

4. Fostering language teachers' intercultural awareness towards linguistic diversity and inclusion in education through COIL

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Abstract

The following paper reports on a collaborative online learning experience (COIL) or virtual exchange (VE) between undergraduate students, pre-service teachers, from Coventry University in the UK and Florida Universit aria in Val encia, Spain. The exchange was embedded in two modules in each institution and aimed to foster critical views on multilingual policies and interculturality in English as a foreign language teacher education (MIEFOLTE).

The participants were grouped in breakout rooms where they engaged in discussions on the topics of social equity, linguistic diversity, and inclusion in education. In addition, their group reflections were posted on a digital noticeboard during the synchronous sessions.

The outcomes seem to illustrate how MIEFOLTE provided students with opportunities for critical reflection and made students aware that they had developed their Intercultural Communicative Competence (ICC) and how to transfer it to their future professional practice.

Keywords: Pre-service Teacher Education, Virtual Exchange, Collaborative Online International Learning, Multilingualism, Intercultural Communicative Competence.

1. Introduction

This paper is reporting on the outcomes of linguistic diversity and inclusion in education expressed by pre-service teachers in the first iteration of a virtual exchange (VE) or collaborative online international learning (COIL) experience on multilingualism and interculturality in teaching English as a foreign language (MIEFOLTE).

Virtual Exchange or COIL refers to an academic experience that enables teachers to improve students, in this case, Higher Education students who will become teachers, to put into practice their communicative skills (O'Dowd, 2021). There is evidence that COIL projects can support the development of intercultural communicative competence (ICC) (Dooly & Vinagre, 2021; Orsini-Jones & Lee, 2018) and critical digital literacy skills (Orsini-Jones et al., 2021). Moreover, COILs have been shown to develop different skills and competences in pre-service teacher education (Cerver o-Carrascosa, 2022). COIL as a learning experience in ELT/EFL/ELF teacher education has increasingly become a relevant approach for future teachers to reflect on

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their professional practice and, particularly, to be able to design and organise COIL projects themselves once in-service.

2. MIEFOLTE (Multilingualism and Interculturality in English as Foreign Language Teacher Education)

The design of this MIEFOLTE COIL project was informed by previous COIL experiences, as both institutions had already collaborated on primary and secondary pre-service teacher education:

- FLOCO (Florida Universitària & Coventry University) in 2017 and FLOCOCO (Florida Universitària, Coventry University & Université de l’Haute Alsace) in 2018 (Cerveró-Carrascosa, 2019; Lloyd et al., 2018).
- BMELTET (Blending MOOCs into English Language Teaching Education with Telecollaboration) from 2017 to 2020, which had four iterations (Cerveró-Carrascosa, 2022; Orsini-Jones & Cerveró-Carrascosa, 2019).

Moreover, MIEFOLTE had a previous version in PREFLOCO (Pre-service teacher education in Florida Universitària and Coventry University) in 2021, in which pre-service teachers explored the development of ICC in English as a foreign language (EFL) teacher education.

The COIL reported here was part of pre-service teacher education in both contexts. At Florida Universitària, it was embedded in a Year 3 module on Culture in FLT (Foreign Language Teaching) for pre-service primary school teachers and was included in TEFL modules to become an English teacher in Primary Education. Furthermore, the contents covered were complementary to other subjects in multilingual policies set in pre-service teacher education in València.

As for Coventry University, the COIL was embedded in a final year undergraduate module on Teaching Young Learners, which is a mandatory module on the Bachelor of Arts (BA) in English Language and TEFL course and an optional module for the BA Languages for Global Communication.

The programme agreed by the COIL leaders, who are the authors of this paper, involved exploring the topics by watching a video about the concept of Culture and ‘locality’, reading articles and investigating multilingual policies in the students’ contexts. There were four synchronous sessions. The session topics were discussed in class in each country before the actual online meetings as Table 1 below shows.

Table 1

Topics and resources used in MIEFOLTE per session

Session	Topic	Resources
1	Concept of Culture and ‘local’	Tayle Selasie’s TEDTalk

2	Intercultural Communicative Competence	Byram and Golubeva (2019)
3	ELT and multilingual policies	Regulations on multilingual policies (Generalitat Valenciana, 2018)
4	Translanguaging (use of L1/L2 in L2/FL classes)	Cenoz and Gorter (2020)

Time: Zoom Thursdays from 1 pm to 2 pm (CET) - 12 pm to 1pm (UK)

The sessions were arranged as follows:

- Welcome and greetings – 5 mins
- Presenting the topic – 5 mins
- Breakout rooms’ discussions + Padlet posting – 25/30 mins
- Whole group feedback – 15/20 mins
- Conclusions, final thoughts & farewell – 5 mins.

