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# Dialogic theorising of Emirati women's technology enhanced learning in the United Arab Emirates


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**Keywords**
Dialogism; Emirati women; technology enhanced learning; gender; transnational; written-out; written-in

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## Abstract

This theoretical study develops a dialogic framework to review literature surrounding technology enhanced learning (TEL), in the United Arab Emirates (UAE). Dialogism is associated with the works of Russian formalist Mikhail Bakhtin (1895 - 1975), articulating the multiplicity and intertextuality of voices, perspectives and texts within any given genre or speech act. Dialogism has been developed within the field of critical pedagogy to foster openings for learners and educators' varying and marginalised positionalities. In this study, the dialogic framework facilitates genre analysis of ten articles, reorientating underpinning assumptions. Findings probe a literary sub-text of non-citizen UAE educators and researchers' transnational positionalities. Simultaneously, dialogism develops reflexive theorising of Emirati women's learners who, although the largest group of learners in UAE federal universities, are often absent from the TEL scholarship discussing their learning. Dialogic analysis of the literature reveals the overdetermination of English as a second language, compared to other languages spoken in the UAE; backgrounding of gender issues; proliferation of neoliberal epistemologies and marketized learning. The inquiry concludes that the UAE-TEL genre, in the instance of the reviewed articles, reflects and constitutes gender discrepancies and other hyper-inequalities. Conversely, dialogism facilitates a theoretical awareness of who and what is 'written-out' and/or 'written-in' and to what effect.

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## 1. Introduction

The Covid-19 global pandemic has been a catalyst for changing the way educators are now thinking about online course delivery in the Arabian Gulf (Hurley, 2020a). The unexpected transition to online classes was a matter of 'needs must' rather than an orchestrated theoretical, empirical or pedagogic strategy. But emergency delivery of online courses has not necessarily been inclusive of all learners. For example, in the United Arab Emirates (UAE) female nationals, known as 'Emiratis,' are indicative of Arab women learners for whom it is not appropriate to show face online, due to gendered customs (Hurley, 2020b). But the extent to which online learning, on platforms including Zoom, Adobe Connect or Blackboard, etc., is adequately catering to learners' diverging needs is difficult to assess. This study addresses the limitations of broad-brush theorising to evoke learners and educators' varying subjectivities within the multiplicities of transnationalism. Transnationalism refers to the crisscrossing of national cultures, languages and discourses, involving not only pluralism but also cultural difference (Massey et al., 1994). Transnationalism thus contests simplistic notions of context and locates sociocultural practices as always diverse, intertextual and dialogic (Petrilli, 2017).

To this end, the theoretical study develops a dialogic perspective of technology enhanced learning (TEL). *Dialogism* (Bakhtin, 1926; 1999) is defined as the pragmatically orientated theory of knowledge that seeks to grasp human behaviour through its relationship to language and provides a reflexive lens to delve into the TEL field. Dialogism in this study is aligned with the journal — *Studies in Technology Enhanced Learning's* — aim to explore assumptions of prior scholarship, to reorientate, challenge and advance research in TEL (Bligh & Lee, 2020). Given the goal of capacity building in this journal's special Middle East edition, the study takes Emirati women as a case to problematise monologic conceptions of TEL practices, practitioners and learners and to develop capacity for dialogism. The research question of the paper asks, to what extent could thinking with dialogism provide openings for conceptualising Emirati women's TEL practices? To address the question, the article first introduces the relevance of dialogism for theorising the UAE transnational context. Second, it develops a thematic review of literature surrounding UAE-TEL scholarship. Third, the broad concept of dialogism is developed for reflexive theorisations of TEL.

## 2. UAE context and transnationalism

The Gulf Arab states include the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia; Bahrain; Oman; Kuwait; Qatar and the UAE. The UAE can be viewed as an educational microcosm indicative of the Gulf's predominantly gender segregated federal higher education system. Other important characteristics that the UAE shares with its Gulf neighbouring states is its transnational quality and reliance on an imported workforce, curricula and discourses surrounding TEL. In the UAE, for example, foreign workers are 88.52% of the population and come from South Asia, South East Asia, the Middle East, Africa and Europe (GMI, 2021). This dependence on an imported workforce and practices locates the UAE as a highly transnational country operating within a complex enmeshment of varying discourses, citizens and non-citizens. Next, I discuss the concept of transnationalism and its relevance to dialogism.

While there are distinct similarities between Gulf nations, including political structure, religion and gender practices, there are specific differences. For example, the UAE has managed to diversify its economy, beyond oil and gas, into the tourism sector and as a transnational hub for commerce and trade (Kanna, 2011). Transnationalism a term that not only helps to define the multiple nationalities of the UAE, but it is also a scholarly research agenda and phenomenon grown out of the heightened interconnectivity between people and the receding technological, economic and social significance of boundaries among nation states (Massey et al., 1994). Nowicka (2020) suggests that connectivity and social context are equally important for transnationalism, but transnationalism cannot be reduced either to one or the other. Alternatively, transnationalism can be defined as the outcome of multiple belongings, practices and dispositions coming together and defining the hybridity of the UAE (Kanna et al., 2020; AlMutawa, 2020). Considering the increasing intersections between offline and online everyday practices, across borders, spatial and temporal locations, the ability to differentiate between transnational spaces can be hard to define (Massey et al., 1994). Furthermore, what happens online is always informed and embodied by positionality offline (Hurley, 2020a; Kaur-Gill & Dutta, 2017).

The lens of dialogism is sensitive to difference and nuances of UAE learners and educators' positionalities. A dialogic perspective of transnationalism could help to scrutinise higher education localities in more than one nation state and to illuminate those aspects of lives of migrants and citizens that could remain hidden when seen through the lens of normative or universal theorising (Nowicka, 2020). TEL

researchers could thus benefit from theoretical dialogism for considering these tricky questions of transnational context while clarifying the aspects of postcolonial and gendered sociocultural histories informing online course delivery and TEL practices. Next, I discuss the relevance of dialogism as a theoretical perspective.

