MOOC as Remote ESP Learning Tool at University in Quarantine: Focus on Students' Attitudes

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Abstract: In a completely new reality of the Covid-19 pandemic, when educational institutions are closed due to quarantine, it is often challenging for teachers to decide which of the wide variety of educational technologies may be most appropriate for their students and best address their learning needs. With this in mind we aim to share our experience of using MOOCs (Massive Open Online Courses) as remote learning tool for teaching English for Specific Purposes (ESP) at university and make a particular focus on students' attitudes to studying them in quarantine so that necessary adaptations and changes could be made to enhance the learning process. The positive attitudes of the students to learning MOOCs, expressed by them in the survey, testify to the appropriateness of their use in ESP instruction during quarantine. However, since students pointed to the limited possibilities of communication between learners and lack of ability to get help from the teacher or peers, we find it appropriate to use video conferencing technologies as additional learning tools besides MOOC to compensate for these limitations and address students' needs more fully.

Keywords: *Massive Open Online Courses; English for Specific Purposes; learning tools; learning in quarantine; university.*

1. Introduction

Like all other spheres of our life at present, education worldwide is striving to find solutions to challenges facing administrators, students and teachers in a completely new reality of coronavirus pandemic when all educational institutions are closed due to quarantine and face-to-face learning is impossible. It is not always easy for teachers to decide which of the wide variety of educational technologies will be interesting for their students and best address their learning needs. In these conditions, it is particularly important for all those who consider themselves a part of the international educators' community to support each other and share the experience, so that colleagues around the globe can use the best practices and be better prepared to coping with difficulties which may arise in distance learning in quarantine. With this in mind we aim to share our experience of using MOOCs (Massive Open Online Courses) as remote learning tool for teaching English for Specific Purposes (ESP) at university and make a particular focus on students' attitudes to studying them in quarantine so that necessary adaptations could be made to enhance the learning process.

Different aspects of students' experiences in MOOCs are analyzed in literature. One of the key issues emphasized by researchers and practitioners is importance of making students interested in using this educational technology. Thus, students' attitudes to and motivation for taking MOOCs has been studied by various authors (Barak et al., 2016; Lusta, 2018). Cole and Timmerman (2015), for example, explored students' attitudes to MOOCs regarding their reliability, accessibility, content, learning, communication, and outcomes. Belanger and Thornton (2013) studied students' experiences and motives in the MOOC environment, such as support of lifelong learning, understanding of the subject matter, fun, entertainment, social experience and intellectual stimulation, convenience, wish to experience or explore online education, etc. As stated by Lusta (2018), "learner motivation cannot be treated as a minor issue but as a major issue to guarantee the success and encouragement for completing these online courses" (p. 156).

2. Materials and methods

We used a mixed type research methodology with the use of quantitative and qualitative data sources. The participants of the study were 58 (32 second year and 26 third year) engineering students of National Technical University of Ukraine "Igor Sikorsky Kyiv Polytechnic Institute" who volunteered to take part in the survey. They studied ESP during

COVID-19 quarantine in Ukraine with the use of MOOCs on two platforms – edX and Prometheus. Both courses are for students with lower intermediate or intermediate English language levels looking to reach a higher intermediate level.

The course on edX, titled "Upper-Intermediate English: Technology Today", consisted of four units (unit 1: Expressing, unit 2: A good job interview, unit 3: Technology today, Unit 4: Knowledge Management) and covered the following topics: cultural differences, aviation and global warming, historical monuments and technological innovation. The course was self-paced and of 4 weeks duration.

The course on Prometheus, titled "English for STEM (Science, Technology, Engineering, Mathematics)", was devoted to innovations in scientific researches in the sphere of climate changes and included five units – Unit 1: Is the Earth getting warmer? Unit 2: The greenhouse effect; Unit 3: The impacts of climate change on our world; Unit 4: Discovering cleaner energy sources to power the world; Unit 5: Discovering cleaner energy sources to power the world: lesson choices. The duration of the course was 5 weeks and, like in the edX course, the students could work in the self-paced mode.

At the end of each week the students sent screenshot confirmation of their intermediary progress in the course and the teachers transferred that progress into academic grades. During the period of remote learning in quarantine (after 3 weeks since it started), the students were suggested to answer 11 open-ended and closed-ended questions in an online questionnaire (with the use of Google Forms) aimed to find out their attitudes to using MOOC as learning tool so that possible improvements could be made in further instruction during the quarantine period which was prolonged for several more weeks. The students were surveyed while they were undertaking the MOOCs. They were asked: 1) if they found MOOCs a useful resource for ESP learning during the quarantine (answer options: yes/no); 2) if it was their first experience of doing a MOOC (answer options: yes/no); 3) what device they used to do the course (more than one option was possible: desktop computer, laptop, tablet, mobile telephone, others); 4) what MOOC features they liked most, if any (more than one option was possible: use of variety of interesting tools; use of varied and interesting materials; multimedia instruction; facilities to work at their own pace; facilities to work at any convenient place; display of the correct answers immediately after performance of tests; none; others); 5) what MOOC features could be improved from their point of view, if any? (more than one option was possible: lack of real face-to-face communication

between learners; inability for students to ask the teacher or peers for help; others); 6) what additional e-learning tools they would like to use during the quarantine (more than one option was possible: video conferencing technologies (Zoom, Skype, Microsoft Teams, etc.), Moodle platform, Google classroom, Quizzlet, Kahoot, others); 7) what difficulties they had while doing the MOOC? (more than one option was possible: problems with the internet connection; my English language level is too low for the course; I cannot organize myself to learn regularly; others); 8) if MOOC helped them to become more independent and self-directed learners (answer options: yes/no); 9) if they intended to use MOOCs to assist their learning in the future (answer options: yes/no); 10) if, after completing this course, they would like to do another MOOC. If yes, in what area (more than one option was possible: English language learning, professional learning and development, others); 11) if, altogether, they were satisfied with using the MOOC as learning tool in quarantine (answer options: yes/no).

