



## A Cultural Approach to Online Language Learning: the Spanish NOOC Project at Nottingham

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### Abstract

*Online language courses have taken an innovative spin with the spread of OERs and open courses such as MOOCs. They have relied on different types of technologies for the delivery of content, including videos, interactive practice exercises and social learning platforms, to name a few.*

*In this paper we wish to present the innovative model of a fully online language course and to reflect on the design process and the implications that emerge from it.*

*The context is a Spanish course offered by the University of Nottingham to students and staff of its three international campuses (UK, Malaysia and China) as a Nottingham Open Online Course.*

*The novelty of our product lies in the design of the course in which cultural content and language activities are combined to ensure that language learning is enriched and complemented by conversations around different topics related to the Spanish speaking world. Videos on cultural topics recorded by highly esteemed academic experts in the field are coupled with language exercises that cater for three different levels of language proficiency, namely beginners, intermediate and advanced.*

*As the cultural content feeds the language structures and activities provided to our learners, features of C(ulture)LIL are highly central in making our course innovative in the current scene of online language courses.*

*Attention will also be paid to copyright challenges related to the use of resources when building an open course that operates across diverse national legal frameworks and cultures.*

*Observing the affordances and limitations of the design of this Spanish course, our aim is to inform the shaping of a pedagogical model for future initiatives of this kind.*

*Keywords: online course, CLIL, OERs, course design, copyright*

### 1. Introduction

In Autumn 2015, after a rather long and complex journey from the drawing board, the Spanish NOOC (Nottingham Open Online Course), *Spain and Latin America: Transatlantic Crossings* went live to an audience of more than a thousand students across the three international campuses (UK, China and Malaysia) of the University of Nottingham.

The background discussion behind the SNOOC commenced a couple of years earlier when a group of language and culture teachers<sup>3</sup> from the Language Centre and the Department of Spanish, Portuguese and Latin American Studies at the University of Nottingham attempted to address issues such as high number of participants and unpredictable mixed abilities; factors that have been identified in the literature [1] as the causes for the slow emergence of language courses within the Massive Open Online Courses (MOOCs), a movement that has revolutionised the educational scene over the last decade.

The SNOOC is novel in combining culture and language, providing the participants with a language learning experience enriched by a socio-historical portrait of the Spanish speaking world. As the cultural content feeds the language learning tasks, the learners are offered the opportunity to engage in cultural exchanges while setting their own language learning paths, in accordance to their abilities.

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This paper will explore some of the challenges faced when designing and building this Spanish course, as well as the pedagogical possibilities (and limitations) of this model.

## 2. The Spanish Nottingham Open Online Course

The Spanish NOOC (henceforth SNOOC) is delivered entirely online via the Moodle platform, it comprises four units, which unfold over a period of eight weeks, and each unit includes a cultural and a related language component. Each language components includes linguistic explanations; practice exercises, consolidation and interactive tasks. Particularly unique in the SNOOC is the aim to cater for the three levels of language proficiency, namely:

- 1) Level 1: for complete beginners or participants up to CEFR A2 level;
- 2) Level 2: for participants from CEFR B1 to B2.1;
- 3) Level 3 for those with advanced skills (CEFR B2.2-C1).

The diagram [2] below, in which the number 1, 2, 3 indicate the language proficiency levels as defined above, summarises the structure of our course:

<b>Week 1: Culture All levels</b>		<b>Week 3: Culture All levels</b>		<b>Week 5: Culture All levels</b>		<b>Week 7: Culture All levels</b>	
<b>Week 2: Language</b>	<b>1</b>	<b>Week 4: Language</b>	<b>1</b>	<b>Week 6: Language</b>	<b>1</b>	<b>Week 8: Language</b>	<b>1</b>
	<b>2</b>		<b>2</b>		<b>2</b>		<b>2</b>
	<b>3</b>		<b>3</b>		<b>3</b>		<b>3</b>

The target audience of the course comprises University of Nottingham students and staff of its three international campuses (UK, Malaysia and China), hence the online course was run in rather different time zones, operating under diverse cultural assumptions and national legal frameworks.

