

## Motivating learners to enjoy an LMOOC experience till the end

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**Abstract:** The aim of this paper is to shed light on the ways participants in an LMOOC can be sustained motivated, so that dropout rates may be reduced. As massive open online learning is by its nature (Larreta-Azelain, 2014) different from the conventional teacher-led one and is sheltered in the related novel learning environments, it is comprehensible that the extent to which it is accomplished depends on the skilful orchestration of the multiple teaching online manifestations. As a result, since motivation cannot be inspired and effected directly by the teacher due to his/her physical absence and the vast volume of participants, and as it might fade away throughout autonomous studying, it has to be integrated in the whole philosophy and rationale of an LMOOC that determine its design (Beaven, Codreanu, & Creuzé, 2014) and constitution.

**Keywords:** LMOOC (Language Massive Open Online Course), motivation, design, content

### Introduction

The large number of participants in an LMOOC dictates a shift from a direct provision of energy, attention and knowledge on the teacher’s part to learner centeredness and autonomous studying, underlying LMOOC learning. Consequently, motivation, which would otherwise be provided directly by the teacher to learners through personal encouragement and guidance, clarification of queries, individualized feedback and face to face interaction, now has to be integrated in a skilfully designed and equipped LMOOC platform. In particular, it has to be catered for through the successful selection, presentation and structure of content, the variety and plurality of materials and tasks, the inclusion of engagement (Sokolik, 2014) and authenticity, the peer-interaction and the aid of technological affordances and tools, all wisely chosen and organized to fulfill pedagogical goals. The present paper attempts to thoroughly analyze all these aspects which are expected to trigger and sustain learners’ motivation in an LMOOC.

### 1. Carefully planned design

The whole concept and rationale of teaching a language in an LMOOC is accommodated in its

design, namely the way content is structured and presented to the participants. A motivating design needs to be attractive, transparent, well organized and easily explorable, based on careful planning (Lopez, 2006) and methodological principles associated with language teaching. An attractive design appealing to senses makes learners more willing to “give an LMOOC a try”, while an easily comprehensible, self-explanatory LMOOC platform reinforces this initial desire and fosters participants “to stay there”. By contrast, participants would be disenchanted and ready to “escape” in case they did not find everything sorted out and spelled out in the first place, as they would anticipate a poor continuation of their effort. In addition, a motivating design should cater for the support of diverse methodological issues and activities intended to satisfy multiple needs as well as learning styles and personalities, through the inclusion of relevant affordances such as spaces, networks, links (Zapata-Ros, 2013), multimodal means of teaching and so on. For instance, it should take into account the presentation of new language through model videos, the promotion of authentic interaction and collaboration by making use of forums and Web 2.0 collaborative tools (Compton, 2009), the provision of immediate formative feedback via recordings, videos or podcasts and every other didactic parameter that needs to be addressed in an LMOOC in order to fulfill its goals and, by extension, the participants’ language needs. The diversity of didactic issues originating from the massive and impersonal participation of learners dictates a varied and well-planned presentation of material, deploying the right affordances that an LMOOC offers and incorporating the appropriate technological tools to achieve learning objectives. Thus, we could notice that a design is motivating and effective when it creates a successfully structured accommodation, intended to house a varied content and the technology supporting it, as well as to create the right context where the appropriate methodology of teaching a foreign language could be implemented, to boost language learning.

## **2. Authenticity and engagement**

An important factor which could increase the degree of motivation in an LMOOC is authenticity. By referring to this notion, we mean the inclusion of authentic interaction (encompassing collaboration) and authentic materials in an LMOOC learning process.

Starting from authentic interaction, we could argue that it is a factor of crucial importance that can stimulate and sustain participants’ interest for the following reasons: First of all, language learning is promoted through real communication, which is in fact the utmost goal of language learning (Richards, 2006). In addition, the interaction among participants gives them the chance to practice the target language more willingly and productively, because it places them in a dynamic and stimulating context as they address a real audience, rather than consume energy and time dealing with decontextualized and sterile artificial items of language. In other words, it prepares them to face the challenges of the real world (Felix, 2002), and this is likely

to be taken seriously into consideration regarding the completion of an LMOOC.

