

Designing a MOOC for learners of Spanish: exploring learner usage and satisfaction

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Abstract. The authors of the *Learn Spanish: Basic Spanish for English Speakers* Massive Open Online Course (MOOC) explored how registered users interacted amongst themselves, providing peer-support and becoming ‘tutors’ to their peers. The analysis was based on data collected through two surveys, as well as through comments on a learner-initiated private Facebook group and course-specific forum posts. Instances of learner usage and learner satisfaction are addressed.

Keywords: massive open online courses, Spanish as a foreign language, learner satisfaction, LMOOC design.

1. Introduction

MOOCs specifically designed for language learning – or Language MOOCs (LMOOCs) as they are more commonly termed – are attracting an increasing number of studies. These studies examine them from various points of view: from analysing what constitutes an effective LMOOC (Sokolik, 2014) to ethical and aesthetic considerations (Álvarez, 2014), through aspects such as learner motivation (Beaven, Codreanu, & Creuzé, 2014), the role of the instructor (Castrillo de Larreta-Azelain, 2014), accessibility (Rodrigo, 2014), and design methodology (Moreira Teixeira & Mota, 2014; Gimeno-Sanz, Navarro-Laboulais, & Despujol-Zabala, 2017). This paper focusses on a recently designed 16-week LMOOC, *Learn Spanish: Basic Spanish for English Speakers*, published on the edX² platform (Gimeno-Sanz & Navarro-Laboulais, 2015), which attracted over 100,000 learners from 210 different countries from all five continents, within the 25 to 40 age range. This paper briefly addresses: (1) the fact that learners spontaneously had the initiative of interacting amongst themselves beyond the

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2. edX is a non-profit and open source MOOC provider.

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scope of the course; (2) how peer support naturally emerged; and (3) the additions that were implemented as a result of the comments posted by learners in the forum after the MOOC had been launched.

2. Method

Before taking part in the LMOOC, registered users were asked to complete a questionnaire³ that sought to gather information on learner profile and expectations. After completion, they were again asked to submit another questionnaire, this time focussing on learner satisfaction. The data⁴ reported here is taken from both of these sources (1,313 respondents), as well as from the comments posted on the MOOC forum and the Facebook group that was set up by the students themselves on the very same day the MOOC was launched (15th September 2015).

3. Results and discussion

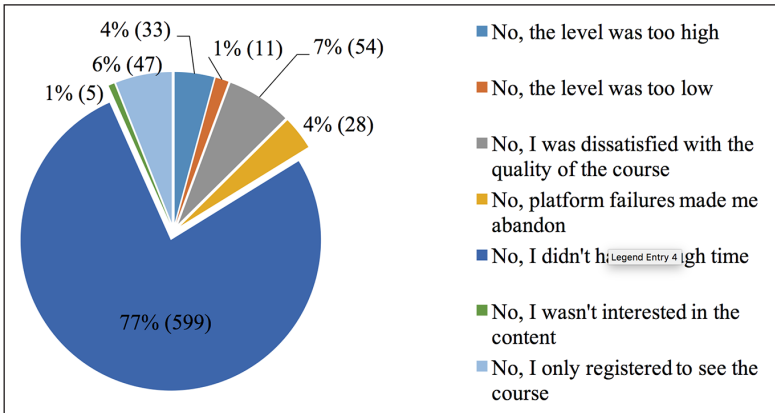
The questionnaires highlighted a number of issues. First and foremost, that the learners had registered on the course primarily out of pleasure for learning Spanish (35% - 460), followed by the will to improve their job prospects (15% - 197), both reasons adding up to half of the respondents. To a lesser extent, users included reasons such as transversal skills and to boost their CV (11% - 144), to supplement their studies (6% - 79), and lastly, 5% (66) because of the University's prestige. The fact that most of the respondents took the course for pleasure rather than as an obligation correlates with the fact that it was seen as a leisure activity and, as such, a way to facilitate engagement in social interaction. This need for interaction is therefore in line with the will to incorporate social media to promote more personalised interaction among users. It is also a way of creating a sense of belonging to a community with a shared interest, i.e. learning Spanish.

When asked whether they had completed the course, under half of the respondents (536, 41%) agreed to have done so, whilst 59% (777) had not. The reasons given for not completing the course are displayed in [Figure 1](#).

3. Powered by LimeSurvey, a free open-source online survey tool (<https://www.limesurvey.org>). The questionnaires were designed by the UPV MOOC Unit.

