

On Learners' Perceptions of Taking MOOC in Learning *Intercultural Communication* (IC)—A Case Study of the IC MOOC from SISU*

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The topic of taking MOOC in learning *Intercultural Communication* (IC) is an under-researched area, and there has been little empirical research published which focuses on students' perceptions. This study explores learner's perceptions of taking the MOOC from SISU in learning IC with both a quantitative and qualitative data collection and analysis, which focuses on students' viewpoints about their MOOC learning experience, development in Intercultural Communication Competence (ICC) and their problems in Learning MOOC.

Keywords: MOOC, perceptions, learning experience, Intercultural Communication Competence (ICC), problems

Introduction

The past 10 years have seen increasingly rapid advances in the field of MOOCs (Massive Open Online Courses) with its successful development since 2008. There are millions of registered users of MOOCs and hundreds of courses offered around the world. Three major MOOC platforms have been established in US, namely Coursera, Udacity and Edx and other two European platforms followed them, namely, Futurelearn and Iversity. Chinese universities also consecutively cooperated with those major MOOCs platforms and set up some MOOCs. The MOOC *Intercultural Communication* from Shanghai International Studies University (SISU) is a case in point, which is built on Futurelearn with leading educators Steve Kulich, Hongling Zhang and Ruobing Chi. As a new teaching model, MOOCs have attracted numerous educators and learners with the unique teaching and learning styles and unprecedented learning freedom both at home and abroad. So far, studies on Intercultural Communication (IC) almost have done within the current traditional teaching system. However, applying IC MOOC to discuss learners' perceptions is barely discussed. The aim of this paper, therefore, is to carry out both a quantitative and qualitative study, which focuses on students' viewpoints about their MOOC learning experience,

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Website of the IC MOOC from SISU: <https://www.futurelearn.com/courses/intercultural-communication>

development in Intercultural Communication Competence (ICC) and their problems in learning IC MOOC. The study will attempt to examine three questions:

1. What are students' learning experiences in taking this IC MOOC?
2. In what degree do students think that they have improved their ICC in taking the MOOC?
3. What gains and problems do students have in learning IC MOOC?

Supporting Literature

Studies on MOOCs

As one of the most prominent trends in higher education in recent years, there is a heated discussion among educators on MOOCs about their pros and cons, the current situation and prospects, and opportunities and challenges. In 2012, Rodriguez compared in details representative courses from AI and c-MOOC formats and further assigned to the AI to a cognitive-behaviourist and MOOCs to connectivist pedagogy (Rodriguez, 2012). Jordan (2014) provided a more detailed view of trends in enrolment and completion and a more accurate view of how the MOOC field was developing (Jordan, 2014). Gao (2014) discussed MOOCs in terms of the core concepts, reflection-on-practice and culture security (Gao, 2014). Meltem (2015) examined MOOCs from various dimensions as the definition, a brief history and its pedagogical and technological implementations around the world and its research focus (Meltem, 2015).

As for the applied studies about MOOCs, Patricia et al. (2014) explored the challenges of receiving feedback in a language MOOC and proposed a model for social feedback that aims to develop students' foreign language writing skills (Patricia et al., 2014). Watted & Barak (2014) employed the qualitative methodology to examine students' preferences and views about learning in MOOCs and specify the criteria that make MOOCs a constructive learning environment (Watted & Barak, 2014). Christensen & Steinmetz (2014) conducted an online survey of students enrolled in at least one of the University of Pennsylvania's 32 MOOCs offered on the Coursera platform to discuss the student population who took MOOCs and their reasons (Christensen & Steinmetz, 2014). Catalinia & Anca (2015) investigated the perceptions and expectations on MOOCs in University of Bucharest (Catalinia & Anca, 2015).

