"IT'S A HUMBLING EXPERIENCE" – LESSONS FROM LANGUAGE MOOCS

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Abstract

This contribution reports on a language teacher education project involving student teachers enrolled in beginning-level Language MOOCs. Participants self-reported their main learning experiences against the backdrop of favourable conditions for language learning. Their feedback focused primarily on materials, activities, interactions, and feedback, as well as the LMOOC design.

Abstract in German

Diese Studie befasst sich mit Studierenden in der FremdsprachenlehrerInnenausbildung, die sich in einen Anfänger-Fremdsprachen-MOOC-Kurs ihrer Wahl eingeschrieben hatten. Die Studienteilnehmer berichten von ihren wichtigsten Lernerfahrungen vor dem Hintergrund der positiven Bedingungen für das Fremdsprachenlernen. Die Ergebnisse beziehen sich in erster Linie auf Fertigkeiten, Aktivitäten und Partizipation, als auch auf das Design der Fremdsprachen-MOOCs

Introduction

MOOCs in Language Education

Massive Open Online Courses (MOOCs) have been around for a number of years (Siemens, 2005), and language MOOCs (or LMOOCs) have received increasing attention in language education (see, for example, edited volumes by Martín-Monje & Bárcena, 2014; Dixon & Thomas, 2015; Martín-Monje, Elorza, & Garcia Riaza, 2016). In 2014, there were a total of 26 language LMOOCs at various language levels offered across 14 platforms, primarily by providers in the U.S. and Spain (Martín-Monje & Bárcena, 2014). By the same token, educators have taken advantage of these new online learning avenues for professional development by enrolling in MOOCs. For example, a recent survey study by Seaton, Coleman, Daries, and Chuang (2015) found that a large proportion of participants in different subject-matter edX MOOCs such as Global Warming, Entrepreneurship, Aerodynamics, or Structures of English, were in fact teachers. 28% of the 33,000 edX survey respondents identified themselves as past or present teachers, with more than 70% desiring greater access to MITx materials for use in their own courses. Seaton et al. concluded that these teachers were resources to be tapped into due to their active engagement in discussion forums; yet, the authors also identified challenges such as pedagogy and peer support, and the adoption of new teaching practices in U.S. school districts (2015). Such new opportunities and challenges presented by MOOCs are thus areas for further exploration in language teacher education.

The pedagogical rationale of this exploratory project was thus to provide language student teachers (STs) with an opportunity to evaluate SLA-grounded principles such as interaction and negotiation of meaning, authentic tasks and audience, enough time and feedback, and meaningful guidance to the learning process (Egbert, Hanson-Smith, & Chao, 2007). To this end, STs enrolled in a beginning-level language MOOC and tracked their language learning process in weekly MOOC logs over eight weeks.

They further evaluated if and how they could use LMOOCs in their own language courses.

While interactional opportunities are crucial for language learning, they become even more important in online distance learning contexts to bridge the psychological separation

experienced by participants (see Moore, 1993). A recent study by Rubio (2015) found that any type of interaction (with either the instructor, another student, or the course content) directly correlated with higher grades. Accordingly, LMOOC designers have argued that engagement and interaction need to be based on authentic communication primarily among students (Sokolik, 2014). Engagement, community, membership, communication, and creativity have been identified as key features for effective LMOOCs by others as well (Martín-Monje & Bárcena, 2014). However, the *massive*, *open*, and *online* elements of LMOOCs can add extra layers of complexity for learners – especially at the beginning-levels. For example, learners may feel overwhelmed by a large or *massive* number of enrolled students because an *open* and *online* course can be taken by anyone with Internet access. Additionally, issues such as participant satisfaction, learning support, technological environment, the quality of the learning experience (Kop, Fournier, & Mak, 2011), and factors for predicting drop-out rates are yet to be fully addressed (Boyer & Veeramachaneni, 2015).

In this project, it was thus hoped that future student teachers of English as a Second or Foreign Language would gain a better understanding of the predicaments of the unique nature of LMOOCs. Participants explored LMOOCs as avenues for language instruction from the student's perspective, i.e., what it is like to interact online with hundreds of thousands of learners in geographically dispersed locations. Feedback was collected from participants' needs analysis questionnaires, weekly MOOC logs, and post-course questionnaires (e.g., Castrillo de Larreta-Azelain, 2014) to answer the following questions: What are the top learning experiences for STs in beginning-level language MOOCs? How can STs imagine using MOOCs in their own language teaching?

