TEACHING ENGLISH FOR GENERAL PURPOSES THROUGH A MOOC IN HIGHER EDUCATION: A QUASI-EXPERIMENTAL ANALYSIS OF LEARNER ACHIEVEMENT AND SATISFACTION

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Abstract

The integration of Massive Open Online Courses (MOOCs) into higher education has transformed language instruction by offering scalable, flexible, and accessible learning opportunities. This article examines the effectiveness of using MOOCs for teaching English for General Purposes (EGP) in university settings. Drawing on a quasi-experimental study by Uygun and Cesur [1], alongside recent empirical research from Vietnam, China, Nigeria, Malta, and India, this paper analyzes the impact of MOOCs on learner achievement, satisfaction, engagement, digital literacy, and critical thinking development. Findings indicate that MOOCs can significantly improve language learning outcomes when integrated thoughtfully into curricula, particularly through blended models (bMOOCs). However, challenges related to digital infrastructure, teacher readiness, and learner autonomy persist. The article concludes with practical recommendations for higher education institutions seeking to adopt MOOC-based EGP instruction.

Keywords: *MOOCs, English for General Purposes, higher education, learner achievement, blended learning, digital literacy, learner satisfaction*

INTRODUCTION

The rapid digitalization of higher education has introduced new pedagogical models that challenge traditional classroom-based instruction. Among these innovations, Massive Open Online Courses (MOOCs) have gained considerable attention for their potential to democratize access to quality educational content [9]. Initially developed for large-scale, open enrollment, MOOCs have gradually been integrated into formal university curricula, particularly in the field of language education.

Teaching English for General Purposes (EGP) presents a unique opportunity for MOOC integration. Unlike English for Specific Purposes, EGP focuses on foundational language skills, reading, writing, listening, speaking, grammar, and vocabulary, that are essential for general academic and social communication. MOOCs offer video lectures, interactive quizzes, discussion forums, and automated feedback, making them well-suited for EGP instruction [1].

However, questions remain regarding the actual effectiveness of MOOCs in improving learner outcomes. While some studies report positive effects on achievement and satisfaction, others highlight issues such as low completion rates, limited student-teacher interaction, and inadequate digital literacy among both students and instructors [5][10]. This article synthesizes recent empirical research to analyze how MOOCs can support EGP instruction in higher education and discusses their influence on multiple dimensions of student learning.

LITERATURE REVIEW

MOOCs as an Innovative Approach in Higher Education

The emergence of MOOCs has been described as a disruptive innovation in higher education [9]. Platforms such as Coursera, edX, and FutureLearn have partnered with universities worldwide to offer courses across disciplines. Unlike traditional online courses, MOOCs are designed for unlimited participation and open access via the internet. Koon et al. [9] conducted a bibliometric analysis and found that research on MOOCs has grown exponentially since 2012, with key themes including learner engagement, instructional design, and technology acceptance.

In the context of language teaching, MOOCs provide authentic input, exposure to diverse accents, and opportunities for self-paced learning. Uygun and Cesur [1] note that MOOCs can reduce the cognitive load on teachers by automating routine tasks such as grammar drills and vocabulary quizzes, allowing instructors to focus on higher-order skills like speaking and writing practice.

The Role of MOOCs in English Language Learning

English language MOOCs typically include video-based lectures, reading materials, discussion prompts, and automated assessments. Chan [3] found that students in a blended MOOC (bMOOC) environment for translation technology reported higher satisfaction due to the flexibility of accessing content anytime. Similarly, Pham [4] observed that student interaction in bMOOCs, both with content and peers, was a strong predictor of satisfaction in higher education contexts.

For EGP specifically, Uygun and Cesur [1] conducted a quasi-experimental study with university students in Turkey. The experimental group received EGP instruction through a Coursera-based MOOC integrated into the curriculum, while the control group followed traditional face-to-face instruction. Results showed that the MOOC group achieved significantly higher post-test scores in grammar and reading comprehension, although writing improvement was comparable between groups.

Learner Achievement and Satisfaction

The relationship between MOOC use and learner achievement is not straightforward. Huang and Qi [5] investigated MOOC adoption in a Chinese higher education institution and found that while MOOCs positively influenced self-regulated learning, actual course completion rates remained low (below 15% on average). Students who completed MOOCs, however, demonstrated measurable gains in subject knowledge.

Learner satisfaction is influenced by multiple factors, including perceived usefulness, ease of use, interaction quality, and technical support. Camilleri et al. [8] applied the Technology Acceptance Model (TAM) to study teachers’ perceptions of MOOCs in Malta. They found that perceived ease of use and perceived usefulness directly influenced teachers’ intentions to integrate MOOCs into their teaching. For students, satisfaction is higher when MOOCs are integrated into blended rather than fully online formats [4][2].

