

Available online at [www.sciencedirect.com](http://www.sciencedirect.com)

ScienceDirect

Procedia - Social and Behavioral Sciences 141 (2014) 242 – 246

---

---

**Procedia**  
Social and Behavioral Sciences

---

---

WCLTA 2013

# Massive Online Open Courses and Language Learning: the Case for a Beginners' English Course

Rubén Chacón-Beltrán<sup>a</sup> \*<sup>a</sup> *Dpto. Filologías Extranjeras y sus Lingüísticas, UNED, Senda del Rey, 7, Madrid 28040, Spain*

---

## Abstract

Massive Online Open Courses have recently burst onto the scene in Spain and may well prove to be a good way to teach and learn foreign languages. The course analysed in this presentation was part of the first large-scale experience with MOOCs as a tool for English language learning in Spain. This course was designed so that absolute beginners could quickly learn the meanings of the thousand most frequent English words and start to read short texts. A comprehensive questionnaire was given to participants to gather qualitative and quantitative information related to their background and previous learning experiences, as well as methodological aspects related to their experience of massive online open learning. Methodological issues in this new language teaching/learning resource explored in this presentation are: crowdsourcing, explicit learning, distance teaching/learning, learner autonomy, materials design, and the development of learning strategies.

© 2014 The Authors. Published by Elsevier Ltd. This is an open access article under the CC BY-NC-ND license (<http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-nd/3.0/>).

Selection and peer-review under responsibility of the Organizing Committee of WCLTA 2013.

*Keywords:* Language Learning, beginners' English course, vocabulary learning;

---

## 1. Main text

In January 2013 a team of university lecturers at the UNED (Spain's principal distance-teaching University) with abundant experience in the development of guided and self-study teaching materials undertook the challenge of designing an English language course for adult absolute beginners to be studied as a Massive Online Open Courses (MOOC). Recently, the development of MOOCs has caught people's interest both inside and outside the academic world and such courses have been portrayed as a revolution in teaching and learning [1]. This MOOC ('Empieza

---

\*Corresponding Author: Rubén Chacón-Beltrán Tel.: +34-91-395-2835  
E-mail address: [rchacon@flog.uned.es](mailto:rchacon@flog.uned.es)

con el inglés' or 'Beginner English') was made available on the UNED's educational platform, UNED Abierta ([www.uned.es](http://www.uned.es)).

This type of language course – its characteristic features are that it is massive, online and free – meets a clear social need. English language learning at initial levels can influence people's employability, their performance at work and their chances of promotion. MOOCs are online courses for students throughout the world in which participants often do not receive credits or grades [2]. Bearing in mind that such a course is relatively short – 24 study hours in this case – and that the linguistic target was for students to learn enough vocabulary to be able to read short texts, an achievement which would subsequently lead them to tackle longer texts and engage in wider learning, the course designers were well aware of the need to establish clear and realistic objectives that would not deceive, disappoint or frustrate those students who completed the course.

### *1.1. Course design*

This course was part of a larger project whose main aim was twofold, first to help to face up to the challenge of designing large scale MOOCs in all areas of interest to universities in the Spanish-speaking world and, second, to gather information related to the general interest and feasibility of this type of teaching/learning methodology. In addition to these fundamental aspects, another innovation was that participants would have the opportunity to get different types of attainment certificates for their participation in the course.

The course designers endeavoured to provide high-quality learning materials some of which had recently been published by Cambridge University Press. A core principle for the course designers was that participants should not perceive the contents of this MOOC as in any sense "second class" on the grounds that it was a free course. The course contents had been carefully written with the target learners in mind, making use of state-of-the-art insights in the fields of vocabulary learning, corpus linguistics and foreign language learning.

Another innovative aspect of MOOCs, perhaps the most important, is the opportunity for crowdsourcing. Collaborative work is not new in the field of language teaching and learning but the chance to get hundreds of students cooperating in their English language development and correcting each other's work is an appealing idea that requires scrupulously careful materials design; the sheer number of potential participants makes it necessary to provide transparent, user-friendly, completely feasible course contents so that the P2P ("person to person") activities allowing course participants to interact and correct each other's work will work smoothly. Students were also encouraged to interact in the virtual courses that were moderated by a course facilitator.

