ONLINE TESOL TEACHER EDUCATION: OUTCOME OF A PILOT PROJECT

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The increasing use of English throughout the world has seen the growth of career opportunities for teachers of English as a second language (ESL). In fact, there is a widespread demand for teachers with up-to-date qualifications in TESOL (Teaching English to Speakers of Other Languages). In addition, as teacher training is increasingly migrating from on-ground to online classrooms, there is a need to reach out to as many TESL teachers worldwide as possible. In fact, online education is expanding access to students internationally and domestically to students who would otherwise be unable to attend college (Christensen *et al.*, 2011; Simpson, 2013). In this perspective, then, the online TESOL certificate program at Lesley University, Cambridge, MA aims at creating international partnerships with overseas teachers and promote the course. This article reports on the outcome of a pilot project that involved opening the online course[1] to an Italian partner.

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[1] i.e. Internet-based courses that are offered synchronously and/or asynchronously

1 Introduction

The globalization phenomenon is having an impact on Internationalization of education in every corner of the globe. This naturally has an influence on education in general and in particular at the University level which is undergoing a paradigm shift in how information and knowledge are transferred. Likewise, for post-degree specialization and training programs. The migration from on-ground to online classrooms has expanded rapidly over the past decades and continues to represent the fastest growing sector of higher education (Allen & Seaman, 2013). In fact, online courses are proliferating at an incredibly fast pace. This is because Online courses can reach anyone anywhere anytime. Thus, online education not only gives access to students internationally but also domestically to those who would otherwise be unable to attend college (Christensen *et al*, 2011; Simpson, 2013).

Moreover, technology has become an integral part of learning and teaching and teachers should receive the necessary training and support to use computers in their classrooms. David Warlick[2] (2006) contends, "We need technology in every classroom and in every student and teacher's hand, because it is the pen and paper of our time, and it is the lens through which we experience much of our world". More importantly, "When future teachers *learn* with technology before *teaching* with it, they are able to experience technology from the students' point of view and thereby evaluate its uses and benefits from a user perspective" (Arnold & Ducate, 2006, p. 42). Thus, an online teacher-training course could be considered an important initial step in preparing language teachers for effectively incorporating educational technology into their own future teaching contexts.

In addition, in 2014 Lesley founded the Global Education Center. Among its goals, increasing collaboration with international faculty is one major objective of the center, along with "Internationalizing" curriculum. In fact, it aims at cultivating a community of scholars with the skills and understanding to be compassionate and engaged world citizens as well as globally astute professionals. It is the hub of collaborative and innovative learning. The Center's mission is to advance international engagement across schools and programs at Lesley and with partner institutions. The Center also serves as a meeting point for the Global Faculty Fellows. Finally, it sponsors the *Scholars without Borders* scholarship fund and events that extend into the classroom and community.

In keeping with the above international perspective, the Online Tesol teacher education program at Lesley University experimented with extending the program to an Italian partner. Opening the Tesol course to pre-service and in-service English teachers in southern Italy on a trial basis gave us the oppor-

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[2] URL: http://2cents.onlearning.us/?p=420

tunity to create international partnerships, promote the course and evaluate its effectiveness.

2 A brief background of CMC technology

CMC (Computer Mediated Communication) technology is a valuable and widely used educational tool due to certain inherent features of the medium, which affect and shape participants' interaction. It lends itself to instruction based on sociocultural principles. As Vygotsky (1978) suggested and further researched by other scholars, learning takes place in a social environment and is facilitated by dialogue (Adair-Hauck & Donato, 1994; Anton, DiCamilla, 1998; Coughlin & Duff, 1996; Warschauer, 1997; 2000). ACMC (Asynchronous Computer Mediated Communication), used in the current study, provides a time lapse between reading a posting, formulating a reply, revising it, and finally sending it. This lack of time pressure allows extra time for reflection (Garrison *et al.,* 2001; Meyer, 2003) and internalizing the new jointly constructed knowledge. This is not always possible in a fast-paced traditional classroom environment. Discussion boards in fact provide an interactive virtual space where language teachers can reflect, evaluate, solve problems or simply exchange ideas (Bonk *et al.,* 1996; Kumari, 2001; Pawan *et al.,* 2003). Thus, the participants are involved in a collaborative learning process that uses scaffolding tools (like providing hints, explanations, prompts, suggestions, etc.) to facilitate learning and above all encourage learner autonomy, teamwork and critical thinking.

