6 The Move-Me project: reflecting on xMOOC and cMOOC structure and pedagogical implementation

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Abstract

This paper discusses the rationale and structure of two Massive Open Online Courses (MOOCs) created as part of the EU-funded Move-Me project, which aims to develop two MOOCs and open educational resources for university learners participating in mobility programmes in Europe. The MOOCs are designed to help learners develop the skills necessary to understand, critique and deploy academic discourse in selected disciplines. The article will first briefly present the Move-Me project, its objectives, and outcomes. It will then explain the methodological framework of reference for the two MOOCs, reflect on *x*, *c*, and hybrid MOOC structures and discuss how metacognitive skills and strategies are employed to achieve the stated learning objectives.

Keywords: Move-Me, language MOOC, academic English, academic Italian, student mobility, languages for specific purposes.

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1. Introduction

In summer 2015, the European Commission approved funding for the Move-Me project under the Erasmus+ programme, Key Activity 2 strand. This two-year project (November 2015-October 2017) is led by the Università per Stranieri di Siena (Italy) and the Consortium is made up of the National University of Ireland, Galway (Ireland), the Open University (United Kingdom), the Computer Technology Institute (Greece), the Federazione Nazionale Insegnanti (Italy) and the Institutul de Stiinte Ale Educatiei (Romania).

Move-Me (MOOCs for uniVErsity students on the Move in Europe) targets university students who take part in mobility study programmes and therefore need to be able to negotiate academic discourse in a second language. Whilst the project focuses on English and Italian for academic purposes, it also aims to deliver templates for future developments in other languages. Upon completion, Move-Me will deliver two MOOCs (one for English for academic purposes and one for Italian for academic purposes), a website (www.movemeproject.eu), and a set of resources for students taking part in Erasmus or other mobility programmes.

The Move-ME project addresses the needs of university students who travel to European or international institutions to attend courses in a second language. Whilst students participating in mobility programmes are normally expected to possess at least a B1 competence – in the Common European Framework of Reference (CEFR) framework – in the target language, in many cases, that competence is limited to standard communication contexts rather than discipline-specific academic discourse, something which can hamper their full and meaningful participation in academic life abroad.

The two MOOCs, currently being developed, will be delivered through the FutureLearn platform and introduce learners to the concept of academic discourse. They are both built around the same macro-structure in terms of theoretical framework, duration and overall learning objectives: enhancing and developing learning to learn skills in the context of academic discourse through

reflection on metacognitive strategies and guided application of metacognitive skills. Both MOOCs include authentic expository texts from the same selection of disciplines: economics, law, linguistics, literature and science. The Move-Me MOOCs are not language courses, however they should be classified as language MOOCs as they help to improve transversal, lexical, syntactical and paralinguistic competences as well as intercultural textual competence, i.e. the ability to understand and structure academic texts consistent with the cultural and stylistic convention of the target language.

2. Methodological framework

As it is now widely known, George Siemens and Stephen Downes are credited with having created the first ever MOOC in 2008[3], which was soon followed by more massive online courses. These early MOOCs, delivered through collaborative tools, blogs and discussion boards rather than content/learning management systems, have come to be known as c-MOOCs. They are underpinned by the connectivist approach heralded by Siemens and Downes, and are characterised by a rather free structure, where participants manage their own time, resources and learning path.

This type of MOOC, however, requires participants to possess advanced fluency in digital literacies and competence in the so-called '21st century skills'. According to the Partnership for 21st Century Skills[4], such abilities include collaboration, creativity, communication, critical thinking and information media skills. cMOOCs participants need these skills in order to be able to share and gain knowledge while navigating the complexities of a non-linear online collaborative and connectivist environment. Without them, learners may encounter difficulties in building their knowledge.

