

BMELTT (Blending MOOCs for English Language Teacher Training): A ‘Distributed MOOC Flip’ to Explore Local and Global ELT Contexts and Beliefs

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Conference paper

**BMELTT (Blending MOOCs for English Language Teacher Training): a
'Distributed MOOC Flip' to Explore Local and Global ELT Contexts and Beliefs
(pp. 608-625)**

1. Introduction

This paper reports on the outcomes of the 'BMELTT' (Blending MOOCs for English Language Teacher Training) project that was funded by a British Council English Language Teaching Research Award. The phase of the project discussed here ran between September 2016 and December 2016 and involved 154 participants from different higher education contexts: Coventry University (CU/UK); Xi'an Jiaotong-Liverpool University (XJTLU/China); Sichuan International Studies University (SISU/China); East China University of Science and Technology (ECUST/China) and the University of Applied Sciences in Utrecht (HU/The Netherlands). The FutureLearn MOOC 'Understanding Language: Learning and Teaching' created by the University of Southampton in collaboration with the British Council in the UK, was embedded with a novel blended learning approach into the English Language Teaching courses of the above mentioned universities.

The type of MOOC blend described here, where the content of a MOOC becomes an integral part of an existing curriculum in institutions that are not involved in the development of the MOOC itself, is relatively new in the UK HE sector, but there are precedents in the USA (Kim, 2015; Sandeen, 2013; Joseph-Israel, 2013). Sandeen (2013) calls this type of blend 'MOOC 3.0' or 'distributed flip' model. There is also a considerable amount of interest in the creation for and integration into the curriculum of MOOCs in China (e.g. Wu & Hu, 2015).

A distinctive feature of the 'flipped MOOC' integration in this project consisted in the fact that it was carried out with the support of an Online Intercultural Exchange – OIE - (O'Dowd & Lewis, 2017) aimed at encouraging a collaborative reflection on ELT theory and practice amongst students on ELT courses in the UK, China and the Netherlands.

It was hoped that this novel MOOC/OIE blend would offer the ELT students involved in the project a unique collaborative learning opportunity, which would enable them to discuss their local ELT contexts while at the same time engage with a global community of practice. The project aimed to ascertain how teachers' beliefs could be affected by a reflection on their knowledge and practice carried out in four ways: 1. individually while doing the steps in the MOOC, 2. collaboratively in weekly face-to-face meetings in class with peers from their home institution; 3. collaboratively in online discussion forums through the OIE with students and staff from the partner universities participating in the project; 3. collaboratively with the rest of the participants from all over the world on the MOOC.

BMELTT also aimed at supporting ELT students' understanding of autonomy in learning and teaching. Autonomy appears to be a challenging concept for students on ELT/TESOL programmes, as reported in relevant literature (e.g. Dam, 1995; Little, 2001; Lacey, 2007), but there is evidence that the concept can be scaffolded through the use of blended approaches (Orsini-Jones 2015; Reinders & White, 2016).

The following research questions were posed:

1. What factors shape ELT students' beliefs regarding English language learning and teaching in different educational contexts?
2. What recommendations on how to integrate MOOCs into existing ELT courses could be made based on the results of the project?
3. Could the MOOC/OIE-blend support ELT students with becoming autonomous teachers?

2. Literature review

2.1 Learning Context

The *context* where language education takes place is one of the fundamental aspects affecting language learning and teaching. Bax (2003) argues that the implicit focus of center-based pedagogies and methodologies leads novice teachers to neglect the local context instead of working with it. Hence, specific contextual aspects such as school and classroom culture, and students' needs in specific contexts should be considered within teaching and learning practices.

Kumaravadivelu (1994) proposes his *postmethod condition*, which entails a shift from the method-based pedagogy to a context-sensitive postmethod pedagogy. This postmethod framework is informed by three operating principles: (1) *Practicality* seeks to promote the advancement of teachers' reflection and action, so they can theorise from their own teaching practice and thereby practice what they theorise based on their beliefs (Kumaravadivelu, 2006a, p.173). (2) *Possibility* seeks to acknowledge the sociocultural reality that shapes identity formation in the classroom (3) *Particularity* seeks to facilitate the development of a context-sensitive postmethod pedagogy that is "based on a true understanding of local linguistic, social, cultural, and political particularities" (Kumaravadivelu, 2006b, p. 69). Emphasising therefore a context-sensitive postmethod approach may lead to the development of contextual awareness that enables ELT practitioners to theorise from their practice and practice what they theorise in accordance with their own context.

