

2 Treasuring and preserving languages: how the inclusive design in MOOCs might help

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Abstract

This paper reflects on the inclusive design features of Massive Open Online Courses (MOOCs) and how these might support and encourage language learning. It considers what inclusivity in the context of MOOCs means, and some of the features of MOOCs which might be inherently inclusive and of value in supporting languages. It presents an example of inclusive design from a MOOC created at the University of Southampton: English as a Medium of Instruction (EMI) for Academics, a professional development course for teachers. It shows how this course was particularly designed to appeal to the broadest audience possible, and indicates how this might be relevant in language learning contexts. It considers the challenges of creating inclusive open content, and how MOOC design encourages the treasuring and preserving of languages through global reach and low barriers to access.

Keywords: MOOC, inclusive design, languages, open content.

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1. Introduction

‘Inclusive’ learning design in digital content is often thought of in relation to the technical usability of web-based materials for the widest possible range of users². However, the vision of inclusive learning design is to create digital materials which attempt to include as many people as possible, taking into consideration individual differences and needs, and reducing barriers to engagement (Sani-Bozkurt, 2018).

The design characteristics of MOOCs may seem to be inherently inclusive: they offer open enrolment to any learner; content is offered for free (money is sometimes involved on an optional basis to pay for certificates or other extra content³); the learner is in control of how much of the course content they engage with and also how they engage with the content (some learners may ‘lurk’ and only read/listen to content, others may take an active part in discussions); they offer flexible learning unlimited by time or location, and they offer community and peer-learning opportunities (Baturay, 2015).

These affordances have the potential to lower barriers to engagement with education, as learners can take a MOOC despite not having appropriate prior learning or entry qualifications; not having enough money, not being geographically located near to an educational institution, or not having time to pursue a full-time course due to work or caring responsibilities.

At the same time, the nature of language learning is characterised by its diversity: language learners study in a wide range of different local contexts with variations in class size, educational sector, class cohort linguistic levels, linguistic homogeneity, cultural background, or motivation for learning. An inclusive approach is essential to cope with such diversity and ensure an effective learning experience which works for the broadest range of learners possible.

2. Website accessibility is rated using the World Wide Web Consortium’s Web Content Accessibility Guidelines (WCAG 2.1) <https://www.w3.org/TR/WCAG21/>

3. An example is the ‘upgrade’ model from www.futurelearn.com

Knowledge of languages is also recognised as beneficial, for example offering employment opportunities through demonstration of linguistic skills, enhanced cultural awareness, possession of complex thinking skills, and resilience ([British Academy, 2016](#)). Yet often, language knowledge is low and opportunities to learn new languages – or value the languages we already have – can be limited by national or local language education policies ([Kelly, 2018](#)).

In these contexts, MOOCs seem to offer an opportunity to respond to the challenges of the diverse language learning landscape and also to support the learning and promotion of languages through open, inclusive design.

2. Case study example: EMI for academics

The MOOC EMI for Academics⁴ was developed in 2017 and has since welcomed circa 20,000 learners over six runs. It is a four week professional development course for teachers who do not have English as a native language but have been asked to teach through the medium of English. It is offered on the Futurelearn platform and was created using Futurelearn's design principles⁵ which emphasise social learning through discussion and shared experience.

A key early design consideration was the need for the course to be highly inclusive: our target learners would be working in a wide range of different local contexts with variations in class size, educational sector, class cohort linguistic levels, and linguistic homogeneity. How could we deliver a meaningful course of learning which could cope with such a wealth of individual differences?

2.1. Practice sharing: the global and the local

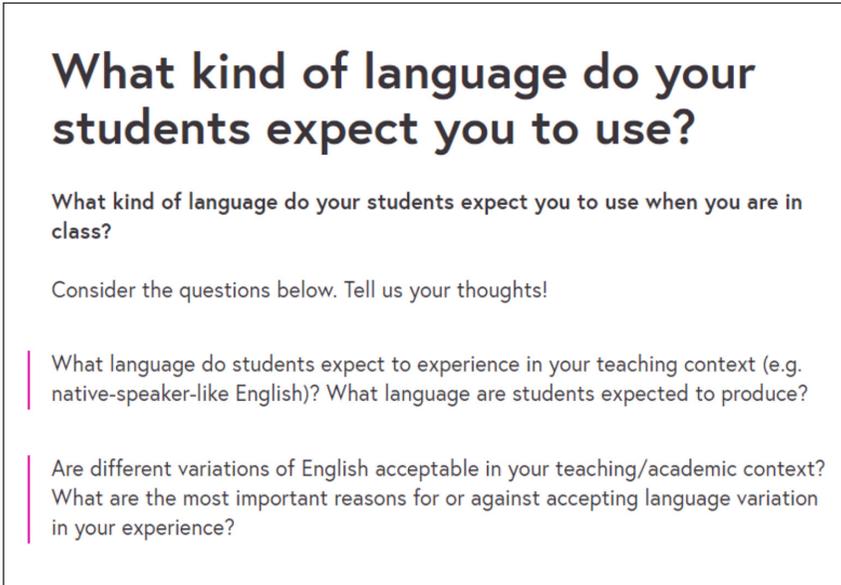
Content on each step of the course is typically presented as a video, text, task, or discussion topic. Each content item has a question for learners to respond to in

