2 MOOCs as a new technology: approaches to normalising the MOOC experience for our learners

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Abstract

MOOCs (Massive Open Online Courses) are currently in favour as a mechanism for 'delivering education' on a massive scale, including language education. However, when viewed as a new educational 'technology', they have arguably not yet reached the stage of normalisation (Bax, 2003) at which they might be most productive. This paper examines the current landscape with regard to language learning MOOCs, drawing on a number of successful Open University projects in Spanish and Italian. It looks critically at where MOOCs seem to be potentially most valuable, and also at aspects of the experience which seem to have impeded normalisation. The paper will conclude by looking at how language MOOCs might develop in the years ahead.

1.   Introduction

I have been discussing normalisation in CALL (Computer Assisted Language Learning) for a number of years (Bax, 2003, Bax, 2011a). Technological innovations do not always become normalised, there are numerous examples

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1. Paper posthumously transcribed by Marina Orsini-Jones from the plenary given by Stephen Bax at the BMELTT symposium, with the permission of his family.

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of new technologies that failed and were not adopted widely. I define normalisation as: "the stage when the technology becomes invisible, embedded in everyday practice"; "the stage when a technology is […] hardly even recognised as a technology, taken for granted in everyday life" (Bax, 2003, p. 23). A recent example of this normalisation is the mobile phone, an older one the humble pen.

In illustrating how normalisation is achieved, I have referred to two factors that can hinder the process through which technologies are adopted: excessive 'awe' (see also Murray & Barnes, 1998 on this point) and excessive 'fear' (see the numerous catastrophic reports on the alleged harmfulness of mobile phones in the press). As mentioned elsewhere,

> "these twin features of excessive 'awe' and exaggerated 'fear' when dealing with new or normalising technologies serve to exemplify the way in which the relationship between technology and society is frequently conceived in popular accounts, namely in absurdly simplistic and polarised terms" (Bax, 2011b, p. 2).

As I have previously argued (Bax, 2011a), when we ask ourselves how a technology can become normalised, it is advisable to seek to answer that question taking into account a number of broader interlocking factors, sociocultural as well as technical. This in turn means that we should set the debate on normalisation within a resolutely social constructivist 'contextualist' framework. For example, chopsticks are normalised technology in China, but not in many other countries. Following Mercer and Fisher's suggestion, I proposed the adoption of a 'Neo-Vygotskian' perspective to the assessment of the normalisation on technology in language education:

> "[t]he essence of this approach is to treat learning and cognitive development as culturally based, not just culturally influenced, and as social rather than individualised processes. It highlights communicative aspects of learning, whereby knowledge is shared and understandings are constructed in culturally formed settings" (Mercer & Fisher, 1997, p. 13, cited in Bax, 2011a, p. 6).

The key points to address in the normalisation process of technology for language education are:

- learning is the priority: the focus must be on fostering language learning, not on technology;

- technology is, in its place, the servant and not the master; and

- beyond 'wow': technology should not be revered, no matter how impressive it appears to be.

Normalisation appears to follow these phases:

- early adopters;

- ignorance/scepticism;

- try once ('no relative advantage' Rogers, 1995);

- try again;

- fear/awe/excessive dependence;

- normalising; and

- normalisation.

It must be pointed out that the above phases do not necessarily follow one from the other and the process of normalisation is not automatic. It does not happen with all technologies – sometimes they are not normalised and are not used. With virtually every new technology there is a fear about the dangers. With reference to MOOCs, I would argue that we are at Stage 5, still quite a way from normalisation. I have encountered both awe and fear when discussing MOOCs with language educators. MOOCs are seen by some as the revolution to learning

and development. Some progress in researching the affordances and applications of MOOCs has been made and there are new publications that help with framing how MOOCs can be utilised in language education (e.g. Kan & Bax, 2017), but there are some fundamental questions that we need to ask on the way to normalisation;

- Are MOOCs normalised?
    - For learners?
    - For teachers?
    - For administrators?
    - For all the stakeholders or just some of them?

- Is normalisation for MOOCs desirable? (As we are in the "awe" stage, of course we think it is desirable – but is this a true reflection?).

- How can we achieve it?

- What obstacles lie in the way?

A critical appraisal of MOOCs for language education is needed, that goes beyond the 'wow' factor (Bax, 2011b; Murray & Barnes, 1998) to ascertain if it is desirable that MOOCs become normalised and, if it is, what shape and form should a good MOOC for language education have.

2.   Key features of MOOCs

MOOCs are, as their acronym states, massive, open, and online. Quite often there is low tutor/student interaction, for obvious reasons: there might be 50,000 students and 20 tutors (see Figure 1: Participants' numbers of the Spanish MOOC by The Open University). So there normally are less opportunities for interaction than in a language classroom or even in a well-attended lecture. For similar reasons, the mode of learning is transmission of knowledge on a MOOC, as it is easier to put information on a MOOC that is accessed by participants

rather than engage in interaction with 50,000 participants, ask them questions, and obtain feedback from them. Although there is some social dimension to a MOOC, as there are forums for example, the opportunity for interaction is reduced in comparison with a face-to-face classroom setting.

