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Learning Academic English Through Tailored MOOCs Materials: A Study of Associate Degree HK Students

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ABSTRACT

The aim of the research presented here is to understand and evaluate the impacts of MOOCs (massive open online courses) on associate degree students' academic English learning at Hong Kong Community College of The Hong Kong Polytechnic University. Using Song & Hill's (2007) self-directed learning model as a conceptual framework of this research, the work in progress project is aiming to analyse the influences of personal attributes, process attributes and learning context in MOOCs learning. As a preparation course for undergraduate degree studies, "English for Academic Studies" is compulsory for all the year one students at HKCC. Through a 2-semester observational study, the researcher has found that she has encountered resistance and low attendance rate when she used examples and sample essays from textbooks. On the other hand, when she adopted tailored MOOCs (Massive Open Online courses) materials in and outside classroom, unexpected popularity was perceived. The preliminary finding of this research has shown that tailored MOOCs materials are extremely helpful for students who are using English as a second language; nevertheless, the role of classroom teachers cannot be neglected as appropriate guidance is desired from students. The research findings validate Song & Hill's (2007) self-directed learning model.

KEYWORDS: MOOC, English learning, Learning context.

1   INTRODUCTION

The innovation of this paper is its research subject. Since September 2010, I started to teach EAS (English for Academic Studies) at Hong Kong Community College, and I have encountered resistance and low attendance rate when I used examples and sample essays from textbooks. To enhance students' learning motivation, I adopt tailored MOOCs (Massive Open Online courses) materials in and outside classroom since 2012, and I found students welcome this new change. With the generalization of smart phones and ipad among students in China (including HK), it is expected that MOOCs can play a positive role in students' English language learning, if, appropriate guidance could be given.

The aim of the research presented here is to understand and evaluate the impacts of MOOCs (massive open online courses) on associate degree students' academic English learning at Hong Kong Community College of the Hong Kong Polytechnic University. Firstly, the writer will explore the current MOOCs learning situation in China. Secondly, by using Song & Hill's (2007) self-directed learning model as a conceptual framework of this research, this work in progress project is aiming to analyse the influences of personal attributes, process attributes and learning context in MOOCs learning. Then the research will suggest methods to enhance individual MOOCs learning outcomes. Lastly, a revised conceptual model for understanding self-directed learning in MOOCs contexts will also be presented.

2   MOOCS LEARNING SITUATION IN CHINA

2.1   Reasons for Using MOOCs

With the development of globalization, intercultural communication among different countries has become increasingly frequent. As a carrier of culture, audiovisual products have become an indispensable way in cultural communication. On November 1st, 2010, NetEase launched an open-course channel and had the first batch of 1200 video clips of lectures, among which most were conducted in English. These videos came from world well-known universities, covering topics from literal arts, society to nature, and they became amazingly popular in mainland China. According to Wu (2011), the young generation in China love famous university's open courses mainly because of the following reasons:

A. The ways of teaching

The relaxing and rhetoric teaching method, interactive teaching method, and open-ended questions have attracted young generations in China.

B. To keep up with time

Wu's (2011) research indicates that many young people uses MOOCs for social interaction as many youngsters report that if they don't know the existence of open courses, and have never explored the relevant websites, their friends will tease them.

C. Nature of the content

On the other hand, many MOOCs fans mention that some of the MOOCs courses are closer to their daily life. Ideas that young people are always considering, but they cannot find in traditional textbooks, such as "what is the meaning of life?", "what is happiness?" actually have been discussed by professors in some famous universities. Aroused by inner motivations, many students spend their spare time to watch MOOCs courses.

D. English language learning

Many students have also reported that most online courses are conducted by native speakers of English so they are authentic English learning resources as well (Fan, 2011).

Some learners mention that they are using one stone to kill two birds because they can learn English and subject knowledge at the same time.

2.2   Channels for Accessing MOOCs

With regards to different channels to view open online courses, Wang & Hu (2011) have done another research and they find that about 38% people retrieve MOOCs from websites, such as www.163.com, www.sina.com (38%), or their own universities' internet (38%); while only 10% students visit famous university's websites directly. On the other hand, around 19% people browse videos from other different resources.

