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Reducing distance through online international collaboration

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Online and hybrid courses offer many benefits for ESL teacher education, but can be hampered by 'transactional distance', a lack of interpersonal closeness which can cause misunderstanding and disengagement. This article describes a pedagogical project in which in-service teachers studying in a distance-learning MA TESL programme in Sri Lanka participated in an asynchronous discussion forum with peers from a university in New York City to discuss varieties of World Englishes. The project increased dialogue between learners, and between learners and the instructor, providing space for informal interactions through text, images, and video, as well as multiple methods for responding to feedback, ultimately reducing transactional distance. This article discusses the benefits of the project as well as the pedagogical and technological challenges, offering suggestions for other MA TESL educators about implementing such collaborations.

Introduction

Open and distance learning (ODL) is becoming increasingly common, as conventional universities offer more online and hybrid courses and as enrolment in new open universities increases. This is particularly true in Sri Lanka, where enrolment in the national Open University has increased dramatically in the past ten years, doubling from 2007 to 2016 (Garrett 2016), and currently more than 40,000 students are enrolled (Open University 2014). This educational model offers a number of benefits, including lower cost, greater flexibility, and increased access for students who are not able to stop working in order to study (Nunan 2012). In-service teachers who enrol in postgraduate teaching programmes are often in remote areas, poorly paid, with little support from their institutions for continuing education, which makes travel to urban centres for university courses difficult; ODL can be a much more viable option (Garton and Edge 2012).

However, distance education also comes with pedagogical challenges, including the potential for loneliness and isolation, which can lead to high rates of attrition (Nunan 2012). More specifically, the limited face-to-face interactions in distance education can contribute to what scholars have called 'transactional distance' (TD). The concept of TD, first developed in the 1980s, captures how physical distance between teachers and students can create psychological distance, what Moore

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described as a 'communications space to be crossed, a space of potential misunderstanding between the inputs of the instructor and those of the learner' (Moore 1993: 23). It thus provides a useful way to understand how web-based learning can be designed to encourage engagement and minimize gaps in communication (Huang et al. 2016; Quong et al. 2018).

In this article, we discuss how a pedagogical project involving both local and global collaboration helped mitigate the effects of transactional distance in an MA TESL course at an open university in Sri Lanka by facilitating greater teacher–student and student–student interaction. We describe the goals and structure of the project, then review the benefits and challenges of this collaboration, offering implications for other teachers seeking to reduce TD in distance education.

Project overview
Goals

The project, conducted in spring 2017, connected the Sri Lankan students, enrolled in an ODL sociolinguistics course taught by Mihiri, with linguistically diverse undergraduates in New York City enrolled in a traditional face-to-face course on the globalization of English, taught by Brooke. While many international exchanges of this kind are primarily focused on developing intercultural communication skills (O'Dowd 2007), we originally designed this project to increase students' awareness of the diversity of World Englishes, hoping to 'showcase the global ownership of English, and raise students' confidence as legitimate users of a global language' (Galloway and Rose 2017: 12). During the project, however, we began to notice an unanticipated benefit: for the Sri Lankan students in the ODL class, the activities also seemed to reduce TD. This article will focus specifically on that effect; for discussion of the implications for both groups of students around exposure to linguistic and racial diversity, see Schreiber (2019).

Students

This project involved 45 Sri Lankan students and 26 students in New York. All of the Sri Lankan students were employed full time, mostly as English teachers at the secondary and tertiary level. They were a diverse group, ranging in age from early twenties to mid-fifties, and identifying as Sinhalese, Tamil, and Moor. In this ODL course, in addition to print materials, the students accessed course materials and submitted work through the course website, with ten optional, 'day schools', face-to-face sessions on weekends. Students in this programme live across Sri Lanka, in the regions of Colombo, Galle, Jaffna, and Kandy, including some highly remote areas, and they often could not attend the day schools due to lengthy travel time, unreliable public transportation, or work and family commitments.

The students in New York were likewise an extremely diverse group. All were upper-level undergraduates in a variety of fields such as business, communications, English, and sociology, also ranging in age from early twenties to mid-fifties, and their first languages, in addition to English, included Chinese, Russian, Haitian Creole, Arabic, Tagalog, and Gujarati.

Structure

We began by dividing the students into groups composed of 3–4 Sri Lankan students and 2–3 American students, then invited them to join a shared discussion forum hosted on the Sri Lankan university's course management website. Within their groups, the students shared brief self-introduction

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videos, wrote responses to readings on New York City Englishes and Sri Lankan Englishes, then commented on their peers' posts.