With regards to methodological principles, the approach adopted in this course was designed to propitiate explicit learning, use of the first language, and to ensure that full advantage was taken of previous linguistic knowledge and pre-existing cognitive abilities: previous linguistic knowledge can help students to find and take advantage of similarities across languages; adult language learners can make good use of other resources such as online dictionaries.

Another key factor that was taken into account was scaffolding. If course participants have a high degree of motivation and are capable of undertaking tasks that require learner autonomy and a considerable degree of self-discipline, it follows that course contents should be presented in a progressive way and that participants need to be provided with guidelines and resources to advance smoothly in their learning process.

An unprecedented number of participants joined the course; a total of 44.410 in all, although it should be emphasized that of these only 26.266 people actually saw the two-minutes-long course presentation video. A total of 14,500 people finished the course; 55.2% of the people who saw the presentation video. This is a remarkable figure if we reflect that usually only about 10% of participants finish MOOCs.

### 1.2. Aims of the study

The purpose of this study was twofold. On the one hand, since it was the first time that a whole set of MOOCs were designed and implemented in the Spanish context and given that this is a radically new way of delivering a course, it was felt that there was a need to know more about participants and their interests. The fact that these courses are online and free makes it difficult to gather information related to profiles of participants. At the same time, there was also a linguistic element in this study and a set of questions was designed to test the participants' performance in this MOOC. Due to time and space restrictions this second aspect will not be analysed here, and we will concentrate instead on the participants' profile and previous language learning experience. This type of information may be valuable for institutions offering MOOCs as well as for course designers, especially in the field of language learning and teaching.

An online questionnaire was distributed among course participants once the course had concluded. It was voluntary and anonymous and 840 participants actually completed the questionnaire that was designed to take them about 20 minutes. Demographic, methodological and linguistic data was gathered with this questionnaire although for the purposes of the present publication only demographic and methodological data will be analysed.

### 1.3. Findings

Among the total number of participants in the study only those who completed the whole questionnaire and had completed more than 80% of the course were selected, which left a total of 364 participants in the present study.

With regards to the age range of participants in the study, 49 informants (13%) were under 29, 118 informants were between 30 and 39 (32%); 123 were between 40 and 49 (34%); 67 were older than 50 (18%); and, 7 (2%) informants didn't answer. All in all, it would seem that perhaps the most representative figure is that 66% of the participants were between 30 and 49 years old. As far as sex is concerned, 248 (68%) were female and 114 (31%) were male. 2 people didn't answer this question.

Given the fact that this was an online course that can be accessed anywhere in the world, it was relevant to ask about the participants' nationality and place of residence. 352 participants (97%) were Spanish citizens and 3% were originally from South America and 98% of participants were living in Spain at the moment. With regards to their mother tongue, 93% (337) reported that Spanish was their mother tongue, 6% (22) said an official language in Spain other than Spanish was their mother tongue, namely Galician, Catalan, Basque or Valencian and 1% gave a different language.

Another important aspect to take into account with regards to the participants in this study was their educational level, that is, the studies they have completed before enrolling on this course. 7% (26) of the participants had completed Primary Education; 36% (133) had completed Secondary Education; and 55% (199) had completed Higher Education, that is 3-5 years of university studies or more; and just 2% (6) did not answer this question.

With regards to the participants' previous experiences with the English language, four questions were posed in order to determine what type of students would enrol on such a course that had been initially designed for absolute beginners in English. 33 (9%) participants had never studied English before, 198 (54%) participants had studied English in Secondary Education; 32 (9%) participants had never studied English at University; 98 (27%) had studied somewhere else; and finally, 3 (1%) people did not answer this question.

With regard to the number of years dedicated to the study of English, 51% (186) had spent less than 5 years studying English; 27% (99) had spent between 5 and 8 years studying English; 11% (39) had spent between 9 and 12 years and 6% (23) had been studying English for more than 13 years. 5% (17) did not answer this question.

