Foreign language MOOCs design: challenges to provide meaningful learning

Desenho instrucional de MOOCs em língua estrangeira: desafios para uma aprendizagem significativa

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ABSTRACT

This paper aims at presenting theoretical discussions and guidelines to support the development of a MOOC (Massive Online Learning Courses) related to academic literacies in the teaching and learning of Brazilian Portuguese as a foreign language. Firstly, some reflections about Language MOOCs as an emergent field are presented. After that, some discussions concerning the conceptualization of Language MOOCs design are carried out, followed by considerations regarding appropriate pedagogies for this kind of courses. Finally, the main challenges for the development of LMOOCs nowadays are approached.

Keywords: Critical language education, MOOCs, Learning design

RESUMO

O principal objetivo deste artigo é discutir e apresentar um conjunto de princípios que possam sustentar o desenvolvimento do design instrucional de um MOOC (Cursos virtuais abertos e massivos) voltado à aprendizagem de letramentos acadêmicos em Português brasileiro como língua estrangeira. Para tanto, reflexões sobre MOOCs como um campo em expansão serão desenvolvidas. Em seguida, são apresentadas discussões acerca do conceito de design e de pedagogias ligadas à aprendizagem em larga escala. Por fim, são efetuadas problematizações sobre os principais desafios relacionados ao desenvolvimento desse tipo de curso na atualidade.

Palavras-chave: Educação linguística crítica, MOOCs, Desenho instrucional

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1. Introduction

The discussions to be presented in this paper are related to an ongoing research into the design and development of a MOOC (Massive Open Online Course) aimed at the teaching and learning of academic oral literacies in Brazilian Portuguese as a foreign[2] language.

In wide terms, such reflections integrate a broader qualitative (André & Ludke, 1986) documental and participative (Reason & Bradbury, 2008) research project, which will be here referred to as central research project (CRP). Taking a Brazilian State University[3] as its educational setting, the CRP is situated in the field of Transdisciplinary (Signorini & Cavalcanti, 1998), Critical Applied Linguistics (Pennycook, 2010) and involves (not necessarily in this strict order): a) comparative evaluation of some Language MOOCs in order to analyze and contrast design approaches; b) web search into new media and digital resources to better support oral production in independent digital learning environments; c) theoretical and practical approaches regarding MOOC design and content interaction; d) classes observation and data production as far as students profiles, views and academic oral practices are concerned in order to support course design development; and e) course piloting, redesigning and launching.

More specifically, the problematic comprised by this paper embraces the connection between MOOCs conceptualization and instructional design, as well as the challenges faced by course developers so that more appropriate pedagogies can be produced and a more effective learning environment can be therefore created. It is expected that the results of this theoretical research work and conceptual problematization carried out in this paper can provide principled guidelines to the previously named Language MOOC (LMOOC) design, so that it can more effectively foster students' critical engagement in academic oral genres and literacy practices in Brazilian Portuguese as a foreign language when the course is finished and launched.

This study proves its social, educational and academic relevance owing to the necessary but limited amount of published research as far as MOOCs are concerned. As Bárcena & Martín-Monje (2014, p. 2) advocate, such courses have exerted a prominent impact on the online educational community worldwide and, as a consequence, they "represent a challenge to the standard institutional model of education for authorities and particularly for course developers, curators and facilitators". However important the

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[2] Terms other than *foreign* have been used to refer to Portuguese as a language learned both in formal and informal contexts. Among such terms, Portuguese as an additional language has been adopted as a way to challenge more rigid and monolithic views on language and culture, which still have the native speaker and the target culture as central elements. In this paper, we recognize the importance of such broad and more complex approaches and adopt the term foreign language and culture aligned with bakhtinian perspectives, so that the idea of the dialogic tension lived in contact zones within language practices can be highlighted.

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implications of the fast and crescent development of MOOCs may seem nowadays, very little empirical and theoretical research in this field has been carried out up to the present days, especially when it comes to LMOOCs (Martín-Monje & Bárcena, 2014; Sokolic, 2014; Ferguson et al., 2018).

According to the theoretical framework adopted within the CRP, *Literacies* are briefly understood as "social practices", to convey the idea of them "involving socially recognized ways of doing things" (Lankshear & Knobel, 2007, p. 4). Orality is highlighted based on many studies, such as the work of Mota et al (2011), which emphasizes the complexity of the skills needed for a language learner to perform effectively in oral practices, the impacts of such a complexity for language education and, finally, the importance that more research be carried out in this field, also in terms of digital learning environments.