3. http://www.downes.ca/post/57750

4. http://www.p21.org/

In addition, cMOOCs, because of their very nature, make official certification of acquired knowledge particularly difficult. Cognitive load theory (Sweller, 1994; Paas, Renkl, & Sweller, 2003) however, indicates that learning paths should culminate in specific (and certifiable) outcomes so that appropriate support can be designed for the purpose of reaching such outcomes. xMOOCs more closely respond to this need. They are more 'behaviourist' in nature and put an emphasis on content rather than connections. xMOOCs tend to mirror more closely, in so far as that is possible, a traditional learning environment, and support more traditional literacies. The xMOOCs are so called because of "the open course model originally formed as MITx, which was then joined by other universities and has evolved into edX.org" (Sokolik, 2014, p. 18).

As MOOCs developed and rapidly became more widespread, the distinction between the two types was blurred. And indeed, Move-Me MOOCs can be classified as a hybrid between the two: they follow a linear structure divided into a number of sequential 'steps' (therefore following the xMOOC model), but they strongly support the development of digital and 21st century skills (which, in turn, positions them within cMOOCs). At the same time, possession of these skills by participants is not taken for granted, so the introductory week of the two MOOCs includes reflective tasks on the digital competences necessary for the successful completion of the courses. It is therefore important to present and explain them to participants. It was decided that a sequential structure was particularly suited to the content of our courses, as it more closely resembles the structure of language modules that university students are normally familiar with, therefore helping to lower the affective filter.

2.1. Macro-structure of the Move-Me MOOCs

In order to cover the four main language abilities, reading, listening, writing and speaking, and to provide an introduction and a conclusion to the course, Move-Me MOOCs are divided into 6 weeks. Week 1 and Week 6 are the introductory and the conclusive units of each course. Week 1 explains the aims and structure of the course, skills needed, and suggestions for progressing through the material presented. Week 6 sums up the work done, the strategies that were highlighted

during the previous weeks, as well as the skills practised so far. It contains activities to encourage learners to become aware of their own learning style and evaluate their own learning also reflecting on their (hopefully) enhanced awareness of metacognitive strategies and skills and abilities to apply them.

Weeks 2 to 5 present a similar structure. Week 2 focuses on enhancing and refining *reading* skills, Week 3 on *listening* skills, Week 4 on *writing* skills and Week 5 on *speaking* skills. The content of each week is linked to the content of previous and/or subsequent weeks. Building familiarity with the content, and therefore gradually simplifying its understanding, is seen as a way of helping learners to focus more on *learning strategies*.

More specifically for the English MOOC, the activities in Week 2, 3, 4, and 5 encourage significant and highly contextualised interaction among learners, mainly based on their reflections on their own approach to studying subjects through the Target Language (TL). Links and cross-references to activities targeting metacognitive strategies in steps presented in other weeks offer an opportunity for deeper learning and show how the same strategies can be re-used or integrated when working on different abilities. The four main language abilities are strictly interconnected and so are the strategies that help to develop them: for instance, global and selective reading strategies (i.e. skimming and scanning) are also related to certain bottom-up or top-down listening strategies (i.e. inferring and predicting, global understanding or listening for specific information); the writing ability involves high order thinking skills as well as visual processing of the text also present in reading. The visual impact of the written text facilitates mnemonic retention of lexical elements that can then be reused when speaking. The purposely tailored cross-reference between the various weeks described earlier aims to enhance learners' awareness of the learning strategies they activate in specific learning contexts[5].

5. Examples of inputs for the Forum or the Learning Journal for reflection on their own learning strategies plus an example of an activity to understand their own listening or reading skills: 1) when you read a paper, according to the definitions given, do you use a global or a selective reading? 2) When do you use one and when the other? 3) After having listened to this section, which strategy do you use more, bottom-up or top-down? Why? Why do you think the strategy you use more suits you best?

Material used in the MOOC was carefully selected: it was decided to use different extracts from the same videos to give unity and continuity to the Weeks (or units). The sequencing of abilities within the MOOC focuses on receptive abilities first (reading and listening) and productive abilities later (writing and speaking), as follows:

- Week 2: *reading*. Learners are introduced to an initial visual contact with the texts: they see the specific language and structures used in specific contexts (i.e. academic texts on the subjects they choose to study); meaningful, selected transcripts and subtitles of the chosen extract are provided.

