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THE IMPACT OF LINGUISTIC LANDSCAPES IN MOOCS

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Abstract

Massive Open Online Courses (MOOCs) have emerged as an eminent and powerful learning platform at various educational areas. Although studies have shown that MOOCs enhance learning, little attention has been paid to written and spoken linguistics landscapes (LL) embedded in MOOCs. Therefore, this research intends to investigate this issue and present an empirical study that employs qualitative research instruments. Ten university level students took a writing MOOC course for five weeks. In the first week, the researcher observed their learning and interaction in the learning environment. In the following weeks, the students learned in the platform on their own. The findings from the ethnographic research have shown that LLs attracted students’ attention to the course. Students regarded their first reaction and interaction with LL as an engaging and motivating element, which does not take place in the classroom in the same way.

Keywords: Higher education; Linguistic landscapes; Massive Open Online Courses; English writing.

1 INTRODUCTION

Underlying all of the various activities incorporated within a MOOC is what can be called the course’s linguistic landscape (LL). The term originates in describing linguistic relations to the physical world: “The language of public road signs, advertising billboards, street names, place names, commercial shop signs, and public signs on government buildings combines to form the linguistic landscape of a given territory, region, or urban agglomeration” (Landry and Bourhis, 1997, p. 25). It is a sociolinguistic concept focusing on “powering relations and identifying marks in the linguistic rendering of [a physical] space” (Ivkovic and Lotherington 2009, p. 17).

Although LLs are not commonly considered in the MOOC literature, virtual space is as important, if not more, than physical space. Hence, Bolton (2012) argues that there should be a move towards understanding how learners interact in an “electronic space… as well as the virtual space of the Internet” (p. 30). Ivkovic and Lotherington (2009) refer to these electronic spaces as virtual linguistic landscapes (VLL). Comparing VLL with physical LL, they argue that:

• Identity markers in LL are more stable than in VLL, as VLL enables a fast replacement of signs or markers.
• VLL is more diverse and immersive as everyone can sign up or enter an open online environment anywhere, whereas LL is located in one place and it takes time to interact with other groups.
• VLL provides a more dynamic environment to use a language, which is, however, still affected by LL. (Ivkovic and Lotherington 2009)

This is helpful for this paper’s purposes here, even though VLL is criticised for only dealing with formal learning spaces (Troyer 2012). Therefore, this paper uses the term online linguistic landscapes (OLL), a term that coincides with Jones’s (2005 p. 142) emphasis that “people do not ever just reside in one space at a time. They inhabit multiple spaces, various built spaces, geographical spaces, political spaces and personal spaces”. OLL is meant to signify this plurality while emphasising the online nature of MOOC engagement.

LLs have been a target for researchers to examine their use for learning in different contexts. Not just limiting their research to educational institutions, the researchers have looked at its effectiveness when learning in external places such as streets. However, there has been little research on LL in e-learning environments, especially exploring virtual LL in web links (Biro, 2018; Blommaert and Maly, 2019). As learning has expanded with the advancement of Information and Communications Technology (ICT), learners have gone beyond what the educational institutions or external learning spaces offered them, and researchers have explored learning through MOOCs. Onah, Sinclair and Boyatt (2014) investigated the interaction in discussion forums of MOOCs and found out that the engagement was very low not merely between a teacher and learners, but also between learners. However, the study by Sharples et al. (2015) suggested looking at such other aspects embedded in MOOCs as quizzes or assignments to see learning process and interaction.
Furthermore, Wise and Cui (2018) demonstrated content and non-content engagement between
learners, mostly thanks to the support of their lecturers, and yet, recommended further investigation on
learning process through forums. Therefore, this paper aims to look at embedded features of MOOCs,
namely OLLs, and ask the following research questions:

1. How do Turkish university level students perceive learning via the MOOC?
2. What impacts Turkish university level students’ learning in the MOOC?

This paper first shows the methodology of the research and then presents results based on the
empirical data. Finally, it concludes with some suggestions for further studies.

2 METHODOLOGY

Ten Turkish students aged between 21 and 27 took part in this study voluntarily. They were studying
in a Turkish state university, and their English level was upper intermediate. They were chosen
deliberately because they had not taken any MOOCs before but had smartphones with access to the
Internet. Having informed them about the study, the researcher had consented to participate it.

The researcher first introduced MOOCs, especially FutureLearn, and in particular the writing
course ‘An Intermediate Guide to Writing in English for University Study’, which is given by a UK
university, lasts five weeks, requires IELTS English level 5.5. and above, and aims to develop the
English skills required for extended writing projects and essays. This course was chosen because of
students’ interest in improving their writing skills, which they also needed for their classroom projects.

