

MASSIVE OPEN ONLINE COURSES (MOOCs): THE PROMISE OF NON-FORMAL EDUCATION IN ENGLISH LANGUAGE LEARNING

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Abstract: Massive Open Online Courses (MOOCs) have a great potential for contemporary higher education in the era of distance teaching and learning. Learners all around the world enrol on MOOCs to participate in courses which meet their age, skills, interests and study programs. There is a great variability in participants' motivation when focusing on their second language learning skills and knowledge. This paper examines the preference of English language participants for MOOCs and also proposes the courses in English language by the most relevant institutions building on participants' needs. Engagement in MOOCs is one of the strongest predictive features for the course completion, while learners' motivation to be involved in a non-formal education affirms their ability to focus on the lifelong language learning.

Keywords: Foreign language learning, higher education, MOOCs, non-formal education, online courses, self-directed learning

1 Introduction

Massive Open Online Courses (MOOCs) are online courses developed in a virtual environment for students and professionals playing the role of an additional platform towards face to face learning. MOOCs offer courses in all possible fields focusing on expanding knowledge, skills and attitudes. Nowadays they function as a part of non-formal learning, but there is a high demand on transformation of this type of learning into a fully accepted and acknowledged element in formal education.

MOOCs may become an inspirational source for students of English language and literature in teaching study programme. Especially in the era of corona virus pandemics, non-formal learning functions as an important platform for graduate students who are looking for their future carrier advancements as a part of lifelong learning. The paper presents a research on MOOCs interest among English language and literature students and offers new insights into its implementation into the higher education environment.

1.1 Formal, Informal and Non-formal Learning

Formal learning takes place in a traditional setting, namely an educational institution. The learning is a focus of "the acquisition of knowledge, skills and competences." It is validated, certificated and intentional (Cedefop, 2008, as cited in Werquin, 2010, p. 21). Nowadays we designate it as formal education and it is generally accepted that it is compulsory for children and regulated according to the laws of the state. Universities also offer formal learning, but it is up to the students whether they enrol in the study programme offered to the public. Formal education is the attention of the Ministry of Education, which is responsible for preparation of tests for national testing in primary and secondary education - Monitor and Maturita exams in Slovakia.

Informal learning "results from daily activities related to work, family or leisure. It is not organised or structured in terms of objectives, time or learning support. It is in most cases unintentional from the learner's perspective" (Cedefop, 2008, as cited in Werquin, 2010, p. 22). It is an experience we obtain by doing something new or by doing it repeatedly. Because the learning process is unintentional, the learner is not aware of it. This type of learning is a part of our life so we cannot set any goals to achieve it or assess it. Nevertheless, informal learning is very important in acquiring new skills and definitely can be considered as the forefather of formal learning.

Non-formal learning is much harder to classify, but it is commonly acknowledged that it is a learning process which is organized and planned by a learner, on the other hand, other activities may not be considered having learning objectives. In fact, a learner always learns more than he or she intends and this extra knowledge or skill makes this process exciting and stimulating (Werquin, 2010, p. 23). This might be the reason why non-formal learning is nowadays so popular among adult learners who would like to learn something new but do not want to go back to school they already finished years ago because of time and money issues. Nevertheless, the need to assimilate to the ever-changing realities of the contemporary globalised world with new social, economic, digital and other competences makes learning a number one necessity.

Therefore, lifelong learning currently becomes an important part of our professional and personal lives. Lifelong learning is defined as "development after formal education: the continuing development of knowledge and skills that people experience after formal education and throughout their lives" (Encarta, 2008, as cited in London, 2021, online). The Council of the European Union adopted a Recommendation on key competences for lifelong learning in 2018. In the publication entitled *Key competences for lifelong learning* (European Commission, 2019), eight competences are presented:

- Literacy competence
- Multilingual competence
- Mathematical competence and competence in science, technology and engineering
- Digital competence
- Personal, social and learning to learn competence
- Citizenship competence
- Entrepreneurship competence
- Cultural awareness and expression competence

Each competence combines knowledge, skills and attitudes. It is quite essential to be able to identify what to know and what to do in each competence. However, direction towards creating positive attitudes has become equally vital, if not the most vital. It shows how psychology influences our lives through our belief in success.

The aforementioned competences are to be obtained throughout attending formal and non-formal education and via experience and practice. They all are equally significant and complex in their nature; moreover they reflect our adaptability and creativity in problem-solving situations. Only high quality education and training can provide opportunities for all people, including refugees, migrants, socially excluded persons and minorities. Unfortunately, even though states in the European Union are obliged to serve such education to all people, access to equal education is often limited by age, social class, income, religion or time. In that case, digital competence seems to be crucial in assisting to get the most out of educational process and especially online learning which makes a wider impact on acquiring knowledge, skills and attitudes among learners.

