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Challenges and Opportunities of Globalised English Language Education

A Case Study of Trentino-South Tyrol

Abstract

Forcing the transition from traditional face-to-face, classroom-based methods to online teaching and learning, the Covid-19 pandemic has further expanded the challenges of contemporary education in a globalised world, characterised by increasing cultural and linguistic diversity.

This paper provides a critical account of the Bolzano Meisei English Programme (BMP), a collaborative project established between the Free University of Bozen-Bolzano and Meisei University of Tokyo during the SARs-Cov-2 crisis in the spring of 2020. By reflecting on this experience, characterised by intrinsic aspects of originality related to the multilingual and multicultural background of the countries involved, the study aims to discuss the challenges and opportunities of online language teaching and learning in the global digital world.

The study is framed in the perspective of Globalised Language Education (GLE) and based on ethnographic approaches (Starfield 2010; Carspecken 1996) and reflective analysis (Gibbs 1988). The dataset is comprised of analogue and digital data, collected in the form of field notes, personal communications, video recordings, email exchanges, and student reflections.

BMP offered participants an international collaborative learning experience, supporting the idea that English can be a window into a range of cultures that are perhaps geographically distant but accessible through digital technologies. While the programme was successful in many respects and well received by participants and stakeholders, it also faced challenges that may be useful for future projects and the advancement of teacher education.

Keywords: *Globalised Language Education, online language education, plurilingualism, Covid-19, teacher education*

1. Introduction¹

It has become increasingly clear that “globalisation poses fundamental challenges for all areas of education in every country” (North-South Centre of the Council of Europe 2012, 17),

¹ Although the entire article is the result of common work and reflection, Maria Cristina Gatti takes responsibility for Section 1, Cecilia Lazzeretti for Sections 2 and 4, and Martina Irsara for Sections 3, 5 and 6.

including English language teaching at various levels of instruction. English generally enjoys a privileged position at school (Cavalli et al. 2009), but it also needs to keep up with global and local societal changes, such as the ever-growing digital landscape and countries' increasing multilingualism and multiculturalism, which are reflected in schools and require teacher preparation. In line with global and local developments, the Companion Volume with New Descriptors (Council of Europe 2018) provides descriptors for areas that were not considered in earlier publications, such as plurilingual and pluricultural competence and online interaction, which has become even more relevant after the outbreak of SARS-Cov-2 and its related mobility restrictions.

This article presents and critically examines an Italo-Japanese online initiative that was set up during the SARS-Cov-2 crisis in the spring of 2020. The collaborative project between the Free University of Bozen-Bolzano and Meisei University (Bolzano Meisei English Programme BMP) provided participants with a multicultural online experience of English language teaching and learning. BMP is to be interpreted within the broader perspective of Globalised Language Education (GLE), whereby English language teaching/learning is viewed as an educational process that facilitates communication in multilingual and multicultural contexts. English language users in lingua-franca environments become intercultural speakers who recognise and appreciate diversity at individual and societal levels, valuing plurilingualism and multilingualism.

Methodologically relying on ethnography (Starfield 2010; Carspecken 1996) and reflective analysis (Gibbs 1988), our study aims to critically reflect on BMP as an experience of GLE, which involved university students, professors, researchers, academic collaborators, internship coordinators, schoolteachers, children, and families from the northern Italian region Trentino-South Tyrol and the Japanese city of Tokyo. While the project was successful in various respects and appreciated by participants and stakeholders, it also faced challenges that might be informative for future projects and the development of teacher education.

The paper is organised as follows: the next Section deals with Globalised Language Education as an area of enquiry that emerged out of European policies and empirical research in the field, taking into consideration the challenges it poses, especially after the pandemic experience. Then, BMP participants and procedures are thoroughly described. After presenting the materials in use and the methodologies adopted, the discussion will focus on the challenges and opportunities provided by BMP in terms of plurilingual and pluricultural competence and online interaction. The last Section summarises the main points made in the article, drawing links between the Sections, and emphasising the opportunities that arise from projects such as BMP.

