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Exploring ESP Learners' Motivation: The Case of MOOC Integration into the University Curriculum.

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ABSTRACT

This research examines the problem of motivation as an important variable in language learning including ESP (English for specific purposes). Despite the fact that there are different approaches to cultivating motivation the author suggests considering the potential of massive open online courses (MOOCs) that may help language learners of non-linguistic specialties. This paper describes the results of the integration of MOOCs into the ESP course curriculum at the faculty of Business Informatics of the National Research University Higher School of Economics, Moscow. The integration of the MOOC component in the ESP course demonstrated that the educational outcome in this case might be higher than in a traditional course due to such factors as the content of instruction being tailored to the learning needs of IT students, regular and inspiring feedback to the students from the MOOC instructors, the use of interactive teaching materials and a personalized approach to learning. Research findings illustrate that imbedding MOOCs in the university ESP course could become the basis for the integrated study of special subjects and the English language in the international learning community, under the condition that on-campus courses have been re-designed to incorporate MOOC-like component.

Introduction

Under the influence of globalization and growing value of professionals able to productively communicate in their working place, ‘the demand for English for Specific Purposes continues to increase and expand throughout the world’ (Dudley-Evans, 2001, p.115). The field of ESP addresses the teaching and learning English as a foreign language where the goal of the learners is to use English in a particular domain (like business or technology). Teaching ESP has developed rapidly in the past forty years to become a major force in English language teaching and research (Hyland, 2007).

Russian tertiary education has always aimed at delivering knowledge and skills relevant to a profession. University students need courses that have an emphasis on practical outcomes, matching the needs and requirements of employers. To provide the students with all the advantages of modern university education at the Department of Business Informatics of the National Research University Higher School of Economics (NRU HSE) the ESP course ‘English for Information Technology Professionals’ has been taught for 9 years. This has led to a growth of the English language proficiency but unexpectedly it led to a decreasing level of the student motivation. First, this phenomenon was perceived indirectly through class observations with a decreasing number of students attending ESP classes, it was discussed in professional conversations with the faculty, and ESP instructors were not completely satisfied with the learner engagement. Finally, in 2017, when the ESP course was announced as an option, the number of the students enrolled in the course reduced by 25%.

The problem considered in this study stems from the discrepancies between the rising level of student language proficiency and the lowering level of motivation for learning a foreign language. It also attempts to find ways to raise the engagement of the learners studying ESP course.

Literature Review

Motivation is one of the most important variables in language learning. The study of motivation in an educational context has received considerable attention (e.g. Bray & McClaskey, 2015; Deci & Ryan, 1985; Dörnyei 20012; Dörnyei & Ushioda, 2011; Ehrman et al., 2003; Gardner & Lambert, 1972; Kormos & Dörnyei, 2000; Pintrich & Schunk, 1996; Reinders, 2016) given their association with learning and achievement. Teachers recognize the importance of motivation, with regard to intrinsic and extrinsic motivations, which are based on the different reasons or goals that give rise to an action (Deci & Ryan, 1985).

Intrinsic motivation comes from within the individual and is related to the individual’s identity and sense of well-being. Students are intrinsically motivated when learning is a goal in itself (Ehrman et al., 2003). They find intrinsically motivating tasks interesting and challenging; the reward is the enjoyment of the activity itself or a feeling of competence (self-efficacy) in doing the task (Bandura, 1997). In such tasks, students may experience ‘flow’, which is an optimal sensation of enjoyment and competence (Csikszentmihalyi, 1991).

Extrinsic motivation comes from outside the individual. Students are extrinsically motivated when learning is done for the sake of rewards (such as grades or praise) that are not inherently associated with the learning itself, that is, when learning or performing well becomes necessary to earning those rewards. (Ehrman et al., 2003)

Walqui (2000) argues that intrinsic motivation correlates more closely with language learning success than extrinsic motivation, but a student's total motivation is most frequently a combination of extrinsic and intrinsic motivation.

Teachers can increase their students' intrinsic motivation by providing them with learning experiences that meet their needs; and teachers can often enhance both students' persistence and sense of autonomy by giving students choices. Motivation thus depends greatly on the context, people involved, and specific circumstances (Pintrich & Schunk, 1996).

