REFLEXIONS ON A MASSIVE OPEN ONLINE COURSE 'ACADEMIC WRITING'

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Abstract

As part of the different strategies implemented to improve students' abilities in English, professors from the Universidad Autónoma del Carmen (UNACAR) in Mexico added a Massive Open Online Course (MOOC) in one of the English courses. This MOOC called 'Principles of Written English 1' was focused on essay development, grammatical correctness, and self-editing. The purpose was also to investigate a different learning setting and students' performance on online courses. In order to gather data, researches designed a weekly reflection sheet where students were asked to provide their reflexions about the course and the difficulties or novelties found during this workshop.   After the analysis of the information, researchers noticed that students are not interested towards online courses because they do not usually take formal online lessons. However, the study revealed they get new information in every session. In conclusion, the use of MOOCs to support on-site classes is useful, but the use of technology, as a mean to learn, must be encouraged before applying online courses.

Keywords: MOOCs, academic writing, English

Introduction

The use of Massive Open Online Courses (Henceforth MOOC's) have become more popular to support the teaching of certain areas or to update knowledge. As MOOC's is an innovative strategy for teaching courses, many people around the world who have access to computers and internet take advantage and make use of it. According to Borys et al. (2014) the main purpose of using MOOC's "is to provide free access to course materials and resources as well as to provide interactive user forums". As mentioned before it is a way to gain knowledge, without investing money.

Some universities offer through these resources different topics based on medicine, biology, math, science, engineering, education, innovation, reading, writing practice in English and so on. Some other universities such as Berkeley the University of California, Tenaris University, Harvard, Tsinghua University and other international schools offer these courses free; the procedure to follow is to register and create an account. If you enroll in any course you are asked to spend 3 or more hours a day in the course and most of the time the length is very short it varies from 3 to 6 weeks approximately.

The definition of MOOC's according to Borys et al. (2004) who points out that Massive means that it is directed to an unlimited number of students. Anyone can enroll without any problem, therefore, it differs from a typical face to face class or online course because there is not a specific number of people that can be registered. Bonk et al. (2015) however, differs from some authors since MOOC's have a start and end dates, charges for a participation if you want to receive a printable certificate and some other aspects that make MOOC's one more online class.

It is open because of several reasons; the first one because it is open to the public, anyone who has graduated from a college or university or simply anyone who is interested in the course can get enrolled. However, it is important to take into account that most of these courses are offered in the English language, that is the reason why an intermediate level proficiency is required in order to understand the instructions, the readings and the whole information given in that language. Second, it is free of charge, and finally, future users can reuse it many times.

It is defined as online course because it is taught via internet, there is no physical attendance required. Although there is not a schedule, the tasks are to be completed within the time set by the instructor of the course, and as a basic requirement, a good internet service is needed. The course is focused on a pedagogical content based on any topic chosen by the instructor and the people who design the course.

For learning a second language, e-learning, as an innovative strategy, has been a very helpful tool for many independent students. Knight (2004, p.12) remarks that "E-Learning is no longer simply associated with distance or remote learning, but forms part of a conscious choice of the best and most appropriate ways of promoting effective learning". What teachers must focus on is learning more that the use of technology.

In the field of teaching a second or foreign language, there are nowadays also MOOC's that can be useful as a support for students of a second language. However, not everyone is open to technology or interested in an online course. Dudeney and Hockly (2007) recommended that if we are teaching adults, we must first discuss if they might be interested in

adding one online component to our course, since some students might not be interested because they spend too much time in a computer or they simply prefer the social relationship that a face-to-face class provides.

Research approach

This study was dealt from a qualitative approach since our main concern was focused on students' reflections and attitudes towards taking any MOOC's. At the same time, the interest of the researchers was to enhance students learning opportunities, as well as strengthening teaching-learning strategies. After all, this approach aims are to "… explore and understand the interactions, processes, lived experiences, and belief systems that are part of individuals, …" (O'Leary 2010, p. 114) in order to explain or change a situation to improve human conditions.