From this perspective, oral practices are approached from a multimodal perspective (Bezemer & Kress, 2016). Consequently, academic practices with a more prominent focus on orality are believed to be realized in a way that the verbal language is entangled with other semiotic modes, so that such practices can be materialized in academic communicative events as a complex and situated meaning making process. In it is turn, language education in academic contexts is understood from a critical perspective (Benesch, 2001; Rocha 2013, 2015) and thought as a means to both learn language skills in order to engage in academic practices in a more proficient and meaning way, as well as to challenge the status quo as far as language and culture practices within Higher Education are concerned.

Such a critical approach to language learning for academic purposes is aligned with the conception of *academic literacies* as proposed by Vian Júnior (2014). This author highlights the importance of offering university students the possibility to engage in language practices that foster the appropriation of the multiplicity of knowledges, discourses and genres which integrate the academic sphere, while also widening critical thinking. From this perspective, language learning is seen as a situated and context-bounded process (Gee, 2004), which is supposed to integrate and reflect the way social activities are organized and realized within specific academic practices.

Taking all that has been said into account and in order to carry out the proposed theoretical discussions, this paper will firstly present some considerations regarding LMOOCs as an emerging research field within contemporary society. Afterwards, some views about appropriate pedagogies for learning at scale will be discussed. Finally, theoretical reflections on LMOOCs design as a way to provide meaningful learning will be carried out.

2. Contemporary social changes and MOOCs as an emerging research and educational field

According to Saint-Georges (2013, p. 1), researchers in the social sciences and humanities have debated the social transformations that characterize developed societies in globalized times usually relating such changes and conditions to terms such as "post-modern condition, late modernity, and superdiversity (Vertovec, 2007)". She goes on to explain that social life, in its most varied domains, have

been greatly impacted by these complex and dynamic transformations of contemporary times and that such impacts can be illustrated from two comprehensive standpoints.

First of all, in the present globalized world, new patterns of mobility and migration, which are nowadays marked by "complex geographical and biographical trajectories", should be addressed since both migrants and locals live the impacts of the global flows of information and communication provided by travel, work and digital media experiences today (Saint-Georges, 2013, p. 1). Secondly, connected to such changes comes the fact that social relations, in their productivity and organizational forms, have been deeply affected by the development of what is today called as the new technologies of information and communication.

In Saint-Georges' (2013, p. 1-2) words, "In this digital era, new media bring challenges to, among other things, existing notions of work, learning, identity, literacy, social networks, bodies, gender, generation ethnicities, agency, time and geographical space". Corroborating Jones & Hafner (2012), Saint-Georges (2013) highlights that not only do digital media change the way we communicate, but they also affect who we can be and how we and relate to others. Diversity becomes more and more evident in social practices and visual and multimodal texts end up redefining "what counts as knowledge, how it can be presented, engaged with and produced" and, as a consequence, "the meaning of teaching, learning, interpreting and assessing demands reconsideration" (Saint-Georges, 2013, p. 2).

In such a challenging educational context, MOOCs (Massive Open Online Courses) can be seen as an important move towards widening access to formal knowledge and education worldwide. As Ferguson et al (2018, p. 205) advocate, "free online courses that provide learning at scale have the potential to open up education around the world".

These authors also explain that MOOCs cannot be considered something completely new, since courses with similar characteristics had been around for a long time before the term MOOC was first used. According to Siemens (2012), the term was firstly and explicitly used in 2008 by Cormier. In fact, as some would say, although they keep their differences, MOOCs could be considered "a natural evolution OERs (Open Educational Resources)", since the latter are defined as "freely accessible learning materials and media to be used for learning/teaching and assessment" (Ferguson et al., 2018, p. 1). However, it is also important to recognize that MOOCs have a flexible nature which allows them to challenge usual barriers regarding access and attendance, for instance, while preserving most defining characteristics of academic courses. Consequently, they represent a remarkably innovative didactic approach, able to provide learning to a considerably high number of people with a shared interest (Ferguson et al., 2018).

In her work, Sokolic (2014, p. 17) highlights the main concepts of a MOOC, which goes as follows:

- Massive: enrollment is large, in the thousands, even tens of thousands of students;
- Open: enrollment is free and not restricted to students by age or geographic location;
- Online: the course takes place entirely online, with no face to face (f2f) component;

- Course: the materials comprise a course, usually with a syllabus and schedule, with the guidance or presence of an instructor and/or instructional assistance.