ELT students are not always aware of the impact that their beliefs can have on their teaching practice. This lack of awareness raises two areas of concern. The first one is that beliefs can act as a barrier or filter when these teachers (or future teachers) are attempting to further their own professional knowledge and pedagogy (Klapper, 2006). Therefore they need to be made aware of their own beliefs and perceptions, while they are still undergoing teacher training and education, in order to explicitly develop their own pedagogical beliefs and assumptions with the underpinning of relevant research, and develop professionally as a result. The second concern is that teachers' personal learning experience is likely to influence what their teaching is going to be like (Klapper, 2006). This is not to suggest that all teaching based on personally experienced models is bad or ineffective; ELT students might have had positive role models who have influenced their beliefs and perceptions in a positive way. However, arbitrary and random transfer might yield problematic results when teachers adopt methods and practices unsuited to a certain group of learners or contexts (Klapper, 2006; Orsini-Jones, Altamimi & Conde Gafaro, 2017). Engaging in meta-reflective practices underpinned by research on language learning and teaching can be one way of achieving beneficial transfer. 'Flipped' MOOC blends, like the one described here, can support future teachers with reflecting on both local and global learning and teaching issues affecting their practice. The initial results from this project reported below would appear to substantiate this claim.

Also, MOOC blends can provide a personalized approach to reflective practice at the user's own pace, as they are characterised by open access and learning at a distance that allows participants to self-regulate their learning journey, determining when, how and with what content and activities they engage with (Hood, Littlejohn & Milligan, 2015). MOOCs share

the “anytime, anywhere principle of m-learning” (Chinnery, 2006, p.9) as defined by Kukulska-Hulme & Shield (2008, p. 281).

The added value of the OIE project and its asynchronous discussion forums running in parallel with the MOOC, offered participants a focused reflective platform which some found less daunting to navigate and to engage with than the discussion on the MOOC, with its thousands of contributions. Unlike the previous iteration of the project, where a closed Facebook area was unsuccessfully used for the OIE exchange supporting the flipped MOOC blend (Orsini-Jones, 2015), a dedicated Moodle platform was designed for BMELTT (see Figures 2&3 below).

2.2 The MOOC: Background and Description

The MOOC selected for this study was The FutureLearn MOOC *Understanding Language: Learning and Teaching* designed by the University of Southampton in partnership with the British Council (*Figure 1*). The MOOC iteration used for this project ran for four weeks between the 17th October 2016 and 21st November 2016, but it had run four times before (e.g. Orsini-Jones, 2015). The MOOC had seen little change in content during the first three runs, but there had been significant revisions ahead of the 4th run (April 2016) and a new, fifth week had been added for the October 2016 iteration. The aim of the additional week was to extend the community of teachers into the realm of research.

The instructions in the MOOC suggested around 3 hours of weekly engagement to complete the course for the five weeks of its duration. Each unit consisted of five sections that included articles, discussions, audiovisual materials or exercises related to the specific themes of the unit. Week 5 had four sections that updated week 4 and invited people to take part in a research project. At the end of each unit, there was a section called ‘Reflection’ where participants were expected to share the positive aspects of the week and to discuss with their online peers their thoughts about how they could take the lessons forward into the field of language teaching and learning. The design of the FutureLearn platform and of the MOOC itself fosters discussion and interaction around

the topics covered in the course. Appendix 1 provides a full overview of the MOOC content.