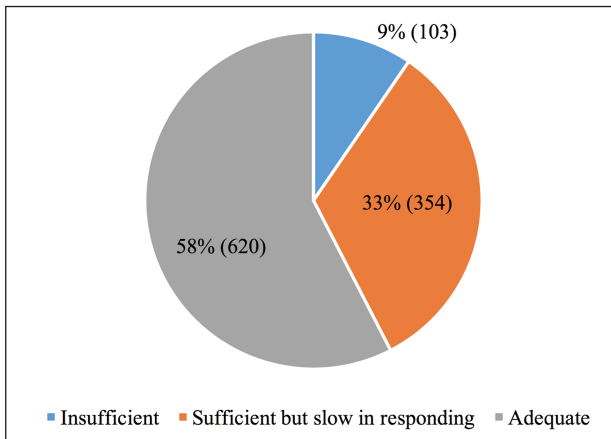
4. Data collected between 15 September 2015 and 16 April 2016.

Figure 1. Reasons for not completing the MOOC



As illustrated in Figure 1, the vast majority of the respondents reported that lack of time was the main reason for not having fulfilled all the course activities nor completed the mid-term and final tests. Despite the MOOC being organised into 16 weeks (estimated at an average of three to four hours of commitment per week), it was available on a self-paced⁵ basis during 15 months. This hindered tutor support and feedback but was balanced by having a teaching assistant permanently responding to learner queries and doubts.

Figure 2. Learner perception regarding efficiency and speed in resolving queries



5. Self-paced courses do not follow a set schedule. Course materials do not become available according to a schedule, but are completely available as soon as the course begins.

As we can see in [Figure 2](#), despite nearly two-thirds of the respondents being satisfied with the quality of the replies to solve queries and problems encountered during the course of the MOOC, there was still a non-negligible 42% who were somewhat dissatisfied either with the quality or the speed of the response. This factor may also imply that the perception of a certain lack in instructor/teaching assistant involvement was also one of the main reasons for many of the participants deciding to turn to fellow peers for support and, thus, engage in interaction outside the MOOC. This motivated the instructors to become members of and participate in the Facebook group to provide further guidance.

One of the first things that became apparent once the MOOC was launched was that the learners had an urge to interact amongst themselves and provide peer support as a natural reaction, i.e. without being instigated by their instructors. This was conducted by creating the private Facebook group mentioned above, which was promptly joined by (1) the most active and enthusiastic learners, and (2) users with a higher proficiency level who were willing to give fellow learners advice, provide explanations to language queries, and share reinforcement learning resources. The course designers thus realised that it was necessary to supply learners with supplementary materials in order to foster learner engagement and motivation. These supplementary materials had the four following functions.

(1) To decrease learner anxiety and frustration by:

- using the *Translectures*⁶ tool to provide videos with automatic transcriptions in Spanish and automatic translations of these into the source language, English;
- allowing learners to reduce playback rate in all of the audio files if they so wished.

(2) To support vocabulary acquisition by:

- adding a link to the Multidict⁷ dictionary interface with over 100 languages catered for, interconnected to sundry (monolingual and bilingual) free online dictionaries;

6. Translectures is a tool allowing us to generate, edit, and download automatic video captions and translations, developed by the Machine Learning and Language Processing Research Group at the Universidad Politécnica de Valencia. For further information, go to <https://www.translectures.eu> and <http://www.mlpl.upv.es>

7. Available from <http://www.multidict.net>

- incorporating automatically generated glossaries for each of the 16 study units inserted into the Multidict dictionary interface, thus allowing learners to quickly seek translations into more than 100 languages – a true asset when considering that participants came from 210 countries around the world.

(3) To provide speaking practice by:

- designing and embedding a voice recording tool (Language Lab) in all of the exercises containing audio, allowing learners to compare their utterances to the models provided by native speakers;
- organising scheduled instructor-led Google Hangouts⁸ sessions to support synchronous oral interaction;
- organising learner-driven speaking practice sessions using the Talkabout⁹ discussion planner, a tool that serves the purpose of organising speaking practice encounters so that students can interact live among themselves and practise the language together through a Google Hangouts video conference.

(4) To provide additional materials and further practice by:

- curating all the resources recommended by the students themselves through the forum and the Facebook group and providing a list of freely available supplementary materials, organised by language skill;
- integrating a link to Duolingo¹⁰ in order to take advantage of its gamification features.

4. Conclusions

The study yielded interesting data. The lessons learnt are the following:

- It is necessary to enrich an LMOOC with extra resources in order to intensify learner support, which in turn translates into increased motivation.

8. For more information, go to <https://hangouts.google.com>

9. For more information, go to <https://talkabout.stanford.edu/welcome>

10. For more information, go to <https://en.duolingo.com>

- Students become more engaged and motivated when they perceive that there are fellow course participants whom they can interact with, either in writing (Facebook) or speaking (one-to-one or group video conferencing).
- The sense of belonging to a community with shared interests can often drive students to turn to their peers rather than to the instructors or teaching assistants for guidance.
- Self-access MOOC participants need to be given incentives in order to become efficient autonomous learners and to keep motivation alive.

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