Language MOOCs: Providing Learning, Transcending Boundaries

Elena Martín Monje and Elena Bárcena Madera (eds).
Warsaw/Berlin: De Gruyter Open Ltd, 2014. nº pages. ISBN: 978-3-11-042250-4. e-ISBN: 978-3-11-042006-7.

Quite by chance, at the time of writing this review, I was myself in the process of designing a MOOC for beginners of Spanish as a foreign language. The book came to me as a blessing and I can only say that it was most definitely inspirational!

As the editors confirm (page 7), it is the first book of its kind, devoted entirely to the specificities of MOOCs for language learning purposes, and comes at a moment when many of us are starting or in the process of designing such courses. To practice what they preach, the book is available from De Gruyter Open Ltd. at http://www.degruyter.com/viewbooktoc/product/455678, where one can download the entire book in PDF or in ePUB format.

In the introductory chapter, and in view of the conclusions arising from the chapters in the book, BÁRCENA and MARTÍN-MONJE claim that "open online courses can be effectively designed to facilitate the development of communicative language capabilities for potentially massive and highly heterogeneous groups, whose only common goal is their desire to learn a given language" (page 3). They provide an overview of existing LMOOCs per platform and their availability worldwide. Not surprisingly, two universities in Spain stand out as being leaders in offering language MOOCs, i.e. that of the editors themselves (Universidad Nacional de Educación a Distancia (UNED)) and that of the undersigned reviewer (Universidad Politécnica de Valencia), which add up to 41% of the total offer equalling that of the USA, where they were born.

In chapter two MAGGIE SOKOLIK (University of California, Berkeley, USA) describes the differences between connectivist MOOCs, known as cMOOCs, and xMOOCs. Quoting Mackness (2013) she explains that "the content in cMOOCs is networked. Participants are encouraged to meet in locations of their choosing and organize themselves" (page. 18). xMOOCs,

on the other hand, are centralized networks running from a delivery platform, where interaction commonly takes place in the discussion forum. She points out that one of the advantages of the cMOOC format is its emphasis on interaction and community building because discussion is the heart of an LMOOC. In concluding, she summarises a number of very interesting tips for instructors and designers to consider for a successful LMOOC.

In chapter three António Moreira Teixeira (European Distance and ELearning Network, Portugal) and José Mota (Universidade Aberta, Portugal) discuss a number of design criteria to favour massive collaborative language learning MOOCs based on the iMOOC model developed at the Open University of Portugal (Universidade Aberta). They describe this model as being learner-centred, where learning is based on the completion and online publication of activities, and evidenced through the "creation of artefacts (texts, videos, presentations, slidecasts, mind maps, mash-ups, etc.) that demonstrate the learner's knowledge and competencies regarding the material studied" (page 36). The authors label their model as iMOOC given its focus on individual responsibility, interaction, interpersonal relationships, innovation and inclusion. Although the model they propose has a solid foundation, there seem to be a number of flaws if we consider the real massiveness of these courses. One such flaw, in my view, is their suggestion to award course credits "following an evaluation by a professor or tutor of the e-portfolio presented by participants (50%), combined with a final, face to face exam (50%) that must test all 4 skills" (page 45). I see this as being highly unmanageable when dealing with thousands of students in varied locations and time zones.

In chapter four Tita Beaven (The Open University, UK), Tatiana Codreanu (Laboratoire ICAR, France) and Alix Creuzé (Institut Français, Spain) focus on the importance of motivation in LMOOCs and provide supporting empirical data based on a study conducted with over 1000 participants enrolled on *Travailler en française* which, according to Vaufrey (2013), referenced on page 52, is the first French as a foreign language MOOC. The authors portray the profile of the participants, exploring their motivation and expectations prior to undertaking the course and reviewing their perceptions once completed. Based on their findings, they provide a number of recommendations for LMOOC designers in order to motivate learners and keep them engaged.

In chapter five Mª Dolores Castrillo de Larreta-Azelain (UNED, Spain) offers her invaluable experience as an award-winning MOOC designer and shares her reflections in relation to the intricate role of the instructor in an LMOOC, identifying his or her main roles and competences, both from a theoretical and a practical point of view. Based on a review of prior work and on her own experience, Castrillo proposes an innovative framework to determine and specify the various roles and competences that a MOOC instructor adopts depending on the different course stages. Her recommendations are visionary and founded on solid pedagogical grounds.

In chapter six Timothy Read (UNED, Spain), introduces MOOCs from yet another very interesting perspective, that of "architectonics". He discusses the architectural issues involved in designing LMOOCs and concludes with a number of recommendations about how such courses should be built. He points out that one of the major differences between web 2.0 online courses and MOOCs can be paralleled to formal versus informal learning, i.e. courses taken in closed environments where only paying students can access the materials and a subsequent certification is awarded versus open environments where more emphasis is placed on competence development rather than certification. In his chapter Read estimates that "by 2020 there will be almost 120 million students […] demanding education, together with changing learner demographics and an increasing number of adults also looking to improve/update their capabilities" (page 93) as a contributing factor toward increasing the demand for MOOCs.