1.2 MOOCs - Online Learning for Everyone

MOOCs - massive open online courses - are online courses offered by educational institutions to anyone interested to learn something new. The courses are free of charge, open to the public, available to any person after registering to the website or platform, finally, all courses are provided fully online. Various types of MOOCs learners can be found amid the platforms. Most of them are learners who study for professional development and continuing education. Then there are university students who are looking for a hobby or try to widen their interests (<https://www.openuped.eu/93-about-moocs>).

In the context of the European Union, MOOCs are organized under EADTU – European Association of Distance Teaching Universities. EADTU is co-funded by the European Commission and its Erasmus+ Programme. The organization has a membership of 25 European countries, covering 200 non-profit open and distance teaching universities. It coordinates the European MOOC Consortium (EMC) representing 400 higher education institutions and over 3000 MOOCs. EADTU aims to organize events in various projects which promote online, digital and virtual learning, interaction and intercultural communication among nations and cultures in the European and non-European geographical context (<https://eadtu.eu>).

Virtual mobility is an academic mobility in which students and teachers at universities study or teach by enhancing digital tools and platforms. It complements physical mobility in the form of face to face, blended or virtual forms of learning. For instance, the Moonlite project - MOOCs for Social Inclusion & Employability, supports refugees, migrants and students in their access to higher education and employability.

There are two major virtual mobility projects running nowadays for university students: Virtual Mobility (VM) and Open Education (OE) which emerged into Open Virtual Mobility (2017-2020). They cover virtual mobility and open education in contemporary high education perspective. The aim of the projects is to find out the good practices of using virtual reality in educational environment, especially in Erasmus+ exchange programme. Upon the decision of the European Commission, the learners should be able to transfer credits obtained in the course within the European Credit Transfer System (ECTS) (<https://eadtu.eu>).

Opening up of universities towards virtual learning is still slow and financially demanding. A group of scientists and educators conducted a pilot research financed by the EU based on content mapping study and found out the following open virtual mobility competences:

- Intercultural skills and attitudes - intercultural awareness of own culture and identity as well as awareness about other cultures;
- Networked learning – ability to learn and communicate in a digital social network;
- Active self-regulated learner skills – ability to learn at own pace successfully;
- Media and digital literacy – ability to search and use the quality resources;
- Autonomy-driven learning – independent learning mode, self-directive attitude of a student;
- Interactive and collaborative learning in an authentic international environment – developing teamwork skills;
- Open-mindedness – open and accepting attitude towards peers and teachers (Rajagopal et al., 2020).

Based on the competences, learners can develop knowledge, skills and attitudes necessary for the contemporary professional needs in the European Union states. The Open VM Learning Hub hosts a set of eight mini-MOOCs, in each of the eight competency areas. The courses usually start in March, April and May and are accessible for registered students and teachers: <https://hub.openvirtualmobility.eu>

The enrolment process is defined accordingly: before starting the MOOC, each student is asked to take a quiz that pre-assesses his/her skills. According to the score obtained, he/she will be suggested to start from one of the three levels: the foundation level, intermediate level or advanced level. In each level, he/she will read texts, e-books or PDFs, watch videos and forums. Once all the tasks are completed, he/she will complete an e-assessment in order to obtain a badge that certifies his/her skills.

MOOCs have not yet become a standard at many universities. Online teaching is often provided by Moodle platform, Microsoft Teams or by online video conferencing systems such as Jitsi Meet, Google Meet or Zoom. However, being affected by

the corona virus pandemics, global trend of MOOCs might develop into a new inspiration not only for many institutions providing mostly face to face education, but also for students, who have also realized that learning is a way of thinking and is not set in a physical environment only. Overall, if there is someone eager to teach and someone eager to learn, any learning can become a success.

1.3 Global MOOCs

Although there is an ongoing effort of the EU to expand virtual education at universities and bring self-regulated learning into a limelight from 2012, there are global MOOCs which set up the new trends of online learning in the world nowadays. Selected platforms best for English language and literature learning are listed here:

- Coursera (USA) - <https://www.coursera.org>
- EdX (USA) - <https://www.edx.org>
- Udemy (USA) - <https://www.udemy.com>
- FutureLearn (UK) - <https://www.futurelearn.com>
- Alison (Ireland) - <https://alison.com>

What makes some of these providers of virtual education successful is the cooperation with top universities and cultural institutions which attract new learners. For example, edX has more than 160 member universities and institutions and Coursera has more than 200 cooperating universities and companies. To mention just few of them, the following universities provide courses in English language and literature:

