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E-Learning, MOOC e Lingue Straniere: Studi, Ricerche e Sperimentazioni
E-Learning, MOOCs and Foreign Languages: Research, Studies and Experiences

A cura di - Edited by
LAURA INCALCATERA McLOUGHLIN
ANDREA VILLARINI

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XARXAMOOC, THE FIRST LMOOC FOR STUDENTS OF XARXA VIVES. A MODEL PROPOSAL FOR FUTURE MOOCS FOR LANGUAGES FOR SPECIFIC PURPOSES

Abstract

This article presents the course entitled “XarxaMOOC: Introducció al llenguatge d'especialitat en les universitats de llengua catalana”, a project by the Xarxa Vives d'Universitats coordinated by the University of Alicante providing an open-access language learning model for LSP (Languages for Specific Purposes) in academic environments.

1. Introduction

Connectivist theorist Dave Cormier coined the term “MOOC” (Massive Open Online Course) in 2008 to refer to online courses where contents are accessible to all users and there are no limits on the number of people who can sign up. In 2011 Sebastian Thrun, from Stanford University, launched a MOOC in artificial intelligence with over 120,000 students enrolled. Prior to these e-learning landmarks, a major methodological trend with a focus on open access had already been developed: Open Course Ware (OCW). OCW is an international program devoted to publishing academic materials for further education and supported by flagship universities from around the world.

The University of Alicante was one of the ten founding universities of this program, which was launched in Spain and Latin America in 2007 [<http://ocw.ua.es/>]. So far, over two hundred courses with open-access material available to all users have been published. The UA's active participation, number of courses, language offer and content relevance were recognised with the Open Course Ware Consortium's first Reference Site Award in 2011 (Figure 1).

OCW is the institutional repository of a university consortium. The courses offered range from short courses to enhance student interaction to full courses with open-access teaching materials.

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Figure 1 - University of Alicante-OCW.

In some respects, the purpose of the University of Alicante's OCW program and platform is common to all MOOCs: increased access to high-quality courses and online learning for free; exchange and reciprocity between standardised and non-standardised education; free access to learning and courses in a number of languages; self-assessment and peer assessment.^[1]

The methodological tsunami caused by MOOCs led some to question the academic teaching model and even the learning models for the Twenty-first century. This paved the way for various platforms which hosted MOOCs to varying degrees of success^[2]. Coursera, from the United States, clearly remains one of the best-known platforms, a pioneering initiative with over 1,000 courses on offer in 2016. Particularly remarkable in Spain is *Miríada X*, a well-established platform launched by *Universia* in 2013. *Universia* is the largest network of Spanish and Portuguese-speaking universities, comprising 1,200 universities from 23 countries and more than 15 million university lecturers and students. The platform currently offers over 200 MOOCs and two accreditation pathways.

The new approach to learning and knowledge-building initially proposed by MOOCs focused on new content creation by students with an underlying principle based on interactive-collaborative teaching. In this sense, MOOCs respected two basic principles: an open-access training offer and interactive collaboration in courses based on participants' proposals (scalability).

MOOCs, however, opened up multiple and diverse possibilities. Today, commercial or semi-commercial platforms allow them to reach a greater audience^[3].

In the field of language teaching, there are already many different proposals which, in one way or another, try to adapt to this new course methodology. The growing interest in this area made us think of how the MOOC methodological revolution and the self-paced (autonomous and self-managed study), open and constructive learning they proposed could benefit language teaching and learning with a focus on effective and inter-

cultural communication skills. In other words, this kind of learning pays particular attention to skills which should also be constructive, collaborative and responsible, allowing learners to “do things” with languages in everyday life as well as in their future professional career. And yet, despite the many studies on MOOCs available nowadays, it is difficult to effectively design LMOOCs with a process and skill-based language learning approach in an online, open-access space. This is due to the fact that experiments involving LMOOCs are still in their early stages [4], which also explains the marked differences among the over 1,000 European LMOOCs in foreign language teaching/learning available on the Open Education Europa portal between 2012 and 2015. Spain, if compared with other European countries, has a remarkable LMOOC offer in Spanish for foreign language learning, with a total of 286 courses ranging from the humanities to language studies. Many of these LMOOCs are based on conventional and traditional audio-visual and written material, as it is a suitable format to test this new e-learning methodology. Furthermore, this format is easily recognised by users [5].

