Incorporating MOOCs
in Teaching a Pre-A1 Arabic University Course

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Abstract

The Massive Open Online Course (MOOC) system emerged as a practical and validated academic solution for individuals and institutions. Acknowledging the demand, Qatar University (QU) developed the first Arabic course for non-native speakers (Ar-MOOC) on edX in 2022. ArMOOC demonstrated a significant demand for online language learning, attracting over 32,000 participants [Al-Hamad and Ibrahim n.d.]. This paper aims to address the following key questions regarding the integration of the Arabic course on edX: How does this course align with the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages (CEFR) standards? Can integrating the course enhance the achievement of learning outcomes (LOs)? What is the optimal approach to integrating the course within the curriculum? What design challenges need to be considered to effectively achieve the course goals?

Keywords: AFL (Arabic as a Foreign Language), Arabic, Ar-MOOC, MOOC.

Introduction

The COVID-19 pandemic has brought about significant changes in various aspects of our lives, particularly in the realm of education. With the emergence of e-learning as a vital lifeline, our educational system was saved from complete collapse.

In response, MOOCs became an integral part of HE and "branded as the tool for 'innovative disruption' that will improve

education" [Zaremohzzabieh 2022: 1]. MOOCs are available to a large and diverse audience, cover various subjects and are open to anyone without strict prerequisites. This flexibility in learning schedules, often including interactive elements, depends on the course design, and may provide certificates upon completion.

A LMOOC (Language MOOC) specifically presents an efficient method for acquiring or improving language proficiency. This approach combines the convenience of online learning with well-organized and engaging language courses especially for xMOOCs (Extended MOOCs), where it provides clear language instruction and a sequence of activities based on a structured curriculum usually aligned with a language framework (e.g. CEFR). Yet, one can suggest that LMOOC has a long way to go for improvements and to better its practices and effectivity [Sokolik 2014].

Methodology

This initial study applies the Content Analysis to the data in order to address the first question of LOs alignment with descriptors of CEFR. Analyzing the records of the learners' performance and other data will give indications to the achievement of LOs.

In order to ensure a significant contribution to achieving the course LOs, the second question will examine to which extent it followed the ADDIE model of instructional design (Analyze, Design, Develop, Implement and Evaluate) as our selected e-didactic approach and instructional design model. ADDIE has been tested for various MOOCs and proved its success and popularity [Buchem and Okatan 2021: 250].

As for the third and fourth questions, they will qualitatively evaluate and discuss the suggested approaches to integrating course

Arabic on MOOC

Arabic is the official language of 22 countries, the native language of over 400 million people, and the religious language of approximately two billion people. This fact coincides with a growing international demand, especially given the unprecedented demand for learning and teaching Arabic after 9/11 [Abu-Melhim 2014].

The Islamic Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (ISESCO) pointed out the need for "developing the teaching methodologies of Arabic in a non-Arab context" (ISESCO 2009: 16–17). Due to the geopolitical challenges in the region in recent years ISESCO has and has devoted more resources to use "educational technologies and multimedia in teaching Islamic education and Arabic for non-Arabic speakers" (ISESCO 2015: 25)." [Al-Hamad 2017: 7].

Qatar reacted to this need and call through many policies and legislations, which promote the use of Arabic in a country where the Arabic speaking communities do not make a majority [Al-Hamad 2017: 8–9]. In addition, Qatar invests in promoting Arabic language and culture via various platforms, including contributing to meeting some of the international demand on learning Arabic as a second language [Al-Hamad 2017: 7].

The above presented the first phase in ADDIE (i.e. Analysis) where the examination of the gap in available AFL resources clearly highlighted the need for reliable standardized e-learning tools. It also underscored the demand from the precisely defined target audience. As a result, QU actively engaged in this project, identifying the essential resources, content, infrastructure, and expertise needed to address this need.

Didactic Approach

In a relatively early work, Maggie Sokolik suggested a few guidelines for a successful LMOOC, including the engagement

and interaction but not limited to that, but by 'Making the Massive Human(e)', where she repeatedly insisted on the human involvement in all levels of LMOOC delivery (pre, during and post) [Sokolik 2014].

Therefore, prior to moving into the design and development phases of ArMOOC it is important to recognize that MOOCs is largely based on a Content and Language Integrated Learning (CLIL) approach to language teaching, which is a very common approach using MOOCs and the didactic principles of the integration of digital technologies [Richards and Rodgers 2014: 116–138; Zubkov 2022]. Yet, MOOCs employ various pedagogical methods, spanning from a collection of videos to more immersive approaches that mimic a conversational learning experience. The xMOOC is expected to include well-structured knowledge-checks, cultural insights, problem-solving activities, a variety of assessment tools, and feedback mechanisms.

ArMOOC represented a good learning solution that align learning objectives with the Pre-A1 defined in CEFR, the "Pre-A1 represents a "milestone" halfway towards Level A1, a band of proficiency at which the learner has not yet acquired a generative capacity, but relies upon a repertoire of words and formulaic expressions" [Council of Europe 2020: 243].

