THE CASE STUDY OF MOOCS FOR UNIVERSITY STUDENTS IN JAPAN

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Abstract - Massive Open Online Courses (MOOCs) are borderless, free educational resources and materials for all learners who want to study at any time, whatever they want, wherever they are, and whoever they are. MOOCs were started mainly in the United States in 2012 (JMOOC, 2016), and there were a total of 81 million MOOC learners all over the world in 2017 (Shah, 2018). The implementation of MOOCs in English as a foreign language (EFL) classes, however, was hardly been known in Japan in 2014. This researcher has been utilizing appropriate MOOCs with first-year students as a means of self-directed learning in required courses at Niigata University of International and Information Studies (NUIS) since 2014. The potential value and effectiveness of MOOCs are clarified and demonstrated by the data findings and analysis of questionnaires completed by NUIS students.

Keywords - MOOCs, E-learning, Self-directed Learning; EFL

I. INTRODUCTION

This study reveals the effect of MOOCs (Massive Open Online Courses) as a method to enhance student motivation and self-directed learning, and to help them acquire the key skills needed in order to succeed; the study was conducted at Niigata University of International and Information Studies with overseas universities. We offered two types of MOOCs to first-year students majoring in international studies at NUIS: "University Preparation Course" at the University of East Anglia and "Beginner's Guide to Writing in English for University Study" at the University of Reading. These courses constitute two of the six MOOC platforms (Yamada, 2014) offered by FutureLearn (FL). FL is a digital education provider launched in December 2012 and owned by the Open University in Milton Keynes, UK.

With the establishment of the new faculty at NUIS in 2014, 132 first-year students were required to take two compulsory CEP (Communicative English Program) courses and a BE (Basic English) course for one year. In the BE course, they learn introductory reading and writing as well as basic English grammar. One MOOC, selected especially by this author, was assigned to them as a five-week self-study course in 2015 and 2016, and a six-week course in 2017. The aim of this MOOC is to improve fundamental academic skills for ESL/EFL students who plan to enter or transfer to universities in English-speaking countries and for ESL/EFL learners who want to brush up their writing skills for their future career. Finally, this paper shows the positive results of a survey and the students' feedback after completion of the MOOC.

II. MOOC TRENDS IN 2016–2017

Udacity, established by Sebastian Thrun at Stanford University, launched the first MOOC in 2012, which is almost seven years ago. Nowadays, the majority of "non-native English speaker" (NNSE) users register for various courses either in English or in another language they are interested in. According to Shah's (2018) Class Central report, approximately 81 million people have registered for 9400 MOOCs at over 800 universities in 2018, as shown on Figure 1. Webb and Doman (2017) presented the ratio of nationalities enrolled in MOOCs in 2016 at TESOL 2017 in Seattle: 35% of the participants were from the US, 25% were Middle-East nationals, 25% came from Asian countries, and 5% were other nationalities. This shows that one fourth of users come from mainly Asian countries such as India, China, Korea, and Japan.

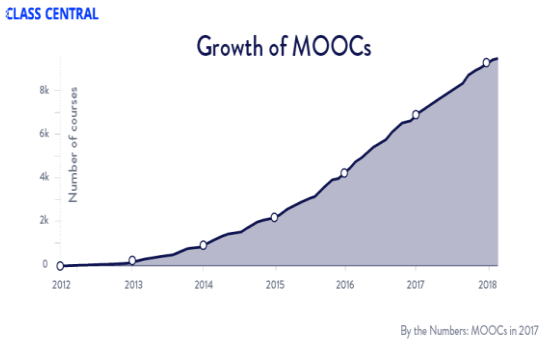


FIGURE 1.The Growth of MOOCs Worldwide. (Shah, 2018)

III. PROCEDURE

Participants

There were 126 students registered for the MOOCs, and 120 of them who completed their course (over 95% of the registered students). They were all Japanese university students at the Faculty of International Studies. After their completion, they provided feedback in a survey.

As part of self-directed learning, one of the MOOCs that the author chose, "A Beginner's Guide to Writing in English for University Study" by the University of

Reading in the UK, was implemented in the second semester from January to March 2018. The duration of the free online course was five weeks, with a three-hour study section each week. Anyone who completed 100% of the course is eligible to pay £42 and attain a certificate of achievement from the University of Reading.

The content of the course is for students to acquire academic English writing skills as a preparatory course for university because academic writing differs from other kinds of writing. This MOOC has been developed to guide students to study the basics of academic writing and brush up on their English language skills. In this program, Prof. Steve Thomas, director of the Academic English Program at University of Reading, helps overseas students to acquire their full academic potential. Of the course, he states,

You'll develop some proficiency in the key areas of "academic" grammar, learn about the stages in essay writing, and produce an essay of your own. You'll also explore how to organize an essay, write in an academic style, and use tools to evaluate your own writing and other learners' writing, so that by the end of the course you're able to write good, basic academic essays. (FutureLearn, 2017, para. 2)

Procedure for MOOC Study in and outside of Class

Step 1. The student completes the registration and is assigned to a MOOC in the computer lab together with a teaching assistant.

