

SELF-DIRECTED LEARNING AND MOOC INTEGRATION INTO HIGHER EDUCATION EFL CLASSROOMS

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ABSTRACT

This research includes the first cycle of an application based on the integration of a MOOC given in the field of “writing” into the formal education curriculum to reinforce classroom teaching and support the learning process to improve English writing skills. It was carried out in the spring semester of the 2021-2022 academic year with 14 students studying in an English preparatory program at a Turkish state university. In this study, qualitative research method was adopted and the action research design was applied. The implementation was carried out within the scope of the Reading/Writing course in the program in question. As data collection tools, a semi-structured interview form, Self-directed Learning Scale, and students’ course completion scores in their chosen MOOCs were utilized. In addition, the articles written by the students at the end of the term within the scope of classroom evaluation were also used to support the research data. The first data obtained in this direction show that the majority of the participants could not go beyond the course selection and registration stage. Although the students mostly did not have problems in accessing technology and showed self-directed learner characteristics, they did not follow or complete these courses due to lack of motivation, technological problems, heavy course loads and health problems.

Keywords: MOOC, foreign language learning, writing skill, preparatory program, university students.

INTRODUCTION

The educational deficiencies caused by the prolonged lockdown during the Covid-19 pandemic were tried to be compensated with open and distance teaching-learning methods such as online courses and telecourses (Ferri et al., 2020; Hazaea et al., 2021, Tsai, 2019), supported by social media (Erarslan, 2021; Muftah, 2022), discussion forums (Bailey et al., 2021), and MOOCs (Amalia et al., 2021; Tlili et al., 2022). Despite the transition to face-to-face education with the removal of educational restrictions due to the pandemic, hybrid models that adopt blended teaching have begun to be preferred instead of moving away from online learning in many developed countries (Cobo-Rendon et al., 2022). In such practices, the classes are carried out by using face-to-face teaching in the classroom together with information and communication technologies and/or online environments. Open educational resources are frequently used to increase learning opportunities in blended teaching. In this respect, massive open online courses (MOOCs) are preferred because they are an open course model that promises free and open access to quality content without prerequisites to anyone with internet access and suitable devices. The interest in these courses, which are mostly based on individual work, has increased even more during and after the pandemic period (Tlili et al., 2022). While MOOCs can often be followed as a stand-alone course, they can also be used to support different teaching models

and approaches. As a matter of fact, the present research includes the first cycle of an application based on the integration of a MOOC given in the field of “writing” into the formal education curriculum to reinforce classroom teaching and support the learning process to improve English writing skills. The investigation of any compensative instructional implementation is thought to suggest a constructive course of action for future probable emergency cases.

Literature Review

Massive open online courses (MOOCs), which were introduced as a modality of distance education without charge at the outset in 2008, became popular in 2012, thus enabling learners worldwide to join courses asynchronously in accordance with their individual learning pace (Siemens, 2013). MOOCs were soon hailed due to the merits they claimed to provide particularly for learners falling behind in mainstream education. MOOCs were regarded to be a breakthrough in the early 2010s on the grounds that they made a reduction in the effect of economic and geographic inequality, by allowing people with low-income and in remote areas to get access to the best learning content (Vodolazskaya, 2020). It is discernible from the current literature that MOOCs have been preferred as a supportive and compensative teaching/learning modality besides synchronous online education in various higher education disciplines since the outbreak of the pandemic (Bhattacharya et al., 2020; Impey & Formanek, 2021; Salas-Rueda et al., 2022; Singh & Sharma, 2021; Tlili et al., 2022).

