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"Democratic" online courses as "glocalized communication" in English language teaching and applied linguistics: A proposal

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Abstract: Education, whether online or offline, should be democratic. This article begins with a brief reflection of my personal experience of taking a Massive Open Online Courses (MOOCs) entitled *Critical Thinking in Global Challenges* administered by Coursera.org in cooperation with University of Edinburg in 2013. Drawing on existing literatures, I discuss why I found this course—and by implication, most of the mainstream MOOCs that are run from the global centres in North America and Europe—undemocratic in various ways. Then I go on to further discuss existing studies in sociology, cultural studies, and post-colonial scholarship in order to propose some recommendations that might be applicable in designing MOOCs, especially in ELT and Applied Linguistics.

***Key words**: Democratic MOOCs, glocalized communication, Southern Theory, Post Method Pedagogy, Resisting Linguistic Imperialism*

Introduction

I recently took a Critical Thinking massive open online course, which belonged to the *xMOOC* category because of its reliance on traditional learning format, including lectures, instruction, discussion, quizzes, and multiple-choice tests. Given that it was free, and I am from a developing country (Indonesia), I was able to enrol in the course. I benefited in some ways from taking the course. However, I found the course to be 'undemocratic' in light of relevant literatures. In this article, I propose some ideas for

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how to create more 'democratic' MOOCs especially in ELT and Applied Linguistics. In doing so, I will draw on Southern Theory (Connell, 2007), Glocalized Communication (Lin, Wang, Akamatsu & Rizai, 2002), Pedagogy of Appropriation (Canagarajah, 1999) and Post Method Pedagogy & Five Modular Model (Kumaravadivelu, 2006a; 2012) as well as some other current literatures relevant to MOOCs.

What was "undemocratic" in *Critical Thinking for Global Challenges*

The most undemocratic part of the course was that critical thinking was taught from one perspective, using a generalist/universalist view about critical thinking that advocated that critical thinking is teachable and has universal application across cultural contexts. In the established Western-world view, critical thinking is "reasonable, reflective and responsible, skilful thinking, that's focused on what to believe and do" (Schafersman, 1991; p. 3). This view is informed by positivistic paradigm which "reduces the ideas into a small, discrete set to test … based on careful observation, measurement of objective reality that exists 'out there' in the world" (Cresswell, 2014; p.7).

To be democratic, the course should have at least provided critical thinking perspectives from post-modern points of view, whereby critical thinking would be tacit, complex and bound to cultural factors (Atkinson, 1997). In this view, critical thinking is not universal; for example, the parameter of critical thinking used in the American Tradition is not applicable to the Asian tradition (Stapleton, 2001). This is also strengthened by the fact that critical thinking in a second language is harder in comparison to the first language (Floyd, 2011). Thus, instead of generalizing critical thinking from only one point of view, it should be "problematized." When critical thinking is only viewed from one perspective, the universalist/generalist positivistic tradition, critical dialogue of knowledge (Canagarajah, 2005) does not occur.

For education to be democratic, its content of learning should be negotiated socially and culturally by learners (Norton, 1997). With regard to this, Kumaravadivelu (2006b) proposes three investments: one in philosophy, another in pedagogy, and a third in attitude. While this is meant to challenge Western imperialism in the teaching of English, it is equally applicable in MOOCs settings in general. So, I contend that we need to change our philosophy (Kumaravadivelu, 2006b), deconstruct the technological design (Panthee, 2012), redesign the course materials, and change our attitude (Kumaravadivelu, 2006b) in order to develop the "enlightened eye" (Eisner, 1998, p.1) needed for meaningful digital literacy practices (Eshet-Alkalai, 2004).

The critical thinking course was undemocratic in the same way as ELT and Applied Linguistics courses have been when they used imported methods such as Communicative Language Teaching in Asian Countries (Hu, 2010; Solihah, 2012; Vongxay; 2013) because they are based on local cultural assumptions from Western societies but teachers try to implement them in very different contexts around the world. In fact, ELT methods like this have been described as politically driven (Pennycook, 1989; Canagarajah, 2002a; Kumaravadivelu, 2006a), both by those who want to promote their culture and by those who adopt dominant culture due to hegemony. Another example is that there is the discrimination of hiring native speaker teachers over non-native teachers (Mahboob & Golden, 2013) and also the presentation of

culture in ELT textbook which is still dominated by Inner circle countries such as the UK and the US (Shin, Eslami & Chen, 2011). Most MOOC instructors from the West may have never learned about the political and power dynamics of education across borders, but factors like these diminish the democratic nature of their courses.