Step 2. After registration, each student completes a three-hour study per week using their own device, such as a PC, tablet, or smartphone, over six weeks as their on-/off-campus self-directed study.

Step 3. The student essay is read with feedback given interactively online by other students around the world as part of the assignment, while the student also gives feedback to the other students on their essays.

Step 4. The student's understanding and progress can be checked on their own device every week, as a weekly quiz is assigned and marked.

Step 5. The student completes the six-section program, and sees the blue bars just below each week. This designates the completion of all six sections of the MOOC (see Figure 2). After the completion of the sixth section, the 100% completion is shown as in Figure 3.

Step 6. Finally, the feedback sheet that the student completes must be sent to the program coordinator at the student's university (the author).

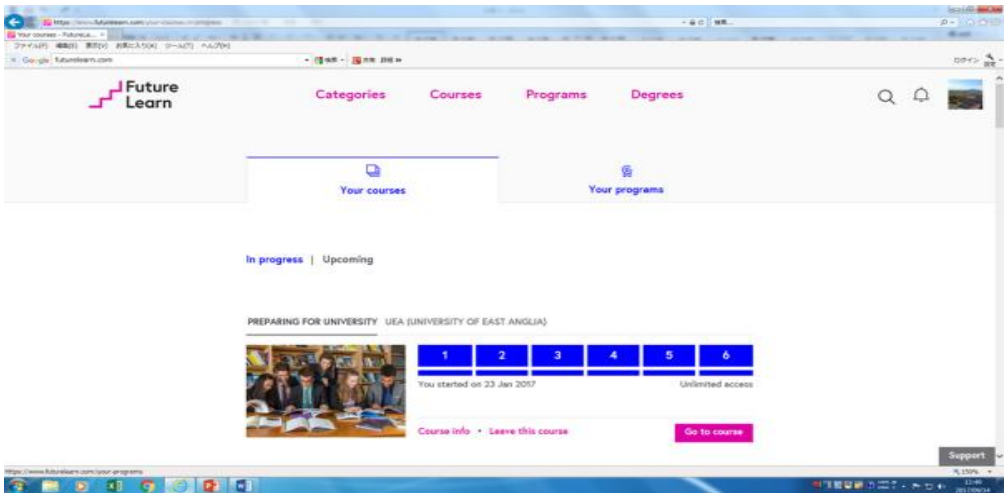


Figure 2. Screenshot showing the student's on the MOOC. This screenshot indicates that the MOOC has been completed. This is shown by the blue bars under each of the six numbered blue boxes. One bar appears under each box as that section of the MOOC is completed. (From the FutureLearn website)

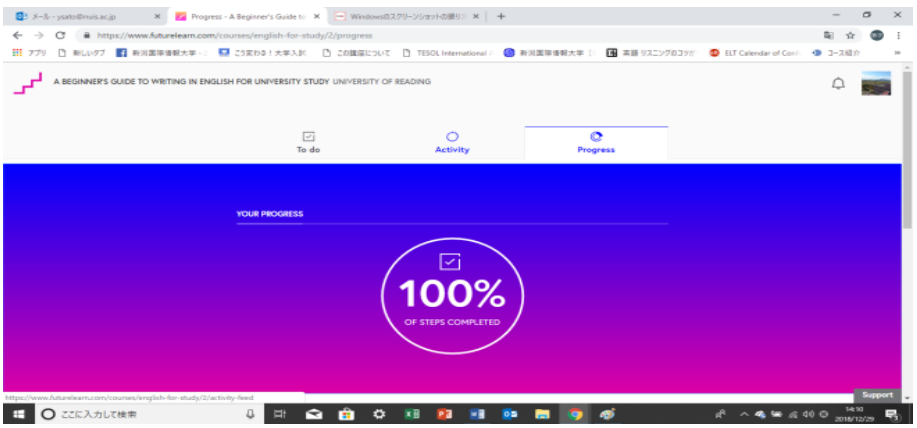


Figure 3. Screenshot showing that all the steps of the MOOC have been completed. (From the FutureLearn website)

IV. DISCUSSION

In the latter part of the students' second semester, this five-week MOOC was introduced to 126 first-year students at NUIS and was completed by more than 95% of them on their own devices on and off campus. As the result of the survey completed by the NUIS students, 71% of them responded that they mainly used their own mobile phones to study the program, while completing the final essay in the fifth week with their own or their family's personal computer (PC) at home. During spring break, the majority utilized their own mobile phones off campus rather than on campus since less than 20% of them owned their own PC, and additionally, they responded on the feedback sheet that it was easy for them to access the MOOC by mobile phone wherever they were.