What is more, learning a foreign language in an LMOOC nowadays cannot be perceived detached from the social and cultural context through which it is effected, where the impact of the constructivist and connectivist (Zapata-Ros, 2013) theories is salient. These theories call for individual expression through authentic interaction and collaboration (Nunan, 1992; Warschauer & Kern, 2000), by making the best use of networked settings like wikis, forums, and social media (Mackness, 2013). In such online settings, language learning is achieved to a great extent in a participatory mode, by negotiating meaning and by giving cognitive information, sharing opinions, ideas and experiences or providing constructive criticism. Participants are expected to develop language fluency with their colleagues’ assistance, while at the same time contribute to their peers’ progress in language learning by discussing, debating or collaborating with them. The occasional (and not overwhelming) presence of the teacher as facilitator (Watson, 2014) in the participants’ interaction is of major importance, since it is not just helpful in clarifying confusing situations and avoiding misunderstandings, but also in motivating them to develop a sense of community (Kop, 2011). The members of such a community assume the responsibility of supporting each other, while simultaneously learning from each other, being actively engaged in a language construction process. The participants’ interaction within communities can be continued even after the completion of an expected LMOOC, if the “chemistry” among them is really successful. This, in turn, can motivate them to maintain autonomous lifelong learning (Martinez, 1999), transcending the restrictions of any set learning context.

Additionally, the use of authentic materials in an LMOOC as language learning tools would be more than motivating and beneficial. Indicatively, oral speech in target language can be modeled via videos or podcasts presenting a real dialogue, a weather forecast, a part of a play e.t.c., or, for example, written speech in target language can be presented through the use of magazines and newspapers. In these ways, learners are assisted in actively conveying what they have learnt, to real life, rather than being exposed to a mass of sterile, artificial and unnatural language.

Apart from authenticity, the opportunities learners are offered to get personally engaged with purposeful and meaningful tasks can increase their desire to pursue and complete their effort. Active involvement rather than passive exposure to language is likely to trigger and sustain their interest, since their own experiences, knowledge, ideas, feelings, tastes, imagination or special abilities/talents become essential components of their learning.

### **3. Variety, addressing a diverse audience**

The inclusion of variety and plurality in the language learning process taking place in an LMOOC, implies respect on the part of an LMOOC designer for all participants. Since the last

are diverse due to their different needs, backgrounds, cognitive language levels, interests, learning styles and personalities, an LMOOC designer should bear in mind that an LMOOC should cater for all the aforementioned points, without privileging just a particular portion of learners. The assigned tasks, as well as their related themes, presentation, methodological approaches and means through which they are delivered, should be varied. Elaborating on this realization, it is comprehensible that not all language learners respond well to the same teaching way. Some learners feel at ease with controlled activities, as they feel more comfortable with direct instruction, rather than with autonomous kinds of work; other learners are more creative and imaginative by nature and prefer tasks which demand creativity and improvisation; many learners, in turn, are sociable and extroverted and are, thus, fascinated by community/collaborative learning. An LMOOC designer should provide all language learners with a holistic learning, promoting all skills in varied and alternative ways by leveraging multimodality and technological affordances and tools as supportive assets to compensate for the inevitable lack of an individualized approach of each learning case on the part of the teacher. Moreover, an LMOOC designer should include a plurality of themes in the content provided, to cover multiple interests and tastes. Last but not least, he/she should take into consideration that there are varying levels of language competence within a certain level intended to be taught (for example, not all beginner or advanced learners are equally competent and knowledgeable). Thereby, it is important for an LMOOC to encompass differentiated and scalable versions of tasks (Teixeira & Mota, 2014).

#### **4. Technological affordances and tools serving teaching objectives. Some suggestions for their integration in an LMOOC.**

A careful selection of technological affordances and tools oriented to serve specific pedagogical goals (Poce, 2015) could to a great extent motivate participants to continue learning a foreign language in an LMOOC. The implementation of technology in such an online context facilitates the process of language learning and compensates for the teacher’s physical absence, by offering alternative options of learning to the conventional teacher-led one.