With the emergence of MOOCs, it would appear that other pedagogical formats for online language teaching are now outdated. Nevertheless, it is worthy to note that some digital language learning environments (namely Spanish [<http://ave.cervantes.es/>] and Catalan [<http://www.parla.cat/>]) can provide a wealth of top-quality methodological and technological resources that can be employed to design more interactive LMOOCs [6]. The reason for this is that their pedagogical approach focuses on autonomous user learning, peer assessment and the importance of tools to improve the learning process for both teachers and students.

In November 2013, the *Xarxa Vives d'Universitats*, with the University of Alicante as coordinator, launched the first MOOC in languages for specific purposes run in Catalan. The primary objective was to make language training in Catalan easier for future exchange and new students enrolled in any of the 22 universities within the Xarxa, located in 4 countries of the Mediterranean basin: Andorra, France, Italy and Spain. The second edition of *XarxaMOOC: Introducció al llenguatge d'especialitat en les universitats de llengua catalana* [<http://xarxamooc.uaedf.ua.es/preview>] (2014-2015 academic year), like the previous one, offered learning tools to give students an introduction to Catalan specialised languages and terminology of the main university disciplines, and also provided a representative cultural overview (educational system, geography, tourism, language, media, etc.) of the territories where *Xarxa Vives* universities are located.

2. Theoretical framework for creating Open-Access materials aimed at Second Languages and Languages for Specific Purposes

The pedagogical structure of XarxaMOOC was based on the notion that a language should be learned as the means whereby social relations are established, developed and maintained [7]. Therefore, language offers a system of options which are updated according to speakers' needs and the social context in which statements are produced, thus reinforcing the axiom that all speech acts take place on a social and cultural basis and that effective intercultural communication skills in personal, academic and professional environments are essential to language learning. New technologies and the potential methodology of MOOCs enable knowledge-building based on collaborative interaction, which could certainly enrich learning in a plurilingual social environment and improve language skills in university studies.

Within the theoretical framework underlying XarxaMOOC's language pedagogy, the metacognitive and metalinguistic dimensions are viewed as a bridge between specific language and its abstraction process. Studies on language interdependence developed by Cummins [8] and on language transfer, interlanguage and contrastive analysis for Iberian languages [9] have been employed, as they make it possible to develop cognitive strategies helping learners comprehend contents with a focus on their academic or professional activity, starting from a basic proficiency in the second language, their previous world knowledge and their first language.

Significant studies include those on multilingualism [10] and plurilingualism which point to a single skill allowing learners to develop better and suitable communication, language and discourse strategies [11], bearing in mind that plurilingual profiles do not necessarily entail rich pluricultural profiles [12]. There is frequent evidence that people learning a second language at basic levels can have a good command of a language system and, at the same time, ignore relevant details about the related culture.

The intercultural approach [13] to language as a process structuring and building a certain way of seeing, understanding and re-proposing reality [14] by means of a range of discourse-related possibilities enables effective discourse strategies. In our MOOC, intercultural skills focused on university and exchange students who needed to approach academic Catalan. For this reason, XarxaMOOC reconsidered the major role intercultural skills should play within communication skills applied to second language teaching or learning and, above all, with a view to related Languages for

Specific Purposes [15] from social and discourse-related language analysis to improve actional competence in academic or professional environments.

The new possibilities and formats offered by the Internet, with interconnected textual and audio-visual material, is an intercultural process in itself, regardless of the tools employed or the contents shared. For XarxaMOOC it was vital to go back to landmark studies on MOOCs [16] and LMOOCs [17], as well as studies examining new methodologies and technologies applied to e-learning and Second Languages [18].

3. XarxaMOOC: the first MOOC in Catalan language

Educación Digital del Futuro, a platform run by the University of Alicante, provides XarxaMOOC [<http://xarxamooc.uaedf.ua.es/preview>] with a space for ongoing teaching and technological experimentation (Figure 2).



Figure 2 - Main page of XarxaMOOC - second edition.

