THE EUROCALL REVIEW

The EuroCALL Review
Volume 28, No. 2, 2020, 13-22
ISSN: 1695-2618
https://doi.org/10.4995/eurocall.2020.13090

RESEARCH PAPER

English Language MOOCs in China: Learners' Perspective

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How to cite this article:

Ding, Y., & Shen, H. (2021). English Language MOOCs in China: Learners' Perspective. *The EuroCALL Review, 28*(2), 13-22. https://doi.org/10.4995/eurocall.2020.13090

Abstract

In the wake of rapid development of Language MOOCs (LMOOCs), numerous studies have proposed principles and guidelines to inform curriculum design. Very few of them have, however, reported on learners' views. This study aims to contribute to this line of research by bringing in a learners' perspective. It is based on a content analysis of 3,510 learner reviews on 41 English LMOOCs offered by a national MOOC provider in China. It focuses on Chinese EFL learners' views of LMOOCs. The results indicate that their views pertain mainly to seven categories: (1) content design of course videos, (2) presentation design of course videos, (3) MOOC program instructors, (4) assessments and assignments, (5) course settings, (6) forum discussions, and (7) technological environment, of which the first three are of the most importance to the learners. It is argued that Chinese EFL learners' perception of English LMOOCs might be rooted in their engagement pattern with the courses, their perceptions of the role of teachers, the design of existing English LMOOCs, and a preference for the traditional way of foreign language teaching and learning they are acquainted with before engaging with the LMOOCs. The context-specific evidence could be used as an empirical base to guide future design of LMOOCs for foreign language learning in China.

Keywords

Language MOOCs, learner reviews, learner perceptions, content analysis, design principles

1. Introduction

Language MOOCs (LMOOCs), that is, MOOCs dedicated to foreign language learning, have been developed since 2012 and are being offered on different platforms ranging from international MOOC providers to smaller, regional ones (Bárcena & Martín-Monje, 2014; Luo, 2017). In China, LMOOCs have been embraced readily by policymakers and practitioners as a potential means to advance the reform of foreign language education (Han, 2019; Luo, 2016). Currently more than three hundred LMOOCs have been launched on iCourse and xuetangX, the two largest national MOOC platforms in China. The number is expected to increase further, as more foreign language teachers are seeking to launch their own MOOCs (Han, 2019).

Some of the most urgent questions for LMOOC developers relate to the principles and guidelines needed for designing LMOOCs. Previous studies have offered a range of suggestions regarding the issue (e.g., Perifanou, 2016; Sokolik, 2014; Wang-Szilas & Bellassen, 2017). However, with the notable exceptions of Gimeno-Sanz (2017) and Ding (2019), few of them have taken learners' views on LMOOCs into account. This study examines the above issues through the lens of Chinese learners of English as a Foreign Language (EFL) by way of a content analysis of learner reviews on existing English LMOOCs in China.[1] The key research questions of the study are:

- RQ1: What do Chinese EFL learners think of existing English LMOOCs in China?
- RQ2: What are the implications of the answers to R1 for the design and delivery of LMOOCs?

It is hoped that the research will provide an empirical base for designing and developing more learner friendly LMOOCs in China.

2. Literature Review

Previous research has provided various design principles for LMOOCs, for example, the principle that LMOOCs should maximize interaction between learners (Carlos et al., 2017; Gimeno-Sanz, 2017; Fontana & Leffa, 2018; Perifanou 2016; Read, 2014; Sokolik, 2014; Teixeira & Mota, 2014; Wang-Szilas & Bellassen, 2017).

Existing studies have also provided a large range of specific guidelines for developing LMOOCs, which focused on: (a) the content design and presentation design of videos; (b) the design of assessments and assignments; (c) course settings; (d) the facilitation of learner interaction and community; (e) the development of the technological environment; and (f) the reorientation of instructors' roles (Carlos et al., 2017; Colpaert, 2014; Gimeno-Sanz, 2017; Fontana & Leffa, 2018; Perifanou 2016; Read, 2014; Sokolik, 2014; Teixeira & Mota, 2014; Wang-Szilas & Bellassen, 2017).