Studies report several major reasons for learners to take a MOOC, such as advancement in their jobs, employment opportunities, personal challenge, and curiosity (Beaven et al., 2018; Christensen et al., 2013; De Boer et al., 2013). However, drop-out seems to be a great challenge in front of the popularity of MOOCs (Gutl et al., 2014). Thus, there are some salient prerequisite factors playing a determinative role in sustainability, successful outcomes, and completion of a MOOC study such as a high-level of voluntary participation and intrinsic motivation (De Barba et al., 2016; Semenova, 2022), learner autonomy (Ding & Shen, 2022), self-regulation (Reparaz et al., 2020), course content (Henderikx et al., 2018), and instructor presence (Koseoglu & Koutropoulos, 2016). Having autonomy over one’s own learning is reported to be the keystone for benefitting from MOOCs at the utmost. In that, it is emphasized that besides computer literacy, the learner should be highly self-regulated and directed, and personally interested in pursuing and fostering his/her learning in a MOOC (Chacon-Beltran, 2017). Motivation is shown to have affected and been affected by learners’ participation throughout the course (De Barba et al., 2016). Moreover, it is reported that some learners may not regard a MOOC as a course, since it does not provide teacher scaffolding every time the students need (Orsini-Jones et al., 2015). The fact that there may not be enough interaction between students and content is also shared as a possible reason for the dropouts (Yildirim, 2015).

Previous Research and the Present Study

While the research on the integration of MOOCs into learning environments, in general, has distinctly increased, this case cannot be observed in terms of foreign language education, which is also articulated in the relevant literature (Palacios Hidalgo et al., 2020; Ding & Shen, 2021; Beaven et al., 2018; Caner et al., 2019; Nethi & Murray, 2014). This problem of research scarcity has been doubled with the emergence of some researchers who are of the opinion that MOOCs are not suitable for language learning because MOOCs cannot address the two basic requirements for foreign language learning: live communicative interaction with a native speaker and pro-activeness (Romeo, 2012). Rubio (2013) in this sense underlines the difficulty of designing and running a MOOC for foreign language teaching on the grounds that the learners do not have extrinsic motivation as they do not pay for these courses and do not get grades; and together with a low level of completion, only some of the materials on a MOOC are utilized. Moreover, Stevens (2013) thinks that MOOCs may not be conducive to the teaching of grammatical structures unless learners are assigned to learn grammar deductively and from each other. Some other researchers (Nethi & Murray, 2014) emphasize in this regard that MOOCs can provide satisfactory opportunities for receptive skills, yet fewer chances of learning productive skills. In that, MOOCs provide students with the opportunity to acquire knowledge about a foreign language, but they rarely offer opportunities of practice by using this knowledge (Jiang, 2022; Nethi & Murray, 2014).

On the other hand, more researchers have now revealed that MOOCs can be effective in promoting the development of language competencies (Panagiotidis, 2019; Nethi & Murray, 2014; Perifanou & Economides, 2014). In this sense, Dolores Castrillo (2014) suggests that the most suitable MOOCs for learning a foreign language are the connectivist MOOCs (cMOOCs) since they provide possibilities for interaction in the negotiation of meaning and for practicing various required language skills. It is claimed that integrating MOOCs into conventional language classes might bolster language learners' practice of their language skills, and assist them in achieving an acceptable level of self-regulation (Conde Gafaro, 2019). This emerged as the foremost incentive for conducting the present study. As a matter of fact, after the students successfully complete the four skills courses offered in the English preparatory program, and are entitled to take the proficiency exam, when they pass that exam successfully and move on to their departments (the medium of instruction is English), they follow the courses there and experience problems because they cannot use the language correctly/sufficiently, especially in written assignments, tasks and exams. The most common problem that the instructors who teach in this preparatory program hear in their interviews with the students who transfer to their departments, and the feedback received from the instructors who teach in the departments about the students, is in this direction. For this reason, it was concluded that the students of the current preparatory program have limitations in acquiring the necessary English in their departments and that the language skills of the students should be supported more in the program. Moreover, the clear observation that the relevant studies in the literature display contradictory results in terms of the use of MOOCs in language learning necessitates the conduction of more research. Thus, the present study is believed to make a contribution to enlighten the practitioners and policy-makers and direct the future research in this regard.

