

17 Using MOOCs in an Academic English Course at University Level

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Abstract

Courses in English for Academic Purposes (EAP) in higher education contexts often bring together students from different academic fields. For this reason, such courses tend to present materials that are sufficiently general to be relevant to all students. However, teachers often need to supplement their teaching with online materials that are relevant to the participants' specific areas of study. Although MOOCs have not been designed as supplements to English language teaching and learning, this case-study illustrates how they can in fact provide a very effective and highly motivating way of enhancing EAP syllabi by allowing learners to enrol in courses of their choice, and select the materials that are most relevant to their language acquisition needs. Compared with other unstructured materials found online (journal articles, podcasts, video-recorded lectures), MOOCs provide an ordered set of materials made available weekly, through which students can develop the macro-skills of reading, listening and writing. At the same time, by putting the onus of choosing what and how much to study on the participants themselves, MOOCs can encourage learner autonomy and responsibility, and offer ways of pursuing academic language learning after the end of the EAP course.

Keywords: English for academic purposes, EAP, MOOC, student autonomy, motivation, supplementary resources, OER.

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1. Context

Courses in English for Academic Purposes (EAP) aim to develop in the learners the specific skills and knowledge necessary to study in an English-speaking academic environment. However, the students within a group often come from a variety of fields, making it difficult for the teacher to provide audio/video and written materials which are specific to the field of study and therefore particularly relevant to the individual student. This difficulty is evident in the choice made in most published textbooks to remain sufficiently general in the topics proposed so as to address the majority of the students in a class. At the same time, it is precisely this choice that often makes published books unattractive both to students and teachers, and require, to be successful, a substantial amount of more relevant (to the learners) supplementary materials.

Today, the Internet provides language teachers, and specifically those teaching EAP, with a wealth of potential resources to enhance their teaching. Examples of these are open access academic journals as well as *iTunes U*, which can be a source of freely-available podcasts and videoed lectures provided by universities on myriad subjects, from Astrophysics to Zoology. Making learners aware of these resources can encourage learner autonomy and motivation. However, these materials are often unstructured, and students can feel overwhelmed by the sheer wealth of resources, finding it difficult to select the material, set themselves reasonable objectives or have the discipline to use these supplementary materials regularly.

MOOCs (Massive Open Online Courses) take this a step further, by providing whole courses for free (for the moment) to learners all over the world. At the time of writing, [Coursera](#), one of the main providers of MOOCs, offers 339 courses from 62 universities to over three million learners. Although not specifically designed to teach foreign languages, they can be seen as invaluable resources to teachers of EAP.

This case-study illustrates how these MOOCs were used to supplement a course

in English for Academic and Professional Purposes offered at the University of Ferrara, Italy, in 2013. The participants came from different areas of study, including Economics, Law, Biology, Physics, Architecture, Literature and Medicine. The aim of the course was to enable the students to develop their English language skills for speaking, listening, reading and writing, in view of further academic studies or work, or their future employment. It was a semester-long 50-contact-hour course usually requiring an additional 50 hours of self-study.

Although supplementary materials such as *iTunes U* podcasts, *TED Talks* or subject-specific academic articles were used in previous editions of this course, the advent of MOOCs for education presented new possibilities by offering more structured open resources for EAP. The primary objective was therefore to offer the students the possibility of working with well-designed academic materials in English that were specifically linked to their fields of study. An additional aim was that of evaluating the usefulness of these materials in the context of an EAP course.

2. Intended outcomes

With such a varied group of students in terms of their academic areas of study, it was important to provide general academic language input, such as practising the skills of note-taking, summarising and data commentary, while at the same time enabling learners to develop their knowledge of the specific language of their field. Previously, students had been given indications of websites where they could find podcasts or video-recorded lectures that could be relevant to them but, left to their own devices, the students had tended to do little extra work beyond what was strictly required for the course. This was mostly due to the time required to locate useful supplementary materials, as well as to the demands in terms of time management made on very busy students. In other words, if the students were not given explicit deadlines to carry out tasks, or a structured list of specific materials they had to use, the weeks would easily go by without them having found the time to study supplementary materials.