The great majority of the existing studies, however, tend to build on a review of learning theories (Beirne et al., 2017; Carlos et al., 2017; Perifanou, 2016; Read, 2014; Sokolik, 2014; Teixeira & Mota, 2014) or an analysis of problems of existing MOOCs (Fontana & Leffa, 2018; Wang-Szilas & Bellassen, 2017). Only a very few studies have taken learners' views into consideration (Gimeno-Sanz, 2017; Ding, 2019). Gimeno-Sanz (2017) analysed data collected via two questionnaire surveys administered to learners of a Spanish LMOOC and put forward a set of suggestions regarding the design of LMOOCs, which included: (a) providing videos with transcriptions in Spanish and English; (b) allowing learners to slow down a video; (c) adding a link to free online dictionaries; (d) incorporating automatically generated glossaries; (e) embedding a voice recording tool in all exercises containing audio materials; (f) organising learner-initiated speaking practice sessions; (g) curating resources recommended by students; (h) providing a list of freely available supplementary materials; and (i) integrating a link to an external language learning website to make use of its gamification features.

Another study that has taken learners' views into consideration was conducted by Ding (2019). This study focused on one aspect of LMOOCs; instructional videos, and drawing on learners' comments on existing LMOOCs, the study arrived at a number of design and

production suggestions concerning the content, structure, presentation style, pace, language of instruction, caption, on-screen text, background music, and length of instructional videos used in LMOOCs.

Large scale research engaging multiple samples and examining all major components of LMOOCs is needed to obtain a more comprehensive picture of what learners aspire to see in an LMOOC.

3. Methodology

Content analysis was used to gauge learners' views on existing LMOOCs. As shown in Figure 1, the method was comprised of four steps, namely, preparing the content, coding the content, counting and weighting, and drawing conclusions (Elo & Kyngäs, 2008). The data used in the present study were the same as those used in the author's previous work (Ding, 2019), but the analysis was extended beyond instructional videos.