Studies on MOOCs in Intercultural Communication

Recently, researchers have shown an increased interest in applying MOOCs in IC teaching. In 2016, Chi et al. published a paper in which they introduced the production of the MOOC *Intercultural Communication* of SISU with more details about the course design, implementation, management, assessment and its implications for enhancing the disciplinary development of IC (Chi et al. 2016). He & Chen (2016) proposed to use flipped classroom, micro-lecture and MOOCs as an innovative study on the cultivation model of ICC in college English teaching (He & Chen, 2016). A recent study by Lu (2017) analyzed the first MOOC *Intercultural Communication* of SISU and indicated that to promote the internationalization of higher education by means of MOOCs, it was of great necessity to obtain the guarantees of government support, funding and overall planning of the school, excellent teachers and excellent production technology (Lu, 2017). A detailed survey by Zhang (2017) to develop ICC of police college students by MOOCs of world-famous universities found that by making scientific use of a variety of network elite courses, the students improved their overall English learning ability, laying a solid foundation to cultivate their ICC for their lifetime (Zhang, 2017). Previous studies have reported that MOOC has

been a good supplementary to traditional IC teaching. One question that needs to be asked, however, is how students view about using MOOC in their IC learning, including their learning experience, gains, problems, and development in ICC. With a case study of the IC MOOC from SISU, this paper is to figure out ways to apply MOOC in IC teaching, giving priority to students' viewpoints about their learning experience of IC MOOC and the development in ICC.

Method

IC MOOC from SISU

In this paper, a case study was chosen because the IC MOOC from SISU was the first and most well-known IC MOOC made in China. With the prestigious educators Steve Kulich, Hongling Zhang and Ruobing Chi, five themes were thoroughly explored in details with Chinese culture as an indispensable part in it, which students would have more connection to it compared to other IC MOOCs. The five themes are: comprehending intercultural communication, contextualizing cultural identities, clarifying and contrasting values, comparing cultural communication styles and cultivating intercultural adaptation. The content is organized by following Moran (2003)'s cultural teaching module: knowing oneself, knowing how, knowing what and knowing why. By using teaching instruments as video lectures, quizzes, forums, readings, case study, peer reviewed assignments, this course was organized around the basic elements of ICC (knowledge, attitude and ability) (Chi et al, 2016).

Participants and Data Collection

Forty-five sophomore non-English major students studying *Intercultural Communication* were recruited for this study. They are 13 boys and 32 girls, aged between 18 and 20, who have taken this course as a compulsory elective course for a whole term with 16 weeks. They registered the IC MOOC from SISU and finished the study of this course after the class at their own free time within 7 weeks. Based on the questionnaires from IC MOOC from SISU and the four elements of Byram (2014) of ICC (knowledge, skills, attitudes and critical awareness) (Byram, 2014), a survey about IC MOOC was conducted in the last week of our teaching. All 45 students took the survey and the effectiveness of the questionnaire was 100%. Additionally, they were supposed to write down a reflection paper about their learning journal and reflections, including the main idea of each topic, the gains, problems and suggestions and hand in the paper in the last of week of study.

Data Analysis and Findings

Quantitative Findings

Before conducting the analysis on the collected data from students' written IC MOOC report, students' responses to the questionnaire were examined to understand their views about IC MOOC learning experience and their development of ICC.

Learners' perceptions of their learning experiences about IC MOOC. Respondents were asked to indicate their attitudes about taking this IC MOOC. Table 1 indicates the respondents' views by percentage. The students were asked to rate 5 items on a five-point scale from "strongly disagree" to "strongly agree". 53.3% of students stated that this IC MOOC met their expectations and the result showed that, obviously, and over half of those surveyed reported that they were satisfied with the overall design, the content, the teachers and the activities. The present results are significant in at least two major respects. Firstly, students enjoyed their learning

experience in IC MOOC, which has provided them more learning opportunities. Secondly, MOOCs represent a good choice for blended learning revolution in universities, which confirmed the findings of a great deal of the previous work in this field (Catalina & Anca, 2015).

