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Analysis Of The Impact Of Social Feedback On Written Production And Student Engagement In Language Moocs

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Abstract

This paper explores the challenges of receiving feedback in a language MOOC and proposes a model for social feedback that aims to develop students' foreign language written skills. The experience of the first edition of the first language MOOC in Spain, a course on Professional English undertaken by the authors, and the design of its second edition on the basis of such experience are presented. Particular attention is paid to certain aspects of the course such as the change of role of the teacher away from being an instructor, how to provide effective feedback with such a potentially unbalanced teacher-student ratio, and how to keep student motivation and involvement up.

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1. Introduction

Since the appearance of Massive Open Online Courses (henceforth, MOOCs) at the end of last decade, the concept of education has been challenged in an unprecedented manner. MOOCs represent the latest stage in the evolution of open educational resources (Mazoue, 2013). Initiated by Siemens and Downes in 2008, they have proved that there are a remarkable number of potential students who are interested in the epistemological content of many courses, are willing to undertake their learning online, but for various reasons are not prepared to follow the highly rigid standard administrative cum academic procedure. This trend where students try to gain control over their learning choices and engage in more flexible, adaptive educational models is linked to the current European directive on lifelong learning, fostered by Delors' report at the end of last century (1996) and stems directly from Siemens' connectivist views, according to which learning is achieved through the set-up of connections or nodes. In

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his words: “Connectivism is driven by the understanding that decisions are based on rapidly altering foundations. New information is continually being acquired. The ability to draw distinctions between important and unimportant information is vital” (Siemens, 2005: p.7). There is a clear direct relation between the underlying learning principles (autonomy, diversity, openness, and connectivity) and the standard MOOC activities (aggregation, remixing, repurposing, and feeding forward).

Social networks are also part of the recent educational landscape and are on the way to becoming teaching tools in technology-enhanced courses. The authors claim that they have the potential to become one of the strengths of successful MOOCs, since they enhance interaction, the exchange of ideas and the build-up of personal learning networks with a strong ludic and motivational component. However, it is the usual great unbalance in the teacher-student ratio of these courses that makes them a vital tool for receiving didactic feedback (Martín-Monje et al., 2013). Feedback, roughly understood as “any information which provides a report on the result of behaviour” (Richards & Smith, 2010: p. 217), is an essential part of teaching/learning and has become one of the most controversial aspects of MOOCs. This paper explores the challenges of receiving feedback in a language MOOC (henceforth, LMOOCs) and proposes a model for social feedback that aims to develop students’ foreign language written skills.

2. The MOOC model and language MOOCs

MOOCs refer to a new model of online education delivering content and proposing activities to meet learning goals for a large number of people with a shared interest, with no initial limits of access, attendance and credits offered at the end (Bárcena et al., in press). It is easy to imagine a potentially enormous conflict of interests with publishing companies and formal educational institutions. Furthermore, there are many ‘MOOC-sceptic’ experts in the literature (Jackson, 2013) who doubt that this modality can actually end in successful learning. However, the MOOC concept is having both a significant impact upon the online educational community, with unprecedented press coverage worldwide and great attention on the side of teachers and educational institution authorities. More importantly, hundreds of thousands of people are currently undertaking these courses. Students obviously appreciate the lack of associated costs and the enormous flexibility of access and commitment. Furthermore, something that is fundamental to understanding the contribution of MOOCs is how they knit together the concepts of education, entertainment (gamification) and social networking (Read & Bárcena, 2013). Good MOOCs are both learner-centred and socially oriented, with emphasis placed on the social interaction generated in study groups around flexible learning materials and related activities, which the students find both stimulating and rewarding. It is easy to see from the description of this model the intimate connection between methodological and technological innovation since, for example, effective study groups targeted to undertaking a given project collaboratively need to be manageable in size and cannot involve simultaneously all the members. The implementation of methodological ideas into platform tools (group formation tools, P2P [peer-to-peer] modules, etc.) is a *sine qua non* condition for the success of the MOOC model.