Dialogism is associated with Bakhtin (1926; 1999), the Russian formalist and philosopher, although it was never a term that he used (Holquist, 2007). According to Bakhtin, dialogue involves a multiplicity of voices and series of perspectives that are always embodied and in process, while the mind and cognition occur in social interaction. Dialogism underpins all of Bakhtin's works, in one form or another, and suggests that the meanings of dialogue are unique to the sender and recipient and based upon their personal understanding of the world, as influenced by their sociocultural background. Bakhtin's dialogism therefore opens up space for scholars to conceive of difference in new ways while emphasising situated meanings.

While considering the positionality of Emirati women learners, dialogism indicates that transnationalism is nothing new. Bakhtin himself, born in 1895 in a small town outside Moscow, grew up in Vilinus and Odessa that were cities characterised by the heterogeneity of languages, including Russian, Lithuanian, Polish, Yiddish, Hebrew and German, as a consequence of nineteenth century transnationalism (Holquist, 2007). Transnationalism orientated Bakhtin to dialogism and it could offer nuanced insights into contemporary hyper-transnational practices, which include multiple belongings, languages, identities and a remixing of epistemologies that impact upon the TEL field.

Transnational-feminism also draws attention to the gap in scholarship concerning the experiences of women in the Global South (Dosekun, 2020). Scholars who use the term 'Global South' do so to refer not only to geographical locations outside of the West, but as a transnational, postcolonial and anticolonial political subjectivity and critique of contemporary capitalist globalisation (Mahler, 2017; 2018; Clarke, 2018). Increasingly, scholars note that while geopolitical relations remain important, growing gaps in wealth and power within countries must also be acknowledged. As Mahler (2018, 32) succinctly puts it, "there are Souths in the geographic North and Norths in the geographic South." Thus, the notion of the Global South looks beyond specificities of geographies to identify the social agency of dominated groups.

A unique contribution of this study is the synthesis of dialogism with feminist-transnationalism, to consider gendered and ethnocentric assumptions of TEL literature. Addressing the invisible bias against female learners from the so-called Global South offers a rejection of gender as a fixed entity (Butler, 1993). Just as individuals experience and interact with cultural practices in varying ways, gender, race and ethnicity are also not essentialist categories. Emirati, Gulf and Arab women are often portrayed as oppressed, but their lives are highly varied, and they do not necessarily perceive themselves as passive or victims (Hurley, 2019a). But while TEL has played a crucial role in enabling women to participate in the public sphere, these forms of participation are largely commercial (Hurley, 2019b). Moreover, Gurumurthy and Chami (2017) caution that feminists need to develop historical and situated knowledge of how technologies routinely disempower women in varying ways. They note that prevailing discourse on women's human rights must go beyond the online-offline binary, to discern gender oppression enmeshed with the hybrid contexts of techno-mediated practices and "the unfreedoms wrought by digitalisation and networks."

In the UAE context, secondary literature suggests the daily practices of Emirati nationals are often based on traditional gender-based roles although there are perceptible changes in women's lifestyles resulting from access to higher education and enhanced freedom to choose marriage partners (Al Hourani, 2019). Emirati extended families are also starting to move apart while Emirati women are increasingly able to work outside the home. This is partly facilitated by the employment of transnational migrant domestic workers from Africa, South East Asia and South Asia, who work within the Emirati domestic sphere as housekeepers and nannies (Alteneiji, 2020). Social media also facilitates access to transnational networks and influences, but, despite the many changes, there are still significant tensions surrounding an Emirati's women's role in the public sphere (Hurley, 2019b). To consider these often contradictory and multiple belongings, dialogism and feminist-transnationalism are synthesised to develop a dialogic framework for the thematic review. This is discussed next.

## 3. Theoretical rationale

Before articulating the specific methods of the study, the rationale for dialogism as a conceptual framework is developed. In particular, this study draws on Bakhtin's (1999) discussion of the problem of speech genres. This suggests that the structure, content and words of a text occur in a dynamic interplay of what is being said, how it is presented and to what purpose. At macro levels, articles in academic journals are not simply the works of individual researchers

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but also sociomaterial products. Macro sociocultural factors constitute the interplay of a text's thematic content, structure and purpose in meso terms. In turn, macro and meso elements influence style, register and vocabulary choice at micro levels. In the case of this study, this dialogic view of speech genres facilitates diachronic and synchronic insights into how the articles reviewed have been produced and circulated within the UAE transnational higher education context. Thus, it indicates that what gets published, read and circulated, as well as how it is written, voiced and interpreted, occurs within the historical parameters of given context, field and individuals. In the UAE context, this therefore involves hybrid transnational co-authoring.

In a similar vein, Bakhtin's (1999) notion of genre correlates with Foucault's definition of episteme (1966). An episteme refers to the conscious and/or unconscious structures and conventions organising the production and style of knowledge within a given time. However, according to Bakhtin (1999), the compositional aspects of discourse genres, are infinitely heterogenous and this perspective helps to envisage how TEL literature occurs within transnational practices of constant process, change and interpretation. Relevant to this study, is Bakhtin's (1999) suggestion that discourses, articles and utterances are always the result of intertextual co-authoring that is shaped by the conditions in which they are produced and, simultaneously, by the goal of these structures.

At meso levels, dialogism indicates that the authors may be writing these articles about their immediate teaching experiences, for regional and/or international journals, but they are also influenced by the local, transnational and global contexts of the UAE and their countries of origin. At micro levels, it suggests that style of writing, choice of register, syntax and lexis operate within the given parameters of the particular speech genre of academic journals and institutions. Authors' positionalities are individual but also determined by their role as employees, associated to particular institutions, and educational backgrounds.