3. Aim of the Study

The main aim of this study was to show participants’ reflections in MIEFOLTE on the relevant topics in EFL pre-service teacher education. These topics are related to the contents to be acquired and competences to be developed by EFL pre-service teachers.

The research questions were:

1. What are the participants’ views on linguistic diversity when developing ICC in schools?
2. What are the participants’ views on inclusion in education by using pedagogical translanguaging in the English classes?

4. Method

A qualitative approach was followed with students’ contributions being selected to illustrate how MIEFOLTE fostered the topics of interest for this study.

a. Participants

The pre-service teachers who participated in MIEFOLTE at Florida Universitària were 12 (N=12) Year 3 students from a BA in Primary Education and the participation in this COIL was

part of their coursework in the module on Culture in Foreign Language Teaching. Moreover, four (N=4) students from a MA in Secondary Education who got involved voluntarily as MIEFOLTE was a complementary activity for their training. All participants from both groups were from Valencia or its metropolitan area except for two Erasmus Italian students in the BA group.

At Coventry University, there were 27 (N=27) students distributed as follows: 16 from BA TEFL and seven from BA L4GC. This cohort included students from a wide range of nationalities and language backgrounds many of whom also spoke various heritage languages at home.

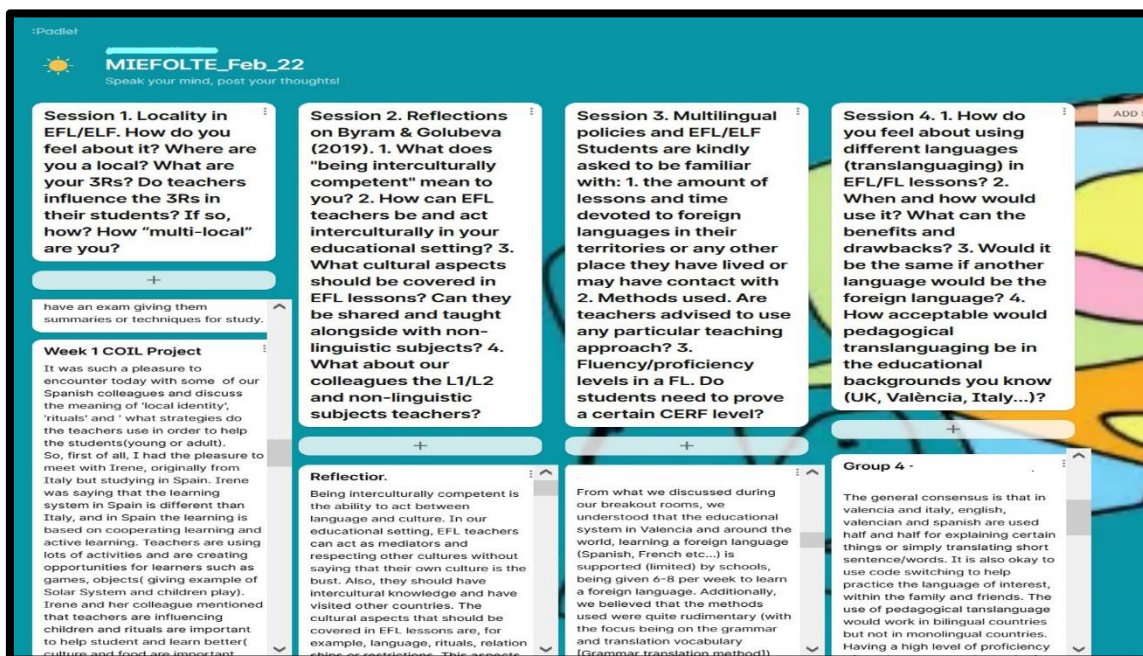
b. Tools

The students' reflections were posted on a Padlet arranged in columns for each session and the information from their contributions is shown below in Figure 1. The posts that best suited the topics of concern in this paper were selected and quoted as being representative of participants' judgements on those topics:

1. Linguistic Diversity. Use of languages or varieties of languages and teaching methods in different educational settings and stages. The regulations in the Valencian region (Generalitat Valenciana, 2018) will spark discussion.
2. Inclusion in Education. English Language Teaching, English as a Foreign Language or English-Medium Instruction and the use of pedagogical translanguaging as proposed by Cenoz and Gorter (2020).