3. Results and discussion

In our survey, most students reported a positive learning experience, which is in line with results obtained by other MOOC researchers (Belanger & Thornton, 2013; Lusta, 2018; Zutshi et al., 2013). Thus, more than three quarters of students (76.5 %) found MOOCs a useful resource for English language learning during the quarantine. We think this figure is the evidence of students' strong interest in and motivation for using this tool, especially in view of the fact that for almost all of them (94.7 % of students) it was their first experience of taking a MOOC. The students' answers also showed the feasibility of using MOOCs as tool for mobile learning, since in most cases students used mobile devices – telephones (63.2 % of students) and laptops (31.6 % of students). As mobile learning tools MOOCs really broaden the access to learning, make learning possible at any place and time, which is especially appropriate for our students, the majority of whom live in rural areas where stable Internet connection is quite problematic.

The survey also showed that students liked all of the MOOC features mentioned in the questionnaire, but the most highly appreciated were: ability to provide multimedia instruction (60 % of students), use of varied and interesting materials (53.3 % of students), use of variety of interesting tools (46.7 % of students), interactive presentation of learning materials (46.7 % of students), display of the correct answers immediately after performance of tests (40 % of students), facilities for learners to work at their own pace (33.3 % of students), facilities for learners to work at any

convenient place (26.7 % of students). To this list the students added other features they liked: the user-friendly interface, interesting and informative learning contents, short lectures, interesting tests, forums, facilities to communicate with people from around the world.

However, 80 % of students mentioned MOOC features which could be improved from their point of view. They were lack of real face-to-face communication between learners (53.8 % of students) and lack of capacity for students to ask the teacher or peers for help (46.2 % students). These results were similar to those obtained by Cole and Timmerman (2015) who also found that their students could not get help from peers due to limited possibilities for interaction. This suggests that in conditions of quarantine in addition to MOOCs it is advisable to use other technologies, particularly those which permit on-line communication in real time to provide facilitation that is a process taking place "in conditions of human interaction and aims at creating the atmosphere of goodwill, trust, openness, self-development, self-improvement of each individual" (Ogienko, 2016, p. 86). In support of this, the students' answers to the question about additional e-learning tools they would like to use showed that most of them (60 %) mentioned video conferencing technologies (Zoom, Skype, Microsoft Teams, etc.).

The survey also revealed certain difficulties our students experienced while learning MOOCs. A considerable number of students (41.7 %) had various problems with the internet connection, which is unfortunately quite common in rural areas of Ukraine. Part of the students (15 %) found that their English language level was too low for the course, which implies the appropriateness of consideration of students' differentiation in choosing MOOCs. More than 1/3 (33.3 %) of respondents had problems with self-management and could not organize themselves to learn regularly. However, 72.2 % of those who took part in the survey believed that MOOC could help them cope with that problem step by step and become more independent and self-directed learners. This is consistent with other studies (Lytovchenko et al., 2018) which focused on technologies as tools for development of a high degree of self-direction in adult learners both inside and outside the classroom.

We found that 83.3 % of respondents were on the whole satisfied with using MOOCs as learning tool in quarantine. Particularly promising in our study was the ratio (61.5 %) of those who said that they intended to use MOOCs in their future learning. Furthermore over 2/3 (71.4 %) of them would like to do another English language MOOC and 28.6 % – MOOC for professional development just after completing the present course. It gives

us ground to believe that the students' experience of learning a MOOC was really a powerful stimulus for their motivation for independent life-long learning and professional development.

However, the results obtained by us should be interpreted with certain caution, since our qualitative research has a limitation related to the small number of students who took part in the survey. To address this limitation, further studies involving a bigger number of participants are necessary, which could make generalization of the results more appropriate.

4. Conclusion

The positive attitudes of students to learning MOOCs testify to the appropriateness of their use in ESP instruction during quarantine. As mobile learning tools MOOCs are particularly applicable since they make learning more accessible to students, permit them to study in a convenient mode. Multimedia presentation of materials, interesting content, facilities for mobile learning make MOOCs very attractive for students and thus raise their commitment and motivation. Facilities for independent learning help students become more self-directed and organized as learners, which, in our opinion, is a most valuable feature of MOOC at present time. Our experience gives ground to conclude that as learning tool in quarantine MOOC can be successfully used not only in Ukraine, but in any other country, since international students will only benefit from the courses created by top universities of the world. However, since students pointed to the limited possibilities of communication between learners and lack of ability to get help from the teacher or peers, we would recommend using video conferencing technologies as additional tools besides MOOC learning to compensate for these limitations and address students' needs more fully.

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