

LMOOCs, classifying design: survey findings from LMOOC providers

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Abstract. Many of the major Massive Open Online Course (MOOC) platforms support learning approaches which can be roughly categorised as transmission-based and asynchronous (Morris & Lambe, 2014), with limited forms of interactive elements. Language learning is viewed within this study as an active process which includes knowledge, skills, and cultural competencies. Designing a Language-learning MOOC (or LMOOC) that facilitates this view of the language learning process is challenging, however, particularly considering the predominance of learning templates within the MOOC platforms that are designed from a mainly knowledge-transmission perspective. Using Conole's (2014) classification of MOOCs, a sample of LMOOC providers self-report in a survey on the pedagogical approach implemented within their LMOOC's learning design. These findings are reported in this paper. This study is timely as the number of LMOOCs being offered is increasing, although the proportion of LMOOCs is still low in terms of the wider MOOC landscape. The paper concludes by considering whether LMOOCs can be aligned with this classification tool or whether an extension to this classification is required to cater for the nuances of MOOC-based language learning.

Keywords: language learning MOOCs, classification of MOOCs, language learning design, LMOOCs.

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1. Introduction

There has been significant growth of MOOCs over the past decade. LMOOCs, however, have been slower than other disciplinary areas to engage with the potential of this new learning model. In 2014, [Bárcena and Martín-Monje \(2014\)](#) conducted an analysis of the availability of LMOOCs on the major MOOC platforms, revealing 26 LMOOCs. A review of the current offering of LMOOCs, conducted by this research team in June 2017, based on the methodology of [Bárcena and Martín-Monje \(2014\)](#), noted an increase of LMOOCs to 143. Chinese joined English and Spanish as the most popular languages in LMOOCs. The provision of other languages is also increasing, with courses for languages such as Norwegian, Malay, Frisian, and Sanskrit now available. The majority of courses are aimed at the beginner level. However, an increasing number of courses are aimed at more advanced learners who want to improve their language skills, particularly in specific domains such as language for business or academic purposes. This emerging language learning model raises important issues for course designers and developers concerning the rationale for adopting a particular pedagogical approach that caters for the specificities of foreign language learning. MOOCs are typically categorised as either xMOOC or cMOOC based on the pedagogical design of the course. xMOOCs tend to adopt a behaviourist learning approach and reflect more of a transmission approach to learning, while cMOOCs support connectivist pedagogy and are focused around learner generated content and interactive media ([Morris & Lambe, 2014](#)). The majority of the major MOOC platforms have xMOOC templates and are predominantly focussed on knowledge acquisition. Language learning, however, is an active process that requires both skill development and knowledge acquisition ([Bárcena & Martín-Monje, 2014](#); [Sokolik, 2014](#)) situated within cultural contexts. Learning a language requires the use of higher order thinking skills as well as high levels of engagement and interaction. In addition, after infancy there is a need for a more rule-based cognitive approach ([Meltzoff & Prinz, 2002](#)). This paper examines how the current supply of LMOOCs are addressing learning within MOOC environments. Using [Conole's \(2014\)](#) classification of MOOCs, the paper explores the approach to (1) learning, (2) technology, and (3) learner support as reported by a sample of LMOOC providers from a variety of the major MOOC platforms.

2. Method

Data for this study was collected by means of a structured, online questionnaire containing 24 items, divided into three sections using both closed and open questions.

The questions were constructed to correspond to Conole’s (2014) classification criteria. The questionnaire was piloted with two LMOOC providers prior to the main study. Participants self-reported (1) contextual information, (2) information relating to the participants, and finally (3) the pedagogical approach adopted in the LMOOC. The questionnaire was distributed to a sample of 40 LMOOC providers identified by the research based on a sampling methodology adopted from Bércena and Martín-Monje (2014). Twenty-one completed questionnaires were classified. To aid with the analysis, three dimensions were developed by the researchers to group responses as low, medium, and high with respect to each criterion (Conole, 2014), an example of this criterion is outlined in Table 1.

Table 1. Example of criterion parameters

Dimension	Low	Medium	High
Massive	0 – 1,000	1,000 – 5,000	More than 5,000
Multimedia	Course is limited to the use of one media type e.g. video	Course utilises a limited number of multimedia types	Course uses a wide range of multimedia and interactive media

3. Findings from the classification of LMOOCs

Table 2 illustrates the finding of the classification of each LMOOC’s responses to the questionnaire, where each response represents one LMOOC in the table. In terms of context, the LMOOCs demonstrate examples of low, medium, and high degrees of size and openness, with openness being viewed as a continuous construct rather than a binary state (Wiley, 2009). With regard to pedagogy, the majority of courses demonstrated high degrees of reflection, multimedia usage, learner autonomy, and communication. The type of communication is predominantly learner to learner interaction whilst learner to instructor communication is not facilitated to the same extent. The LMOOCs demonstrated a lower degree of collaboration. The courses that encourage collaboration facilitate it through platform tools but tend not to link it to the learning content. Interestingly, while most MOOCs are not formally credentialed, many LMOOCs self-reported medium to high degrees of course formality. Certification is provided on completion of most of the LMOOCs in the sample, often for an additional fee. While reflection is encouraged in many courses, further investigation is required to reveal its nature and extent. With many courses promoting an asynchronous approach to learning, learner autonomy was reported as high. The LMOOCs in the sample self-reported high quality with quality assurance mechanisms being implemented by the major MOOC platforms. The categorisation of the diversity of the participants or the nature of the learning

pathways within each LMOOC is not reported as it did not align with the scale used by the researchers in their analysis.

Table 2. Classification of LMOOCs

Dimension	Low	Medium	High
Open	2	10	8
Massive	5	5	10
Multimedia	1	7	13
Collaboration	10	9	2
Communication	1	9	11
Quality	1	2	18
Reflection	3	-	18
Formal Learning	5	8	6
Certification	2	16	3
Autonomy	2	10	9

4. Discussion and conclusion

The classification schema is used to describe MOOCs, but it is also in use as a checklist to guide the design process and as a means of evaluating a MOOC's learning design (Conole, 2014). With regard to LMOOCs, however, in order to fully investigate the way in which language acquisition is supported within the course, further dimensions are required. Based on the literature pertaining to the key characteristics of effective LMOOCs (Bárcena & Martín-Monje, 2014), the researchers recommend at least the addition of two further dimensions to Conole's (2014) categorisation: language skills and instructor presence. Facilitating and assessing the development of all four language skills (reading, writing, speaking, and listening) is fundamental to the effective design of online second language courses (Don, 2005). The existing classification does not address any specific aspects of course content. As a result, the extent to which language skills and cultural competencies are dealt with by the course was not examined. In addition, the literature acknowledges the importance of instructor presence and support in developing language learner confidence and participation (Don, 2005; Kop, 2011; Moreira-Teixeira & Mota, 2014). While instructor presence is alluded to by the existing dimensions of autonomy and communication, it is not an exclusive component of these categories. The classification, therefore, does not specifically address the extent of instructor presence in the course. Designing an LMOOC that addresses the specificities of foreign language learning is challenging. The adaptations to Conole's (2014)

classification recommended by this paper could make a useful tool in assisting LMOOC course designers.

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