Can MOOCs Be a New and Effective Instrument in Teaching Languages?

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Abstract

In Russia all the system of higher education has to admit that foreign language proficiency is no longer a luxury and it is becoming an important tool to implement goals of university development. In this regard, new methods and techniques of foreign language teaching are highly demanded, which would significantly improve the language competency of both students and academics. A search for effective methods to enhance foreign language teaching makes the author analyze Massive Open Online Courses (MOOCs) with the aim to study possibilities of their integration as a ready educational package into the existing system of language education in Russian higher educational institutions. The term MOOC has become a part of university vocabulary. These courses have been embroiled in controversy with regards to their efficacy and role in relation to traditional in-person university classes. Based on the research findings, the author concludes that it is irrational to use the resources as embedded components without significant adjustment to the conditions existing in the functioning system.

Introduction

Nowadays, one of the relevant objectives the Russian universities are facing is to enhance Russian higher education (HE) which is associated with recognition by the global university society and increasing competitiveness of the Russian universities on the world education market. To do it universities have to reach the maximum value on such significant indicators that consist of university rankings, among them: academic reputation, employers assessment, the number of foreign specialists involved, percentage of international students, and citation index [1].

It should be admitted that achievement of high indicators is quite a difficult objective for the leading Russian universities, which is explained by some reasons: 1) poor integration of HE system into the world academic community, 2) weak cooperation of scientific schools with the world's leading research centers, and 3) a low level of foreign language proficiency.

The reality dictates the necessity to undertake some initiatives to solve these problems. Among these initiatives are: international conferences and seminars, inviting foreign academicians to run lectures and practices to create a prototype of language environment, increasing the publishing activity in English to make scientific results and practical achievements more available for the world professional community. Accumulating all, the leading Russian universities hope to improve the language proficiency, identifying it as a "fast victory". It might be the fast victory if not the restriction with the time factor, 5 years. This means in 5 years all university staff will reach the level of C2 according to the Common European Framework for Languages [2].

In this regard, it has become relevant to search for the ways how to optimize foreign language teaching. One option of it is launching innovative technologies which involve a variety of recourses, among them are MOOCs.

MOOCS as a new field for educators to research

What is MOOC? It is an online course aimed at unlimited participation and open access via the web. In addition to traditional course material such as videos, readings, and problem sets, MOOCs provide interactive user forums that help build a community for students, professors, and teaching assistants [3]. Meanwhile university managers debate whether MOOCs are good or not for HE, students are signing up MOOCs every day, building their proficiency on their own, choosing what they need for the future career.

All mentioned above made us examine opportunities of MOOCs in order to integrate them as a variable component into the entire language course. But before speaking about possibilities and mechanisms that we can recommend, we need to formalize all processes that are involved into the language teaching model. As known, each educational model has changeable and unchangeable conditions.

To the unchangeable conditions we refer: line schedule, curriculum, number of academic hours (classroom and non-classroom hours), education goals and outcomes in compliance with the Principal Education Program (PEP) [4]. For the changeable conditions we specify: study materials, didactic tools, education format (classroom/online work), the system of management and cooperation between participants of the education process.

As a set of learning outcomes for a foreign language course, it is determined to abilities:

- to find, extract, analyze, interpret, and represent significant professional information in a foreign language in oral or written form,
- to present research findings and take part in scientific conferences in a foreign language,
- to write research papers, theses, abstracts, and synopses in a foreign language,
- to cooperate with representatives of different cultures.

The analysis of didactic opportunities for MOOCs is based on the assumption that integration of MOOCs as a variable component into foreign language training will provide sufficient improvements for learning outcomes within a short period of time. Learning outcomes discussed above will be considered as outcome criteria. The compliance of MOOCs courses with these criteria will be checked.

The basic principle of functioning MOOCs is to make education accessible. According to the standards of electronic education, MOOC courses use quite a simple teaching model: short lectures (10-15 minutes), tests with automatic checking, materials recommended for self-study work [5]. The basic didactic principle of MOOCs is a high level of interaction between listeners provided by the discussion of lecture materials as well as cross-evaluation and participation in forums. A necessary condition of interaction is a good knowledge of English [3].

One problem still exists - the knowledge gained by students is confirmed by means of certificate. The platforms issue certificates such as "statement of completion", which certify completion of the course and do not provide any information about the level to define student's knowledge. Platform holders do not have official agreements with universities to grant MOOCs academic credits. Universities, in their turn, do not rush to do that [6]. So, we can state that today MOOCs demonstrate high percent of unfinished education, only 9% of users complete the programs [5] but in nearest future it can be changed completely.

Analysis and results

At first glance, everything looks perfect: MOOCs' education format corresponds to the didactic goal; education environment is clear and acceptable. However, if MOOCs are considered as a component to be integrated into the existing system, then it raises a question: whether the management tools of this system are capable of adapting a new component under their requirements and conditions.

As mentioned above, any system has changeable and unchangeable conditions. Traditionally, the beginning of academic courses in Russian universities is determined by the beginning of a semester, whereas the number of academic hours is determined by a curriculum of an educational program. Even if we consider the case when a part of the traditional course is replaced by a MOOC, which can be integrated as a variable component, we cannot ignore the functioning conditions of the entire system.