This MOOC, launched in 2013 under the University of Alicante's presidency of Xarxa Vives, was the product of a complex process. XarxaMOOC, which was originally intended to offer a course in Catalan for academic purposes, developed into a multi-module course targeted at all university students wishing to take any subject in Catalan.

Since its first edition, leading Spanish and international institutions and associations have taken part: Institut d'Estudis Catalans, Direcció General de Política Lingüística de la Generalitat de Catalunya, TERMCAT, Acadèmia

Valenciana de la Llengua, Research Chair for Science Dissemination (University of Valencia), University of Naples "L'Orientale", Federació Escola Valenciana, Softcatalà, Un Entre Tants and El Tempir, among others.

XarxaMOOC comprises 12 specific units or courses. As shown in Table 1, the first five are common to all students and the remaining seven are specific, according to the area of knowledge users wish to focus on.

- | |
|----------------------------------|
| 1. Presentation |
| 2. Education |
| 3. Language |
| 4. Media |
| 5. IT |
| 6. Law |
| 7. Geography and Tourism |
| 8. Economics |
| 9. Architecture |
| 10. Biology and Natural Sciences |
| 11. Medicine and Health Sciences |
| 12. Literature |

Table 1 - XarxaMOOC units.

Completing all 12 units is not required, as each has its own certification badge on Mozilla/badges. Each of these certifications lists the contents and skills covered in the unit. The Google Course Builder platform was employed because it was best suited to the objectives and structure of the course. Furthermore, to reach a greater audience and given that massive audiences are not specific, many of the videos, which are still accessible for free on a YouTube channel, were subtitled in English, French, Italian and Spanish.

Each unit aimed to provide a relevant sample of language for specific purposes and tap into the new ICT learning potential. Table 2 outlines the standard didactic structure of each unit. All sections of each unit included comprehension activities. The 12 units feature over 100 teaching videos specifically made for the course, with interviews with specialists and leading figures in Catalan culture, recorded lessons, lecture models and specific sessions with the contents of each unit.

- Unit presentation
- Teacher's lecture
- Interview with a specialist
- Language for Specific Purposes
- Terminology activities
- Specialized discourse
- Example of class or lecture
- Magazines and blogs
- ICT/LKT tools
- Catalan learning assessment test

Table 2 - Contents of XarxaMOOC units.

XarxaMOOC was one of fourteen MOOCs selected for funding by Catalonia's Office for Universities. This selection of projects made up a research group to share an experience whereby a MOOC, called #14MOOCs14, would be created. According to the final report and the annexes [19], it was one of the most productive courses in the Catalan language and received a number of awards recognising its quality and the interest of the teaching material. At present, it is still available to anyone who wants to complete it, as part of the UA's OCW.

This model has served as a basis for various projects run by the University of Alicante at different stages of development, focused on literary contents [20]. In addition, it was even taken as a model for projects on Spanish for specific purposes on open virtual platforms targeted at native Italian university students and medical doctors [21].

4. Conclusions

Ever since Cormier coined the term MOOC in 2008 and Thrun proved actual massive potential of this type of courses in 2011, many universities have taken MOOCs as a model for teaching innovation. In this regard, the University of Alicante became a reference in MOOC design throughout the 2012-2013 and 2013-2014 academic years. This was possible thanks to UniMOOC, focused on the digital economy and a pioneering model which has enjoyed worldwide success, and *XarxaMOOC*, developed in cooperation with the *Xarxa Vives d'Universitats* and an educational flagship in the Catalan language.

The concept of connectivism has been mentioned in this work as a new pedagogical approach or a new learning theory. In our view, even if it is not easy to apply this concept to language learning, it is the best principle seek-

ing to explain – and above all integrate – the many changes technology has brought about in education in the Twenty-first century.

The theoretical framework of this article highlights that *XarxaMOOC* is a new LMOOC model which can advance towards more interactive proposals. It also points out that MOOCs can still make major contributions to language learning courses.

Obviously, interuniversity cooperation existed long before the Internet, MOOCs or connectivism appeared. Those who took part in their development, however, have indeed witnessed how knowledge generation and exchange have evolved in less than twenty years. This cooperation also sets the foundations for all connected learning where LMOOCs represent a key space for development to improve communication between users of different languages and enhance plurilingualism.

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