In terms of 'motivational intensity', motivation is the effort learners are prepared to make to learn a language and their persistence in learning. Learners might demonstrate particular orientations but be weakly or strongly motivated to achieve their goals (Gardner, 1985). Gardner and Lambert (1972) suggested that integrative motivation correlates most strongly with measures of L2 achievement but subsequent research has shown that in some teaching contexts (e.g. the Philippines or India) an instrumental motivation was more important. The extent to which each learner is prepared to pursue the learning goal (i.e. motivational intensity and perseverance) is important.

Kormos and Dörnyei (2000) investigated motivation in relation to oral performance on an argumentative task. They report a significant correlation between individual student willingness to communicate, their overall attitudes to the course and their attitudes to the particular task on the one hand, and the amount of speech produced on the other. This study suggests that task-based instruction needs to include a consideration of individual differences.

Obviously, motivation is a complex and multifaceted concept (Dörnyei, 2012). What motivates one learner may not be motivational for the other one. In some ways, it may be more productive, to speak of attempts to 'engage' learners. Making assumptions about what materials or instruction will make students want to learn (motivate them) is hard. Identifying topics and themes that engage learners, especially if the target audience is well defined, is easier (Reinders, 2016).

Bray and McClaskey (2015) consider that the learners want to be engaged with the content and they want to learn more about something they are interested in. Engagement is the effective side of learning. Including what learners are interested in, have a talent in, or aspire to be. This can be what inspires them to learn something. The teacher should keep track of learner aspirations, talents, interests, and passions. This will help define who they are as learners and how they learn best.

Cultivating motivation is crucial to a language learner's success and therefore crucial for the language teacher and researcher to understand (Dörnyei & Ushioda, 2011). The majority of ESP instructors admit the fact that maintaining learner motivation at a high level is not an easy task.

Research conducted by Zaitseva (2013) on the motivation of students studying a foreign language at the Engineering Faculty revealed that the level of motivation had decreased by the second year of study for a variety of reasons such as the students' inability to acquire knowledge independently, unfavorable relationships with other students, the old-fashioned methods of instruction and the low quality of textbooks and teaching aids. However, the most important reason was that many learners do not see the benefit of using a foreign language for their professional development since the ESP teaching is not filled with personal meaning and it is often divorced from the professional realities (Rybushkina & Chuchalin, 2015).

Many ESP practitioners who work on the problem of increasing the motivation of the students of non-linguistic specialties already apply a set of tools that may engage the learners in the learning process such as the integration of video clips and blogs into classroom activities (Lansford,

2014), the using of mobile devices in the language classroom (Godwin-Jones, 2011), the organization and monitoring of group discussions (Halpern, 2000), the introduction of LMS (Learning Management System) in the educational process (Rozanova, 2012), the case method (Strekalova, 2014), the use of personalized handouts (Stognieva, 2009), and texts on professional subjects (Molodykh-Nagaeva & Chuwil'skaya, 2014).

In this paper, the author argues that Massive Open Online Courses can be effectively integrated into the university ESP curriculum and contribute to increasing the motivation for the learning of English by the students of IT specialties, since the subjects of the courses correspond to their professional interests. MOOCs trigger huge changes in Russian education standards. They break the stereotyped teaching mode and provide a stage for new trends in education. The success of MOOCs is defined by the wide range of opportunities they give their diverse and heterogeneous audience (Gruzdev, Makarov, Semenova, & Terentev, 2015).

From 2013 until 2016 only in NRU HSE 725,000 learners registered for the online courses¹.

The biggest advantage of MOOCs is that they are designed and delivered by well-known professors from prestigious universities such as Stanford, Princeton, Harvard and MIT. This fact not only guarantees high-quality instruction and authenticity but also provides additional motivation to students for learning.

Khan (1997) and McCormack and Jones (1997) have found that adding web-based elements to a course increases student motivation and participation in class discussions and projects. Motivation is crucial for effective learning, and as an educational tool MOOCs can help to keep up motivation through a personalized approach to learning, which is defined as instruction that is paced to learning needs, tailored to learning preferences, and tailored to the specific interests of different learners (Bray & McClaskey, 2015). Personalization gives learners a sense of ownership and relevance. Kucirkova and FitzGerald (2015) point out that personalized learning is about teachers working with students to customize instruction to meet the student's individual needs and interests. The main feature of the ESP course is that the content should satisfy the specific needs of the learners (Hutchinson & Waters, 1987). Crookes and Schmidt (1991) revealed that if students feel that the course they have opted to study meets their needs and expectations, they are more likely to be motivated to achieve success.