It is reasonable that controlled activities, aimed at the accuracy of the introduced language, should be the first task types to start with. The new language to be taught can be modeled through authentic videos, supported by online tools such as “Translecture” or “Multidict”, intended to facilitate learners’ comprehension of the videos. “Translecture” is a tool which can assist learners in understanding the content of the presented videos, by providing the transcript and the translation of the videos in question. In this way, the newly presented language becomes explicit and understandable to learners. This is very helpful for people with hearing problems, for the less competent listeners, as well as for those whose language level is lower than the level of the language presented in the videos. Furthermore, it alleviates learners from

the stress of “missing information” while listening. Therefore, since they receive a comprehensible input, they are more motivated to continue. Similarly, “Multidict” is another useful tool that aids language learners by providing the definitions of any unknown words they might need to look up when, for example, are involved in a reading or vocabulary task.

Then, just after the presentation of the new language, participants can be provided with controlled practice with immediate automated feedback, giving them the chance to evaluate how adequately they have consolidated the new input (grammar, vocabulary or pronunciation). For instance, through a podcast or short recordings, they can check their pronunciation and through gap-fill, matching or multiple-choice tasks, they can assess the extent to which they are able to apply the expected language successfully. When they reach a desirable score in such a controlled practice of the new input, they can proceed with semi-controlled tasks.

Semi-controlled tasks can be presented to learners in the form of guided short dialogues, giving them cues about how to make a follow-up sentence intended to accompany a given utterance. These cues can be revealed in a multimodal way (acoustic, visual or verbal). The feedback in such cases is expected to be provided again in an automated way.

Learners can put together and present the language they have learnt by making up a digital story, leveraging online tools such as goanimate.com, powtoon.com, bitstripsforschools.com, storyboardthat.com, racontr.com or storybird.com individually or in groups. Then, they can post their creations publicly in order to elicit feedback by their colleagues. Digital storytelling is likely to function as a very creative and, therefore, motivating way for learners to apply the new language according to their expected level, by making the best use of their imagination and taste. At beginner levels, for example, they may present simple structures with characters introducing themselves or/and elementary vocabulary related to family members, house or school equipment, e.t.c., taking advantage of the multi-media included in the digital tools previously mentioned. At higher levels, they can create comics making use of the newly introduced language such as phrasal verbs, modal verbs or more complex vocabulary, in the characters’ dialogues. To raise participants’ interest, the designer can set a sort of competition, so that they can vote for the most inspiring and imaginative creations.

Finally, learners can move to authentic interaction and collaboration, by deploying well-known contemporary online settings intended for “digital encounters”, such as forums, social media, blogs or wikis. All these affordances are likely to foster learners’ motivation, since they equip them with continuous cognitive and psychological support, place them in a dynamic animate learning context, provide them with feedback on assignments of open-ended or creative nature and at the same time build a community for them (McGuire, 2013). The concept of community is very helpful and inspiring for LMOOC participants, since it allows them to learn in a supportive and safe environment (Sharif & Magrill, 2015), as well as keeps them oriented towards their learning goal. “Though each may be pursuing a different educational goal, their overall objective and means of travel is the same, and thus they offer mutual support,

encouragement and reassurance” (Downes, 2013). Another factor that can stimulate learners’ motivation is that, by leveraging the technological affordances mentioned before, they are also invited and expected to “filter, aggregate and enrich the course with their participation” (Cano, 2013), very often by adding their own tangible artifacts (Teixeira & Mota, 2014) to the already existing content created by the instructor, namely through posts and comments in forums and blogs, as well as by creating collaborative works in wikis (Lomicka & Lord, 2009; Sharif & Magrill, 2015).