Regarding the factors that influence learners to choose open online courses, many interviewees mention that the content of the course (30.71%) and whether the course will be charged (36.11%) are the two most important attributes for them to consider when choosing a course. Other factors, such as reputation of the school (12.81%), the charisma of the lecturer (11.11%) have also been taken into consideration but they are not as significant as the previously mentioned two factors (Wang, Hu, 2011).

2.3   The Problem that MOOCs Learners Have Encountered in China

A.   English language problems

Many viewers admit that they do not have good command of English so they can just rely on subtitles. Liang (2012) find that many participants agree that if there are no English subtitles in the video, they will not watch MOOCs (71.2%). In a similar way, Pang and Xu (2011) report that the course became popular since 2010 mainly because many courses can provide Chinese subtitles.

B.   Social-economic status influences

Research has also shown that people who are more interested in MOOCs are university students and "white-collar" staff in south-west coastal areas. It is believed that these cohorts of people are financially more comfortable than people in other regions in China (Wu, 2011). Similarly, Liang (2012) reports that MOOCs courses have different impacts for university students who are at different stages of their study. Students who have higher media literacy tend to think that MOOCs can give them more help than students who have less knowledge of multimedia.

C.   Feedbacks

Many viewers report that it is not convenient for them to receive culturally tailored feedbacks as the communication is mainly one-way. Although there are online discussion forums, offline non-simultaneous discussions have reduced participants' motivations. In addition, some videos are not interesting or they are too difficult to be understood. For example, some MOOCs courses need viewers' background knowledge, but many viewers do not have the expected shared knowledge so the course becomes too difficult for them. Consequently, it is hard for learners who have accessed MOOCs to use the service for a continuous period of time (Liang, 2012).

D.   Learning context

Lastly, because many MOOCs learners mostly "watching videos of lectures and answering multiple-choice questions" individually (Rai & Deng, 2016), they lost their interest after several attempts. It is because the flexible learning environment can easily distract undisciplined learners while they are browsing online courses (Rai & Deng, 2016).

3   SONG & HILL'S (2007) SELF-DIRECTED LEARNING MODEL
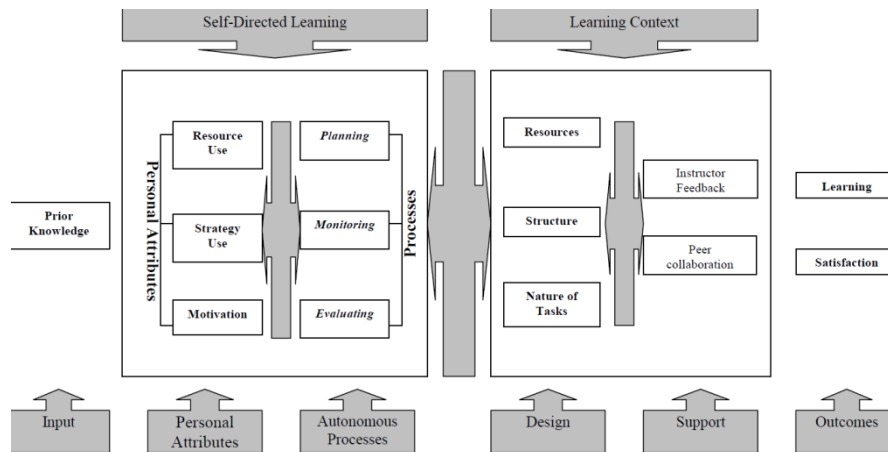

Figure 1: Song & Hill's self-directed learning model

The study of online learning has drawn many researchers' attention. Among all the studies, Song and Hill's self-directed learning model has been adopted in this research because it emphasizes the importance of learning context. There are three major areas in this model:

3.1   Personal Attributes

In Song & Hill's (2007) model, personal attributes not only means the resource and strategy that online learners adopt for their learning, but also refers to learners' motivation for learning.

3.2   Processes

Processes refer to the learning process that autonomous learners apply in their learnings, which include planning, monitoring and evaluating.

3.3   Learning Context

As we can see from figure 1, learning context consists of design factor and support factor. For design factors, there are three parts, which are resources used, structure and nature of tasks; while instructor's feedback and peer collaboration are two essential parts at the learning support aspect.