The ability for students to choose an online course according to their personal preferences, interests, individual abilities, and competencies gives them an opportunity of a personalized approach to learning that suits their learning styles and busy schedules.

Every student has a unique learning style. To accommodate different learning types online environments permit the instructor to design a course implementing a variety of resources. In this case, students can utilize materials in the way that works best for them, for example, videos, java applets, reading materials, lecture notes, presentations. These resources are available to the students anytime, and they can access content and review it at a self-determined pace.

The rector of NRU HSE, Professor Kuzminov outlines that students taking an online course benefit from MOOCs as they can experience a new learning environment of the most prestigious

¹ NRU HSE Centre for Institutional Research.

URL:<https://www.hse.ru/data/2016/07/04/1116628106/%D0%A2%D0%B8%D0%BF%D0%B8%D1%87%D0%BD%D0%B0%D1%8F%20%D0%92%D1%8B%D1%88%D0%BA%D0%B0%20E2%84%9625.pdf> (accessed: 18.03.2018).

and well-established universities according to their choice, which is no longer restricted to only one brick-and-mortar university (Kuzminov & Carnoy, 2015).

The participants of MOOCs take part in a global network of discussions on curriculum content and exchange learning experiences. The integration of online forums offer possibilities for the emergence of learning communities to share experiences and common interests, where more knowledgeable participants help others to develop skills and knowledge (Manning, Morrison & McIlroy, 2014).

Along with multiple general academic strengths, integrating MOOCs into the ESP curriculum can be a powerful instructional tool in non-English-speaking countries, despite the fact that most online courses are not designed as a means to develop language skills (Rybushkina & Chuchalin, 2015). English is the working language of most MOOCs, and this provides a potential increase of motivation for Russian students learning English in order to be understood by other learners. This practice directly contributes to the development of the students' foreign language competency.

Material and methods

Experimental teaching incorporating MOOCs in the ESP curriculum was carried out at the NRU HSE (Moscow campus) while teaching the ESP course 'English for IT Professionals' to seventy-five Bachelor students from the faculty of Business Informatics. The participants' level of proficiency in English was estimated as B2-C1 according to the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages (CEFR).

The level of EFL proficiency was verified using The Oxford Online Placement Test (OOPT), which is a standardized test from Oxford University Press. It is used as a quick (about one hour) measurement of students' general proficiency, which is automatically marked, accurate and reliable. After completion of the test procedure, learners were put into target proficiency levels based on the scores they received.

The students were allowed to make a choice between a traditional face-to-face approach and an online course format provided by platforms like Coursera, Udacity, edX or FutureLearn.

As a result, fifty-three students out of seventy-five preferred to study online, though 85 % (forty-five students) had never taken an online course before. Course selection should meet the following criteria:

1. the course should be conducted in English;
2. the course should be field-specific and correlate with one of the relevant subjects of the students' curriculum;
3. the dates of the course should be within the period of experimental teaching (February-April 2017)
4. the course material should include video-lectures, texts and tasks for further reading, and tests;
5. the educational platform should provide the opportunity for communication with both tutors from the university organizing the course, and other students participating in the course via forums, chatrooms, webinars;
6. the course should be followed by the final automatically evaluated examination, test or (peer) assessed project.

ESP instructors shortlisted six courses that fitted the curriculum outcomes. Table 1 presents which MOOCs satisfied the criteria and were chosen for experimental teaching. ESP instructors also helped students to select a course according to their personal needs and preferences, conducted group discussions in English about the goals and rules of online instruction, and recorded formative and summative assessment results.