The second part of the project involved a small-scale linguistic landscapes study (Gorter 2006). Students chose a small area within their hometowns and took photographs of written language such as street signs, billboards, or advertisements, which they shared with their groups via Flickr. For the Sri Lankan students, the linguistic landscape study was a local collaboration: the students collected images and analysed their linguistic landscapes as part of geographically based groups of 3–4 students. Finally, both groups of students presented their conclusions via face-to-face poster presentations. Students were assessed on their participation in the forums and the quality of their linguistic landscape presentations.

The data presented here are part of a larger study on this project, and come from three main sources: the students' posts on the discussion forums, which comprised 40 discussion threads with a total of approximately 27,000 words, semistructured interviews with 18 of the Sri Lankan students and 4 of the New York students (see Appendix), and the instructors' observations and reflections from field notes.

Transactional distance in distance education

According to Moore (1993), transactional distance in a course is a function of three features: how *structured* the course is (how rigid the courses goals, methods, and timeline are); the amount of constructive interpersonal interaction (called *dialogue*) between teachers and students that is supported by the course; and the amount of *autonomy* displayed by individual learners. Transactional distance is relative, and can best be understood as a continuum from high to low TD: a course with low TD is characterized by greater 'interpersonal closeness, sharedness and perceived learning' among the students (Huang et al. 2016: 738).

The key concept in the theory of TD is dialogue, which has been expanded to include four types: instructor–learner, learner–learner, learner–subject matter, and vicarious interaction, which learners observe between others (Gorsky and Caspi 2005). Moore (1993) has argued that high structure, by limiting the responsiveness of the course to students' needs and preferences, increases TD. However, other scholars have found that high structure can actually increase dialogue between students and therefore lower TD, given the 'richer, more interactive modes of communication' through new online platforms (Huang et al. 2016: 736). Asynchronous discussion forums, which provide additional time for participants to plan their contributions and create a record of the interaction that can be reviewed at any time, can be especially effective at increasing dialogue (Andresen 2009). These advantages of asynchronous forums dovetail nicely, as will be discussed later, with the demands of an international collaboration.

Reducing transactional distance
Learner–learner interaction

For the Sri Lankan students, the international discussion forums represented a novel activity in two ways. First, in the teaching context of the Open University of Sri Lanka, discussion forums are available but not commonly used, and students reported that this low-stakes writing was in positive contrast to the more formal writing they usually do. As Ranmali noted, 'we [are usually] limited to paper test and written answers'.

Other students described the low stakes, more conversational nature of discussion forum writing as liberating:

> Nelum: ... I think assignments you have to like be academic ... but the forum ... you can be more open ... because we don't have academic restrictions on us so we can like express ourselves freely

> Dilshani: we are free to express ourselves and really have our own identity ... and we can use the colloquial language and intimate tone so it's really nice

Second, many students reported that this activity was the first time that they had used English to communicate online with someone from outside of Sri Lanka: Ramya noted about the forum that 'I've never done such a thing before in my life, to be honest', and Gehan commented, 'I think the most exciting thing was that it was something new ... to get different perspectives from different parts of the world.' Mihiri observed that these forums were far more active than forums she had used previously as an instructor (and has used since).

Discussion forums only among local peers can become performative, written primarily for the benefit of the instructor (Andresen 2009). The Sri Lankan students in this course had studied together for over a year, and had connections through social media, email, text, and occasional face-to-face meetings. In contrast, communicating with the New York students created a completely new audience and thus a more authentic communicative context; in the context of discussions about their own varieties of English, both groups of students were able to assume positions of expertise. These differences generated mutual interest and enthusiasm. As Nelum noted: '[W]e are bringing something of our culture into this and they are delivering something of their culture so ... it's nice'; Namal called the international communication 'successful' and 'easy', saying that 'rather than negative ... we had only the positive' experiences with the forums. The students described these two novelties of the project, expressing themselves 'freely' and communicating across national borders, as new and engaging. The students reported that this increased their interest in using the forums, making them more likely to participate in the dialogue afforded by these sorts of platforms (Quong et al. 2018), which in turn reduces TD.

