The trouble with telecollaboration in BMELTET

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Abstract. This study reports on the 2019-2020 October-February cycle of the project, Blending Massive Open Online Courses in English Teacher Education with Telecollaboration (BMELTET). The project blends the MOOC *Understanding Language* (Futurelearn) with telecollaboration – or Collaborative Online International Learning (COIL) or Virtual Exchange (VE). It involves students enrolled on teacher education courses at both undergraduate level (from Spain) and postgraduate level (from the UK and China). This work discusses some of the challenges encountered in this 2019-2020 pre-COVID cycle and proposes, in line with other previous related studies, that telecollaboration is troublesome for students as it takes them out of their comfort zone. It does not align with what they were expecting to study at university. At the same time, BMELTET illustrates the gains that students and staff can make when engaging in such a project and its transformational impact on their beliefs.

Keywords: telecollaboration, English language teacher education, COIL, MOOC, blended.

1.   Introduction

Project BMELTET is a continuation of previous projects (Orsini-Jones et al., 2018). The main difference between the original cycles of this MOOC blend (Orsini-Jones, 2015) and the more recent ones (Orsini-Jones & Cerveró Carrascosa, 2019), is the addition of telecollaboration (or COIL or VE), to the students' learning experience. Participants in this cycle were from the UK, Coventry University (CU); Spain, La Florida Universitària (FU); and China, Xi'an Jiaotong-Liverpool University (JLU).

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As discussed by De Lima Guedes (2020), this project is an example of a hybrid blending of 'off the shelf' MOOCs into existing curricula, in this case the curriculum of students engaged in, or interested in, English language teacher education[4]. The tutors involved felt that the blend would enable students to expand their opportunities for reflective practice, add value to their learning experience and enable them to engage with different communities of English language teaching practice (both local and global). It was also hoped that it would develop their ability to reflect on online learning and teaching 'in action', while doing the MOOC and the telecollaboration 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., 2018).

The difficulties that students can encounter when engaging with telecollaboration is, however, documented in the relevant literature (e.g. O'Dowd & Ritter, 2006). It could be argued that the MOOC blend added to the complexity of the exchange. This paper will report on the challenges encountered, the lessons learnt, and some of the positive outcomes that resulted from the project.

2.　　Method

The overarching aim of the project was to enhance 'teacher cognition' as defined by Borg (2015), "what language teachers think, know and believe" (p. 1) about blended learning.

A mixed-method approach was adopted (QUAL-quant, Dörnyei, 2007). Participation was strongly encouraged in the three countries, but not compulsory. There were assessed tasks linked to the project in the UK and Spain, but not in China.

Seventy-one students participated in BMELTET 2019-2020 most of them were not English L1: 37 from CU (from 13 different nationalities), 19 from FU (18 Spanish, 1 with dual USA/Spanish nationality), 15 from JLU (14 Chinese and 1 American).

Students were asked to engage in five asynchronous weekly discussions in Moodle on the topics in the MOOC: (1) language learning and teaching in general; (2) task-based language learning and teaching; (3) Content and Language Integrated Learning (CLIL); (4) online learning and teaching; and (5) global Englishes.

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4. The MOOC used was by FutureLearn: Understanding Language: Learning and Teaching, University of Southampton with the British Council: https://www.futurelearn.com/courses/understanding-language.

Students from CU and FU also had three one-hour synchronous class-to-class seminars on Skype. All students were encouraged to take part in telecollaborative asynchronous discussions in Moodle and were divided into groups of 4-5 to carry out a joint group task. While there were exchanges on the first three topics in the general discussion in Moodle, the group task did not happen and most students became frustrated by the lack of communication in each group – or 'failed communication' (O'Dowd & Ritter, 2006). The use of Moodle was dictated by the need to comply with the General Data Protection Regulation (GDPR[5]) and collect data from a GDPR-compliant environment. Data were mined from

- a pre-BMELTET and a post-BMELTET survey designed with Online Surveys (https://www.onlinesurveys.ac.uk/) consisting of Likert-scale type statements and open-ended questions;

- discussion fora in the dedicated telecollaboration Moodle website;

- face-to-face focus group interviews with self-selected groups of students at the time of the visit to the UK by the partners' from Spain (2-4 March 2020);

- individual and group interviews with self-selected groups of students from CU and FU after the completion of the project, in July-August.

The data collected as above were triangulated and analysed in the light of the research questions below.

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

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

3.   Results and discussion

There were different levels of engagements in the three groups of students and 24 out of the initial 71 participants completed the post-BMELTET survey.

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5. https://gdpr-info.eu/

Unlike in the previous cycles, the anxiety about integrating technology into their teaching practice did not appear to have been helped by the project at the time on completing the survey – Figure 1 (pre-project 55% worried) and Figure 2 (post-project 58% still worried).