Yet, reflexive positionality is not always made explicit within theoretical studies, even though theoretical analysis involves researcher subjectivity, operating from situated positions of race, gender, class and power (Hammond & Wellington, 2013). Various modes of reflexivity work simultaneously within dialogic theorising. These include reflexivity as recognition of self; as recognition of the research object; and as an interpretive account of knowledge (Pillow, 2003). To enunciate theoretical reflexivity, I next discuss the positioning of research within dialogism; the theoretical research object of this study; and self-reflexivity about my own researcher positionality.

In terms of reflexive positioning of research within dialogism, the term 'dialogue' itself is derived from two words in classical Greek, 'dia' meaning 'through' and 'logos' meaning 'word' or 'discourse.' Dialogism suggests inquiry can be developed at micro levels through dialogue, sentences and at word levels and also through emerging questions. As argued by Bakhtin (1986, 168), who is a major reference for dialogic pedagogy, "If an answer does not give rise to a new question from itself, it falls out of the dialogue." This suggests that dialogic theorising is an ongoing process of questioning, series of interactions and a possible opening for different points of view rather than a transmission of facts.

Reflexivity concerning the research object, from a dialogic perspective, suggests that theorising cannot be considered as separate to or outside of practice (Freire, 1970; Giroux, 2014). Dialogism underpins the conceptual understanding that definitions, discussions and theorising of the UAE-TEL genre, which is the research object of this study, has tangible implications for shaping the field of research, scholarship and practice.

In relation to my own researcher positionality, as the author of this article, I come to this study as a feminist social media and TEL researcher, delivering undergraduate online courses in media and communication at a federal governmental women's only university in Dubai. Originally from the United Kingdom, I have been working in the UAE for almost a decade and my experiences before this were in other countries in the Gulf and South East Asia. Having spent my professional career in diverse and non-Western contexts orientates me to the challenges and opportunities of dialogism and feminist transnationalism.

While not ignoring the conceptual challenges, dialogic theorising is an ethical move to consider the hybridity of sociocultural learning practices. Bakhtin (1986) suggests that all the diverse aspects of human activity involve dialogic language. This is because every discourse, as Bakhtin suggests, "is internally dialogic, adorned with polemic, filled with struggle; it is accompanied by a continual sideways glance" (1984, 32). Being mindful of the struggle for meaning, merely importing external theorisations of dialogic TEL pedagogy, into the UAE higher education context, would be antithetical to dialogism. This would not help to conceive of meaningful positionalities or what is obscured and backgrounded. Conversely, through situated reflexivity, dialogism can facilitate a multidirectional "sideways glance." In this study, dialogism provides the framework to consider macro sociocultural aspects and transnationalism in the

UAE; the content and context of production and reception of TEL scholarship at meso levels; and the form and style of the articles in micro terms.

Considering the importance of asking questions within dialogic theorising, I therefore ask a number of reflexive questions about the theoretical assumptions of researcher positionality, the research object and the ethical values of research. Asking questions is crucial for developing dialogic perspectives of TEL. Dialogic questions provide reflexive openings to inquire how TEL occurs in feminist-transnational terms. These dialogic principles of intertextuality, self-reflexivity and questioning, inform the thematic dialogism of inquiry. Next, I discuss the study's dialogic methods.