Research Questions

This study aimed to reveal the general consequences of an attempt to integrate MOOCs into traditional face-to-face English as a Foreign Language (EFL) classroom. To this end, the following research questions were raised:

1. To what extent do the students of the present study self-direct their learning?
2. Are there any significant differences among the students' self-directed learning scores in terms of such variables as their gender, department of study, and course completion rates?
3. What are the reasons for partly completing, or not completing their MOOCs?
4. In what way the action plan implemented affected students' writing skills?

METHOD

Research Model

This research was designed according to the action research pattern of the qualitative research method. Mills (2003) defines action research as "any systematic research conducted by teachers, administrators, counselors, or persons interested in the teaching and learning process to collect data on how a school is going, how teachers teach, and how students learn". This type of research is an approach to improving existing practices to correct an existing problem. As a matter of fact, in this study, action research was used because it was aimed to find solutions to the points where the standard curriculum is insufficient to improve the writing skills of students enrolled in the English compulsory preparatory program of a state university. Action research is a cyclical process. This process begins with the identification of the problem and the planning that will help solve the identified problem. In the second stage, this plan is put into practice. In the third stage, data on the implementation process and its results are collected and the process is closely observed. As a result of the analysis and interpretation of the data obtained in the fourth stage, the process is evaluated holistically. Based on this evaluation, the action plan is reviewed, and the process is re-planned, and this cyclical process continues until the desired result/solution is reached (Johnson, 2014; Koklu, 1993).

Similar steps were followed in this study. Accordingly, a direct data collection process was not applied to determine the problem, and a decision was made based on one of the researchers' experiences and observations since she had been working as a lecturer in the preparatory program for many years. In addition, the negative feedback received over the years from the faculty members who teach in the departments of the students who have completed the compulsory English preparatory program has also been effective in shaping the problem of the research. In line with the problem, an action plan to be implemented as a solution was designed and necessary permissions were obtained from the ethics committee of the higher education institution to implement the application. In order to understand the effects and effectiveness of the application, the data collection techniques and tools to be used were determined and applied at the beginning and end of the research. Afterwards, the obtained data were analyzed, and the outputs of the application were interpreted and evaluated in line with the researcher's experiences in the observation and application process. In line with the results reached, inferences regarding the changes and developments to be made in the next implementations of the action were reached.

Participants

While deciding on the participants of the research, the convenience sampling method was preferred. Convenience sampling is a non-random sampling method in which the sample to be selected from the population is determined by the judgment of the researcher. In this type of sample selection, data is collected from the population in the easiest, fastest, and most economical way" (Aaker et al., 2007: 394, Zikmund, 1997: 428). Accordingly, students studying in the English preparatory program of a state university -in the class where one of the researchers taught the Reading/Writing lesson- were chosen as the participant group. There are 14 students enrolled in this class. However, since one of these students did not attend the classes due to absenteeism, a total of 13 students, who regularly attend the classes, constitute the participant group. These students have an English proficiency level of B1(+) (Intermediate/Intermediate plus). Table 1 gives the descriptive information pertaining to the students:

Table 1. Distribution of the Participants by Demographic Characteristics

Demographic Variable	Groups	n	%
Gender	Females	4	40
	Males	6	60
Department	English Language & Literature	8	80
	Translation & Interpretation	2	20
How did you access the internet during the course?	Smart Phone	4	40
	Smart Phone & Laptop	5	50
	Smart Phone, Tablets, Laptops & PC	1	10
How many hours per day did you use the internet on average during the course?	0-2 hours	2	20
	3-5 hours	6	60
	6-7 hours	1	10
	8-9 hours	1	10
Did you complete your chosen course on Coursera?	No	6	60
	Partly	3	30
	Did not even sign up	1	10

According to Table 1, 60 % of the students participating in the research were male and 40 % were female. 80 % of the participants study in the department of English Language & Literature, and 20 % in the department of Translation & Interpretation. 50 % of the students accessed the Internet via both smartphones and laptops, while 40 % of them had only smartphones. The average daily internet usage time of 60 % of the participants is 3-5 hours, while for 20 % of them 0-2 hours. While 60 % of the participants reported that they did not complete their MOOCs, 30 % said they only completed it partly, and 10 % did not even create an account to join the MOOCs.

