

5. Virtual Exchange as a Third Space to Decolonise ELT (VETSDELTA) project: report on its first action-research cycle

Carlos Alberto Hildeblando Júnior¹

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Abstract

This paper aims to report on the VETSDELTA (*Virtual Exchange as a Third Space to Decolonise English Language Teaching*) project. Its focus was to stimulate a reflection on English, ELT, and the ‘native-speakerism’ ideology through a Virtual Exchange (VE) as a safe Third Space. The paper illustrates how students and tutors engaged in English language teacher education in universities in Brazil, Spain, the UK, and Sri Lanka reflected on ELT in a series of synchronous dialogic sessions on Zoom. The paper reports on the initial findings stemming from cycle one of VETSDELTA, which ran between November and December 2022 and involved 44 participants. The initial data analysis showed that VE could facilitate intercultural and international knowledge exchange in a safe Third (online) Space.

Keywords: Virtual Exchange, Third Space, Decolonial theory, English Language Teaching.

1. Introduction

There is a widespread belief in many English Language Teaching (ELT) circles (Galloway, 2017) that ‘Native’ English-Speaking Teachers (NESTs) have indisputable language expertise and are ideal teachers of English. This (incorrect, as argued here) assumption was defined as ‘native-speakerism’ by Holliday (2006; 2015). It is based on a ‘standard’ English ideal and ignores the Englishes in existence worldwide.

English has ‘become this common language on a global scale’ (Seidlhofer, 2011) and is not used exclusively among L1 speakers, the so-called ‘native speakers’ (Holliday, 2006). Most interactions through English take place in non-English-speaking communities, therefore, the number of L2 speakers of English outnumbers that of L1 speakers. Consequently, English is taught by a majority of L2 speakers, or ‘Non-Native’ English Speakers (NNESs).

Despite ‘Non-Native’ English-speaking teachers (NNESTs) representing 80% (12 million) of the 15 million English teachers worldwide (Wang & Fang, 2020), a native-speaker-oriented curriculum still influences hiring practices within the ELT context. Due to the prevalence of the ‘native-speakerism’ ideology in ELT, NNESTs are frequently discriminated and stereotyped (Houghton & Rivers, 2013), and most advertised positions in ELT are for ‘native speakers’ only.

Despite the attention this topic has attracted in ELT, it is still necessary to explore this conceptualisation further, especially from the perspective of the Global South (Macedo, 2019).

¹ Coventry University, Research Centre for Global Learning, Theme – Global Learning: Education Without Boundaries, England, United Kingdom; Email: hildeblanc@uni.coventry.ac.uk, ORCID: <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-3378-8784>.

Here it is proposed that the utilisation of Virtual Exchange (VE) (O’Dowd, 2018) as a language teacher education approach (Fuchs & Orsini-Jones, 2022; Guimarães et al., 2022) can support the decolonisation of ELT and stimulate a critique of native-speakerism by questioning deep-seated beliefs amongst L2 students and staff involved in English language teacher education.

Drawing on Bhabha (1994), it is argued here that VE can afford Third online Space(s), a liminal place of hybridity that challenges the notion of authenticity, static identities, and deep-seated beliefs. With the mediation of different technologies, the VE Third Space is a place of exchanges and clashes, contrast, re-articulation, and negotiation rather than a resolution space.

2. Method

The VETSDELTA (*Virtual Exchange as a Third Space to Decolonise English Language Teaching*) project aimed to provide pre- and in-service students in teacher education and ELT teacher educators with opportunities to re-examine their existing belief system about English and ELT. The first cycle of the project ran between November and December 2022 and involved participants from four different higher education contexts as follows: 11 from Coventry University (CovUni), the United Kingdom; 20 from La Florida Universitatària (FU), Spain; nine from the National Institute of Business Management (NIBM), Sri Lanka; and four from Universidade Federal do Espírito Santo (UFES), Brazil.

The sessions were delivered through the institutional Zoom in the lead university in a series of VE dialogic sessions of one hour each on four topics: 1. Varieties of English; 2. ELT beliefs, ideologies and attitudes; 3. Teaching English as a Global Language; and 4. ‘Native-speakerism’. Participants were divided into five groups of eight in each breakout room (BoR), which were facilitated by two e-mediators. The training for the e-mediators was based on the experience and outcomes of a British Council-funded project². Participants were asked to read a text on the session’s topic as an asynchronous preparation task so that the seminar could be run in flipped mode (Bergmann & Sams, 2012).

Padlet walls were utilised to support the discussion on the topics debated by participants in BoRs. All materials and contents used in VETSDELTA were available in Aula³ Space, an institutional teaching and learning platform to support students’ engagement in classes. The Aula Space for the VETSDELTA project was organized week by week. After registering, participants had full access to articles, videos, and the links for the Zoom synchronous sessions, Padlet Walls, Microsoft Forms, and Surveys.

Data were mined from a) pre- and post-VETSDELTA surveys administered with ‘Online Surveys’ (<https://www.onlinesurveys.ac.uk/>) consisting of Likert-scale type statements and open- and closed-ended questions; b) Padlet walls (<https://teach.coventry.domains/articles/padlet/>) to post the reflections of each group during the

² Available at <https://vivexelt.com/breakout-room-guide/>

³ More information at <https://www.aula.education/>

BoRs; c) Microsoft forms (<https://www.microsoft.com/en-us/microsoft-365/online-surveys-polls-quizzes>) administered at the end of each session as a wrap-up; and d) focus group interviews with self-selected participants after the completion of the project in December 2022.