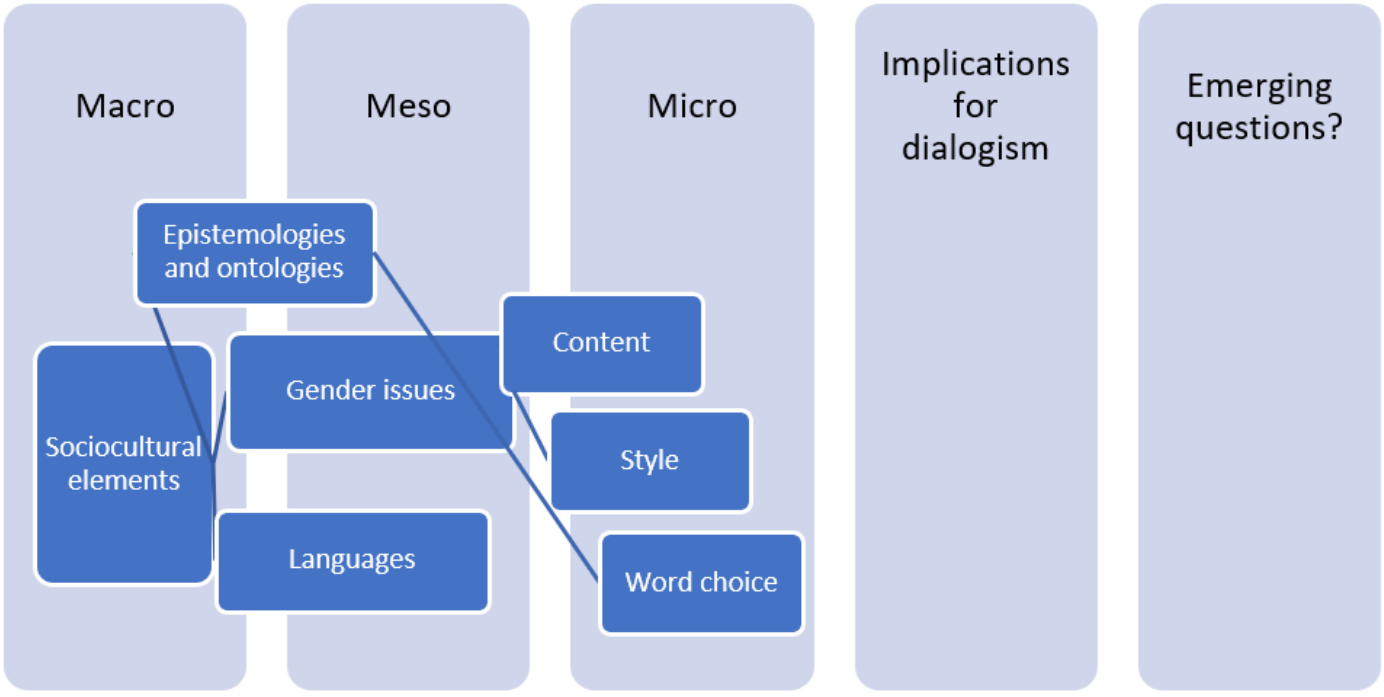
## 4. Dialogic inquiry

In terms of article selection, ten articles relating to higher education and TEL practices in the UAE were reviewed. While this may seem a relatively small number, dialogic analysis in this instance is concerned with depth rather than breadth. Furthermore, the dialogic inquiry considers articles from the UAE specifically, in adherence to dialogism's orientation to a genres' contextual features. The articles were written between 2011 – 2019 and were taken from a range of journals, books and academic data bases. The selection involved articles written in the last decade to convey a broad overview of contemporary features of TEL in the UAE context.

The articles are reviewed thematically, rather than chronologically, since the issues are not teleological but messy and overlapping. The selection was orientated to focus on the UAE higher education system, language issues and Emirati women learners. The articles were chosen via thematic word searches including, UAE pedagogy; TEL; mobile learning; e-learning; educational technology; multicultural learning; learning and TEL; Emirati/Arab women learners. Thematic analysis of the literature involved searching across the data set, of the ten UAE-TEL articles, to find repeated patterns of meaning. Braun and Clarke (2006) suggest that it is important that the theoretical position of a thematic analysis is made clear since any theoretical framework carries with it a number of assumptions about the data and what it represents.

The thematic categories of the dialogic framework consider macro-meso-micro factors of the texts; relationship to TEL; discussions of gender, dialogism and questions emerging from the inquiry. These thematic nodes are considered as discrete entities as well as in terms of their crosscutting integration, in order to organise the interpretative review of the texts. Intersecting scale, themes and correlates of the dialogic framework are outlined below (Figure I):

**Figure 1. Dialogic framework**



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The dialogic framework (Figure I) positions cross-cutting and integral analytic themes. These thematic entities cut across macro-meso-micro aspects of the UAE-TEL literature. The analytic themes consider the articles' sociocultural elements; discussion of gender issues; epistemologies and ontological views of educators and learners; languages, content, style and word choice. In terms of thematic reliability, it is acknowledged that the primary instrument of interpretation was the single author of the study. Although this could be considered a limitation of the study, I am self-reflexive that what is presented is derived from application of the dialogic instrument and the principle of co-construction of knowledge, via theoretical processes designed to be interpretative and performative (Denzin, 2001). Furthermore, through the theoretical insights of Bakhtin's dialogism, it is argued that even the research of an individual operates within a social context and in terms of intertextual perspectives.

This contests the conventions of positivism, concerned with reliability or validity (Lather, 2016). Conversely, it adheres to qualitative research values of trustworthiness, narrative openness and interpretive analysis achieved through dialogic principles (Denzin & Lincoln, 2018). Each of the articles was explored via the dialogic framework and in relation to the central question of the study asking, to what extent could thinking with dialogism provide openings for conceptualising Emirati women's TEL practices? To answer the question, and to develop further paths of questioning, the presentation of findings has been grouped according to the most pertinent thematic findings. These are presented next.

## 5. Findings

First, the findings are first presented as a thematic summary, providing broad mapping of the macro-meso-micro aspects of the articles.

As indicated in Table I, the nodes are further divided into the following categories:

1. sociocultural perspective
2. epistemologies and ontological views of learners and educators
3. style of writing
4. language(s)
5. context
6. gender

Second, these categories inform the presentation of the thematic findings as dialogic narrative. This offers varying interpretive perspectives of the articles reviewed. The themes revealed here, via the dialogic framework are, (T.1) sociocultural perspective; (T.2) gender issues; (T.3) neoliberal epistemologies; and (T.4) marketized learning ontologies. The qualitative style of presentation is in keeping with the values of dialogism and interweaves narrative, thematic and intertextual threads for the reader, who is also encouraged to carryout their own interpretation. It also informs the staging of a series of questions. This is presented next.

### 5.1 T.1: Sociocultural perspective

Analysis of sociocultural aspects of the articles revealed focus on English as a second language (ESL). For example, *Learning and Teaching in Higher Education: Gulf Perspectives*, a journal launched in 2004 in the UAE, emphasises the importance of ESL in relation to culture and technology (Palfryman, 2019,1). Alongside imported curricula, technologies and educators, English language is the imported medium of instruction in higher education in the UAE (Hopkyns, 2014; 2017). In macro terms, uses of English in the Gulf are explained through links to the discovery of oil and rapidly changing economic and social conditions. Drawing on McArthur's (2004) term 'global English,' conveys a sense of the way the language is linked (often negatively) to socio-economic globalisation. Hopkyns' (2014, 1) says that global English in the UAE higher education context is a "double-edged sword" since, despite the opportunities it affords, there are concerns regarding the 'negative effects' on local language and culture.

Hopkyns (2014, 3) refers to a number of other scholars who have voiced concerns regarding the "linguistic flood" and suggests that recent UAE governmental policies of Emiratisation, to include more locals in the workforce and to raise the prestige of the Arabic language, are signs of notable resistance to the effects of global English. Ramifications for TEL in Hopkyns' (2014) article imply uses of global English, occurring via educational management systems, social networking sites and learning applications, that are not neutral or devoid of a neo-colonial impact.