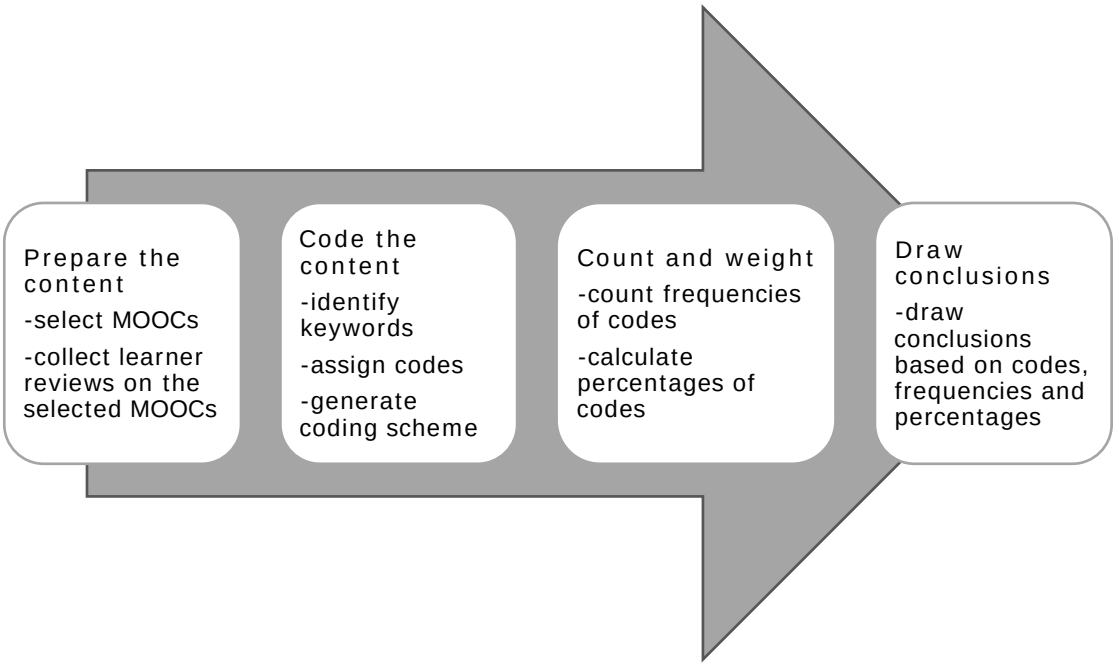

Figure 1. Steps of content analysis.

To prepare the content, learner reviews on 41 existing English LMOOCs hosted in iCourse were collected. Course reviews were used as they serve as a new interactive tool that can provide valuable insights into learners' concerns and opinions (Peng & Xu, 2020). Of the 41 English LMOOCs, 24 were on English for General Purpose (EGP), such as *Advanced Course for College English* and *English Grammar and Sentence Writing*;13 were on English for Specific Purposes (ESP) or English for Academic Purposes (EAP), such as *Business English* and *English for Academic Writing*; and four were on cultural basics of English-speaking countries, for example, *A Survey of the US and UK*.

All 41 MOOCs were centered around instructional videos, assessment and / or assignments. About a half of the courses required participation in forum discussion as a mandatory course requirement. Seven of them adopted peer assessment in addition to automatic assessment, and one of the MOOCs used external social media for learner interaction. By the time of data collection (September 24, 2018), these MOOCs had 3,393,578 learners enrolled and received 3,510 reviews.

To code the content, a bottom-up approach was adopted, where no coding scheme was predetermined. Instead, codes were identified from the keywords in the reviews and were then categorized and organized into a scheme. The coding process was iterative in that the codes and the coding scheme were constantly refined to best fit the data and draw parallels with the design guidelines proposed in the literature.

All the reviews were fed into a qualitative data analysis tool called QDA Miner and coded manually. Subsequent to data coding, the frequencies and percentages of each code were generated automatically by QDA Miner. Conclusions were drawn based on the codes as well as their frequencies and percentages.

4. **Chinese EFL learners' views on existing English LMOOCs**

4.1. An Overview

As shown in Table 1, the reviews were primarily concerned with seven aspects of an English LMOOC. "Count" indicates the frequency of a code; "% codes" indicates the relative weight of a code, calculated by dividing the frequency of a code by the total frequencies of all the codes in the table. It can be seen from the table that the vast majority of the codes (i.e. 90.7%) related to the content and presentation design of the videos and to the instructors. The subsequent sections will present the details of the seven aspects.

Table 1. Chinese EFL learners' views on the English LMOOCs

Code	Count	% Codes
Content design of videos	1502	57.1%
Instructors	462	17.6%
Presentation design of videos	422	16.0%
Assessments and assignments	119	4.5%
Course settings	47	1.8%
Technological environment	43	1.6%
Forum discussions	35	1.3%

4.2. Content and presentation design of videos

This section will only give a very brief summary of learners' views on the content and presentation design of videos in LMOOCs, as these have been presented in the author's previous work (Ding, 2019). With respect to the contents, the learners paid most attention to whether they were useful, rich, attractive, detailed, easy to understand, and clear. As for the presentation design, the learners focused on the pace, presentation style, subtitles and transcripts, language of instruction, extended materials, production quality, and length of the videos. Most of the learner reviews on these aspects were positive.

4.3. Instructors

The feedback on the instructors fell into four categories. The first category related to the instructors' pronunciation and intonation. A majority of the respondents, 180 of 200, regarded the instructors' pronunciation and intonation as clear, accurate, or standard. However, 20 participants stated that the course instructors or student actors (i.e. those who participated in role-plays recorded in course videos) in 13 courses had a marked accent.