Unlike MOOCs, the SNOOC was neither massive nor offered globally, but the number of students far exceeded those of traditional presential classes. However, underpinning the pedagogical model of the SNOOC we can still find several of MOOCs' pedagogical features, as it:

- has no application prerequisites;
- relies on and generates Open Educational Resources (OERs);
- is delivered online;
- is a course, i.e. it includes a taught structure lead by MOOC-like roles of tutors and facilitators.

Goria and Lagares [2] highlight the significance of course structure and activity design of the SNOOC.

Building on Lane's [3] typology of open courses, the SNOOC's design includes features of:

- 1) task-based MOOCs, as it requires the participants to engage in pre-defined tasks;
- 2) content-based MOOCs, as it delivers pre-determined content, instructions and automated drill-and-practice activities;
- 3) networked-based MOOCs, as it relies on the community of learners for generating content, providing language practice and peer-feedback.

As far as activity design is concerned, it is important to highlight that in the SNOOC a given resource, generally drawn from the cultural component, is used to create learning activities for the three language levels supported by the course. As a consequence, once the learners have selected a level of language proficiency appropriate to their abilities, they are facilitated to move up or down a level, should they feel the need to do so, while working with the same resources. This is a desirable result given that the unpredictability of mixed language abilities is an attested characteristic of open online courses [2].

Another unique feature of the SNOOC is that a high number of language tasks have been created utilising the content of the cultural resources. Thus, in this sense, the SNOOC provides the context for the implementation of a different form of the Content and Language Integrated

Learning (CLIL) approach to language learning - one in which the C of the acronym refers more appropriately to *culture* of the target language, than to *content*, i.e. subject matters, like History, Physics, Maths, taught in the target language [4].

More precisely, the SNOOC juxtaposes an exploration of the historical links and migratory movements between Spain and Spanish America with a related language component. Hence, culture and language are enmeshed into a structure that supports both language acquisition and the advance of historical and cultural knowledge, at the same time as providing a space to reflect on intercultural issues.

The next section offers an example of course structure, activity design and C(ulture)LIL.

### 3. Examples of C(ulture) and Language Integrated Learning

This short section describes activities that are representative of the C(ulture)LIL approach that emerges in the SNOOC.

The first set of activities described here is built around the mural titled 'América Prehispánica' (Mexico City, 1923-39) by the Mexican painter Diego Rivera. First, the learners are presented with a video in which the piece of art is described in the target language, focusing not only on the actual visual representation but also on the socio-political significance of the work of Diego Rivera.

Second, the learners are asked to write (in English or in Spanish) a short paragraph in which they describe the painting. For this activity the students are provided with the transcription as well as the translation of the description of the painting. This is to allow all learners access to the resource, regardless of their level of language proficiency.

Third, the learners engage with a set of activities which involves language and comprehension tasks for the three language proficiency levels described earlier. Level 1 learners are asked to complete vocabulary and grammar exercises based on terms introduced in the description of the painting, level 2 are offered comprehension exercises, and level 3 are required to complete grammar activities again based on the content of the video.

In other words, all learners engage with a coherent learning object in which the visual and socio-cultural description of Rivera's piece of art is repurposed for the creation of language tasks at three different levels of language proficiency.

Another piece of evidence of the integration of culture in the process of language learning is provided by the activity titled *Spanish America Independence* which pivots around a video concerned with the historical perspective of the journey towards Independence by Latin American countries.

First, the learners watch the video and familiarise themselves with the topic which is presented in English. Second, all three levels of language proficiency are catered for through comprehension and grammar practice exercises based on the translation of the content of the video. The result is a learning event in which an historico-cultural resource is used to engage the learners in related language activities.