4   THIS RESEARCH

4.1   Research Question

To see how MOOCs courses can help students improve their academic English language learning, I adopted MOOCs as supplementary teaching materials in my language classroom. The research question at the forefront of this research was: **"What is the perspective of Associate Degree students on their experience of using MOOCs materials to improve their academic English**?" This led to specific sub-questions:
1) What are learners' understandings of MOOCs? What expectations do they have from MOOCs?
2) What are the major differences between self-directed MOOCs learning and traditional

E-learning?
3) What are the roles of individual learners in MOOCs learning setting?
4) What learning resources and strategies can MOOCs learners apply to improve their academic English?
5) How can learners plan, monitor and evaluate their MOOCs learning?
6) How can self-directed learning theory be used to guide this study?

4.2   Research Participants

My participants are year-one associate degree students. Most of them are DSE graduates but they could not reach the universities entrance requirements so they entered our college to earn an associate degree. For students whose GPA (grade point average) can reach a certain level, they can enter local universities, year 2 to pursue a Bachelor degree. In the past 3 years, the articulation rate of the college is over 75%.

At this college, "English for Academic Studies" is a compulsory general education courses and it runs for two semesters for all year one students. The course objective is to "prepare students for successful academic studies in an English medium post-secondary school learning environment". Academic oral presentation skills, academic essay writing skills and researching skills are the main teaching contents of this course.

5   PLAN AND METHODOLOGY

This project is an action research study to look at two groups of year one Associate Degree Social Sciences students in year 2014/15 and 2015/16. As a subject lecturer, I have introduced MOOCs learning to my target students at the beginning of each semester, and I have collected data in two semesters respectively.

This research uses a variety of data collection tools which include interviews, questionnaires, and research diaries.

Questionnaires are among the most popular data collecting tools in research (Gray, 2004, p.188). As Gillham (2000) claims, questionnaires have many advantages. For example, they are comparatively quick to administer, lack interview bias, and may be cost effective. Cohen & Manion (2003) add that questionnaires have the strength of being comparatively easy to analyse because the close-ended questions can be coded quickly. Gray (2004) states that questionnaires have the advantage of obtaining responses from many people in a short time. In addition, respondents can answer the questionnaire at a convenient time and place so time and distance will not be barriers. As a questionnaire survey can give a detailed and quantified description from a larger population, and can enhance the quality of this research, I decided to use a survey questionnaire to get a general description of my target groups. My plan is to triangulate survey results with other qualitative research results.

My design for the questionnaire is influenced by Cohen & Manion (2003) who propose that the process of designing a questionnaire is turning a general purpose into a concrete researchable one. The purpose of using a survey questionnaire is to triangulate with other qualitative data and help answer the research questions that were proposed earlier in this paper. The form of the questions will be mixed: both open ended questions and closed questions will be involved. The closed questions consist of scale questions and multiple choice questions.

The second type of data gathering tool is interviews. As Merriam (1998) states that the interview is a common tool to collect qualitative data. Furthermore, interviews could allow researchers to explore and deepen their research questions by listening to inside voices, to have a "thick description" account. Based on the analysis of each round questionnaire and

research topics, I will finalize follow-up interview questions shortly after collecting each round of questionnaire data.

Every time before and after I sent questionnaires out, I have written diaries to describe what have happened; what frustrations I have encountered; what interesting things I have found and so on. Contentment and worries during the time of data collection have also been put in the research diary. The diary is organised chronologically. I hope that the research diary can help me identify repeated concerns and pick out instances or incidents to exemplify interview or survey findings.

6 THE LEARNING CONTEXT AND PRELIMINARY FINDINGS

6.1 The Design of MOOCs Aided Classes

According to my observation, I have identified that students welcome multimedia learning resources because the materials help them understand the concept and theories that are stated in textbooks. So I watched the video clips before my classes, and chose the appropriate videos that suit my teaching content. For example, when I taught students how to do presentation in different settings, I used Harvard University professor Michael Sandel's "Justice" course as an example to show how we can use stories to draw audience's attention in the opening part. I also asked students to observe the presenter's non-verbal communication behaviors, such as the way he put his hands, the way he moved, his eye contacts and facial expressions. Students were amazed to find that theories could be learned in an enjoyable way and world-wide famous professor also used presentation skills that were stated in textbooks.