It was also interesting to establish participants' self-perception of their level of English and one item in the

questionnaire was designed for this purpose. 36% (132) felt that they had a basic knowledge of English, 2% (9) considered they had a beginner level; 24% (88) reported having an intermediate level; 37% (133) felt that they had an advanced level; and 1% (2) did not answer this question.

Finally, the last question about the personal and linguistic background of the participants was designed to gather information about the participants' motivation for learning English in this MOOC. 55% (200) reported that they joined the course because of their personal interests; 37% (134) said they did it for professional reasons, and 8% (30) said they had other interests.

#### 1.4. Data analysis

The data gathered in this research project suggests that Spanish adult middle-aged males and females (aged between 30 and 49) with university studies may be interested in improving their foreign language knowledge, particularly English, and that they are ready to use this new source for learning as a way to keep on learning languages, either out of personal interest or for professional reasons. This clearly defines a target group that institutions offering MOOCs should take into account when designing and offering new courses.

The qualitative part of the questionnaire allowed the designers of this MOOC, as well as the researchers, to ascertain that there were many very positive comments about the course and that the MOOC had proven to be useful for most of the participants both with regards to the methodology used to teach English vocabulary as well as with the results since participants were generally satisfied with the knowledge and skills they had gained. Overall, it was perceived that there was a positive cost-benefit balance between the amount of time invested and the knowledge acquired. This has encouraged the course designers to start working on additional MOOCs along the same lines.

## 2. Conclusions

The aim of this study was to analyse the type of participants on a large scale MOOC which was specially designed to start learning English as a Foreign Language. The data analysed here suggests that there is a specific target group of participants that are interested in using this type of teaching/learning methodology to learn languages and therefore efforts should be made to meet their needs and interests.

One of the major potential fields of interests in the use of MOOCs is precisely that of language teaching and learning given that the available technology makes possible many exciting experiences in this the field. The course described in this article has proven to be useful for language learners and teachers alike [3]. Previous studies have already shown that the teaching environment found in a MOOC can also provide very suitable conditions for the teaching and learning of aspects that can often be difficult to deal with in traditional learning contexts [4].

MOOCs are a very recent phenomenon and a number of issues still need to be solved. Some authors like Agued-Gómez [5] point for example to monetization, to determining the authenticity of participants and to the certification of courses as issues that need to be discussed. In the area of language learning there are others, more pedagogically oriented, such as the usefulness of these courses for different types of learners with regard to their age and previous knowledge, motivation, continuity, as well as the usefulness of crowdsourcing.

The positive results of the present study show that this methodology presents numerous advantages for language learners and therefore further investment and research would be worthwhile in order to find new ways of facilitating large-scale education [6], particularly language learning, either inside or outside the university system.

## References

Pappano, L. (2012). The year of the MOOC. *The New York Times*, 2(12), 2012. Retrieved from (<http://www.nytimes.com/2012/11/04/education/edlife/massive-open-online-courses-are-multiplying-at-a-rapid->

- pace.html?pagewanted=all&\_r=0).
- Godwin-Jones, R. (2012). Challenging Hegemonies in Online Learning. *Language Learning & Technology*, 16(2), 4-13.
- WiziQ announces MOOC for teachers on english language teaching techniques. (2013, Jul 15). PR Newswire. Retrieved from <http://search.proquest.com/docview/1399968030?accountid=14609>
- Mackness, J., Mak, S. and Williams, R. (2010). The ideals and reality of participating in a MOOC. In: *Proceedings of the 7<sup>th</sup> International Conference on Networked Learning 2010*. University of Lancaster, Lancaster, pp. 266-275.
- Aguaded-Gómez, J. I. (2013). The MOOC Revolution: A new form of education from the technological paradigm?. *Comunicar*, 41, XXI. DOI: <http://dx.doi.org/10.3916/C41-2013-a1>
- Bradshaw, D. (2013, march 11). Academic freedom goes global. *Financial Times*. FT Special Report, p. 1.