Open online language courses: the multi-level model of the Spanish N(ottingham)OOC

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Abstract. Research into open education has identified a *high number of participants* and *unpredictable mixed abilities* as factors responsible for the relatively weak presence of language Massive Open Online Courses (MOOCs). This contribution presents a model for open online language courses that aims to bridge this gap. The tangible context is a course in Spanish Language and Culture offered by the University of Nottingham: an online course confined within the boundaries of the institution and yet exhibiting several pedagogical features typical of MOOCs. Our Spanish Nottingham Open Online Course combines cultural content and language activities ensuring that language learning is enriched and complemented by informed exchanges on a variety of topics related to the Spanish speaking world. The novelty of our course rests in its design: a highly structured learning environment that facilitates mobility across different language levels and capitalises on community collaboration as a way to support unpredictable mixed abilities and cope with a high number of participants.

Keywords: course design, open online course, OER, language teaching.

1. Introduction

The purpose of this short contribution is to present the course design model of an online language course which will be offered by the University of Nottingham in autumn 2015, under the registered trademark of Nottingham Open Online Course

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(NOOC). The present study is one of the many attempts to address some of the issues that have been identified in the literature (Martín-Monje & Bárcena, 2014; and references therein) as the causes for the late appearance of language courses within the MOOCs movement that has revolutionised the educational scene over the last decade.

The NOOC, titled *Spain and Latin America: Transatlantic Crossings* (henceforth SNOOC), offers a cultural perspective to the theme of people's migration inside the Spanish speaking world, juxtaposed with a related language component. The uniqueness of the SNOOC rests in its ambition to cater for three levels of language proficiency, namely:

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

The SNOOC, which is hosted in Moodle, is an eight-week course divided into four two-week units. Each unit comprises a cultural and a language tier (2-tier structure), and the language tier of each unit is further divided into the three language ability levels mentioned above (3-level structure).

The pedagogical model of the SNOOC relates to that of MOOCs in a number of ways.

The SNOOC, unlike MOOCs, is not massive but it is expected to exceed by far the participant number of a traditional class. Furthermore, in contrast with MOOCs, the SNOOC is not offered globally – it is restricted to affiliates of University of Nottingham, including the overseas campuses in China and Malaysia. On the other hand, the SNOOC shows several of MOOCs' pedagogical features, as it:

- is open in that it has no application prerequisites;
- is based on open dialogues between all participants, tutors and students alike;
- relies on and generates Open Educational Resources (OERs);
- is delivered entirely online;

- is a course, i.e. it includes a taught structure led by MOOC-like roles of tutors and facilitators.

As mentioned earlier, the present study aims to deal with some features typical of open online learning that appear to be problematic for language learning and teaching. The concerns of the SNOOC are:

1) the high number of participants;

2) the diversity of the community of participants and the difficulty in predicting the participants' skills and abilities; and as by product of 1) and 2):

3) the degree of interaction in the target language required to achieve the learning outcomes.

Thus, this study seeks to provide some answers to the following issues:

- how to cope with a number of participants that is by far superior to that of conventional language classes;
- how to cope with mixed abilities and the related unpredictability factor, considering that language classes tend to target participants with a similar level of language skills;
- how to select language content to cater for different language levels and a heterogeneous audience;
- how to provide the level of interaction in the target language required to ensure language improvement, given the high number of learners and the different levels of language abilities.

In the following section, the structure of the SNOOC is presented – it is by leveraging course structure and activity design that we address the SNOOC's concerns outlined above.

2. Methodology

It was mentioned earlier that the structure of our SNOOC is a 2-tier and 3-level model, as illustrated in the Table 1 below.

Table 1. 2-tier/3-level model

Week 1: Culture All levels		Week 3: Culture All levels		Week 5: Culture All levels		Week 7: Culture All levels	
Week 2: Language	1	Week 4: Language	1	Week 6: Language	1	Week 8: Language	1
	2		2		2		2
	3		3		3		3

A number of considerations guided the design process. Firstly, we identified the main features of our course and, relying on Lane's (2012) tripartite typology of MOOCs, we designed the SNOOC to include:

- features of task-based MOOCs: it relies on the participants to perform pre-defined tasks;
- features of content-based MOOCs: it provides pre-determined content, instructions and automated drill-and-practice activities;
- features of networked-based MOOCs: it relies on the community of participants for generating content, providing language practice and peer-feedback.