The survey about MOOCs conducted among the NUIS first-year students in the study showed that approximately 95% of them completed the entire MOOC and more than 80% recognized it as being effective (see Figure 4). It is deduced that this is due to (a) more than 5.7 million people gained access to high quality and free online education from top universities and specialist organizations (Marszal, 2012) and (b) the NUIS students realized that MOOCs were not as difficult as they had previously expected. Merely by staying connected to the Internet, they were able to study at any time and in any place to obtain credits from among more than 100 academic courses in FL throughout a year. According to the results of Question 2, more than 20% of the students responded that three skills (listening, writing, and reading) were acquired in equal amounts because the aim of this MOOC at University of Reading was to learn how to use English for overseas study at an institution of higher education and to develop English skills, such as writing, vocabulary, and grammar (see Figure 5). In Question 3, more than 60% of students responded positively that they were able to develop their language skills through the MOOC (see Figure 6). Some students pointed out the effectiveness of MOOCs and positive attitudes towards them, including high quality and no-cost online education from prestigious institutions without any limitation of location or the device they are using. Yet, others negatively indicated the reality that more than half of the students had to complete their final essay on a mobile phone because they did not have a PC to use at home, and they found it difficult to concentrate deeply on the course throughout the entire five weeks.

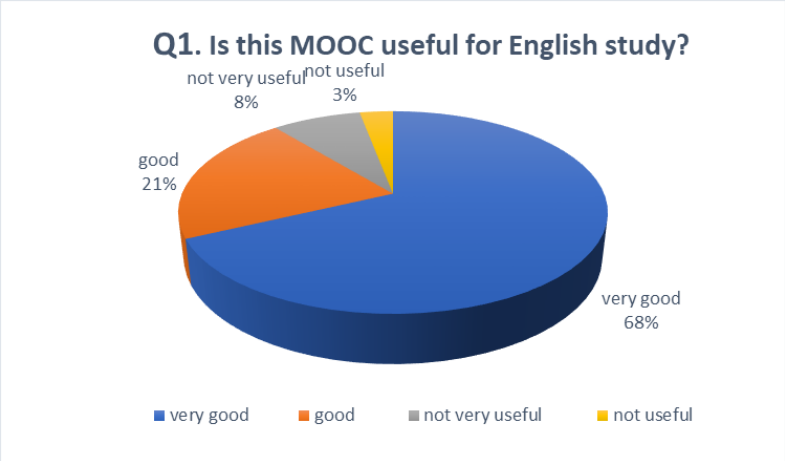


Figure 4. This figure shows how the students assessed the MOOC in terms of English study on the survey (N = 126).

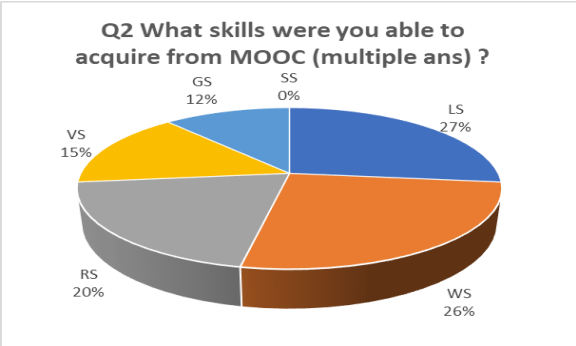


Figure 5.This figure shows how the students rated on the survey five English skills (listening, writing, reading, vocabulary, grammar, and speaking skills) acquired through the MOOC (N = 126). [LS = listening skills, WS = writing skills, RS = reading skills, VS = vocabulary skills, GS = grammar skills, SS = speaking skills.]

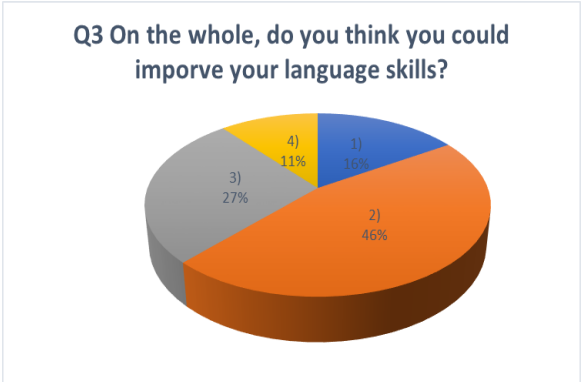


Figure 6.This figure shows how the students reported on the improvement of their language skills through the MOOC. There were four responses: 1) Strongly agree, 2) Agree, 3) Neither agree nor disagree, 4) Disagree (N = 126).

V. CONCLUSION

A primary limitation of this study is that student progress had to be assessed only after the completion of the course. The photo of the progressing achievement with his/her final essay enables the researcher to check and evaluate. The MOOC in the required course introduced by the author is a part of self-directed learning, and the main goal was to enable students of English as a foreign language (EFL) to experience the effectiveness of MOOCs and the infinite possibilities of MOOC study, as well as acquisition of English language skills. As present, anyone, who cannot study suitable courses either in their own or a foreign country economically and environmentally can make use of MOOCs anywhere in the world and take free online courses as lifelong education at any time. Additionally, the upgraded course (at US$59) allows learners to get unlimited access to MOOCs from FutureLearn, and a certificate of achievement as proof of successful course completion.

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