The instructional and testing strategies of ArMOOC were linked to course objectives in a logical sequence that enable learners to acquire skills and knowledge. Therefore, firstly, the instructor demonstrates the process and explains to learners what to expect, show another video of a dialogue while learner watches and comment on it, then allow learner to have a go through knowledge checks aligned with the LOs, the instructor gives up his active role to the learner and offers support and feedback when needed.

The design of ArMOOC considered several key instructional principles, including:

1. The nature of the course as a 'Self-Study' 'Self-Pace' course: ArMOOC offers well-explained materials through a semi-guided approach. Learners can progress at their own pace trusting they reach the LOs following a well-timed course, which has been carefully pre-planned. English serves as the medium language of instruction to enhance accessibility.

2. Simplification and Diglossia: Recognizing the linguistic feature of diglossia in Arabic, as highlighted by Charles Ferguson [1959], ArMOOC has chosen to focus on '*faṣīḥa*' a simplified version of Arabic, or 'Educated Spoken Arabic' as the linguistic basis. On another account, a Romanized Arabic script was used to enable learners to access dialogues and other material, while learning Arabic alphabet.

3. Intensification: ArMOOC incorporates knowledge checks and assessments at various points to reinforce learning and ensure comprehension,

Pedagogical Approach

By integrating multiple LL approaches in ArMOOC, a course can cater to the diverse needs and preferences of learners, making LL engaging and effective. These LL approaches include:

1. Communicative Approach: Emphasizing real-life communication and language use [Richards and Rodgers 2014: 83–116], ArMOOC is organized around various themes, situations or scenarios that learners are likely to encounter. The Situational Approach helps learners acquire language relevant to their needs, such as education, travel, or everyday life.

2. Task-based Approach: Focusing on practical language tasks and activities. The intensity in graded and non-graded assessments presented in ArMOOC involves learners com-

pleting specific language-related tasks and help achieving specific goals [Richards and Rodgers 2014: 174–214].

3. Spiral Approach: A spiral curriculum revisits and reinforces previously learned language concepts at regular intervals, ensuring retention and gradual improvement. This is taken into consideration when designing the second ArMOOC.

4. Cultural Awareness: ArMOOC incorporates both overt and covert cultural messages, fostering cultural awareness and sensitivity among learners. This was apparent in the diversity and representation of people's color, nationality, gender, dress... etc. Specific remarks and videos discussed the cultural issues in-detail, it is recorded that these videos were completely viewed by 75–80% of the participants [Al-Hamad and Ibrahim n.d.: edX Insight].

5. Grammar-Translation Approach: Adult learners have the ability to conceptualize abstract ideas. Therefore, despite the general communicative language learning ArMOOC follows, it gave some grammatical explanations for various remarks.

Part of the development phase, QU allowed a thorough validation process including pilot testing by academics, practitioners and learners. QU courses reached the phase of implementation and launch in October 2022 of three xMOOCs, including ArMOOC.

The initial feedback and evaluation came within three months only, ArMOOC was ranked amongst "The 100 Most Popular Free Online Courses (2023 Edition) " [Patra 2022]. In one year only, the total enrolment reached 32,898 that stretched over 178 countries; it is noteworthy to say that 69.3% of the participants hold university degrees [Al-Hamad and Ibrahim n.d.: edX Insights]. The aforementioned figures might serve as an indicative formative evaluation stage in ADDIE [Buchem and Okatan 2021: 254]. The initial summative results were derived from the

answers of around 950 respondents in a post-MOOC 5-point Likert scale survey in which results showed that 85–90% were either strongly agreeing or agreeing in a positive manner with ArMOOC [Al-Hamad and Ibrahim n.d.: edX Courseware].
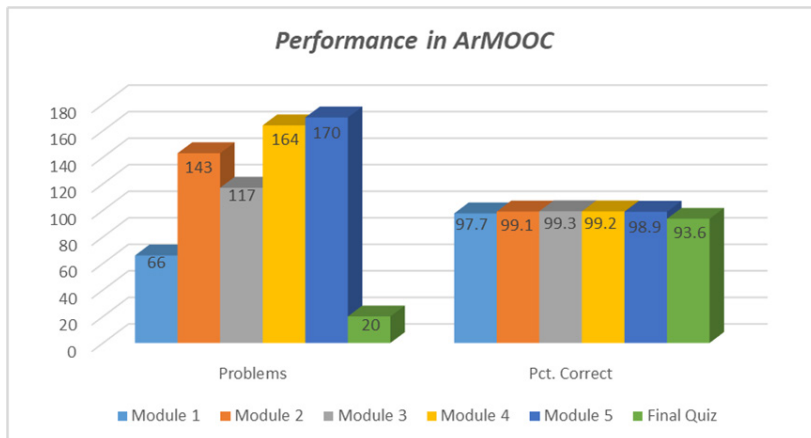
Graph 1. Learners' Performance in ArMOOC

However, out of the 454 learners who sat the 'Final Quiz' as 'Graded Conten' assessment tool, only 427 learners finished all 20 questions covering LOs of the five modules, the average grade of those learners was 93.6% as shown in *Graph. 1*, where learners scored no less than 97.7% in the 'Ungraded Problems' over all five modules.