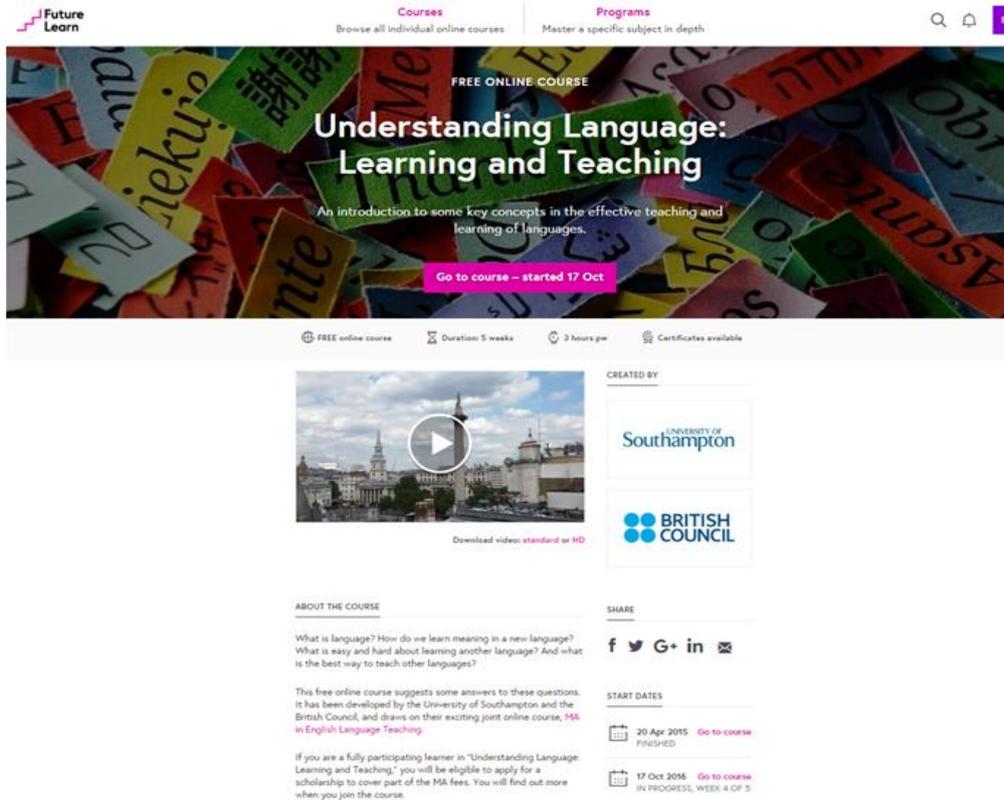


Figure 1. Screen shot of the front pages of the FutureLearn MOOC *Understanding Language: Learning and Teaching*

3. Research Methodology Tools

The research methodology approach was based on related action research cycles (Orsini-Jones *et. al.*, 2015; Orsini-Jones, 2015) that had preceded the implementation of the BMELTT project. A grounded mixed-method approach was adopted, in which both qualitative and quantitative data were collected. The main data sources used were:

1. A pre-MOOC and a post-MOOC online survey administered through the Bristol Online Survey (BOS: a survey provider that complies with the UK Data Protection Act requirements) to involve participants in individual meta-reflections before and after they engaged with the MOOC modelled on previous cycles of the project.
2. The discussion postings in the asynchronous forums in a tailor-made Moodle environment managed by Coventry University to engage participants in collaborative meta-reflections while doing the MOOC that was set up in October 2016, before the MOOC started. The need to set up an area where the participants could exchange reflections and comments on the MOOC had been made necessary by the fact that FutureLearn did not grant access to their analytics in the previous iteration of the project.
3. The transcripts of the semi-structured interviews carried out after the completion of the post-MOOC survey with self-selected participants to triangulate the findings from the surveys and from the weekly discussions posted in the VLE. Some of these were carried out in group and some individually.

4. Results

4.1 Moodle discussion on asynchronous forums (selected results)

There were 154 participants enrolled on the Moodle BMELTT website in Moodle (*Figure 2*).