2. Globalised Language Education

The term GLE has first been adopted by Gearon et al. (2009, 6) to identify experiences of language teaching and learning in multilingual and multicultural classrooms and societies, with a view to highlighting the challenges of contemporary education in a globalised world, characterised by increasing cultural, racial, and linguistic diversity in schools. Although relying on a different terminology, GLE has been widely theorised by the Language Policy Division of the Council of Europe (CoE) through a number of official documents and reports, made available on the official website of the CoE. These speak about “plurilingual and intercultural education” (see Cavalli et al. 2009; Coste et al. 2009), pointing at the crucial distinction between multilingualism and plurilingualism: both are recognised as common aspects of a globalised world, yet the latter is seen as a prerogative of individual speakers, while the former as a societal feature. In defining ‘plurilingual and intercultural education,’ the CoE therefore prioritises the individual perspective: what distinguishes it are “its purposes, which are the fundamental rights of each learner, based on values which guarantee his/her education as an individual and as a citizen” (Cavalli et al. 2009, 8). Furthermore, the concept of GLE is grounded in five main principles: 1) every society is multilingual; 2) every language is plural; 3) every school is a space open to plurality of languages; 4) all education is plurilingual in varying degrees; 5) every identity is plural (Cavalli et al. 2009). On these premises, GLE is neither envisaged as a revolution, as it already exists in our globalised world, nor as a new teaching methodology for the teaching of languages; it rather advocates for a change of perspective, as it involves not only foreign languages but all languages in use. The CoE encourages the implementation of GLE “into the ethical position of every teacher” (Cavalli et al. 2009, 8), recommending, in operational terms, the introduction of relevant activities and experiences able to construct the personal identity of learners.

While ideologically adhering to the theoretical orientations provided by the CoE about GLE and attempting to implement its guidelines as fully as possible, BMP is also reflective of the difficulties inherent in this path, which are often overlooked or over-simplified, resulting in educators’ confusion. Reality is far from the ideal depicted in the official reports and EU policy statements sometimes fail at recognising how challenging diverse classrooms can be. Gearon et al. (2009) envisage three main challenges involved in GLE. The first deals with educational provision equity: working with culturally and linguistically diverse students entails considering that some of them may be socially, politically, or economically marginalised, because of immigration and refugee status. The second challenge relies on the consideration that diversity is often silenced in public discourse, while national curricula and national standards are

emphasised, with the risk of homogenising diverse groups. Lastly, the third envisaged challenge is that of the disparity between native speakers of the dominant language and non-native students, who speak other languages and may require additional support to keep up with their schoolmates.

As if that were not enough, the Covid-19 pandemic, forcing a shift from traditional face-to-face, classroom-based systems to online teaching and learning, has further expanded the challenges traditionally involved in GLE. The consequences of the pandemic on education have been felt all over the world, with effects widely debated by scholars (for a general overview on the topic, see, for example, Rahman et al. 2021). Yet, given the scope of our study, it is worth focusing here on research that specifically addresses the consequences of Covid-19 on English language education (Erarslan 2021), considering the experiences of Italy (Freddi 2021) and Japan (Kim 2021).

Globally, research shows that emergency online English teaching and learning mostly produced problems due to poor/unstable internet connection and students' difficult access to computers or smartphones, while, on the bright side, it contributed to instructors' digital literacy. After reviewing almost seventy research studies conducted between March 2020 and February 2021 on the impact of the pandemic on English language teaching and learning worldwide, Erarslan (2021) came up with findings pointing at crucial issues, such as access, implementation, and pedagogy. Many institutions were unprepared for a worldwide crisis that demanded revolutionising the conventional ways of English teaching. As the author posits, one of the most difficult problems in offering English classes online had to do with the ease of access to the internet, computers, and smartphones: inequalities across nations and societies have created barriers to students' access to the essential infrastructures to attend online courses, leaving teachers unable to reach them. Online English instruction did not provide the desired results also due to pedagogical reasons, such as a lack of preparation, planning, educational strategies for emergency scenarios, and instructors' limited understanding of technology. While this was equally true for students, they however had greater experience in coping with technological challenges. Furthermore, while some teachers regarded emergency online teaching as an obstacle which raised their anxiety level (Gao and Zhang 2020), others saw it as an opportunity to increase their expertise in teaching English remotely (Chiatoh and Chia 2020; Hadiani and Arisandi 2020).