Investment in philosophy

Especially the teaching of language and other subjects in the area of humanities and social sciences should be based on post-modern and post structural paradigms as the frames of reference, so that the voice of different learners can be heard and represented. The knowledge/material presented in the course should be from different geographical locations, not only knowledge from the centres (Connell, 2007). If MOOC instructors fail to meet such basic tenets of critical thinking, they will just perpetuate the practice of *Self* versus *Other* (Lin, Wang, Akmatsu and Riazi, 2002) as exemplified as Arab or Islamic World versus US and Europe (Said, 1985). By the focus of its design and implementation, the "critical thinking" course essentially reinforced the idea of *self* or *us* as always ideal and *them* is always marginal, not desirable.

In order to address this rather invisible but serious problem, MOOC instructors should educate themselves about issues of power and politics and they should collaborate with universities from the developing countries in Asia, Africa and Latin America in designing, selecting material, and running the program. Only by so doing, a global critical dialogue could take place, thereby promoting more open knowledge production and sharing.

Deconstruction of technological design

MOOCs should try to empower learners. In my example of "critical thinking for global challenges," the course reinforced cultural and technological hegemony instead of deconstructing it through its pedagogical and technological design (Panthee, 2012). In order to avoid that pitfall, the course's technological design could have included scholars from periphery countries so that participants could learn different views about knowledge and culture. This is of paramount importance as technology can also be a form of hegemony if the design, materials, and opinion presented are only made to represent the centre's values, mindset, and culture (Panthee, 2012).

For sensitive and open-minded educators, there is plenty of scholarship on the subject. Educators don't need to simply buy into the "global-village narrative" which is shaped by American and Western cultural interest at the level of ideological production (Selfe, 1999 cited in Hawisher and Selfe, 2000, p.1). As a multimodal scholar, Kress (1999) advises us to move from *critique* to *design*. He states that "while critique looks at present through the means of past production, design shapes the future through deliberate deployment of representational resources in the designer's interest" (p.87).

Material realities may prevent educators' attempts to overcome the domination of MOOCs by providers and teachers from one or two places in the world. But at least scholars in the field of ELT and other humanistic or social science subjects can and should "negotiate the technology" through glocalization of people's cultural and political

identities through the virtual space. Scholars in the periphery must also do the same, such as how educators have done in Nepal (Edingo, 2013).

Investment in attitude

MOOCs instructors must encourage students to critically problematize the assumption that Western knowledge is always superior (Canagarajah, 2002a). They should also make sure that they not perpetuate the valorisation of knowledge produced in the UK and USA (Kumaravadivelu, 2006a) as all knowledge is basically "local," shaped by each society (Canagarajah, 2002b). The attitude that Western knowledge is superior is clearly reflected among today's xMOOC instructors, scholars, and others involved—whether or not they explicitly state this view. It is not surprising that most xMOOCs are instructed by professors in elite universities (Chea, 2012; Kolowich, 2014) who seem to simply assume that their ideas must be regarded as universally relevant and valuable. This was blatantly the case in my own experience of the monolithic, universalist view of critical thinking among the professor from the University of Edinburg.

Besides being undemocratic, the course also had a limitation in that it only enabled participants to opt for multiple-choice tests. That constrained learners against providing their own perspectives on critical thinking, and therefore the course was merely directive with no teacher-student negotiation. In terms of validity, the test may only measure surface competence of the participants, but it does not measure creativity and analysis (Wesolowsky 2000; Paxton 2000 cited in Roberts, 2006). While this might be deemed as necessary due to the massive number of participants, quick feedback, and machine-assessed answers (Higgins & Tatham, 2003; Kuechler & Simkins, 2003 cited in Roberts, 2006, p.1), such features made MOOCs "shallow" in terms of learning in a course on critical thinking.

Furthermore, the course neglected to consider that MOOCs participants should be equipped with necessary survival skills in the digital era as suggested by Eshet-Alkalai (2004). Mastering the conceptual framework for survival skills in the digital era, according to Eshet-Alkalai, includes photo-visual literacy, reproduction literacy, branching literacy; information literacy, and socio-emotional (p.93). In addition, I would assert that either teachers or students in MOOCs should be critical toward the ideological, cultural and "intellectual imperialism" (Alatas, 2000, p.23) of any forms of digital learning system (e.g. MOOCs) which perpetuates "academic dependency" (Alatas, 2003, p.599) and produces "captive mind[s]" (Alatas, 1973, p.9) by only adopting and implementing knowledge produced in the US or UK. Should MOOCs be only conducted without attention to basic tenets of digital, social, and political realities mentioned above, they fail to meet these basic objectives of critical literacy in a globalized world. Prior to further discussion on how MOOCs should be presented on ELT and Applied Linguistics, let me also briefly discuss Southern Theory, Glocalized Communication, Pedagogy of Appropriation and Post Method Pedagogy.