Table 1. Shortlisted courses for experimental teaching

The name of the course	Platform	Length (weeks)	Institution	Certification	The form of final evaluation
Internet history, technology and security	Coursera	10	University of Michigan	Certificate	Final exam
An introduction to interactive programming in Python (Part 1)	Coursera	5	Rice University	Statement of Accomplishment (Certificate is available after completing all 6 parts and the capstone project)	To complete the course the learner has to do all the assessed tasks
The data scientist's toolbox	Coursera	4	Johns Hopkins University	Statement of Accomplishment (Certificate is available after completing all 10 parts and the capstone project)	To complete the course the learner has to do all the assessed tasks
Programming in Scratch	edX	6	HarveyMuddX	Honor Code Certificate or Verified Certificate is available	Peer assessed project
Introduction to Linux	edX	8	LinuxFoundationX	Honor Code Certificate or Verified Certificate is available	Final exam
Statistics and R	edX	4	HarvardX	Honor Code Certificate or Verified Certificate is available	Final test

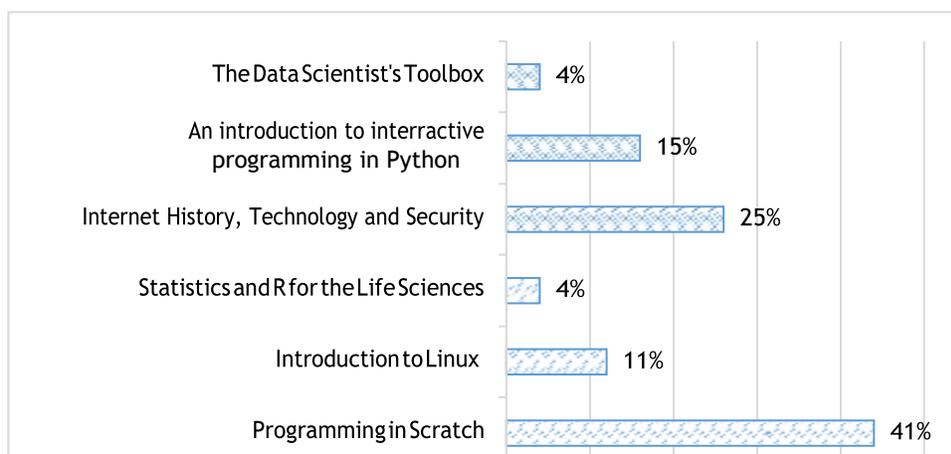


Figure 1. The percentage of MOOCs selected for experimental teaching

As the six chosen courses were diverse in terms of their length, the proficiency level required for the participants, the difficulty level of the material and the ways of certification, a rubric to grade academic progress of students participating in the course according to a 10-point scale was designed. The criteria presented in Table 2, allowed the ESP teacher to develop a unified approach to the final evaluation of the online course.

Table 2. The rubric for online course evaluation

Points Criteria	0	1	2	3
The length of the course	-	2-3 weeks	4-6weeks	7-10 weeks
Academic achievement	Less than 60% of the course is completed.	60% of the course is completed.	61%-80% of the course is completed. All intermediate tests are completed	81%-100% of the course is completed. All intermediate tests are completed Final tests and projects are completed
Contribution to learning community	Does not make efforts to participate in forums and discussions	Occasionally makes a meaningful reflection, marginal effort to become involved with the group	Frequent attempts to direct discussion and present relevant viewpoints. Interacts freely.	Aware of needs of the community, frequently attempts to moderate the group discussion. Presents a creative approach to the topic.

* One point is added for retrieved Certificate or Statement of Accomplishment.

Following the experimental teaching phase, the students were asked to fill in a questionnaire, which provided information for further analysis. The survey asked about the level of motivation of those who studied the online course and investigates whether there is a positive outcome of the MOOCs integrated into the ESP curriculum.

- 1) What are the reasons for choosing a MOOC as a part of your ESP course?
- 2) What aspects/factors of online course engaged you the most in the studies?
- 3) To what extent do you agree that your English language proficiency improved while studying the course?
- 4) To what extent do you agree that a MOOC component should be integrated into the ESP course 'English for IT Professionals'?

Questions number 3 and 4 the students were asked to rate from *strongly disagree* to *strongly agree* on a 5-point Likert-type scale.

Results and Discussion

Initially, only 17% of respondents chose a MOOC to improve their English language skills. The most common reasons for choosing a MOOC was personal professional development, curiosity for a new way of learning and earning a higher grade for the course (see Figure 2).