Reporting on her experience as a teacher of English of a course delivered in the middle of the first outbreak of SARs-Cov-2 at the University of Pavia, in Northern Italy, Freddi (2021) highlights that the digital environment opened up unexpected opportunities, such as the

possibility for colleagues abroad to participate in her online course, whose collaboration would not have been possible in person due to costs. Furthermore, students' feedback at the end of the course was positive and focused on the strengths of digital learning. Yet, the author comes to similar conclusions as Erarslan's (2021), when claiming that "teachers need more training to fully embrace the digital paradigm and exploit its pedagogical possibilities to the full" (Freddi 2021, 292).

The results of Freddi's (2021) study can be compared with Kim's (2021), reflective of a similar experience in a Japanese university. Kim (2021) argues that, due to a lack of experience with online learning, most Japanese students originally reported a preference for face-to-face instruction over online instruction. To alleviate learner concern, all instructional materials and instructions were then uploaded and organised on an online platform prior to the classes. When students saw how easy it was to obtain class materials, they realised they had more time and could focus more on their studies. Under these conditions, Japanese students felt more self-motivated, autonomous, and prone to actively participate in group interactions.

The two aforementioned studies appear particularly relevant for BMP, as they present similar experiences in terms of content and context.

3. BMP participants and procedures

The organisers, managers, and supervisors of BMP were professors, researchers, academic collaborators, and internship coordinators at the Faculty of Education of the Free University of Bozen-Bolzano and at the Department of International Studies, School of Humanities, of Meisei University. The basic collaborative concept of BMP grew out of the face-to-face *Meisei Summer School Project* (MSSP), which was inaugurated in Tokyo in 2002. BMP1 was implemented in 2020, after the first Covid-19 outbreak, while BMP2 was implemented in 2021. Whereas BMP1 took place at a time when all teaching activities at university were carried out exclusively online due to pandemic restrictions, during the BMP2 academic teaching in South Tyrol was offered in a hybrid mode with some students attending lectures and workshops online and others face to face.

3.1 Participants: students and children

After the initial preparation stages among the organisers in the spring of 2020 and 2021, student enrolment took place in the summer of 2020 and 2021.² BMP1 involved 30 Master

² The term *students* is used in this article to indicate the university undergraduates and not the primary school children who participated in the project.

students at the Faculty of Education of the Free University of Bozen-Bolzano and the same number of Japanese students at the Department of International Studies of Meisei University. While the number of the Japanese students remained approximately the same, only 10 students from Trentino-South Tyrol participated in BMP2. BMP1 students (more than 60) formed 10 mixed-nationality teams, while BMP2 students (more than 40) were grouped into 7 teams, which were named by the students combining a word indicating a colour with one referring to fruit or vegetables, such as *pink mushrooms*, *green strawberries*, *white tomatoes*, *blue carrots*, etc. All Italian students had been trained to become general primary school teachers and teachers of English to young learners (YLS), and already possessed a strong pedagogical background. By contrast, only a few Japanese students envisaged becoming teachers of English, while others saw their future jobs in intercultural communication. All the Italian students were higher-year Master students, while the Japanese group comprised students in various years of study.

Children entered the picture in early autumn during the teaching-implementation phase. BMP involved more than 30 children from South-Tyrol in 2020, which grew to more than 40 in 2021, alongside a slightly lower number of Japanese children. The children were divided equally among the 10 and 7 student teams in BMP1 and BMP2 respectively. The Japanese children were from different parts of Japan, such as Tokyo, Tochigi, and Okinawa. They all spoke Japanese as their first language (L1). The children in Trentino-South Tyrol were from Trento, Brunico, and surrounding areas. The latter spoke standard and dialect forms of various L1s, such as Italian, German, Ladin, Slovakian, Romanian, and Albanian and attended primary schools that value plurilingualism and adopt multilingual teaching approaches, with English officially offered from the first grade. While the Trentino-South Tyrolean children were mostly 7-9 years old, the Japanese children had a broader range of ages.