Next, we will examine some of the technological challenges faced when designing the course.

### 4. On Technological Matters

The chosen Virtual Learning Environment at Nottingham, Moodle, provided the backbone for the SNOOC. Being the first online Modern Languages course at Nottingham, it was also intended as an exploration of the educational possibilities of this platform for language and culture teachers.

Given the limited resources allocated to actually running an open and non-profit online course, perhaps one of the most pressing concerns when designing the sections for language learning was to find a balance between automated exercises for guided learning and creating a sense of a shared space, a learning community that would encourage participation and would provide sufficient interaction for language acquisition.

Moodle forums were our choice for the most dialogical exercises, but not before exploring other options. Initial research into --and trial runs with-- some commercial programmes (mainly those funded through adverts) made us aware of reliability issues when using external servers, as well as the inappropriateness of the advertising in an educational context. Also, some of the programmes could not be customised sufficiently for our needs.



Since the forums were integrated in Moodle, not only we had a stable and reliable environment which we could adapt according to our requirements (i.e. choosing between different types of formats and interactions in the forums) but it also proved versatile in allowing students to upload easily not only texts but also sound and image files for certain exercises. And, since we were operating in rather diverse time zones, the asynchronic nature of the forums proved crucial for the running of the course.

An added advantage of running within a controlled environment (in which all entries were attributable to an identifiable person inside the institution) was to advert some of the worst features of social media and discussion boards. A respectful and encouraging atmosphere was observed among course students, from the initial icebreaker introductory forum, throughout the language exercises, and even whilst having sensitive cultural discussions. It is also important to note the role of the course facilitators (the SNOOC team, language teachers and postgraduate students) in setting a positive tone in the forums and stimulating discussion when required.

Besides, the forums allowed us to integrate peer-feedback within the language exercises, with students from advanced levels interacting with Level 1 learners, which also contributed to strengthen the sense of having a shared learning space.

Finally, Moodle integration and the forums gave us the most accurate picture of student involvement in the SNOOC, not just because the forum entries were held in a database, but because we could also extract statistics from Moodle about learners' access to all areas of the course, which included videos and materials connected to the forums. Some cultural patterns seemed to emerge from the analysis of the data: i.e. the involvement of all students in the icebreaker forum was high irrespective of cultural background, however, learners from China and Malaysia were more reticent to participate in language and culture forum activities (where entries were visible to all participants), despite the statistics showing that they were accessing and viewing all areas of the course as much as learners from the UK. Time differences and the fact that most of our facilitators were based in the UK (hence, active within UK daytime and evening hours) might have played a role, but perhaps also the fact that they were learning a foreign language through what was for them a second language, English.

Another factor to consider when analysing participation in the forums is whether the number of students (more than 1000 in the first edition of the course) proved too large for some learners, and whether breaking up the forums into smaller groups (perhaps randomly assigned) would help to create a more cohesive and less intimidating space for learners. This could be easily implemented within Moodle.

As for the interactive language exercises, we found Xerte was the most appropriate choice. Xerte is an open source authoring toolkit based on HTML5 and developed by the University of Nottingham, which allows the creation of interactive learning objects. It integrates well with different types of media, sitting embedded into Moodle (or any webpage) and so creating a seamless experience for the learner. Crucially, considering the SNOOC is a pilot project exploring the educational uses of Moodle and the potential of e-learning resources, this tool allows for the creation of rather sophisticated interactive exercises by developers with just basic IT skills.

The language exercises created for Xerte included, among others, self-marking quizzes, matching texts, fill in the gaps, multiple choice questions, all providing interactive responses and integrating diverse types of media, from videos to Powerpoint presentations. Importantly, Xerte allows for customisation of accessibility features and a certain degree of visual customisation.