- Berkeley University of California
- Harvard University
- Stanford University
- University of Michigan
- Boston University

Two types of MOOCs have been established during the evolution of online learning. cMOOCs are courses with no set curriculum, process, or particular method. The focus is on community and connections; connectivist learning theory forms the background of learning, which is based on Siemens' research (*Connectivism: A learning theory for the digital age, 2005*; as cited in Nethi, Murray, 2014, p. 660). In xMOOCs, the focus is on mastering the content of the course. Assessment of the course is done by automated quizzes and tests because there are thousands of learners enrolled. Teachers are trying to prepare materials which cover as much information as possible in an interesting way. High number of enrolled students on the other hand leads to high drop-out rates, especially in courses with free access.

Typically, there are four main learning activities designed for MOOCs (Bang et al. 2016, p. 124):

- Assignments from teachers
- Teacher video lectures
- Student assignments and productions
- Communication and discussion

Even though the learning environment is digital and students mostly view presentations and videos, the role of the teacher is still crucial – his/her voice, accent and positive attitude while presenting the topic affect the overall likeability of the course more than it might be expected.

In language and literature oriented courses, academic degrees are not usually offered, but some institutions offer TESOL certificates after successful completion of the course. There are also courses offering study skills at the university level – academic writing, academic research, learning online, etc.

1.4 MOOCs in English Language and Literature

Materials and Methods

The research was conducted among the students of English Language and Literature teaching study programme. There were 36 undergraduate students and 23 graduate students who filled in the questionnaire based on their interest in taking a MOOC course during the corona virus pandemics: March-September 2020. The questionnaire was also focused on individual preferences of students based on their teaching study programme – courses covering English language and literature.

Results

The following tables – Table 1 and Table 2 show interest of students in MOOCs enrolment. When comparing the interest of undergraduate and graduate students, the results show that graduate students are more interested in online learning than undergraduate students.

Table 1: Interest in MOOCs – undergraduate students

| INTERESTED IN MOOCs | YES | NO |
|-----------------------|-----|----|
| UNDERGRADUATE FEMALES | 13 | 13 |
| UNDERGRADUATE MALES | 4 | 6 |
| TOTAL | 17 | 19 |

Source: own elaboration

Table 2: Interest in MOOCs – graduate students

| INTERESTED IN MOOCs | YES | NO |
|---------------------|-----|----|
| GRADUATE FEMALES | 10 | 2 |
| GRADUATE MALES | 9 | 2 |
| TOTAL | 19 | 4 |

Source: own elaboration

Table 3 and Table 4 show interest of undergraduate and graduate students in specific courses related to their study programme. The selection of courses was based on the modules taught in the programme. The modules in the tables are listed in accordance with the results of their interest. While for undergraduate students courses on “Skills” are the most important ones, for graduate students “Translation and interpreting” seems to be the most essential one.

Table 3: Interest in courses – undergraduate students

| INTERESTED IN COURSES | UNDER GRADUATE FEMALES | UNDER GRADUATE MALES | TOTAL |
|--|------------------------|----------------------|-------|
| Skills (reading, writing, listening, speaking) | 15 | 4 | 19 |
| Translation and interpreting | 9 | 6 | 15 |
| Literature | 12 | 1 | 13 |
| History, life and institutions of Anglophone countries | 9 | 3 | 12 |
| Intercultural communication | 9 | 2 | 11 |
| Grammar | 5 | 5 | 10 |
| Phonetics and phonology | 3 | 4 | 7 |
| English for specific purposes | 5 | 1 | 6 |
| Stylistics | 5 | 0 | 5 |
| Other | 2 | 1 | 3 |

Source: own elaboration

Table 4: Interest in courses – graduate students

| INTERESTED IN COURSES | GRADUATE FEMALES | GRADUATE MALES | TOTAL |
|--|------------------|----------------|-------|
| Translation and interpreting | 7 | 8 | 15 |
| Skills (reading, writing, listening, speaking) | 6 | 5 | 11 |
| Grammar | 4 | 3 | 7 |
| Intercultural communication | 5 | 2 | 7 |
| English for specific purposes | 3 | 3 | 6 |
| Phonetics and phonology | 2 | 3 | 5 |
| Literature | 3 | 1 | 4 |
| Other | 1 | 2 | 3 |
| History, life and | 0 | 2 | 2 |

| institutions of Anglophone countries | | | |
|--------------------------------------|---|---|---|
| Stylistics | 2 | 0 | 2 |

Source: own elaboration

2 Discussion

Online learning via MOOCs is a unique phenomenon which gains its proponents in a digital environment very fast. At the beginning of the 21st century, multimedia and CALL were leading mediums for computer based instructions in foreign language teaching (Badinská, 2009, p. 277). With the rise of internet connection accessibility among the general public, universities and companies started to offer online learning on a global scale.

