The Role of MOOCs in the Continuous Professional Development of ELT Professionals

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Abstract

Massive open online courses (MOOCs) are known worldwide as one of the rich resource to enhance continuous professional developmental (CPD) opportunities of English language teachers (ELTs) across the world. The principal strength of MOOCs lies in systematic design of courses, highly researched content along with team endeavours of several professional course designers and subject experts. Moreover, they are well-structured and provide global exposure to the language teachers on the recent advancements in the areas of teaching strategies. Further, teachers who are deprived of specialised training and knowledge in any area can always choose such exclusive courses to enhance their competency, for make steady progress and to grow professionally. In addition to this, it promotes learner-friendly instructional strategies which result in conducting various pair and group activities to encourage students' active involvement and participation.

The objective of the study is to explore the efficacy of employing MOOCs for the CPD of English language teachers in the ESL context in India. The method adopted for this study was to analyze the recent literature on the role of MOOCs in improving language teachers' ability in teaching, designing materials, updating their knowledge besides integrating technology for better teaching and learning process. Further, the study explores the positive impact MOOCs on teachers' CPD activities. It also examines whether Technology enhanced language learning through MOOCs can be considered as effective as face-to face professional training sessions or more. It is concluded with the advantages of MOOCs in revolutionising the process of learning and CPD of ELT professionals.

Keywords: MOOCs, CPD, ELT, professional development

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Introduction

The analysis of previous studies on the technology enabled language teaching (TELT) focuses on assessing the potential of integrating technology in teaching for successful learning outcome and to influence policy makers positively to invest and promote TELT in the future. Moreover, educators, curriculum designers, professional language trainers, teaching professionals who are inquisitive are equipped to identify suitable technological tools and make informed decisions in making imparting language skills to their students.

Technology enhanced language teaching results in using a lot of aids in teaching such as MOOCs, Webinars, Prezi presentation, Virtual conferences, online seminars, audio and visual resources, computers, laptops, television, digital classrooms, internet, virtual teaching, online discussion forums, blogs etc. To examine the positive influence of TELT through MOOCs in the continuous professional development (CPD) of English language teachers, it is unreasonable to assess one or two works for comprehensive outputs. Nevertheless, a detailed analysis of the available literature will shed light on the specific and general findings of the topic of research (Kennedy, 2007, Knolf, 2006, Fink, 2014, Ridley, 2012).

To analyze the significance of the constructive role of TELT in English language teachers (ELTs) CPD, it is required to discuss the essential outcome of some of the seminal studies conducted experimentally in this field. Review of literature available in the area creates a platform to gather, review, synthesize and present literature produced in the previous and present times (Haidich 2010, Julien 2015, Tatsioni, 2008). Further, this meticulous analysis examines and details the essential role of TELL in CPD of ELTs.

Barriers in CPD

In view of today's rapidly changing world, English language teachers are expected to adopt changing times and customize their teaching methods, materials, and techniques to suit learners' requirements. With the hectic teaching schedule, overwhelming administrative responsibilities and unending paperwork, there is little or no room for teachers in their workplaces to get trained and equipped with necessary skill-set to keep abreast of the latest developments in their domain field as stated in an on-line article titled The Secret Teacher (2014). In the same lines, Trapper (2018) reported that excess workload, lack of encouragement from the institutions along with minimal or no training support are demotivating factors for teachers across the world to quit their profession quicker than they can be substituted.

It was reported by many studies that teachers experience feelings associated with burnout, get frustrated, undergo pressure and feel disturbed when the expected course objectives are not

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realized through classroom teaching (Donna, 2016, Scherer, M. 2012, Segura, H., 2011, Warren, F., & Sorges, S. J., 2013). Consequently, teachers feel discouraged and become helpless to bring intended necessary transformation in their teaching. With professional support from within and beyond their workplace in the form of TELT programmes will act as source of strength for teachers. It is because teachers are the major change agents in the field of education in general and language teaching in particular. Providing them opportunities for technology enhanced learning through MOOCs; providing sufficient time to learn; giving space for practice, encouraging to implement the learning outcome will lead to room for introspection on innovative teaching and learning strategies for effective teaching and learning process (Linda et al. 2017). This process ensures self-learning and a systematic self-reflection to contribute for their and their students' development.