Table 1

Students' Perceptions of Their Learning Experiences About IC MOOC

Items	Strongly disagree	Disagree	Neither agree nor disagree	Agree	Strongly agree
meeting expectations	0(0%)	4(8.9%)	17(37.8%)	19(42.2%)	5(11.1%)
satisfied with the overall design	0(0%)	2(4.4%)	18(40%)	21(46.7%)	4(8.9%)
satisfied with the teachers	0(0%)	0(0%)	11(24.4%)	23(51.1%)	11(24.5%)
satisfied with the content	0(0%)	2(4.4%)	12(26.7%)	23(51.1%)	8(17.8%)
satisfied with the activities	0(0%)	1(2.2%)	15(33.3%)	24(53.3%)	5(11.1%)

Learners' views about their ICC development through IC MOOC. The students were asked to choose a response from “strongly disagree” to “strongly agree” to describe their opinions about their ICC development through this IC MOOC. These criteria were from Byram's ICC model with four elements (knowledge, skills, attitudes and critical awareness) (Byram, 2014) with more specific details of each element from Wang (Wang, 2018) in Table 2.

Table 2

Students' Views About Their ICC Development Through IC MOOC

Items	Sub-items	Strongly disagree	Disagree	Neither agree nor disagree	Agree	Strongly agree
knowledge	acquiring similarities and differences	0(0%)	0(0%)	5(11.1%)	32(71.1%)	8(17.8%)
	interacting with foreigners	1(2.2%)	2(4.4%)	8(17.8%)	25(55.6%)	9(20%)
skills	interpreting possible explanations	0(0%)	1(2.2%)	9(20%)	26(57.8%)	9(20%)
	learning and applying culture	0(0%)	6(13.3%)	5(11.1%)	28(62.2%)	6(13.3%)
attitudes	curiosity and openness	0(0%)	0(0%)	14(31.1%)	21(46.7%)	10(22.2%)
	empathy	0(0%)	1(2.2%)	11(24.4%)	29(64.4%)	4(8.9%)
critical awareness	critical awareness of “self”	0(0%)	1(2.2%)	13(28.9%)	23(51.1%)	8(17.8%)
	critical awareness of “other”	0(0%)	3(6.7%)	13(28.9%)	23(51.1%)	6(13.3%)

Broadly speaking, the majority of respondents felt that they have improved ICC through learning this IC MOOC. The overall responses to these questions were very positive. As for “knowledge”, an overwhelming majority of students (88.9%) agreed that they learned more about cultural similarities and differences and 75.6% said they knew more about how to interact with foreigners through learning this course. In terms of “skills”, 77.8% and 75.5 % of respondents indicated that they learned to suspend judgment and think of different possible explanations about critical incidents and also relate to Chinese culture, and know methods to learn a culture and apply what have been learned in real encounters with foreigners respectively. For “attitudes”, 68.9% of students thought they became more curious and interested in cultures and 73.3% of them learned to show empathy by putting themselves in other's shoes. Speaking of “critical awareness”, 68.9% of students showed that they became more sensitive to the uniqueness of Chinese culture, which is an indispensable part in ICC and 64.4% of them obtained the critical awareness of foreign cultures as well.

This combination of findings provides some support for the conceptual premise that MOOC could raise

student's IC awareness and stimulate their curiosity towards different cultures in order to further cultivate their ability to judge cultural similarities and differences, learn to respect cultural differences and tolerate the uncertainty in them (Zhang, 2017).

Qualitative Findings

Students' reflection paper about their views in learning IC MOOC was carefully read, and their comments were analyzed and the data coded in order to identify categories. A number of themes emerged in term of gains and problems, the most representative quotations being presented below with student's initials to protect their privacy but without correcting their grammatical mistakes.

Gaining first-hand IC experience. The majority of respondents identified that they gained first-hand IC experience, as highlighted by the following remarks.