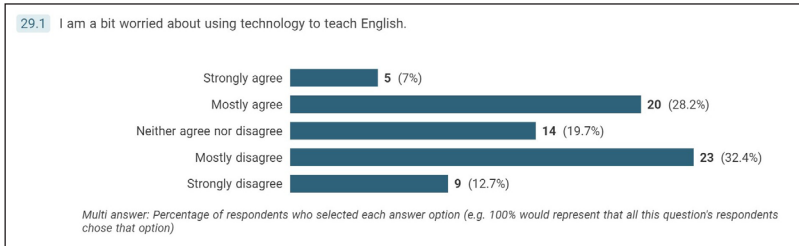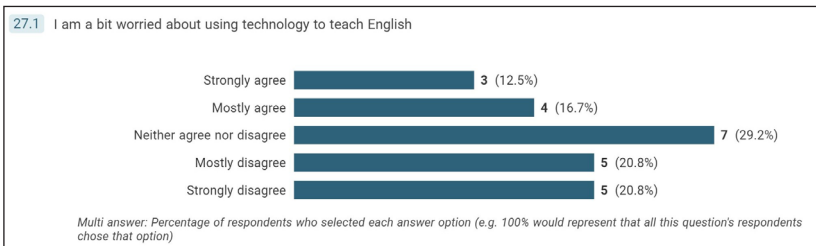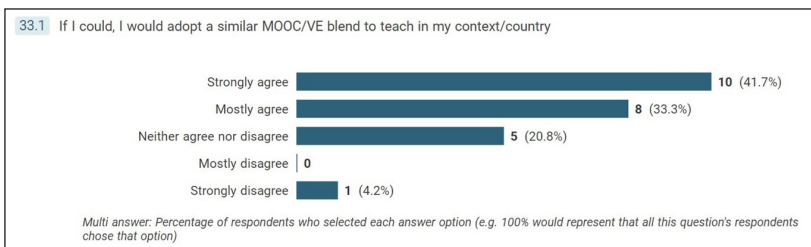Figure 1.   Pre-BMELTET project survey (open to students between 3-20 October 2019)

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

Strongly agree	5 (7%)
Mostly agree	20 (28.2%)
Neither agree nor disagree	14 (19.7%)
Mostly disagree	23 (32.4%)
Strongly disagree	9 (12.7%)

Multi answer: Percentage of respondents who selected each answer option (e.g. 100% would represent that all this question's respondents chose that option)

Figure 2.   Post-BMELTET project survey (open to students between 4-12 December 2019)

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

Strongly agree	3 (12.5%)
Mostly agree	4 (16.7%)
Neither agree nor disagree	7 (29.2%)
Mostly disagree	5 (20.8%)
Strongly disagree	5 (20.8%)

Multi answer: Percentage of respondents who selected each answer option (e.g. 100% would represent that all this question's respondents chose that option)

A very positive outcome was the expression of willingness to adopt such a blend – if possible – in their own context (Figure 3).

Figure 3.   Willingness to adopt a blend similar to BMELTET in own teaching context

33.1   If I could, I would adopt a similar MOOC/VE blend to teach in my context/country

Strongly agree	10 (41.7%)
Mostly agree	8 (33.3%)
Neither agree nor disagree	5 (20.8%)
Mostly disagree	0
Strongly disagree	1 (4.2%)

Multi answer: Percentage of respondents who selected each answer option (e.g. 100% would represent that all this question's respondents chose that option)

In line with the results reported in Figure 3, in the interviews carried out in March and August 2020 (15 participants), the most positive outcome was the declarations of changed beliefs about technology and blended/online learning: "I used to hate technology but I am definitely a convert now" (Student X, CU, group interview 3/3/2020). Also, the FU participants commented in the summer that the project had prepared them for their teaching practice, that had had to be carried out online.

Learner autonomy, critical digital literacy and some fundamental topics in applied linguistics (like task-based language learning) were confirmed as troublesome areas. These are particularly challenging for students who come from tutor-centred learning and teaching contexts. For example, some Chinese participants stated that they would not be able to integrate 'off-the-shelf' MOOCs into their teaching as they would not be in full control of the material if they did so, and student might ask questions they would not be able to answer.

As the telecollaborative aspect of the project was the one that worked less well, it was agreed to add more scaffolded opportunities for interaction in it in the next cycle. The most negative aspects were the lack of success with the group task and the lack of discussion postings on the last two topics. Most students disliked the Moodle interface and the Chinese partners found its access problematic. Students at CU mentioned that deadlines for other coursework tasks had also played a part in their lack of engagement.

The actions for the next cycle of BMELTET (starting in October 2020) are the following in view of the feedback received:

- add an element of gamification: e.g. quizzes in mixed teams;

- discontinue the use of Open Moodle: difficult to access from overseas and not dynamic in 'look and feel';

- use Padlet for reflections on the project;

- use of Zoom or Teams for synchronous exchanges instead of Skype (N.B. Zoom and Teams were not yet available at institutional level at the time of the October 2019-Feb 2020 exchange); and

- link the project to assessment in each country.

4.   Conclusions

On the whole it was ascertained that BMELTET disrupts students' expectations of their learning experience at higher education level. This can be troublesome for them, but it can also be rewarding and cause a positive change of perspectives and beliefs.

It will be interesting to investigate the next post-COVID BMELTET cycle in October-December 2020, to see how remote learning has impacted on students engaging in teacher education and whether it will cause a shift towards the normalisation of technology in general (Bax, 2018) and telecollaboration in particular.

5.   Acknowledgements

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