Brief History and Definition of MOOCs

The concept of designing and delivering courses online in the form of MOOCs has come into effect for more than a decade. When a course by name 'Connectivism and Connective Knowledge' was delivered by George Siemens and Stephen Downes in 2008, David Comier christened such online courses MOOCs. This course though it was first of its kind received a lot of attention was enrolled by 2000 interesting members globally. The popularity of MOOCs is grown leaps and bounds since then because of its quality content, updated information, free of cost, easily accessible to many with internet and scope for professional development.

With the changing times, many professionally driven organizations, educational institutions and corporate-houses are interested in exploiting the advantages of MOOCs. For instance, hundreds of courses on a variety of cutting edge topics are offered virtually by many platforms such as FutureLearn, edX, The Great Courses, ALISON, The Canvas Network. Some of these courses are offered free of cost and others are charged as per service provider's policies. There is a range of subjects like English language, Linguistics, Science, Technology, Computers, Foreign Languages, Humanities, Social Sciences, Arts, Sculpture, Finance, Trade, Management etc. are offered for students and professionals across the world.

In addition to this, MOOCs are called massive because of the large number of enrollments of international participants which is over and above 100 000. Stating more details, Richard (2014) reported that there are two major types in MOOCs. The former one is 'xMOOCs' where the content of lecture is replicated and is concluded with a summative assessment. 'cMOOCs' is synonymous with Cooperative Learning, in other words, Open Learning, provides more independence for participants in selecting specific learning materials focusing on specific learning aims.

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Structure and Duration of MOOCs

MOOCs are generally scheduled between 3 to 12 weeks and can be accessed 24/7 around the world with internet connection. Content delivery is done synchronous and asynchronous modes depending on the course. For instance live programmes, interactive discussions and talks are delivered synchronously in the form of webinars which require prior registration of participants and joining the live sessions at the specified time. On the other hand, MOOCs are delivered in asynchronous mode, where the course content can be accessed by students at their own time, place and pace apart from completing it within the deadline. Questions can be posed and doubts can be clarified in discussion forums available in MOOCs. Evaluation pattern of participants is done through multiple-choice, open and close ended questions. Assignments once uploaded will be properly evaluated and graded which is followed by feedback. The course is free and does not require participants to buy any textbook or material. Having a pre-requisite is not mandatory though internet connection is essential to get access to the course. The course will be conducted with a series of quizzes checking comprehension of various modules of the topic. A certificate acknowledging participants' performance, learning outcome and score will be generated at the end of the course.

Learning Potential of MOOCs

Technology enhanced learning through MOOCs renders support, strength and guidance to language teachers to overcome several problems listed here. These programmes infuse confidence, cheerfulness and ability in them to deal with various problems and challenges in the context of language classroom. MOOCs which are offered on various cutting-edge topics in the field of language teaching impart sophisticated methods, techniques and approaches in teaching which empower individual teachers and it helps providing required support to their students, colleagues and institutions in general. Laying stress on the significance CPD of teachers, Donaldson (2011) suggests:

"Long-term and sustained improvement which has a real impact on the quality of children's learning will be better achieved through determined efforts to build the capacity of teachers themselves to take responsibility for their own professional development, building their pedagogical expertise, engaging with the need for change, undertaking well-thought through development and always evaluating impact in relation to improvement in the quality of children's learning" (p. 84).

Reporting on the role of MOOCs in education, Yousef, Chatti, Schroeder, Wosnitza and Jakobs (2014) stated:

"Massive open online courses (MOOCs) have drastically changed the way we learn as well as how we teach. The main aim of MOOCs is to provide new opportunities to a

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massive number of learners to attend free online courses from anywhere all over the world. MOOCs have unique features that make it an effective technology-enhanced learning (TEL) model in higher education and beyond" (p. 9).

Moreover, MOOCs can facilitate learning to a large number of teachers working in various parts of the world. Supporting this point of view, Pradeep (2018) stated that MOOCs which are freely available virtually powered by Internet can provide a lot of learning potential for language teachers' professional growth on a regular basis. MOOCs are designed and delivered professionally in online platforms become of certain features

Defining the key features of MOOCs, Jolie (2014) revealed three essential characteristics "varied definitions of openness, barriers to persistence, and a distinct structure that takes the form as one of two pedagogical approaches." These necessary features include accessibility of courses online; availability for massive number of people and completely free and open for all to enroll and learn.