However, English and Arabic are only two of the numerous languages routinely spoken in the UAE. Other widely used languages include Farsi, Hindi, Urdu and Tagalog, along with Bengali, Malayalam, Tamil and Turkish, amongst others (Kanna, Renard & Vora, 2020). Although these languages continue to play an important and daily role in the UAE's vernacular, they are rarely if ever mentioned in the TEL literature, further revealing contemporary neo-colonial hierarchies. Yet, the UAE linguistic landscape is complicated

**Table 1. Summary of findings**

| | | Macro | Meso | Micro | | | |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| **Author** | **Year of pub.** | **Sociocultural perspective** | **Epistemologies and ontological views of learners and educators** | **Style of writing** | **Language(s)** | **Conception of context** | **Discussion of gender** |
| Palfryman | 2019 | Constructivist | Intersecting with language and culture Constructivism | Interpretive | Explicit<br>English | Multicultural | None |
| Hopkyns | 2014 | Dialogic | Constructivist<br>Reflexive Transnational | Qualitative<br>Interpretive<br>Dialogic | Explicit<br>English<br>Arabic | Transnational | None |
| Alzeer | 2016<br>2018 | Dialogic | Spatially and culturally situated<br>Reflexive Transnational | Qualitative<br>Interpretive<br>Dialogic | Explicit<br>English<br>Arabic | Gendered | Explicit |
| Khelifa | 2012 | Dialogic | Culturally situated<br>Reflexive<br>Educational psychology | Qualitative<br>Interpretive<br>Dialogic | Explicit<br>English<br>Arabic | Gendered | Explicit |
| Tubaishat and Lansari | 2011 | Neoliberal | Banking model<br>Technological determinism | Normative<br>Quantitative<br>Marketized | None<br>Implicit - English | Multicultural | Implicit |
| Cavanaugh et al., | 2012 | Neoliberal | Technological determinism<br>Positivist | Marketized | None<br>Implicit - English | Ethnocentric | None |
| Hojeij and Hurley | 2017 | Constructivist | Constructivist | Marketized | Explicit<br>English<br>Implicit -Arabic | Limited | Limited |
| Ally | 2013 | Neoliberal | Fordist | Cultural learning styles | None<br>Implicit - English | Essentialist | None |
| Santos | 2017 | Techn. determinist | Tech. solutionist | Marketized | None<br>Implicit - English | Normative | None |

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by the multiple number of languages being spoken while dialects of Arabic are diverse and often quite different from one another (Alteneiji, 2020).

Dialogism could explore the uses and functions of global English, but also other languages and dialects, to consider linguistic features of UAE-TEL. Language use and cultural identity in the UAE are sociocultural issues that are fraught with tension and complexities but acknowledging this helps to raise important questions about UAE-TEL practices. For example, other possible questions that became pertinent during this analysis were, what languages do Emirati women students use for TEL? How do they feel about these? When and where is it appropriate to use English, Arabic or other languages, or to code switch between them? How does the language of TEL impact cultural and individual identities in the UAE?

At meso levels, and topics of content, issues of gender are generally not foregrounded in the articles mentioned (Palfryman, 2019; Hopkyns, 2014). While, not every article can be expected to have an explicitly gendered focus, as a feminist transnational researcher I began to question the backgrounding of this important factor (Hurley, 2020a). From a dialogic perspective, backgrounding gender does not imply that gender issues are less significant than factors of English language learning, especially considering the fact that 80% of students at federal universities in the UAE are women (gbc.gov.ae; 2020). Conversely, it reveals tacit androcentric values of the UAE-TEL field. Furthermore, findings relating to 'T2: Gender issues' reveals that, across the articles, definitions of Emirati women's identities are 'fuzzy' since there are so many elements intersecting with gender, including language and culture. I discuss some of these next.

### 5.2 T.2: Gender issues

Block (2007) asserts that conceptions of identity need to go beyond essentialist categories of race, ethnicity, age, linguistic identities and gender. This stance is pertinent to a dialogic perspective concerning the complexity of Emirati women learners' identities discussed by Alzeer (2016). This article forges dialogic openings due to discussion of hybrid sociocultural and historical factors. Alzeer is an Arabic speaker and has self-reflexivity about her identity as an 'insider/outsider' in the UAE. What is also interesting about Alzeer's (2018) article is detailed discussion of gendered learning spaces, which vary across cultures, historical and political periods. In terms of emerging questions, this could have important implications for considering Emirati women's embodied experiences within offline spaces for engaging with online courses and sense of virtual presence (Hurley, 2020a; 2020b). This helps to raise questions about whether Emirati women learners' online behaviours are extensions of offline gendered spatial navigations? Or are they enabling varying and new experiences of online spatiality?

Khelifa's (2012), article also incorporates a strong dialogic framework and potentially non-essentialist understanding of gender in the UAE context. Khelifa's English-Arabic bilingualism enables self-reflexivity and consideration of Emirati women learners who are actively negotiating the terrains of a globalised and transnational educational context, while picking and mixing varying cultural values according to a range of needs. She says her research indicates: "… the complexities of Emirati females' identity development struggle. They exhibit an interest in Western values and lifestyles and at the same time place a lot of emphasis on their culture and religion" (Khelifa 2012, 28). She explains that, whilst some of the learners select Western values that can be reconciled with local values and beliefs, others are struggling to align these globalised forces: "Many young Emiratis are lately grappling with psychological problems and stress, with many engaging in juvenile delinquency and unorthodox behaviours."

In relation to TEL, Khelifa's (2012) research indicates that Emirati women students will be navigating TEL and online spaces in varying ways. Her study raises questions about how these practices are situated and not essentially bound by categories of gender or culture. Khelifa's (2010) provides examples of how UAE female learners are not homogenous. Therefore, what enhances Emirati women's technological learning in this context cannot be assumed as uniform but rather is dependent on the needs of the learner, including linguistic, cognitive and psychological aptitude, sociocultural background, etc. This is a highly dialogic perspective of TEL and aligns with Bakhtin's (1999) view of culture as consisting of living language, speech acts and genres. However, this dialogism is in contrast to a number of the other articles reviewed that were underpinned by neoliberal epistemologies and ontologies. I discuss these next.

