

An Exploratory Study of Applying MOOC Concept to College English Teaching for Non-English Majors

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ABSTRACT

With the development of economic globalization, the modern society sets more strict requirements of the comprehensive ability of English and the multicultural communication ability for the college students. However, in China, the prevailing teaching model of college English is a combination of classroom teaching with the aid of multimedia equipment and the students' autonomous online learning. Despite its comparative advantages over the traditional teaching model, it still has a lot of shortcomings. For instance, the students are not eager enough to learn, less disciplined, and have less time for the knowledge internalization. The arrival of MOOC era provides a new perspective for solving the above problems. This thesis first makes an feasibility and risk analysis for the application of the MOOC concept on the college English teaching for non-English majors, then explores a teaching model of college English teaching which is suitable for the regular universities in China so as to create a better opportunity for students to enjoy the learning resources from the top universities in the world, thus achieving the goal of improving students' comprehensive language application ability.

Keywords: *MOOC; College English Teaching for Non-English Majors; Asynchronous SPOC*

1. RESEARCH BACKGROUND

MOOC, which is short for Mass Open Online Courses, is the product of the deep integration of information technology and education. This concept was first proposed by Dave Cormier and Bryan Alexander, two Canadian scholars, for the University of Manitoba in 2008. In 2011, Professor Sebastian Thrun of Stanford University and Peter Norvig jointly developed a free course called *An Introduction to Artificial Intelligence*, which was put online for his postgraduates to study. This course attracted over 160,000 students from more than one hundred and ninety countries, and opened a new era of MOOC. Since 2012, such MOOC platforms as Coursera, Udacity and EDX have been widely recognized by many universities. After the launch of EDX by Harvard University and MIT, many universities such as Tokyo University and Hong Kong University of Science and Technology also followed suit. [1]

On January 15th, 2018, Chinese Ministry of Education held a press conference. Wu Yan, the director of the Department of Higher Education, announced some related statistics about the first group of National Top Online Open Courses. According to the press conference, the construction and application of MOOCS in China is growing explosively. Relevant universities and institutions have independently built more than 10 domestic MOOCS platforms; more than 3200 MOOC courses built by 460 universities are online, and over 6 million students have attained MOOC course credits: 55 million college students

and learners in the society take MOOC as their elective courses.[2]

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

The emergence of MOOCS breaks the time-space limitation of the traditional education and subverts the traditional model of classroom teaching and learning in universities. Many scholars have also studied and discussed the ensuing changes in the teaching philosophy, teaching technology and teaching modes.

According to the current research, experts and scholars have different opinions on MOOCS, with both praise and criticism. The most concerned question is whether or not MOOCS can really disrupt the educational process, thus leading to the reengineering of teachers' roles, curriculum models, organizational structures and management methods. Currently, the research about MOOCS in China is mainly around the value and future of MOOCS' application in the primary and secondary school education and adult education, such as *The Current Situation and Future of the Application of MOOCS to Elementary Education* [3], *MOOCS and the Curriculum Reform of Elementary and Secondary Schools in China*[4], *The Teaching Practice of Hybrid Teaching Mode in Clinical Tissue Embryology Class for Adults on the Basis of MOOCS*[5], etc. And some scholars have also focused on the effects and application of MOOCS on full-time ordinary institutions of higher education, such as *An Exploratory Study of the Teaching Model on the Basis of MOOCS in Undergraduate Colleges and Universities* [6],

The Revelation of MOOC Teaching Model in Pediatrics Courses for Undergraduates[7], *The Opportunities and Challenges Faced by College English Teachers in the MOOCS Era*[7], and so on. However, few scholars have explored the application of MOOCS to the college English teaching for non-English majors in the ordinary colleges and universities.

The preliminary idea of the exploratory study is whether we can take advantage of MOOCS to make our students enjoy better learning resources from the top universities. Of course, the vision is very beautiful, but how to realize it needs to be carefully considered, such as what kind of courses to choose, what kind of teaching mode to use, how to certify credits, how to manage, what roles the teachers will play in MOOCS learning, and so on. Therefore, the thesis first makes some preliminary research on the specific application of MOOCS in teaching, then makes a feasibility and risk analysis, and finally explores the specific application model in the pilot class, summarizing some valuable practices for the future application of MOOCS to the college English teaching for non-English majors.