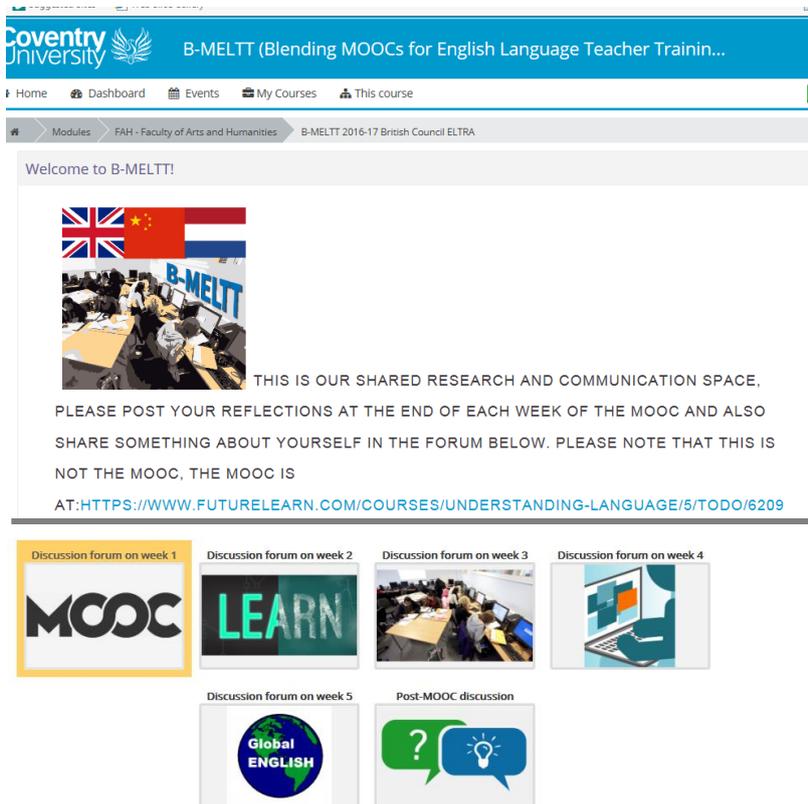


Figure 2: Moodle Website for the BMELTT project

Of these, 78 posted on the forums. In relation to 'contexts' of teaching, two trends emerged in the forum exchanges: the first one related to appreciation for how much could be gained by engaging with a global community of teaching practice, e.g.:

Participant 1 (HU), posting from 11/12/2016

In the MOOC, the discussion forum added extra value as compared to my blended learning experience as I really learnt from the many postings of other participants.

Participant 2 (HU), posting from 16/12/2016

I thought it was really cool about the mooc that people all over the world could comment on your ideas and even add in some ideas of their own. it gave me , as a student teacher, a lot of tips to work with students face to face but also via the internet. it gave me also a fresh perspective on how to deal with online learning and how to make the best of it for students and for myself as a future teacher. technology is our future so we have to learn how to work with it and how to make sure your students can adapt easily towards the future and technology is a big part of that! I enjoyed this course and it will be likely to do one again.

Participant 3 (HU), posting from 14/12/2016

In week 1, it was especially eye-opening to see SO many people and their opinions on teaching etc. It was very helpful and informative, inspiring even, because we're a bunch of people from ALL around the world trying to be the best teachers we can possibly be and it's nice to know that on here, we could give each other advice, talk to each other and motivate each other.

The BMELTT project on the other hand also appeared to provoke some 'food for thought' in terms of raised awareness of specific teaching contexts and the need to teach intercultural awareness as well as a few words of warning towards the dominance of English on the global linguistic arena:

Participant 13 (SISU), posting from 14/11/2017

English is taught as a foreign or second language in many countries, this is the inevitable result of globalization. Many universities around the world to offer courses through the medium of English to meet the needs of the global community. As far as I am concerned, this can help students adapt to the society and further connected with the world. But every coin has two sides, this teaching methods does not take into account the individual differences of students. What's more, some universities pay too much attention to English, but ignore the mother tongue. This is not conducive to the heritage and development of local culture.

Participant 14 (SISU), posting from 8/11/2016

As a future teacher, I will not just teach my students the vocabulary, the grammar and other aspects of English (which I received in my previous study), I will consider more about the intercultural awareness.

