure 2 below.

Figure 2

Results of the Post-BMELTET Survey on How Learning and Teaching Online can Motivate Future Teachers



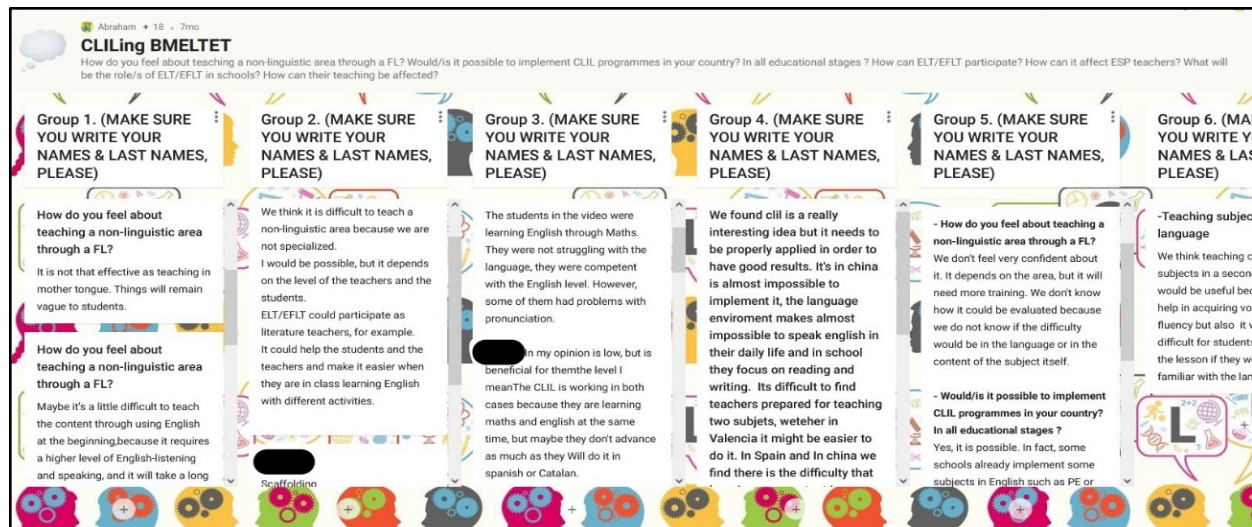
RQ2. Can BMELTET promote intercultural awareness in the field of teacher education?

BMELTET sparked up discussions among participants on different topics related to education and teaching English as a foreign language. It was hoped this would debunk the native-speaker myth. The reflection on the different ways and context-specific issues, relating to the application of the ELT approaches, covered were saved, as participants posted their group discussions on a Padlet. This highlighted intercultural issues they had not considered before.

BMELTET engaged students in reflection about a variety of approaches and their potential application in their country/context. They collaborated to synthesize their reflections on a Padlet, as Figure 3 below illustrates (on Content and Language Integrated Learning).

Figure 3

Screenshot of Participants' Reflections on CLIL on Padlet



As reported by some of the participants, BMELTET contributed to expand their ideas on teaching, to promote the use of English in real communication, and to provide wider insights on their conceptions of other worldviews.

The answer provided by one of the participants (below) may well summarize the previous research questions.

Participant CU 3: I came to enjoy online learning as much as I liked the face-to-face. The opportunity of synchronous learning with students and teachers from China and Spain was inspiring.

RQ3. Can BMELTET support the identification of troublesome areas in English-language teacher education with particular reference to digital critical literacy development?

It must be stated, from the beginning, that some participants were reluctant to engage with online classes; it took them out of their comfort zone:

Participant CU6: As far as I'm concerned, I thought it could be hard for me to get used to online learning and teaching, particularly, because I was not used to it. But eventually, I get [sic] to appreciate it, as it allows [the ability] to connect to more people. Nevertheless,

I think I am still more attracted to face-to-face teaching and learning, but I understand and acknowledge the interest of getting to know online learning and teaching.

RQ4. Can BMELTET support reflection on practice?

Reflection and metareflection (Flavell, 1979) are at the heart of BMELTET, which has provided solid ground for ‘on’ practice considerations. One of the participants asserted all the possibilities they had noticed on the course of this COIL project:

Participant CU7: I discovered many benefits that online classes offer, which face-to-face cannot (e.g., the opportunity to re-watch lectures, particularly if I forgot what was said later on).

Moreover, considerations ‘for’ practice could also be identified, so as to convey how the contents dealt with could be used for future practice:

Participant FU5: As a teacher, I soon realized it was very effective and left room for creativity.

RQ5. Can BMELTET support the integration of international students in an overseas learning setting?

BMELTET did help the inclusion of overseas students, since it was managed and run bearing in mind the online circumstances of participants. The controlled interactions via ZOOM, in breakout rooms, included questions that addressed the topics that had been covered in the MOOC and in the lectures. These synchronous exchanges seemed to have provided participants with a sense of a safe environment. Furthermore, gamification elements were included in each class to lower students’ anxiety.

Discussion and Conclusion

It would appear that BMELTET contributed to lowering the majority of its participants’ anxiety about online learning and facilitated a ‘glocal’ intercultural dialogue, where both local and global ELT issues were discussed. There appeared to be less diffidence towards online learning, possibly because the pandemic has ‘normalised’ (Bax, 2018) technology use. The live Zoom interactions were conducive to a healthy discussion on who can/should be a teacher of English language and the Global North/South dialogue made participants aware of the limitation of certain approaches, in relation to their teaching contexts. However, some participants still felt uneasy about their online presence and their level of digital literacy. Their lack of engagement was made more visible in breakout rooms by their ‘black mute box’ on screen. More research needs to be carried out on how to support international students in teacher education to become more resilient online during a pandemic.

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