As Wood (2013) states that one-way linear communication model cannot capture the complexity of human communication; an interactive model or a transactional model is more desirable. In addition, Wood (2013) also suggests that giving students more shared field of experience and providing more background information can facilitate them having a more effective communication with senders (Wood, 2013). To maximize the effectiveness of open online courses, for some videos, I provided students a brief introduction before watching to increase their background knowledge. For example, before watching "The history of English in 10 minutes" (from Open University UK Clive Anderson), I briefly introduced the features of the courses to students so they knew what they were expected to learn. Students also understood that each video clip was just about one minute long with authentic British accent, and then they listened to the video to improve their listening comprehension skills. As a side product, they can learn history of English at the same time. As time was limited, students were introduced with only one or two episodes of the course series in class. They were encouraged to use their spare time to watch other episodes in the same video series. In this way, students were provided with directions for additional exercises so further improvements become possible.

6.2 Providing Support for MOOCs Learning

After students watch the video, I asked relevant questions and provided feedbacks to let them know how much they have understood the course. If they don't understand the content, they can watch the video repeated after class. For getting feedbacks, students can approach me, a physical instructor after class to clarify unclear points. From students' oral feedback and daily face-to-face interaction, I have learned that most students welcome the MOOCs aided teaching, because they think they have learned extensively in limited time. Furthermore, the videos showed in classes provide valid and vivid examples for applying theories/concepts in real contexts. Thus students welcome the introduction of MOOCs courses because they can learn with their own speed. In a similar way, some students appreciate the Chinese sub-titles because they can understand the open courses without difficulties. At the experimental stage, every sign has shown that MOOCs-aided learning is promising. On the other hand, I have also noticed that for some introverted students, teachers need to push them for questions otherwise they may get lost easily.

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6.3   The Influences of MOOCs on Teachers

In China, some people call the appearance of MOOCs as a storm because it urged educators to face the new changes and respond accordingly (Li, Zhang & Huang, 2013). For courses that cannot draw students' attention or for teachers who just read PowerPoint slides, the emergence of MOOCs could be a threat to them. Furthermore, teachers may face pressures that they have never encountered before, because students may compare their own teachers' teaching with professors in online open courses. In this way teachers are under the pressure to update their teaching materials more frequently. What's more, for teachers whose first language is not English, they have the pressure to improve their English as well because many teaching in open online courses are conducted in English.

In this way, we can see the availability of MOOCs promotes the internationalization of higher education. Through watching up-to-date MOOCs courses, teachers have more opportunities to understand the current development of their subject areas in other parts of the world; subsequently, they can update their teaching materials.

6.4   The Influence of MOOCs on Learners

Conversely, the availability of free, high quality learning resources is great news for learners. Although many learners may not want to earn a degree or certificate by engaging in online courses, MOOCs provide a channel for them to improve their English and to broaden their horizon. In addition, MOOCs can also help promote the concept of life-long learning: "live and learn" to citizens. Some general education courses, such as "what is justice", "positive psychology" are meaningful for people at different ages and from different fields. They can also encourage people to think more widely. For people who want to enhance their competitiveness in the job markets, they can watch some business management courses (e.g. human resources management from New Jersey Institute of Technology) to see whether they are useful for them.

6.5   The Importance of Learning Context in MOOCs Learning

My preliminary findings indicate that a supportive learning environment is an essential part for a successful MOOCs learning. The designs of courses, in my context, the choosing of appropriate MOOCs materials play an important role. Feedback from tutors (in this research, a physical teacher) and peer supports are stimulators that push learners to move to the end of the course. When students have encountered frustrations in individual MOOCs learning, they will persist if the problem can be solved by peers around them or by tutors. On the other hand, some students give up halfway because of heavy workload they perceived from assignment guidelines and tests.

6.6   The Autonomous Learning Processes

For the MOOCs learning process, a detailed planning before the start of MOOCs learning, continuous reminders and monitoring can push MOOCs leaners to be more autonomous for their study.

7   CONCLUSION

Like storms, MOOCs has brought great impacts to higher education (Li, et al 2013). Yet, the traditional classroom teaching still has its value. This research has indicated that tailored MOOCs materials are helpful for students who are using English as a second language; nevertheless, the role of classroom teachers cannot be neglected as appropriate guidance is desired by students. For more effective MOOCs learning, classroom teachers can choose

tailored materials and provide feedbacks to students in and outside classrooms. Lastly, my preliminary research findings have shown that Song and Hill's self-directed learning model is applicable in my research context. The learning context, especially the design of learning resources and supports from tutors and peers can motive learners in their self-directed learning.

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