# 10 Learning specialised vocabulary through Facebook in a massive open online course

## Patricia Ventura[1] and Elena Martín-Monje[2]

## Abstract

This paper explores how the incorporation of a social network such as Facebook can enhance the acquisition of specialised vocabulary in the context of a Massive Open Online Course (MOOC). Such initiative took place in the second edition of the MOOC Professional English, the first ever English for Specific Purposes (ESP) MOOC to be launched in Spain as one of the courses offered by Aprendo, the UNED online platform. The main aim of the experiment was to ascertain how this social network, which has proved to foster motivation and engagement in language learning contexts (Blattner & Lomicka, 2012; Zourou, 2012), could enhance the students' learning experience and promote vocabulary acquisition in an ESP MOOC context. Following an action-research methodology (Lewin, 1946) a Facebook group was created by the MOOC curator and ran for eight weeks out of the twelve that the course was comprised of (11 November 2013-31 January 2014). A mixed-method approach was adopted for the data collection, using both quantitative techniques, such as student tracking in the MOOC, and also qualitative ones (e.g. questionnaires). The results point towards a positive impact of the Facebook network in the motivation of students to learn specialised vocabulary and an improvement in their progress in the MOOC, likewise fighting the main two problems that MOOCs currently are said to have: high drop-out rates and lack of student engagement.

Keywords: ESP, social networks, massive open online courses, vocabulary.

1. Universidad Nacional de Educación a Distancia (UNED), Madrid, Spain; patricia.vex@gmail.com

2. Universidad Nacional de Educación a Distancia (UNED), Madrid, Spain; emartin@flog.uned.es

## 1.    Introduction

Today, informal learning offers teachers and students a variety of resources that can be combined to create personal and adapted learning experiences. MOOCs, the latest trend in education, are being enriched by the incorporation of different social media tools, such as blogs and social networks (Facebook, Google+), with the aim of increasing students' participation and engagement.

 As stated in Ventura Expósito (2014),

> "the motivation of this research was precisely to provide students in a Professional English MOOC with a new enhanced language-learning experience by integrating a Facebook Group (henceforth FG) that focused on the acquisition of specialised vocabulary. The research hypothesis put forward was that […] social networks such as Facebook in a foreign language learning MOOC [can foster] motivation and engagement, thus enhancing the students' educational experience" (n.p.).

Also, in the context of ESP, it can promote the acquisition of specialised vocabulary in Professional English. In line with this, the authors posed the following research questions:

- What was the participants' knowledge of specialised vocabulary in Professional English before joining the FG?

- Did the FG have any positive impact on their knowledge of specialised vocabulary in Professional English?

- Was the implementation of the FG perceived as useful for language learning by the course participants?

- Did the FG help reduce dropout rates keeping students motivated and engaged enough to complete the whole course?

## 2.     Literature review

MOOCs are one of the most recent models of online education and in fact an increasingly popular one (Dhawal, 2013). Although there is still no consensus regarding its definition and despite some criticism raised by experts (Jackson, 2013), the reality is that they have been very well received, as data in terms of student numbers, course statistics and teacher satisfaction seem to demonstrate (Martín-Monje, Bárcena, & Read, 2013). Probably one of their main strengths is the way in which they place the emphasis on social interaction, and the flexible learning materials which allow students to make progress at their own pace, while at the same time feeling part of a community.

As far as foreign Language MOOCs (LMOOCs henceforth) are concerned, there have been quite a few solid initiatives, although it must be said that language learning is not one of the most prolific disciplines in MOOC development, and it has also faced controversy, such as Romeo's (2012) forcefully negative view on MOOCs on English as a Second Language (ESL): "[i]f you think about it, ESL is all about exactly what the MOOCs specifically, and self-study in general, cannot do" (p. 2). Nevertheless, there are some excellent examples of successful LMOOCs: Bryant (2013) developed two parallel online courses using his language exchange website, The Mixxer (http://www.language-exchanges.org/); one in Spanish, "MOOC de Español" and one in English, "English MOOC", which were selected as one of six "Big Ideas" for the Emerging Leaders Competition to be presented at the New Media Consortium Summer Conference in the UK; and another award-winning LMOOC "Alemán para Hispanohablantes", from UNED, Spain, which obtained the first prize for the Best MOOC in the MiríadaX platform (Castrillo, 2013).