The second category of feedback related to the professionalism and sense of responsibility of the instructors. All the 118 reviews in this category, except two, appeared to be quite positive. The students gave credit to the instructors for being "professional", "responsible", and "patient". The two less positive comments, concerning two different courses, suggested that the instructors should look at the audience rather than the teleprompter.

The third category of feedback related to the appearance, voice, and manner of the instructors. Reviews in the third category were also predominantly positive.

Finally, 33 learners commented on teacher-student interaction. Seventeen of the reviews were positive, stating that the instructors could answer students' questions timely or comment on the discussions and assignments. The remaining 16 reviews showed dissatisfaction and expected a more responsive instructor.

4.4. Assessments and assignments

There were 119 reviews on the assessments / assignments of a course, which focused on the function (49), quantity (26), level of difficulty (9), and clarity (8) of the assessments / assignments, as well as peer assessment (11).[2] The reviews regarding the function of the assessments / assignments were overall positive. Only four of the 49 reviews, commenting on two courses, showed dissatisfaction, as the assessments / assignments did not quite "match with the course videos". The remaining 45 participants all stated that that the assessments / assignments had helped them to master and consolidate the knowledge and skills taught in the course videos.

By contrast, reviews concerning the quantity, level of difficulty, and clarity of the assessments / assignments were predominantly negative. Only three out of the 26 learners who provided feedback were satisfied with the quantity of the assessments / assignments. The other 23 regarded the assessments / assignments on five of the courses as too many, and those of another four courses as too few. With respect to the level of difficulty, three users, commenting on three different courses, regarded the level of difficulty as appropriate, whereas the remaining six stated that the assessments / assignments on five courses were too difficult. Regarding the clarity of assessments / assignments, the eight reviews were all negative, complaining about ambiguous directions and answers. While learners' judgment on the quantity and clarity of assessments / assignments were consistent, their opinions on the level of difficulty of the assessments / assignments were contradictory in a few cases, possibly owing to individual differences such as language proficiency.

Finally, the learners did not appear to be quite receptive to peer assessment. Only less than a half of the learners who provided feedback (i.e. four of 11) enjoyed peer assessment, regarding it as interesting and helpful. Of the seven who did not like peer assessment, five doubted its validity and fairness. The remaining two learners considered peer-assessment as "troublesome" due to some technical problems they encountered during the process.

4.5. Course settings

The 47 reviews on course settings focused on the schedule (18), certificate (11), course requirement (8), and "review" function (10) of a course. Almost all of them (i.e., 42 of 47) were either negative reviews or questions. Regarding the schedule, four students, commenting on four different courses, stated that the schedules of the courses were reasonable, enabling them to complete the learning tasks of each unit with ease.[3] However, 14 students, commenting on another five courses, complained about the limited time given for completing a unit, or too long intervals between units.[4] Comments from respondents with respect to the certificate were mostly questions about how and when to get it. As for course requirements, eight learners, commenting on four different courses, said the requirements of the courses they attended were over-complex.[5] Finally, one learner commented positively on a course for its providing the review function, which allows the learner to view the content of the course after the course deadline, whereas nine learners raised suggestions for improvement or commented negatively on five other courses for their lack of this function.[6]

4.6. Technological environment

A total of 43 respondents pointed out the problems and strengths of the platform of iCourse. The most highly recognized weakness of the platform was in its "alert" function. Though the platform showed the assignments / assessments that would be due in the personal centre page after one logged onto the website, five students mentioned that this was still not enough. They expected an additional alert function that could remind them of the deadlines in a manner that was timely and less likely to be ignored.[7] The most frequently mentioned strength of the platform was the "speed-control" function that allowed a learner to slow down a video (i.e., watch a video at 0.75 times of the normal playback rate) or speed up a video (i.e., watch a video at 1.25, 1.5, 1.75 or 2 times of

the normal playback rate). This function could help learners to follow a course whenever they found a video too fast or keep attention when they found a video too slow.