3.2 Teamwork organisation

BMP organisers, supervisors, and student teams worked together in general meetings and breakout rooms on the Zoom platform. In the general meetings, students received theoretical input, practical information, and specific tasks, which they accomplished in smaller groups in the breakout rooms. The students' overall goal was to plan 45-minute English lessons (2 in BMP1 and 3 in BMP2) that they would subsequently deliver online to YLS, adopting a team-teaching approach, sharing a group of learners and teaching jointly. Besides attending the general meetings (5 in BMP2) and working in supervised breakout rooms, the Italo-Japanese student teams organised themselves autonomously, meeting online outside the official times,

exchanging emails, sharing WhatsApp messages, and uploading materials to the Slack platform, which is an instant messaging programme developed by Slack Technologies for professional and organisational communications and which is now adopted as a community platform.³ Before teaching the groups of YLs, the student teams trialled their teaching activities in mock lessons (3 in BMP1 and 4 in BMP2), which were followed by reflections and modifications. Students were generally invited to make restricted use of ready-made materials and to design their own activities, creating a personal atmosphere. The general aim was for students to encourage children to interact, focusing on language that helps to make friends.

4. Materials and methods

Ethnography and reflective analysis are the main methodological references of our study. The ethnographic approach is widely used in educational and ESL research, as it allows researchers to grasp the sociocultural processes involved in language learning and gain more holistic understandings of teacher-student interactions. Scholars have advocated a rigorous implementation of this methodology in applied linguistics (see, for instance, Dressen-Hammouda 2013 and Watson-Gegeo 1988) and for a series of good practices, which include multiple ways of gathering data, multiple observers, peer evaluation, non-biased language use, and flexibility (Carspecken 1996; Starfield 2010). Furthermore, special emphasis must be placed on the “trustworthiness” of the emic standpoint, whereby participants provide “their perspectives on their own meaning-making practices” (Starfield 2010, 56).

In the case of BMP, researchers were directly involved in the organisation and management of the project. Thanks to their dual role as project organisers and analysts, they were able to benefit from a privileged viewpoint on the activities and interact with all the participants for all the duration of the project. This enabled them to gather naturalistic data through a number of means. On the one hand, analogue data were collected in the form of field notes, based on extemporary observation, and personal communications with students and families both formally and informally. On the other hand, data consisted of video recordings of the Zoom meetings (general meetings and breakout rooms), video recordings of the YL lessons, Slack messages, email exchanges, and student reflections on Strengths, Weaknesses, Opportunities, and Threats (written SWOT analyses and videos). The collected data allowed the researchers to share the experiences among peers and repeat the observation over time, thus corroborating the insights and hypotheses formulated during the project.

³ <https://slack.com/help/articles/115004071768-What-is-Slack->. Last visited 25/05/2023.

On completion of BMP1 and BMP2, a critical-reflective analysis was carried out using the lens of Gibbs' (1988) Reflective Cycle. This model is particularly suitable for the analysis of repeated events, as it enables the analyst to compare them, learn from previous experiences and plan consequently. Gibbs' (1988) framework is organised into six stages (see Figure 1): 1) description of the experience; 2) feelings and thoughts about the experience; 3) evaluation of the experience, both good and bad; 4) analysis to make sense of the situation; 5) conclusion about what has been learned and what could have been done differently; 6) action plan about how to deal with similar situations in the future, or general changes. Each phase is accompanied by a series of questions and prompts, guiding the analyst to the completion of the process. While stages 1 and 2 focus on content information (e.g., What happened? How did you feel during the situation?), stage 3 involves an overall assessment of the experience (e.g., How did the experience go?); stage 4 requires an explanation for the observed phenomena (e.g., Why did/didn't things go well?), stages 5 and 6 focus on lessons learned and future directions (e.g., What did you learn from this situation? If you had to do the same thing again, what would you do differently?).

