



MOOCs and Adult Language Learners

Silvia Matthies Baraibar

HEOI Bilbao (Spain)

Abstract

ICT and education, lifelong learning, adult education and language learning have been targeted by the European Commission Department for Education and Training as priority areas for the years 2014-2020. The aim of this paper is to present an experience carried out at HEOI Bilbao, where adult English learners at the level B2 and C1 were encouraged to use MOOCs offered by mainstream platforms as part of their process of language learning.

The results of this experience show that although MOOCs are not a substitute for more traditional-style lessons, they can be successfully used as a supplementary resource for adult language learners at B2/C1 levels. MOOCs are very popular with these students because of their friendly design and their accessibility. As there is a wide range of MOOCs on offer, students can pick those courses that best suit their professional needs and individual interests. The European Commission for Education and Training policies stress the importance of two essential competencies - the ability to communicate in more than one language and ICT skills. Using MOOCs as a tool for L2 learning enables and supports the simultaneous development of both competencies. It also makes language learning meaningful for students because it is precisely the language they are learning what gives them access to other learning experiences relevant to their needs.

From the teachers' viewpoint, MOOCs are an excellent learning environment that allows students to access an unlimited amount of linguistic material of excellent quality and can be used to promote students' autonomous learning. Nevertheless we should not forget that MOOCs have their limitations as language learning tools - above all limitations regarding the specific skills and sub-skills we want our students to acquire. Our experience shows that MOOCs are particularly successful when we want students to improve their listening comprehension and written interaction in semi-formal contexts.

1. Introduction

ICT and education, lifelong learning, adult education and language learning have been targeted by the European Commission Department for Education and Training as priority areas for the years 2014-2020 [1]. The aim of this paper is to present an experience carried out at HEOI Bilbao, where adult English learners at the level B2 and C1 were encouraged to use MOOCs offered by mainstream platforms as part of their process of language learning.

According to the scales published in The Common European Framework of Reference for Languages about receptive activities and strategies, B2 level speakers can follow the essentials of lectures, talks and reports and other forms of academic/professional presentation which are propositionally and linguistically complex [2]. It follows that students who are working towards a C1 certificate in English, and who, consequently, have already achieved B2 level proficiency, should be able to successfully process the linguistic materials commonly found in a MOOC.

The students who took part in this experience were adults. Most of them either held a university degree or were working towards one. They were part-time students; many had also professional and family commitments, and had to struggle to balance study, work and family demands. The first aim of the experience was to assess if MOOCs taught in English could be a supplementary second language learning tool for these students. They are inexpensive, accessible, user-friendly and allow students to learn at their own pace, and at the time and location of their choice. As there is a great number of MOOCs on offer on different platforms, students can choose the courses that best suit their professional needs and individual interests.

There were several questions I wanted to answer too: are MOOCs attractive enough for C1 students so they decide to spend some of their after-class time completing one of them? How difficult is it going to be for students at this level to complete a whole course working on their own? What should be the teacher's role? How much class time should be devoted to working with MOOCs? And if students working towards a C1 English certificate can benefit from MOOCs, can students working towards a B2 certificate benefit too?



2. MOOCs and C1 students

In October 2013 a total of 334 students working towards a C1 level English certificate were interviewed about their ICT skills and their previous experience with MOOCs. Although 98% of them had the ICT skills and technology necessary to do one those courses, only 4% of the students interviewed had heard of MOOCs. Our students were invited to an hour-long presentation about MOOCs where they were also shown how to use the MOOC platform Coursera and encouraged to register. In a subsequent survey, 97.53 % of the students said they had found the presentation interesting and 95.07% said they had found it useful.

Once assessed the interest of the students for these online courses, two groups were formed. Group A, consisting of 224 students, were asked to complete two listening comprehension exercises the week after the presentation. Those two listening comprehension exercises were based on videos from unit 1 in one of the courses active at the moment. The 53 students in Group B were not required to perform those tasks. Two weeks later, 31.03% of the students in group A had registered in one MOOC, whereas only 22.64% of students in group B had. Interestingly, a majority of the students decided not to register in the course they had seen in class/during the presentation, but to look for another course that interested them more.

In May 2014 the students were asked again about the MOOCs they had registered in. While the typical completion rate of MOOC students is about 10% [3], with 2012 data from Coursera suggesting only about 7% to 8% of the students who sign up typically complete the course [4], our students' completion rate was remarkably high: 40.17%, which accounts for the interest of our students and the feasibility of using MOOCs as additional material for independent work.