Within the wide range of MOOCs, there are different degrees of suitability according to the discipline and the specific epistemological goals therein, the complexity of the learning materials, and the activities and infrastructure that are considered necessary for developing the capabilities required in each field. Foreign language learning is argued by the authors to be in the middle of a scale of ‘intrinsic MOOC suitability’ as it is both skill-based and knowledge-based, which means that a network of capabilities (competences, skills and data) have to be finely intertwined as learning progresses (Martín-Monje et al., 2013). Not everybody agrees that the MOOC format is suitable for foreign language learning (Romeo, 2012). This author claims that such a process involves two key requirements: proactiveness and live communicative interaction with a ‘native’ speaker, and that LMOOCs can provide neither dynamic, learner-driven training, nor sufficiently rich and realistic interaction with native speakers or at least proficient ones. Martín-Monje et al. (2013) and Read & Bárcena (2013) have observed other potential challenges with LMOOCs, such as the change of role of the teacher away from being an instructor and how to provide effective feedback with such an unbalanced teacher-student ratio, among others.

What follows is a presentation of the first LMOOC in Spain, a course on Professional English undertaken by the authors, which was launched in parallel in the two national MOOC platforms: UNED’s *Aprendo* (<https://unedcoma.es>) and the joint Telefónica and Banco Santander’s *MiriadaX* (<https://www.miriadax.net>) in November 2012. The second edition is expected to start in November 2013. Particular attention is paid to the strategies followed so far to cope with the above-mentioned challenges and the results obtained.

3. The methodology of the ‘Professional English’ MOOC

The course is structured in six different modules (Looking for a job is a full time job; The first day at IBS; A new milestone in Peter’s life; Settling in at work; Daily activities; Going online) to be studied in 12 weeks. Each module is designed for students to complete in a fortnight, although all the contents are accessible from the beginning, in order to provide participants with a flexible methodology, according to which they can choose to work and progress at their own pace. The course includes a scaffolding mechanism that guides the student through the learning processes, all related to written work. For example, students with difficulties can resort to extra (simpler) activities for reinforcement, and in the tests, explicit feedback is provided with a link from each question to the specific point in the course where the topic was explained, so the student who answered it incorrectly or did not feel confident about his answer, can go back and revise the topic. The course materials consist of a number of videos and audios, recorded by English native speakers, with a battery of related multiple-choice questions and evaluation tests for every module. The social component of the course is provided by a forum, oriented to develop student's written skills and to foster interaction, and P2P activities, designed to evaluate oral communication skills through students' responses recorded on video and uploaded to the platform.

Interaction, both written and oral, is key to the course design. Consequently, the authors developed a series of activities to foster collaborative learning in the MOOC forum and P2P activities. The former consists of a proposal posted in the course forum, aimed at motivating students to practise open writing. The latter pays attention to oral and intercultural aspects related to the corresponding topic of the module. Students have to record their oral production in video format and upload it to the MOOC platform. Then the task is sent to three other students who act as evaluators and have to provide feedback according to the criteria in the introductory course guide: 1) appropriateness of vocabulary, terminology and register; 2) grammatical correctness; 3) fluency, pronunciation and intonation; and 4) intelligibility and coherence.

4. Analysis of the first edition of the course: teacher role and student feedback and involvement

The starting point for the research described here was the observation of a remarkable change of teacher roles in the Professional English LMOOC, when compared to other online courses. Three teaching figures were established: the teacher per se who, rather than being an instructor, became the course designer and material developer; the curators (support teachers), who initiated and coordinated social learning via the forums and answered epistemological queries; and the facilitators (animators), who motivated students by keeping the forum active and answered general methodological and technological questions. A fourth figure was devised that lied between the teachers and the students: the monitors, who were upgraded students that had achieved a high *karma* (positive tagging) from their fellow students and teachers, by the number, usefulness and quality of their contributions to the course forums. Given the great numerical unbalance between the teaching team (5) and the students (50,272 between both platforms at the highest peak of the course), course participants were encouraged to provide essential feedback on their peers’ intervention (both content and form), which was rewarded with karma points.

