

Transforming learning, conceptualisation and practices through a MOOC on English as a Medium of Instruction for Academics

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Abstract. One of the oft-cited advantages of Massive Open Online Courses (MOOCs) is that they provide access opportunities for learners that they might not otherwise have, for example, offering continuing professional development, complementing traditional courses of study, or opening up new areas of knowledge (Ferguson & Sharples, 2014; Hollands & Tirthali, 2014; Zheng, Rosson, Shih, & Carroll, 2015). We report on our experiences designing the FutureLearn MOOC *English as a Medium of Instruction for Academics*, and reflect upon how a free, online platform, operating across a global network, has the potential to enhance learning and practice in English Medium Instruction (EMI) domains. We consider how EMI, a topic with transient, contextual, and emergent themes, can profit from contextualisation through global online dialogues in ways that benefit wider understanding of EMI while simultaneously informing educators about the field.

Keywords: MOOC, EMI, English language, open education.

1. Introduction

MOOCs have been a growing phenomenon in UK higher education for some years now and researchers are still developing an understanding of their value, purpose, and impact as an educational experience. Practitioners have identified potential benefits to this kind of free, open, large-scale course, including continuing professional development, complementing traditional courses of study with additional educational material, or accessing new areas of knowledge (Ferguson &

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Sharples, 2014; Hollands & Tirthali, 2014; Zheng et al., 2015). This paper focusses on the potential of the Futurelearn MOOC platform in the area of EMI from the perspectives of the designers. The next phase of our MOOC will see further empirical research carried out around the MOOC's users' experiences.

2. Method

2.1. The approach

The MOOC 'English as a Medium of Instruction for Academics' was made in collaboration with FutureLearn, a UK-based MOOC platform provider (www.futurelearn.com). The FutureLearn course model is designed "according to principles of effective learning, through storytelling, discussion, visible learning, and using community support to celebrate progress" (<https://www.futurelearn.com/using-futurelearn/why-it-works>). It is informed by a particular learning design based on a conversational model of learning which promotes social activity as an integral part of learning. A core intention is to create a learning community and involve learners as participants in sharing their own experiences and knowledge.

We considered conversational activity as more important than any pre-made course content, and so courses were designed to foster discussion of ideas and encourage online social interaction. This was stimulated through a range of functions and activities designed to elicit such insights and interaction, with each step of the course inviting comments and some prioritising such input as the step's content. Participants were invited to engage with polls and quizzes; share resources, examples and experiences with others; evaluate and reflect on informative content (e.g. articles or videos) from their own contextual and professional experiences; and to engage with debates ranging from contextual best practice to the status of English and other languages. Together, we tried to design each step to position the voices, experiences, and participation of the 'learners' as the course content, with provided resources seeking to stimulate dissemination of ideas rather than guide thought.

2.2. The focus

EMI refers to courses that are taught through English in 'international' contexts (Dearden, 2014). In the pursuit of perceived benefits associated with internationalisation, some universities are pushing to implement EMI despite

challenges they face in doing so effectively (Kirkpatrick, 2017). Such challenges can relate to developing infrastructure and support across populations with diverse roles and needs, and various communicative issues facing students and staff when using English in their contexts.

Jenkins (2014) observes that English is prevalent in higher education discourses around the world and Baird (2013) highlighted that ‘EMI’ can refer to a vast range of educational scenarios, with materials, assessments, goals, contextual communication, and student/staff populations all providing points of potential variation in how EMI is realised. This creates a need for the development of networks that can establish an enduring channel of communication between academics working in these areas. An open online course was perceived as an ideal place for such dialogues to be initiated and developed.

2.3. The ‘E’ of EMI

Language changes with users and uses, and English as a Lingua Franca (ELF) researchers have highlighted the complex, pragmatic, and dynamic ways in which communication can take place between speakers who do not share a first language (Baird, Baker, & Kitazawa, 2014; Jenkins, 2015; Mauranen, 2012). We see accessing experiences of actual EMI language practices as essential to understanding what the ‘E’ in EMI can refer to and in developing educators’ abilities to engage with ‘it’ in their settings.

The recent work of Jenkins (2017) has gone beyond ‘which kind of English?’ to consider the role of multilingualism in ELF and EMI contexts. Different approaches to English and multilingualism in EMI settings are directly accessible through the abovementioned conversational approaches of this MOOC, which allows content to be grounded in diverse experiences, identities, and practices rather than presented by experts who have never worked in or been to many settings in which these educators operate.

3. Discussion

There are clear challenges presented by EMI to individuals and institutions, but not everybody has equal opportunities to engage in professional development, networking or critical reflection. In order to bring people together who are involved with EMI in its various realisations, we needed a platform that was accessible, free, inclusive, and which did not have constraints on participation times (with

participants in different time zones). This inclusivity was not only convenient for reaching people, but was a key design principle for collaborative learning within a complex field of practice. With EMI involving such diversity, networked knowledge-sharing is an essential part of understanding, contextualising, and processing ideas and practices.

One concern was how to allow for the development of an individual's self-belief and simultaneously allow space for shifts in perception within the structure of the MOOC. In our experience, confidence and self-efficacy can be the most obvious barriers that many EMI educators face, and this can be inhibited by pacifying EMI educators through instructing them or setting objective targets. Our 'bottom-up' approach was also a way of addressing this. Reflective practice was core to the design of learners' online experience, and rather than prescribing an EMI template ("this is what you have to say and do in your classroom"), we encouraged participants to contribute to discussions of their own and others' practice. By doing this, we attempted to embrace the diversity of the EMI environment and assign shared responsibility for determining what might be appropriate practice in each setting.

4. Conclusions

The Futurelearn MOOC design enabled us to encourage participants to reflect on their environments, explore alternatives, and justify their rationales for approaching EMI in their chosen ways. Initial participant data shows that interaction on the course was good: it attracted nearly 4000 learners, of whom 55% posted at least one comment. We sought to create a transformative learning community in which all participants provide, negotiate, and co-construct knowledge across the various EMI contexts and practices. Participants were seen as experts within their own localities and specialities, equipped with relevant knowledge and skills to share and discuss strategies and approaches that could benefit their learners. An open, dialogic learning model uniting globally-located learners suited this purpose. This allowed us to embrace learning as co-constructed rather than transmitted, and allowed us to identify, define, and negotiate contextually relevant practices and constructs through dialogue, which is fitting for an emergent field such as EMI and for communication in ELF settings, as both have various realisations and contextual influences on their use. Through the course's discussion areas, insights were sustained by the community in a way that we hope enhanced educators' awareness, autonomy, and confidence within their roles. Further in-depth analysis of participant data and responses is underway.

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