Overall, the study aimed to explore the following research questions: 1. How can the VE ‘Third Space’ support the questioning of ‘native-speakerism’? 2. What are the beliefs about English of pre-service and/or in-service teacher education students and ELT staff? 3. What are the views and attitudes towards ELT of pre-service and/or in-service students in teacher education and ELT staff?

3. Results and discussion

Most of the participants⁴ were female (40 out of 44). Regarding their age, 32 participants were in the 18-30 years old group, and 12 were in the 31 or above group (see Table 1). Most participants (39) self-rated their proficiency level in English as higher intermediate to advanced, while five rated themselves as lower intermediate. As for teaching experience, only six participants reported not having taught English before.

Table 1. Demographic data on the participants

Institution	Age		Gender		Level of proficiency		Have you ever taught before?		Length of teaching experience (year)		Are you a student (ST), practicing teacher (PT), or teacher trainer (TT)			Total
	>30	<31	M	F	>B1	<B2	Yes	No	>3	<4	ST	PT	TT	
CU	5	6	0	11	0	11	9	2	3	6	8	2	1	11
FU	18	2	3	17	3	17	16	4	10	6	16	3	1	20
NIBM	7	2	1	8	2	7	9	0	6	3	5	4	0	9
UFES	2	2	0	4	0	4	4	0	0	4	1	3	0	4

⁴ The researcher and his Director of Studies are not included in this section because they were project leaders.

Amongst the 38 participants with teaching experience, half reported having three years or less of experience, and half reported having four years or more of experience. Out of the initial 44 participants, 26 completed the post-VETSDELT survey.

a. Native-speakerism

Table 2 shows part of the results for the question ‘Do you agree the classification of English teachers as L1 (‘native’) and L2 (‘non-native’) speakers entails a hierarchical relationship in the profession, as well as dominant professional discourses?’. The results align with Holliday’s (2006, 2015) conceptualisation of ‘native-speakerism’: the divide between ‘native’ and ‘non-native’ teachers, ‘native’ speaker model orientation in ELT, and the idea that L1 English speakers are better teachers than L2 speakers.

Table 2. Results of respondents’ opinions about native-speakerism and dominant discourses in ELT

Number	Opinion
1	Yes, and I have suffered it when searching for a job, too. Native speakers are preferred to qualified teachers who teach a L2. In some jobs you are asked as well to have a ‘good accent’, meaning preferably a British accent to teach English
3	Yes. I agree that this classification happens, but I do not agree that it should happen. The market and even some students are worried with the ‘perfect’ English, not with ideologies related to the language. They bother with accent, for example
4	Yes, it implies that L1 English teachers are better than L2 English teachers. This is discriminatory as being an L1 speaker of a languages does not imply that you are a good language teacher

The results in Table 2 suggest that accent, ‘perfect English’ and ‘standard’ English (American and British) are features that contribute to the maintenance of ‘native-speakerism’ ideology and inequalities within ELT. Another major consequence of this ideology is discriminatory employment practices against NNESTs. Regarding this topic, respondents were asked: ‘To your knowledge, do L2 English-speaking (‘non-native’) teachers encounter discrimination in the ELT job market/workplace?’. Selected answers are shown in Table 3.

Table 3. Selected respondents’ opinions about discrimination against L2 English-speaking teachers in the ELT job market (all quotes are *verbatim*)

Number	Opinion
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1	Sure they do. In my city, for example, there [are] schools that only hire native teachers. I still see the slogan ‘Learn English with a native teacher’ very often on the internet (as a way to add value to a course), and it is common sense to believe that to reach a ‘satisfactory’ level of competence, one must spend some time abroad
2	Many schools look for native teachers, there are even job announces asking for native CVs only. I agree that getting that first-hand culture and language knowledge can be great, but sometimes a non-native speaker can contribute as much or even more to the classroom than a native speaker. I believe non-native speakers can be very helpful sharing their experience when learning the language and sharing tips, but they are usually excluded from the job search
3	Somehow, there is a huge believe that good teachers need to be native speaker just because [of] pronunciation and cultural related matters

The responses show that the ‘native-speakerism’ ideology is intertwined with the notion of the superiority of ‘native speaker’ and, as a corollary to this, the assumption that NNESTs are worse teachers. As discussed by Holliday (2015), there is a strong belief that NESTs represent a ‘Western culture’, which was also mentioned by respondents. The responses indicate that many language schools and courses do not associate their brand with NNESTs. The idealised standard language canon and the idea of mainstream culture are more valued than teaching experience and qualifications (see Table 4).

Table 4. Padlet posts on teaching experience and qualifications

Group	Session	Post
1	4 – 28/11/2022	‘[...] the teachers should be selected on their qualifications and relevant experiences ’
3	4 – 28/11/2022	‘In language schools they prefer the accent, they prefer to hire native speaker even if they don’t have teaching qualification . But we believe that teaching qualification is more important than being native ’
4	4 – 28/11/2022	‘[...] accent and pronunciation are not the most important thing to be a good teacher, you need some specific skills to be a good teacher apart from accent and pronunciation’

4. Conclusions

The partial data analysis shows that the VE Third Space can help with decolonising beliefs regarding English and ELT and challenge canon thoughts through global perspectives. Figure 1 shows the word cloud created at the end of the last session of the project. VETSDELTA was

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