- Week 3: *listening*. The material selected for this unit is strictly connected to the material presented in Week 2 and the types of activities recall – and possibly facilitate the reuse of – what was learnt the previous week and can now be applied in the current week.

- Week 4: *writing*. Activities in this week help to reinforce both linguistic competence and learners' awareness of how their own strategies work, and focus on exploring how such strategies can be optimised in written tasks.

- Week 5: *speaking*. This is arguably the most challenging ability to develop in an asynchronous online environment. Learners are asked to interact among themselves not only through the forum (in writing) but also by recording and sharing short podcasts in which they discuss academic topics.

The theoretical framework chosen as background for designing the macro- and the micro-structures of the two MOOCs, and the sequencing of abilities, is Bloom's taxonomy revised and adapted to a digital environment (Anderson & Krathwohl, 2001a). The original taxonomy arranged thinking skills on a scale which went from lower to higher order thinking skills as follows:

> Lower Order ----------> Higher Order
>
> Knowledge – Comprehension – Application – Analysis – Synthesis – Evaluation

Anderson and Krathwohl's (2001b) revised taxonomy, instead, includes the following thinking skills:

> Lower Order ----------> Higher Order
>
> Remembering – Understanding – Applying – Analysing – Evaluating – Creating

Starting from lower order thinking skills – remembering, understanding, applying – involved primarily, but not exclusively in Week 2 (reading) and Week 3 (listening), learners are gradually encouraged to develop and use higher order thinking skills – analysing, evaluating, creating – employed mainly, but again not solely, in Week 4 (writing) and Week 5 (speaking). Feedback is provided to learners through quizzes or tests that are self-assessed. The methodological framework for creating activities is the Task-Based model, to encourage learners to work on and with the TL and improve their linguistic competence with what Ellis (1995) defines as interpretation tasks:

> "An alternative approach to grammar teaching is to design activities that focus learners' attention on a targeted structure in the input and that enable them to identify and comprehend the meaning(s) of this structure. This approach emphasises input processing for comprehension rather than output processing for production and requires the use of what I have termed interpretation tasks to replace traditional production tasks [… Interpretation] is the process by which learners endeavour to comprehend input and in so doing pay attention to specific linguistic features and their meanings. It involves noticing and cognitive comparison and results in intake" (pp. 88-90).

Learners are therefore encouraged to process input through interpretation, reflecting on linguistic and paralinguistic features. This should lead to enhanced mnemonic retention of lexical and syntactical elements. However, the aim of the Move-Me MOOCs is not just the enhancement of linguistic competence but, as already stated, also the elicitation of the cognitive processes involved in language learning.

2.2. Micro-structure of the English MOOC

Within the overarching macro-structures which ensure consistency as well as adherence to the overall learning objectives of the MOOCs and of the Move-Me project in general, each week has a micro-structure with its own learning objective and internal cohesion as well as specific focus on chosen metacognitive skills and strategies. These metacognitive skills and strategies are selected in accordance with the Cognitive Academic Language Learning Approach (CALLA) devised by Chamot and O'Malley (1987, 1994). Metacognitive strategies "involve executive processes in planning for learning, monitoring one's comprehension and production, and evaluating how well one has achieved a learning objective" (Chamot & O'Malley, 1987, p. 241). More specifically, metacognitive strategies can be divided into:

> "**Advance organisation:** Previewing the main ideas and concepts of the material to be learned, often by skimming the text for the organising principle; **Organisational planning:** Planning the parts, sequence, main ideas, or language functions to be expressed orally or in writing; **Selective attention:** Deciding in advance to attend to specific aspects of input, often by scanning for key words, concepts, and/or linguistic markers; **Self-monitoring:** Checking one's comprehension during listening or reading or checking the accuracy and/or appropriateness of one's oral or written production while it is taking place" (Chamot & O'Malley, 1987, p. 248).

