Worldwide state of language MOOCs

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Abstract. In the age of globalization, the need for language learning is greater than ever before. "Globalization is a process by which the people of the world are unified into a single society and [function] together" (Chomsky, 2006, cited in Ivan, 2012, p. 81). As global citizens we need to be able to work in settings characterized by linguistic and cultural diversity and that means that "language competencies and intercultural skills [are] more than ever a part of the key qualifications needed to successfully work and live in this new reality" (Perifanou & Economides, 2014, p. 3561). Even though many prestigious universities offer open language courses at a large scale, choosing well known Massive Open Online Course (MOOC) providers, the body of research on mapping existing language learning MOOC initiatives worldwide is rather poor. This paper aims to partially fill this research gap presenting the research contribution of the Erasmus+ KA2 project entitled LangMOOC project. More specifically, the paper first presents the main findings of the background research (Perifanou, 2014; Perifanou & Economides, 2014) of the LangMOOC project that has explored the first language learning MOOC initiatives and evaluated them based on the Massive Open Online Interactive Language Learning Environment (MOILLE[2]) framework. Next, the paper analyzes the overall aims of the LangMOOC project and in the end, it discusses its first research findings as well as its future research steps.

Keywords: MOOLCs, Foreign Language Learning, OER.

1. Introduction

In the age of globalization, open access to language courses and resources is needed more than ever before in order to meet the needs of linguistically and culturally diverse learners who live and work in a global society. Nowadays, the levels of

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2. The MOILLE framework is also discussed in Perifanou (2016, this volume)

multilingualism and multiculturalism have increased. The challenge of offering free language education worldwide and at a large scale is huge. Massive Open Online Language Courses (MOOLCs) is a recent educational phenomenon of online learning that can promote linguistic diversity and language learning, breaking all linguistic barriers (Colas, Sloep, & Garreta-Domingo, 2016). In fact, in the last four years there is a really growing interest for MOOCs and Open Educational Resources (OERs) connected to foreign language learning. For example, over 370,000 students have enrolled in the #FLEnglishIELTS course that prepared them for the English language proficiency test IELTS[3]. This course was offered by the FutureLearn MOOC provider, making it the biggest MOOC so far in the world (Coughlan, 2015).

The first attempt not only to map but also to evaluate the situation of MOOLCs worldwide was made in 2014 (Perifanou & Economides, 2014). More concretely, the researchers proposed the MOILLE framework in order to evaluate all the MOOLCs initiatives offered up to 2014. This framework – also discussed in Perifanou, 2016, this volume – proposes six basic criteria (i.e content, pedagogy, assessment, community, technical infrastructure, and financial issues) that need to be taken under consideration for the successful design and creation of an efficient interactive open and online language learning environment for a massive number of learners.

The MOILLE framework generally embraces a constructivist way of language learning and proposes a "highly interactive [learning] environment where the learners are interconnected to a language learning community building collectively their language skills" (Perifanou & Economides, 2014, p. 3568). The main research aim was to identify if there were MOOLC initiatives that could provide a promising MOILLE. According to the research findings the answer was 'no' because of the following main reasons. Since the beginning of MOOCs up to 2014 there were "more than 16 MOOC platforms that [have offered] more than 50 free [online] language learning courses. More than a half of them were English language MOOCs but there [was] also a great interest for other languages like Arabic, Spanish, Japanese, Chinese, etc." (Perifanou. 2015a, p. 6). Another important research finding was that even though there were some good MOOLC examples, like SpanishMOOC and Mixxer MOOC, most of the evaluated MOOLC initiatives have adopted the traditional model of MOOCs based on a cognitive behavioral pedagogical model (xMOOCs) and did not embrace a more constructivist type (cMOOCs) (for futher reading on a behavioural as opposed to constructivist approach in MOOLCS, see Perifanou & Economides, 2014).

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3. International English Language Testing System

One of the basic aims of the EU funded project LangMOOC[4] was to repeat the same research methodology with few changes, such as to identify open source and free MOOC platforms, in order to map and evaluate the state of MOOLCs during 2015 but also to compare the latest research results to those of 2014.