Participant 6 (SISU), posting from 20/11/2016

There are many traditional festivals every year in China. While in these years, more and more people especially children celebrate western festivals, such as Christmas, Halloween, April fool's day. It is difficult for our children to recognize what is tradition, why they are different. This may affect our culture's inheritance. Learning a language, we must get to know some cultures of their country. If we blend them together with our own's, the disadvantage is obvious.

4.2 Pre-MOOC Survey (selected results)

There were 154 participants that gave their consent to participate in this project, of these 121 completed the pre-MOOC survey. In the first set of questions, 67% of respondents answered that they knew what a MOOC was. However, only 25% of them had participated in a MOOC before and 4% of them stated that they had completed an online course for Continuous Professional Development (CPD): Table 1 below:

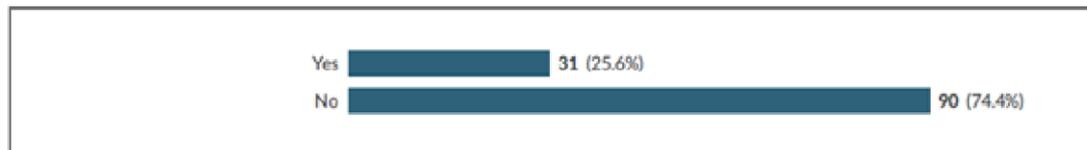
Table 1. Sample answers from the Pre-MOOC survey

Do you know what a MOOC is?



The

Have you participated in a MOOC (Massive Open Online Course) before?



Have you ever completed an online course for CPD (Continuous Professional Development) before?



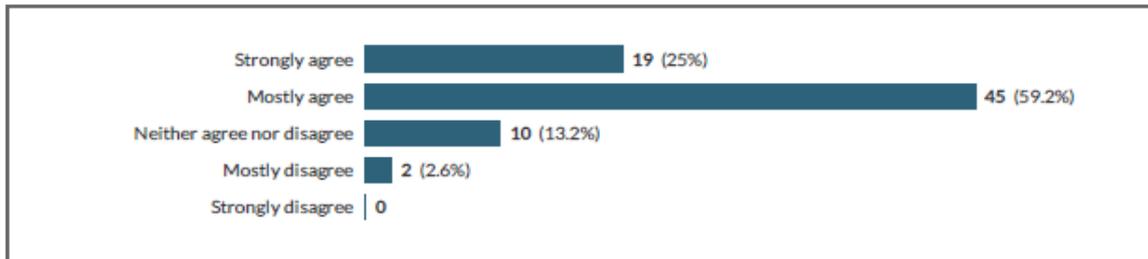
major differences amongst the three educational contexts represented in the project related to the definition of 'learner autonomy' (varying between 'working on one's own' (CU and CHINESE Universities) to 'learning with others but taking responsibility for one own's learning' (HU). Another difference in the pre-MOOC survey related to the differing degrees of control that the teacher should have on the learning environment (same 'split' as for previous question). The fact that 23 out of the 36 CU participants were Chinese would appear to indicate that participants from China, whether based in China or at CU, favoured a tutor-centred approach and associated the concept of 'autonomy' with working on one's own.

4.3 Post-MOOC survey (selected results)

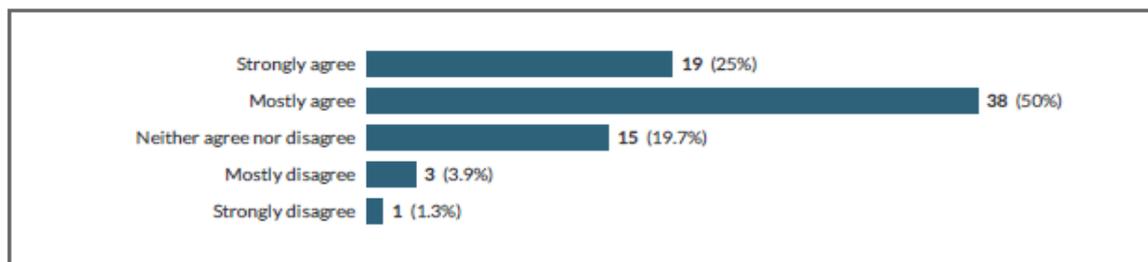
The post-MOOC BOS was completed by 76 participants and their feedback on the engagement with the project was overall very positive, particularly with reference to their raised awareness of their teaching context (Table 3).