According to Nikolaos Koukis, Athanassios Jimoyiannis (2019) MOOCs promote teachers' professional empowerment. While stating this, they reported four key design features of MOOCs:

"a) connecting course content and teacher learning practices to the educational reality of the classroom; b) defining concrete learning objectives of the course; c) promoting teachers' collaborative learning; and d) creating a learning community among peers."

Information furnished here reflects high potentiality for learning and development through MOOCs. Regardless of the potentiality, research in the area of effectiveness of MOOCs for CPD needs to be expanded and conducted in a systematic way. Experimental studies should be promoted with a special focus on participation of teachers in MOOCs and its impact on learners, institutions and teachers' personal and professional growth. The literature available on this area shows that a few researchers explored the impact of individual MOOCs on teachers in terms of the course design and content. It indicates room for improvement and further systematic research in this area.

Reporting the crucial role of MOOCs in CPD Kleiman, Wolf, and Frye (2013) stated that these programmes are implemented innovatively during the time when the reach-out of traditional training is limited to only some teachers. With the increasing number of educational institutions in rural, urban and semi-urban parts, providing formal training on a variety of topics for teachers on a massive scale is almost impossible. With the advent of MOOCs, the magnitude of this problem is tackled to some extent. To exploit the usefulness and effectiveness of these

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programmes, teachers should be encouraged and provided facilities and time by their workplaces. The design and delivery of MOOOCs are studied by Falkner (2014) in Australia while developing a cost-effective MOOCs for the professional development of teachers was reported by Laurillard (2014).

Contribution of MOOC Platforms in the CPD of ELTs

MOOCs have a meaningful role to play in improving the efficacy of English language teaching in schools, colleges and universities in the global context. Primarily, inquisitive teachers are motivated to take up them for self-learning, self-study along with personal and professional development. Secondarily, the courses are meticulously planned, carefully designed in collaboration with subject experts, professional trainers and educators. Further, these courses are made free and open for all which can be enrolled and completed in the stipulated time frame. Stating a similar view Anna Lloyd (2020), Head of Educational Technology, Cambridge English, said:

> "The best thing about MOOCs is that people from all over the world can gain knowledge and skills quickly, for free and at a time and place that suits them. We're excited to give people around the world access to information from our team of experts."

Cambridge English which is part of Cambridge University is renowned globally for creating high quality MOOCs and imparting language skills to millions of people. Cambridge on-line courses are offered through Future Learn (FL), based in the UK. FL being a societal learning platform offers free virtual programmes designed by experts and professional trainers. FL is credited with the huge database 3 million registered participants taking up more than 6.5 million courses as mentioned in its official website. Two MOOCs by name Inside IELTS and Exploring the World of English language teaching are scheduled currently in CAE website in addition to many courses supported by FL. Duration of these courses is six weeks and a minimum of two hours weekly study is needed to obtain the certification. The former one is aimed at providing necessary inputs of exam, i.e. preparation material, strategies to score higher band and techniques to master LSRW skills, for the learners appearing for the International English Language Testing System (IELTS) examination. The later one explores the ins and outs of the world of ELT including various aspects of teaching EL across the world (CAE, 2020).

The British Council, also known as BC, is a leading global organization of UK established for promoting cultural relations and educational opportunities. BC is reputed for its global expertise in teaching English in on-line and off-line environment apart from designing MOOCs which are supported by FL. These are courses are designed with an intention to contribute for professional development of teachers and enhance communicative competency of learners living in various parts of the world. Language Assessment in the Classroom and English

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in Early Childhood: Language Learning and Development are the currently listed MOOCs in BC website. Information pertaining to designing various types of tests and assessment techniques will be explored in the first course. Acquisition of language in the childhood, ways to develop language besides supporting and challenging children learning and measuring progress is the purpose of second one. Plethora of other courses related to the domain of ELT, ESP, CPD, Testing, Evaluation etc. are kept open for learners to choose, learn and earn a certificate.

In addition to this, MOOCs' various subjects are offered by leading global universities in the USA, UK, Australia, Canada, New Zealand and others employing platforms such as Coursera, Canvas.net, Edx, Udemy, Udacity, FutureLearn, etc.