Forums can be engaging, since participants can extensively analyze topics of their interest through discussions (Onah, Sinclair, & Boyatt, 2014; Sharif & Magrill, 2015) with their peers or - in cases when they need an expert opinion- with the instructor, and can acquire a better insight into a particular issue by agreeing or disagreeing, adding new posts or commenting on others’. Discussion threads make conversations seem more organized, and participants can choose to engage in one or more discussions which interest them. It is remarkable how the contribution of expert and non-expert (Onah, Sinclair, & Boyatt, 2014) opinions can scaffold the construction of knowledge and lead to user-generated content (Anderson, 2004), which can function as a participant-produced resource in an LMOOC. Similarly, wikis, which have been characterized as “collaborative in nature” (Jones, 2003; Minocha & Roberts, 2008), can accommodate learners’ creations like, for example, collaborative stories or poems and potentially reveal special abilities and talents. Yales (2008), drawing on Minocha and Roberts (2008), mentions that wikis enable empowerment, since all learners have a voice in them, and it is understandable that even introverted and shy learners need to feel worthy, participatory and active by contributing to the language learning process. Another useful affordance that may also be leveraged in an LMOOC with the aim of keeping learners’ interest alive is a blog. Apart from accommodating learners’ comments and discussions triggered by a given stimulus like, for example, a post, a video or a picture, a blog is also believed to function as an e-portfolio (Sharif & Magrill, 2015) that displays participants’ artifacts, being itself a tangible proof of their achievements and learning outcomes. Last but not least, learners may also decide to digitally meet each other on social media (Zheng, Han, Rosson, & Carroll, 2016) like, for instance, Facebook. Since the last is a part of most learners’ everyday lives, it would seem natural to them to enhance their language competence through genuine communication taking place on this familiar and easily accessible social medium, that makes language learning feel an obvious and integral part of their everyday routine. In particular, through the formation of closed groups on Facebook participants can be better coordinated concerning their obligations related to an LMOOC, exchange information, be familiarized with intercultural elements, provide support and constructive criticism to each other, as well as develop strong bonds among them.

All these new ways of learning can sustain participants’ motivation by turning them from passive learners into active agents of knowledge (Sharif & Magrill, 2015) and by engaging them in meaningful and purposeful interaction in online contexts, where they can use the target



language to share feelings, opinions, experiences, information, or even make new friends with whom they feel closer or identified. Whatever the case is, learners are likely to get personally or/and emotionally involved in their language learning.

## Conclusion

To sum up, considering the points analyzed throughout this paper, we could argue that many parameters should be anticipated and catered for by an LMOOC designer, in order for learner motivation to be triggered and sustained.

At first, motivation will be determined to a great extent by the way the whole rationale of teaching a language is going to be accommodated in an LMOOC, in other words how tasks and material are intended to be tangibly presented on an LMOOC platform. Attractiveness, transparency, easy navigation, well-organized material and reasonable distribution of content based on pedagogical principles, are expected to determine learners’ retention in an LMOOC. On the contrary, in case they feel confused and at a loss to “find their way” on an LMOOC platform, then the game is lost from its inception.

Authenticity as well as engagement, are two factors of paramount significance that can motivate learners to pursue their learning in an LMOOC. Authenticity, being an equivalent of genuine communication and interaction, should be definitely boosted, since it makes up the very essence of learning a language. Learning in authentic contexts, by addressing a real audience and by using real rather than artificial and decontextualized language, is meaningful for learners and at the same time prepares them for the demands, challenges and expectations of the real world. Furthermore, personal engagement with tasks fosters learners’ interest, since they learn in a purposeful and creative way, related to their individualities.

Expanding on learners’ individualities, we should not neglect that an LMOOC should cater for the language needs, cognitive levels, interests, learning styles and preferences of a diverse audience. Plurality and variety of tasks, making use of multimodality, scalability and varied methodology, are expected to respond to all these heterogeneous participants’ characteristics.

Last but not least, the inclusion of technological affordances and tools in an LMOOC plays a very important role, since they do not only add varied nuances to the learning process, but also function as channels through which different teaching approaches are manifested and multiple pedagogical and didactic objectives are addressed. It is worth noting that technology should not be chosen at random or for its own sake, but with the aim of serving and corroborating pedagogy.

All in all, taking into consideration the points mentioned so far and coming to a conclusion, we could claim that, although the teacher’s physical presence is subtle and almost lost in the massive accumulation of learners, at the same time the provision of motivation can definitely be

salient and diffuse in the way an LMOOC is designed, structured, equipped with content, supported technically and approached pedagogically. It is up to the LMOOC designer to make it feasible.

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