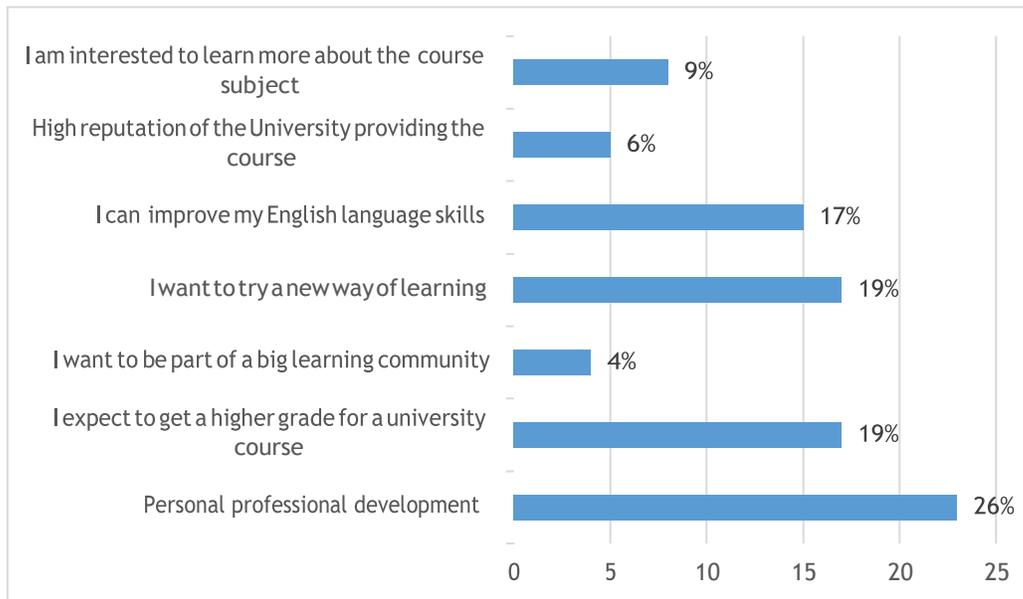


Figure 2 The reasons for taking a MOOC

However, after the course completion about more than a half of the participants (65%) admitted that their English language skills have improved in the process of learning the online course. In their feedback, many students admitted that taking an online course is one of the ways to develop their English skills, for they expanded their vocabulary, developed their listening, reading and writing skills through repeatedly watching video lectures, reading downloaded files, submitting written assignments, participating in online discussions, sharing their learning experience with other participants of the course and completing other tasks required by the course design.

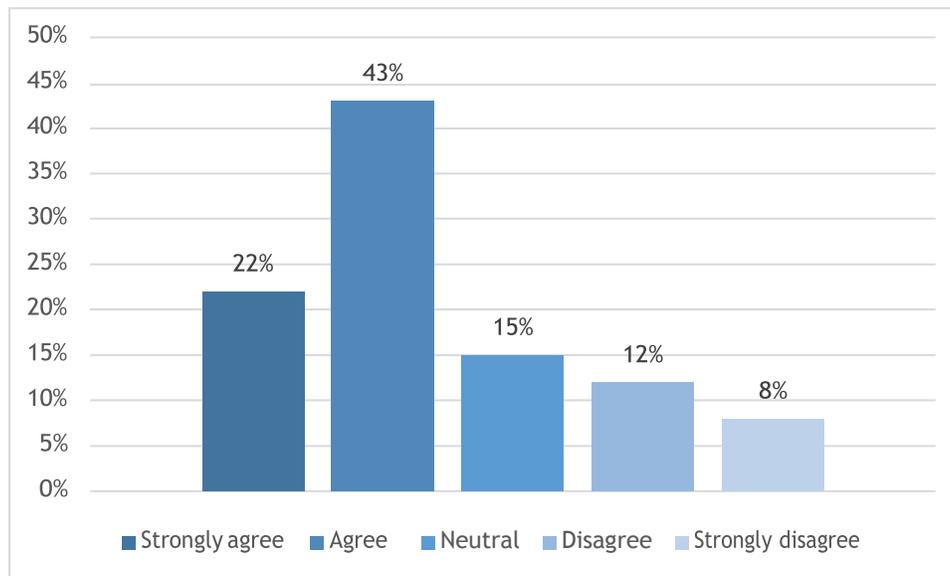


Figure 3 Improvement in learning English

Figure 4 illustrates that the most engaging aspect for learners taking a MOOC is inspiring and regular feedback from the instructors. Students appreciate when instructors consistently let them know if their performance is good or needs to be improved. It keeps students engaged in the course and is mentioned by 47% of the participants. The content of the instruction that is tailored to learning needs and specific interests is mentioned as a motivational factor by 44% of participants. 38% of the students are kept engaged in the course by interactive teaching materials (videos, presentations, lectures, etc.) which are not available in the face-to-face teaching environment. The opportunity to learn at their own pace and their own schedule is stated by 35% of learners. A personalized approach to learning suits their learning styles and busy schedules. Being involved in group discussions by publishing online posts and sharing their opinions within the international learning community is an engaging factor for 25% of learners.