Figure 1.   Participants' numbers of the Spanish MOOC by The Open University on FutureLearn[2]
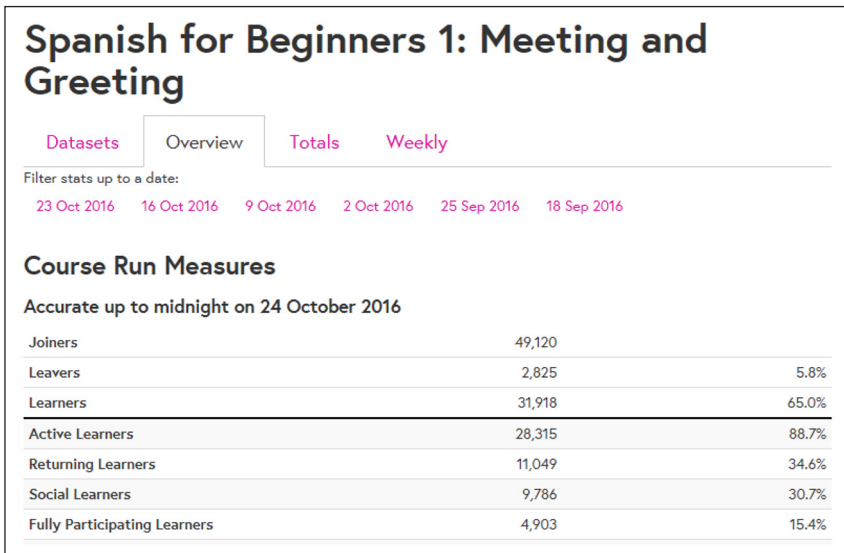
I propose to evaluate where we are with MOOCs and where we should be from a theoretical perspective. In this context, it is useful to refer back to an old, but still valid, framework by Jane Willis (1996), who classifies the key areas of language learning in four points, or conditions. Willis (1996) states that three are essential:

- **exposure** (which I would call **input**) to a rich but comprehensible input of real spoken and written language in use;

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- **use** of the language to do things (i.e. exchange meanings, which I would call **output)**;

- **motivation** to listen to, read, speak, and write the language (i.e. to process and use the exposure).

Willis (1996) also adds a fourth, which she calls desirable: **instruction in the language** (i.e. chances to **focus on form**).

I agree with Willis (1996) that these four areas are fundamental to language learning, but would propose to move them around. Motivation comes first for me, how the learner feels about the learning that is taking place, the 'affect' – the will that you have towards the subject you are studying. A language learner is unlikely to learn a language if they hate their teacher and/or the language they are learning. Secondly comes input: the quantity and quality of it. Quality includes the range of language input, so a student who is focusing on conversational Italian will not be able to read Dante, unless they are exposed to a wide range of language. Likewise, output needs to consist of good opportunities for speaking and writing, the third aspect. Fourthly, focus on form should relate to feedback – the importance of focusing on where you went wrong. I do not see this aspect of language learning as optional, like Willis does, but rather that it forms an integral part of the language learning process.

If we look for these four factors in Language MOOCs (LMOOCs), we can see that LMOOCs score quite high on motivations, they can be fun, but sometimes the experience can be a bit isolated and the student will need support. The evaluation of the Open University's LMOOCs delivered on the FutureLearn platform illustrates that the affective point is well addressed by MOOCs, possibly also because they are still relatively new ('wow' factor). Input is also good on LMOOCs, even considering their interactional limitations and the lack of exposure to genre variety in them. There are, however, problems with output and feedback. It is difficult to practise output (speaking and writing) on a MOOC and obtain feedback on one's production. These are essential factors in language learning and LMOOCs have serious shortcomings in these two areas.

3.   Conclusions and recommendations

The limitations of the LMOOCs identified above can hinder their normalisation. If students think they can learn a whole language from a MOOC students will become dissatisfied, attendance on LMOOCs might decline and 'massive' might become 'miniscule' as a consequence of this. If the expectation is too high to start with there is a serious danger of it failing.

So what can we do? Firstly it is necessary to cast a critical eye on LMOOCs, paying attention to their shortcomings to see how they can be resolved or circumvented through research, design, and operation. It is recommended to go beyond the 'wow' factor and manage the expectations of students. LMOOCs are not a panacea for language learning, not the whole solution, only a part of it. That is the usual problem with new technologies, that some people start to think that new technologies can solve all their problems. This is the lesson learnt from research into normalisation. Students must be supported in accessing additional listening and speaking elements, for example, and/or be provided them as extras outside the LMOOCs. If this is not done, LMOOCs might die the same death that some other rather unusual technologies died, before becoming normalised.

It is also important to carry out more research on MOOCs and examples of this are provided in Kan and Bax (2017). We must also think about the design and operation of MOOCs to take account of gaps and shortcomings we might identify. Some of this LMOOC research has for example informed the design of the FutureLearn Spanish for Beginners LMOOC. Learners' perceptions of LMOOCs must be studied and must inform their design.

In summary:

- MOOCs are not yet normalised;

- normalisation requires more research, leading to planning, then more research;

- research: focus on obstacles to normalisation;

- research: based on language learning theory/research base;

- identify gaps;

- then plan for the gaps, and alternatives; and

- raise awareness of learners and teachers of the limitations of the MOOCs and encourage them to take action to resolve the issues/lacks and wants.

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