

4 Integrating a MOOC into the MA curriculum: an ‘expert’ student’s reflections on blended learning

Minh Tuan Phi¹

Abstract

Autonomy is a highly debated concept in the field of language learning and teaching. It is argued here that the integration of Massive Open Online Courses (MOOCs) in tertiary education can help language teachers and learners to address this troublesome concept. This paper reports on the learning journey of a Master of Arts (MA) in English Language Teaching and Applied Linguistics (MAELTAL) student at Coventry University (CU). It discusses autonomy and blended learning in language learning and teaching in the context of engaging with the FutureLearn MOOC *Understanding Language: Learning and Teaching* integrated into the MAELTAL curriculum. This report explores how a blended MOOC approach impacted on the MAELTAL student’s beliefs and his identity as an autonomous teacher of English.

Keywords: reflection, learner autonomy, teacher autonomy, blended learning, MOOC.

1. Introduction

I am an English language teacher from Hanoi, Vietnam. I obtained my Bachelor Degree in International Economics at the Diplomatic Academy of Vietnam.

1. University of Coventry, Coventry, United Kingdom; minhtuanphi@hotmail.com

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During my undergraduate study, I worked as an English private tutor for IELTS candidates. That part-time job fuelled my desire to become an English teacher. In 2013, I became an English assistant lecturer in Hanoi Open University, where I worked under a module leader's supervision to give lectures on General English and Academic English. This job provided me motivation to further my study at CU, where I completed my MA in English Language Teaching and Applied Linguistics in 2017. I had never engaged with a MOOC before the MA study, and the concept of autonomy in language learning and teaching was completely alien to me. However, engaging with a FutureLearn MOOC complimented my study on the MA course in that my learning was consolidated through the learning material which was presented in various ways and from a variety of different perspectives at no extra cost.

The FutureLearn MOOC *Understanding Language: Learning and Teaching* was embedded as an open educational “extra line of support” into the compulsory module named *Theories and Methods of Language Learning and Teaching* at CU (Orsini-Jones et al., 2015). According to Orsini-Jones (2015), it provided the opportunity for MAELTAL students to explore how Learner Autonomy (LA) could be developed through the engagement with a face-to-face module blended with an online course.

Students were required to record their reflections during each week throughout the five-week duration of the FutureLearn MOOC, and then shared their meta-reflections on a weekly basis on the CU Open Moodle platform. At the end of the module, students were assessed through an optional question on their experience of involvement with the FutureLearn MOOC in relation to LA in English language learning and teaching. This question was incorporated into the summative assessment via the in-class test (see Orsini-Jones, 2015, for further information on how the FutureLearn MOOC was blended into the MA programme).

This auto-ethnographic report focuses, therefore, on the reflections concerning my own experience of engaging with the FutureLearn MOOC throughout my MA study at CU.

2. The FutureLearn MOOC blend at Coventry University

Various studies (Orsini-Jones, 2015; Reinders & White, 2016) have emphasised the integral role of technology-based instruction in promoting autonomy. According to Kleiman, Wolf, and Frye (2015, p. 117), MOOCs have paved the way for improvements in language teachers' education, focusing on enhancing their expertise and advancing their professional teaching practices. MOOCs are supported by Siemens' (2005) idea of connectivism for the digital age. In another study, Siemens (2012) characterises the distinct feature in designing MOOCs as knowledge that can be co-constructed. The language learners are engaged in a "technological-supported environment that supports meaningful dialogue and collaboration" (Kizito, 2016) to "connect and form information and knowledge sources" (Bartolome & Steffens, 2015, p. 96).

Ragan (2007) defines the concept of blended learning as "the planned integration of online and face-to-face instructional approaches in a way that maximises the positive features of each respective delivery mode". This form of MOOC blend, in which the content plays an integral part in an existing curriculum, is relatively new in tertiary education in the UK (Orsini-Jones, Gafaro, & Altamimi, 2017). Such courses, Picciano, Dziuban, and Graham (2014, p. 3) propose, are also known as 'mixed-mode learning', or 'hybrid learning'. Within this teaching approach, not only do language teachers employ technology-enabled teaching materials on the internet to improve their teaching efficiency and effectiveness, but they also prepare their students ahead of time for the traditional teaching methods (Larson & Murray, 2008). According to Sandeen (2013), blending a MOOC into a part of the higher education programmes can "enable campus faculty to retain a high degree of control over course content and the granting of credit recognition" (p. 36). Bonk and Khoo (2014) believe the engagement with MOOCs as parts of the traditional curricula may foster an autonomous approach to language learning (pp. 156-158).