Whilst it seems Xerte is particularly effective for guided learning and the students can, if they wish, obtain a printout of the embedded pages (although the exercises are designed for online use) one downside is that the completed exercises are not saved anywhere in the system, so neither the student can have a record of their work nor course developers and facilitators can access stats about completion of tasks and rates of accuracy. This would assist both in the running and in the further development of the course. As the Xerte Project is a work-in-progress, perhaps future versions of the toolkit might include the ability of linking it to a database.

Grammar explanations were introduced both through Xerte and VideoScribe. The last one is a commercially available programme that facilitates the creation of videos with interesting graphics and animations. Videos produced with this programme were particularly effective and

engaging, not least because of its ability to couple the voice of the teacher with animated explanations of grammatical points.

Language exercises were produced in-house by the team of language teachers, so copyright matters were not an issue: sound files and videos have been recorded by the SNOOC team; graphics were sourced from public domain and CC licenses or, in the case of VideoScribe, were licensed for educational uses by payment of a fee. As for the cultural side of the course, matters became rather more complex, as we will examine in the next section.

## 5. The *Small Matter of Copyright*

The core of the culture section was constituted by several videos per unit, all recorded in-house with academics from the Spanish, Portuguese and Latin American Studies Department at Nottingham, who kindly donated their time and expertise to the project.

The videos consisted of a recording of a purpose-made lecture based on the topic for each Unit, edited with maps, photographs and images to illustrate the lecture, at times including brief texts to underline its content. These recordings sat in the university portal for video content (MediaSpace) but were embedded in Moodle as inline frames (iframe), hence integrating seamlessly into the pages. From the portal we could also extract statistics about access and viewing times for each video, which together with participation in the discussion forums (the main interactive space for the culture section) proved to be useful when trying to obtain an overview of the running of the course.

Complementing the videos, a selection of texts and images were chosen to provide a background view on the subject for each unit, to explore more in depth a particular topic or just to establish a dialogue with the recordings. The topics spanned several centuries in the history of the Spanish and Spanish American peoples, but focused on decisive time periods and events in the history and relations of both sides of the Atlantic such as the Conquest, the Transatlantic Slave Trade, the American Independences, the Cuban Revolution, the Spanish Transition to Democracy and the Pink Tide in Latin America.

Copyright issues were paramount when selecting the materials for accompanying the video-lectures. This was an open non-commercial educational project, albeit within the closed environment of a VLE, so it was covered by university copyright licenses and Fair Dealing exceptions (as for example an illustration for instruction).

Creative Commons materials were also used, particularly under Attribution-Non Commercial licenses (CC BY-NC). This license, whilst acknowledging the author of the original work, allowed for the remix and integration of the original work into the OERs.

The music used in the credits, and sometimes as a background soundtrack, consisted of mainly contemporary recordings (under CC non-commercial licences) of classical Spanish guitar works now out of copyright.

As for the images, we used digital reproductions of works (mainly older paintings) in the Public Domain or under CC non-commercial licenses. This is a contentious area: a number of publicly funded museums, particularly in Spain, try to exert a rather tight rein on the image rights of works whose authors are long deceased, whilst non-profit online repositories such as Wikimedia Commons have made quite a few of those reproductions widely available for educational uses. Some photographs witnessing historical events have become so iconic and are so widely distributed through the internet that copyright issues seem to have become meaningless in respect of them.

Legal copyright frameworks across national lines are also a factor when developing an online course. So we have to consider:

- If known, national status of the author of the original work and copyright status of the work;
- Copyright status of the digital reproduction of the original work;
- Legal copyright framework of the country/ies where the course is being developed;
- Legal copyright framework of the country/ies where the course is being accessed.

## 6. To Conclude

From the drawing board to the limited enclosure of our computer screen, it might seem those earlier fuzzy sketches of the Spanish NOOC have not yet managed to break out of the bi-dimensional space. But this field work on the educational uses of technology has certainly



highlighted for us the rather corporeal dimensions and ever insistent nature of the human exchanges.

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