PART 4

Students Getting the Hang of It

CHAPTER 20

Out of the Comfort Zone

The Trouble with a MOOC-Virtual Exchange Blend at the Time of the COVID 19 Pandemic

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1 Introduction

This chapter reports on *Blending MOOC s into English Language Teacher Educa-tion with Virtual Exchange during a Pandemic* (BMELTEVEP), a virtual exchange project carried out between March and April 2021, with students and staff based in three Higher Education Institutions, two in the Global South (Brazil and Sri Lanka) and one in the Global North (UK). Participants were involved in the Third Space (Bhabha, 2004; Bhabha & Rutherford, 2006) created through the VE project, engaging with each other synchronously online and also asynchro-nously with a global English Language Teaching community of practice (Lave & Wenger, 1991) of over 200,000 participants on the FutureLearn MOOC *Under-standing Language: Learning and Teaching* (by the University of Southampton and the British Council, 2020). Third Space, as coined by Bhabha (2004), is a place of exchange, clash, contrast, rearticulation, and negotiation rather than a space of resolution (Guimarães & Finardi, 2021; Helm, 2013; Orsini-Jones et al., 2022). Third Space emphasises the ambivalence that questions authoritarian and colonial discourses as well as the systems that reproduce them (Bhabha & Rutherford, 2006; Finardi & Guimarães, 2020).

One of the main purposes of the project was to foster the development of more inclusive (De Wit et al., 2015) and critical internationalisation processes in the form of 'Internationalisation at Home' approaches (Beelen & Jones, 2015) during the Covid-19 pandemic. Another aim was to integrate critical digital lit-eracy and metareflection facilitated by an intercultural and innovative blended learning experience into English language teacher education courses, involving the integration of both a Virtual Exchange and a Massive Open Online Course into existing teacher education curricula. This type of blended learning model had been tried and tested before in related projects (Orsini-Jones et al., 2018) to provide students with opportunities to engage with a global English Language Teaching community of practice through synchronous online interaction with

the extra dialogic opportunity offered by the engagement with the asynchronous global MOOC community that had over 200,000 participants.

Virtual Exchange, also known as Collaborative Online International Learning (Rubin, 2017) and/or telecollaboration (Orsini-Jones & Lee, 2018), is a challenging and fertile liminal Third Space for decolonising education. It promotes intercultural encounters and innovative approaches in Higher Education to cope with local, national and global tensions (Wimpenny et al., 2022). The EVOLVE – Evidence-Validated Online Learning through Virtual Exchange – project defines Virtual Exchange (VE) as a:

> practice, supported by research, that consists of sustained, technology-enabled, people-to-people education programmes or activities in which constructive communication and interaction takes place between individuals or groups who are geographically separated and/or from different cultural backgrounds, with the support of educators or facilitators. Virtual Exchange combines the deep impact of intercultural dialogue and exchange with the broad reach of digital technology.[1]

For the purpose of this study, virtual exchange is not just seen as a practice, but as a novel approach to English language teacher education and Continuous Professional Development for English language teachers (Dooly & Vinagre, 2021; O'Dowd & Dooly, 2022). Virtual exchange can however challenge the expectations of students enrolled in Higher Education courses (Wimpenny et al., 2022) and take them out of their comfort zone (Orsini-Jones et al., 2020b). The students participating in BMELTEVEP and in its previous related action-research cycles (e.g. Orsini-Jones et al., 2017, 2018, 2020a) are studying courses on English language teacher education and are engaging with the conceptualisation at both epistemological and ontological level of 'becoming' English language teachers in the 21st century. Three threshold concepts were identified over the course of five years of threshold concepts-informed investigations into troublesome knowledge in English language teacher education in the pre-pandemic period (2016–2020): (1) autonomy in language learning and teaching; and (2) reflective practice and (3) online communication (Orsini-Jones et al., 2017, 2020a). In these studies it was ascertained that while participants found the concepts of autonomy, reflective practice and online communication challenging and troublesome (for example moving from a teacher-centred pedagogical stance to fostering an autonomous approach to learning and teaching), the integration of the blended learning project discussed here into their curricula supported most of them with moving beyond the liminal space and grasping these concepts. The move from a blended learning experience consisting

