The Role of Modularity and Mobility in Language MOOCs

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Resumen

Este artículo refleja la adecuación de los MOOC para el aprendizaje de segundas lenguas. En él se argumenta que los LMOOC pueden fomentar la interacción entre estudiantes a gran escala y facilitar el desarrollo de la competencia verbal si el contenido del curso está pormenorizadamente estructurado con este fin, es decir, es modular, diversificado y provisto de un mecanismo de andamiaje didáctico. La mayoría de los LMOOC constan de textos y grabaciones seguidos de actividades fuertemente estructuradas y los estudiantes suelen estar limitados en la forma en la que trabajan con dichos materiales. Un LMOOC organizado modularmente ofrece ventajas para grupos heterogéneos, ofreciendo más actividades de las que son estrictamente necesarias para el estudiante medio ideal (teoría adicional, actividades más sencillas que sirvan como andamiaje) y ofreciendo un margen de flexibilidad para su compleción. En el artículo también se argumenta que los LMOOC Asistidos por Móviles ofrecen un gran potencial para el aprendizaje centrado en el estudiante que abre la puerta a una diversidad de escenarios de uso itinerantes y basados en el contexto que difuminan la línea divisoria entre el aprendizaje formal e informal y nuestra propia vida digital.
Palabras clave: Language MOOCs, Modular Materials, MALL, Mobile Assisted LMOOCs.

Abstract

This article reflects on the suitability of MOOCs for second language learning. It is argued that such LMOOCs can potentiate large-scale student interaction to facilitate verbal competence development if the course content is carefully structured to this end, i.e., modular, diversified and scaffolded. Most LMOOCs consist of texts/recordings followed by highly structured activities, and students are typically limited in the way in which they can work with the materials. A modularly organised LMOOC has advantages for heterogeneous groups by offering more activities than are strictly necessary for the ideal average student (extra-theory, extra-simple activities to be used as didactic scaffolding) and making students complete only a certain percentage of the total. The article also argues that

Mobile Assisted LMOOCs offer diversity to student-centred learning that opens the door to a variety of itinerant and context-based scenarios that blur the line between formal and informal language learning and our own digital living.

Keywords: Language MOOCs, Modular Materials, MALL, Mobile Assisted LMOOCs.

Introduction

Over the past decade[1] or more we have seen a transition from a Society1.0 to a Society 2.0. The former, active until the end of 20th century / early 21st century, can be called a "Knowledge Society", where knowledge is "scarce" and controlled by a few (i.e., centralised) . Therefore, "he who knows more is king" and content is controlled by the mass media, universities, etc., and is locked away in content/learning management systems. In this context, people are mostly seen as passive consumers, with limited participation . The latter, active in the 21st century, has moved away from the notion of a society based upon knowledge towards a "Creative Economy" model, where knowledge is "abundant" (in excess), and its control is decentralised. We can appreciate that here "content is no longer king!", but is distributed freely in social networks, open educational resources, and MOOCs. People are key in this type of society, where "he who shares more is now king! " The implications for education are obvious: we have left an Education 1.0 model for an Education 2.0 one. Here, student behaviour and learning is social, collaborative, personalised and networked. It is less the case that wise teachers are the only ones producing content. User generated content, based upon the long tail phenomenon which harnesses collective intelligence, is leading to a proliferation of shared knowledge, where such knowledge, if carefully managed, can have a profound effect on learning. However, not all content is the same. There are differences of format, expression, size of a given material, and also credibility (a lot of online material is misleading at best and sometimes wrong!). Such management can be undertaken in MOOCs.

Massive Open Online Courses (e.g., Downes, 2012; Daniel, 2012) enable large numbers of people to combine the advantages of open content and open learning for different types of training and knowledge exploration, by removing initial limits of access and attendance. MOOCs are having a significant impact in Higher Education, with large numbers of people undertaking these courses. They have been hailed as an "educational phenomenon" (Pappano, 2012); and 2012 was called "the Year of the MOOC" by the New York Times. Different ways of classifying these courses have appeared. For example, Clark

(2013)identifies 8 types: TransferMOOCs (essentially a copy of an existing eLearning course hosted on a MOOC platform, using a standard knowledge transfer from teachers to students); MadeMOOCs (careful and innovative preparation of video materials, together with more difficult assignments than typical courses); SynchMOOCs (courses with fixed start, end, and assessment dates); AsynchMOOCs (opposite of synchMOOCs); AdaptiveMOOCs (present personalised or adapted learning experiences to the students depending upon their progress); GroupMOOCs (with restricted student numbers); ConnectivistMOOCS or cMOOCs (based upon networked-learning); and MiniMOOCSs (which focus on content and skills that can be learned in a small timescale).