Figure 1

Screenshot of Padlet (<https://padlet.help/1/en/article/cpfiutfzfb-what-is-padlet>) with participants' posts from all four sessions



3.3. Procedure

During every synchronous session, participants posted their reflections about the questions they had been asked from the texts they had been assigned on Padlet, as Figure 1 above shows. The views reflected by participants related to linguistic diversity and inclusion in education were selected and quoted by researchers after being discussed.

The quotations extracted from the participants in MIEFOLTE were referred to according to the institution they belonged to: Coventry University was mentioned as CU and Florida Universitària as FU.

5. Results and discussion

The review of the pre-service teachers' contributions displayed a wide range of opinions that responded to the questions posed.

a. RQ1. What are the participants' views on linguistic diversity when developing ICC in schools?

The participants showed largely their agreement with the promotion of linguistic diversity in multilingual societies, particularly in multilingual societies as it enabled intercultural

communication as these CU students posted: ‘A belief in the value of intercultural communication between groups. It helps if you speak more than one language.’

MIEFOLTE also expanded the views of participants on different educational contexts. CU students discovered the multilingual nature of most territories in Spain. Moreover, the project helped them with becoming familiar with school organisation in two different countries and the methods implemented in those contexts, as put forward by a CU student: ‘we found that other European countries dedicated more time to the subject of foreign languages than the UK, usually around 2-3 hours in primary school, compared to 45 mins in the UK.’

Finally, as summarised on Padlet by one of the groups, participation in this COIL project enabled them to compare different educational programmes in several countries. They gained awareness of the implementation of multilingual programmes and the requirements for learners in those educational contexts as the quotation below by CU and FU students’ depicts:

Spain appeared to be the only country we discussed that dedicated some lessons to the CLIL method of teaching. In Italy and Spain, students are expected to work towards a CEFR level or similar certification, while in the UK, students are just fed the information they need to pass the exam.

b. RQ2. What are the participants’ views on inclusion in education by using pedagogical translanguaging in the English classes?

As Cenoz and Gorter (2020) state, pedagogical translanguaging is a trendy term in multilingual studies in education. It refers to a practice employed by teachers who use the stronger language to develop the weaker one, which helps learners improve their knowledge on the content dealt with and their proficiency in the target language. In MIEFOLTE, pre-service teachers reflected upon this multilingual practice and suggested that translanguaging could reduce students’ discomfort in situations in which cultural differences stand out. Translanguaging promotes a safer class atmosphere where students can feel confident to interact, it builds links between the home and school languages and cultures and fosters the development of a multilingual and multicultural repertoire (Cenoz & Gorter, 2021). As the following quote by a CU student outlines, ‘cultural differences are important to understand and work with, especially in an educational environment. This [pedagogical translanguaging] will have an impact on the child's learning as not knowing the culture could make individuals feel uncomfortable in the environment.’

In a similar contribution, another group of students agreed with the basis of pedagogical translanguaging and that it encouraged English learners’ participation regardless of their background as the following excerpt from a group of CU and FU students’ post illustrates:

Everyone agreed that translanguaging is an acceptable practice, as some students struggle with classroom anxiety, so switching between two languages would probably make them feel more comfortable. Not only that but it could also be helpful to draw comparison in the 2 language patterns and structures.

This previous post also acknowledged how pedagogical translanguaging can enhance language learning and allow students to compare patterns and structures so that learners with different L1s can take advantage of this practice.

6. Conclusions

Participating and completing MIEFOLTE appeared to have helped participants gain awareness of the meaning of ICC and knowledge of participants' educational systems (O'Dowd, 2021). Increasing pre-service teachers' knowledge of multilingualism and interculturality has widened participants' views on how schools face linguistic diversity. Moreover, MIEFOLTE also enhanced the role of the use of different languages in the EFL/ELT class to face differentiation in the foreign language classroom and as a policy in education, especially in primary schools.

The posts on Padlet and the discussions in the whole group feedback facilitated the promotion of reflection on linguistic diversity and multilingual policies across different and distant territories, allowing students to acquire an international perspective and fostering a 'glocal' community of practice (Orsini-Jones et al., 2022).

The MIEFOLTE COIL allowed a weekly exploration of different linguistic landscapes in different contexts, focusing on English language education. Additionally, it demonstrated the value placed on exploring students' cultural knowledge of their own heritage languages. Many of the CU students initially identified themselves as only being speakers of English but through this project and discussion with the FU students they realised that they could also include their heritage languages as part of their language identity.

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