of face-to-face and online delivery, which used to also include the opportunity of staff and student mobility, to a fully remote learning experience because of the pandemic, highlighted the emergence of novel troublesome knowledge in the cycle of the VE-MOOC project discussed here that relates to being, learning, relating and teaching online in a fully remote mode.

2 Literature Review

As previously discussed (Orsini-Jones et al., 2022, p. 306), according to Ladson-Billings (2021) we live in an era affected by four pandemics: 1. COVID-19; 2. systemic racism; 3. economic crisis; and 4. climate crisis. The residual effects of these four pandemics increase and expose the long-standing disparities in our education systems calling for reflection and action in a hard re-set fashion (Ladson-Billings, 2021, pp. 68–78). A re-think is also needed to address the United Nations Sustainable Development Goal 4: 'Quality Education: Ensure inclusive and equitable quality education and promote lifelong learning opportunities for all' (Department of Economic and Social Affairs, 2022).

Despite the negative connotations normally associated with a pandemic, the COVID-19 crisis offered (and is still offering) a unique opportunity to reflect and re-set mindsets and educational systems. This re-set could be at least partially achieved by, and translated into, a decolonisation turn, requiring thinking of a future 'otherwise' (Stein et al., 2020; Stein & Andreotti, 2021) to redress deep-rooted inequalities and to dismantle, redesign, and decolonise systems that have reinforced social and cognitive injustice (Andreotti et al., 2018).

Drawing on decolonial perspectives (de Sousa Santos, 2007, 2015, & 2020), it is proposed here to move towards the reimagining of systems conceptualising education as a human right that integrates and engages with a range of human experiences, knowledges and languages from both sides of the abyssal lines (de Sousa Santos, 2007; Finardi et al., 2022). Abyssal lines are related to the view that modern Western epistemologies consist of a system of visible and invisible lines that divide the world, whereby knowledges produced in the Global North are visible whereas those produced in the Global South or on the other side of the lines are not. The division of knowledge in abyssal lines results in a form of epistemicide or cognitive injustice (de Sousa Santos, 2015) that can be avoided by promoting a diverse ecology of knowledges. According to de Sousa Santos (2015), current discussions in the field of epistemology indicate a change from a traditional view of 'knowledge' as a unified and fixed entity to a pluralistic and dynamic view of 'knowledges', due to the changing conditions and settings in which these 'knowledges' are produced, reproduced, contested

and transformed, involving social, political, historical, economic (and other) factors. The above-mentioned re-set or reimagining of systems that can facilitate a range of ways of knowing and being requires access to transformative teaching and learning.

Third Space learning through VE facilitates the encounter and clash of different languages, cultures and knowledges, thus contributing to the visibility/appreciation of difference, diversities and minorities. VE offers the opportunity to engage with different worldviews while also engaging in constructive, albeit challenging, intercultural dialogue (Helm, 2013; Orsini-Jones & Lee, 2018). Third Space questions authoritarian and colonial discourses as well as the systems that reproduce them (Bhabha, & Rutherford, 2006). Third Space learning can also be challenging and go against the educational *status quo* (Orsini-Jones et al., 2022). It brings learners, those who are used to more tutor-led educational system in particular, 'out of their comfort zone', and in so doing it aligns with Threshold Concepts (TCs) literature and theorisation.

As argued by Schwartzman (2010, p. 38):

> Real learning requires stepping into the unknown, which initiates a rupture in knowing … By definition, all TC scholarship is concerned (directly or indirectly) with encountering the unknown.

