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Foreign language anxiety on a massive open online language course

Zsuzsanna Bárkányi¹ and Sabela Melchor-Couto²

Abstract. This paper examines learner attitudes, self-efficacy beliefs, and anxiety in a beginners' Spanish Language Massive Open Online Course (LMOOC) by answering three research questions: (1) how do learners feel about acquiring speaking skills on an LMOOC?; (2) do they experience anxiety with regards to speaking?; and (3) do their self-efficacy beliefs remain unchanged during the LMOOC? Data was collected from over 900 participants registered on two Spanish for Beginners programmes offered by The Open University (UK). Quantitative data was collected through reflective questionnaires (11 items) and participants' comments were obtained on two discussion forums. Results indicate that learners have positive attitudes towards LMOOCs and present higher speaking self-efficacy beliefs by the end of the course. Although spoken interactions in this environment are not synchronous, most participants report feeling intimidated by the idea of posting their recordings on the course forum.

Keywords: LMOOC, self-efficacy beliefs, foreign language anxiety.

1. Introduction

LMOOCs are massive open online courses for teaching and learning second and foreign language with unrestricted access and unlimited participation. LMOOCs are unique in that language learning is skill-based rather than knowledge-based and acquiring these skills involves interaction with other speakers, which might not be easy to achieve on a Massive Open Online Course (MOOC). The Spanish for Beginners programme offered by The Open University comprises six four-week courses covering level A1 – Common European Framework of Reference for languages (CEFR). Interaction is possible in the discussion areas, where dialogue

1. The Open University, Milton Keynes, United Kingdom; zsuzsanna.barkanyi@open.ac.uk
2. University of Roehampton, London, United Kingdom; s.melchor-couto@roehampton.ac.uk

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and peer feedback is shared. The only way of ‘speaking’ to peers and instructors is by recording one’s own voice and uploading the file to the forum.

LMOOCs present an interesting and unexplored context to observe affective variables such as Foreign Language Anxiety (FLA) or self-efficacy beliefs, which is the aim of this study. FLA is a specific type of anxiety that can be experienced by learners across all language activities and most scholars concur that it is mainly negative for learners (MacIntyre, 2017). The most widely used instrument to measure FLA is Horwitz, Horwitz, and Cope’s (1986) Foreign Language Classroom Anxiety Scale (FLCAS); other questionnaires measure the anxiety experienced in specific language activities, such as writing or reading.

Self-efficacy beliefs refer to people’s perceived ability to perform in specific contexts (Bandura & Schunk, 1981). Research indicates that users feel they perform better when interactions are via Computer-Mediated Communication (CMC) environments instead of face-to-face (F2F) (Tanis & Postmes, 2007). Similar conclusions have been found in CALL research (Henderson, Huang, Grant, & Henderson, 2009). Most of the instruments available for measuring self-efficacy in language learning consist of items that ask students overtly to rate their competence on specific skills.

2. Method

The first course of the Spanish for Beginners programme had 4,903 fully participating learners, completing at least 50% of the activities, out of the total 49,120 registered students; the last course had 301 participants.

Quantitative data was collected through reflective pre- and post-course questionnaires (11 questions). Post-course surveys have 10% of responses as compared to pre-course surveys, and respondents often skip questions, resulting in uneven data. Responses from various courses were merged into two pre-course and post-course sets. Comparing learners’ answers at the beginning and at the end of a course would require a repeated measures analysis like ANOVA or a paired t-test. However, due to the nature of our courses and ethical reasons (anonymity of answers), it is not possible to match the pre- and post-course data. Therefore, both sets have been treated as two groups, and, following Boone and Boone’s (2012) recommendation to analyse Likert-type data, a Pearson’s chi-square test was applied. Qualitative data was obtained from comments on the questionnaires and discourse in the discussion forum. A total of 207 responses to open-ended

questions were provided, mostly on attitudes and habits regarding the speaking activities proposed in the LMOOC.

All responses were analysed and coded according to topic, which resulted in four broad categories referring to technical issues, motivational factors for completing the activities, lack of motivation, and anxiety experienced.

3. Results and discussion

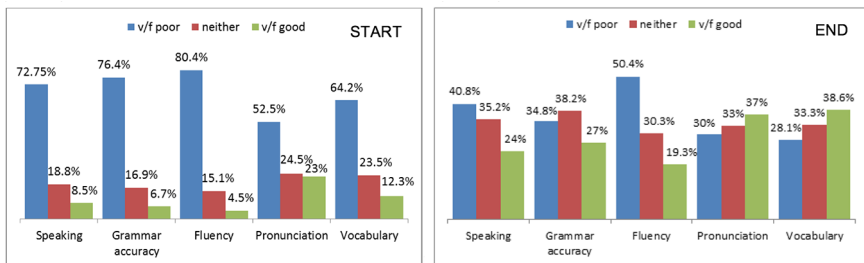
3.1. Learner beliefs and behaviours

Most participants have a positive view of LMOOCs. When it comes to speaking specifically, pronunciation and understanding were seen by the majority as very easy or fairly easy to learn online (44.7% and 60.1%), whereas fluency was described as fairly or very difficult to learn online (49.3%). Accuracy presents responses spread evenly amongst the three options.