This paper focuses on the implementation of Facebook, a social networking tool, into an LMOOC with the aim of enhancing social interaction and specialised vocabulary acquisition. Although social networking has been used for a number of years in language learning, it has mainly focused on the build-up of identity in online communities (Harrison & Thomas, 2009), and has not been properly

investigated (Wang & Vásquez, 2012). One of the few instances of insightful research is provided by Blattner and Lomicka (2012), who aim at developing a better understanding of the role that Facebook can play in foreign language education. They also admit that more research is needed in order to ascertain its effectiveness.

As far as the acquisition of specialised vocabulary is concerned, there is conversely abundant literature already published, highlighting the types of vocabulary, underlying pedagogy and current trends in lexis teaching and learning (see for example Carter & McCarthy, 1988; or Nation, 2001). Since the LMOOC focus of this research deals with ESP, it was important to draw the distinction between core and non-core vocabulary (McCarthy, 1990) and make clear to the participants the significant role of vocabulary in ESP teaching and learning.

## 3. Methodology

This experiment falls under the fourth stage of a wider action-research investigation (Lewin, 1946) on students' motivation and engagement in ESP MOOCs. On our first stage, coincident with the first edition of the Professional English MOOC (January-April 2013), the authors' aim was to foster interaction and collaborative learning through the social component of the course: the forums. After the first edition, data were gathered and analysed, their results showing a very low participation rate in the forums (Martín-Monje, Bárcena, & Ventura, 2013). Following a reflection period previous to the second edition of the course, the authors devised a new strategy to enhance the students' learning experience in the MOOC and promote vocabulary acquisition through a social network.

It was the authors' belief that the integration of a social network in the MOOC, such as Facebook, would provide students with a different, more familiar approach to the course and facilitate engagement, given the fact that social networks have become an integral part of our daily lives (Elogia, 2013). Thus,

the MOOC curator and member of the teaching team, created an FG as a complement to the Professional English MOOC on its second edition, focusing on the acquisition of specialised vocabulary.

## 3.1.    Context

The Professional English MOOC was the first ever ESP MOOC to be launched in Spain, offered by Aprendo (https://unedcoma.es/), UNED online platform and MiríadaX (https://miriadax.net/home), Telefónica Learning Services and the Universia platform, with more than 50,000 students between them at the highest peak of the course, on its first edition.

The second edition of the course, launched in Aprendo, comprised 12 weeks (11 November 2013 – 31 January 2104) and was followed by more than 8,000 students. Over the fourth week, a massive email announcing the opening of an FG as a complement to the MOOC was sent to all the students. The email explained the purpose of the FG and contained a list of frequently asked questions with their answers, and a series of recommendations to take full advantage of students' participation in the FG.

## 3.2.    Instruments and procedure

A mixed-method approach was adopted for the data collection during this experiment, using quantitative techniques (student tracking in the MOOC and Facebook) and qualitative techniques (questionnaires and observation), with the aim of considering multiple perspectives and developing a complete understanding of the problem (Bryman, 2006). FG participants were asked to fill in two questionnaires during the experiment, one previous to the beginning of the experiment (pre-course) and one at the end (post-course). The pre-course questionnaire aimed at gathering information about how Professional English MOOC students used technology and social networks in language learning. The post-course questionnaire's objective was getting to know more on the MOOC students' experience in Facebook. For the purposes of this paper, we will analyse the qualitative data obtained from the post-course questionnaire.

## 4.     Data analysis

Similar to Ventura Expósito (2014), the eight-week experiment on Facebook focused on learning specialised vocabulary related to the MOOC subject, Professional English, and was divided into different topics, following the MOOC syllabus but also expanding its scope. There were 657 participants – 8% of the total amount of Professional English MOOC students – who voluntarily requested to join the FG. The FG administrator provided vocabulary input on a regular basis and if necessary elicited participants' responses, as well as their exchanging of feedback in order to keep the conversations flowing.

Sixty-one participants answered the post-course questionnaire, which amounts to less than 10% of the FG members, which may seem low but is actually a good number if only actual participants – students who actively participated during the course – are taken into account. In this questionnaire, participants were asked about their expectations before taking part of this new learning experience, their opinion on the course contents and dynamics and their vocabulary learning techniques among other questions. For this paper, we will focus on participants' perception of their learning experience and their professional English vocabulary knowledge before and after joining the FG.