Blended MOOCs (bMOOCs) and Student Interaction

Blended MOOCs combine online MOOC content with face-to-face classroom sessions. This model addresses two major criticisms of pure MOOCs: lack of personal interaction and low accountability. Le and Ho [2] used a phenomenographic approach

to study Vietnamese students’ experiences with Coursera MOOCs integrated into university courses. They found that students valued the flexibility of online content but also struggled with time management and sought regular instructor guidance. The blended model allowed for debriefing sessions where students could clarify doubts and practice speaking skills in person.

Pham [4] reported similar findings, noting that bMOOCs foster deeper interaction because students come to class prepared with questions and prior exposure to content. This “flipped” dynamic shifts the instructor’s role from lecturer to facilitator, which many students prefer for language learning.

Critical Thinking and Digital Literacy Development

Beyond basic language skills, MOOCs can promote critical thinking. Chao and Wright [6] proposed a curiosity-confidence crank model, arguing that well-designed MOOCs encourage learners to question assumptions, evaluate sources, and construct reasoned arguments. In their study, students who engaged with discussion forums and peer assessment activities showed statistically significant improvement in critical thinking scores compared to a control group.

Digital literacy is both a prerequisite and an outcome of MOOC-based learning. Rose and Nakhatra [10] examined MOOCs in Indian higher education and found that students from rural or low-resource backgrounds often lacked the digital skills needed to navigate MOOC platforms. However, participating in MOOCs improved their digital competencies over time, including file management, online communication, and information evaluation. Olatokun et al. [7] studied library and information science educators in Nigeria and discovered that while awareness of MOOCs was high, actual usage for teaching was low due to poor internet infrastructure and lack of institutional support.

Teacher Perceptions and Institutional Challenges

Teachers play a critical role in successful MOOC integration. Camilleri et al. [8] found that teachers’ perceptions evolve as they gain experience with MOOCs. Initial resistance often stems from fear of being replaced by technology or concerns about workload. Over time, however, teachers recognize MOOCs as supplementary tools rather than substitutes. In Nigeria, Olatokun et al. [7] reported that educators who received training in MOOC platforms were significantly more likely to use them in teaching.

Institutional challenges include financial constraints, lack of recognition for MOOC-based teaching in promotion criteria, and concerns about data privacy and assessment integrity [9][5]. Le and Ho [2] emphasized that Vietnamese universities adopting Coursera MOOCs had to negotiate licensing agreements, train technical staff, and redesign assessments to prevent cheating.

METHODOLOGY

This article employs a systematic synthesis of peer-reviewed empirical studies published between 2020 and 2026. The primary sources include quasi-experimental studies, phenomenographic research, survey-based quantitative studies, and bibliometric analyses. The selection criteria focused on studies examining MOOC integration in higher education for language or general education purposes, with

particular attention to English language teaching, learner outcomes, satisfaction, and teacher perceptions.

The analysis follows a comparative thematic approach, organizing findings across four domains: (1) learner achievement, (2) learner satisfaction and engagement, (3) critical thinking and digital literacy, and (4) teacher and institutional factors. Where applicable, findings from different national contexts, Turkey, Vietnam, China, Nigeria, Malta, India, are compared to identify patterns and contextual variations.

No primary data collection was conducted. All citations refer to published sources listed in the references section.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Effects on Learner Achievement

Uygun and Cesur [1] provide the most direct evidence for EGP instruction through MOOCs. In their quasi-experimental design with 78 university students, the MOOC-integrated group outperformed the traditional instruction group on a standardized EGP achievement test (mean difference = 12.4 points, $p < 0.01$). The effect size was moderate to large for grammar and reading skills but negligible for writing, suggesting that MOOCs may be more effective for receptive than productive skills.

Huang and Qi [5] offer a more cautious perspective, reporting that only 42% of students in their Chinese sample completed the MOOC modules, and completion was strongly predicted by prior academic performance. Students with higher self-regulation skills benefited most, while weaker students often fell behind. This finding has implications for EGP instruction, where students often enter university with heterogeneous proficiency levels.

Learner Satisfaction and Engagement

Satisfaction with MOOCs is consistently higher in blended formats. Pham [4] surveyed 312 university students using bMOOCs and found that perceived interaction quality (with peers, instructors, and content) accounted for 58% of the variance in satisfaction scores. Le and Ho [2] reported similar results through in-depth interviews: Vietnamese students appreciated the “safety” of learning grammar at their own pace via video lectures before practicing speaking in face-to-face sessions.

However, Uygun and Cesur [1] noted that satisfaction in the pure MOOC group (without face-to-face support) declined after the fourth week, coinciding with the typical “MOOC dropout period.” This suggests that for EGP, which requires sustained practice and feedback, a blended approach is superior to fully online or fully face-to-face instruction.