Project Set-up

Course and Participants

Participants included 15 STs of English as a second/foreign language in the Author's spring 2015 technology elective at a private graduate institution in the Northeast of the U.S. The three-unit course, which met for 1hr 40minutes over the course of 15 weeks, modelled different technology uses by engaging STs in virtual tasks and discussions. The main focus was placed on fostering multiliteracy skills and on providing STs with experiential learning in online and hybrid/blended. Students analyzed the socio-cultural and linguistic affordances of different instruction formats (e.g., online/blended language teaching, MOOCs), and they also refined their understanding of student and teacher roles by examining technological and institutional constraints. Course objectives included the following:

- Explore, analyze, use, and evaluate various Web 2.0 tools by engaging in virtual exchanges with local and telecollaborative partners in Turkey.
- Generate online quizzes using different freeware/software.
- Participate in and evaluate a language MOOC.
- In teams, design, administer, and grade a technology-based task for a chosen target population.
- Provide peer critiques on other teams' tasks.
- Evaluate and present technology-based task design and results in final session.

In addition to attendance and active participation (including discussion leading and quizzes), which made up 20% of the grade, there were three main assignments in this course (see Appendix 1 for a detailed description): MOOC participation through enrolment and weekly MOOC reflection logs, and a final analysis and evaluation (30%), technology-based task design including peer feedback and revisions (30%), and a final presentation and peer evaluation (20%).

The focus of this report is on the MOOC participation for which STs enrolled in a beginning-level language MOOC of their choice and kept a log of their learning process/progress (over the course of eight weeks). Most STs signed up for Spanish (7) and Chinese (3), others for Italian (2), Japanese (2), and Hindi (1); all of the beginning-level LMOOCs were xMOOCs.

That most STs enrolled in Spanish and Chinese reflects the trend in 2014, when English and Spanish were the top languages offered, followed by Chinese, German, Valencian, and French (Martín-Monje & Bárcena, 2014). As becomes evident in the assignment descriptions, the MOOC project was one out of three main assignments. Thus, there was only limited time that could be dedicated to in-class discussions.

Participant Feedback

In this project, participant feedback was collected through the following instruments:

- needs analysis in the form of a pre-course questionnaire;
- weekly MOOC reflection logs;
- post-course questionnaire.

At the beginning of the technology elective, STs filled out a Needs Analysis questionnaire, which elicited information on their prior experience and expertise with MOOCs and technology tools, and their experience in engaging with technology in language teaching. Questions in the weekly logs were based on Egbert et al. (2007) and centred around the foci of the MOOC activities, the pedagogical goals of the activities, the use of authentic materials, or the use of technology tools to support the pedagogical goals of the activities. Post-MOOC questions asked participants about their top learning experiences, and their overall impression of the success of the MOOC for language learning purposes. Given the STs' pedagogical training, they were further asked if and how they would incorporate MOOCs into their own language teaching.

Descriptive quantitative results were generated by the Likert-scale questions; qualitative data were derived from participants' open-ended questionnaire responses, and answers regarding their experiences and potential MOOC use in teaching were coded according to meaning units (e.g., Saldaña, 2009). STs' top three learning experiences provided the initial coding criteria (e.g., Strauss & Corbin, 1998), which were later categorized. For example, "tone lesson" and "practicing speaking in Hindi" were grouped under *skills/activities*.

Participant Feedback

According to their needs analyses, all 15 student teachers were second-semester students with the exception of one student who was in her final (4th) semester. Five STs were in the K-12 track, while ten were getting their Masters in the general track. Most STs self-reported little prior MOOC expertise and experience. A few STs mentioned in their weekly logs that they switched to a different language (from Russian to Hindi, or from Spanish A to Spanish B), or to a higher-level MOOC (from Chinese or Russian to "Advanced Placement Spanish and Culture") when they did not like their original choices. According to Table 1 below, answers regarding STs' top learning experience from their LMOOCs can be grouped according to structural aspects (further sub-divided into design, materials, and skills/activities) and psychological/interactional aspects (see Healey, 2007). The different categories with the number of STs in parentheses in descending order are shown below.