However, MOOCs seemed to provide ideal supplementary materials for these students for a number of reasons:

- the offer has increased in the last twelve months to the extent that it is now possible to find courses on a huge variety of subjects;
- the courses can easily be found in the websites of providers such as *Coursera*, *Udacity* or *Edx*, to mention but a few;
- being courses and not only collections of resources, they provide a clear structure that is easy to follow week by week;
- the length of the courses is usually relatively limited (many under ten weeks), which make them ideal as supplements to a semester course;
- being open, the participants can choose to do as much or as little of the work as they wish. This means that they can dose the amount of work according to their availability, as well as to their interests and needs;
- they are free (for now – this may well change in the future);
- they provide opportunities to listen (to lectures), read (documents provided) and write (in the forums and by completing assignments) in English;
- they offer learners the opportunity of an authentic academic experience in English, and an insight into a different academic culture (be it American or British, or from any of the other countries in which the institutions offering the courses are based).

3. Nuts and bolts

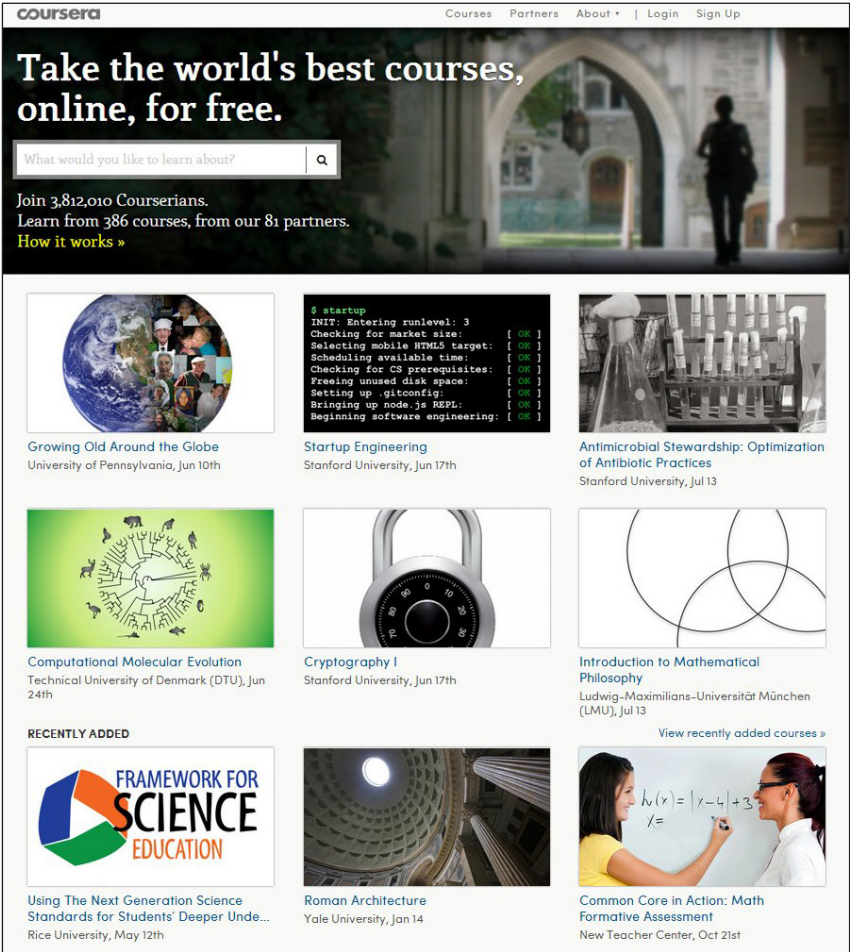
The EAP Course described in this study ran from February until early June. With the help of a questionnaire submitted during the first week, an initial review of

the participants' awareness of the existence of online resources to help them develop their language skills was carried out.

From the survey it appeared that, out of 20 students present in the class, 19 had used online dictionaries, 13 had read publications and 10 had watched broadcasts in English, only 4 were aware of the existence of *iTunes U* and none had explored the possibility of enrolling on a MOOC. Following this survey, the participants were introduced to some supplementary resources – including MOOCs – they could use to develop their knowledge of the language specific to their field of studies, and were made aware of the need to take some responsibility for their own learning. They were asked to explore the [Coursera](#) website (see [Figure 1](#)) and search for a course in which they might like to enrol. They were advised to choose one related to their studies or future profession or, if none could be found, one of a topic they felt was relevant to them. They were told that there was no obligation on their part to do all the work that was required within the course, but were encouraged to choose to do what they felt would benefit their English the most. They were also made aware of the fact that most courses offer certificates of completion which could be used in the students' portfolios or CV. They were also asked to preferably choose a course that finished before the end of the EAP course. Fortunately, many of the MOOCs offered by [Coursera](#) that particular semester began in March, which fitted perfectly with the organisation of the language course. It may be a good idea in the future to check the start dates of MOOCs on the websites of the various providers in order to direct the students to those beginning at a convenient time.