As part of this approach, the agreed design for this research was an action-research since the main aim of the whole activities involved in the project was to improve students writing and identify their attitude toward learning online, especially on academic writing constraints. According to Hernández Roberto, Fernández-Collado y Baptista Lucio (p. 706), action research is used to improve individual performance, as well as changing a situation with the intention to make it better. That is why, aware of the students needs, and our objectives to train them in writing, this learning strategy and research were implemented for the students described in the corresponding section of this paper.

In order to gather information for analyzing if the objectives of the research were fulfilled, a reflection guide and observations were conducted during the whole learning strategy. Therefore, each participant ended up with a total of five reflection sheets at the end of the course. The reflection sheet consisted on reporting what they had learnt and what had been a challenge to learn along the week.

Subjects

The study was carried out on 13 Mexican students of the faculty of Educational Sciences in the English language degree. They all speak Spanish as their mother tongue and have studied English at the Universidad Autónoma del Carmen for more than 3 years as part of the degree. The age range is from 20 to 24 years old.

Besides, the participants were working on their thesis projects as a product of their course or Research Methodology. The reason for them to participate in the MOOC's course about academic writing was that this course is no longer taught at the English Langue Degree.

Research process

The way the participants were chosen consisted on an open and free invitation to participate in the MOOC's "Principle of written English 1" offered by the University of Berkely the University of California, and it was free online course, which is regularly taught. This invitation was addressed to all 34 students taking Research Methodology, who were working on their thesis projects. The purpose to invite the students was to identify how willing to take an online course the pupils were, nonetheless only 13 decided to begin the course due to a lack of time since the term was about to finish, and most students were more concerned on their compulsory courses grades.

The course lasted 5 weeks. The first week had activities to review grammar and practice writing. The course had some additional homework about the topic taught per week, for instance the first week was based on some grammar topics and the extra assignment consisted on practicing with other topics that they could choose among the list. The second week had activities focused on writing sentences and paragraphs. The third week had activities concerned for writing thesis statements. And the fourth and fifth week, the student had to work on the assignments to turn an essay as a final assignment.

After every week each participant registered his own information on a reflection sheet by responding three main hints focused on their perception about what they learned and what was difficult or represented a challenge to them. At the same time, students' records on their attitude toward the online course were registered.

Results

On the first week, thirteen participants were registered on the MOOC's showing a genuine interest on taking the course. At the same time, they expressed their interest to study English grammar and specific aspects about academic writing. These aspects were of utmost interest to the students because they wanted to use such information on writing their thesis, something they were dealing with.

However, even when these 13 students immediately responded to the invitation, the expected participation on the course was not reached, since a total of 34 students were invited.   This means, that the non-interested students in taking the course was higher than the one interested on participating.

On this first week, the thirteen students appointed for the course had to become familiar with the platform. The working platform where the students had to work was really friendly and it had a clear guide about the activities the students had to do (See Fig. 1.1). As a monitoring action, a professor joined the course in order to identify the students participating in

this learning experience and registered all their participations during the course.
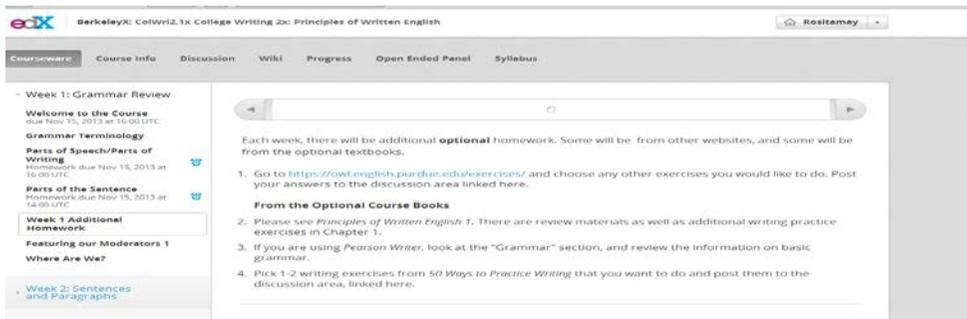
Fig. 1.1 web site

During the course, only three students participated in 5 weeks the course lasted.   Five students participated only 4 weeks. Three students participated 3 weeks. Two students participated only 2 weeks.   At the same time, the participants had to write down their reflection sheets.