Also, experiencing Third Space learning through VE can bring into view new perspectives, as the intercultural knowledge-sharing online learning space can open up novel epistemological and ontological perspectives that can challenge and transform the learners' beliefs and, as discussed in TC literature: 'this permits a new and previously inaccessible way of thinking about something' (Meyer et al., 2010, p. IX).

One of the purposes of the BMELTEVEP project was to provide students in English language teacher education with different perspectives on ELT and to debunk the myth of the 'native speaker' as the ideal teacher of English language, thus decolonising ELT through dialogic online exchanges (Orsini-Jones et al., 2022). Metareflection (Flavell, 1979) was encouraged: to develop the students' ability to reflect on online learning and teaching 'in action', while engaging in the synchronous online collaborative sessions; 'on action' after having carried out the tasks with the partners and on the MOOC; and 'for action', applying the lessons learnt to their future teaching practice (Orsini-Jones et al., 2021, 2022).

Another motivation for the BMELTEVEP project arose from the need to further develop Internationalisation at Home (IaH) strategies in each of the partner institutions involved, one of which had extensive experience in COIL/VE projects (Wimpenny & Orsini-Jones, 2020), while the other two were new to

this type of Third Space learning. Beelen and Jones (2015) define IaH as the integration of international and intercultural dimensions into the formal and informal curriculum of domestic learning environments. IaH can foster the decolonisation of the curriculum and integrate a variety of multiple perspectives in it (Wimpenny & Orsini-Jones, 2020). The fact that most students participating in BMELTEVEP who were based in the UK were not British and were mainly from a variety of countries located in the Global South (see details below) also strengthened this point. COIL/VE can underpin the development of more inclusive and critical internationalisation processes (e.g. Guimarães & Finardi, 2020). BMELTEVEP students enrolled on courses on English language teacher education in the UK, Brazil and Sri Lanka were supported with discovering alternative ways of teaching languages and with reflecting on the way they were becoming teachers of languages while practising the critical digital and intercultural competences needed in the 21st century. The BMELTEVEP project built on the lessons learnt on B-MELTT and BMELTET (Orsini-Jones et al., 2018; Orsini-Jones & Cerveró Carrascosa, 2019), that also explored the integration of an existing Massive Open Online Course into ELT courses at both undergraduate and postgraduate level.

3   Methods

The BMELTEVEP project enabled a cross-continental scholarly cooperation involving academics and students based in the Global South and North for the development of IaH approaches in institutions which were new to this type of learning experience and approach.

BMELTEVEP was underpinned by a threshold-concepts-informed participatory action-research methodological approach (Orsini-Jones, 2010, p. 287). The main research aims of the project were to:

– Analyse if the repurposing and integration of a MOOC into existing teacher education curricula could help learners with acquiring a global perspective on ELT while engaging with a both a local institutional setting (their university class) and global (the VE and the MOOC) communities of practice.
– Investigate if operating in a Third Space blend of a VE supported by a MOOC would lower the anxiety of L2 students on English language teaching courses, help them to gain confidence and debunk the myth of the 'native speaker' as the ideal teacher of English language (Holliday, 2006).
– Explore how such a multicultural and multilingual community of practice could support the decolonisation of the ELT curriculum (Rubdy, 2015) by also exposing students to a variety of ELT expert perspectives that were not

the usual 'White Anglo-Saxon and Protestant' ones, which tend to dominate the field.

– Investigate if the VE-MOOC blend could support students in English language teacher education with 'metareflecting' on: their online experience 'in action', while doing the MOOC and the VE exchange; 'on action', after having carried out the tasks with the partners; and 'for action', applying the lessons learnt to their future teaching practice (Orsini-Jones et al., 2022).

– Ascertain whether or not the engagement with BMELTEVEP could foster the acquisition of critical digital literacy, the development of intercultural awareness and lower the anxiety about the integration of technology into ELT that had been identified as an issue in previous related action research cycles (Orsini-Jones et al., 2020b).