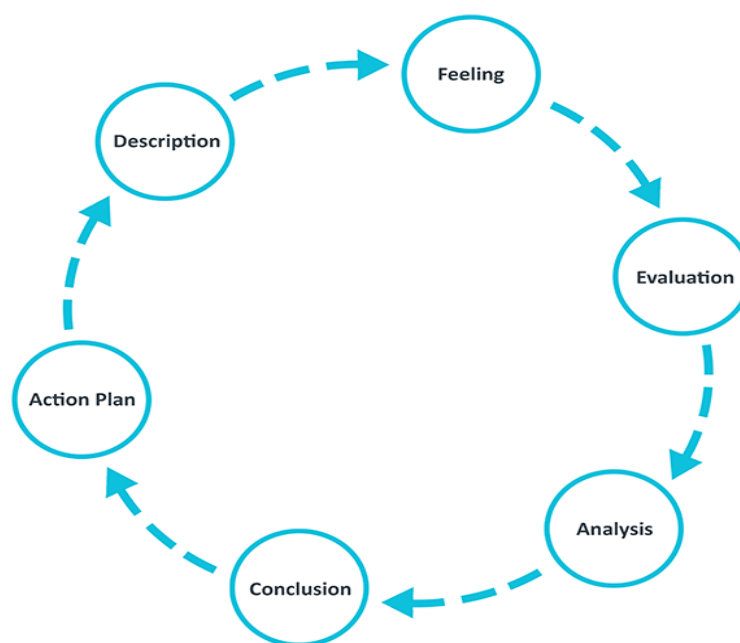


Fig. 1: the Reflective Cycle Model (Gibbs 1988)

5. Discussion

This Section discusses challenges that BMP faced, interpreting them as a source of insight for future projects and teacher education. More specifically, it addresses issues that might warrant consideration in planning and implementing English language online teaching programmes for

pre-service teachers involving YLs with multiple languages and cultures. Practical and educational matters are raised, arguing that teachers of English “have a responsibility to pursue general educational aims together with those of the subject taught” (Byram 2021, 54). General educational aims clearly include intercultural communication.

A distinguishing feature of BMP was the complex transnational network of participants, including university professors, researchers, internship coordinators, university students, children, school personnel, and families, whose project commitment was key to the success of this challenging yet exciting experience. The complexity of the project raised a number of issues.

5.1 Student engagement

When activities are carried out remotely, engaging students can be demanding, as was the case with BMP2 for various reasons. The call for participation was circulated via group emails in the peak holiday month of August for both BMP1 and BMP2. However, while BMP1 took place in the period of forced online learning, BMP2 was conducted at a time of hybrid teaching, which put additional organisational demands on students, some of whom had restarted commuting. Time was also an issue because of the different time zones between Italy and Japan. Like many transnational cooperation projects, BMP required responsiveness and flexibility in terms of time, confirming the importance of being adaptable in teams that operate in different time zones and distribute working time in different ways over the week and year.

Considering the novelty of the project, its digital-only advertising, and its extracurricular nature, joining BMP required openness and curiosity. Furthermore, there needed to be a strong motivation to actively engage in a learning opportunity on a voluntary basis. Although university students could have the BMP experience recognised as part of their compulsory practical training at local schools, fewer students than expected initially saw this as a sufficient incentive to join BMP2. This seems to be indicative of the need to emphasise the general value of extracurricular activities that do not necessarily have readily quantifiable and measurable benefits.

Byram (2021, 54) stresses that it should be a primary aim in the teaching of English at various levels to “instil in learners a disposition for engagement and interaction with others.” There should be a “willingness to seek out or take up opportunities to engage with otherness in a relationship of equality” (Byram 2021, 62).