2.   Research methodology

2.1.   LangMOOC basic research steps

The LangMOOC project has adopted the same research methodology adopted by previous research (Perifanou & Economides, 2014; Perifanou, 2014) following 4 concrete research steps:

- First stage: exploration of all the MOOLCs aiming at identifying all MOOC platforms available during 2015 with the support of concrete research tools such as MOOC aggregators, MOOC portals, etc.

- Second stage: classification of the MOOLC initiatives/platforms with respect to the following criteria: (1) use of open source platform/possibility to create a language course individually (i.e. as a teacher), (2) free access to massive online language courses, (3) pedagogy, (4) type of accreditation, and (5) variety of languages and number of courses.

- Third stage: evaluation of six representative MOOLC platforms based on the MOILLE framework.

- Fourth stage: analysis of the research findings and useful conclusions (Perifanou, 2015b).

2.2.   LangMOOC implementation

Based on the research findings, the LangMOOC research team aims to propose an improved MOOLC solution that could be implemented by non-academic institutions such as private language schools, language teachers and trainers. In order to achieve this goal the LangMOOC project team has created a toolkit, a step-by-step guideline which includes all the innovative methods and technical tools

4. https://www.langmooc.com/

for the creation, management and evaluation of MOOCs and OERs for language learning addressed to non-academic institutions. The LangMOOC project team has also run a series of pilot MOOLCs in order to test the use of OERs in language MOOCs as well as the efficiency of the toolkit promoting at the same time the learning of less 'popular' used European languages (e.g. Greek, Norwegian and Italian).

3.   Main results and discussion

We found 67 different MOOC platforms/providers in total and 29 of those have already offered MOOLCs of 20+ different languages during 2015. Most of them (21 out of 29) were courses for English but there was a big interest for other languages too such as Spanish and Chinese/Mandarin (12 out of 29) but also for less spoken languages such as Greek, Swedish and Irish (1 out of 29). Compared to the research results of 2014, there is an increase of MOOLC initiatives from 16 to 29. Another interesting research finding is that there are 18 out of 29 MOOC platforms (e.g. Open EdX, Moodle, OpenMOOC, WeMOOC, OpenLearning) which use free and open source software. Many of those also give the opportunity to language organizations or to language teachers to build their own MOOLCs (with the possibility to add payment for their services). Almost all of the MOOLCs (24 out of 29) offer accreditation (certifications, badges and/or ECTS credits) after the completion of 70% or 80% of the language course in most cases. Regarding the pedagogy adopted, there are few examples (3 out of 29), such as Mixxer, Instreamia, OpenLearning and TandemMOOC, which support a connectivist way of learning, emphasizing the role of social and cultural context. The results show that the MOOLCs' pedagogy has remained almost the same compared to the one of 2014 despite the total number increase of MOOLCs' initiatives. The third stage of the research evaluating six representative MOOLC platforms (i.e open. EdX, OpenLearning, Instreamia, The Mixxer, UNED, and Eliademy) based on the MOILLE framework have shown another important research finding: there is not one ideal MOOLC platform that can offer a successful MOILLE but there are a few successful cases. In general, most of the evaluated MOOLCs are following the traditional model of xMOOCs (Perifanou, 2015b).

4.   Conclusions

One of the LangMOOC's main goals was to map and evaluate the MOOLCs at a global level. The results described in the previous paragraphs have shown that even

though there is an increasing interest for MOOLCs worldwide, the need for the design and creation of successful MOOLCs is high because most of the evaluated MOOLCs still do not offer a successful MOILLE. Furthermore, issues such as the language teachers' new role, time and implementation costs, the empowerment of authentic communication with native speakers, multi-level assessment and accreditation, and MOOC platforms' interoperability remain important and should be considered carefully by all MOOLC teachers/designers.

The LangMOOC project team envisages that the toolkit will facilitate the work of language teachers and language and training institutions across Europe who wish to design and create successful MOOCs.

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