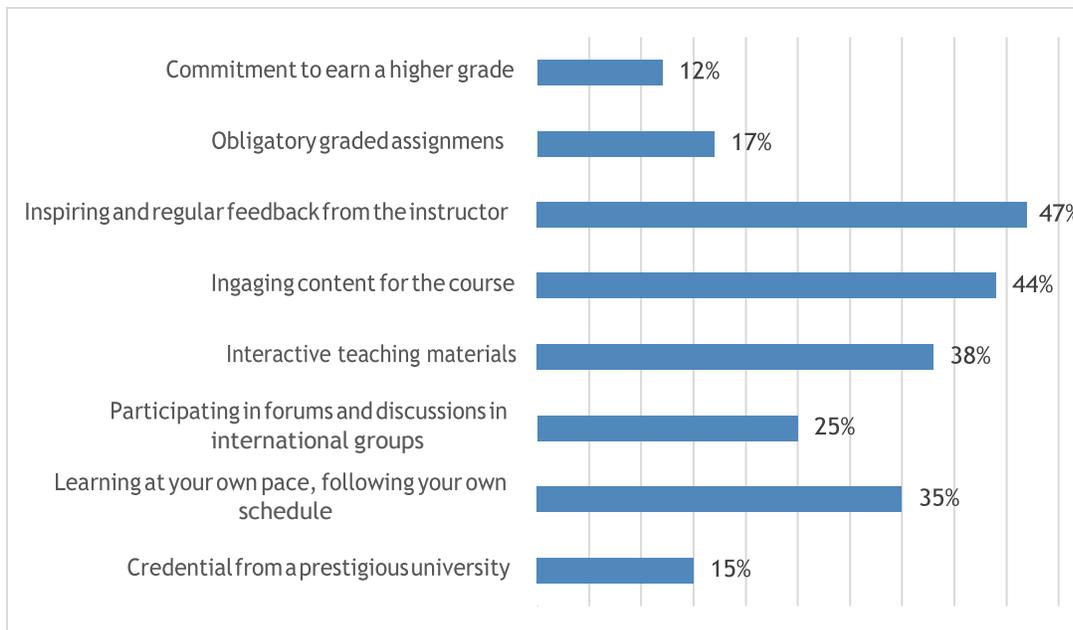


Figure 4 Factors that engaged learners taking a MOOC

In response to the question whether MOOC component should be integrated into the ESP course 'English for IT Professionals' on a permanent basis the majority (about 80%) of the students provided a positive response, which showed a high level of comfort with MOOCs.

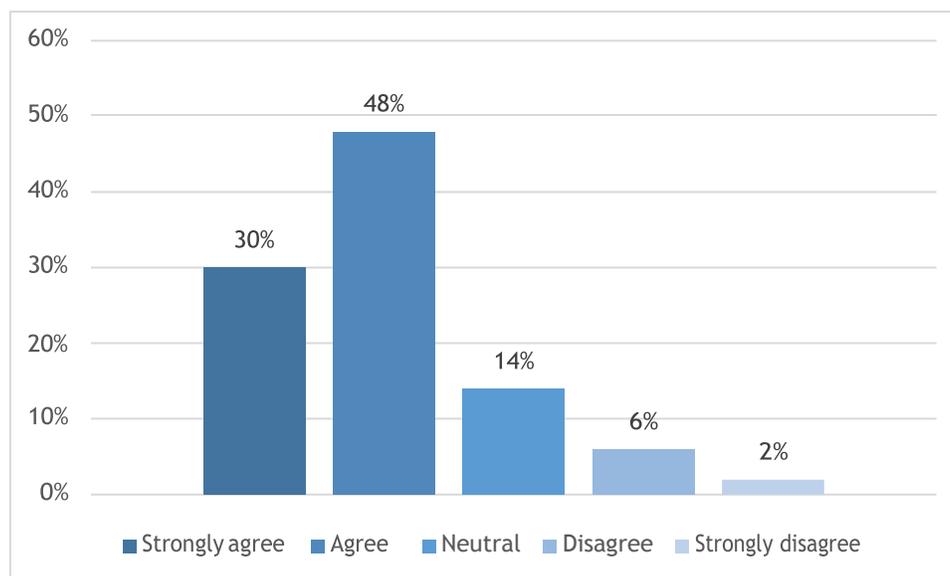


Figure 5 The students' opinion about whether MOOC component should be integrated into the ESP course