3.2. Self-efficacy beliefs

When asked at the start of the course, most participants rated their speaking ability, grammatical accuracy in spoken Spanish, fluency, and vocabulary as very or fairly poor. However, when compared with the results collected at the end of the course, a shift towards the positive end of the spectrum is observed across all parameters, particularly in pronunciation and vocabulary (Figure 1).

Figure 1. Speaking self-efficacy beliefs: start (n=907) and end (n=270)



The Pearson's chi-square test administered indicates that the differences between the data recorded at the start and end of the course are significant in all cases

($p < .001$). This suggests an improvement in participants' self-efficacy beliefs after completing the LMOOC (see [Table 1](#)).

Table 1. Self-efficacy beliefs Pearson's chi square test

Overall speaking	$X^2 = 110.51, df = 4, p < 0.001$
Grammatical accuracy	$X^2 = 196.36, df = 4, p < 0.001$
Fluency	$X^2 = 132.73, df = 4, p < 0.001$
Pronunciation	$X^2 = 83.91, df = 4, p < 0.001$
Vocabulary	$X^2 = 150.99, df = 4, p < 0.001$

3.3. Foreign language anxiety

The data available in this category is more limited than in previous sections, yet it presents interesting findings. Participants report feeling insecure when recording themselves but are not particularly anxious when faced with audio materials that they do not understand and feel more comfortable when shielded by their computer in speaking activities. In fact, most learners prefer CMC interactions. Unlike their perceived self-efficacy beliefs, learners' fear of synchronous speaking situations shows a similar level at the beginning and at the end of the course. It is interesting to note that, at the beginning of the course, learners do not show so much appreciation for the advantages of CMC interactions as compared to the end of the course. A Pearson's chi-square test was applied to identify statistically significant data. These have been signalled with an asterisk in the [Table 2](#) below. Students' comments also reflect this anxiety, as they report not being confident enough to record themselves or they feel intimidated and embarrassed.

Table 2. Pre- and post-course answers to anxiety-related questions (n=182 and n=26, respectively)

	Strongly agree / agree		Neither		Strongly disagree / disagree	
	START	END	START	END	START	END
I never feel quite sure of myself when I have to record my voice.	57.14%	44.00%	21.98%	28.00%	20.88%	28.00%
I don't worry about making mistakes in Spanish.	45.36%	46.15%	21.86%	7.69%	32.79%	46.15%
It frightens me when I don't understand the audios and the videos in the course material.	24.16%	7.69%	38.76%	38.46%	37.08%	53.85%

I get nervous when I don't understand every word in the audios and videos of the course material.	26.97%	11.54%	31.46%	19.23%	41.57%	69.23%
I would not be nervous speaking Spanish to native speakers.	31.84%	34.62%	24.58%	26.92%	43.58%	38.46%
I would probably feel comfortable around native speakers of Spanish.	34.64%	42.31%	36.31%	23.08%	29.05%	34.62%
It's easier to speak into a computer than face-to-face* (X-squared = 9.658, df = 2, p-value = 0.008)	40.98%*	73.08%*	35.52%*	19.23%*	23.05%*	7.69%*
The lack of physical presence makes me feel more comfortable.	35.52%	53.85%	44.81%	38.46%	19.67%	7.69%
The lack of physical presence makes me feel more nervous* (X-squared = 7.5394, df = 2, p-value = 0.019)	10.44%*	0.00%*	43.41%*	26.92%*	46.15%*	73.08%*

Over half of the participants (54.1%; n=133) recorded the speaking activities, although the majority chose not to post them (62.35%; n=85) because they felt intimidated by it (46.6%) despite the fact that it is an asynchronous activity. This indicates that FLA is present in online courses and it can have inhibitory effects.

4. Conclusion

In line with [Rubio \(2014\)](#), the data analysed indicates that LMOOC learners have positive attitudes towards this type of (spoken) language learning environment. By the end of the course, participants present higher self-efficacy beliefs in terms of speaking competence. A majority of learners feel more comfortable interacting in the foreign language via a CMC environment than F2F (in accordance with earlier literature, e.g. [Wehner, Gump, & Downey, 2011](#)) and, although spoken activities are not synchronous, most learners report to be intimidated, not confident enough, and even embarrassed by the option of posting their recordings. This shows that FLA is not only present in F2F classrooms but also in online courses. A novel finding of the present research is that due to FLA, learners on LMOOCs can also experience an inhibitory effect.

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Edited by Kate Borthwick, Linda Bradley, and Sylvie Thoušny

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