CMC has been implemented in teacher training and education courses in a number of ways, such as, discussing teaching scenarios (Bonk *et al.*, 1996), engaging students in discussions with experts (Lomicka & Lord, 2004), reflecting on teaching experiences and observations (Liou, 2001), collaborating and providing feedback on group projects (Curtis & Lawson, 2001), and promoting group problem-solving skills (Kang, 1996).

The fact that ACMC does not provide participants with immediate feedback from their peers and/or teacher may be perceived as an apparent drawback of technology. However, it can also be a pedagogical advantage since this encourages the interlocutors to write clear, concise messages to convey the intended meaning (Koschmann *et al.*, 1996; Meyer, 2003). Nguyen (2008), referring to Ingram and Hathorn (2004, p. 28), states that "while synchronous discussions may be best suited for brainstorming and quickly sharing ideas during interaction, asynchronous exchanges allow more time for considered opinions and are more effective for deeper discussion of ideas".

Studies show that ACMC has been successfully implemented with different cognitive benefits. Interactions via E-mail or discussion boards often include

dynamic information exchanges (Kanuka & Anderson, 1996; Pawan *et al.,* 2003), which display in-depth processing (McKenzie & Murphy 2000) and critical thinking (Liou, 2001; Newman *et al.,* 1995). In addition, reading one another's comments, ideas and experiences also exposes students to multiple viewpoints (Mitchell, 2003) and helps to expand students' knowledge and deepen their understanding (Gunawardena *et al.,* 1997; Mitchell, 2003). Moreover, building on each other's ideas (Pawan *et al.,* 2003) and learning from each other (Sengupta, 2001) often result in co-construction of knowledge (Kamhi-Stein, 2000; Pena-Shaff & Nicholls, 2004).

Besides the cognitive benefits mentioned above, ACMC has also shown a positive social impact. Asynchronous electronic exchanges seem to foster the building of a learning community, where participants offer each other support and praise (Cole *et al.,* 1998; Sengupta, 2001). Although some experts argue that the lack of social context cues such as smiling or nodding makes ACMC a reduced register (Ferrara *et al.,* 1991), less social cues often lead to greater equality in participation than in traditional classrooms (Kang, 1996; Warschauer, 1997) further contributing to the social network of the ACMC community (Arnold & Ducate, 2006).

All these findings illustrate how "CMC creates the opportunity for a group of people to construct knowledge together, thus linking reflection and interaction" (Warschauer, 1997, p. 473). Hence, in view of the above, CMC seems to be very appropriate for promoting the kind of student-centered learning that is central to the sociocultural theory of learning and teacher education.

3 Description of Lesley's Online TESOL program

The graduate TESOL certificate program was launched in 2012. A team of eight professors from the TESOL and Bilingual Education Department, along with a professor versed in online education, met monthly to develop the suite of courses. Support was also provided by the librarians to develop a course guide with video links, and the eLearning and Instructional Support (eLis) department helped with all technical aspects of online course development. Four of these courses had previously been taught on campus or off campus in a hybrid model. Thus, the instructors were tasked with creating discussion forums, power point lectures, and final assignments from their former syllabus.

Table 1 below illustrates the courses set up to fulfill the certificate program.