4.7. Forum discussions

There were 35 reviews on forum discussions, of which 33 were positive. According to these reviews, forum discussions were "interesting", "inspiring" and "helpful", as they allowed a learner to "deepen one's understanding of the content", to "solve some problems", to "see the diversity of ideas", to "realize the limitations of oneself", and to "know some peers having the same goal". Specifically, one course used external social media to facilitate discussion, which was very "convenient for learners to share information". The two learners who were not so positive about forum discussions stated that they were not good at forum discussions because of their poor language proficiency.

5. Characteristics of Chinese EFL l**earners' views**

Chinese EFL learners' views of existing English LMOOCs display two characteristics. The first one is a consistent emphasis on course videos and instructors. This can be seen from the fact that a vast majority of the codes (i.e. 90.7%) were related to the content and presentation design of MOOC videos and MOOC program instructors. Such an emphasis is in keeping with findings from previous research which showed that many MOOC learners, including those of LMOOCs, interacted mostly or even entirely with instructional videos (Breslow et al., 2013; Martín-Monje, Castrillo, & Mañana-Rodríguez, 2018). Moreover, it was noted that Chinese learners tended to see their instructor as a figure of authority responsible for transmitting knowledge, organizing learning activities, and nurturing their students (Ho & Crookall, 1995; Scollon & Scollon, 1994; Zhong & Shen, 2002). In other words, for many Chinese learners, an experienced and knowledgeable instructor is a strong guarantor of the quality of a course. This may help explain the great attention that Chinese EFL learners in the present study paid to the instructors of the English LMOOCs.

The second characteristic is the general overlook of learner interaction in the reviews, which is evidenced by the low weights of the codes pertaining to learner interaction. There were two codes, namely, forum discussion and peer assessment, which were connected to learner interaction. The percentages of both codes—1.3% and 0.4%—were both very low.

This obvious absence of attention to learner interaction could have been attributed to the overall design of the existing English LMOOCs, which was heavily rooted in the instruction-driven approach of a typical Chinese EFL classroom. All the 41 English LMOOCs were the so-called xMOOCs which are based on the traditional instruction-driven principle (Khalil Brunner, & Ebner, 2015). Often, in existing English LMOOCs, a learner can pass a course without interacting with other learners. For example, though some of the English LMOOCs listed participation in forum discussion as a course requirement, they only required the learners to answer the questions posted by the instructors rather than discuss the questions among the learners or comment on each other. This poses a potential danger that a highly individual and isolated learning mode will deprive learners of opportunities of interactive learning.

It would therefore appear that the instruction-driven tradition of Chinese EFL classrooms, which has persisted even into the era of modern educational technology, underlies both the design of English LMOOCs and the learners' perceptions of the existing English LMOOCs. More than a decade ago, Zhong and Shen (2002) found that the introduction of new technology into the Chinese EFL classroom only resulted in a "technologized traditional classroom" where technology served "as a magic wand for the teacher-magician to present teaching materials in electronic garb" but did not affect any changes to "the ecology of the classroom or the established patterns of behaviours of both the teachers and students" (p. 46). A decade and a half later, we can still observe the same established patterns in these English LMOOCs. Students, as can be seen from their reviews on course videos, assessments and assignments, mostly expected to acquire knowledge or skills by viewing the videos (i.e., the teachers) and then consolidate their

knowledge and skills through exercises. It remains a typical master-apprentice style of learning.

6. Implications for the design and operation of LMOOCs

The most important lesson to be learned from the results of the present study is the failure of current English LMOOCs produced in China to promote interaction between learners. To rectify this deficiency in course design, LMOOC developers may need to think more creatively of ways to maximize learner interaction through selection of materials and tasks, as suggested by researchers (Carlos et al., 2017; Gimeno-Sanz, 2017; Fontana & Leffa, 2018; Perifanou 2016; Read, 2014; Sokolik, 2014; Teixeira & Mota, 2014; Wang-Szilas & Bellassen, 2017). This is admittedly a difficult task, which requires a change in the perception of language teaching and learning and a redefinition of the role of the teacher (Zhong & Shen, 2002), as well as specific techniques to enhance learner interaction, such as more channels for communication and more opportunities for active participation (Drake, O'Hara, & Seeman, 2015; Hew, 2016).