As stated by McAuley et al. (2010, p. 5):

> A MOOC integrates the connectivity of social networking, the facilitation of an acknowledged expert in a field of study, and a collection of freely accessible online resources. Perhaps most importantly, however, a MOOC builds on the active engagement of several hundred to several thousand 'students' who self-organise their participation according to learning goals, prior knowledge and skills, and common interests. Although it may share in some of the conventions of an ordinary course, such as a pre-defined timeline and weekly topics for consideration, a MOOC generally carries no fees, no prerequisites other than Internet access and interest.

Siemens (2012, p. 5) states that MOOCs can be said to "represent and reflect the angst of educators and administrators in attempting to understand the role of the university in the Internet era". According to such author, currently, it would be correct to say that MOOCs "have developed into a significant talking point for universities, education reformers and start-up companies" (Siemens, 2012, p. 5). Based on Siemens (2012), Bárcena & Martín-Monje (2014, p. 1) explain that the term – MOOC – was firstly "explicitly used in 2008" by Cormier.

Ferguson et al (2018) highlight the fact that MOOCs presently engage millions of learners around the world. Coursera, officially launched in 2012 by Stanford Professors, is considered the world's largest platform. Also in 2012, edX was founded by other American Institutions – Harvard University and MIT, as a non-profit organization. FutureLearn is the United Kingdom's most prominent MOOC provider. Many other countries have now launched their own platforms and Brazilian initiatives include Veduca, launched in 2012[4].

In his turn, drawing on the work developed by Hill (2012), Siemens (2012, p. 9) provides us with a timeline representation of MOOCs models and early providers, as follows:

Figure 1 - History of MOOCs
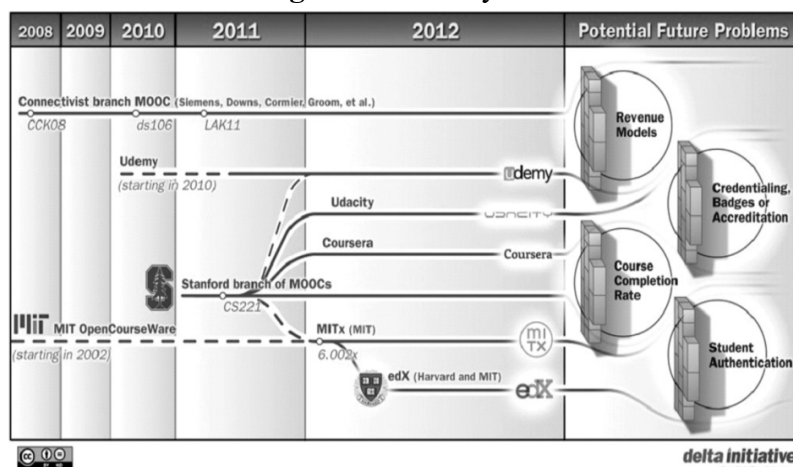
Source: Siemens (2012, p. 9)

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[4] Information based on Class Central Report, which can be accessed at:
https://tinyurl.com/ycvt7ybw

As far as MOOC development is concerned, Ferguson et al (2018)[5] researched into UK universities repositories, so that publications in this field could be tracked down and grouped in terms of their priorities. Based on such research, these authors (Ferguson et al., 2018, p. 206) came up with a set of eight most prominent areas:

1. Develop a strategic approach to learning at scale;
2. Develop appropriate pedagogy for learning at scale;
3. Identify and share effective learning designs;
4. Support discussions more effectively;
5. Clarify learner expectations;
6. Develop educator teams;
7. Widen access;
8. Develop new approaches to assessment and accreditation.

Ferguson et al (2018) advocate that although MOOCs have so far proved to be able to engage millions of learners, mainly because of their flexible conceptual nature, much work is urgently needed concerning these eight main priority areas and others which may be considered relevant in this field.

According to these authors, MOOCs should first of all be made more sustainable, which demands clear strategies in terms of balancing expenditure on such courses with value to the institutions involved in offering them. A carefully planned strategic approach can lead to possibilities of widening participation. Among other possibilities, such approaches can "support the development of lasting collaborations and the enablement of impact by linking MOOCs with other open education initiatives" (Ferguson et al., 2018, p. 206).