Table 1
PROGRAM OF STUDY IN FULFILMENT OF THE TESOL CERTIFICATE (A.Y. 2014-2015)

Course Type	Credits
EECLD 6001 Culturally Responsive Teaching	3
EECLD 6002 Essential Linguistics: What Every Teacher Needs to Know about Language	3
EECLD 6004 First and Second Language Acquisition and Oral Development	3
EECLD 6007 Teaching English to Speakers of Other Languages: Literacy and Literature[3]	3
EECLD 6010 Teaching English to Speakers of Other Languages: Content Areas	3
EECLD 6012 Assessment for Equity and Inclusion of CLD Learners: Linguistic/Cultural Differences and Disabilities	3
TOTAL CREDITS	18

Students must complete the 6 required courses, 3 credits each. However, in order to complete the TESOL program, students must submit evidence of minimal proficiency in a foreign language, equivalent to one semester's work of approximately 45 class hours. The maximum course enrollment is 15 students.

This 18-credit graduate certificate, which meets endorsement requirements in multiple US states, is designed to enhance the knowledge, skills, and dispositions of licensed teachers who wish to teach ELL (English Language Learner) students. It offers a theoretical foundation as well as practical strategies for the classroom and empowers teachers with the most current technologies, research-based strategies, and culturally responsive teaching. It is aligned with TESOL/ National Council for Accreditation of Teacher Education (NCATE) National Standards in the five domains: Language; Culture; Planning, Implementing, and Managing Instruction; Assessment; and Professionalism (see paragraph 3.1).

Blackboard serves as the learning management system for this online course. This platform gives students a place to interact, serving as their own learning environment. Multiple resources, including Blackboard IM, Kaltura, and Voice Thread can be added to increase collaboration in a virtual environment.

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[3] Developed by D. Bardetti. A hands-on course dedicated to using outcome-based TESOL standards in multilingual /multicultural context for teaching reading, writing, and spelling in English to Culturally and Linguistically Diverse (CLD) students who are at different levels of English proficiency. Teachers acquire, evaluate, adapt, and develop materials that are responsive to the language proficiency level and cultural diversity of students in a classroom that fosters critical thinking skills and respect for all.

3.1 Aim and proposed outcome

The expected outcome for graduates of Lesley's TESOL programs is *learning to teach effectively to all children*. Since one of the goals is for graduates to be well prepared to teach all students effectively, a system has been developed that tracks students' progress in their graduate program, so as to ensure continuous improvement. Key assignments, which address competencies linked to state and professional standards, have been developed for every program course, and professors give students prompt and constructive feedback on their progress based on these assignments. The expected outcomes are aligned to TESOL/NCATE standards (National Council for Accreditation of Teacher Education) and fall under the following five domains[4].

Domain 1. Language
Standard 1.a. Language as a System
Standard 1.b. Language Acquisition and Development
Domain 2. Culture
Standard 2. Culture as it Affects Student Learning
Domain 3. Planning, Implementing, and Managing Instruction
Standard 3.a. Planning for Standards-Based ESL and Content Instruction
Standard 3.b. Implementing and Managing Standards-Based ESL and Content Instruction
Standard 3.c. Using Resources and Technology Effectively in ESL and Content Instruction
Domain 4. Assessment
Standard 4.a. Issues of Assessment for English Language Learners
Standard 4.b. Language Proficiency Assessment
Standard 4.c. Classroom-Based Assessment for ESL
Domain 5. Professionalism
Standard 5.a. ESL Research and History
Standard 5.b. Professional Development, Partnerships, and Advocacy

4 Expanding the Language and Literacy module to Italian partner

One module, precisely, Language and Literacy[5] was made available to the Italian partner[6]. The TESOL teacher educator based in Italy was added to the course as Teaching Assistant (TA) for the module. In addition, three Italian pre-service teacher trainees and three Italian in-service teachers were given access to the course as guests. Their participation was invaluable in terms of

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[4] For a more detailed analysis of each one, refer to http://www.lesley.edu/english-language-learners/program-outcomes/
[5] Deana Bardetti, Course Mentor and Instructor, based in US
[6] Serafina Filice, Assistant Professor, based in Italy

final course evaluation as we shall discuss below.