The Impact of MOOCs on CPD of ELTs

English language teachers' involvement and completion of courses speak volumes about the kind of support and confidence theses MOOCs infuse in them. It was reported in a study https://teachonline.ca/sites/default/files/tools-trends/downloads/five_ways_moocs_are_influencing_teaching.pdf in (2016) that MOOCs created a sense of urgency and moulded language teachers to integrate technology in their teaching for creating a better learning environment for their learners. Further, it influenced them to change their traditional teacher-centered role to a learner-centered teacher facilitating students' learning by being a guide and mentor. It was highlighted that while doing courses, many teachers personally experienced and admitted the necessity to update their obsolete teaching practices and to reflect more on making classroom interaction purposeful and fruitful. By employing learner-centered practices, 'educational democracy' was promoted amongst students to question, clarify and disagree with teachers in the classroom discussions. Such healthy interactions provide more room for learners to speak their mind, boost their confidence in improving their language skills. Qualities such as flexibility, openness and inventiveness are instilled through MOOCs: teachers' teaching practices can be flexible whether it is face-to-face or on-line teaching; they are more receptive and positive in allowing learners to present, perform and play a central role in learning and inventive in using creative methods and activities to suit learners' language requirements.

Enrollment in national and international professional bodies (ELTAI and IATEFL) besides social networking with language teachers across the globe was improved steadily. Their ability in identifying classroom problems, finding solutions, designing their own material based on students was enriched. There was a visible progress found in teachers' willingness to improve knowledge by reading articles, presenting and publishing papers besides increased interest in attending MOOCs and webinars for their professional development. Knowledge acquired form the MOOCs along with fruitful interactive discussions with the trainers, moderators and co-participants helped teachers to some extent in sharing their problems and getting required help.

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There were studies reporting teachers' ability in distinguishing ESP and EAP in teaching besides developing curriculum accordingly was improved. Above all, teachers experienced continuous systematic learning, self-reflection, sharing and collaboration and steady progress in their professional competence through MOOCs.

Validity and Need for MOOCs to Indian Teaching Professionals

The fraternity of English language teaching professionals requires technological tools in teaching, learning inputs for continuous professional development, take home value for courses to implement in their classroom teaching and innovative techniques and methods in the context of teaching English as a second language (ESL). The availability of training programmes may not equip large number of English teachers in India with required skill-set. Limited means of professional development may turn good language teachers into teachers without any motivation and interest in their profession. Consequently, it negatively influences the students' learning outcomes.

Literature pertaining to this area shows that of all the factors in academic institutions, teachers play the most critical role in student progress and accomplishment. Statin gin this context, a famous Economist Eric Hanushek reports "a child taught by a good teacher gains 1.5 grade-level equivalents, while a child taught by a bad teacher only gets half an academic year's worth." Moreover, the recent report of the World Development Report On Education (2018) mentions that "teacher skills and motivation both matter"

It implies that teachers require continuous training and supporting system in the form of MOOCs to provide sophisticated tools and techniques for imparting language teaching which will boost their confidence and upskill their learning outputs for effective teaching and learning process. Moreover, it is the need of the hour and necessity of the day in the context of ESL teachers in India.

or poor quality hence, teachers should explore alternative means such as MOOCs for upskilling, support and motivation for professional growth.

Shortcoming s of MOOCs

One of the common limitations of MOOCs is the certification part. It is not recognized or valued as much as the full-time courses offered by institutions. Moreover, some courses are not customized to fulfill varied needs and requirements of some learners across the globe. Further, there is little or no room for the registered participants to seek any assistance/clarification/feedback from the course designers/professors instantaneously (Bergelson, 2019). Along with this, peer feedback on participants' assignments may not always

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provide required insights for further improvement. Above all, it is extremely difficult for some learners to recognize the quality aspects of certain courses before getting enrolled.

The course designers of MOOCs can look into these issues to design courses in the future to make these courses more valid, insightful and increase scope for continuous professional development of the participants.

Conclusion

In the conclusion, it can be stated that MOOCs have revolutionized the way people learn over the years. Carefully designed, meticulously structured, innovative and pedagogically sound course are offered in the field higher education for the purpose of life-long learning. The large number of enrollments and completion rate globally represents success rate and quality of courses being offered. The literature reviews shed light on certain exclusive courses which included sophisticated novel practices, methods and approaches in the field of ELT teaching. This process positively reinforces the effectiveness of technology enabled language teaching and its advantages.

In addition to this, MOOC as a technological source for advancement of life-long learning requires a lot further investigation which can focus on conducting and examining longitudinal studies and their impact on teachers, learners and educational institutions in general to explore and exploit MOOCs in their complete sense and purpose. Research should be done to assess how teachers' continuous professional development leads to learners' development, autonomy in learning and engagement in the process of teaching and learning.
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