Table 2. Sample results from the Post-MOOC survey December 2016

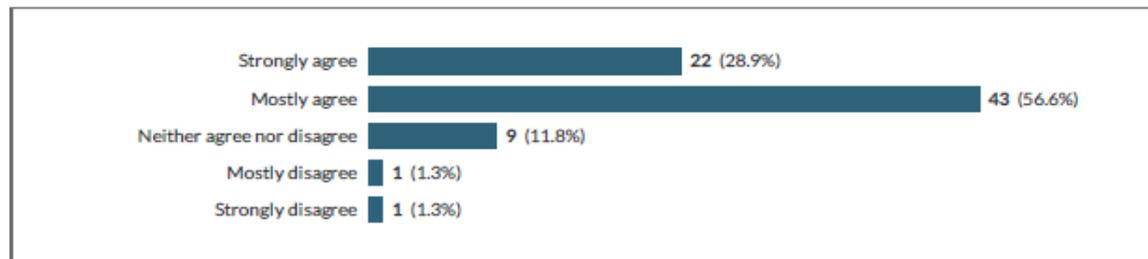
I think that participating in the project as a whole helped me to reflect on how students from my teaching context learn.



I think that participating in the project as a whole helped me to reflect on how I learn.



I think that participating in the project as a whole helped me to reflect on how I plan to teach in my teaching context.



Most participants agreed that more scaffolding was needed within the MOOC from mentors/tutors as they thought that there was not sufficient support to gain full benefit from its socio-collaborative aspects.

It was also interesting to observe that the percentage of the sample that considered the teaching context as an obstacle to promote autonomy increased from 48% to 68% after engaging with the blended MOOC.

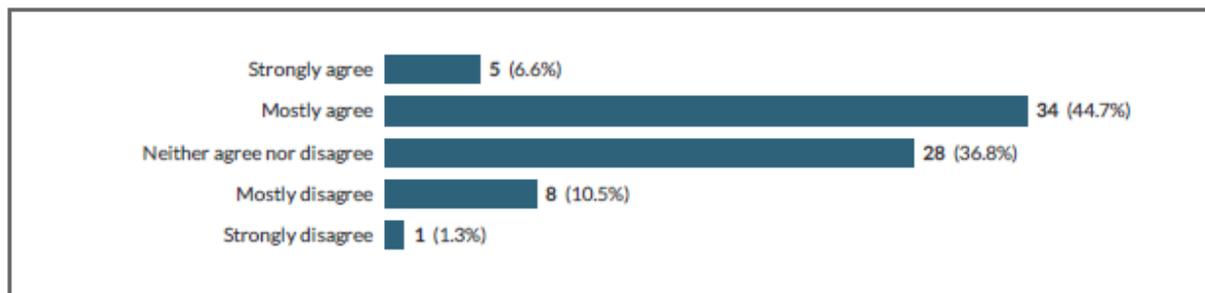
Half of the participants (51%) agreed that engaging with BMELTT had changed their

beliefs on language learning and teaching (Table 3). Triangulation with the semi-structured interview transcripts confirmed that many participants were converted to the use of online learning for their own practice, which they had not considered before: (the BMELTT project) “opened my eyes not only to new ways to learn but also new ways to teach. I was thinking a lot about what it is like to be a teacher on a screen (...) and it also opened my eyes to teaching online” (HU2, semi-structured interviews group 2).

Table 3. Post-MOOC survey Perceptions on Changed Beliefs

5. Conclusion

My beliefs on language learning and teaching have been changed by engaging with the B-MELTT project.



The initial results have suggested that students studying on ELT courses welcome this type of MOOC/OIE-blend. With reference to the initial research questions:

- What factors shape ELT students’ beliefs regarding English language learning and teaching in different educational contexts?

