Learning language through Task-Based MOOCs

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Abstract. The current state of language teaching favors the communicative approach, as stated in the CEFR: "language learning should be directed toward enabling learners to act in real life situation expressing themselves and accomplishing tasks of different natures". The emergence of language learning MOOCs has given access to language learning to many learners, but it is often the case that the new technology tools follow the Presentation-Practice-Production methodology for reasons of easier adaptation into online learning. However, the latest technological developments combined with the task-based approach, as defined by Nunan, has introduced a new element of real-life based language learning to the discussion. Having developed task-based MOOCs in 6 languages used by thousands of Erasmus+ students, we have shown that this is possible and that it exceeds learners' expectations in terms of learning experience and outcomes. This paper will present in detail the pedagogical implications of such MOOCs, and in a few words presents two tools available to provide the learner with the possibility to practice the language they are learning rather than be assessed on passive knowledge.

Keywords: Task based approach, language, flipped classroom, Communicative approach

1 The Mooc as a piece of the language learning puzzle

1.1 MOOCs & Erasmus + Online Linguistic Support

Erasmus+ Online Linguistic Support MOOCs are Massive (all Erasmus+ students have access to them), Open in that they are free (albeit only for Erasmus+ students), and they are available Online. They take the form of a 30-minute interactive language course embedded in a free navigation e-learning platform complemented with video-conference sessions. Before participating in a video-conference session, it is important that learners are prepared to make the most of their learning, and use the contact time with trainer to practice acquired skills rather than having a one-way course where a language trainer delivers knowledge to learner. Flipping the model allows individuals to use the MOOCs as the linking element, a semi-guided transition between online self-paced learning (systematic learning) and video-conference sessions (free practice).

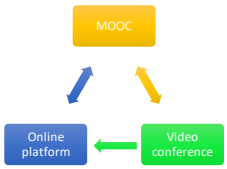

Fig. 1. Flipped classroom with MOOC as the Key Element.

1.2 Interactive MOOCs: A semi-guided learning experience

The methodology relies on the communicative approach and a joining up of complementary learning elements: the e-learning platform provides learners with a systematic approach of the language in a communicative context, MOOCs provide a semi-guided learning environment, and the video-conference session a free-practice learning environment. These MOOCs are a combination of tutor led videos and interactive activities with dynamic feedback aimed at being the transition between e-learning and video-conference. MOOCs can enhance student engagement through the personalization of learning and the motivational elements brought by the video. Allowing learners to access activities in context, where they can understand how the language works rather than simply learning rules to be applied to exercises, works well at engaging students. For the same reason, the outcome is not presented as a grade but as a feedback on performance with incentives to redo the task or the pre-task if some elements were not mastered. A survey conducted among more than a thousand students indicates that this feature is well appreciated.

2 Turning Moocs into an interactive communicative learning experience (Task-based MOOCs)

Two key downsides to the current state of online learning activities that the Task Based MOOCs attempt to address are: one, there is too much of a focus on repetitive online activities such as grammar exercises; and two, not enough of a link between activities that would give learners the sense of progression they need to feel motivated.

In response to the second point, the presence of a ‘Coach’ who follows the learner through their 30-minute MOOC has been well appreciated by respondents to the survey.

To address the second point, the PPP-approach (Presentation Practice Production) seemed inappropriate for our target students. So, after much research into the different methodologies for online learning, it was decided that task-based would be the most appropriate. This task-based approach is based on Nunan’s model, with every lesson containing a rehearsal task, activation task, enabling skills and culminating in a final target task. Our pedagogical assumption is that a MOOC should provide a semi-guided environment where the learner finds their self in an immersive environment, is able to discover the vocabulary, functions and various language elements which can be systematized online but without any formal, summative assessment. Our MOOCs had

to combine various key factors: There should be more action than purely learning elements, progress measurement should be achieved via feedback, the final task should be inspired by a real-life context. The human aspect is brought with the video which provide a mix of linguistic explanation, motivational elements and learning strategies.

The MOOCs are based on the immersive approach (linguistic immersion and real life immersion where the visual context should be carefully drafted). MOOCs as a transition between online learning and real life situations basing the whole MOOC experience in a real-life context with a final task anchored in the real life, and which has directly transferable linguistic skills, has an enormous impact on learner satisfaction as opposed to PPP. Besides learning the language, the development of autonomous learning through the differentiate and adaptive feedback and self-reflection is also an important element of the approach. The differentiated feedback allows this reflection and helps the learner to get motivated to continue their learning path or to redo some sections of the MOOC.