Table 1: Top Learning Experiences

Structural Design	Quizzes (4), assessment tools (speaking exercises) Game-styled instruction (2) MOOC interface 24/7 access to course Creating course does not equal teaching effectively Many activities of little help and needed improvement Poorly presented MOOC still a resource Discovering MOOCs to learn a language / Learning what MOOCs are Getting experience with the MOOC Learning how to distinguish good and bad MOOCs The lesson's technological features

Structural Materials	Built in gloss function
	Feature for direct English translation when hovered over with mouse
	Music/videos (13), motivating/interesting, intros, grammar, replaying
	Selection of topics, structure of each lesson
	Seeing how thematic online curricula are organized
	Different ways to support language development (visual/linguistic through redundancy/picture cues, wide learner community, interesting/relevant content)
	Realizing importance of testing oneself/practice
	Authentic materials
	Explanation for new words in exercise
Structural Skills/ Activities	Vocabulary (6), matching exercises for memorizing, recycling
	Exposure to new language (4)
	Cultural experience (3)
	Reading comprehension activities (3), Spanish
	Tone lesson [Chinese]
	Hearing NS pronounce certain words/Listening (3), Hindi
	Speaking in Hindi (2)/Daily conversation in Italian/Pronunciation (2)
	Writing Skills (2), but oral activities/speaking needed
	Integration of all skills (2)
	Explicit grammar instruction/Summary of grammar/Metalinguistic
	Immersion language learning style
	Learning/polishing Spanish a bit
	Relearning some forgotten Japanese
	Practicing some new language knowledge
	Knowledge of morphology in different genders
	Repeating activities multiple times
	Seeing context is very important
	Food lesson
Psychological	Low stress/anxiety level (2)
	Online requires highly invested learner
	Exercises, assessment, feedback needed
	Humbling process/experience
	Learning about best methods for succeeding in MOOCs
	Even if not learning the language, still gaining an understanding of it
Interactional	Interaction needed (fun/motivating)
	NS assistance with lesson offline
	Enough feedback from instructor/peers
	Instructor comments/examples

As can be seen from the table above, STs listed more structural aspects (design, materials, and skills/activities) as their top learning experiences from their LMOOC courses. Examples include the selection of topics and structure of each lesson, and assessments. For instance, the Chinese MOOC was applauded primarily for the content of the lessons (e.g., tones), while the other MOOCs provided video and music materials (Spanish A, Italian A) and picture cues and games (Spanish B) that STs liked. It does not seem surprising that videos ranked favourably among STs since in many xMOOCs, video is the primary medium for transmitting content (Hansch, Hillers, McConachie, Newman, Schildhauer, & Schmidt, 2015). Nonetheless, Sokolik has cautioned that LMOOC designers need to integrate the "use of instructional videos that present examples of the language and culture of study without resorting merely to expository lectures on linguistic structures" (2014; p.27). A number of participants also liked the quizzes and the self-assessment functions; yet, there was only one comment regarding peer feedback. Moreover, while a couple of STs felt that writing skills were useful, they also commented that oral activities and speaking were needed.

In contrast, only a few STs listed interactional benefits such as enough feedback from the instructor and peers, and the instructor's comments, examples, or getting assistance from NL speakers offline (from friends) while completing the Chinese lesson. With regard to the last

point, it should be noted that this type of interaction did not take place via the LMOOC but outside, through face-to-face discussion, as the ST had asked a native speaker Chinese friend to sit down with her and help her work through the MOOC. Since this type of negotiation of meaning can be highly effective, it would be worthwhile to consider how to facilitate this interaction online in a beginning-level MOOC. This seems especially important since STs explicitly stated that interaction was needed due to its motivational power. By the same token, social interaction may help learners be more invested in online courses, which was another challenge STs pointed out.

A number of STs appreciated the new experience, i.e., getting experience with the MOOC, being humbled by the process of learning a different language (Spanish B), and realizing that no matter how "poorly presented" a MOOC, it was still a language learning resource (Japanese). The fact that only one person mentioned enough feedback from instructor and peers seems in line with Teixeira and Mota (2014), who have stressed that individual support and tutoring were "impossible in a massive course" and that "[l]earning support has to rest in the learning community, through collaboration, dialogue, peer feedback and active engagement from participants in the learning process" (p.36).

With regard to the question of how STs would use LMOOCs in their own teaching, nine STs said they would use LMOOCs as a supplement, for homework, out-of-classroom assignment, or extra practice. One ST said he would not use MOOCs, and another one said she would use only a less time-consuming MOOC. A number of STs commented that they would use MOOCs for advanced learners/adults/high school; for content units or courses (business, literature, music, history, TOEFL). This does not seem surprising as interactional opportunities seemed few in the LMOOCs in this project and because content is more easily designed for and delivered to higher-level learners.

Yet, the affordance of an LMOOC as an *add-on* for language learning also became evident in STs' replies. Students seemed to see the value for language learners to sign up and practice outside of class. For instance, one of the STs enrolled in Italian A summed up that he would not incorporate a MOOC into his classes but recommend to students to sign up for "extra/optional out-of-class practice if they were interested". Another student echoed this in her post-questionnaire stating that she would use the Spanish A MOOC "as a supplementary homework thread in which students could do further practice". She thought it could be "most useful for highly motivated adult learners" with regard to the effects on grammar and lexical acquisition. Motivational challenges or the "high degree of learner attrition" (Joksimović et al., 2015) seem to have been well-known phenomena in non-language MOOCs and become even more pronounced in beginning-level LMOOCs.