Southern theory and its relevance to ELT through MOOCs

Advancements in MOOCs, which are dominated by Western instructors and Western knowledge, should be critiqued and made to accommodate multi-form knowledge. Only

if we do so can MOOCs serve as epistemological tools for people from a variety of contexts and cultures. In order to address this aim, Southern Theory is necessary to adopt.

Connell (2007) proposed Southern Theory to counter the Sociological theory in the world which is dominated by Europe and North American thinkers and regard the knowledge from Asia, Africa and Latin America is equally legitimate. The dominant theories accordingly have four major weaknesses such as the claim of universality, reading from the Centre, the exclusion of postcolonial theorists and the erasure of colonial experience (Connell, 2006). In serving the purposes, Southern theory *firstly* advocates "multi-centered social science." *Secondly*, it promotes "social science function of critique." *Thirdly*, it encourages social sciences which produce "many forms of knowledge." And *last*, it promotes social science, which is relevant to democracy as it is "a form of democratic action" (Connell, 2007, pp. 230-231). This framework of Southern theory is very useful if applied in ELT through MOOCs, as I have indicated at the outset that *critical thinking for global challenges* (the xMOOC I took) only perpetuated the four major weakness as described in Southern Theory (which implicitly makes claims for the universal application of critical thinking rooted in US and UK and only "reads" critical thinking concept from these dominant centres without thinking other peripheral contexts in which critical thinking might not be applicable). In so doing, the course only served as a new form of imperialism of knowledge through a new medium.

For creating a democratic ELT through MOOCs, their administrators should accommodate the diverse notions of critical thinking from across the globe—including the southern hemisphere—and provide a chance where the participants can use critical thinking as a mode of social critique from different perspectives. The participants should be encouraged to think about the domination of knowledge by certain societies in all forms, including in the use of ELT methodologies such as communicative language teaching, which encountered constraints in Asian countries (Hu, 2010; Sholihah, 2012; Vongxay, 2013) as well as the politics of English in the assessment of IELTS (UK) and TOEFL (USA) versus the growing acceptance of World English(es) as the portrayal of agency and identity.

"Glocalized communication" in English language teaching and applied linguistics through MOOCs

To serve the purpose of meaningful learning for all, MOOCs should mediate global and local dialogues of knowledge. Doing this will allow knowledge to be produced, negotiated, and shared as "glocalized communication" (Lin, Wang, Akamatsu and Riazi, 2002, p.295). As these scholars advocate, Teaching English must be done as Glocalized Communication (TEGCOM) instead of the existing Teaching English to Speakers of Other Languages (TESOL). Furthermore, as Lin, Wang, Akamatsu and Riazi (2005, cited in Lin and Luke 2006, p. 295), alternative of research paradigms are also necessary in the field of language teaching:

- Toward socially, culturally, historically, and institutionally situated perspectives in doing research in English language learning, curriculum development and

teacher education in a variety of contexts: foregrounding the social, cultural and historical situatedness of human communication and activities.
- De-centering the production of discipline's knowledge and discourse from Anglo-speaking countries to a diversity of sociocultural contexts in the world.
- Drawing on interpretive sociological methods, including narrative analysis, discourse analysis, cultural and critical ethnography, cultural studies and autobiography.

The three alternatives of the research paradigm above can also be used as the principles of administering MOOCs. Using the above principles, MOOCs can be more socially, culturally, historically and institutionally grounded in local societies around the world. Doing so can allow participants to de-center the topics presented in MOOCs and get the opportunity to interrogate, negotiate, and appropriate knowledge to their local context and, in the end, gain the space to perform their own views about topics in MOOCs from a variety of disciplines and angles. If this is done, MOOCs will be rich in knowledge claims. Instead of privileging UK and US English only, MOOCs instructors would promote writing that enables participants to shuttle between languages and cultures (Cangarajah, 2006) or the use of World English(es) in creative writing (Hashim, 2007).