To the question "How would you rate your vocabulary knowledge on the subject (Professional English) before joining the FG?" more than half of participants (58%) answered they had a "basic" vocabulary knowledge, whereas 38% rated their vocabulary knowledge as "wide" and only 3% as "weak", as we can see in Figure 1.

Figure 2 shows participants' perception of their improvement after the FG experience. Only 5% of them considered that their vocabulary knowledge on the subject had not been affected by their participation on the course. Thirty-nine per cent of participants stated that their vocabulary knowledge had really improved and 56% considered it had slightly improved after joining the FG.

Figure 1.  Participants' vocabulary knowledge perception



**Vocabulary knowledge**

- Weak 4%
- Wide 38%
- Basic 58%
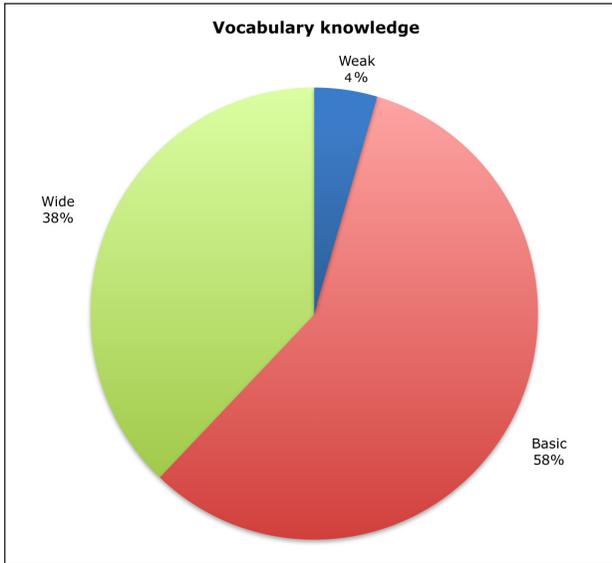
Figure 2.  Participant's perception on improvement



**FG impact on vocabulary**

- Not affected 5%
- Really improved 39%
- Slightly improved 56%
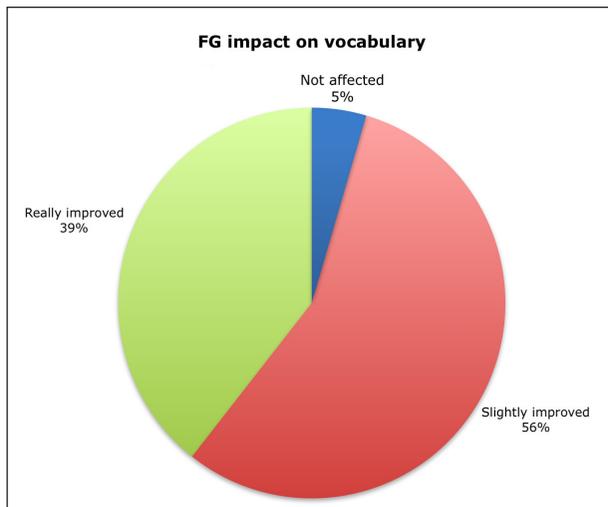
Figure 3.   FG participants' MOOC results



**MOOC completion rate**

Not finished
44%

Finished
56%
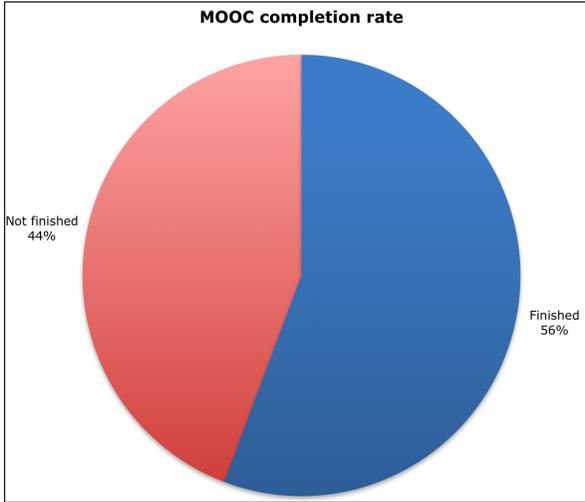
Figure 4.   Participants' views on MOOCs + FG