2.1 Task based learning fundamentals

David Nunan's work on Task Based Language Teaching can be summed up as follows. The approach comes from the need of learners and focus on communicating with the language with the help of as much authentic material as possible. Besides discovering and using functional language in context, it also provides an opportunity to focus on the learning process itself. The whole approach aims at bringing the external world into the classroom as opposed to, for instance, a grammar activity - where mastering the language is an objective - the task based approach focusses more on the negotiation of meaning, language as a function where learners are not asked to *reproduce* but to *produce* and where the assessment is the communicative outcome. As pointed out by Willis and Willis, task based learning differs from, for example, grammar activities because learners are free to use a range of language structures to achieve a task outcome.

To that extent, TBL exists on the same continuum as the Communicative approach itself which aims at aiding students to communicate meaning as effectively as possible in concrete situations rather than mastering grammar concepts in a non-communicative context (Littlewood, 1981). The CEFR reinforced this approach by promoting the language learner as first a 'language user' and 'social agent' and thus sees language as a vehicle for communication rather than as a subject of study:

"The methodological message of the CEFR is that language learning should be directed towards enabling learners to act in real life situations, expressing themselves and accomplishing tasks of different natures". (CEFR, 2017)

In 2017, the new section "Mediation" offered learners a set of descriptors where learners are seen as social agents who create bridges and help to construct or convey meaning within the same language. Leading, collaborating and facilitating have become

key words for the CEFR but a yet more interesting section, from our perspective, is Strategies, where language is presented as a perfectible tool that can contain limitations according to your level. The section provides learners with strategies to compensate for the fact that communication is not linguistically pure of mistakes.

The task based approach is a continuity of this adding the fact that the learners themselves need to use feedback provided to remedy failure by using different strategies or language such as, "can use a variety of strategies to achieve comprehension, including listening for main points, checking comprehension by using contextual clues".
Nunan's Task Based Approach consists largely of 7 principles. Provide supportive framework which contains a learning element oriented towards a task realization with task growing upon each other where language can be recycle to maximize learning opportunities. Language should be actively used in activities strongly creative and communicative integrating all the elements of the language with a stress on their relationship (form, communicative function and semantic meaning). Last but not least learner should be given the opportunities to reflect on what they have learned and how well they are doing.

3 How to Apply TBA to online Language Learning

3.1 How to design an online communicative task

MOOCs contains various activities to create a set of skills essential to completing a linguistic task. Deciding on this final linguistic task is the core of the pedagogical approach and should be based on learners' needs in their daily environment. For instance, at level A2, what are the skills feasible for the learner to perform? What linguistic elements are necessary to complete a task? And how can we provide a task that is close enough to his environment to get him involved in the learning process and to present him with new linguistic tools to be self-sufficient in conducing this task outside of the classroom.

Throughout each lesson, learners complete tasks that are as close as possible to their day-to-day personal/working life, including tasks such as: greeting and seating customers, taking an order, buying supplies or dealing with a complaint over the phone. The 'enabling skills' are given to the students through grammar, vocabulary and functional language exercises, in order for them to be able to complete the final task. The final task is a culmination of everything they have learnt in the lesson, and gives them the opportunity to put it into practice.

The rehearsal tasks offer activities to learners to practice within the security of the classroom (face to face or virtual) and to provide constructive feedback with advice on how to progress rather than an evaluation of knowledge. This moves the MOOC from the reproductive language models provided by trainers and books to a more constructive

language use. The main difference relies on the fact that in a, let's say, traditional PPP language exercise the answer is predictable and learners are assessed according to their answer. Yet, with the task based approach the Communicative goal predominates, the outcome is the most important: Could the learner achieve the outcome (whatever the fluency or strategies put in place)? And, if not, what constructive remedial actions are offered. The structure of the OLS Task Based Approach MOOC could be resumed in this graph:

3.2 A concrete example

This concrete example illustrates the building of a Mooc targeted at level B1 in English in a vocational training language instruction context in this case Travel consultant. See annex 1 for screenshots

Mooc Objectives	Learn how to make suggestions and book travel arrangements.	
Linguistic needs in everyday tasks	Being able to ask questions, make recommendations and tell confirmation are key linguistic tools necessary to accomplish daily duties.	
Linguistic elements of the target level in Everyday task		Questions, phrasal verbs, past tenses
Vocabulary	Expressions for talking about holidays and travel arrangements.	(1)Listening comprehension in context of customers expressing their needs (2) Gap fill travel agency web page
Grammar	Questions to learn about your customers' situation, needs and previous experiences.	(1)Reorder customer questions: Past / present perfect.
Function	Phrases to make recommendations, communicate important information and confirm arrangements.	(1)Reorder phrasal verbs and modals (2)Listening: to Travel Agent customers' sentences and decide on function
Final Task	Take a booking via an online text chat.	(1)Fill a text chat with recommendations to clients