In chapter seven Covadonga Rodrigo (Fundación Vodafone, Spain) focuses on an ever-increasing aspect sought in MOOCs, i.e. that of eliminating barriers for people with certain disabilities due to the fact that they allow students to learn at their own time, place and pace, enhancing continuous communication and interaction between participants in knowledge and community building. She sees MOOCs as facilitating inclusion but is wary also of a number of difficulties that may arise due to the need to develop specific digital or even social skills. In line with this Rodrigo analyses the critical factors that are necessary in order to build a specification of requirements for accessible MOOCs and presents an outline of requirements to ensure access to LMOOCs. This endeavour is not only limited, in her view, to student access but also to instructor or administrative roles as there seems to be "a gap in the scientific analysis of how instructors using assistive technologies can use these systems as learning creators" (page 113).

In chapter eight INMA ÁLVAREZ (The Open University, UK) contributes with yet another very interesting perspective by dealing with ethical and aesthetic considerations in LMOOCs. She discusses how elements such as context, content, medium and the agents involved in education can be approached from an aesthetic and ethical point of view, and their relevance to language programmes. Álvarez also questions the concepts of openness and open initiatives in relation to education, and discusses the issue of addressing global masses in terms of the problems that have already been identified such as "the use of MOOCs for commercial interests, the issue of the digital divide [not just] in terms of access to technology but also with respect to the level of digital literacy, as well as the linguistic and cultural challenges of addressing the world population" (page 136). In this sense she recommends educators aiming globally to be aware of the linguistic and cultural difficulties that arise from addressing a diverse student population in open online education" (page 137), something which – in my opinion – is easier said than done when we consider the geographical and culturally diverse contexts that our MOOCs can reach out to.

In chapter nine FERNANDO RUBIO (Utah University, USA), reports on a very meticulously presented study comparing the gains in comprehensibility of students enrolled on a traditional face-to-face pronunciation course with those taking part in the same course on an LMOOC, which basically differed on the amount of feedback provided to each group of learners. He reports that the results showed significant improvements in both course formats, but larger effect sizes in the case of the LMOOC due, perhaps, to the fact that the latter were provided with more quantity and variety of "effective feedback". Consequently, the author concludes that the absence of face-to-face interaction and large enrolment numbers did not hinder acquisition.

In chapter ten JOZEF COLPAERT (Universiteit Antwerpen, Belgium), provides an overview of the affordances and weaknesses of LMOOCs portrayed in the eight preceding chapters, pointing out that "LMOOCs have mainly been initiated by elitist universities and that current users are mainly motivated, well-educated students and that drop-out rates are too high" (page 163). He then goes on to situate LMOOCs in a framework of ontological specifications and analyses them in terms of educational engineering, i.e. an instructional design model that provides a theoretical framework to design, develop, implement and evaluate any educational artefact, including MOOCs. He closes the book by framing LMOOCs in the context of

research conducted in computer-assisted language learning (CALL) and makes a number of suggestions for improved MOOC design.

Whilst it is obvious that the book has been carefully and precisely edited, I do, however, have one small criticism to make… it's an awful shame that the graphics and visuals included are in general of a poor quality, being detrimental for the reader who cannot benefit from the valuable information depicted in them.

Lastly, I would just like to say that in the course of reading the book and writing this review for *Ibérica*, our beginners' Spanish xMOOC (Gimeno et al., 2015) has been launched on edX.org with an astounding 57,000 registered students at the start of the course from all parts of the globe. As Cristina Navarro, one of the colleagues I designed the LMOOC with said, "I was overwhelmed one of my LMOOC co-designers said, "I was overwhelmed when we were told that we were nearing 5,000 registered learners 4 months before the course was due to start; I was terrified when we were told that over 10,000 students had enrolled just a couple of months before starting, and it suddenly became natural when we were told that 57,000 learners had finally registered for the course start!"

As I said earlier, this book is a must for anybody interested in LMOOCs and as Colpaert predicts I too think that "this volume will be considered a milestone in LMOOC history" (page 171).

Reviewed by **Ana Gimeno Sanz**
Universidad Politécnica de Valencia (España)
agimeno@upvnet.upv.es

References

Gimeno, A., C. Navarro, V. González & B. García (2015). *Learn Spanish: Basic Spanish for English Speakers*. URL: https://www.edx.org/course/learn-spanish-basic-spanish-english-upvalenciax-bsp101x. [06/10/2015]

Mackness J. (2013). "cMOOCs and xMOOCs – key differences" in Jenny Mackness's blog. URL: http://jennymackness.wordpress.com/2013/10/22/cmoocs-and-xmoocskey-differences [06/10/2015]

Vaufrey, C. (2013). "Travailler en français", le premier MOOC de FLE. URL: http://cursus.edu/article/21244/travailler-francais-premier-mooc-fle/#. UzMK6Kh_tQA [06/10/2015]