

Exploring Tertiary Education Students' Academic English Learning by Adopting Tailored MOOC Materials

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Abstract

This research reports on the academic English learning process of Hong Kong tertiary students who studied at a community college for a prolonged period of two years. “English for Academic Studies” is a compulsory course for all the year one students to prepare them for undergraduate degree studies. It has been frequently observed that English teachers at this college encountered resistance and low attendance rate from students when they relied on textbooks to teach this course. To enhance students’ learning motivation and outcome, a new approach, which is to adopt tailored MOOC (Massive Open Online courses) materials in and outside classroom, has been employed since 2014. Unexpected popularity of this course was perceived from students’ learning feedbacks.

Using Song & Hill’s (2007) self-directed learning theory as the conceptual framework of this research, we argue that, for MOOC aided academic English learning; success mostly depends on learning context. In other words, well-designed learning resources, effective feedbacks from tutors and peer support play important roles in enhancing students’ English learning outcomes.

Keywords

MOOC, academic English, self-directed learning, learning contexts

Introduction

The innovation of this paper is the importance of learning context in online learning. Since September 2010, the first writer of this paper started to teach EAS (English for Academic Studies) at a Community College in Hong Kong, and she had encountered resistance and low

attendance rate when she used examples and sample essays from textbooks. To enhance students’ learning motivation, she adopted tailored MOOC (Massive Open Online course) materials in and outside classroom since 2012, and she found students welcome this new change. With the popularisation of smart phones and ipads among students in HK, it is expected that MOOCs can play a positive role in students’ English language learning if appropriate guidance could be provided.

2. Conceptual Model

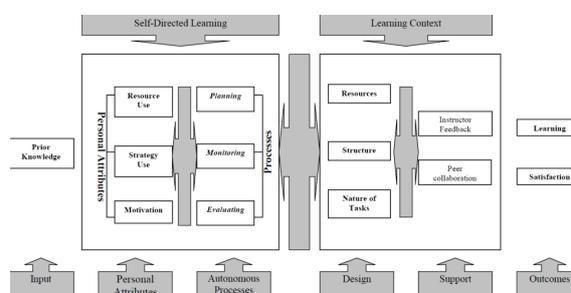


Figure 1: Song & Hill’s self-directed learning model (2007)

The study of online learning has drawn many researchers’ attention. Among all the studies, Song and Hill’s (2007) self-directed learning model has been adopted in this research because it not only emphasises personal attributes and learning process, but also takes learning context into full consideration.

3. Research Background & Design

The research participants were year-one

associate degree students. Most of them were secondary school graduates who could not reach the universities entrance requirements, so they entered community college to earn an associate degree. For students whose GPA (grade point average) can reach a certain level, they can enter local universities as year 2 students to pursue a Bachelor's degree. In the past 3 years, the articulation rate of this college was very high. In year 2014/15, over 85% graduates could enter local or overseas universities to pursue their degree courses.

At the college, "English for Academic Studies" is a compulsory general education courses and it runs for two semesters for all year one students. The course objective is to "prepare students for successful academic studies in an English medium post-secondary school learning environment". Academic oral presentation skills, academic essay writing skills and researching skills are the main teaching contents of this course.

This research is an action research study to look at two groups of year one Associate Degree Social Sciences students in the year of 2014/15 and 2015/16 respectively. As a subject lecturer, the first writer of this paper has introduced MOOC learning to her target students at the beginning of each semester, and she has collected data in two semesters respectively.

This research uses a variety of data collection tools which include interviews, questionnaires, and research diaries.

4. Results

The open-ended questionnaire data indicates that tailored MOOC learning materials are helpful to enhance students' academic English proficiency because students perceived that there is no time and space constrains for their learning. In addition, students were motivated to learn English because there were more interesting learning resources available online. Moreover, some students mentioned that they enjoyed the teaching methods that different lecturers provided in MOOC courses. Nevertheless, because of lack of self-control and incentives, over 80% students mentioned that they preferred classroom based MOOC learning to entire self-learning on their own. This is because they could receive tailored learning materials

provided by course tutors; get instant feedbacks from tutors and have collaboration with peers. Corresponding to Song & Hill's (2007) self-directed learning concept, our data shows that a supportive learning environment is an essential part for a successful MOOC learning. The design of courses, in our context, the choosing of appropriate MOOC materials plays an important role in improving students' learning. Feedbacks from tutors (in this research, a physical teacher who also teaches the academic English course) and peer supports are stimulators that push learners to persist in their MOOC aided English learning. When students encounter frustrations in individual MOOC learning, they will feel more supported if the problems can be discussed with peers or tutors who are around. On the other hand, some students who do not perceive receiving supports from their learning context may give up halfway.

5. Conclusion

Within a relatively short period, MOOC has brought great impacts to higher education (Li, et al 2013). Yet, the traditional classroom teaching still has its value. This research has indicated that tailored MOOC materials are helpful for students who are using English as a second language; nevertheless, the role of classroom teachers cannot be neglected as appropriate guidance is desired by students. For more effective MOOC learning, classroom teachers can choose tailored materials and provide feedbacks to students in and outside classrooms. Lastly, our research findings have shown that Song and Hill's self-directed learning model is applicable in our research context. The learning context, especially the design of learning resources and supports from tutors and peers can motivate learners in their self-directed learning.

References

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