All the strategies mentioned by Chamot and O'Malley (1987) are employed in the MOOCs and particular attention is paid to self-monitoring, which "has

been linked to productive language, in which learners correct themselves during speaking or writing […] effective ESL listeners also use self-monitoring to check on how well they are comprehending an oral text" (Chamot & O'Malley, 1987, p. 243). With self-monitoring learners are more actively involved in the comprehension and learning tasks and with the self-evaluation process, they decide whether the learning task is achieved or whether they need revision.

Sequencing of activities within each week follows the revised taxonomy shown above with tasks aimed at leading learners to become aware, recognise and develop the most common cognitive strategies and apply them to reading, listening, writing and speaking in the TL. Although each week focuses on one skill, other skills are also practised – and awareness of intercultural specificity in linguistic elements is also stimulated, for example understanding and recognising different coding systems, register, intonation, tone, and ways of emphasising important information in discipline-specific contexts in different cultures.

Following the introduction to each week, the first input learners receive each week is an audio-visual input: a short video clip introduces the linguistic content which will form the main focus of that week. The inclusion in the MOOC of video, audio and written material is designed to appeal to different learner types, however the authors felt that videos should be positioned at the beginning of each week because they are engaging text types and can help to activate motivation, especially among the intended target group.

As the week develops, two essential tools become the main platform through which interaction and reflection takes place: a forum section and the Reflective Journal. Typical of MOOCs, the forum aims to create a community of learners who, for affinity of interests and purposes, should be willing to share experiences, ideas and comments using the TL, thereby involving both the emotional and the intellectual sphere. The Reflective Journal is an individual task, which institutions could recognise through awarding of European Credit Transfer and Accumulation System (ECTS) or other accreditation, and requires

participants to write entries related to specific and guided input[6] and to interact in the Forum using the target foreign language.

Metacognitive strategies and skills are a significant part of the learning content of the Move-Me MOOCs: it is envisaged that making learners aware of their own learning strategies and style, while pragmatically and practically dealing with the foreign language and its structures and specific vocabulary in an academic context, will provide them the necessary tools to become autonomous learners. Ultimately, participants are guided towards understanding and appraising their reactions when faced with complex linguistic input relevant to their field of study. This, in turn, should lead participants towards a more efficient organisation of TL learning by stimulating an inclination to monitor their own learning process, enhancing their ability to combine this monitoring attitude with background discipline-specific or linguistic knowledge and improving confidence in reapplying metacognitive strategies.

3. Conclusion

Studying a discipline through a foreign language can be a daunting task for students who may well have acquired a good level of fluency in standard communication but may still lack the competence to tackle discipline-specific discourse, because quite often language courses at university level only cover standard communication and not necessarily or not extensively discipline-specific academic discourse. This competence, however, is needed if learners are to participate in and enjoy the benefits of academic life while on mobility. The emphasis that the Move-Me MOOCs put on the recognition and development of metacognitive skills is designed to help students develop the necessary tools to progress to more complex texts outside the confines of the MOOCs, and hopefully encourage them to take a more active part in their academic

6. Sample questions for the Reflective Journals are: What did you learn today? How will you use what we are learning outside the class? When you are about to try something new, how do you feel? When you are doing something and you get stuck, what do you do? Do you carry on normal daily activities (e.g. study, cook, relax, drive) the same way in every situation? Which is the most important ability for you? Why? Can we consider the four main abilities linked or separated one from the other? How will they help you while studying in a foreign university?

experience while abroad. As the MOOCs are currently being developed and will be piloted in 2017, data on participation and feedback is not available at the time of writing. Reports on the MOOCs and on the project will be available on www.movemeproject.eu on completion of the project. The website will also give access to material and resources developed for the MOOCs as well as guidelines and templates for the development of similar MOOCs in other languages and/or other disciplines. It is hoped that the MOOCs will become part of university students' preparation for their mobility programmes and that they can eventually be formally incorporated into training and/or teaching modules.

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