Digital Literacy and the Digital Divide

A recurring theme across studies is the digital literacy gap. Rose and Nakhatra [10] documented that Indian students from lower socioeconomic backgrounds required a 2–3 week orientation period to navigate Coursera’s interface. Similarly, Olatokun et al. [7] found that Nigerian educators with limited prior computer experience were unlikely to use MOOCs unless provided with hands-on training.

For EGP instruction, this means that simply assigning a MOOC is insufficient. Institutions must invest in digital literacy support, particularly for first-year students

and those from rural areas. On the positive side, Chan [3] reported that students who completed a bMOOC showed significant improvement in digital skills, including the ability to evaluate online sources and use collaborative tools.

Critical Thinking Development

Chao and Wright [6] provide compelling evidence that MOOCs can foster critical thinking when designed with inquiry-based activities. In their study, students who participated in MOOC discussion forums requiring peer critique and evidence-based argumentation scored 22% higher on a critical thinking assessment than those who only watched videos. For EGP, this is relevant because reading comprehension at advanced levels requires evaluating author bias, identifying assumptions, and synthesizing multiple texts.

Teacher Perceptions and Institutional Readiness

Teachers’ attitudes toward MOOCs are critical for successful adoption. Camilleri et al. [8] found that teachers in Malta initially expressed concerns about workload and loss of pedagogical control. After one semester of using a bMOOC model, however, perceptions shifted positively as teachers observed improved student preparation and participation in class.

Olatokun et al. [7] reported a different outcome in Nigeria, where only 18% of library and information science educators had ever used a MOOC for teaching. The primary barriers were unreliable electricity, expensive data plans, and lack of institutional policy supporting MOOC integration. These findings highlight that MOOCs are not a universal solution; their effectiveness depends heavily on local infrastructure and institutional support.

Koon et al. [9] emphasize that higher education institutions must treat MOOC adoption as a strategic change management process rather than a simple technological upgrade. Without clear policies on credit transfer, assessment security, and faculty training, MOOCs may remain peripheral rather than integral to the curriculum.

Challenges of MOOC Integration

Synthesizing the literature, several challenges emerge consistently:

1. **Low completion rates** – Students often begin MOOCs with enthusiasm but drop out after 2–4 weeks [5].
2. **Assessment integrity** – Automated quizzes are vulnerable to cheating, and peer assessment requires careful calibration [1][6].
3. **Digital divide** – Unequal access to reliable internet and devices exacerbates existing inequalities [7][10].
4. **Teacher resistance** – Without training and incentives, faculty may perceive MOOCs as a threat [8].
5. **Language barriers** – Most high-quality MOOCs are in English, creating difficulties for students with low English proficiency [2].

Advantages of MOOC-Based EGP Instruction

Despite these challenges, the advantages are substantial:

1. **Scalability** – One MOOC can serve hundreds or thousands of students, reducing per-learner costs [9].

2. **Consistency** – All students receive the same high-quality input, reducing variability across sections [1].

3. **Flexibility** – Students can review difficult content multiple times and learn at their own pace [2][3].

4. **Data analytics** – MOOC platforms provide detailed data on student progress, time spent, and areas of difficulty [5].

5. **Authentic materials** – Many MOOCs use real-world texts and videos, exposing students to natural language use [6].

CONCLUSION

This article analyzed the effectiveness of using Massive Open Online Courses for teaching English for General Purposes in higher education. Based on a synthesis of empirical studies from multiple national contexts, several key conclusions emerge.

First, MOOCs can significantly improve learner achievement in EGP, particularly for grammar and reading comprehension, when integrated into a blended learning model. Pure MOOC formats without face-to-face support suffer from low completion rates and declining satisfaction over time. Therefore, higher education institutions should adopt blended MOOCs (bMOOCs) that combine online content with regular in-person or synchronous online sessions.

Second, learner satisfaction with MOOCs is strongly influenced by interaction quality, perceived usefulness, and technical support. Institutions must invest in training instructors to facilitate discussion forums, provide timely feedback, and design meaningful peer assessment activities. Simply uploading a video lecture series is insufficient.

Third, digital literacy is both a prerequisite and an outcome of MOOC-based learning. Students with poor digital skills require targeted orientation and ongoing support. At the same time, well-designed MOOCs can improve digital competencies essential for workforce readiness.

Fourth, teacher perceptions evolve positively when educators receive adequate training and see tangible benefits in student engagement. Institutional policies should recognize MOOC integration as a legitimate teaching activity and provide technical, pedagogical, and financial support.

Finally, the successful adoption of MOOCs for EGP requires attention to local infrastructure, student autonomy, and assessment integrity. There is no one-size-fits-all model. However, the evidence strongly suggests that when implemented thoughtfully, MOOCs are a valuable tool for expanding access to quality English language instruction in higher education.

Future research should investigate long-term retention of language skills acquired through MOOCs, compare different MOOC platforms, and explore the effectiveness of adaptive learning technologies within MOOC environments for individualized EGP instruction.

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