3. FEASIBILITY ANALYSIS OF APPLYING MOOCS TO COLLEGE ENGLISH TEACHING FOR NON-ENGLISH MAJORS

With the in-depth development of economic globalization, China's international exchanges with foreign countries at all levels are increasingly frequent, thus enterprises have new expectations and requirements for the future college graduates. According to a GMAC (Graduate Management Admission Council) survey of about 600 companies in 2014, the skills employers most value are "communication skills" in the verbal and written communication, followed by cross-cultural awareness. However, the current college English teaching generally adopts the mode of combining multimedia centralized teaching with students' autonomous online learning. Although compared with the traditional teaching mode, it has incomparable advantages, but the research [8] shows that there are still many shortcomings. First of all, the multimedia courseware is like a movie flash in which the knowledge point is not impressive enough, and the students cannot keep up with the speed of the teacher to take notes, so that the students have a sense of frustration and gradually lose the enthusiasm to learn English. Secondly, in the limited classroom teaching time, students cannot timely notice the problems by watching the PowerPoint, thus having great difficulty in internalizing the knowledge. Thirdly, students' autonomous learning after class often has little effect due to the lack of rich and varied contents of the learning platform and textbooks, and the lack of teachers' supervision and guidance, which fails to truly realize students' personalized learning requirements and effectively improve learners' communication skills and cross-cultural understanding ability.

The arrival of MOOC era and the rise of mobile learning and online learning provide a new perspective for solving the above problems. First of all, contemporary college students born in the information age are used to getting the latest information through computers and mobile phones. They have a strong ability to accept new things and pursue personalized learning experience. Secondly, MOOCS is "mainly taught by video, ranging from a few minutes to more than ten minutes, which is more in line with the characteristics of fragmented reading in the Internet era" [9]. Learners can choose their own appropriate time, place and pace according to their language levels, and realize fragmented and personalized learning. Thirdly, with the rapid development of information technology and the popularization of computers, mobile phones and the Internet, college English learners are fully equipped with the hardware conditions for online learning. Therefore, the research group believes that the emergence of MOOC platform will bring about more opportunities than challenges for the college English teaching, and it is quite feasible to apply MOOCS to the college English teaching for non-English majors.

4. RISK ANALYSIS OF APPLYING MOOCS TO COLLEGE ENGLISH TEACHING FOR NON-ENGLISH MAJORS

Although it is feasible to apply MOOCS to college English teaching for non-English majors, it does not mean that teachers can adopt the "take-over doctrine" and completely entrust college English teaching to MOOCS. The combination of MOOCS and college English teaching is still in the running-in period, and there are still many problems.

Firstly, as stated earlier, the full name of MOOCS is "massive open online courses". The features of being "mass", "open" make it possible for lifelong learning. With the aid of network, computers and mobile phones, anyone can register MOOC courses online. On the other hand, it has brought difficulties for regulation: most MOOCS use multiple-choice quizzes as the main tool of assessment. Although there are some MOOCS which take open-ended questions as the appraisal method, because of the limited MOOC teacher resources, it is actually very difficult for a teacher to review essay assignments from thousands of students in a short time. What's worse, the problems of cheating and plagiarism in such MOOCS are magnified by the great number of the registered students.

Secondly, its "open and free" learning mode is also a double-edged sword: on the one hand, learners are no longer limited by time and space, and can arrange their learning time and place freely; on the other hand, a considerable number of learners will eventually end up with the low course completion rate and high dropout rate due to their poor self-control.

Moreover, although it is true that MOOCS platform indeed bring vast learning resources for learners, it is still very

difficult for the freshmen and sophomores of non-English majors to fully understand its vocabulary and content. And the resources are so various that one may feel confused and even do not know how to start. So, although it is easy for the learners to register in the MOOCS platform, it is still very difficult for the freshmen and sophomores of non-English majors to choose suitable learning resources in accordance with their levels.

5. A PRELIMINARY STUDY ON COLLEGE ENGLISH TEACHING MODEL FOR NON-ENGLISH MAJORS IN MOOCS ERA

On the basis of the above analysis, we can find that it is not the best solution to just copy the MOOCS mode in the college English teaching. Therefore, the thesis, with the method of questionnaires and interview, makes a survey of the college English teachers and learners (a total of 461 people), aiming at having an overall view of the current language level and the expected language competency of the non-English major learners, and the deficiency of the current teaching model. Based on the problems revealed by the survey, the research group fully discusses the specific application mode of MOOCS in college English teaching for non-English majors, finally deciding to adopt the MOOC + Asynchronous SPOC teaching mode.

The full name of SPOC is Small Private Online Course, of which the features of “small-scale” and “being restrictive” are in contrast with “large-scale” and “openness” of MOOC. There are two types of SPOC: Synchronous SPOC and Asynchronous SPOC. Synchronous SPOC means that when a teacher uses an open MOOC course, he can add new content, but cannot modify the original content while Asynchronous SPOC means that the teacher can copy the MOOC content of a completed course and delete or add the content as needed.