On the average, approximately 80% of the students enrolled reside in New England. Approximately 50% live in the Boston/Cambridge area. In general, about 20% are US residents who are teaching English abroad (for example, in Turkey, Peru). The 14 students (12 female, 2 male; average age being 28) in this specific online class (Spring, 2015) were in fact all living in Massachusetts near the university; they were native English speakers except for two students who were bilingual Spanish/English, and had moved to New England as adolescents from the Dominican Republic and Puerto Rico. The Italian partner added a European perspective to the existing American-based course. In fact, the Italian TA posted extra reading resources on the platform, and provided input from a different reality, thus extending the outlook and giving it a more international dimension.

The module spanned an 8-week period for a total of 45 hours of student workload. Each weekly session was organized with a different focus:

Session 1: Foundations of Literacy Instruction

Session 2: Promoting Emergent Literacy

Session 3: Vocabulary Development

Session 4: Process Writing

Session 5: Reading and Literature Instruction

Session 6: Connecting Reading and Writing

Session 7: Culturally Responsive Literature

Session 8: Students with Interrupted Formal Education (SIFES)

The introductory session begins with a thorough review of essential research, including the National Literacy Panel Report on developing second language literacy in language–minority children and youth (August & Shanahan, 2006). Sessions two through five highlight stages of literacy development and strategies to support students at each level of language study. The final two sessions focus on working with students with limited or interrupted formal education (migrants, refugees, international adoptees, etc.) who are a growing subgroup of language learners both in the US and Italy. Additionally, students are guided (through multimodal resource materials like hypertext documents with hyperlinks, YouTube videos, etc.) on how to select appropriate literature for multicultural classrooms.

Resources for the eight sessions included the TESOL standards, yet in this pilot project, we also added the European Common Framework and EU Language Portfolio. Instructor-developed PowerPoint lectures serve to frame the sessions.

The first assignment was due after session 3 (i.e. a response paper of 1500

words based on the readings and the activities); during weeks 2-5 they had four virtual quizes based on the readings; a final project involved the development of a lesson plan for reading or writing skills, for which a multi-step template and accompanying rubric were provided in the syllabus. Ongoing participation was assured through weekly tasks that involved a comment/reflection/response to the course instructor's post on the discussion forum. This stimulated active participation characterized by thoughtful, respectful, and timely contributions that help to extend their thinking and deepen their understanding of essential concepts.

4.1 Qualitative Feedback on pilot project

Both the official course participants and the guest teachers from the University of Calabria were asked to comment on the course, giving positive and negative feedback, what they liked/enjoyed about the course and what they didn't like/didn't enjoy and possibly provide suggestions for improving the course.

The anonymous final course evaluations revealed that participation was higher than in previous courses, suggesting these students felt strongly about voicing their opinion on the internationalized course. Overall, the students based in Cambridge expressed their appreciation for the comments and feedback on numerous TESOL topics by the Italian overseas Professor.

Strengths of the course were identified as: constructive feedback, relevant assignments, high quality instruction, and an enriched understanding of the eight weekly topics. The variety of resources used, including the European Framework and TESOL Proficiency Indicators, were helpful and informative. One student shared the following comment,

> The international aspect of this course was exciting and educational. The professors were friendly, approachable, extremely knowledgeable, and shared important informative resources. Blackboard (online platform) was updated often, which is extremely helpful when working in an online setting.

Areas of improvement highlighted include the need for increased peer interaction and the inclusion of an assignment in the form of a group project.

Similarly, a qualitative enquiry from the Italian perspective generated the following observations / suggestions from this experience:
1. the possibility to enroll in a single module and receive a certificate for the 3-credit course;
2. the contents of the module should not be limited to the American reality but have a universal bearing;
3. more student-student interaction is needed through topical threads where

students can respond to each other's posts.

