Defining Success in a Language MOOC From Learner Perspectives

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ABSTRACT

Despite their popularity, there remains a challenge as to how success should be measured in Language MOOCs. Although traditional metrics such as completion rates have often been adopted, they have failed to take into account the fact that learners enroll in LMOOCs with different learning goals. This study examined how success is perceived in an LMOOC on English presentations from learners' perspectives. Data were collected through 137 questionnaire responses and 22 semi-structured interviews. The quantitative results showed that the majority of learners who completed the course, as well as those who dropped out, thought that they were successful in learning in this LMOOC. Qualitative results showed that course completion was not the primary reason for their perceived success. Rather, they attributed their success to learning specific aspects of the course, language development, applications of the content to their work or study, and achieving their learning goals. The authors conclude with suggestions and implications as to how success can be measured in future LMOOC implementation.

KEYWORDS

Completion Rates, Language MOOCs, Learning Goals, Measure of Success

INTRODUCTION

Massive Open Online Courses for language learning (LMOOCs) have attracted tremendous interest from teachers, researchers and administrators over the past decade. Language MOOCs (LMOOCs) are defined as "dedicated web-based online courses for second languages with unrestricted access and potentially unlimited participation" (Barcena & Martin-Monje, 2014, p.1). It seems that LMOOCs offer opportunities to democratise language education and allow learners to have free access to language learning resources anywhere, anytime. Despite these promises, there remain several challenges to this educational model. Pedagogically, the nature of MOOC delivery may not be suitable for skill-based subjects such as languages, especially productive skills (Sokolik, 2014; Vorobyeva, 2018). There is also a lack of socialisation in LMOOCs, partly due to their impersonal nature (Barcena et al., 2015; Schulze & Scholz, 2018). Practical experience also suggests that learning in a MOOC environment requires learners to be highly self-motivated to navigate learning by themselves. Such a work-as-you-like environment may not suit everyone (Sallam et al., 2020).

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Because of the open nature of LMOOCs, there is ongoing uncertainty as to how success should be measured in the LMOOC environment. In a traditional and structured language course with regular, scheduled assessments, this may not be difficult. One measure of success in the MOOC environment is completion rate (Jordan, 2015). Completion rates of many MOOCs and LMOOCs are often very low, especially compared with those in more traditional settings. However, using completion as a main measure of LMOOCs may exclude some of the factors that motivate learners to enrol in the first place. Learners have a wide variety of personal learning goals prior to joining the course. Liyanagunawardena et al. (2017) state that "success" in MOOCs varies for different stakeholders (institutions, teachers or learners). Downes (2013) also proposes the concept of individual success, suggesting that success in MOOCs is the product of the individual experiences of learners. Some other factors such as the usefulness of course content and learning experience learners have with the course may also affect how learners view their success. Clearly, it is not easy to define success in LMOOCs. The authors, therefore, propose that success should be defined by the learners in LMOOCs themselves. It is important for LMOOC designers and teachers to recognise how learners view their success in an LMOOC environment so that they can design LMOOCs that meet the learners' expectations as well as offer necessary support to help learners succeed. In addition, knowledge of how learners view success in LMOOC environments can enable LMOOC designers and teachers to better understand how learning may take place in them. To date, there have not been any studies that have investigated this issue in the context of LMOOCs. This study aims to fill this research gap by investigating how English as a foreign language (EFL) learners define their success in a Language MOOC called *Presentation@work*. This particular LMOOC deals with essential skills that language learners need to deliver effective presentations in English. The study is guided by one research question:

How do language learners define their success in a LMOOC?

The next section of this paper discusses the benefits and challenges of LMOOCs and the concept of success in LMOOC contexts, as well as how it is currently measured.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Benefits and Challenges of LMOOCs

There are several clear benefits of LMOOCs for three primary stakeholders: institutions, teachers and language learners. From an institutional and teaching perspective, LMOOCs offer teachers and administrators valuable educational data on learning behaviours, performance and learners' profiles. These data provide insights into how learners learn in this environment and such insights can be used to improve learning and teaching in subsequent implementation. Also, as Liyanagunawardena et al. (2017) summarise, there are three main objectives for institutions offering MOOCs: a marketing tool, recruitment and social good (Downes, 2013). From a learner's perspective, it is much more complex. One clear benefit of LMOOCs is that they are "open" to any language learners to register regardless of their geographical location or educational background as long as they have access to the Internet, thus lowering long-standing educational barriers. The massive nature of LMOOCs also creates opportunities for language learners to interact and practise the target language with peers from all over the world. In addition, although several LMOOCs only involve the provision of short videos, followed by closed tasks and comprehension quizzes (similar to a traditional language course), they can increase exposure to the target language for learners, something often lacking in several learning contexts. (Jitpaisarnwatta et al., 2019). For many working professionals, LMOOCs offer opportunities to improve their language skills in a structured course at no or very low cost and to fit their learning into their professional schedules. From a pedagogical perspective, LMOOCs can be useful to support blended, flipped or remedial learning (Orsini-Jones et al., 2017; Phi, 2017).

In terms of challenges, a relatively high level of autonomy is required for learners to navigate their own learning in an LMOOC environment (Godwin-Jones, 2014, 2019). This means that

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