Instructor–learner interaction

This more relaxed communicative mode opened up new interactions locally as well as globally, especially around teacher feedback on student writing. In the context of this university, students tend to submit lengthy, high-stakes written assignments either in hard copies or via email, and students rarely respond to or question feedback given by the teacher. Thus, feedback on student work, a major form of teacher–student interaction in online education which has 'crucial significance in determining the effectiveness of the teaching learning process' (Contijoch-Escontria et al., 2012: 22), becomes a site where TD increases and communication gaps can occur.

Via the forums, Mihiri observed, students were more likely to directly address the instructor's feedback, as in the screenshot shown in Figure 1. Here the student has directly taken up the instructor's critique, further

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From Mihiri Jansz @ Mar 7, 2:36 am (995 days ago) 0 votes , + −

Dear ▢

I have to disagree on a number of statements in your reply. English IS a first language to a small percentage of the population, most would be Burghers and there are many Sinhala, Tamil and Muslim persons who have grown up with English as one of their first languages. I believe the Burgher community (of which I am a part of) switched from Dutch and Portuguese to English during the colonial rule of Britain, and that is why many Burghers have 'English' as their first and home language.

I think you seem to be completely discounting the major role of English in Urban communities in Sri Lanka which is evidenced in the Media presence and English Medium education in the growing number of 'international' schools.

+ Reply   ✎ Edit   🗑 Delete

From ▢ @ Mar 14, 4:11 am (988 days ago) 0 votes , + −

Dear Madam,

Use of English language is given many explanation under the purview of 'link language'. Majority of People in the country use Sinhala and it is only a minority of the population use English in the country.

It is affirmed that the Burgher community, some Sinhalese and Tamil use English as their first language. This point has valid reasons:

1. the location that they live is most of the time in Colombo and suburbs

2. People who speak English as their first language are not willing to grow in a school environment which is the Sinhala Buddhist culture- this pushes them to go for Catholic environment in which they find their religious observance in English and most of Rev. Fathers too speak in English when the people address them in English too.

3. The above environment undoubtedly helps them to grow in a Catholic background in which the use of English langauge in common.

4. Socio- economic background focuses on the people who can converse in English. Job opportunities are for the people who know English. Therefore people are in way forced to be in the same social class and maintain their language as the first language.

Considering all these reasons, it is clear to state that their first language is English. But their first language: English will not be the language as that of the British people use due the variations and the style of the Brotish.
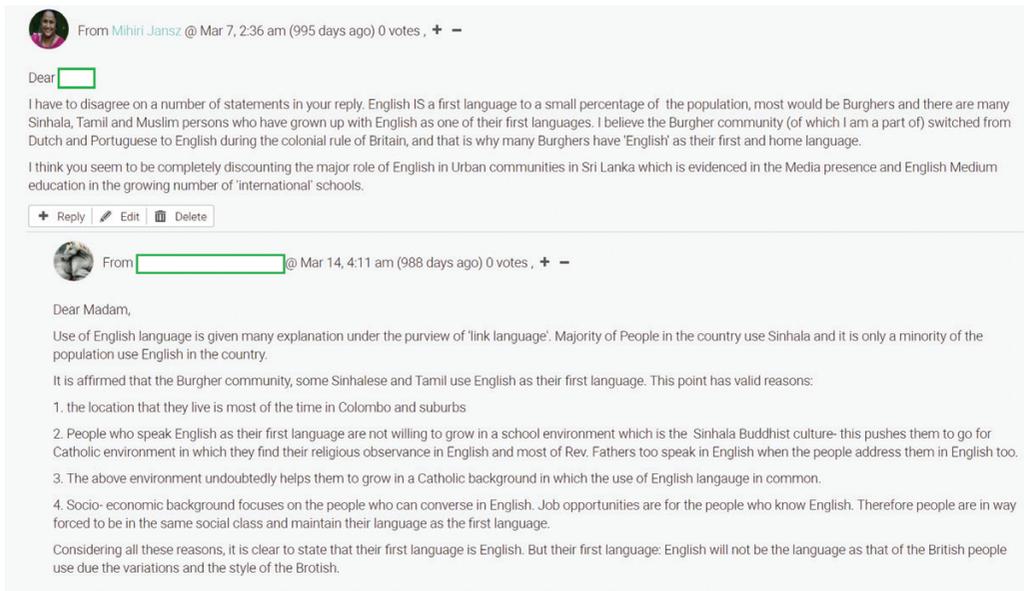
FIGURE 1.
Feedback screenshot

justifying her own position, and opening the possibility for further interaction. In contrast to usual assignments in this context, where students would have to make an extra effort to respond to the instructor's comments through email or a face-to-face meeting, the student can simply respond to the thread. As Chinthinka commented about the forums, 'this is very effective ... it is a really immediate feedback we can get'.