Pedagogy of appropriation and its relevance to ELT and applied linguistics in MOOCs

Learning a foreign or second language should be framed within the learners' ways of viewing the world in order to be meaningful. Learning a foreign and second language should be contextualized to learners' own society and culture. In this regard, appropriation is required in the teaching and learning a foreign or a second language. Canagarajah (1999) proposes a pedagogy of appropriation to respond to this local and global need. The pedagogy he recommends aims to empower students from periphery classrooms (in this case from Sri Lanka) to negotiate the centre discourses. Canagarajah describes the benefits of allowing code mixing in students' writing so that they can employ their local linguistic codes and center linguistic resources. When they do so, students are still grounded in their local realities but they are able to access global resources. In addressing the local and global together, Canagarajah (1999; p. 192) proposes ethnographic-based teaching comprising of the following five points:

1. Pedagogy which enables students to express subtle forms of opposition to classroom ideologies without jeopardizing their chances of academic success by openly resisting the institution
2. Pedagogy which nurtures collaboration among students for interaction, play and alternative curricular agendas as a response to boredom, alienation and the oppressiveness of schooling.
3. Pedagogy which encourages pride in students' own cultural and discursive traditions and provides a safe site to celebrate and nurture them
4. Pedagogy which is a potentially subversive site of alternative community, based on values that differ from the classroom and institutional culture

5. Pedagogy which is an educationally productive site that enables students to engage with classroom proceedings even as they remain somewhat detached from institutional agendas and authorities. (p.192)

Using the above principles of ELT, MOOCs instructors can enable participants to critically understand and benefit from themes presented by dominant discourses, such as discourses of critical thinking from universalist points of view. They can encourage collaborative and exploratory projects based on participants' own interests so that they sustain their motivation in learning. And they can provide space for participants' ontological perspectives of critical thinking from their own context, as well as enable participants to challenge the dominant discourse and facilitate their productive work in which they can juggle between their own voice and non-local MOOC instructors' objectives.

Post method pedagogy: Other possible framing of ELT and applied linguistics through MOOCs

Historically, technology is associated with the rise of the positivist paradigm of knowledge (Danaher, Schirato and Webb, 2000). This has been problematized by scholars from the post-modern and post structural schools of thought; these scholars have helped us to appreciate the plurality and contextual nature of knowledge. Drawing on scholars such as Michel Foucault, Homi Bhaba as well as other critical thinkers such as Paulo Freire and Henry Giroux, Kumaravadivelu (2001; 2006b) develops Post Method Pedagogy, pedagogy that is responsive to teachers' and students' own contexts.

Post Method Pedagogy is built on *three pedagogic parameters* -- *particularity, practicality, and possibility* -- which advocate context-sensitive pedagogy, enable teachers to theorize what they practice and practice what they theorize, and link the classroom teaching and learning with socio-political issues respectively (Kumaravadivelu, 2001; 2006a).

Following the particularity, practicality and possibility aspects, MOOCs should promote local themes from participants' own culture, should engage participants in a reflexive process that enable them to personalise ELT teaching, and should generate their own personal theory about their MOOC's activities. Furthermore, they should also be informed about the underlying social, economic and political aspects behind MOOC activities such as what economic advantage the providers of MOOCs can get and what social benefits that the provider can get, as well as the political project behind MOOCs. The answers of these can spur students' intellectual growth.

In order to implement the above pedagogy, Kumaravadivelu (2012) suggests that we re-vision language teacher education with regard to several interweaving globalizing perspectives: *post-national, post-modern, post-colonial, post-transmission* and *post-method perspectives*. *Post-national* inevitably emerges as the effect of globalization marked by three distinct characteristics, "shrinking space, time and disappearing border" (UN Human Development Report 1999 cited in Kumaravadivelu, 2012, p.3). *Post-modern* problematizes "the status of knowledge and the understanding the concept of Self" (p.5). *Post- colonial* interrogates the colonial characteristics of English which still

"linger," and *post-transmission* rejects the "predetermined, pre-selected and pre-sequenced body of knowledge from teacher educators to student teachers" (p.8). As the last perspective, *post-method* criticizes the concept of methods in ELT for several reasons, including concept limitation, unequal power relations between experts and teachers, insensitivity to local context and most importantly that they do not empower teachers. In achieving the above, he proposes five modular models: Knowing, Analyzing, Recognizing, Doing and Seeing (KARDS) (p. 17).

It is beyond the scope of this paper to discuss in detail the KARDS model as it deals more with the provision of a framework of teacher education. However, it is relevant to think about those five points in conducting MOOCs. Definitely MOOCs by nature are *post-national* in that their design or delivery are not limited within national borders. As for *post-modern time*, the knowledge presented in MOOCs should be assessed on the basis of "differences," and all the forms of knowledge from all geopolitical regions of the world should be appreciated. As for *post-colonial,* it should be noted that all forms and phases of education should avoid the imperial characteristics: no teacher should teach only one dominant discourse of knowledge such as teaching critical thinking from only a universalist/generalist perspective. *Post–transmission* promotes teaching which is not "dictated" by the design made in the centre. As scholars like Lane & Kinser (2012) contend, MOOCs' products are at present still "pre-packaged and standardized" and therefore it needs to be problematized. *Post method*, the teaching and learning process of MOOCs, should be grounded on three pedagogic principles: particularity, practicality and possibility.