5.2 Family involvement

The skills and attitudes of flexibility, adaptability, openness, curiosity, and engagement are also

included among the competences that should be taught to YIs in primary school (Council of Europe 2021). Therefore, initiatives to support children's engagement with otherness within structured and framed experiences are to be encouraged.

As with the students, involving children and families was also challenging, especially in BMP2, partly due to the online learning fatigue that often sets in when YIs have reached their point of saturation in learning through the screen. Yet, after some initial hesitation, a high number of children unexpectedly signed in thanks to the help of internship coordinators and the children's teachers of English, who succeeded in communicating the intercultural value of BMP to the parents and motivating the children. This confirms the importance of personalised communications to draw learners' attention to specific learning offers in the current wealth of online information and events.

Extracurricular online activities for YIs require additional practical, ethical, and legal considerations, for instance concerning privacy and data protection issues. Parents or guardians had to sign a written consent form for children's participation. On obtaining authorisation, the English lessons delivered to the children were recorded strictly for research purposes. In one case, a higher level of confidentiality was needed since the child was living in an SOS village for children without parental care.

Moreover, practical considerations had to be made concerning home access to computers or the internet and technology or computer skills. Assistance with lost Zoom links, general access difficulties, and audio issues was provided simultaneously to families via mobile phone and at a digital help desk that was set up for the occasion. While all technical issues could apparently be solved, a few enrolled children from families with a migration background from non-European countries were lost and missed the interactive event. This seems to suggest that extra-European migrants need further support to engage in extracurricular online learning experiences, which is reminiscent of the challenge raised by Gearon et al. (2009) as concerns the equity of educational provision for learners with different social and economic backgrounds.

5.3 English language competence

Students' and children's initial reluctance to join the project stemmed partly from personal or teachers' concern about the lack of English language competence, namely "the ability to apply knowledge of the rules of a standard version of the language to produce and interpret spoken and written language" (Byram 2021, 60). This seems to point to the importance of encouraging learners of English to see communication competence from a broader perspective and to expand their notion of competence to include strategic competence, namely the ability to employ coping

or compensating strategies to repair breakdowns in communication (Canale and Swain 1980). While foreign language speakers may occasionally feel powerless and “sense the constraints of insufficient knowledge and skill in linguistic competence to meet the specific requirements of the interaction” (Byram 2021, 52), it is important that they learn to find solutions and overcome communication difficulties when these arise. While resorting to their L1s was not always possible for students and children in BMP, they showed how reformulations and non-verbal communication helped them getting their meanings across.

The BMP experience called for the need of embracing a broader notion of competence which includes tolerance of ambiguity, that is “the acceptance of confusing situations” (Oxford 1992, 37), a moderate degree of which has been identified by researchers as supportive in language learning. Therefore, learners should be helped to accept their uncertainty to some extent, since this encourages them “to take intelligent risks with the new language” (Dewaele and Wei 2013, 233; Oxford 1992), and to see themselves as active problem solvers, rather than passive reluctant subjects. A high tolerance of ambiguity was required of university students in the preparation phase of their lessons, when children’s enrolment was taking place, and students did not know the children’s proficiency level. Tolerance of ambiguity is namely the ability “to deal effectively with situations even when there is little objective information present and outcomes are difficult to predict” (Byram 2021, 22).

5.4 Intercultural competence

Students’ concerns about their proficiency in English are partly rooted in a latent native-speaker model, which implicitly creates an unfeasible target that can provoke feelings of inadequacy and frustration. Instead, in the context of English language learning, it is often argued that

the more desirable outcome is a learner with the ability to see and manage the relationship between themselves and their own beliefs, values, behaviours and meanings, as expressed in a foreign language, and those of their interlocutors, expressed in the same language—or even a combination of languages—which may be the interlocutors’ native language, or not. (Byram 2021, 17)