In another example, a student, Kishani, read a lengthy exchange in the discussion forum involving three of her groupmates and the two instructors, regarding why Sri Lankan English replaces the 'wh' sound with the 'v' sound. Kishani commented that Sinhala was missing the 'wh' sound altogether, and Mihiri disagreed. Within a day of the teacher's comment, Kishani took to email to continue the interaction privately, writing: 'Having noted your comment [on the forum] ... I thought of contacting you personally.' This initiated a three-email exchange over the next few hours between teacher and student clarifying the point, a first for this particular student and a rarity in Mihiri's experience with her students. This example suggests not only increased dialogue via vicarious interaction (Gorsky and Caspi 2005) but also fluidity between communicative modes. As Quong et al. note, the opportunity for 'multiple pathways to engage in interaction' increases dialogue between learners as well as between learners and instructors (Quong et al. 2018: 93) and lowers TD.

The reduction of TD is a reciprocal process, and one unexpected outcome of the project was that the instructor herself experienced deepening 'sharedness' and a resulting shift in her perceptions. As Mihiri noted in her teaching reflections, she had initially seen one group of students as not especially committed to the master's programme. These students all reside in the central province of Sri Lanka, closer to the university than many of their peers, yet they did not attend the 'day schools', and they

maintained only minimal email contact with their instructor. The lack of either physical presence or online communication caused her to view them as unenthusiastic or disengaged—a common pitfall in the distance learning model, and a marker of TD (Moore 1993).

However, once the project began, Mihiri identified this group's discussion thread as being particularly lively and rich: while most of the other groups had only around 5 responses in a thread, one of their discussion threads had 12 turns and another had 10. They also regularly shared personal stories and feelings, evincing 'interpersonal closeness' with their American colleagues and each other. Their engagement in the online space helped their instructor see them as active participants in the project who cared about the master's programme; she was then able to talk to the students more sympathetically about their non-attendance, further reducing the TD and closing that communication space with its potential for misunderstandings.

A further advantage of the discussion forums was the increased opportunity to communicate multimodally. Beyond the required introductory videos and linguistic landscape images, many students chose to use images and videos in their posts to illustrate their points to their international peers, as in the screenshot shown in Figure 2. Here the student has selected a video of a Sri Lankan song with English subtitles, taking advantage of the multimodal format to make the meaning of the song accessible. Other students shared video examples of New York accents or humorous memes about their dialects; Nilanga noted that on the forum 'some of the partners were really good in picturizing what New York was'. This affordance of the discussion forum, the ability to link quickly and easily to multimodal sources, helped to reduce TD by building a shared understanding of the two linguistic contexts and supporting students as they engaged across linguistic and cultural difference.

FIGURE 2.
Multimodality screenshot

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Challenges of the project   Setting up this international discussion forum required the collaborating instructors to overcome practical as well as pedagogical challenges, and some decisions made from practical necessity worked against our efforts to reduce TD. First, the two classes were on vastly different schedules. Sri Lanka is 10.5 hours ahead of New York City, and the Sri Lankan class met face-to-face on some weekend mornings, whereas the New York class met on Tuesday and Thursday evenings. In addition, the majority of both groups of students were employed full time, one major reason students opt for distance learning (e.g. Nunan, 2012). Given these circumstances, we chose asynchronous rather than synchronous activities. However, in the interviews, several students explicitly asked for more direct interaction. Dilshani pointed out that 'face-to-face' interaction 'would be nice' as 'we can [talk] ... about accent and all those things'. Synchronous discussion has been shown to increase students' perception of social interaction in online learning (McBrien et al. 2009), so if feasible, synchronous discussion would likely have further reduced TD.

Technology also presented significant challenges for both instructors and students. Although user-friendly, the platform we chose, NEO LMS, had bandwidth limitations, which created serious difficulties when students needed to upload the large files of the introductory videos. To resolve this problem, we moved to the image-hosting site Flickr for students to share the linguistic landscape images, which created the burden of learning a new platform and switching between platforms for submitting work, both issues which can lower student engagement, reduce teacher–learner dialogue, and increase TD (Quong et al. 2018). In addition, NEO LMS is explicitly designed for and associated with pedagogical purposes, which students reported as a negative. Using a platform such as Facebook or Instagram, which are aimed specifically at developing social connections and are already familiar to the students, may have further lowered TD.

