A MOOC Experiment in a Chinese EAP Classroom

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Abstract

With the development of today's information communication technology (ICT), traditional language teaching methods in educational institutions are faced with unprecedented challenges. How to incorporate ICT into language teaching classrooms, making it an asset instead of a liability, needs to be well explored. This essay, based on the first-hand experiences of a MOOC (Massive Online Open Course)experiment conducted in a Chinese EAP (English for Academic Purposes) classroom at Harbin Institute of Technology, a key engineering university, discusses the possibility of combining modern technology with traditional approaches in order to enhance the efficiency and quality of language learning. The experiment started in 2014 as one of several projects supported by the university to launch some existing quality courses online. English for International Communication, the course of which the author is the head teacher, was the only humanity course which received a grant alongside 7 courses of science and engineering. This essay is an account of the project from investigations, hypothesis, designing and preparations, to video recording, lesson making, and actual implementing processes. The author summarizes the difficulties facing language teachers in making MOOC lessons, suggests ways of solving such problems, and points out areas for further research.

1. Introduction

MOOC (Massive Online Open Course)is comparatively a new concept. It is generally acknowledged that MOOC started officially in 2008 when two Canadian teachers, Stephen Downes and George Siemens, put their course online and attracted 2200 students to register for it. Since then, MOOC quickly became a hit word in education. It brought excitement to teachers, schools and universities because of its broad reach and great impact. In 2011, Stanford's Artificial Intelligence attracted 160,000 students, reaching the peak of MOOC student enrollment. In May 2012, Harvard and MIT launched edX, joining the family of Coursera and Udacity. In April 2013 the European OpenupEd was open with 164 online courses from 11 countries. Also in 2013, educators in China started to see a surge of MOOC platforms and MOOC lessons. The year 2014 witnessed the growing popularity of MOOC in Chinese universities. Up to the time of this paper, Icourse, MOOC China, XuetangX, and Guokr, etc. have established their leading positions as MOOC platforms in China by offering many courses online.

Harbin Institute of Technology (HIT) is a key engineering university in the northeast of China which is striving to build itself into a world renown academic university. In the face of MOOC popularity, the university would grip any opportunity.

In September 2014, HIT decided to launch some existing quality courses online. An array of courses, circa 7 courses among which English for International Communication is the only humanity course, were selected and offered with a financial support to be built into MOOC lessons. Since the teachers were MOOC illiterate, but they knew that a MOOC lesson was to be very different from a classroom lesson, an initial experiment was carried out in order to know what the students need to learn from such a course online and how to learn an English course on line, so that the teachers know what to put online and how to deliver them. It was the teachers' belief that only when the students' needs were known, could it be possible to design, implement and launch a MOOC lesson successfully.

The experiment started in November 2014. A random class of English learners from HIT was chosen to enroll an English MOOC course on one of the then popular Chinese MOOC platforms. These students were asked to keep a diary about the MOOC to report their learning experiences and to complete a questionnaire after the MOOC was closed. The author as the head teacher of English for International Communication, the only humanity course receiving a grant alongside 7 courses of science and engineering, registered the same MOOC course as the students and decided to use the feedback to design her own MOOC course.

2. A MOOC Experiment

The authors' MOOC project started from a MOOC experiment on the students. It started in November 2014 and lasted for 2 months. A random class of 2nd year non-English-major learners from HIT was

chosen to enroll an English MOOC course: College English, on a popular Chinese MOOC platform. These students were asked to keep a diary of around 100 words of Chinese to record their MOOC learning experience. At the end of the course, the same students were asked to complete a questionnaire. The author, as the head teacher of English for International Communication, the only humanity course receiving a grant alongside 7 courses of science and engineering, registered the same MOOC course as the students and decided to use the feedback to design her own MOOC course. To test the reliability of the data from the questionnaire, she also interviewed six randomly chosen students on a voluntary basis. At the end of the semester the authors of this paper compared the English level of the group of students who had taken the MOOC course with those who had not based on their final English examination scores.

The reason why the specific MOOC course College English was chosen for the experiment was that it is a compulsory course for all Chinese university first to second year students, and the students in the experiment would take it seriously when being told that the hours they spent online studying MOOC could be transferred to traditional classroom teaching and thus less hours were required of them to attend real classes in classrooms. In this way the students were motivated to study the MOOC and do what they were asked to do.