Data Collection Tools and Procedure

The implementation process of the research started in the second week of the Spring semester of the higher education institution where the study was carried out. In order to carry out the application, first permission was obtained from the Scientific Research and Publication Ethics Committee of the institution in question. After the approval, platforms such as Coursera and Edx, which are among the world's leading MOOC providers, were scanned and courses prepared to improve writing skills were determined. In addition, an interview was made with the students during the lesson to understand which aspect they had the most difficulty in writing and that they had problems with. Accordingly, it was determined that the students mostly experienced the correct and appropriate use of English phrases and expressions and article writing rules and techniques while writing articles or compositions. The detected MOOCs were examined in terms of their content, learning outcomes, starting date, weekly time that participants should allocate for these courses, and fees.

In the light of the information obtained, considering the needs and characteristics of the research participant group, two specialization packages were selected that were expected to support them in developing their writing skills. One of these packages is more focused on English grammar and the correct use of the language, while the other consists of lessons that focus on the requirements for advanced and effective article and composition writing. Both course packages are offered on Coursera, and one consists of three courses and the other four. Before this MOOC task was introduced to the students, the Self-directed Learning Scale was conducted. Afterwards, the Coursera platform was introduced by projection during the lesson, and it was explained in practice how to create a membership and login. Afterwards, the two selected course packages and their features were introduced by showing them. The access links of these courses were shared on the WhatsApp group of the class, and the students were asked to review the courses and decide on the more suitable course package for them within a week. In this respect, students are given the flexibility to choose the most suitable package for them and the courses they deem necessary, considering the aspects that they lack or think they need to improve. These specialization packages and the number of students who choose them are shown in the table below.

Table 2. MOOC Specializations and Course Types

Field of Specialization	Number of Learners	Courses	Number of Learners
Academic English: Writing Specialization	4	Grammar and Punctuation	3
		Getting Started with Essay Writing	3
		Advanced Writing	3
		Introduction to Research in Essay Writing	1
Learn English: Writing Effectively with Complex Sentences Specialization	6	Writing with Adverb Clauses	2
		Writing with Adverbial Clauses	2
		Writing with Noun Clauses	4

It was announced to the students that MOOC courses would affect their performance scores and they were given 12 weeks in total to complete them. During this process, the instructor of the course received feedback by asking the students on a weekly basis which lesson/topic they were and whether they encountered any problems. In the last four weeks before the completion of the MOOCs, she sent weekly messages from the WhatsApp group, reminding the deadline. As a result of not receiving any response from the students after a point, and receiving feedback on the low follow-up and completion rates when asked in the classroom, she asked the students for their e-mail addresses and passwords that they used to access the courses on Coursera. In this way, their progress in the lessons could be observed closely. At the end of the designated 12-week period, the deadline has been extended by one more week. Finally, short individual interviews were conducted with the students, and they were asked whether they completed the courses on Coursera and their opinions on the reasons for this.

Self-Directed Learning Scale

The Self-directed Learning Scale (SDLS) is a questionnaire developed by Lounsbury et al. (2009) for determining learners' self-directed learning skills. The scale was adapted to Turkish by Demircioglu et al. (2018). This is a ten-item and one-factor 5-point Likert scale from 1 (strongly disagree) to 5 (strongly agree). The learners who get higher scores are associated with stronger self-directed learning. The test-retest correlation of the SDLS is reported to have been 0.82, whereas the Cronbach alpha coefficient of the scale was found to be 0.85 in the Turkish adaptation process (Demircioglu et al., 2018). According to the test carried out to ensure the reliability of the scale within the present study, the Cronbach Alpha coefficient of the scale was determined as 0.92, which means a high degree of reliability.