Secondly, we delineated the characteristics of the SNOOC's community of participants by ensuring that the our design answered guideline questions as in Table 2. These questions were informed by the Galley, Conole, and Alevizou's (2014) community indicators framework which identifies four key aspects of community experience. These are:

> "participation – the ways in which individuals engage in activity; cohesion – the ties between individuals and the community as a whole; identity – how individuals perceive the community and their place within it; and creative capability – the ability of the community to create shared artefacts, and shared knowledge and understanding" (Galley et al., 2014, p. 379).

Thirdly, we focused on activity design and ensured that: 1) the medium of communication within the cultural component is English; 2) resources from the cultural tier are adapted for language tasks; 3) a given resource is adapted to

create learning activities for the three language levels supported by the SNOOC; and 4) each language unit includes linguistic explanations; practice exercises, consolidation and interactive tasks.

Table 2. Community indicator framework guideline questions (adapted from Galley et al., 2014)

Participation	Identity	Cohesion	Creative capability
Does our design encourage participants to take a social and facilitative role? Does our design encourage participants to make repeated contributions? Does our design encourage participants to engage equally with both tiers of the SNOOC?	Does our design encourage participants to connect their existing knowledge and experience to that of others? Does our design encourage people to interact in the target language?	Does our design encourage participants to share ideas and experience? To what extent is our design inclusive for learner with low or no Spanish language skills?	Does our design encourage participants to express multiple points of view? Does our design encourage our participants to make links between concepts and ideas?

The pedagogical significance of these choices is discussed below.

3. Discussion: the power of course design

In this section, we highlight the role of the SNOOC's model in addressing the study questions outlined in section 1.

3.1. 2-tiers

Within the cultural tier all participants are presented with the same resources in English and interact in English as one and the same group. As English is the medium of communication, the language competence of the learners is irrelevant and subsequently the educational outcomes of this tier are not strictly concerned with linguistic achievement. In this way, our model will ensure that 1) the learners engage more deeply with the content, given the absence of the language barrier effect; 2) all participants gain familiarity with the same content; and 3) community cohesion is strengthened.

Points 1) and 2) are significant as deeper engagement and increased familiarity with the content are expected to facilitate learning within the language tier. This is

achieved by recycling and adapting content of the cultural tier to create the language learning activities of the language tier of each unit. Point 3) is significant because it is by increasing the sense of community that we encourage our participants to be more readily prepared to engage in student-led activities across language levels. In this way we aim to address the concerns 1) and 3) presented in section 1.

3.2. 3-levels

The three language levels and their related learning outcomes are based on the CEFR descriptors and the language content is adapted from the *Plan Curricular del Instituto Cervantes*' inventory.

Within the language tier, the participants take their own learning path: self-diagnostic tests and self-perception will help the learners to select the language level that best suits their needs. In this way, the model deals with different learners' language abilities (concern 2).

In addition, the language learning resources are shared by all language levels. That is, a given resource is adapted to generate language learning materials for each language level. By doing so, our design model facilitates 1) mobility across the levels, allowing the learners to move up or down a level in accordance with their needs; and 2) peer-collaboration across the levels, especially peer-feedback from the higher levels of language proficiency to the lower ones.

The most significant consequence of 2) is the expected increase in the degree of interaction in the target language, which is no longer provided solely through the tutor-learner exchanges, but also through the additional interaction amongst the learners (concern 3).

4. Conclusion

In this short contribution we have highlighted the significance of course structure and activity design in the context of an open online language course. We have contextualised our study within the MOOCs' scenario, we have raised the concerns that justify the study and we have presented our attempt to deal with these concerns, namely the SNOOC's 2-tier/3-level model by which we address the issues of:

- high number of participants by supporting interaction across levels and facilitating peer feedback, especially from the higher to the lower levels;

- mixed abilities by facilitating mobility across the levels – same resource for all levels;

- providing the participants with the necessary degree of interaction in the target language by strengthening the sense of community and increasing community cohesion.

To conclude, by prioritising the alignment between pedagogical approach, the role of the community and course structure and activities design, the SNOOC attempts to resolve some of the issues that have held the MOOC culture from affecting language teaching with the same speed witnessed in other subject fields.

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