In this regard, the notion of the intercultural speaker should be further emphasised in teacher education, encouraging students to consider the study of English “as initiation into a kind of social practice that is at the boundary of two or more cultures” (Kramsch 1993, 9). Learners of English should be enabled to interact with both ‘native speakers’ of the language and with people who use English in lingua franca situations, “where it is an estranging and sometimes

disturbing means of coping with the world for all concerned” (Byram 2021, 5). As a matter of fact, no BMP participants spoke English as an L1, and all viewed language learning as a life-long process whereby language competence can be constantly developed in its various facets. The communicative exchanges among students were often slow and included silence, which sometimes caused unease and was difficult to interpret. Silent moments were recorded particularly among Japanese students, who took longer to process statements and questions and to respond to them. While this might be due to linguistic difficulties, dimensions of cultural variability might also explain the silent moments and how these were perceived. Silence tends to be regarded differently by members of individualistic and collectivist cultures, in which individuals take precedence over groups and vice versa (Gudykunst 2004). Members of collectivist cultures (such as Japan), generally value silence as an important component of communication, while members of more individualistic cultures (such as Italy) tend to feel uneasy and to view silence as something that needs to be filled in communicative exchanges (Gudykunst 2004). It was therefore important for Italian BMP participants to respect the silent moments and give the Japanese sufficient time to verbally contribute to the conversations, which was sometimes demanding, also considering the time pressure to complete their joint lesson plans.⁴ This points to the importance of coordinating turn taking in online conversations, ensuring that the length of the turns is appropriate and that the turns are distributed evenly. The BMP experience therefore highlights the value of giving interlocutors time to take the floor (after switching on the microphone in online conversations), being sensitive to different views of silence and turn taking in multicultural groups in particular.

Language and culture are intertwined and difficult to separate in language teaching and learning. Kramsch argues that “culture in language learning is not an expendable fifth skill, tacked on, so to speak, to the teaching of speaking, listening, reading, and writing,” but that “it is always in the background” (1993, 1). Cultural diversity emerged at various stages of BMP, for instance in the selection process of themes and topics to be included in the lessons for the YLs. Among the most popular topics were Halloween and Christmas. While the former is a recently imported festival with little recognition among families in Trentino-South Tyrol, the latter is a most significant occasion with many long-lived customs and traditions around it. The widespread holiday of Christmas illustrates how common practices can differ in meaning and significance across countries, regions, and families. The latter emerged in BMP when Italian

⁴ By way of an example, an Italian student who intended to contribute her teaching ideas to her Japanese peers ended up monopolising the entire conversation in a time-limited breakout room and needed to apologise when the time warning appeared.

students started explaining local Advent and Christmas traditions to their Japanese peers, before realising that these were less widespread than they had previously assumed and becoming better aware of a range of cultural differences within their own region of Trentino-South Tyrol. BMP made students consider the value of acknowledging intra-country as well as inter-country linguistic and cultural differences in interactions with people of complex linguistic and cultural identities. Students were also cautioned against making instant assumptions about children's languages and cultures in English language classes, in which diversity is the norm rather than the exception.

5.5 Communicative Language Teaching

The overall aim of English language education in our digital and globalised world is to enable learners to communicate with speakers who have various linguistic and cultural backgrounds. While the idea of integrating various world cultures into English language teaching is more recent, it has been stressed since the 1980s by proponents of Communicative Language Teaching (CLT) that learners should be given opportunities to use English for communicative purposes in authentic contexts, in which they learn by doing through direct experience (Richards and Rodgers 2014). BMP provided an authentic lingua-franca context in which Japanese and Italian students cooperated in order to reach a common goal, namely the development and delivery of English lessons to YLs. BMP was student centred, and professors and their collaborators offered general guidelines and functioned mainly as facilitators. While some Italian students appreciated their general freedom of action within BMP, others reported finding it challenging. In this regard, it can be argued that giving higher-year undergraduates detailed instructions on processes and contents to be pursued is not always productive, and that autonomy is a personal competence that needs to be developed and is one of “the crucial elements which make language teaching ‘educational’” (Byram 2021, 58).