Contextual factors, such as a tradition of tutor-centred, face-to-face ELT practice strongly affect ELT students’ beliefs. However, the global discussion on the MOOC provided interesting ‘food for thought’ for all participants and there was a noticeable shift in positive beliefs towards online learning during the course of the project. Many participants who had not contemplated blended learning before started to see its potential. It could be argued that the global collaborative knowledge-sharing exchange afforded by the MOOC and reinforced by the OIE Moodle discussion and the face-to-face contact in BMELTT contributed to some transformative changes in some of the participants’ beliefs.

- What recommendations on how to integrate MOOCs into existing ELT courses could be made based on the results of the project?

Although most participants valued the asynchronous discussion forums, many stated that they would appreciate it if there were more synchronous sessions both on the MOOC and on the BMELTT project. One recommendation would therefore be to include more opportunities for synchronous communication in future projects and MOOCs whenever possible. The second recommendation for teacher trainers considering this type of ‘flipped MOOC blend’ carried out in conjunction with an OIE project like BMELTT, would be to clarify in writing with all partners involved what is meant by each relevant term, starting at “MOOC” and “blended learning”. The third recommendation would be to provide clear written step-by-step instructions on the stages of the project and the aim and purpose of each tool used (again, both for the MOOC and the OIE project). The fourth would be to insure that the blend includes a face-to-face element.

- Could the MOOC/OIE-blend support ELT students with becoming autonomous teachers?

A limitation of this study is that this question cannot be answered without a longer, longitudinal, approach to data collection and analysis. The initial results, which could not be reported in full here due to word-length constraints, would appear to indicate that the engagement with the MOOC in conjunction with an OIE stimulates the development of an autonomous approach towards a review of one's own ELT practice. Some ELT students found the amount of information on the MOOC daunting though and, contrary to some existing literature, many were not as digitally literate as some experts claim and were challenged by navigational issues. On the whole the data collected would however appear to indicate that BMELTT supported the enhancement of digital critical skills, the development of the ability to engage online with a global community of practice and the opportunity to embrace new practices. Some of the results from BMELTT are still being processed at the time of writing (April 2017 -semi-structured interviews) and more research is needed to ascertain the value of embedding MOOCs into existing ELT curricula in conjunction with OIE, which is still a relatively underexplored area of CALL.

Appendix 1: Structure of the FutureLearn MOOC 2016: Understanding Language: Learning and Teaching.

FutureLearn MOOC: Understanding Language: Learning and Teaching		
Week 1: Learning Language: Theory		
Section 1: Welcome		
1.1	Welcome to the Course	Video (02:02)
1.2	Join the Online Community	Article
1.3	Using future learn and Getting Help	Article
Section 2: Introduction to Week 1		
1.4	Welcome to Week 1	Video (00:47)
1.5	How do You Use Language in Your Life?	Video (04:43)
Section 3: What is Language?		
1.6	What do We Know When We Know Language?	Video (02:40)
1.7	What is Meaning?	Video (04:26)
1.8	Task: What is Meaning? -Implied Meaning	Article
Section 4: What is Hard and What is Easy in Second Language Learning?		
1.9	How do We Acquire Meaning: The Bottleneck Hypothesis	Video (02:57)
1.10	Understanding 'the Bottleneck' of Language and Issues in Language Learning	Discussion
1.11	What is Hard in Second Language Learning?	Article
1.12	What is Easy in Second Language Learning?	Article
1.13	Implications for Teaching	Video (01:15)
1.14	Other Factors Which Affect Language Learning	Audio
1.15	Poll: What do You Think?	Exercise
Section 5: Summary Activities		
1.16	Video Update on the Week's Activities	Article
1.17	Reflection	Discussion
1.18	What's Next?	Article