The authors decided to explore the affordances and limitations of this new mode of feedback, gathering data of student participation in the MOOC through an action-research scheme. Hence, for example, it is known that only 2,938 completed the course fully, which amounts to 7% of the participants, an unsurprising outcome for a MOOC, which normally has a considerable dropout rate. Forum participation oscillated greatly at different moments of the course and the percentage of students that kept sending messages regularly towards the end of the course was also below 10%. Based on these and other results obtained (see Martín-Monje et al. 2013] for a rather complete presentation), a new model was devised to improve the overall quality of the course (including student participation), which takes feedback in foreign language learning one step further, encouraging students to become an active part of a social network such as Facebook, in order to integrate the learning experience and make it a meaningful part of their daily lives.

5. Proposal for the second edition: social feedback and student engagement

Results obtained after the first edition of the “Professional English” MOOC showed that students’ forum participation in the discussion topics proposed by the teaching team was much lower than desirable. This lack of ‘quality interaction’ among students and between the teacher and the students failed to provide the latter with a complete language learning experience and left them somewhat unsatisfied and frustrated. In our second edition of

the course, this experience has been taken into account so as to devise a way to enhance students' participation and foster written interaction in the target language. Given the fact that the use of social networks has increased over the last years (IAB Spain Research, 2013) and that one of them in particular, Facebook, is having a great impact on non-formal learning, the teaching team have decided to transfer part of the social component of the course - discussion topics - to this social network.

The educational shift from CALL (Computer Assisted Language Learning) to SMALL (Social Media Assisted Language Learning) is evident today, judging by the actual use of social networks in formal and non-formal education (Blattner & Fiori, 2011, 12; Zourou, 2012) and the numerous language learning communities that have been created over the last few years. Social networks, the most popular being Facebook, Twitter, and Google+, and language learning communities, such as Livemocha, Busuu, Sharedtalk, etc., share some basic features but differ mainly in their goals. Recent investigations about the integration of social networks, such as Facebook, as a complement to the language classroom context, show that they can provide immediate opportunities to collaborate with peers and instructors (Blattner & Fiori, 2009), and that students can engage in meaningful and enjoyable learning experiences (Mills, 2011). Stevenson & Liu (2010) also demonstrated that language learning sites like Livemocha, attract language students because of the possibilities they offer to learn directly from native speakers who, in turn, are interested in learning another language. Despite the proved benefits of the integration of social networks to language learning, there are some limitations concerning the optimum use of technology in education in general. Privacy is one of the most controversial issues in social networking. Students are prone to share everything on their social networks and do not separate their private from their academic lives, many times because they ignore the privacy settings that social networks offer (Schwartz, 2009). Also, based on web 2.0 features, such as the creation, sharing and manipulation of user-generated content, students collaborating in social networks can easily cheat. Boundaries between collaboration and appropriation are blurred and teachers find it difficult to verify authentic work.

While a progressive adaptation from teachers to this social type of learning is taking place, the appearance of MOOCs has given another turn to the current educational landscape (Madge et al., 2009). Since the MOOC phenomenon is very recent, there is little research discussing social networks integration in these massive courses, but it is a fact that some of them are using social networks as a complement to the course. This is the case of the connectivist MOOC "E-learning and Digital Cultures", offered by Coursera - <https://www.coursera.org>), which relies on the use of social media to build personal learning environments and create communities of learners, and invites participants to use Twitter and Flickr (an online photo managing and sharing application) to share their work. FutureLearn (<https://www.futurelearn.com>), a private company owned by the Open University, is integrating features, based on those of social networks, like the "following" from Twitter, into its own platform. Students taking a course on FutureLearn will be able to "follow" a course mate if his/ her comments are interesting. The possibility to add a comment to any piece of media or text given in the course and engage in a conversation with other course mates and instructors is similar to that of social networks.

So far, LMOOCs are integrating social media tools, such as Skype (<http://www.skype.com/>) and Google Hangouts (<http://www.google.es/intl/es-419/hangouts/>) to foster synchronous oral interaction among their participants (SpanishMOOC [Rapp, 2013]; English MOOC: Open Course for Spanish Speakers Learning English [Bryant, 2013]) but results are still to be known. The SpanishMOOC had discussion boards to facilitate interaction among participants and discuss over specific content on the course, but most interactions were in the learners' first language. In the "Professional English" MOOC, however, discussion boards provide students with an opportunity to develop their written production in the target language while sharing their views on topics related to the course subject.