A meta-analysis by the United States Department of Education published in 2009 reported that it was found some evidence to support the notion that blended learning is more effective than either

face to face or online learning by themselves. Further, between online and face to face instruction, online is at least as good and may even have the advantage in terms of improving student achievement and potentially expanding the amount of time students spend learning. (Graham, 2015).

Experimental teaching with the integration of MOOCs at the ESP curriculum in NRU HSE revealed that it could be a worthwhile contribution to higher education. As Hollands and Tirthali (2014) point out, educational outcomes can be improved through MOOCs when they are integrated with on-campus courses or when on-campus courses are re-designed to incorporate MOOC-like components.

The research shows positive attitudes of students towards integrating MOOCs into the ESP on-campus course. The findings of the study reported in this paper indicate four benefits that the students may gain.

First, since any ESP course is designed to meet specific needs of the learner (Strevens, 1988), the integration of MOOCs can bring more personalization to the learning process, for MOOCs are student-centered and addresses students' specific needs. The learning activities, which use multiple modalities to support different learning styles are specified by the MOOC design, which meets affective needs of students: motivation, self-esteem, and autonomy.

Second, in ESP course teaching content (themes and topics) should be related to specific disciplines (Strevens, 1988) including custom-made materials (Flowerdew & Peacock, 2001). Engagement is achieved by the use of authentic up-to-date materials created by a team of professionals in their subject field. The use of technology is also important for keeping IT students engaged in the course.

Third, the students are more engaged in the class in case they feel a connection to the MOOC instructors and receive inspiring and regular feedback from them. The role of the ESP teachers is changing at this point. They become language advisers, having equal status with the learners who often demonstrate more expertise in the subject matter (Sierocka, 2008). MOOCs engage authentic audiences, including outside English speaking experts in specific fields, which often cannot be provided by learning on-campus.

Fourth, ESP makes use of underlying methodology and activities of the discipline it serves (Dudley-Evans & St John, 1998), preparing the learners to operate in a professional environment. Moreover, MOOCs establish a learning community by using collaboration and by providing interaction through communicative activities representative of specific professional environments. The results of the experimental teaching demonstrated that imbedding MOOCs in university ESP courses could contribute to increasing the motivation for learning ESP by the students of non-linguistic specialties taking in consideration such factors as regular feedback to the students from the MOOC instructors, the content of the instruction that is tailored to the learning needs of IT students, interactive teaching materials and personalized approach to learning.

Conclusions

Experimental teaching incorporating MOOCs in the field of IT as a component of the ESP curriculum was carried out at NRU HSE and was followed by a student survey, which revealed that the incorporation of MOOCs into higher education could bring significant benefits to students including the development of their English language proficiency combined with the increased level of their motivation to learn a foreign language.

As with any research effort, this study does have limitations that should be considered when interpreting the results. First, experimental teaching was limited to a three-month timeframe, about

10 % of the students failed to choose a course based on their specific interests and aspirations due to the available online courses schedule. Second, time constraints only allowed one university to be studied, which could affect the generalizability of the study.

The results presented in this paper have highlighted a number of topics on which further research would be beneficial. The sample size and scope of study could be expanded by engaging other teachers who are ready to implement MOOC integration to the ESP curriculum for obtaining a higher level of student motivation and engagement. Additional research could be conducted to determine the extent to which MOOCs enhance learner vocabulary, reading and listening skills.

For the last decade, Russian universities have been directed to modify their curriculum in compliance with new standards of technologically advanced innovations in education. ESP teachers today are motivated to integrate technology into their courses because it plays an essential role in their learners' everyday lives. Integration of MOOCs into the ESP curriculum can significantly enhance the educational outcomes of university ESP courses in various subject related fields. The role of MOOCs in this process is to contribute to higher education and not to replace it. As Bill Gates reminds us, online education courses, and all higher education programs, only help those who are passionate and genuinely want to learn (Tucker, 2014).

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