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Understanding the design of MOOCs for ESL learners: language as an enabler or barrier to learning

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Abstract

The MOOC movement is global, but even in 2018, it was reported that in the production of MOOCs, English is the most commonly used language. This means that many learners, who use English as a second language (ESL), have to adapt their learning needs and seek out available technology: multilingual platforms, subtitles, transcripts or online dictionaries. Furthermore, while MOOCs allow interaction in the forums with other peers, obtaining help from facilitators can be problematic when learners cannot communicate in English.

During the author's doctoral research, he was able to access demographic data of participants of Open University MOOCs in FutureLearn, as well as to interview learners. Language is undoubtedly an enhancer for online learning, however, MOOCs add visual and auditory components that make comprehension more difficult for learners who use ESL, also learners must communicate in a second language causing situations of loss of motivation and engagement, leading to abandonment. This view is compatible with the social model of disability where language acts as an accessibility barrier, since these situations may be producing an access limitation for those learners who do not have enough knowledge of English to take full advantage of MOOCs.

This presentation will uncover the language accessibility barriers found by the author in his doctoral research and discuss with the audience possible improvements in MOOCs design.