– Explore how VE could further support the Internationalisation of the Curriculum in the institutions involved in the project.

The research design used a mixed method approach which was mainly qualitative and 'grounded' but also included some quantitative elements: 'QUAL-quant' model (Dörnyei, 2007, pp. 170–175). 'Thick data' was collected and safely stored in secure and password-protected areas. Explicit informed consent was sought from all participants and ethics approval was gained through the Coventry University ethics governance processes that are GDPR-compliant.[2] Participants' consent forms were coded and all data was treated anonymously.

Participation involved:

– Registration on the FutureLearn MOOC *Understanding Language: Learning and Teaching.*

– Around 2 hours of engagement per week with the MOOC's set activities for the 4 weeks of their duration in preparation for the live synchronous sessions on Zoom.

– Reflection on individual beliefs on the topics covered (see Table 20.1) through:

  – A pre- and a post-project survey designed with the JISC Online Surveys (formerly BOS,[3]), consisting of Likert-scale type statements and open-ended questions.

  – VE engagement through one-hour long Zoom classes (synchronous task-based discussions) and Padlet tasks.

  – Completion of specific collaborative tasks.

– Participation in focus group interviews at the end of the project (self-selected participants).

Table 20.1 outlines the structure and features of the project.

TABLE 20.1   BMELTEVEP project outline

Institution and degree course involved	Academic staff	Topics	Sessions	Platform	Activities	Assessment: Formative (F) or Summative (S)
UK Coventry University MA in English Language Teaching and Applied Linguistics	2 tutors	Task-Based Language Learning and Teaching	One-hour synchronous session per week for 4 weeks	Zoom (Coventry University host/ institutional Zoom)	Flipped learning on the MOOC and engagement with the MOOC discussion fora	Group cross-country oral presentation (F)
		Content and Language Integrated Learning (CLIL)	Asynchronous activities on the MOOC	Padlet (as above, Coventry University institutional Padlet)	Icebreakers	Socrative Quizzes (F)
Sri Lanka National Institute of Business and Management BA English and TESOL (Teaching English to Speakers of Other Languages)	1 tutor	Online learning and teaching and Intercultural Communicative Competence		Socrative Quiz (Freeware)	Mini-lectures	Kahoot! Quizzes (F)
				Kahoot! (Freeware)	Workshops	Pre- and post-project survey (F)
		Global Englishes			Breakout room seminars and collaborative tasks (e.g. on the shared Padlet wall)	Viva based on the VE project (S/UK)
Brazil Federal University of Espírito Santo BA English and TESOL	4 tutors (one senior and three junior)				Collective oral reflections	

The BMELTEVEP project was a blend of online in-class synchronous and online asynchronous learning and activities. Participants watched lectures at home on the MOOC and then discussed them both in shared sessions and in breakout rooms in the live online classes. BMELTEVEP followed a 'flipped' format (Orsini-Jones & Smith, 2018) since the lecture on the MOOC had to be watched first and was followed by the seminar discussing the topics covered on the MOOC that aligned with those covered on the ELT syllabus in each institution during the synchronous sessions. As from Table 20.1, the topics addressed both in the MOOC and in the live Zoom sessions were:

– *Topic 1*: Task-Based Language Learning and Teaching (TBLT) – live Zoom session delivered by an Italian national based in the UK;
– *Topic 2*: Content and Language Integrated Learning (CLIL) – live Zoom session delivered by a Spanish national based in Spain;
– *Topic 3*: Online learning and teaching and Intercultural Communicative Competence (ICC) – live Zoom session delivered by the same academic as in 1;
– *Topic 4*: Global Englishes – live Zoom session delivered by a Brazilian national based in Brazil.

The project planning, execution and data collection ran between January and May 2021, while the VE live sessions took place in February and March 2021.