Data Analysis

Content analysis technique was applied in the analysis of qualitative data, and the data were analyzed manually. Both researchers coded the data independently, and then these codes were compared, and an agreement was reached on the categories and themes. While reporting the qualitative data, students were named as P1, P2, P3...P10, and direct quotations were used to support the credibility and reliability of the findings. In the analysis of quantitative data, SPSS 21.0 program was used. Data on demographic information obtained using descriptive statistics are shown in the table as frequency and percentage. The skewness coefficient (skewness) and kurtosis (kurtosis) coefficients were taken into account in the normality test of the Self-Oriented Learning Scale scores. Parametric tests can be used by making square root, logarithmic or inverse transformations of scores that do not show normal distribution (Buyukozturk, 2011). In this direction, two independent samples t-test was used to compare the scale scores according to gender, department, and MOOC completion status by making appropriate transformations of the scores that did not show normal distribution (Table 4), and the ANOVA test was used to compare the internet access devices and the average daily time spent on the internet. When a significant difference was observed in the ANOVA test, the LSD post hoc test was used to determine between which groups the difference was. Finally, quantitative and qualitative data were interpreted together.

FINDINGS

Findings Regarding the Self-Directed Learning Scale

In Table 3, 4, 5, and 6, the scores regarding the Self-Directed Learning Scale and certain variables are given.

Table 3. Descriptive Statistics

Variable	N	Min.	Max.	\bar{X}	sd	Skewness	Kurtosis
Self-directed Learning Scale	10	1.30	4.40	3.25	1.06	-1.12 ¹	0.23 ¹

¹: Logarithmic transformation done.

According to Table 3, the SDLS mean score of the learners who participated in the research was determined as 3.25 ± 1.06 , and considering the lowest (1) and highest (5) points that can be obtained, it can be said that the students directed their own learning at an average level. In order to identify whether the learners' SDLS scores differed significantly in terms of their gender, an Independent-Samples t-test was carried out. Table 4 gives the results of the test:

Table 4. Comparison of Scores in Terms of Gender

Variable	Gender	n	\bar{X}	Sd	t	p
Self-directed Learning Scale	Female	4	3.50	0.60	0.67	0.520
	Male	6	3.08	1.31		

In Table 4, it was determined that the learners' SDLS scores did not differ significantly according to their gender ($p>0.05$). In order to identify whether the learners' SDLS scores differed significantly in terms of their department of study, an Independent-Samples t-test was carried out. Table 5 gives the results of the test:

Table 5. Comparison of Scores in Terms of Departments of Study

Variable	Departments	n	\bar{X}	Sd	t	p
Self-directed Learning Scale	ELL	8	3.51	0.91	1.72	0.123
	T&I	2	2.20	1.27		

ELL: English Language and Literature; T&I: Translation and Interpretation

Table 5 shows that the learners' SDLS scores did not differ significantly according to their departments of study ($p>0.05$). In order to identify whether the learners' SDLS scores differed significantly in terms of their MOOC completion rates, a One-Way ANOVA test was carried out. Table 6 gives the results of the test:

Table 6. Comparison of Scores in Terms of MOOC Completion

Variable	MOOC completion	n	\bar{X}	Sd	F	p
Self-directed Learning Scale	A-No	6	3.31	1.08	0.62	0.564
	B-Partly	3	2.80	1.17		
	C-Did not even sign up	1	4.20	-		

According to Table 6, it was determined that the learners' SDLS scores did not differ significantly according to their MOOC completion rates ($p>0.05$).