The instruments used for collecting data were diaries, a questionnaire and an interview. The questionnaire was designed by Zhou Zhinan, consisting of questions to answer, choices to make, and a table to be filled in, asking questions about what English language skills were taught, how well he/she had learned, comments about the teacher and teaching methods. The diaries and the interview which included questions that allow students to express at length the rationale of their answers, were used as supplementary tools of investigation. The data collected were then analyzed, categorized, and processed. They served as a basis for the design of a new MOOC.

The findings: most students agreed that MOOC College English is generally new and interesting, but having a huge room to improve. The points that the students were not happy about were: teacher's rigidness in front of the camera, boredom of watching the same video and listening to monotonous voice, and lack of interaction between teachers and students. The group of students who took the MOOC course did not have a higher mark in their final written examination. On the contrary, some showed much difficulty in doing the final exam paper. In other words, the success of a MOOC course depends on many factors: the course design, the teachers, and the students.

3. A New MOOC Course to be designed

The information obtained from the MOOC experiment, plus the actual teaching experience of the teachers and an analysis of the target students shed some light on the course design. Some secrets were unveiled upon its completion. Based on the findings of the experiment, English for International Communication started to undergo its long journey from designing, preparations, considerations, to recording and implementing.

The design: whom to teach? What to teach? How to teach? Before it became a MOOC course, English for International Communication was intended specifically for the students at the advanced level who had a prospect of going abroad to study as exchange students. To give a MOOC course on English for International communication, the possible learners may come from all walks of life who have opportunities to communicate with foreigners in international situations. Therefore, the content of teaching should be good for most learners and the difficulty level should be lowered. In turn, the course should be reorganized so that general topics, such as: greetings, gift-giving, dressing, table manners, traveling abroad, accommodation, telephone skills, studying or working in international environments, should be covered. The core skills of listening to lectures and conference presentations, reading academic journals fast and effectively, making oral presentations, translate academic articles into proper English styles, and behave gracefully in international social occasions. Effectively, ask and answer questions about their research, compose email in appropriate styles, etc. were kept in the MOOC course but reduced to an easier level. In the end, after plenty of debating and discussing, English for everyday communication including dressing, table manners, accommodation, telephone skills and traveling, English for international academic communication such as applying for foreign universities, studying in universities abroad, discussion and public speaking skills, and writing of application materials, etc. were decided to be the main contents for the MOOC lesson: English for International Communication.

As soon as the aim and content of this MOOC lesson was determined, the next of our tasks involved implementing the course design. All possible means were tried to make the lessons interesting and interactive. Teachers were trained intensively about recording lessons in front of a video recorder. They even took drama lessons and learned a bit of pronunciation and acting. Foreign experts were invited to do demonstrations of tying and eating a steak. With the support of the technical staff of HIT,

an engineering university famous for its information technology, and the use of Camtasia, a software enabling screen video recording, the teachers responsible for this MOOC course have overcome countless technical problems such as acting out teaching in front of a computer camera while there was no student around, clipping audio-visual materials for course use, directing, screen play writing, or acting for small video plays, learning to use modern software, and launching the course online. The MOOC is now under censorship and will be online in December 2015. After the launching of this MOOC, the teachers will meet other technical problems like collecting homework, answering questions and evaluating homework. But these problems will be surely solved. At the completion of the project, all the teachers of this course have become skilled in this MOOC lesson, and are confident to meet the challenge of launching more classroom lessons online and build MOOC lessons.

4. Summary

Over a period of two years, with the combined efforts of researchers, teachers and foreign experts, the MOOC teaching program has been proven successful in that putting English for International communication online as a MOOC lesson has turned from a discouraging hardship to an enjoyable winning experience, by facilitating the students with what they really need, in an effective and efficient way. Students from this MOOC English program have made up the majority of active and confident participants in international academic activities on and outside the campus.

The success of the program lies in the initial MOOC experiment, which tells us what are good so as to keep and what are to be avoided. It is always risky to do language teaching online, as MOOC lessons are good for transmitting knowledge but not for fostering skills, but our approach has certain value for the design of language teaching MOOC. However popular MOOC is, there have been questions, doubts and controversies. With the development of today's information communication technology (ICT), traditional language teaching methods in educational institutions are faced with unprecedented challenges. The authors believe that, changes and innovations in language teaching, to adapt to new ICT, or rather, to make good use of present-day ICT, are necessary in today's world of electronic technology.

References

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