### 5.3 T.3: Neoliberal epistemologies

Across a number of articles, affordances of TEL were conceived in neoliberal terms. Neoliberalism is defined as the marketisation of services of the state, including education (Harvey, 2005; Means, 2018). The UAE and other Gulf Arab states' drive to become knowledge economies can be understood as occurring as part of this effort to capitalise upon knowledge (Lightfoot, 2016). However, in the Gulf context, like elsewhere, neoliberalism manifests as a series

of imaginaries that varies according to context, gender and positionality (Brown, 2015). Furthermore, appropriation of neoliberal discourses is not uniformly available for all subjects since they occur in gendered, classed and racialised terms (Grewal & Kaplan, 2006).

Thinking transnationally means thinking of "scattered hegemonies," that is, the lines and clusters of power that do not respect local, national, or regional borders but crisscross them and thereby come to constitute other kinds of boundaries and belongings (Dosekun, 2020; Grewal & Kaplan, 2006). A dialogic perspective indicates that transnational subjects might be responsive to more than one governing consensus, since power is not only the product of one location or imaginary community but an assemblage of different forms of power that work together. In the next section, I consider some of the neoliberal imaginaries underpinning the UAE-TEL articles.

Tubaishat and Lansari (2011), when considering e-learning in the UAE, proposed that TEL helps students to build confidence, develop autonomy and become more marketable. They recommend a focus on individualised learning and suggest that student success depends on a foundation of readiness rather than as a result of the state education system in preparing them for higher education. Tubaishat & Lansari (2011, 10) define TEL as "using new multimedia technologies and the Internet to improve the availability and quality of learning." However, specifics of how new technologies improve learning are assumed rather than described and situated examples of TEL are less developed.

This echoes TEL literature in other contexts, whereby big promises for learning are made but within the "cruel optimism" of neoliberal imaginaries (Berlant, 2011; Macgilchrist, 2018). Technological solutionism is considered cruelly optimistic since effective learning is unlikely to occur when pedagogic strategies and logistics are vague (Means, 2018). Furthermore, learner difference is backgrounded, without explicit reference to varying cultural, gendered, linguistic or cognitive differences of learners. In the next section, I further discuss the micro aspects of the articles' styles, informed by neoliberal epistemologies and constituting marketized ontologies of learners and educators.

### 5.4 T.4: Marketized learning ontologies

'T.4: Marketized learning ontologies' was an emerging theme and evident across a number of the articles reviewed. Cavanaugh et al.'s (2012, 2), in their article *iCelebrate teaching and learning: Sharing the iPad experience*, define TEL as "ubiquitous" learning beyond the classroom, following a "flipped learning" model. At micro levels, dialogism focuses on specific words and style. In Cavanaugh et al.'s, discussion of the implementation of Apple iPads into higher education in the UAE, they suggest the technology enhances "new paradigms of learning." These enhancements included "active and engaged learning… hands-on mathematics, note taking, media authoring, and using augmented reality." These are facilitated through networking opportunities of social media, opportunities to develop portfolios and authoring opportunities for creating materials and e-books.

But these mentioned activities and tools are highly diverse while theorising of specific pedagogies is broad-brush, as are the variables concerning impacts of learners' language(s), culture, ethnicity or gender. The absence of specific details results in vague description of learner ontologies, or ways of being, influencing their learning practices, uses of technology and responses to pedagogy. At word and sentence level, the article has a neoliberal rationale and ontology positioning 'ideas' and 'people' as assets to be commodified. For example, they state: "Transforming a national higher education culture requires intense focus in order to capitalize and build on the richness of ideas and people to realize our vision of optimising meaningful, relevant learning for all students" (Cavanaugh et al. 2012, 9).

Key words like "capitalize", "richness" and "optimising" operate within the semantic field of business. This is a marketized style, enunciating a neoliberal learner ontology. However, it is also an example of cruel optimism suggesting that all social phenomena and actors are prospective commodities. Similarly, in an article that I co-authored, called 'The triple flip: Using technology for the peer and self-editing of writing' (Hojeij & Hurley, 2017), we offer some sweeping assumptions about TEL. In this article we claim:

> "The process termed the Triple Flip was not seeking to replicate traditional pedagogies but aimed to harness technology to create new structures and training for peer and self-editing of writing. The learning process is not restricted to the classroom or bound within traditional hierarchies of teacher – student control and reception."

This implies that TEL is developing new pedagogies but raises questions about why it is important to not "replicate traditional technologies"? Within the narrative of the "Triple Flip," going beyond "hierarchies of teacher – student control" educators are also being 'written-out' of the learning equation and replaced by technologies. In other words, there is a tacit assumption that technology can take the place of the educator while learning itself, through a technolog-

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ical-solutionist lens, becomes a black-box that obscures cognitive, linguistic and other sociocultural factors including gender. Consequently, 'writing-out' is the term coined in this dialogic study to refer to a more general obfuscating and silencing of learners and educators' voices, perspectives and experiences of learning.

Dialogism, in addressing writing-out of learners and educators from the TEL narrative, could question why we need to go beyond the transmission of content from teachers to learners? Or, whether learners are equipped for learning technologies to move into the domestic sphere? Dialogism indicates that Hojeij and Hurley's (2017) article is indicative of the recent TEL zeitgeist, eager to keep up and "harness" technology's potential, while dazzled by the market and thrill of the 'new.' However, we are now beginning to realise how dehumanising costs of marketized TEL is subsuming the experiences of learners and educators. This is not to suggest that technologies do not have an important role to play in learning. Rather, just as educators are being written-out of the higher educational narrative, learners, who are struggling with online learning during the Covid-19 pandemic, have few channels or opportunities for their voices to be heard (Hurley, 2020a; 2020b).