Before they began their MOOC, the students were asked what they expected to obtain from doing such a course as part of their EAP training. Developing their English was mentioned by all the students, although the focus ranged from improving listening, reading, writing or speaking skills to expanding vocabulary specific to a field of study, and becoming more confident users of the language. Some also mentioned acquiring new knowledge: “I expect to be able to understand a lesson taken in English and to discuss with people about issues of my field of studies”, or “I expect to acquire more skills in reading and writing in an academic context, and to expand my vocabulary”.

Figure 1. The Coursera home page, showing a selection of courses offered



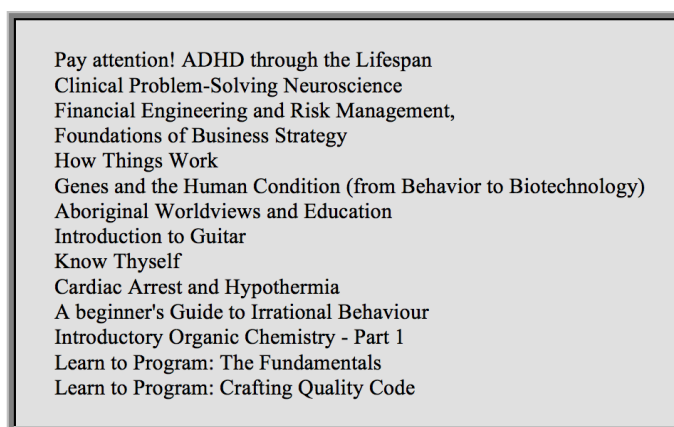
4. In practice

All the students signed up for a MOOC on the Coursera website. The structure of the MOOCs and the open approach to learning imply that an underlying

principle is the learners' freedom to do as much or as little as they wish. This is usually considered a weakness of MOOCs, leading to a putative high dropout rate. However, in this context, this aspect was undoubtedly a strength, as it enabled learners to select those parts of the course they found most useful to the development of their language skills.

Figure 2 below shows some of the courses that the students attended during the semester. It is clear that although most of the students chose courses that were related to their fields of study, others preferred MOOCs which offered the opportunity to explore new interests.

Figure 2. Coursera MOOCs chosen by the students



In order to integrate the MOOC and EAP course more explicitly, and to ensure the students would pursue with their commitment, regular opportunities to exchange opinions and discuss learning outcomes were provided in class.


Discussions were also initiated in the EAP's Virtual Learning Environment ([Canvas](#)), where students were asked to tell each other about the courses they were doing. Figure 3 below is an exchange between some of the learners, showing how the fact of having to explain what the MOOC was about enabled students to reuse the vocabulary learned during the course.

Figure 3. An exchange between participants and teacher on the EAP course's VLE

Search entries or author

Unread

Edit



Aboriginal Worldviews and Education - this is my Coursera course


Mar 15 at 9:15pm

5

Hi everyone, this is my online course and I enjoy it a lot. It started on 25th February and will finish in a week for now. It was organized by the University of Toronto and the professor is Jean-Paul Restoule, associate professor of Aboriginal Education in the Department of Leadership, Higher and Adult Education at the Ontario Institute for Studies in Education of the same university.

I found out so many things about the Aborigines from Canada, about their history, education, lifestyle, and how the white Canadians did almost everything to exterminate them. Unfortunately they were succesful more than you can imagine, although they shared only a 400 years' history. Now they are taking a "healing path" and try to accept the diversity in their society.


Taking this course was an interesting experience, and if it will be offered again on Coursera, think about it; trust me, it's worth it;)



Mar 17, 2013

[daniela.pagani@student.unife.it](#)


Hi Cristina! I'm following the same course! I find it really interesting, too. It gives a lot of information about the history of the Aborigines and how they live. What do you think about the assignment? Have you done it? I just follow the lessons. Bye



Mar 17, 2013

[Ana Catarina](#)

Hi Daniela. What did the assignment consist in? Is it just one, or one per lesson?