It should be noticed that MOOCs' curricular do not provide for a long-term planning. Open platforms do not function in a cyclic mode. Courses can be offered either every 3-6 months or only once. Thus, a holistic approach to a curriculum planning in a traditional way is not appropriate. It is possible only if universities are ready to make annual renewal of the content of their academic courses and to change line schedules. However, it is a labor-consuming process.

Platforms can partially provide conditions to develop communication skills, by means of participating in forums. A forum assumes that opinions are changed in a free format. The basic goal is to provide cross-studying and assessment focused on expanding professional knowledge and developing skills for critical analysis.

It is important that an enormous number of people and representatives of various cultures and languages take part in discussions. As a result, students become motivated and they feel being involved in global discussion of professional issues which helps to eliminate language barriers, provides conditions for language immersion and smoothes cultural differences.

However, communication in forums is done in writing only, with the lack of speaking. At the same time, forum is a type of computer-mediated communication which is not perceived as a written discourse. It does not establish high-level requirements for "language quality"; it allows to use not only lexical but punctuation neologisms. Slang and professional jargon are accepted as communication tools that everyone understands. The following examples can prove it.

Sample (introducing yourself): *"I'm 26 years old, from Ukraine (have anyone ever heard about it), have no technical education, but master's degree in international economic and interpreting. I'm here due to my decision to learn more about database and the stuff. Hope this course in modelling will help me to expand my area of thought. So let's look how far I can get.* (Note: the text of messages is taken without any changes).

Thus, a forum can hardly be seen as a ground to develop language skills. It can be partially viewed as a condition for language immersion environment since it functions according to its own rules. Consequently, students can master communication skills only within these rules. The question here is: is it enough for future professionals? Will engineer specialists communicate only in forums? The answer is vivid that – Not.

MOOCs lack oral communication, which is possible to provide within classroom training using a blended method. However, in this case the content of the main subject must be closely integrated with the content of MOOCs. But taking into account that an instructor cannot be aware of the content of MOOCs learning materials in advance, he/she will have to organize "just-in-time" preparation and then training. In this case, it brings up the question "how to comply with the principals of systematic and consecutive teaching, quality of teaching and university willingness to implement the model of quick responsiveness?"

One of the most contradictory issues in considering a chance of integrating, so called, "ready to use" educational products into the existing system is how to manage the process of education. Management can be tentatively divided into two components: 1) who manages the process, and 2) tools to manage the process [7]. An attempt to answer the first question leads to deadlock. First, if the process is managed by language instructors, then they do not have specific knowledge to analyze the content in order to facilitate professional discussions. If professional faculty members are involved in management, then the question here is whether they are ready to give a professional course in a foreign language.

Even if we take into account an opportunity for implementing both scenarios, then it saves the situation only partially since for monitoring and developing training technologies, the instructor will be required to register for the course as a participant and to study the course along with the students in order to follow up student's performance.

The SWOT analysis is used here to show intermediate conclusions.

Strengths:
1. High quality content;
2. High technological support;
3. Integration of language environment;
4. Expanding the limits of teaching ;
5. Expanding professional and terminological vocabulary.

Weaknesses:
1. Inconsistency between the course content and learning programs
2. Lack of speech communication;
3. Lower requirements for "language quality" to communicate in forums;
4. Failure to administer a learning process;
5. Difficulty to follow up the outcomes;
6. Long-term planning failure.

Opportunities:
1. Receiving new knowledge from the world's leading universities;
2. Global communication;
3. Smoothing language and cultural barriers;
4. Flexible format of learning, development of skills to manage academic freedom.

Threats:
1. Disintegration of academic discipline, loss of consistency and succession;
2. Loss of knowledge quality due to the lack of control;
3. Disruption of line schedules;
4. Transformation of learning goals, discrepancy between obtained results and expected results of learning.

Conclusion

On condition that some difficulties occur in order to adapt the management system of open platforms to the existing university educational system, it should be noted that the research assumption has been proven false. MOOCs can be considered as independent, autonomous and effective resources for self-study which encourage development of professional and linguistic competency. We admit that foreign language instructors can use platform resources as additional materials to educational programs in teaching a foreign language and/or in teaching a special course via a foreign language.

In this regard the exemplary practice can be called the attempt of our colleagues from Technical University of Munich to use MOOCs as an instrument to organize self-study of students in more

efficient way [8]. The teaching goal is clear - to use the original personal-oriented material (chosen by a student himself) in language practices aimed at writing. In other words, in the framework of the writing course a language instructor does not develop special materials, he/she offers to use the ready ones of MOOCs.

The instructor approves the course proposed by a student, then sets up a plan for 60 hours (it depends on the course length). The plan should include summaries of lectures, drafts of homework assignments and exercises tailored to a student needs. A student will receive written feedback on the texts and can have face-to-face meetings with the instructor to get individual feedback if necessary. Further, the work of a student will be graded on a pass/fail basis, with 2 ECTS credits awarded upon successful completion of a plan. The call to participate looks very attractive: "*This is a great way to learn from international scholars in your field while brushing up your English, all without the fixed schedule and stuffy air of a lecture hall*".

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