Today, teacher development courses serve an essential role in upgrading one's CV; for this reason, some students / teacher trainees are interested in following only a single module and at the end receive a certificate for a 3-credit course. This means they would be required to pay for only the single module. The Italian guests also noted that the module components and the course discussions were at times limited to the local reality of the States and that on the contrary they should have a more general perspective in order to be applicable to international settings worldwide. In addition, there should be more interactivity going on among the enrolled students; for example, creating thematic threads in which each student has to respond to each other's posts would reduce Teacher-Student interaction and increase Student-Student communicative exchanges, which would help build a growing community of learners.

This small-scale experience also highlighted other challenges, such as: a) working in different time zones globally can hinder synchronous events; b) international partners need more time to order and purchase course texts; c) a glossary of commonly used terms in the specific TESOL field needs to be developed and would be an asset, especially for terms which vary slightly, such as Sheltered Content Instruction in the US vs CLIL in Europe.

Taking into account the above recommendations would be very beneficial in order to recruit international students mainly because nowadays, online Tesol programs have to be competitive on a global scale.

Conclusion

Overall, we can say that these teacher trainees appreciated the convenience and flexibility that this online course offered. Web-based learning can be a flexible and cost-effective alternative to classroom learning, but it can also be a waste of time and money if not implemented correctly. From our experience, we can affirm that with online courses students and teacher(s) share their experiences and become partners in the (co)learning process (see Appendix A for sample posting). Perhaps, one of the biggest advantage in online learning programs is the interactivity they offer. Although student participation, both productive and informative, was very high, S-S interaction remained low, constituting in this case a drawback. According to the feedback, the reason was due to lack of time on the part of the participants; in fact, they had no time to create a thread with another peer because a) some were working students and b) the course workload was very demanding. In order to create a more intense discussion among participants, the teacher could solve this by having the participants reply to at least one peer posting per week. Another suggestion could be to lengthen

the course from 8 weeks to 10 weeks; during in-class f2f situations, on the spot comments are spontaneous and do not require extra time. On the other hand, in ACMC contexts reading classmates posts, reflecting and then replying requires more time. An extra two weeks therefore would allow course participants more space to breathe. In this way, students can interact not only with the instructor but also with their classmates at anytime from anywhere to seek clarification for issues they encounter in their homework assignment, to discuss topics raised in the course contents, or to initiate new discussions on related topics. A successful online discussion can have the same synergistic effect as group or in-class discussion, in which students build on one another's views to gain a deeper understanding of the materials from different perspectives.

Designing and conducting online courses effectively can be a challenge. Course design should aim to facilitate dialogue and decrease psychological distance thereby increasing a sense of community among the participants. From this experience, we realized that it takes twice as much time to teach an on-line course as compared to a face-to-face course for both Instructors and students. We also realized that Humanizing language learning is the key; in fact, the course leader created a friendly and anxiety-free online environment, which enabled course participants to feel confident and stress-free. In addition, both learning process and product must have personal value to the student. Therefore, in designing online courses we should ask ourselves: Is the material/content/task personally relevant and significant for my students? Are they truly interested in the topic/issue/task? Simply having the course material online is not the essence of online courses, but the energy that flows into it throughout the course. This energy derives from teacher's enthusiasm to care, motivate, and make sure students understand the material for themselves.

In today's constantly changing globalized society, Professional Development has a fundamental role in education as it keeps teachers up-to-date on new research in education, on how children learn, on emerging technology tools for the classroom, on new curriculum resources, and much more. As mentioned earlier, teacher-training courses delivered via some form of technology gives the teachers-to-be the opportunity to practice, experiment with the technology as students. This enables them to evaluate the pros and cons of technology, what works and what doesn't work, so they may implement ICT in their own classrooms in the future.

It is worth noting that the best professional development is ongoing, experiential, collaborative, and internationally connected. It is hoped that the two universities working in tandem can provide excellent online teacher training programs in ESL/EFL field in the future.

Acknowledgments

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Appendix A: Discussion Board Sample