Also, efforts should be made towards strengthening the capacity already shown by MOOCs to provide lifelong learning at a massive scale. Actions in this direction will require the involvement of experienced teams, as well as clarification of learners' expectations. Likewise, a lot of attention, discussions and research - in theoretical and empirical terms -   should be carried out in order to support the development of more appropriate pedagogies and more effective learning designs. Lastly, Ferguson et al (2008) highlight how important it is that MOOCs go on to widen possibilities of assessment and accreditation of learning.

 They advocate that changes are needed so that MOOCs can "make use of the full range of computer-based assessment options, including selected response […]; short-answers questions and essays; and the e-portfolios, blogs and wikis […]" (Ferguson et al., 2018, p. 212). Peer assessment is also considered a good option which needs to be better explored. The authors go on to explain that badging

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[5] Ferguson et al (2018, p. 206) show the following link so that the complete report can be accessed: http://r3beccaf.files.wordpress.com/2017/03/moocs-2016.pdf

can be a means to allow reflection on intended learning outcomes, that the credits offered by MOOCs should be recognized worldwide and that qualifications should be consistent and rigorously assessed.

Based on solid research and well planned policies, MOOCs can grow to effectively offer education to all, from a very flexible and diversified perspective. Ferguson et al (2018, p. 213) complement their ideas by saying that, "In time, MOOCs may become one component in a global education system that blends campus and online learning, combining free and paid-for courses, leisure learning and professional development".

Bárcena & Martin-Monje (2014) also recognize the challenging scenario that MOOCs are involved in, especially because of the huge numbers of students attending courses and their heterogeneity in terms of skills, expectations and needs. Beaven et al (2014, p. 49) state that, even though MOOCs have been depicted by the press as "democratizing education, offering free learning or affordable education for all", the concept of such courses has been challenged and "some exploding of the MOOC myths are beginning to be heard". As they illustrate, Laurillard (2014) defends the idea that MOOC content, although supposedly free, could also be curated, which always comes at a cost. Laurillard (2014) also alerts to the fact that MOOCs cannot solve the problems regarding educational scarcity or concerning high costs of western universities.

Teixeira & Mota (2014) call our attention to some challenges MOOCs face at present, among which we can mention, the high number of drop outs and the low completion rates, as well as problems concerning learners' satisfaction, learning support and learning experience quality and technological environment. Due to such limitations, they reinforce the developing nature of the field and emphasize that there is "a great deal of experimentation going on and many relevant questions still to be answered" (Teixeira & Mota, 2014, p. 35).

Bárcena & Martín-Monje (2014, p. 4), however, sound optimistic since they believe that all possible constraints can be worked out and "turned into an opportunity to have many motivated and proactive students undertaking highly valuable peer-to-peer interaction to some degree".

Siemens (2012) states that MOOCs may be "a transitory stage for education" and that, consequently, the concerns raised by such courses need to be addressed before they can be broadly accepted. Teixeira & Mota (2014, p. 35) also reinforce the fact that MOOCs are still "a developing field, with great deal of experimentation going on and many relevant questions still to be answered". However, according to such authors, MOOCs should be seen "as non-formal online learning experiences and therefore, clearly differentiated from the typical formal educational offerings" (Teixeira & Mota, 2014, p. 35).

As Sokolic (2014, p. 17) sees it, in their short lifespan, "MOOCs no longer comprise a singular concept". Based on her explanations, MOOCs are now categorized and represent a new educational

typology. The most common types of MOOCs are the xMOOCs [6] and the connectivist MOOCs (cMOOCs).

When discussing MOOCs, Beaven et al (2014, p. 52) find support in the work developed by Siemens (2012) to advocate that "different types of MOOCs are driven by different ideologies and pedagogic approaches". xMOOCs can be described as a more traditional kind of course, based on a teacher-centered and transmissive approach. This type of MOOC usually has content delivered by short video lectures and assessed by quizzes. By contrast, cMOOCs tend to follow a connectivist, student-centered approach. This way, such courses generally emphasize creation, creativity, autonomy and social networked learning (Siemens, 2012; Beaven et al., 2014).