In another article, Ally's (2013) literature review positions the UAE higher education context as an emerging market. The UAE is compared to Brazil, South Korea, Thailand and India. Yet, while these countries can be defined as emerging economies, other similarities to the UAE are not developed through sociocultural or pedagogical analysis. Ally (2013) says that the increasing use of mobile technologies is connected to the countries' realisation that IT literate citizens will give them an economic advantage. The enhancements of technology are thereby framed as economic, placing this article within a distinctly Fordist or neoliberal paradigm. In ontological terms, people and human activity are viewed as potential capital (Evans 1995; Harvey 2005).

Ally (2013, 16) also explains challenges facing learners in terms of cultural learning styles.

Yet, learning styles is an ambiguous concept that tends to be used in imprecise ways since what is being referred to are habits or preferences, rather than fixed cognitive behaviours. Ally proposes that each nation requires specific mobile learning materials and delivery systems for students with different learning styles: "…different cultures may favour certain ways to learn…Some cultures may prefer multimedia while other cultures may prefer text-based learning." But, from a dialogic perspective, this vague description raises questions about what is meant by culture or which cultural learning style characterises the transnationally diverse UAE? Nevertheless, despite these limitations, Santos (2017) draws on Ally's article in her review of mobile learning research within the UAE. She builds on it to develop a tech-centric review of TEL, in which economic factors overdetermine critical reflection of pedagogies and learners.

The dialogic framework here therefore establishes themes, topics and social actors being written-out of the UAE-TEL literature but also the intertextuality of articles constituting the genre. This illustrates the perpetuation and writing-in of certain pedagogic practices and logics, that are often economically driven. Next, I develop analytical discussion of the reviewed articles from a dialogic perspective.

## 6. Discussion

As indicated in the presentation of the findings, central themes emerging from the UAE-TEL literature include (T.1) sociocultural perspectives, foregrounding English as a second language in the UAE, while other languages are backgrounded; (T.2) gender issues are explicitly discussed in two articles but tacitly or not all in others; (T.3) neoliberal epistemologies; and (T.4) marketized learning rhetoric. These thematic findings indicate that the UAE-TEL literature is representative of some of the trends and tensions of TEL more generally.

The TEL field has been defined as economically driven, tech-centric and conflating e-learning, mobile learning, online learning, while also referencing equipment and infrastructure surrounding educational technology (Bligh, 2020; Macgilchrist, 2018; Means, 2018; Bligh & Lee, 2020). Subsequently, as a number of scholars suggest, it has become increasingly apparent that the term 'enhancement,' is being applied as a catch-all phrase but as a consequentialist value since what it means to technologically enhance or improve learning, for Emirati women learners for example, may differ widely to another group of students (Kirkwood & Price, 2014).

The dialogic framework offers analysis of how Ally (2013); Tubaishat and Lansari (2011); Cavanaugh et al., (2012) Santos (2017) and Hojeij and Hurley (2017), for example, offer neoliberal imaginaries of the UAE-TEL field, at macro-meso-micro levels, that sometimes literally write-out learners and educators from the learning narrative. However, the neoliberal visions conveyed in the articles are not necessarily representative or coherent with how the UAE government or local citizens, including Emirati women, position themselves. Kanna (2011) discusses the UAE's home-

grown inflected neoliberalism and "flexible citizenships" to describe social actors' shifting between different languages, scales and cultural worlds in constructing their identities. The dialogism of Emirati women learners is also emphasised in the articles of Alzeer (2016) and Khelifa (2012). This indicates that neoliberal imaginaries are inflected at meso-micro levels, by local meanings, dialects, discourses, histories and positionalities. It suggests how appropriations of neoliberalism mediate local ambiguities and differences pertaining to varying transnational sociocultural and gender identities.

Simultaneously, dialogism offers insights into how TEL scholarship is being defined as a marketized genre, through the neoliberal inflected style of blogs, websites and within the broad-brush episteme of business rhetoric. Transnational neoliberal imaginaries cross-fertilise with expatriate/migrant/non-citizen positionalities, to different extents and effects. UAE higher education is defined in corporate terms, as a consumer product and business endeavour to serve 'clients.' Pedagogic theories explicating the complexities of learning also intersect with a journalistic off-shoot of TEL, advancing bitesize, snackable content and formulaic solutions for teaching. From a dialogic perspective, this provides an example of how theory, scholarship and practice intersect rendering learning and teaching as an increasingly technologically driven product.

However, I suggest that in the UAE-TEL context, technological solutionism and the marketization of learning occurs, not only as the cruel optimism of inflected neoliberal imaginaries, but also through the precariousness of non-citizenship for many social actors in the UAE. Accordingly, neoliberal imaginaries and technological solutionism coalesce as a convenient means of writing-out learners and educators. As counter point, dialogism builds capacity for integrative macro-meso-micro analysis, deeply ethical epistemologies, valuing difference and multiplicity of social actors' voices, positionalities and alternative ontologies. Next, I consider dialogism's possible reorientations of the TEL field.

## 7. Dialogic reorientations

The above discussion illustrates how the dialogic framework analysed the ten TEL articles at macro-meso-micro levels. Theoretical reorientation is an important aspect of dialogic inquiry since it develops new pathways and possibilities for disrupting taken for granted phenomena, or what and who are being written-out/written-in. In the case of this inquiry, the findings indicate the agility of the dialogic framework for demystifying, contesting and questioning the autonomy of neoliberal imaginaries, underpinning UAE-TEL. This is because dialogism is sensitive to the differences of UAE learners, teachers and researchers, who come from around the globe, occupying diverse and transnational positionalities. It indicates that they thus encounter neoliberalism's scattered hegemonies, in varying ways, to different extents and with contrasting effects. Dialogic inquiry thus challenges the apparent homogeneity and stranglehold of neoliberalism and the writing-out of learners and educators from the TEL narrative. Next, I discuss these theoretical gains of dialogism in more detail.

