

# Transitions in Language MOOCs: International Perspectives to Redefine the Field

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## Abstract

Language MOOCs (LMOOCs), defined as “dedicated Web-based online courses for second languages with unrestricted access and potentially unlimited participation” by (Barcena & Martín-Monje, 2014) have seen significant interest in the past two decades, as a practical means of online language education and a subject of research. As coordinators of the LMOOC Special Interest Group at EuroCALL, the authors of this paper identified that the nature of what is considered ‘an LMOOC’ was potentially changing, leading to a gap in understanding. We conducted a survey among 38 global LMOOC experts. Based on the findings, a new definition of LMOOCs is suggested, considering their value and nature of LMOOCs in diverse, international, educational contexts, and includes not only linguistic competence, but also other aspects such as culture, intercultural awareness, linguistics, and teacher education.

**Keywords:** Language MOOCs, Language MOOC practitioners, Language MOOC research, Conceptualization

## Introduction

The topic of this paper is closely linked to the theme of this conference, “Transitions in CALL”, as it draws on our survey data to highlight the recent development of Language Massive Open Online Courses (LMOOC) research. Open educational practice (OEP) reveals a transition from the sharing, using, reusing of unconnected OER (Open Educational Resources) to structured

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openness in Massive Open Online Courses. This general evolution is also reflected in open language teaching and learning.

The proliferation of OER through open access repositories allowed the sharing of good educational practice amongst language teachers, as well as creating a wealth of free content (Comas-Quinn & Borthwick, 2015). However, evidence of actual use and reuse of OER in practice is unusual (Beaven, 2018) and researchers have continued to highlight a lack of context-specific evidence on effective pedagogical practices using OER (Bradley and Vigmo, 2016).

As enablers of open educational practice, LMOOCs in language instruction continue to be developed, and they contribute to democratizing access to quality language resources, empowering learners worldwide and facilitating scalable and inclusive learning environments (Martín-Monje, 2023). Their relative stability and popularity have facilitated the development of a field of research to emerge, evolve and generate empirical research dedicated to OEP and Languages.

This paper will draw on our study findings to both illustrate this transition in practice (highlighting the lived experiences of LMOOC experts) and propose a redefinition of the field based on this evolving understanding.

## **Background**

It has been more than a decade since LMOOCs (Language Massive Open Online Courses) were first defined as “dedicated Web-based online courses for second languages with unrestricted access and potentially unlimited participation” (Barcena & Martín-Monje, 2014, p. 1), focusing on the functional learning of language skills and the value of social learning. Scholarly work published can be divided into two phases: 1) Incipient research (2012–2018) directed its efforts to sharing good practice and attempting to theorize about this new sub-field of CALL (Computer-Assisted Language Learning) (see, for instance, Sallam et al., 2020); and 2) The consolidation of LMOOC research with an increase in the number of publications (Martín-Monje & Borthwick, 2021) and a shift in research topics towards more theoretical issues, such as the conceptualization of LMOOCs and instructional design.

In terms of LMOOC practice, the following thematic typology has been established (Martín-Monje, 2023): 1) general LMOOCs which focus on the mastery of English as a Foreign Language or English as a Second Language as a whole; 2) LMOOCs focusing on certain skills; 3) LMOOCs on English for Specific Purposes; 4) Tandem LMOOCs combining the native language and the target language; 5) LMOOCs on cultural aspects in English-speaking countries; 6) LMOOCs to prepare for standardized tests; 7) LMOOCs for social inclusion;

8) MOOCs on English Medium Instruction and Content and Language Integrated Learning; and 9) MOOCs on language learning methodology.

As coordinators of the LMOOC Special Interest Group at EuroCALL (The European Association of CALL), the authors of this paper identified a practical knowledge gap, since the definition that was being used for LMOOCs did not really reflect the wider scope that is evident in LMOOC practice. It was thus decided to conduct a survey to understand the current landscape of LMOOC practice and research.

## **Overview of Methodology**

An online survey was designed with 30 items which included demographic questions, multiple choice questions, and open-ended questions. A total of 38 experts in LMOOC practice and research completed it, providing information on LMOOCs in a total of 11 countries: United Kingdom, Spain, China, France, Belgium, United States of America, Switzerland, Russia, Italy, Iceland, and Egypt.

## **Results and Discussion**

The results of the survey have aided in identifying the profile of the LMOOC practitioner, understood as the person who creates and delivers LMOOCs, or has a research interest in them. A significant proportion of them are female (70% of the respondents) and have been teaching languages for more than 10 years (82%). Most of them teach English as a Foreign Language (58%) in blended courses (online and face-to-face, 66%). Their interest in LMOOCs is relatively recent, between one and five years (45%) and they have both experience as LMOOC designers (68%) and learners (53%).

When asked what it is about MOOCs which might be useful to language learning, they highlighted the following features: 1) the ability to reach big cohorts of people who would not be able to attend face-to-face classes; 2) their open nature allowing learners to try new things at low cost/impact on their time; 3) their ability to bring together learners in diverse global locations; and 4) the potential for social inclusion. In terms of areas which need to be explored in LMOOC research, they identified the following five: 1) task design in LMOOCs; 2) technical and pedagogical issues around LMOOC design; 3) social interaction in LMOOCs; 4) mobile assisted language learning and MOOCs; and 5) integration of LMOOCs in Formal Education. Besides, and more importantly, the majority of the LMOOC experts responded (63%) that there was a need to broaden the definition of LMOOCs, to ensure the

inclusion of language learning methodology and culture but more particularly to include language teacher education (60% of respondents highlighted this missing element in existing LMOOC definitions but evident in practical LMOOC creation).

## Conclusion

In view of the results of the survey, we suggest a new definition of LMOOCs: “Language MOOCs (or LMOOCs) are dedicated Web-based online courses which deal with various aspects related to second languages, such as language learning, language teaching and learning methodology, linguistic expression of cultures or language teacher education. They have unrestricted access and potentially unlimited participation.”

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