...when people from other country returned her opinion to me, I feel so excited and learn a lot from others by participating in this real IC interaction. (GJ, 2018, p. 5)

...The opportunities to read other people' culture and communicate with them are invaluable. It was a fun journey. (GYP, 2018, p. 6)

Improving language proficiency. Most of students also mentioned they improved language proficiency and also their confidence in communicating with foreigners. The following comments are representatives of these views.

Through this course I have not only improved my English writing level, but also improved my listening and speaking ability... (HMJ, 2018, p. 5)

...I became a better listener and observer which has probably helped to smooth my path when moving into a new cultural situation and become more confident in communicating with foreigners. (CJL, 2018, p. 4)

Developing ICC in terms of knowledge, skills, attitude and critical awareness. A common response from the surveyed students highlighted that they benefited from taking MOOC with the aspects of knowledge, skills, attitude and critical awareness.

It gave me new insights about IC. I learned more about the knowledge of IC through this course...I have learned more about the cultures of different regions, cultural conflicts, and how to avoid conflicts (YXY, 2018, p. 7).

...Now I realize how important ICC is. By learning it, I know more about myself and learn to appreciate others' cultures or customs...I have learned a lot about the methods and skills of learning IC. It provides guidance for my future IC." (HYW, 2018, p. 5)

I learned a lot of new theories and new ways to communicate with people during the five-week study. And that was a great help to me...I not only learned about the cultural differences in countries, but also saw the different views and opinions of people from different countries on the same problem, and I also improved my English listening and prepared for my future travel abroad. (HYY, 2018, p. 7)

The responses to IC MOOC were largely positive and the reports they produced demonstrated a growing understanding and appreciation of the cultural similarities and differences, and attitudes and belief of others. The process of interacting with other learners through MOOC also brought them into frequent online contact with people from other cultures and enabled them to practice their English in discussing various topics to deliver their points.

Content being too difficult. Due to the fact that these students were non-English major sophomores, some of the comments also highlighted that the content is too challenging for them.

...because my personal English is not very high, because there are no Chinese subtitles, some fragments are not fully understood, even misunderstood in my own understanding. (HYY, 2018, p. 7)

...In the process of learning, I really encountered many difficulties, so I took advantage of translation software. The profound theories should be explained in simple language, some of the later courses are too theoretical and a bit confusing and some essays are too long and theoretical for me to read. (YJY, 2018, p. 6)

Not enough and diverse Examples. Some student mentioned that they need more examples to learn and analyze. In addition, examples should be more diverse rather than only focusing on western cultures.

...I would have liked more examples of different cultural practices across more cultures. There seemed to be a focus on Western's and Chinese differences interesting though they are. (ZXY, 2018, p. 6)

...If there are more examples, it should be more interesting. We can also analyze the differences between different cultures and matters needing attention through examples... (PYX, 2018, p. 5)

These two findings have important implications for producing and choosing MOOCs for students, whose cognitive level and language proficiency should be taken into account. For learners with relatively low-level language proficiency, the choices of topics would better begin with those which are specific and related to daily life, then move to abstract topics like different values and ways of thinking. The examples which are given for analysis, additionally, should be diverse to avoid over-westernization or over-Americanization, for students should enable themselves to have more comprehensive and critical understanding of IC.

Concluding Remarks

As is stated by Chi at al. in 2016, MOOC can enrich the IC experience with its learners from all over the world, provide multi-channels for cultivating students' ICC with information-sharing forums, satisfy the needs of different cultural groups for learning experience with multiple online presentation methods and enrich the teaching content and teaching style of IC (Chi at al, 2016). Therefore, In order to provide students more learning opportunities and improve their learning experiences, in light of the above-mentioned findings about students' perceptions of the IC MOOC from SISU, applying MOOCs into teaching IC might be a good supplementary to traditional classroom. This research hopefully stimulates future researchers to mine the potential of study MOOCs with more diverse data collection from different MOOCs, and how learners from different cultures interact with each other through MOOCs.

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