4. www.futurelearn.com/courses/emi-academics

5. <https://www.futurelearn.com/using-futurelearn/why-it-works>

the comments area. These questions are carefully designed to draw out learners' individual, local experiences (e.g. see [Figure 1](#)).

Figure 1. Screenshot from EMI for academics, step 1.11



This approach encourages a ‘glocal’ experience, where learners share their individual, local contexts and ideas, and reflect upon the ideas and experiences of their globally-located peers. The lead educators emphasise throughout that the course offers ideas for reflection, acknowledging that no single approach will be suitable for every EMI context ([Baird, Borthwick, & Page, 2017](#)).

2.2. Range of activity types

The course uses a range of ways to present content and invite interaction, including practical tasks, quizzes, reading texts, videoed interviews, or ‘talking heads’, alongside research activities requiring learners to discover information and share it ([Figure 2](#)).

Figure 2. Screenshot from EMI for academics, step 2.5

Task: find an example of a good EMI lecture

There are a tremendous range of good lectures shared and openly available online. These are useful to use in considering your own style and language.

In this task, we would like you to find a good lecture online, share it with us and then tell us why it would work for an EMI audience of learners. Here are some instructions:

1. Search online for a recorded lecture. It can be on any topic, but should be (in your opinion) a good example of a lecture suitable for a higher education EMI audience. The language of the lecture should be in English but it could be delivered by a native speaker of English or a non-native speaker. You may wish to look at websites like [TEDtalks](#) or [Youtube](#) to find a suitable lecture.
2. Share the link to the lecture in the comments area and tell us why you have selected it. Why is it suitable for an EMI session? What does the speaker say/do which enhances its suitability for an EMI session?
3. Finally, identify language used by the speaker to structure the lecture.

This deliberate variety of task-type enables learners to engage with the course in diverse ways which suit individual needs and preferences. No activity is compulsory and learners have complete freedom over how, and how far, they engage with the course.

2.3. Community-building

The notion that the course is a community of equal learners underpins the framing of all course activities and community-building starts at the outset. This is done in a range of ways including: the use of a Zeemap⁶ for learners to plot

6. <https://www.zeeamps.com/>

location and thereby obtain an immediate, visual sense of the scope of the course ‘community’, weekly summary emails, weekly video reviews by educators responding to course activity, and a live question-answer session. These activities are intended to create a welcoming community in which educators are both content providers and also learners within the peer group.

The design elements described above align to core principles in the Universal Design for Learning framework in respect of “providing multiple means of engagement, representation, action and expression” (CAST, 2018, n.p.). This framework is intended to assist educators in the creation of inclusive learning materials and environments, which are effective for the broadest range of learners.

3. Challenges to inclusivity

Despite the possibilities for inclusivity afforded by the MOOC design, there are challenges. Ferguson and Sharples (2014) reported that the massive scale of MOOCs can present a frustrating, depersonalised learning experience, where learner comments are lost amongst thousands. They also noted that content is not always accessible to learners with disabilities, or in certain geographical locations (e.g. the use of YouTube in China). Other research reports that high numbers of MOOC learners are well-educated and from socially advantaged groups (van de Oudeweetering & Agirdag, 2018), which suggests that MOOCs may not be realising the potential of their inclusive properties.

4. Conclusions for languages

While the inclusive nature of MOOCs may not be as effective as it appears, design models offered by MOOCs present an opportunity for learning and promoting languages. When languages have small numbers of speakers and learners, they are not taught widely or promoted in different local contexts.

MOOCs have the potential to fill the gap by uniting geographically dispersed linguistic and learning communities. Such groups can learn from each other in a connected, supported, and social way. The low access barriers to MOOCs invite experimentation with new subjects or ideas – or languages – and use of inclusive design principles opens MOOCs to the widest possible audience. So, if treasuring and preserving languages is to use them and encourage others to use them, then MOOCs seem to offer a way to help.

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