Our efforts to increase the structure of the project so as to produce more dialogue may also have contributed to TD. Although as discussed above many students reported a sense of freedom and informality in the discussion forums, other students also reported that the highly regulated (and frequently assessed) nature of the discussion forums made them feel they should take the forum discussions formally, as graded assignments. Nelum noted that:

> [W]e had a goal to complete this then complete that, we had like a checklist to do and uh we didn't have time to actually (get to) know each other more.

Ramya commented that:

> I wish we had more communication between them and us, because we're (only) directed: 'Do this' ... and we were worried about deadlines ...

Similarly, Gehan commented that: '[W]e didn't really break the ice, per se.' Altogether, the students felt that structuring the discussion forum through prompts, deadlines, and completion checks increased participation, but also made the task decidedly academic, raising dialogue but not necessarily lowering TD, and complicating the association between high structure and lower TD (Huang et al. 2018).

Finally, the project required a significant investment of time and energy by both instructors. As O'Dowd (2007) observes, facilitating these intercultural exchanges requires the instructors to take on a number of roles, not only organizing the activities (selecting the platform, setting deadlines, establishing assessment practices, etc.), but also modeling appropriate participation, correcting misinformation, and becoming intercultural partners with their collaborating instructor, all of which is time-consuming, though ultimately beneficial.

Implications for teacher education

In distance learning, there is rich potential for local and global online collaborations to mitigate transactional distance. Discussion forums can promote both learner–learner and instructor–learner dialogue, which is correlated with reduced TD (Andresen 2009; Huang et al. 2018). In our project, the asynchronous discussion forum provided not only the expected opportunities for dialogue, but also the chance for informal discourse, a novel audience, ease of responding to teacher feedback, and the sharing of multimedia content. Given the increase in MA TESL programmes and other ELT programmes being offered in distance learning and hybrid modes, projects such as these which use asynchronous discussion forums to connect learners across national borders can contribute to the reduction of TD and thus enhance the engagement and learning of pre-service and in-service student teachers.

Our analysis suggests that the multimodality of the interactions, both structured into the course (introductory videos, linguistic landscape images) and spontaneous, worked to lower TD. The students also reported that gaining hands-on experience with multimodal assignments, as well as with online learning tools more generally, helped them to develop as teachers. Thus, MA TESOL instructors might consider building in required multimodal components, perhaps making more use of student-created videos or asking students to find and share content-related videos and images.

We should note that this project involved, beyond the asynchronous discussion forum, students working in geographically based groups to collect, analyse, and present the linguistic landscapes. By its nature, face-to-face groupwork should reduce TD, yet this option is certainly not available for many instructors in distance learning courses (and was not without struggles for the Sri Lankan students, who had to negotiate their work schedules to find times to meet). To reduce TD without such issues, instructors might consider how in-depth group activities such as the ones described here—field work and presentations—could be conducted via digital platforms, creating opportunities for dialogue. Likewise, while not all instructors have international academic connections, the chance to discuss language variety across diverse contexts offered students a new and authentic audience, something that could be replicated by reaching out to regions within countries where other language varieties dominate. Finally, while this lies outside the scope of the current analysis, it would be interesting to explore how students' diverse languages and educational cultures impacted their level of engagement with and responses to these activities.

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Our project suggests that it is necessary for instructors to balance the importance of clear expectations and accountability created through highly structured forums (McBrien et al. 2009) with opportunities for students to communicate less formally. Instructors might consider, where synchronous communication is not possible, offering interactions through more socially focused platforms, perhaps even outside of the teachers' view, which could permit students to make deeper interpersonal connections. Ultimately, the goal of these local and international collaborations is to allow student teachers to engage with the material presented, their instructors, and their peers, and to develop awareness and skills which will serve them and their future students well.

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Appendix: Interview questions

- What did you like most about the international collaboration? What did you like least?

- What were your initial impressions of the New York students you communicated with? Did anything surprise you about the way they used English?
- What did you like most about the linguistic landscape project? What did you like least?
- Did anything surprise you about the linguistic landscape data you collected?
- Has the linguistic landscape project changed the way you see the use of English in your community? If so, how?
- Has any part of this project changed the way you teach English or communicate with your students now? If so, how?

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