Qualitative Findings of the Study

In the final stage of the action plan, a short semi-structured interview was held with the students individually to determine why the implemented action plan did not work out, and the reasons for not completing the MOOCs were asked. Accordingly, the themes and categories reached are shown in Figure 1 below:

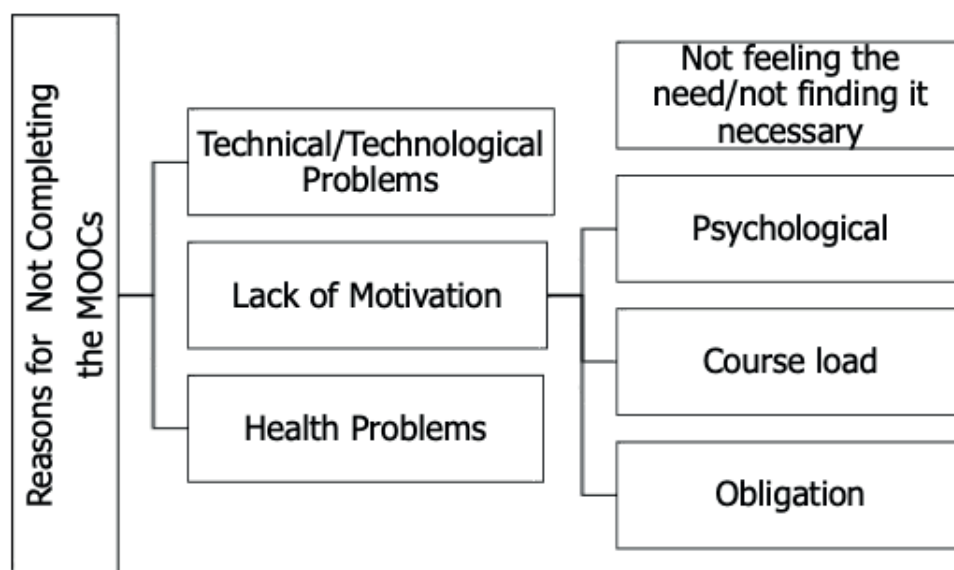


Figure 1. Themes related to the reasons for not completing the MOOCs

It was determined that the reasons why students did not complete the MOOCs they chose were mostly motivational. Students mostly explained this as “a lack of motivation and laziness”. Accordingly, the motivation-based reasons for these students not completing the MOOCs can be listed as not seeing it as necessary, psychological reasons, course load, and homework being compulsory. Students who did not complete the courses because they did not consider it necessary indicated that they considered the courses and assignments in the curriculum alone sufficient in order to be successful in the preparatory program and that they could get the grades they wanted with their individual studies. The following views of some students can be given as an example of this finding:

I did not spare enough time for this practice as I found our activities and studies in the course sufficient, and I also studied the subjects myself. (P2)

If I wanted to, I would go to the library and find a way to complete the courses, but I didn't think it was something to focus on because I didn't see it as necessary to complete the semester. Of course, it would definitely add something new, but there was no need for all that effort and sacrifice, at least for that period. (P5)

...I think students who haven't completed Coursera don't bother because they don't have to complete it. (P9)

Some students stated that they see the necessity of the MOOC task as a factor that negatively affects their motivation to complete the courses. One student said, “*The difficulty of these courses also causes students to attend the course only so that they can be seen in the system, rather than learning something like I observed in my own roommate.*” (P1). The expression supports this finding.

The student number 3, who evaluated this situation from a psychological point of view, expressed his situation as “*I absolutely have no idea, herd mentality I guess*”. Another student complained that the course load in the preparatory program was already heavy and attributed this to his failure to complete the MOOCs. The student expressed this opinion as “*I didn't want to do it because the lessons and exams were heavy*” (P10). There are four students who stated that they could not complete their MOOC courses on Coursera due to technical/technological reasons. These students stated that they could not complete the lessons due to low and/or limited internet connection and the difficulty of following the lessons on a smartphone. The statements of some students supporting this finding are given below:

The main reason is low internet connection. (P7)

Because I was staying in the dormitory where I was not at home, there was no internet connection, which is a general problem for dormitories anyway. (P4)

An average or above-average student staying in a state dormitory prefers to use his already limited internet for his pleasure rather than his lessons, and the quota is insufficient even for 1 month of daily use. (P2)

It was very difficult to follow while using the smartphone. (P8)