Still in line with the CLT approach, there was great emphasis in BMP on how to communicate to become friends, which was a stated learning outcome for students and children. Despite the students' intention to generally follow CLT principles in their online lessons with the YLs, they could not always implement the CLT approach effectively, partly due to the different pedagogic backgrounds and needs among Japanese and Italian children. For example, lessons included individual and choral imitation and question-answer drilling, in which one child was invited to ask a question and another to reply until all children in the group had practised asking and answering the specific question, in a way reminiscent of Situational Language Teaching (Richards and Rodgers 2014). While Japanese children seemed comfortable repeating after the

student-teachers and answering the same questions more than once, some Italian children grew puzzled and disinterested. Both Japanese and Italian students became better aware of the greater potential of referential over display questions to keep a high level of attention among children.⁵ At the same time, different needs exist and need to be catered for in multilingual groups of YLs. In the context of BMP, Japanese children had a greater need than Italian children for repetition and articulation exercises. Hence, while computer issues slowed down the beginning stages of the YL lessons, BMP participants were mainly confronted with teaching matters that also arise in face-to-face classes, such as gauging the amount of repetition that is needed and ensuring an appropriate lesson pace.

5.6 Student reflections

The final step of BMP consisted in students reflecting on the overall experience by carrying out SWOT analyses, making videos, and discussing issues in a final online meeting. Students appreciated the opportunity they had been offered to actively interact and cooperate in an authentic, multilingual, and multicultural online context they had never experienced before. They mainly identified practical limitations, such as timing, occasional computer issues, specific teaching issues, and limited instructions provided for them, whereas they found it difficult to engage in more in-depth critical thinking and analysis. Although the value of careful reflection, self-assessment, and evaluation is indisputable, it remains a challenge for teacher educators to effectively guide their students in this respect. Devising additional instruments for reflection in GLE is a task for the future.

6. Conclusions

In line with GLE principles and measures advocated by the CoE, BMP offered participants an experience of collaborative learning at an international level, encouraging the perspective that English can be a window on a variety of cultures perhaps geographically distant but reachable by means of computer technology. Similarly to the online experience reported by Freddi (2021), the digital nature of BMP presented an unexpected opportunity for transnational collaboration. Working in tandem with Japan would have been unfeasible for the Italian participants without the technological advancements of contemporary society.

⁵ Referential questions are real or information-seeking questions, to which the questioner does not know the answer (e.g., How many cousins have you got?), whereas display questions are asked in order for learners to show what they know (e.g., How many fingers have you got?) (Thornbury 2006).

Like the online course described by Freddi (2021), BMP was evaluated positively by its participants. Nonetheless, it presented challenges for both organisers and participants. Relying on Gibbs' (1988) Reflective Cycle, our study offers a critical-reflective analysis of the issues that an online project raises within the wider intercultural framework. Such issues have been approached from an emic and etic perspective, which helped us identify necessary conditions for a successful development of GLE at large, as well as general areas for improvement in teacher education.

Rather than advocating change, our reflection on the BMP experience suggests the need to direct the attention to the acquisition of new competences in the pre-service education of future primary school teachers of English, including responsiveness, flexibility, adaptability, openness, curiosity, engagement, and autonomy. Initiatives such as BMP can foster these skills and attitudes, which are fundamental for a smooth running of multilingual and multicultural projects. Besides providing opportunities for students to interact in authentic lingua-franca contexts, teacher educators need effective ways to improve students' experience of teaching and learning in intercultural environments. Throughout the various phases of the project, we observed that students enacted several strategies which fostered team collaboration. This included the ability to tolerate a certain amount of ambiguity, sensitivity to different views of silence, respectful turn taking, and acknowledgement of differences within as well as between countries.

Overall, the BMP experience suggests viewing CLT in a critical perspective, considering its caveats and implementation difficulties, despite the fact that scholars still see it as "the most plausible basis for language teaching in many contexts today" (Richards and Rodgers 2014, 382). Finally, the present study calls for the development of further reflection tools to aid students in their evaluation of English language learning experiences in global contexts. Critical reflection should be aimed at finding new theories and better methods of teaching and learning foreign languages in the era of globalisation.

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