A Facebook Group (henceforth, FG) will be created by the teaching team of the "Professional English" LMOOC, to be joined voluntarily by students who want to complement their language learning experience. Groups in Facebook provide closed spaces for people to communicate about shared interests (Facebook, 2013). Privacy settings are available in this social network, so that only members of a group can see posts and updates. Also, an administrator decides who can join a given group and approves or rejects members. These features among others, such as the different ways of communicating with participants (uploading and sharing files, photos, videos, etc.), has led the teaching team to choose a Facebook Group instead of a Facebook Page.

The "Professional English" FG has two main objectives: (1) providing an additional space for MOOC students to

enhance their learning experience with authentic materials, and (2) fostering social learning and student engagement (see Mills [2011] for an analysis of this concept). The figure of the teacher, in this case *group administrator*, will be present as an input provider and facilitator, thus, participating in discussions only to direct topics and deal with unresolved doubts. On a weekly basis, the teacher will start a new socio-cultural topic, related to a study unit in the MOOC, via text (questions, statements, etc.), photos, videos and audios, asking for students' participation. Register, behaviour and participation rules will be given to FG participants, in order to keep a safe and profitable environment. The FG will be opened simultaneously with the second edition of the MOOC, and an announcement on the course blog and via email will be made prior to the beginning of the course, in order to explain its aim to the students and to give further instructions. Students who may want to join the FG do not need to "friend" other members to participate, and their profiles will maintain the same privacy settings as they had before joining the group. The group will be private so that posts are only visible to other members, whose interventions will not appear on their own personal profiles. Only the LMOOC participants will be approved as members by the group administrator, thus ensuring the convenience and relevance of students' interventions.

Students will be encouraged to participate expressing their opinions on the presented topics, rating and commenting on others' contributions, and especially to help other group mates who might be having problems with their use of written English. Error correction by peers might discourage participants and will therefore not be the focus of the following edition of the course. Feedback between peers and groups of participants will be analysed in order to measure its impact on written production and students' engagement. The figure below shows the authors' proposal graphically:

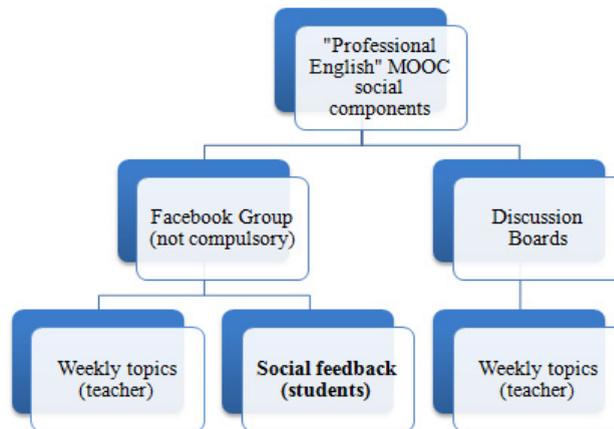


Fig 1. Social feedback integration in the second edition of the "Professional English" MOOC

6. Conclusion

This article has explored MOOCs in the current context of formal and particularly non-formal education and claimed their enormous potential for rich, flexible, and attractive collaborative learning and social interaction, which makes them suitable for language learning. The experience of the first edition of the first language MOOC in Spain undertaken by the authors was presented, together with the design of its forthcoming second edition on the basis of such experience. In particular, various course aspects have received particular attention that affects both types of participant, namely the teacher's change of roles and the students' participation and engagement. Furthermore, the unbalanced ratio between teachers and students in LMOOCs implies a didactic challenge related to one of the key steps of the foreign language process: feedback production/reception. A model for social feedback based on Facebook Groups has been proposed that aims to develop students' foreign language written skills in manageable spaces that stimulate interaction, the exchange of ideas and the build-up of pro-active personal learning, integrating the social ludic and motivational component with individual introspection and metacognition.

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