39 participants filled in the pre-project survey by its deadline of the 12th March 2021 (around 80% of all students enrolled on the relevant courses): see Figure 20.1 (BMELTEVEP Participants). Of these 39 participants, 18 were full-time and 21 part-time. There was a majority of female participants (34) and the age range was 21–55. 13 participants had not had any experience of teaching and all participants but 2 were L2 speakers of English as illustrated in Figure 20.2 (BMELTEVEP Participants by L1 – First Language). The majority (29) had never participated in a MOOC before and none of them had taken part in a VE before.

While participants from Brazil and Sri Lanka were all nationals from their respective countries, the students based in the UK were from 9 different nationalities: British, Chinese, Egyptian, Indian, Maldivian, Nigerian, Jordanian, Pakistani, Sudanese and Romanian.

Which institution are you studying at?

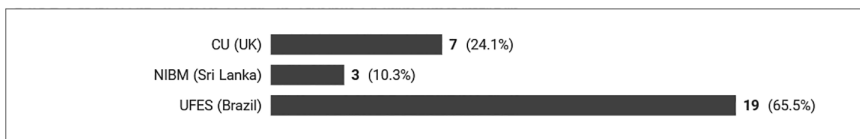|	
CU (UK)	7 (24.1%)
NIBM (Sri Lanka)	3 (10.3%)
UFES (Brazil)	19 (65.5%)

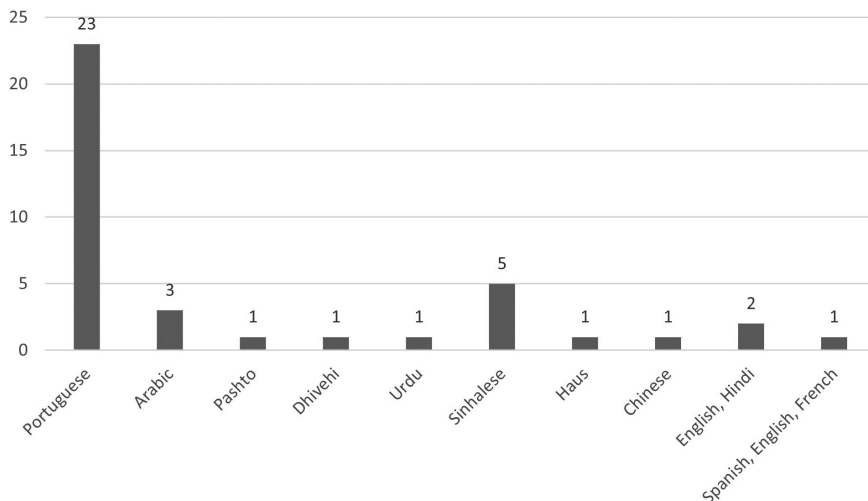FIGURE 20.1   BMELTEVEP participants by institution

FIGURE 20.2   BMELTEVEP participants by L1 (first language)

In terms of returns from the second post-project survey (deadline 30th April 2021) there were 29 returns, 7 from students based in the UK, 3 from Sri Lankan students and 19 from the Brazilian ones.

4   Findings

The analysis of the qualitative data in the 'pre-' and 'post-' surveys would appear to illustrate that BMELTEVEP was perceived to be a positive learning experience by the majority of its participants and created a sense of dedicated English Language Teaching Community of Practice.

For example, in reply to question 14 in the post-project survey, namely: 'How did you feel about engaging with a MOOC/COIL-VE online blend as part of your degree programme', many students reported that it had been an eye-opening experience, e.g.:

> I felt it was very interesting because of the interactions with people from different places and our sharing of experiences. It certainly made my degree richer in terms of content, exposure and practice.

> This is the first time to have MOOC and COIL/VE experience in my life and this is one of the greatest chances I got to improve myself, rather than only following the degree. Great exposure with multi-cultural backgrounds.

> I am so thankful for having this opportunity, I always wanted to partici-
> pate in a project like this, where I could meet people from other countries
> and know more about their culture, while I could learn more about my
> area and what I like to study. So this project was more than I could ever
> imagine, because it was collaborative and everyone had the chance to
> participate and engage in the classes.