Next, the researcher implemented a qualitative research design to collect data. Ethnographic research
was carried out to learn, through observation, “the meanings that people attribute to what they make
and do” (LeCompte and Schensul, 1999, p. 2). The researcher started the course in a classroom using
a projector, so every student could easily see the course. The researcher observed and took notes of
their learning and behavior while they were reading, carrying out, listening and watching the activities.
They did the activities in the first week of the course with the researcher, and for the rest of the course,
four weeks, they did the activities individually on their own mobile phones. In order to increase the
validity and reliability of data from ethnographic research, interviews were held. Interview questions
were drawn from the related literature asking how they perceive their learning in the MOOC and what
impacted their learning in the MOOC.

Data were analyzed and coding was undertaken with a second reviewer in NVivo, which
ensures the objectivity in research. The agreement on each code was more than 80%.

3 RESULTS

This section introduces the answers to the study’s two research questions, covering participants’
perceptions of learning in the MOOC and the way the embedded features in the MOOC impact their
learning, respectively.

3.1 Participants’ perceptions of learning in a MOOC

Data from observation and interviews show similar results. During the observation, ten students
carried out the activities as requested; however, they followed different learning paths. For instance,
three students skimmed the activity, whereas others read the activities in order. Yet, all of them looked
motivated and engaged with the course. Additionally, four of them took notes of what they learned and
what they could learn aside from the course in FutureLearn.

Likewise, data from interviews show that nine of them thought that FutureLearn was very
useful, while one disagreed, which might be because he did not finish the course due to the classroom
exams, as stated by the interviewee. Similarly, except from this student, all of them mentioned that
learning in the MOOC contributed to their learning a lot. For example, one student said: “I improved
my writing skills not just for my classroom courses but also for my future learning”, whereas another
one uttered “I think I will start learning a different language thanks to FutureLearn”. One student also
talked about how it increased her motivation and self-confidence saying: “I am eager to improve my
English skills and believe that I can learn on my own via FutureLearn”. Half of them stated that
learning in FutureLearn did not only help their English writing skills, but also supported other English
skills of theirs. How their learning was impacted will be dealt with and elaborated in the next
subsection.

3.2 Impact of LL on learning in a MOOC

Data from observation and interviews demonstrate that a number of salient features can comprise a
MOOC OLL impacting students’ learning. Accordingly, this study briefly focuses on the followings:
Firstly, language use and formatting used in the MOOC were found effective because bullet points helped them "learn how to take notes"; content was convenient covering all related topics; web links were useful to "understand the issue better"; summaries were precious to "check what has been learned"; tables and diagrams visualised what to "take in from the course"; font style made it easy to learn; and highlighted texts and images were demonstrating key concepts.

Secondly, quizzes were stated as the best way to "practise" and "evaluate learning". A number of tasks before moving to a new topic enabled them to repeat and reinforce what had been learned. Right or wrong functions inserted in each activity supported them to check their answers and continue learning. Colours drew their attention to learning tasks, while given hints helped them find out the solutions.

Thirdly, examples were mentioned as "an excellent opportunity to understand the issues" thanks to the exemplification of each topic such as essay types, which increased the engagement and interaction with the topic; different ways narrated in the course to, for example, write a good heading or take notes; the demonstration of contradictory use of words to "think about diverse perspectives"; and authentic activities carried out in the course.

Fourthly, videos and audios were seen as the most engaging factor in the MOOC. Because subtitles and transcripts encouraged them to pronounce new learned words and check their pronunciation of known words, which led to the development of their speaking and listening skills as well as their writing and reading skills, as stated by nearly all of them. Additionally, students mentioned that the more they understood accents used by native lecturers, the more confident they felt in speaking the language.

Last but not least, the comment section was seen as a way to "share ideas", even though just two students used this feature. They also stated that the comment section was a gateway to hear others’ ideas. One student said “When I could not bring together my words, I made use of the comment section. I mean that I read others’ comments and paraphrased and copied some parts in order to make my words and sentences meaningful. This also helped me to tell my perceptions of my learning in the MOOC”.

4 CONCLUSIONS
This study investigated Turkish university level students’ perceptions of learning in the MOOC and the ways that impacted their learning in the MOOC. Corroborating the studies by Onah et al. (2014), Sharples et al. (2015) and Wise and Cui (2018), this study argues that MOOCs have an impact on students’ learning and students have a positive view of their learning through the MOOC thanks to the embedded features in the MOOC. In line with the definition of LL in online spaces by Ivkovic and Lotherington (2009), the study discusses that OLLs in the MOOC present engaging visuals, which in turn mean that students are more motivated to learn. Also, their self-confidence and self-assessment increase. The paper concludes that OLLs in MOOCs can play a vital role in encouraging users to interact with online courses and resources.

This paper has shown an empirical study on one context, Turkish students’ learning in MOOCs, especially by considering the MOOCs’ OLLs. Also, it has looked at English writing for academic purposes, so it cannot generalize its findings on OLL in the environment of MOOCs to other educational areas. Therefore, further studies are needed looking at other contexts and areas rather than just language learning. A longitudinal study with mixed methods research can contribute to understanding the impact of OLL on students’ learning.

REFERENCES