MOOCs have a great potential for second language learning (henceforth, 2LL) because, amongst other things, the large number of students that take part in them represent a varied, extensive and geographically dispersed community for communication, collaboration and the development of fundamental competences for the correct, adequate, and skilful use of the target language. However, for such potential to manifest, a methodological approach is required that provides scaffolding and feedback for students to keep on target, while at the same time providing a rich and valid form of evaluation. The role of technology cannot be underestimated here, since as information access becomes more mobile, pervasive and ubiquitous, the way in which students access and work in MOOCs is also changing with respect to the way in which eLearning was always carried out, and separation between everyday life and learning is blurring in such a way that they are mutually reinforcing each other. The way in which knowledge is assimilated and manipulated by students using (mobile) technology, modified, curated, analysed and criticised, and re-purposed for their own use, or for use in social media or networks, or in MOOCs, opens the door to just-in-time situated and task-based learning which is expected to potentiate active 2LL in an unprecedented way.

Modular LMOOCs

Language MOOCs (henceforth, LMOOCs), are popular with both students and teachers, although not without criticisms. Romeo (2012:2) argues that self-study in MOOCs is not appropriate for language learning since it does not foment pro-activeness. Martín-Monje et al. (2013) and (Read, 2014) highlight other problems, such as the new role of the teacher, how to provide effective feedback, and the management of a heterogeneous student group of people distributed all over the world, with different levels of language communicative competences and goals. Solutions to these problems are argued to require a network of capabilities (competences, skills and data) to be finely intertwined as learning progresses (Read, 2014), requiring, first and foremost, high order cognitive skills

together with social interaction with competent speakers of the target language (Read et al., 2010). A structured educational course design involving content, activities and appropriate social media tools and technologies to cover the different capabilities and processes involved in language use (as per the CEFR, Council of Europe, 2001) are proving to be effective for 2LL since they integrate a number of elements which have been identified to be essential for effective communicative language competence development and reproduce a learning environment that is not seen any more as a "lesser evil" to the face-to-face scenario.

Interaction between students is limited in small face-to-face classrooms (and in standard online and blended courses). In LMOOCs, formal and informal learning can be combined, facilitate the development of productive and interactive skills that are often missed in other educational contexts. Structured access to native speakers is the best-case scenario (Swain, 2000); however, realistically this is often difficult to obtain. LMOOCs can potentiate large scale student interaction to facilitate competence development if the course content and activities are carefully prepared and structured to this end, i.e., modular, diversified and scaffolded. If it were just a case of selecting some course notes and working with them, then more people would dominate other languages than their own, since any search on the Web regarding materials for this purpose will return hundreds of thousands of potential links.

xMOOCs, since they resemble conventional online courses, would arguably offer better structured materials and activities for 2LL, but they tend to lack the proactive and interactive characteristics necessary for developing second language competences. cMOOCs, however, arguably represent the opposite case, facilitating communication but often at the cost of the control of the teaching team, and also lacking the appropriate structure necessary to consolidate core principles before interaction and communication can take place as part of an 2LL process. Initially, students require a minimum foundation of theory (vocabulary, grammar, pragmatics, social cultural knowledge, etc.). Subsequently, a communicative approach can be applied for didactic interaction, involving aspects of social constructivism (cf. Knight, 2003), which can facilitate the development of communicative abilities (Warschauer, 1998; Roed, 2003; Compton, 2004). As Yeager et al. (2013) point out, there are four types of activities in (c)MOOCs that can increase proactivity on the part of the students and facilitate interaction, both of which are of great value when undertaken in the target language: aggregation/curation (gathering links to existing resources), remixing (producing new content, undertaking blogging, etc.), repurposing/constructivism (where users arguably build their own internal connections)

and feeding forward (where new content, resources, summaries, etc., are shared with others).

A key factor that influences the effectiveness of the digital resources in an LMOOC is that of their granularity. In a lot of MOOCs, a block of text or a single recording is typically followed by a highly structured closed/open activity. A student in this context would be limited in the way in which s/he can work with the materials, which in itself limits the applicability and usefulness that can be expected from them. A modularly organised LMOOC has the advantage of serving the interests of greatly heterogeneous groups by having all the different activities optional and making the students complete a percentage of the total (which could reasonably oscillate between 75-80%, e.g., professionals might be more interested in oral communication activities and not so much in gaining accuracy). Advanced students could skip unnecessary modules and those with a lower level can work systematically through the course and even undertake simpler foundation activities when they detect that a particular topic has been problematic.