Making ELT and applied linguistics MOOCs democratic and context sensitive

In implementing more democratic MOOCs, the providers should change their *philosophy* (Kumaravadivelu, 2006b), deconstruct the *design* (Panthee, 2012) and change *attitude* (Kumaravadivelu, 2006b). The *philosophy* of MOOCs teaching should be grounded on the awareness that all knowledge from different parts of the world has the same rights and therefore needs to be evenly introduced. The *design* of MOOCs both in terms of program, templates and material designs should involve periphery scholars so that they truly represent different knowledge from different geopolitical traditions.

In *terms of pedagogy*, teachers should enable appropriation (Canagarajah, 1999), glocalize communication (Lin, Wang, Akamatsu & Riazi, 2002), and integrate post-method teaching strategies (Kumaravadivelu, 2001; 2006b; 2012). MOOCs should also apply the spirit of Southern theory (Connell, 2007). Also, pedagogy of appropriation, glocalized communication and post method pedagogy can sit under the umbrella of Southern Theory. And in terms of *investment in attitude*, we should start thinking about how to make these MOOCs more democratically designed and presented so that they represent "multi forms of knowledge" (Connell, 2007, p.231).

Finally, even though the mentioned frameworks and theory are not designed particularly for online courses, the spirit of those could be used as general guidelines to design and run MOOCs.

Suggested topics for MOOCs in ELT and applied linguistics

The following are some topics that would be approriate for MOOCs in English Language Teaching and Applied Linguistics in order to be democratic:

- Critical Thinking (CT) from universalist/generalist (Stapleton, 2001) versus post-modern perspectives (Atkinson, 1997). The instructor could discuss the assumptions of both why critical thinking is teachable across context and why critical thinking is bound to cultural factors.
- The concept of English (Quirk, 1990) versus English (es) (Kachru, 1991). In this context, the instructor could discuss why Quirk insists on standard English as necessary, rejecting *Linguistic liberation* and why Kachru contends that what Quirk proposes is *Linguistic deficit*.
- Intercultural conversation (Dooley, 2009). The instructor could explore how students from different cultural backgrounds might be scaffolded to "the problem of understanding intrinsic to intercultural conversation" (p.504). Furthermore, it is essential in this conversation so that students can build mutual understanding.
- The relation between English and religion: teaching English as missionary language (Pennycook, A &. Coutand-Marin, S. 2003), English as an Islamic English (Mahboob, 2006; Al Faruqi, 1986), Budha in the Classroom (Adakar & Keiser, 2007). The instructor could explore how English is viewed from different religious perspectives. Furthermore, those students could discuss the differences and the similarities among those perspectives.
- Discourse and social cognition (Van Dijk, 2008) versus Foucauldian Discourse Analysis (Foucault, 1971). In this topic, the instructor could explore the definition of discourse informed by social cognition which prompts Van Dijk to describe discourse as mental models and context models and explore the discourse in a Foucauldian sense which is emphasized in political action and power and which frames discourse as something constructed.
- Linguistic human rights and language policy in education (Skutnabb-kangas, 2008). Instructor could discuss the UN report on the limitation of people's abilities to use native languages in education, especially in sub-Saharan Africa, and why this "can be a serious human rights violation" (p.107-108). Then the instructor could relate this issue on the use first language while learning the target language.
- Traditional English Language Teaching Methods (Rodgers and Richard, 2001) versus Post Method Pedagogy (Kumaravadivelu, 1999; 2001; 2006a; 2012). The instructor could compare the nature of traditional teaching methods where 'the principles' have been predetermined or imported from the US or UK with post-method pedagogy, where teachers are vested with rights to design their own 'method' and therefore can engage in personal transformation.

The above topics are just some examples which might be used when teaching MOOCs in ELT and Applied Linguistics. It could be challenging indeed for MOOCs providers if they want to promote education which is empowering, liberating, enlightening, and democratizing for learners. But the challenges are worth taking in order to avoid

perpetuating “academic dependency,” or the reliance on the knowledge produced by the center (Alatas, 2003; p. 599), creating “captive minds” and conducting education as an imitation of knowledge from one or two centers (Alatas, 1973; p. 9). In order to facilitate digital literacy development, MOOCs providers, administrators, and material developers should “develop an open approach to continuous learning” (Hall, 2010, p.175). Otherwise, MOOCs will only be a form of “McDonaldization of global higher education” (Lane and Kinser, 2012) and will result in a perpetuation of imperialism in the post-modern time.

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