FutureLearn MOOC: Understanding Language: Learning and Teaching		
Week 2: Language Teaching in the Classroom		
Section 1: Welcome to Week 2		
2.1	Introduction to Week 2	Video (00:59)
Section 2: Classrooms as a Community of Practice		
2.2	Classrooms as Communities of Practice	Video (03:56)
2.3	Classroom Culture	Video (04:36)
2.4	Classroom Culture	Article
2.5	Task: Classroom Culture	Article
2.6	What's your Classroom Culture Like?	Discussion
2.7	Naturalistic vs Classroom Learning	Video (05:21)
Section 3: Task Based Language Teaching (TBLT)		
2.8	Task Based Language Teaching (TBLT)	Video (04:17)
2.9	What is a Task?	Article
2.1	Task: TBLT in Action	Video (01:24)
2.11	Review: Task TBLT in Action	Video (02:49)
Section 4: Content and language Integrated Learning (CLIL)		
2.12	Content and Language Integrated Learning (CLIL)	Video (04:47)
2.13	Task: CLIL	Discussion
2.14	Applying TBLT/CLIL and the Challenge of Innovation in Teaching	Discussion
Section 5: Summary Activities		
2.15	Video Update on the Week's Activities	Article
2.16	Reflection	Discussion

FutureLearn MOOC: Understanding Language: Learning and Teaching

Week 3: Technology in Language Learning and Teaching: A New Environment		
Section 1: Welcome to Week 3		
3.1	Introduction to Week 3	Video (00:47)
Section 2: Difference between Online Learning and F2F Learning		
3.2	Differences between Online Learning and F2F Learning	Video (03:28)
3.3	Is it Possible to Learn Languages Well Online or is F2F Essential?	Discussion
3.4	Online Learning and languages	Video (03:45)
Section 3: Teaching in a new environment		
3.5	Engaging with Online Learning	Video (04:58)
3.6	Teaching in a New Environment	Video (02:18)
3.7	Task: Identifying the Roles of an E-Tutor	Article
3.8	Task: Facebook Discussion with BC Tutors	Article
Section 4: Connectivism and Language Learning		
3.9	Connectivist Learning	Video (02:20)
3.1	Online Learning and Using Social Media in Language Learning	Discussion
Section 5: Summary Activities		
3.11	Video Update on the Week's Activities	Article
3.12	Reflection	Discussion

FutureLearn MOOC: Understanding Language: Learning and Teaching		
Week 4: Language in Use: Global English		
Section 1: Welcome to Week 4		
4.1	Introduction to Week 4	Video (01:07)
Section 2: Global Englishes		

4.2	Introduction to Global Englishes	Video (02:17)
4.3	Historical Spread of English	Video (05:28)
4.4	Is the Spread of English a Good Thing?	Discussion
Section 3: English as a Lingua Franca		
4.5	English as a Lingua Franca	Video (04:28)
4.6	Task: Identifying Characteristics of ELF	Article
4.7	Controversies in ELF Research	Video (04:01)
4.8	Poll: What is your Attitude to ELF?	Exercise
4.9	Interview with an ELF Researcher	Video (03:13)
4.1	Feedback from Poll: Attitudes to ELF	Article
Section 4: The Future of English		
4.11	Implications of the Spread of English for Teaching	Video (03:55)
4.12	Native Speakers V Non-Native Speakers Teachers	Discussion
4.13	The Future of English	Video (04:48)
4.14	Poll: What do You Think is the Future of English?	Exercise
4.15	Responding to Questions and Controversies in ELF Research	Article
4.16	Feedback from Poll: The Future of English	Article
Section 5: Summary Activities		
4.17	Video Update on the Week's Activities	Article
4.18	Reflection	Discussion

FutureLearn MOOC: Understanding Language: Learning and Teaching		
Week 5: The Future is Now! Join a Live Research Project		
Section 1: Welcome to Week 5		
5.1	Introduction to Week 5	Video (01:22)
Section 2: What do We do all Day?		
5.2	English the 'Multilingua' Franca	Video (03:54)
5.3	English Used as a Medium of Instruction in Universities: The Growing Trend	Video (05:54)
5.4	A Year in the Life of the Centre for Global Englishes	Article

5.5	The Next Phase of ELF: What do You Think?	Discussion
Section 3: Join a Research Project		
5.6	Background to Our Current Research Project	Video (01:46)
5.7	Discussing our Results So Far	Video (06:34)
5.8	Become a Part of Our Research Community and Join a Live Research Project	Video (01:28)
Section 4: Summary Activities		
5.9	Reflection	Discussion
5.10	Goodbye!	Video (01:27)
5.11	An Invitation	Article
5.12	Post-Course Survey	Article

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