Informal assessment showed that students were mainly interested in watching videos and answering quizzes, and they showed only occasional interest in reading written texts- which are often offered as additional material in MOOCs. They completed the written assignments necessary to obtain a certificate, and although they visited the discussion forums and chats that were part of the courses, they took active part in them only occasionally.

As a conclusion, MOOCs proved an attractive tool for our students. It is not practical to use a whole MOOC in class, both because MOOCs are too lengthy for regular classes and because students show a strong preference to choose the specific MOOC they want to do. However, devoting one extra hour of class after the presentation (for the listening exercises) increases almost a fifty percent the likelihood of students at this level decide to register in one MOOC. Finally, we must remember that students who are encouraged to work on MOOCs on their own are going to be working mainly on their listening comprehension skills.

3. MOOCs and B2 students

In May 2014, 85 students working towards their B2 English certificate were asked to do the first of the listening comprehension exercises C1 students in group A had done in October 2013. It was a multiple choice listening comprehension exercise based on a 6 minute long video lecture. The exercise had 8 questions, and 64 students, 75.29% of the whole group, answered 6 or more of those questions correctly. This seemed to indicate students working at this level are able to do MOOCs.

Another concern at this point was if an increase in class time devoted to MOOCs would result in a higher percentage of students doing this type of courses out of class. Thus, in March 2015, a new group of students working towards a B2 certificate were asked to take part in a more sophisticated scheme.

During one of their class sessions these students were given a one-hour presentation on MOOCs and how to use two MOOC platforms: Coursera and Edx. During a second class session, the students were asked to do a listening exercise based on the introductory videos of five courses active on those platforms. Students were encouraged to register in one of those five courses and/or look for any other course in those platforms that could be of their interest. There were other three twenty-minute long sessions, schedules with a two week interval between them as part of their regular classes. During those sessions, students discussed in small groups the work they had done in their MOOCs. Those students who were not willing to work on MOOCs on their own were asked to do other type of listening exercises at home and comment on them with their group mates.

In May 2015, 46 students who had participated in the experience were asked to complete a survey. 33 students (71.73% of the whole group) had registered in at least one MOOC. 8 of those 33 students (24.24%) had registered in two or more MOOCs. 12 students (26.66% of the whole group) had completed or was about to complete one MOOC and 5 students had completed or was about to complete two MOOCs, which results in 17 students (36.96% of the whole group and 51.51% of the students who had registered in a MOOC) having completed at least one MOOC after two months of the beginning of the experience. Completion rate was higher than it had been in the group of C1



students. B2 students in this last group had registered in a total of 46 MOOCs and had completed 22 of them, which accounted for a completion rate of 47.82%. Notwithstanding the relatively small number of students who took part in this experience, the results obtained seem to point that a moderate increase in the number of class time hours devoted to MOOCs (up to three hours an academic year) results in a higher completion rate.

Should MOOCs be used with adult B2 students? MOOCs seem to be very popular among them. After the experience, 82.22% of the students who took part said that they believed working with MOOCs could help them develop their English proficiency. However, 28.88% said the language used in the MOOCs they registered in was too difficult for them to understand. It seems that we need to be careful if we want to use MOOCs with adult students working towards a B2 certificate. Unless the group of students we are working with is homogeneous, there will always be some students who are closer to B1 than B2 proficiency levels in the CEFR scales and MOOCs may be still too linguistically advanced for them.

4. Conclusions

MOOCs in English can be effectively used with adult students with some higher education background who are working towards a C1/B2 certificate in English. My experience is that a regular MOOC includes so much learning material that students should be asked to work on them on their own outside the classroom. If we make sure that students know MOOCs are there for their use, we allow students to choose a MOOC that interests them and we provide a minimum of classroom support, a significant number of these students will choose to do them in their free time. Teachers should remember, however, that individual work with MOOCs is going to be especially useful for those students who want to improve their listening comprehension skills and/or want to work on language related to their field of expertise.

References

- [1] European Commission/EACEA/Eurydice, 2013. Education and Training in Europe 2020: Responses from the EU Member States. Eurydice Report. Brussels: Eurydice. ISBN 978-92-9201-512-1 doi:10.2797/49490, pp. 58,59.
- [2] Council of Europe, The Common European Framework of Reference for Languages, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 2001, p. 67.
- [3] Lewin, T. "Universities Abroad Join Partnerships in the Web" New York Times, 2013.
- [4] "Moocs on the Move: How Coursera Is Disrupting the Traditional Classroom" (text and video) Knowledge @ Warton, University of Pennsylvania, 2012.