Considering the interest, learning needs and current language competency of the students in the pilot class, the author chose the course *Conversational English Skills* on the EDX platform, adopting a more flexible mode of MOOC+ Asynchronous SPOC and deleting some of the original MOOC content where necessary.

First, the teacher sorted out the MOOC resources which were suitable for the English learners in the pilot class, and selected high-quality course resources with appropriate difficulty for learners. This approach solved the problem that English learners of non-English majors could not choose appropriate learning resources due to their own language ability and time constraints in the pure MOOC mode mentioned above.

Then, with the help of the existing college foreign language teaching network, teachers regularly sent the revised version of MOOC resources to the students, and used such APPs as QQ, WeChat to interact with them. The MOOC+ Asynchronous SPOC teaching mode adopted in the pilot class can enable teachers to guide students throughout the whole semester. Learners with poor

language skills can watch the learning contents with higher degree of difficulty repeatedly and ask the teachers questions through Internet. Teachers can also timely understand the difficulties in students’ after-class learning so as to better solve their problems. Meanwhile, it is convenient for collaborative learning among learners and conducive to the cultivation of their teamwork and communication skills.

Upon the completion of online learning came the face-to-face teaching. In this part, teachers would give the reference answers and strengthen exercises about the difficult language points (such as pronunciations, intonations, intercultural communication mistakes, communication strategies etc.) reflected in students’ pre-class learning. In the pilot class, due to the teachers’ participation and guidance in the whole course of MOOC learning before class and the knowledge accumulation in the early stage, the face-to-face teaching became much easier. Besides, due to sufficient communication between teachers and students, the face-to-face teaching content was highly targeted and closely related to the daily life of college students. Learners were very interested in it, and their participation and activity in class have been significantly improved.

In addition, in order to overcome the shortcomings of MOOCS such as learners’ poor self-control ability, low completion rate and potential cheating problems, the pilot class adopted the teaching mode of MOOC+ Asynchronous SPOC, with small class size and easier supervision, and combined the formative evaluation with terminal evaluation together to assess the students’ academic performance in this course. Teachers conducted periodic assessment of learners’ daily MOOC learning and recorded their scores in the formative evaluation, which not only comprehensively evaluated learners’ command of knowledge, but also contributed to the improvement of learners’ autonomous learning ability.

To sum up, the arrival of MOOC era has brought the dawn for the college English teaching reform. Taking the current situations of college English teaching into consideration, the research group tried to carry out teaching in the form of MOOC+ Asynchronous SPOC, sorted out the appropriate quality MOOC resources for learners, provided regular guidance through QQ and WeChat, timely solved their problems, and conducted assessment by combining formative evaluation and terminal evaluation, which improved the status quo of students’ low learning enthusiasm, low self-discipline and insufficient knowledge internationalization under the traditional college English teaching mode. Small classes as well as the combination of two kinds of evaluation appraisal ways can also ease the difficulties in the supervision in the large-scale online courses and reduce the risks of high dropout rate and low completion rate to some extent.

However, MOOC is still a new thing after all. This model has only been tried out in the pilot class for one semester, and needs further feedback and revision. With the reform of teaching mode, there are more new problems to be solved urgently, such as the construction of campus MOOC platform, the change of teachers’ roles, the

verification of teachers' workload, and the reform of corresponding credit mechanism and evaluation mechanism.

6. CONCLUSION

To conclude, by analysing the feasibility and risks of MOOC concept in college English teaching for non-English majors, the thesis, for one thing, enriches relevant research on college English teaching and provides directional guidance for the application of MOOC concept in college English teaching for non-English majors. For another, it tries to carry out college English teaching in the form of MOOC+ Asynchronous SPOC by sorting out high-quality MOOC resources with appropriate degrees of difficulty for learners and using QQ and WeChat for regular guidance and timely solution of problems, and conducts assessment by combining formative evaluation with terminal evaluation, which has certain reference value for the effective combination of MOOC concepts with other learning stages in the future. At the same time, through the innovative combination of MOOCS and college English teaching for non-English majors, the advantages of MOOCS such as "freedom", "quality resources" are highlighted while such drawbacks as "low completion rate" and "being not easy to supervise" are eased in the form of a small and manageable school-based MOOCS platform, which meets the needs of college English learners for fragmented and personalized learning, improving the efficiency and quality of self-study, and promoting the comprehensive improvement of learners' independent learning ability and lifelong learning ability to some extent.

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