3.3 Bring context

In order to provide a linguistic experience to the context we based our MOOCs on, two characters, John and Lisa, are used alongside real-life tutors. Evidence shows that these

'robotic pedagogical agents' (animated characters in this case) help students to complete more complex, online tasks in an online lesson. (Schroeder & Adesope, 2012). These characters may help students recall more information than real-human tutors, although attitudes towards human tutors is more positive. (Li, Kizilcec , Bailenson, & Ju, 2015). In terms of the 'human-like' quality of the characters, human-like animated characters produce a significantly higher degree of arousal, pleasure, and learning motivation than other styles of characters (Lee, Hsiao, & Ho, 2014). The use of these characters also allows for a context to be created at the start of every lesson, with John and Lisa in a different situation and producing dialogues throughout. The explanation videos are delivered by the real-life tutors, and the tutors also carry the student through the lesson through encouraging videos. The combination of both the characters and real-life tutors allow the MOOCs to be engaging and reach a range of participants while also providing pedagogical context and interest.

4 The technological aspect

Technologically, interactive MOOCs offer much more than the video format. New technologies allow for the integration of video and side activities in one single piece of learning to offer learners an interactive and engaging MOOC. One key element of Task Based MOOCs is the addition of dynamic feedback in the activities which are personalised and adjusted to the specific student response. The dynamic feedback is based on the CODA (Computerized Dynamic Assessment of Language Proficiency) model developed by the Centre for Advanced Language Proficiency Education and Research (CALPER) at Penn State University. Task based approach MOOCs can go even further in the personalization of the learning experience with extensive use of audio and video feedback and customization of recommendations or remedial in the flipped classroom context but as well in the customization of the learner's learning path.

Throughout the MOOC, many types of interactive exercises are available to the participants in order to complete the rehearsal task or the enabling exercise. These exercise types include: Multiple-Choice, True/False, Fill-in-the-blanks, Short answers, Matching, Hotspot, Sequence, Drag and drop. There is also the aspect of gamification that is possible using this format, which includes elements such as: Word Search, Word Catch, Hangman, Jeopardy, Jigsaw, Memory, Millionaire.

There are various softwares which offer features to apply our methodology. Adobe Captivate and Articulate Storyline are not the easiest to use but their flexibility and the long list of features make them strong candidates when it comes to choosing one software. Both softwares require technical skills as well as instructional design skills. The linguist in charge of writing the script should also have a comprehensive understanding of the possibilities of the software.

5 Questions to continue the debate

- How the new format of videos will enhance the Mooc experience: 360 videos, Multiple scenario videos, Augmented reality
- The emergence of a new profession: language instructional designer
- The limits of the flipped classroom
- How innovative approach has to be flexible to answer all learners need;
- The role of community manager in the engagement of learners

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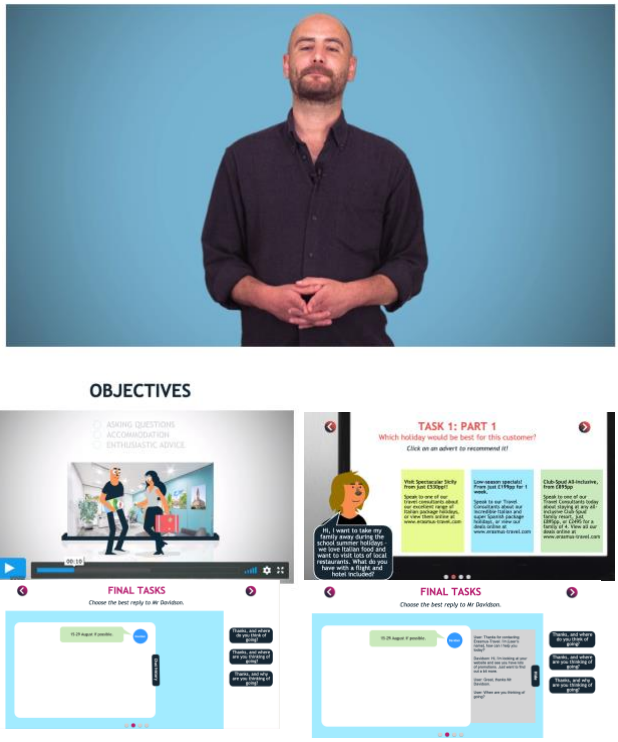
Annex



Images: screenshots of various sections of a Mooc : Introduction, objectives, rehearse activity and Final Task