In relation to the aim of providing students in English language teacher edu-
cation with different perspectives on ELT and debunk the myth of the 'native
speaker' as the ideal teacher of English language, the feedback obtained during
the focus group sessions held in both the UK and Brazil appeared to illustrate
that most students had felt at ease in the multilingual and multicultural Third
Space of the BMELTEVEP project. The fertile global dimension of the experi-
ence also emerged from some of the feedback in the online survey, e.g.:

> It was a great experience exchanging ideas with people from Srilanka and
> Brazil. At masters level we need to have a knowledge of global education
> system and that's what we got from this module. Srilanka is a country hav-
> ing English as a Second Language and in Brazil English is a Foreign lan-
> guage and also have more influence of American English, so it was good to
> know how the teaching learning is carried out in this two countries as well.

The above quote also illustrates how the ELT curriculum can be decolonised
through dialogic online exchanges that include a discussion on 'Global
Englishes'. Students actively 'metareflected' about the issue of who had the
right to teach a language and whose model should be followed. The metare-
flective aspect of the project and the experience of teaching online during the
pandemic appeared to have triggered a re-think of some participants' beliefs
about face-to-face versus online learning, whereby a positive shift had hap-
pened in favour of online learning for some. In response to question 30, 'Can
you expand on how the pandemic has impacted on your beliefs about online
learning and teaching?', one participant wrote:

> It has expanded my horizons. I value online teaching much more now,
> and I want to keep doing it even after the pandemic, because it is great
> in many aspects.

Another wrote:

> I had experience of teaching 2 semesters in a English course and it was
> difficult. I never saw myself teaching online because of the virus situation,

stress and resources too. But then when I started to teach my beliefs started to change. I believe it helped a lot of people that could not leave home for health reasons. And as a teacher it made me question the future.

Question 30 appeared however to polarise views and some participants expressed strong dissatisfaction with online learning and teaching, one also making some valid points about equality, diversity and inclusion (EDI), e.g.:

> With the COVID 19 pandemic, it became even clearer to me that remote education only favors those who have the conditions to do it. Unfortunately, the poorest people continue to be neglected, before in face-to-face teaching for various factors not only inherent in the "classroom" and now in this pandemic world that once again opened up the social divide that exists, especially here in Brazil. Not to mention that teachers were also overwhelmed to do more than double work and often without much support from schools. I believe that we need to go a long way so that online teaching and learning can be for everyone and in an appropriate way.

> I never liked the idea of Online Teaching, the pandemic made me hate it even more.

> In a way, the COVID19 Pandemic has affected me emotionally, impairing my activities in general.

The unease about the remote learning and teaching experience also transpired in some replies to the above-mentioned question 14 in the survey, one participant just wrote: 'uncomfortable'. Another one wrote:

> As a person who is missing social interaction so bad, and cannot stand online stuff anymore I felt a little bit overwhelmed.

And another, 'I am still getting used to this', reiterating previous related findings that the VE/COIL blend can take the learners out of the comfort zone of what a traditional syllabus is about (Wimpenny & Orsini-Jones, 2020). A possible explanation might be that a project like BMELTEVEP adds to the cognitive load of students who are already challenged by the (often) new learning environment they find themselves in. This applied to the majority of the students based at Coventry University, particularly at a time when their 'culture shock' was aggravated by a pandemic and the need to learn remotely only.