Mar 17, 2013

[daniela.pagani@student.unife.it](#)

Hi Ana! There was a compulsory assignment after the first Week. It consisted in giving an ethnographic description of a chosen place, describing it as if you were an outsider and explaining the connected worldviews. After that you were asked to evaluate 3 works of other students. Then there are some quizzes about Weeks 2 and 4. Moreover there are free activities each week. As I enrolled when the course had already started, I had no time to write the first assignment, because it was not so easy. But I find the course very interesting from a cultural point of view.

Edited by [daniela.pagani@student.unife.it](#) on Mar 17 at 1:46pm



Mar 17, 2013

[Roberta Collettello](#)

Hi everybody, I chose the same course and I find the topic unusual and interesting. As Daniela already explained, it's much work to do and I don't have the time for all that. But I'm trying to listen to the lessons and of course it's useful to improve language skills and to focus on some issues from a different point of view.

Similarly, towards the end of their EAP course, the students had the possibility of presenting the MOOC they had attended as part of a compulsory individual oral presentation task. Figure 4 below shows a slide from one of the presentations on the “Aboriginal Worldviews in Education” course offered by the University of Toronto.

Figure 4. A slide from a student's presentation of the MOOC she participated in



It is true that integrating a face-to-face EAP course with the experience of a MOOC implies that the teacher has no means of checking the activities that the students engage in. The extent to which the work done in the MOOCs is integrated in the EAP face-to-face course will depend on the individual teacher's preferences, the time available, and the context in which the course takes place. Some possible options include:

- regular in-class group discussions on the learning processes attached to the MOOC experience;
- writing tasks (such as reports, learning diaries, essays);

- student-led online discussions on the EAP's virtual learning environment (see [Figure 3](#));
- oral presentations on the topic of the MOOC (see [Figure 4](#)).

Once they had concluded their MOOC experience, feedback was collected in the form of a questionnaire. It emerged that the dropout rate had been minimal, probably due to the fact that the students were given opportunities to discuss their learning in class, which may have functioned as regular motivation boosters. The students had also enjoyed being responsible for their own learning in terms of choosing what materials and sections of the course to study. This meant that, although by the standards of the MOOC providers, these participants may have been regarded as “dropouts” or unengaged students (some may not have watched the last video or done the last assignment, or done any of the assignments for that matter), they all felt they had been successful in their purpose of practising their English. In fact, all the participants declared they would recommend other learners of EAP to enrol on a MOOC in order to improve their English. When asked to give their reasons, they mentioned that it was “a funny and effective way to learn and improve English”, and that the courses offered an opportunity to “improve a wide range of skills”, including learning skills. One student pointed out that “lectures are given in a very clear English, it will be of help to anybody who wants to improve his/her listening skills and also learn something new in any field of culture and science. The choice is vast and the quality is great”, while another mentioned that MOOCs offer “a unique opportunity to improve the language by listening to a native professional speaker, talking about a topic you feel motivated to know more about (or that you already feel comfortable with)”.

Regarding the advice the participants would offer future students, this included choosing courses on topics of interest, even if they do not necessarily fit into the student's curriculum (“So do not choose a MOOC just because it fits their academic career at university, but because they think they could enjoy it”), to consider time-management carefully, (“take a long term course and take advantage [of peer-assessment]”, “check what it requires in terms of assessment

and workload”) and ultimately, enjoy the course. Finally, all the participants declared they were very likely or almost certain to enrol on another MOOC in the future.

5. Conclusion

MOOCs have recently made their appearance in the higher education landscape and scholars, practitioners and administrators are trying to understand the different applications that this new type of course can have in the future. This case-study illustrates one valuable use – as support to English for Academic Purposes courses. It is arguable that the experience of MOOC inserted in a more structured course such as the English for Academic and Professional Purposes Course enabled the students to positively engage with this type of learning and increase their confidence in their own ability to benefit from Open courses in the future. In addition, it is to be expected that with the appearance of MOOCs in other languages (such as those promoted by the European consortium [OpenUpEd](#)), this resource will be available to learners of languages other than English.

Useful links

Canvas: www.instructure.com

Coursera: www.coursera.org

EdX: www.edx.org

OpenUpEd: www.openuped.eu

Udacity: www.udacity.com



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