The FutureLearn MOOC blend I experienced at CU was accompanied by classroom teaching lessons. MAELTAL students could find similar topics which

were equivalent to the face-to-face lessons in class - such as task-based language learning and teaching and Content and Language Integrated Learning (CLIL). This gave students more assistance in understanding the pedagogical themes they learned on the MA module. For instance, I was not fully aware of what CLIL was until I watched the relevant videos on week 2 of the FutureLearn MOOC. The videos and the tasks on the FutureLearn MOOC could be considered as a good preparation that helped me comprehend the lesson in class. In addition, The FutureLearn MOOC shares the principle of mobile learning – studying “anytime”, “anywhere”, suggested by [Kukulka-Hulme and Shield \(2008, p. 281\)](#). According to [Hood, Littlejohn, and Milligan \(2015\)](#), the MOOC blend allows participants to self-regulate their own learning journey. Therefore, MAELTAL students could complete their studies at their own pace, which represents an individualised approach to adaptive learning.

Not only did the MOOC blend I took part in at CU provide MAELTAL students an opportunity to engage with the global community of practice on the MOOC, it was also amplified by the face-to-face seminars and the online knowledge-sharing exchange on the CU Open Moodle platform with CU partners in China and the Netherlands, as part of an added Online International Learning (OIL) project funded by the British Council (English language teaching research funding). The exploratory study carried out by [Orsini-Jones et al. \(2015\)](#), which discussed the experience of engaging with the MOOC, emphasised that the communication on the FutureLearn MOOC forums was difficult to follow since there were too many comments. The question of how best to structure the MOOC blend’s online discussions to maximise social co-construction of knowledge was then answered by designing a dedicated CU Moodle platform. This is in line with what is suggested by [Coetzee et al. \(2015\)](#) who emphasise the use of small peer groups to support MOOC participants in their learning of content and reflection on their progress. Furthermore, the online international exchange was then followed and reinforced by a joint staff/student conference on the FutureLearn MOOC organised during a study visit to the Netherlands in April 2017 to meet the OIL partners. The MAELTAL students at CU had the opportunity to discuss their learning journey on the FutureLearn MOOC in a “meta-blended approach” proposed by [Orsini-Jones \(2015\)](#), including: (1)

within the blended learning setting at CU; (2) online with a globally connected discussion forum on teaching and learning via the FutureLearn MOOC website; (3) online with their peers on the CU Open Moodle platform; and (4) face-to-face with their peers in the Netherlands.

However, the FutureLearn MOOC also had some negative aspects. Orsini-Jones et al. (2015, p. 455) note that MOOCs lack the presence of teachers “supporting the learners at each step they take”. MAELTAL students might find it easier to interact face-to-face rather than on MOOCs’ online discussion. Israel (2015, p. 112) emphasises the fact that the level of participation on MOOCs can decline due to the feeling of isolation produced by the absence of tutors.

3. Conclusions

The blending of advanced technology in English language learning and teaching is opening new horizons for LA and Teacher Autonomy (TA) (Cappellini, Lewis, & Rivens Mompean, 2017). Autonomous pedagogical teaching approaches can be promoted through an integration of conventional/formal/face-to-face and informal/distance learning settings, for instance by blending MOOCs into existing curricula (Orsini-Jones, Zou, Borthwick, & Garafo, 2017). On a personal level, the MOOC blend that I experienced during my MA studies has certainly transformed my perception of online and blended learning. I have moved from scepticism to conversion and I now believe that a MOOC blend can promote autonomy. I believe that the experience of reflecting on how to teach English with the support of a MOOC blend has also helped me to understand Kumaravadivelu’s (2001) post-method philosophy, which encourages “teachers to theorise from their practice and to practice what they theorise”.

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