Conclusion

Participant feedback indicates that STs perceived the potential of LMOOCs with regard to the different language skills, authentic materials, automated quizzes, but only listed a few interactional aspects such as getting additional native speaker input or peer feedback. Nonetheless, most of the participants could see using LMOOCs in their own teaching in form of a supplement, for homework, extra practice, or out-of-classroom assignment. Based on participant feedback, language MOOCs are best used as an add-on to enable learners to practice the language outside of class. Yet, it also seems clear that more interactional opportunities would be beneficial. Instructors might consider incorporating LMOOCs systematically into a course (for student teachers to take, for professional development, or for language learners for additional language practice outside the L2 classroom) by making LMOOC enrolment part of the course assignment/grading. The actual language learning progress should feed back into the face-to-face class so that learners get an opportunity to explore different language learning strategies as well as find ways to maximize interactional opportunities.

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Appendix 1

1) Attendance & Active Participation (incl. Discussion Leading & Quizzes) (20%)

- Attending course and participating actively in class and online on a regular basis
- Preparing course readings, synthesizing online exchanges, designing interactive in-class activity (using the LP Template)
- Designing a follow-up DL quiz for peers to take after DL session
- Taking pop quizzes designed by other DLs

2) MOOC Participation, Weekly MOOC Reflection Log & Final Analysis/Evaluation (30%)

Participants will sign up for one of the beginning-level language MOOCs (ideally a language participants are not familiar with). Each week, participants will fill out a MOOC Reflection Log reflecting on their learning progress and documenting their learning process. The Log will be in the form of a Qualtrics online survey and will be submitted starting in Week 2. The log is due every **Friday 12pm.**

Here are some MOOC options. Please stipulate 60-90 min/week (10-15 min/day) for MOOC language learning:

- Chinese for Beginners (self-paced)
- Advanced Spanish Language & Culture (starts 2/16 x 6 wks)
- Spanish I, II, or III on Spanish MOOC (self-paced)
- Italian I or III on Instreamia (self-paced)
- Russian Phonetics for Beginners (self-paced)
- Russian for Beginners - Level 1 (self-paced)

3) Technology-Based Task, Peer Feedback, Revisions (30%)

Technology-Based Task Design for the adult English program:

In teams, you will design a technology-based task for a target student population of your choice (adults/children/ESL/EFL, etc.). The goal of this assignment is twofold:

1. To provide you with hands-on experience with the technology tool(s) covered in class by tying the assignment back to the in-class and virtual discussions;
2. To train you in task design, administration, execution, evaluation, and revision.

Based on the virtual and in-class discussions, you and your team will design a technology-based task for the program using your tool of choice. The task can focus on any of the skills, vocabulary, grammar, or a combination thereof.

Task Feedback and Revisions:

Each team will provide feedback and receive evaluative feedback on drafts of their tasks from an assigned partner team (as well as from the instructor and TA). All teams are required to revise their drafts based on the feedback they receive. After all feedback and revisions are completed, each team will administer their task in their teaching program.

4) Final Presentation & Peer Evaluation (20%)

Each team will present their technology-based task in class at the end of the semester. Presentations should use Powerpoint, Prezi, or another visual aid or tool, and the presentation length should not be exceeded (tbd depending on number of participants). The presentation needs to be interactive and involve an activity of the technology-based task, which will be tried out by the rest of the class during the final week of class. The presentation will include an evaluation of the task outcome. More detailed specifications will be provided.

Peer Evaluation: Each team will evaluate a task presentation by one of the other teams.

NB: Specific guidelines for each of these steps to follow.

The task product needs to include the following:

1. Description of target student population and teaching context (level, course content/theme etc.)
2. Brief rationale for how the tool(s) can enhance teaching (tied back into the literature and including a webliography as specified below).
3. Description of the content of the task, the goal, objectives, purpose, procedure, product, assessment component (e.g., a grading rubric detailing how you would weigh the different components), and a sample activity.
4. A brief reflection on working with the tech tool (benefits? challenges?), your experience collaborating on this project with your team. In addition to reflecting on working with the technology tool and your team, you will also reflect on the success of the task you implemented (referring back to peer feedback as well as the task outcome), particularly how well it worked.
5. An Annotated Webliography

You are asked to include a list of 5-7 annotated online sources with proper APA citations.