**MOOC + FB**

They're OK, but not necessary
3%

N/A
2%

Absolutely
95%
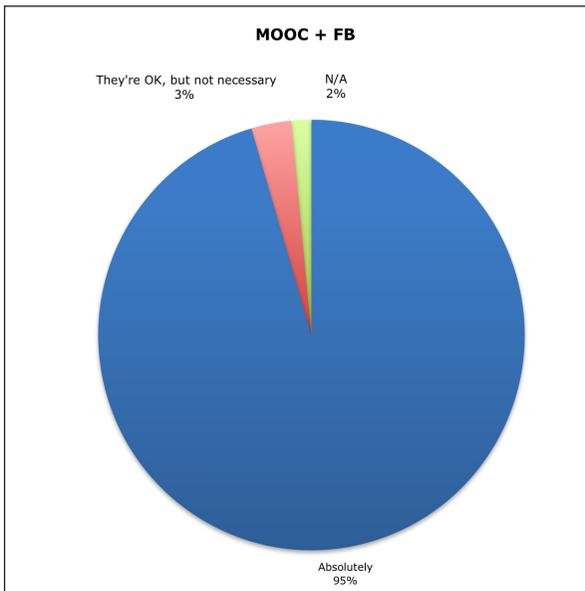
Participants' perceptions of their improvement are in line with their opinions about the overall experience in Facebook, since more than half of them (58%) rated it as "good" and 13% as "excellent". Twenty per cent of participants rated their overall experience as "OK" and only 1% as "poor". The rest (2%) indicated that they had not participated enough and could not rate their experience.

Tracking the progress and results of Professional English MOOC students who participated in the FG will be analysed and compared with their activity on Facebook, in order to reach a conclusion on the effectiveness of using a social network as a complement to language learning MOOCs. For the time being, completion rates of students who participated and answered the post-course questionnaire have been analysed and the results obtained point towards a positive impact of Facebook on students' engagement in the MOOC, since 58% of them finished the MOOC (Figure 3). Almost the totality of FG participants (95%) thinks that Facebook groups are a good complement to MOOCs, as Figure 4 shows, and only 5% either thinks "they are OK, but they are not necessary", or did not provide a concrete answer.

## 5.    Discussion and conclusion

This section of the paper is structured following the four research questions stated in the introductory part. The first research question dealt with the participant's previous knowledge of specialised vocabulary. The majority of students perceived it as basic, which is probably caused by the sort of language courses that students have previously taken. It is not common for Spanish students to join ESP courses, they tend to be general ones; consequently, the amount of Professional English lexis they have been exposed to beforehand is rather limited.

With regard to the second research question, whether their participation in the FG had favoured their acquisition of specialised vocabulary, the students' perception was generally quite optimistic, since the vast majority felt that they had widened their knowledge of Professional English terminology. However, when asked to rate it, just over one third of the participants (39%) deemed it as significant.

As for the third research question, the students' overall opinion about the usefulness of a FG for language learning, the general response was rather positive – it must be taken into account the fact that this was a voluntary, optional part in the course, which would give them no extra credit towards course completion. Not only that, when asked specifically about the appropriateness of such a complement for an online course, virtually all of them regarded it as essential (cf. Figure 4).

Finally, the fourth research question dealt with the long debated issue of dropout rates in MOOCs. Although, as stated previously, the quantitative analysis has not been finalised yet and is not included in this paper, the analysis and tracking of those students who joined the FG has already been done and results confirm the data shared by the qualitative analysis: the participation in the FG has had a very encouraging impact on students' completion rate, since more than half of those belonging to the FG continued to finish the whole course (56%), which is over 20% more than the percentage considered to be satisfactory in terms of MOOC completion, that is, around 30% (see for example Martín-Monje, Bárcena, & Ventura, 2013).

After discussing the four research questions, the initial hypothesis is confirmed, which leads the authors to sustain that social networking, and in particular Facebook, can be a powerful tool to reinforce online interaction and engagement in MOOCs. It will be interesting now to look into ways of increasing that positive impact of the use of FG in ESP in such a way that it caters for learners' needs more accurately, identifying their specific requirements in terms of core and non-core vocabulary and consolidating their engagement in these new types of online courses.

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