The results of the present study also highlight the necessity of considering the needs of learners in specific contexts, as these can give rise to context-specific design guidelines for developing more learner friendly MOOCs. In the context of the present study, for example, the identification of the needs of Chinese EFL learners provided several implications that complemented previous study findings.

Firstly, apart from the level of difficulty, variety, and clarity (Carlos et al., 2017; Perifanou, 2016; Teixeira & Mota, 2014), the quantity of assessments and assignments remains a major concern for course instructors.

Secondly, in addition to an introduction to the course (Carlos et al., 2017; Fontana & Leffa, 2018; Sokolik, 2014), a detailed introduction to the features and functions of the MOOC platform is also needed. Otherwise, the learners may not be aware of some useful functions of the platform.

Thirdly, while short courses of less than eight weeks might be popular (Carlos et al., 2017; Teixeira & Mota, 2014), longer courses can be made available. The English LMOOCs investigated in the present study lasted for eight, ten, twelve, or even sixteen weeks, but received no negative feedback regarding their length. In fact, none of the reviews commented on the duration of a course, which suggested that course duration was not a concern of the Chinese EFL learners in this study.

Fourthly, it is suggested to update content weekly, but give learners more time, such as two or three weeks, to complete the assessments and assignments.

Finally, it should be possible for learners to access a course after the deadline, as learners may want to review the course or complete the course at their own pace, even though they cannot get a certificate.

One limitation of the present study is that the current method of content analysis cannot provide definite answers to questions such as what the appropriate quantity of assignments is. However, the study did make a conscious effort to draw attention to these questions in LMOOC design, to which future research that adopts a more quantitative or experimental approach may be able to provide answers.

7. Conclusion

The present study conducted a content analysis of 3,510 Chinese EFL learners' reviews on 41 existing English LMOOCs offered by a national MOOC provider in China. The results showed that the learners were much concerned with the content design and presentation design of course videos as well as course instructors, and there was an obvious lack of focus on interaction among learners. It is argued that this imbalance could have been caused by a MOOC course design deeply influenced by the traditional teacher-led approach. There was little emphasis on learners being agents in the meaning making process. The extremely high level of teacher dependence and the perception of his / her

being a role model and source of authentic linguistic and cultural knowledge reveal the complexity of the issue. It is implied that a change in pedagogical innovation as induced by technologies in language education may need to be taking place alongside, or at least after, a change of mindset in educational philosophy. It is anticipated that learner interaction could well be enhanced by a well-designed LMOOC with a range of engaging materials and tasks to facilitate more interactive learning that are sensitive to the specific learner needs in their contexts. Future research is needed to further explore these points.

Ethical statement

The data analysed in the paper were Internet content accessible to the general public. The authors have no conflict of interest to declare.

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Endnotes

[1] English LMOOCs refer to MOOCs dedicated to the learning of English as a foreign language. The present study focused on English LMOOCs, as they constituted a vast majority of the LMOOCs offered in China.

[2] The figures in parentheses indicate frequencies.

[3] The courses receiving positive reviews in this aspect updated content weekly and gave student two or three weeks to complete unit assessments / assignments.

[4] The course receiving negative reviews only gave students one week for unit assessments / assignments or updated content biweekly.

[5] A primary examination of the requirements of the four courses showed that the courses all adopted a very common way of grading: students' final scores depended on their scores in unit assessments / assignments, scores in final examinations, and participation in forum discussions. Thus, students' dissatisfaction was likely to result from requirements of specific tasks.

[6] Whether learners can view a course after the course deadline depends on the decision of course instructors, who can allow the function in settings.

[7] The platform can actually send messages via Wechat to remind a learner of the due assignments / assessments, provided that the learner scans the QR code of the Wechat account of iCourse. It seemed that the students making the comments were unaware of this function.