SUBJECT	Reflection 1	Reflection 2	Reflection 3	Reflection 4	Reflection 5
S1	X	X	x	x	x
S2	X	X	x	x	
S3	X	X	x	x	
S4	X				
S5	X	X	x	x	
S6	X		x	x	x
S7	X	X	x	x	
S8	X	X	x		
S9	X	X	x		
S10	X	X	x	x	x
S11	X	X	x		
S12				x	
S13	X	X	x	x	x

Table 1.2 Participation per week.

Although 3 people completed the whole sessions, many of them completed more than 3. However, the total of students who finished the course, if we consider the total number of the invited students and the actual number who registered, was very low.

Among the most outstanding records the participants did on their reflection sheets during the course are the following:

Week 1

What I did not know…

- *How to structure a sentence and how to organize the parts of it.*

Now, I have clarified…

- *Grammar terminology, parts of speech and writing, parts of a sentence, how a sentence is structured, and organize parts of a sentence.*

I feel unsure about…

- *Nothing.*

Week 5

What I did not know…

No comments

Now, I have clarified…

- *how to write an essay appropriately.*
- *Edit and review the essay*

I feel unsure about…

- *How to write the essay in a correct way.*

Discussion

It seems that the idea of taking an online course made students feel afraid and excited at the same time. As seen from the results, it is remarkable that the number of students that registered in the course is less than the media of all students invited to participate. Most of them stated that one of the reasons they did not join the course was the end of the term that was about to finish by the time the course began, and the fact that they had some tasks that they had to deliver. An extra course would increase stress on their class activities something that was not previously discussed at the beginning of the course, and that was necessary to be done (Dudeney and Hockly 2007).

Anyway, the students that joined the course, at the very beginning showed enthusiasm and interest, but as the days passed and the activities began, they lost or at least diminished their participation. The students showed a lack of responsibility to fulfill the activities from the course.

The reflection guide demonstrated to be too general, and the information the students registered on them were poor about their real reflection about the activities. Most of them only reported facts about the things they were learning or what they lacked to learn, but there is not an analysis or reflection about the reason why they learned, or why they could not learn, or what is still difficult for them. At the same time, they do not express a single comment if the information studied in the course was really helping them to improve their learning, and especially to write their thesis, which was one of the aims why they were invited to participate in the course.

Due to the type of course, the observation to the students were minimum since from the few that participated, most of them did the activities at home or in a place where the professors rarely could see them. Any way,

a few records about their attitude demonstrated low responsibility and a lack of interest to learn, especially about academic writing.

Even when most of the participants mentioned to be interested and excited to learn more, most of them did not end the course, which demonstrate the reverse. Something positive on the students' part is that most of the participants (13 students) recorded their advances and showed they were effectively learning (Knight 2004).

Conclusion

Although students did not finish the training and the participation was low, they had track of their learning process. We can attest learning took place, since every student after doing the exercises were self evaluated to find out if they had learnt something about the topic. Taking into account that the semester was about to finish, and it could have been an important factor why students did not complete the course, at least a few did participate in the course and were eager to face a new learning experience.

A factor which could have affected on the students registration and participation was that students are not used to taking courses online. There is not any course offered in the language degree under this modality, and students do not have the habit or formality to self-learning that is why it is important for our degree faculty to be aware of this, and make use of this type of teaching learning online tools.

Regarding the aims of this research, they were partially fulfilled since the students reflections were not really gathered at all, and the students attitude toward taking a MOOC were recorded, but a deeper study is necessary. On the other hand, the learning aims of the strategy were fullfilled, at least on the students participating. The participants had the opportunity to learn about academic writing, and work on a new learning tool.

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