First, dialogism is informed by diachronic and macro perspectives of the UAE-TEL's broader economic and sociocultural context. It considers how scholarship in the UAE, like the rest of the Gulf, operates within a particular version of neoliberalism, economic drivers of higher education and the precarious infrastructure of non-citizen educators and migrant workers. In the absence of citizen status, residents, or non-citizen educators, while motivated by economic survival, have limited means of resistance or vested interest to move against the dehumanising rhetoric of neoliberalism.

Dialogism also considers UAE-TEL scholarship at meso levels to consider content (who/what can be written/voiced) and at micro levels (how it is written/voiced) to analyse paragraphs, sentences and words. This helps to reveal neoliberalism's persuasive logics articulating and constituting the distinctly marketized style across a number of the articles. The macro-meso-micro scales of dialogism articulate questions about this scholarship as well as guidelines for educators and researchers to develop reflective practice, beyond prescribed and packaged formulas of TEL pedagogies.

Second, dialogism is a highly intertextual perspective. In this study, it develops as a critical genre to expand insights into UAE higher education context, in terms of the intersections of historical discourses, multiple belongings and scattered hegemonies. Dialogism conveys that UAE-TEL scholarship is located within a transnational context, positioning social actors at the cross-roads of the so-called Global South and North. Dialogic inquiry reveals how this comes through in the TEL literature at tacit levels and in terms of what is foregrounded, omitted, recycled and/or refashioned. For example, while ESL is a major topic of discussion, within the UAE-TEL context, other languages and issues of gender are written-out. These omissions occur in relation to broader local and global systemic racial and gender inequalities. But current UAE-TEL literature, if silent on these matters becomes complicit in the perpetuation of neoliberal logics and hyper-inequalities. TEL scholarship could therefore also articulate the situated needs of students

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and educators and the systemic inequalities surrounding us all. Dialogism highlights the politicised aspects of who, what, where, why and how we teach and learn as well as the impact that pedagogies have on current and future learners, learning, ways of being and knowing.

Third, dialogism is an ethical framework and sensitive to the diversity of TEL voices. It could look forward to emancipatory technological learning futures, by hinting at alternatives to neoliberalism, racial inequalities and androcentrism. A crucial step in overcoming neoliberal hyper-inequalities is to reveal that they are not inevitable (Grewal & Kaplan, 2006). Dialogism thus advocates alternatives to neoliberalism's writing-out of learners and educators through marketized, implicitly ethnocentric and gendered TEL rhetoric. In the concluding section, I offer further comments, recommendations and limitations of the study.

## 8. Conclusion and recommendations

The central question of the study asks, to what extent could dialogism offer insights into Emirati women learners' TEL practices? In answer to this question, the dialogic framework developed reflexive modes and scales for considering how TEL scholarship is orientated around certain themes. These included the prominence of English as a second language over other languages; backgrounding of gender issues; neoliberal epistemologies and marketized views of learning that are writing-out learners and educators.

Simultaneously, the inquiry revealed particular tensions surrounding the precarities of imported non-citizen expatriate educators and migrant groups, working within the UAE's transnational arena. Devoid of citizen status, expatriate and/or migrants educators/workers supporting the higher education system have limited vocabularies, platforms or motivation to articulate alternatives to TEL platforms' market driven formulas.

Conversely, dialogism is an ethical framework seeking to develop critical infrastructure. It articulates a variety of voices, questions and expansive theoretical conversations within UAE-TEL scholarship. Simultaneously, this provides openings to consider Emirati women learners' experiences with online courses, content and practices. This is important since Emirati women are surprisingly absent from TEL literature in the UAE higher education context, despite populating 80% of federal universities.

The unique contribution of the study is the application of the novel macro-meso-micro dialogic framework for shifting modes of critical reflection. It provides a multidirectional review of UAE-TEL scholarship, as a speech genre, operating within the parametres of its given speech conditions. Dialogism unpicks the knotted and complex issues interwoven within the UAE's neoliberal but constantly shifting transnational context. Dialogism therefore enunciates the potential diversity, transnationalism and multilingualism of TEL in the UAE.

The dialogic framework offers insights into the growing body of TEL literature in the UAE context as indicative of the exponential economic growth of the region, as well as the significant financial and academic investments into TEL research. Dialogism reveals that the content and style of texts are underpinned by the constraints of the genres and epistemes within which they operate. Not surprisingly, a common stance in the literature is that the UAE higher education context is a market and learners are consumers. The dehumanising rhetoric of the market is also theorised as contributing to the writing-out of learners and educators. Yet, dialogism, through commitment to questioning, holds TEL theorists and academics working in the UAE as also accountable. Like academics elsewhere, we make pragmatic choices about whether our research is complicit or challenges inequalities. Dialogism asks for self-reflexivity on these issues as well as the articulation of learners' needs and perspectives.

In terms of limitations, since it is a theoretical study, it does not fully incorporate the voices of Emirati women learners. This is ironic considering it is a paper orientated to dialogism. But theorising also occurs through scholarly conversations and the writing-in of others. In the spirit of Bakhtin's dialogism (1999), it is argued that all research operates within intertextual perspectives and as co-authoring.

It is hoped that dialogism will path the way for future theoretical, empirical and transnational TEL studies in the UAE context. TEL scholarship needs to explore more deeply how learners feel, experience and engage with situated contradictions, imported curricula, language, technologies and educators, to make learning their own. Going beyond neoliberal versions of TEL is also very much an unfinished project and in the spirit of the Bakhtinian theory (1984) it is "unfinalizeable."

Future studies could develop alternative narratives to the neoliberal versions of UAE-TEL scholarship and elsewhere. Scholars interested in dialogism might consider learner positionalities, conception of the research object

and researcher self-reflexivity in relation to speech genres. The sheer hybridity of the UAE's multicultural, transnational and rapid technological change makes for a fascinating and important research object, providing insights generalisable to other Gulf nations and beyond. Finally, reorientating TEL scholarship in the UAE, in dialogic terms, is not only capacity building but a politicised move to question who and what are written-out while advocating the writing-in of learners and educators' pedagogic practices and experiences.

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