Finally, there is a student who stated that he could not follow the MOOC courses they chose due to health problems. This student stated that he had to use digital technologies for a limited time due to his health problem. The student explained this reasoning with the following words: “*Unfortunately, I cannot use digital technology continuously and as I'd like to due to the time limitation and for my eye health. So, I just have to make use of the books.*” (P5)

On the other hand, student number 6 made the following suggestion, taking into account the psychology of the students and the conditions they are in, so as to ensure that these MOOCs are completed by the students:

I think the only way to convince average and above students to participate in this program is to make the preparatory program more difficult. In that case, the student can see this course as a good resource in the face of difficulties and can give himself to the course in a motivated way, but this of course causes other problems.

DISCUSSIONS

It is obvious that the transition to a fully online platform for foreign language teaching during the Covid-19 pandemic turned out to be quite challenging and demotivating both for teachers and students (Ekaterina, 2021; Mahyoob, 2020; Zboun & Farrah, 2021). However, online education has not been totally abandoned during the post-pandemic transition, and the integration of virtual learning environments into conventional classrooms is still being strongly articulated by the researchers due to the benefits it provides based on the empirical evidence (Cobo-Rendon et al., 2022; Censuswide Future of Learning Report, 2022). MOOCs, in this regard, seem to have been utilized to a greater extent during the pandemic (Tlili et al., 2022) and are thought to be preferred more as supporting learning environments during the post-pandemic era. Accordingly, the present study was designated to back up the face-to-face university EFL learners in the English preparatory class who were falling behind the anticipated objectives of the curriculum with the supportive and compensative merits of virtual learning environments, namely with language learning MOOCs in this instance.

In order to make sure that the study reveals some in-depth implications in terms of providing us with a general frame of reference for a MOOC study, the learner profiles were further clarified as regards to their technological and language readiness. In that, it was determined that all the students owned at least a smartphone, or both a smartphone and a laptop in most cases in order to pursue their MOOCs. The students mostly spent 3-5 hours a day on the internet, and they all had at least B1(+)-level of English to easily follow their online courses on Coursera. In terms of their self-directed learning scale results, it was found that their mean score is at an average level, which means that they can at times regulate their own learning. As a result of the statistical analyses, it was determined that the learners' self-directed learning scores did not show any significant difference in terms of their gender and department. It was further identified that the learners' self-directed learning scores did not show any significant difference in terms of their course completion rates, either. A small number of students who completed the MOOC package stated that these courses contributed greatly to their writing skills and language development, and this was also observed in their end-of-year articles. On the other hand, keeping all these characteristics in mind, however, it was revealed that the majority of the students did not complete their MOOCs. Namely, despite the learners' technical readiness and the instructor's regular follow-up of their progress, this did not culminate in a desired and anticipated outcome of a successful MOOC completion. Thus, the researchers went on to investigate some possible reasons for the indifference shown by the students in terms of their MOOC study.

It was determined that the reasons why students did not complete the MOOCs they chose were mostly motivational. Accordingly, the motivation-based reasons for these students not completing the MOOCs can be listed as not seeing it as necessary, psychological reasons, course load, and homework being compulsory. Students mostly explained this as "lack of motivation and laziness". Students who did not complete the courses because they did not consider it necessary indicated that they considered the courses and assignments in the curriculum alone sufficient in order to be successful in the preparatory program and that they could get the grades they wanted with their individual studies. In fact, lack of persistence and low retention rates are two common phenomena often encountered in the relevant literature on MOOCs (Bloch, 2016). The sustainability of a MOOC in this sense necessitates a high level of self-directed learning skills (Chacon-Beltran, 2017; Conde Gafaro, 2019; Zhu, 2022) and motivation (Beaven et al., 2014; De Barba et al., 2016). The fact that the learners within the present study did not demonstrate self-directed learning behaviors at a satisfactory level may account for their indifference towards completing their MOOC study. Conde-Gafaro (2019) underlines, in this regard, the fact that MOOCs are generally designated for learners who can regulate and direct their own learning, thus these courses could be challenging for those who take them for the first time. Moreover, Semenova (2022) states in this sense that motivation is a significant predictor of the level of engagement in MOOCs, and it has also a significant relationship with course completion.