   Another area of troublesomeness consisted in the discrepancy between the enthusiasm for the project and its digital aspects declared in the feedback

by most participants (with particular reference to having embraced online learning as teachers and future teachers of English) and the answers on their beliefs about integrating technology into their teaching practice. Figure 20.3 (BMELTEVEP pre-project survey – question 'I am a bit worried about using technology to teach English') and Figure 20.4 (BMELTEVEP post-project survey – question 'I am a bit worried about using technology to teach English') below illustrate the summary responses on the participants' beliefs in relation to the statement: 'I am a bit worried about using technology to teach English'. There did not appear to have been any major shift in beliefs (e.g. lowering of anxiety) after having completed the VE exchange, which might betray a certain level of mimicry (Cousin, 2006) in the enthusiastic and positive quotes reported at the beginning of this section. In fact, if the 'neither agree nor disagree' are considered as 'negative' statements for the purpose of data analysis here, the anxiety about the utilisation of technology in English language teaching had actually increased from 51.3% in the pre-project survey to 55.1% in the post-project one. This – slightly alarming – result will be discussed in the final section of this chapter.

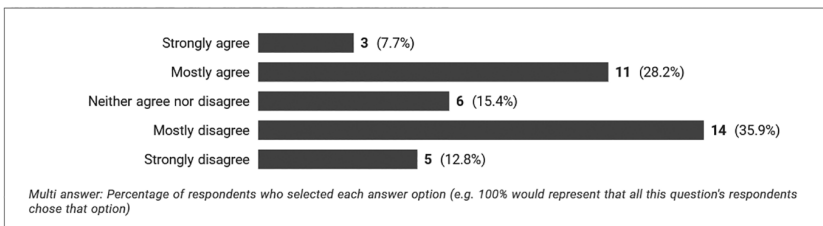27.1 I am a bit worried about using technology to teach English.

FIGURE 20.3   BMELTEVEP pre-project survey – question 'I am a bit worried about using technology to teach English'

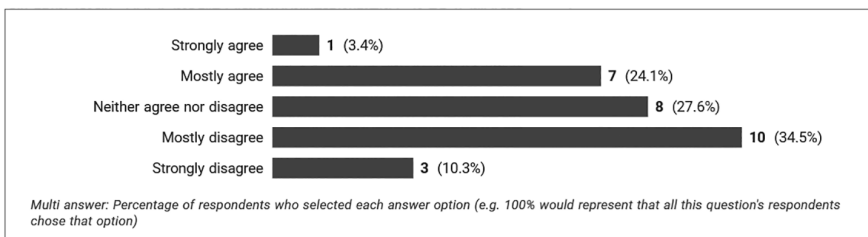I am a bit worried about using technology to teach English

FIGURE 20.4   BMELTEVEP post-project survey – question 'I am a bit worried about using technology to teach English'

5   Discussion and Conclusion

The analysis of the data emerging from BMELTEVEP project illustrates that the project was effective in implementing an Internationalisation at Home strategy for the two institutions that were new to it and fostered a 'glocal' intercultural dialogue, where both local and global English language teaching issues were discussed in the BMELTEVEP Third Space. However, it would appear that despite the positive feedback on the virtual exchange experience provided by the majority of its participants, there still was a considerable amount of anxiety around the adoption of technology in their English language teaching and learning practice. This seems to indicate that while the familiarity with online tools might have normalised the online experience during the COVID 19 pandemic, learning and teaching remotely is still proving to be challenging for some of the participants involved in BMELTEVEP. So, while the pandemic has somewhat 'normalised' (Bax, 2018) technology use, deep-seated diffidence towards the online environment and the use of ICT (Information and Communication Technology) in English language teaching is still prevalent amongst students in teacher education, as ascertained in the related pre-pandemic cycles of BMELTEVEP. The novelty of the virtual exchange approach (all participants were new to it) may have exacerbated the disruption (both physical and emotional, as illustrated by some of the quotes above) caused by the pandemic for some of them.