Another factor that is important is the way in which we access and interact online that has also changed in the last few years. Most people carry some form of mobile device in our pockets or bags that can be used to get online. As (Looi et al., 2010) argue, our mobile devices, and the related pervasive and almost ubiquitous online access they provide, are important for finer-grained student-centred learning. This enables students to switch from activities in their everyday lives to ones promoting learning (informal, social, and even formal). Hence the question of how such mobile devices can be used for LMOOCs.

Mobile Assisted LMOOCs

When considering how mobile devices can work with and complement LMOOCs, a series of questions need to be addressed: firstly, can MOOC content be deployed to mobile devices? Some platforms like Coursera have a mobile app and other platforms, like FutureLearn, are mobile friendly, in that courses can be accessed from the Web browser present on most mobile devices. Access in this fashion is a non-trivial matter due to differences in screen size, data entry, etc., that need to be addressed. However, the benefit for students in using their mobile devices as portable course clients is obvious, enabling them "anytime-anywhere" access, so that they can continue their studies in a flexible way, making the most of the time they have. Arguably, once the linguistic bases have been established, more access will lead to more interaction (students check back more often to the course), thereby facilitating communication and collaboration. There is no need to be in front of a computer to see if, for example, they have already received a reply to some question they have asked in the forum. Work is being done on how mobile devices can be

used to improve interaction in MOOCs, which are appropriate to LMOOCs (e.g., de Waard, 2013).

Secondly, access from a mobile device is different than that from a desktop computer, so are specific resources or content structure required to compensate for the difference? In general terms, an activity structure is required which works across devices, where the students can combine production, comprehension and reflection. Most multimedia should work as well on a mobile device as a desktop computer, but video, audio and textual materials need to be sized and structured taking into account screen size, fonts, etc. Furthermore, the written production possible from a typical mobile device will be lower than that from a desktop computer, due to the lack of keyboard and the screen size. Rather than considering all activities as being equally possible from all devices, it is more a case of designing a course so that certain tasks can be undertaken from a mobile device, as a way of complementing other task types that do not profit from mobility and context, and/or increasing the frequency with which a student is connected.

Thirdly, how can the mobile app culture complement what is undertaken in an LMOOC? With the Web 2.0, we had a point-and-click interface to online applications that greatly simplified our interaction with them. Now, with the proliferation of mobile devices and the associated ecosystems of Apple and Google, there is an app for everything. In the two main online app stores controlled by these respective companies, there are hundreds of apps for 2LL and also other ones that can be used to support 2LL, even if not directly intended for this purpose. While still very much a question for research, there is scope for such apps to be used as part of an LMOOC, since they provide another example of how the learning experience can be moved out of the standard online environment. These apps mostly contain encapsulated content and resources, which let students work away from both the course and also a connection to Internet (that can be useful since we are still some way from a ubiquitous access to Internet), but can also be integrated as part of a larger learning object.

Fourthly and finally, it should not be forgotten that mobile devices are also packed with sensors that can provide information about the world around us. So, how can the information, images, etc., obtained by these devices be linked with a student's learning in an LMOOC? Modern mobile devices are like digital Swiss Army knives with a host of functions. It is like carrying around a photographic/video camera, an audio/video recorder/player, an eReader, etc. These functions are particularly useful since they enable the students to interact with the world around them as part of activities contained in a LMOOC, bringing back different types of materials for use in subsequent learning activities. The potential of this approach is enormous. Although these functions can be

used independently of any LMOOC, in combination with any 2LL classroom- or social media- based activities, when used with LMOOCs, they represent a bridge between the digital and the real worlds, extending the scope of the learning process from the online course to the everyday events of the student's lives. Furthermore, skill development implies repetition. If a student is not in a country where the target language is used, then it is difficult for him/her to work with the 2LL away from the course. Extending learning activities, in this case, to real world tasks via mobile devices enable the student to dedicate more free time to the course and the results of these tasks can be fed back into the social community of the LMOOC, undoubtedly a significant step forward in LMOOC methodology.

Conclusions

It can be appreciated that mobile assisted LMOOCs offer a richness to student-centred learning that opens the door to a variety of 2LL activities and scenarios that blurs the line between formal and informal learning and living. A student is able to carry over his/her learning into the world in which s/he lives, away from the desktop-computer-based online course, and also into the free moments that make up a typical person's day. As long as a (networked) mobile device is at hand, something didactically relevant can be undertaken. Hence, for language course designers, thought has to be given not only on how to structure materials and resources for optimal learning online, but also on how such materials can be accessed from different devices and how students can interact with such materials (and other students), modify them and generate their own, from the limited input capabilities that such devices offer. As we move toward a future with ubiquitous access to information and the separation between the devices we use to access the information and the world around us blur, thought will have to be given to the management of resources so that they scaffold a student's learning while not saturating him/her with information in such a way as to ironically limit what learning can be actually undertaken.

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