Motivational issues are the most reported reasons within the relevant literature for higher drop-out rates of MOOCs (Badali et al., 2022). Lack of intrinsic motivation, in this regard, stands out more in terms of the discontinuation of a MOOC study. This fact also underlines the finding that the students in the present study did not find a suitable triggering incentive for completing their MOOCs. Although participation in the MOOC courses was announced to be graded within the total class performance grades (extrinsic motivation), this did not affect learners' motivation satisfactorily, implying the role of intrinsic motivation to pursue a MOOC.

The MOOCs the students of the present study were supposed to sign up for are prepared and delivered by native speakers. Since students use the “audit” option and take the course free of charge, they cannot benefit from feedback, etc. from the instructors. These are called specialization courses, each one of which consists of 3-4 lessons. Therefore, they are self-study courses that do not include any direct guidance and feedback from the instructors. There is only automated feedback on short answer multiple choice type questions. Course design/expectations management is reported to be a significant barrier that influences learners’ intention achievement in MOOCs (Henderikx et al., 2018). Furthermore, in this regard, the instructor presence (Koseoglu & Koutropoulos, 2016) and the learners’ interaction with each other and with the instructor play determinative roles in course sustainability and completion. A study by Goh et al. (2017) revealed that instructor presence, interesting learning contents, consistent feedback, and interaction are vital to sustaining the engagement of students in MOOCs. Moreover, the instructor’s regular attention and guidance is a determinant in learners’ construction of their foreign language writing skills, and in their ultimate achievement in a writing course, since foreign language learners are generally in dire need of guidance and a step-by-step assurance while improving their productive language skills. Therefore, the fact that there was no interaction between the learners and the instruction of the MOOC may have led the learners to lose interest after a while.

It was further identified in this study that some students stated that they see the necessity of the MOOC task as a factor that negatively affects their motivation to complete the courses. In fact, as MOOCs are generally voluntary courses, obliging learners to take these courses may have discouraged them. Moreover, it was understood that although the students in this study were mostly computer users who spent plenty of time regularly on the internet, this did not result in their MOOC completion. This finding contradicts with that of Namestovski et al’s (2018) who found that regular computer users have a better chance of completing an online course. As the students complained about the course load they already had, the obligation of a MOOC study did not turn out to facilitate their in-class learning, yet it rather brought a new cognitive load which may have in turn led to dropouts. Furthermore, Yasar (2020) shares findings that are not in parallel with the present study. In that, it is reported that MOOC utilization in language learning classes improved learners’ communication skills provided that they are fun, surprising, simple, universal, and interactive.

CONCLUSION

One of the most significant implications of the present study is that MOOCs may not be a first-line supportive environment for productive skills (writing in this case) in foreign language teaching. Moreover, the integration of MOOCs into conventional foreign language classes should be organized carefully and well to let them be an important part of the whole teaching-learning process. The utilization of MOOCs as a component of a blended learning practice intertwined with face-to-face teaching could provide better results than their stand-alone use, or use as supplementary/supporting material. The MOOCs designed specifically by the instructor of the face-to-face classes could be more effective in maintaining learners’ persistence. However, it should be noted that each of the implications drawn from this study requires further experimental investigation. Moreover, the findings of the present study should be cautiously interpreted together with its limitations. The fact that this study was only the first cycle of a whole action research study planned to understand what can be done for those learners falling behind in their departmental study as they have problems with satisfactory language use may limit our capability to see the bigger picture in terms of learning outcomes. The findings of the study should also be evaluated with the limitations of qualitative research. Conduction of more studies, especially those combining the findings of both a qualitative and a quantitative one, is thought to supply better implications for the integration of MOOCs into conventional foreign language classes.

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