The feeling of a dehumanised learning experience was aggravated by the muted mics and disconnected video cameras during some of the breakout room interactions, which made some online seminar work challenging to carry out and painful to experience for both staff and students involved. The area of the troublesome nature of online presence (or rather lack of) in Zoom breakout rooms deserves further investigation, particularly in view of the fact that participants were enrolled on a course on teacher education. The unease with the remote environment expressed by some participants also needs to be addressed and might have been negatively affected by a previous experience of badly planned emergency remote learning and/or teaching (Can & Silman-Karanfil, 2022). Said negative experience could have had an impact on the participants' perception of BMELTEVEP, a kind of negatively connotated emotional 'tacit knowledge' that pre-dated, and/or co-existed with, the VE experience.

For this reason, two recommendations stem from this cycle of BMELTEVEP. The first one relates to the need to address and foster the sphere of the participating students' psychological capital (Luthans et al., 2006; Land et al., 2014), that is to say an individual's positive state of development that is characterised by:

– Self-efficacy: having confidence to take on and put in the necessary effort to succeed at challenging tasks;
– Optimism: making a positive attribution about succeeding now and in the future;
– Hope: persevering toward goals and, when necessary, redirecting paths to goals in order to succeed; and
– Resilience: when beset by problems and adversity, sustaining and bouncing back and even beyond to attain success.

The second recommendation, partly linked to the first and to participants' anxiety in relation to the use of technology, is to provide all staff involved in future cycles of BMELTEVEP with dedicated ELT mediator training for the online environment to make them aware of both the emotional and technical competences an effective online tutor should have. In relation to these, Moorhouse et al. (2021) provide a helpful set of e-CICs (e-Classroom Interactional Competencies) which they classify according to three main areas: technological competencies; online environment management competencies; and online teacher interactional competencies – which include attending to students' emotional needs across distance and maintaining a sense of presence despite not being physically together.

On a more positive note, the live Zoom all-group synchronous 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 limitations of certain teaching and learning approaches in relation to their teaching contexts. Students engaged, for example, in an interesting critique of how some of the MOOC topics were covered (they appeared to reflect a Global North perspective) on the virtual exchange collaborative Padlet walls.[4] As previously mentioned, the data analysis suggests a positive ontological and epistemological shift for the majority of the BMELTEVEP participants towards becoming 'glocally aware' teachers of English equipped with the necessary digital and intercultural competencies to teach online.

Despite the challenges encountered, overall the data appear to suggest that the VE/MOOC blend did support the re-imagination of English Language Teaching and Internationalisation at Home in the field of English language teacher education and also in the identification of challenging areas in English language teacher education with particular reference to digital critical literacy development and intercultural awareness.

Also, it is proposed here that virtual exchange, as a CPD approach to English language teacher education, could be a threshold concept as:

– The learners often find it problematic;
– It takes learners out of their comfort zone;
– It challenges learners' beliefs and 'being' and their existing knowledge (epistemology);
– Once understood, its potential effect on student learning and behaviour is to occasion a significant shift in their understanding of English Language teaching and learning;
– It exposes the previously hidden interrelatedness of concepts that were not previously seen as linked.

The above topics, together with the troublesome nature of online presence, will be further explored in the next cycle of the project. It could be argued that in view of the results, the cycle of the Virtual Exchange/MOOC blended learning project analysed here was conducive to the integration of knowledges from both sides of the abyssal lines (de Sousa Santos, 2007), promoting a novel digital ecology as well as a plurality of knowledges (de Sousa Santos, 2015), which are both produced, reproduced, contested and transformed in the Virtual Exchange Third Space. The results of the project align with Threshold Concepts theory as participants were taken 'out of their comfort zone' and experienced a different way of engaging with English language teacher education from what they were used to in their previous educational experience; this facilitated encounters with the unknown, opening up novel epistemological and ontological spaces that have the potential to challenge beliefs and change practice.

Acknowledgements

Notes

1 https://evolve-erasmus.eu/about-evolve/what-is-virtual-exchange/
2 GDPR is the General Data Protection Regulation law protecting privacy introduced in Europe and the UK in May 2018: https://gdpr-info.eu/
3 https://www.onlinesurveys.ac.uk/
4 https://en-gb.padlet.com/

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