The performance was exceptional as recorded by graph above, which emphatically suggests that the learners responded well to the learning strategies adapted in ArMOOC.

Integrating ArMOOC in Formal Education

Unlike other LMOOCs, ArMOOC had to allocate significant time and space for the learning of phonological and orthographic control. Arabic script, a Semitic right-to-left non-Romanized

script, should be integrated in the lesson plans without affecting the communicative approach. Therefore, while learners at ArMOOC indulge in various communicative situations from the very beginning, extra parallel instructional videos and tasks are presented for those who are not familiar with the phonological and orthographic nature of Arabic alphabet. This formed a bridge for some Arabic Heritage Learners who would be at least familiar with the phonological side of the letters [Al-Hamad 2021, 33–34], while the Qara'a who have studied reading Arabic via Quran classes might find it useful not to spend their time going through the reading the alphabet [Al-Hamad 2021].

In this section, a content analysis comparison between the Pre-A1 level descriptors in CEFR [Council of Europe 2020] and the ArMOOC LOs content to examine the relevance or alignment between them. Alexiou and Stathopoulou investigated CEFR-Companion Volume and found that "the total number of Pre-A1 level descriptors is 46 while the scales not including pre-A1 level descriptors are 54 (out of 84)" [2021: 16], then they have included all incidents of Pre-A1 descriptors in tables [2021: 23–28]. Out of these tables, the abstract Chart 1 below outlines the number of descriptors addressed in ArMOOC.

Aligning ArMOOC with the CEFR descriptors in Chart 1 shows that ArMOOC has addressed almost all descriptors and hence LOs. It is worth noting that ArMOOC presented the Arabic culture using various modes in different lessons, the remarks were present in the commentary on the first dialogue.

Niine et al. concluded that: "MOOCs can and should be integrated where they add value…one should not see MOOCs as a replacement of a full academic diploma track" [2022: 862]. Because "MOOCs cannot in principle serve as a Lego-block for diploma. " [Niine 2022: 863]. However, the support of integrating MOOCs positively influence the learning experience of learners [Niine

Chart 1

Aligning ArMOOC with the CEFR descriptors

Descriptors		Addressed in ArMOOC			Comment
		Yes	Not fully	No	
Reception	Spoken	4	1	—	—
	Written	6	2*	—	*Reading Comprehension
	Strategies	—	1	—	
Production	Overall	1	—	—	
	Spoken	2	—	—	
	Written	1	—	—	
	Strategies	1	—	—	
Interaction	Spoken	16	—	—	
	Written	3	—	—	
	Online	2	—	—	
	Strategies	2	2	—	
Mediation	Text	3	—	—	
	Concepts	—	—	—	
	Communication	—	—	—	
	Strategies	—	—	—	
Communicative Language Competence	Linguistic	2	—	—	
	Phonological Control*	—	—	—	*Phonological & orthographic control are covered thoroughly in ArMOOC.

Descriptors	Addressed in ArMOOC			Comment
	Yes	Not fully	No	
Sociolinguistic	—	—	—	
Pragmatic	2	—	—	
Plurilingual & Pluricultural Competence	—	—	—	ArMOOC paid attention to the intercultural communication and non-verbal communication.

2022: 864, Zaremohzzabieh 2022: 17], furthermore, research concludes "that the adaptation of these technologies in education will support innovative pedagogies, guaranteeing comprehensive and equitable Quality Education…" [Ahmed 2022: 13].

When considering the integration of ArMOOC into HE courses may face some challenges, including: could ArMOOC present itself as a learning solution to users, academic institutions, and others? Should ArMOOC be part of staggered process in TAFL in HE? Moreover, which institutional, personnel and pedagogical challenges and implications should we expect?

Conclusion

In their study on LMOOCs, Martín-Monje and Borthwick stated that although LMOOCs is considered as an emerging and expanding research field, it has "been recently identified as one of the less studied areas in CALL" (quoting: Gillespie 2020) [2021: 107].

However, compared to other modern languages, it is obvious that the field of AFL is still under-researched using empirical

evidence, likewise the research on technology use and its applications in the field. The methodologically sound quantitative and qualitative research will enhance the approaches and practices in AFL and lead to having best approaches in integrating technology in the age of AI.

Adapting the didactic and pedagogical approaches to the new and fast-growing industry and education trends, which will advance the creation of practical models and frameworks that lead to an improved teaching and learning practices. The new models including MOOC 5.0 appear to practitioners to reach best results [Ahmad 2022].

However, one cannot suggest that the main question of this paper has reached a definite answer; it is not completely evident that integrating ArMOOC into HE would be the right choice, despite its positive outcomes. Further research should be conducted in order to address on which route a HE institution should follow:

— Micro-credential: Replacement course to an existing one or a prerequisite for an A1 level course. Many institutions would perceive this as a way forward in education through the application of Technology-Enhanced Learning. *or*
— Flipped Classroom: ArMOOC may adopt a flipped classroom model, where learners review didactical materials (such as pre-recorded uploaded instructions and material) independently before engaging in pedagogical activities during synchronous or asynchronous class time.

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