The aim of the research was to gather information about interest of students of English language and literature teaching programme on online learning as well as to find out what courses do students find important for their future carrier and would like to enrol in. The results showed that graduate students are more interested in MOOCs as an additional source of learning. It seems that they are more motivated to take the courses in order to obtain certificates which they would benefit from in the future. On the other hand, the results from interest of undergraduate students show that they are less interested in MOOCs.

“Skills in English language” and “Translation and interpreting” are perceived as the courses with the top importance by both groups. However, there is a difference when it comes to the third place; for undergraduate students a course on “Literature” and for graduate students a course on “Grammar” dominates. Taking into account the aforementioned results with what online platforms offer to our students, we come into conclusion that there are many courses on learning skills in English language but none in practising translation and interpreting. Also, there are many courses on literature but a few on grammar practice.

The following list shows courses offered by edX to illustrate the variability of subjects for students of English language and literature:

Education and Teacher Training Courses

Understanding Classroom Interaction
Blended Learning with edX
Intercultural Competency in Education
Academic Writing for Clarity and Meaning
Developing Course Content and Teaching Materials

English as a Second Language (ESL) Courses

General Academic English
Upper-intermediate English
English for Journalists

Writing

AP® English Literature & Composition – Part 1: Stories
AP® English Literature & Composition – Part 2: Poems
Creative Writing

In the following tables – Table 5, Table 6 and Table 7 – three courses on introduction to poetry are briefly presented. The aim of this presentation is to show the difference between three platforms for students and also variability students have when deciding on enrolling on the MOOC.

Table 5: FutureLearn - Poetry: How to Read a Poem

| FutureLearn | |
|-------------------------|--|
| Name of the institution | University of York, United Kingdom |
| Name of the course | Poetry: How to Read a Poem |
| Length of the course | 4 weeks |
| Effort | 4 hours per week |
| Access to the course | Free access to this course for 6 weeks |
| Price | 49 € with access to this course for as long as it's on FutureLearn; Access to this course's tests as well as a print and digital Certificate of Achievement once you're eligible |

| | |
|---------|---|
| Website | https://www.futurelearn.com/courses/how-to-read-a-poem-york |
|---------|---|

Source: own elaboration

Table 6: edX - What is Poetry? An Introduction to Literary Analysis

| edX | |
|-------------------------|---|
| Name of the institution | The University of Newcastle, Australia |
| Name of the course | What is Poetry? An Introduction to Literary Analysis |
| Length of the course | 3 weeks |
| Effort | 2-3 hours per week |
| Access to the course | Free access to the course |
| Price | 40 €with a verified certificate |
| Website | https://www.edx.org/course/what-is-poetry |

Source: own elaboration

Table 7: UdeMy - How To Analyse Poetry - English Literature Short Course

| UdeMy | |
|-------------------------|---|
| Name of the institution | Independent Education Consultant |
| Name of the course | How To Analyse Poetry - English Literature Short Course |
| Length of the course | 5 weeks |
| Effort | 13 lectures – more than 1 hour overall |
| Access to the course | No free access |
| Price | 9,99 €with Certificate of completion |
| Website | https://www.udemy.com/course/how-to-analyse-poetry-short-course/ |

Source: own elaboration

Two courses are offered by universities and one course is offered by an independent education consultant. All three courses are short – 3-5 weeks and it takes only a few hours to study the materials. Access to two courses is free and one is a paid course, which does not correspond with the idea of MOOCs to represent free courses available to everyone. Availability of courses is questionable, because some of them can only be found in archives and some of them are currently closed and will be open only in a couple of months from now.

3 Conclusion

Massive Open Online Courses (MOOCs) as a platform for non-formal learning is nowadays a highly expanding field in global educational environment. Students have many possibilities to choose and study for free, in their own free time and also the amount of courses offered to them is extremely wide. It is the role of the educators, teachers and education consultants to make them aware of all the possibilities for their future carrier. The research conducted on undergraduate and graduate students of English language and literature in teaching programme showed that graduate students are eager to enrol in MOOCs and use the possibilities they offer. They would like to expand their knowledge in English language skills and Translation and interpreting, but also in Grammar and Literature. Virtual teaching and learning might become common in the future, but in the optics of contemporary corona virus pandemics we should be aware of the fact that the crucial role in educational process still bears the teacher who is the best motivator and facilitator on the path to knowledge, skills and attitudes.

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