Siemens (2012, p. 8) explains that cMOOCs are based on "a connectivist pedagogical model that views knowledge as a networked state and learning as the process of generating those networks and adding and pruning connections". As far as the attributes of cMOOCs are concerned, Siemens (2012) states that:

> The content and discussion in a cMOOC reflect the open, networked and distributed structure of the Internet. While a classroom-type model is evident in open courses through the use of readings and recorded lectures, participants have control and autonomy to move beyond the planned structure of the course through the use of OER, the use of personal blogs, and the formation of sub- networks around areas of personal interest. (Siemens, 2012, p. 11).

Table 1 - Key differences between MOOC formats

Main Feature Topics	xMOOCs	cMOOCs
Platform	Single platform	Multiple platforms
Diversity	Participant diversity – same message to all	Approach & Resource diversity
Accreditation	Copyright driven	Open education & OERs based
Epistemological approach	Traditional/Transmissive • Teacher/Institution centered • Controlled activities • Declarative knowledge	Connectivism • Learner centered • Content and interaction remixing, repurposing and co-creation • Generative, connective and integrative knowledge
Interactions	Controlled and single-spaced	Distributed and multi-Spaced
Learner participation	Passive	Active, self-regulated and selective

Sources: Siemens (2012), Read (2014) and Sokolic (2014)

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[6] Sokolic (2014: 18) explains that "the *x* comes from the open course model originally formed as MITx, which was then joined by other universities, and has evolved into edX.org".

As far as forms of assessment are concerned, Sokolic (2014) states that Crowley (2013) confronts xMOOCs and cMOOCs and well synthetize the main differences between formats. From his perspective,

> In XMOOCs, learners complete assessments (quizzes or peer-reviewed assignments) that evaluate their comprehension of a topic as it is understood from the instructor's view. In cMOOCs, learners share their insights as they go through the knowledge-building process (e.g., via status updates or blog posts) and self-assess their learning paths. (Crowley, 2013, p. 2).

Sokolic (2014) says that the focus on interaction and community building should be considered an advantage of the cMOOC format. By contrast, she states that some disadvantages of cMOOCs are often related to navigation difficulty and content inaccessibility in some geographical areas.

In his turn, Siemens (2012) synthetizes and illustrates the technology elements in cMOOCs, as shown below:

Figure 2 - Technological elements in cMOOC formats
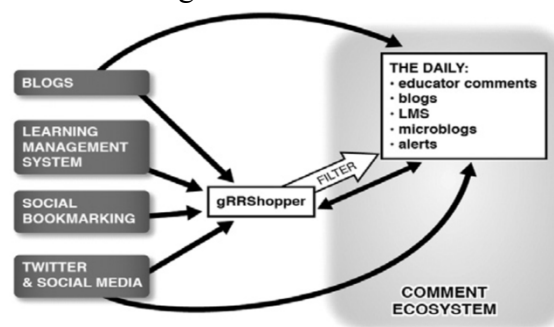
Source: Siemens (2012, p. 12)

Teixeira & Mota (2014, p. 35) say that the introduction of MOOCs in Higher Education represents a big challenge as far as combining "typical non-formal learning experiences with a formal education setting". These authors defend an innovative perspective, represented by the iMOOc model[7]. In their view, such a MOOC format can be described as a synthetized "articulation of the networked learning model with the structure of higher education" (Teixeira & Mota, 2014, p. 35). Based on Pereira et al (2008), Teixeira & Mota (2014) complement that this MOOC format draws on the cMOOC model and expands the latter's approach because the iMOOC model is more complex, since it incorporates many aspects of other existing approaches and necessarily involves the learner's realization of activities and creation of artefacts to be published online as an important part of the learning experience.

Besides, this model is driven by a reflective perspective, once taking responsibility for one's own learning and also for supporting someone else's learning play a central role in this kind of course. According to Teixeira & Mota (2014), there are four main pillars that support iMOOC's pedagogical approach: learner-centeredness, flexibility, interaction and digital inclusion. The main goal behind this model was "to combine autonomous and self-directed learning with a strong social dimension and the interaction that make learning experiences richer and more rewarding" (Teixeira & Mota, 2014, p. 35).

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[7] According to Teixeira & Mota (2014, p. 35), this format was first developed at Universidade Aberta (UAb.pt).

The educational challenges posed by the rapid social changes we face nowadays tend to highlight the importance of competence-based learning, mainly because such an approach allows for learning opportunities to take place, without the need of an extremely rigid pre-determined curricula (Teixeira & Mota, 2014). From such a perspective, based on European Communities (2008), Teixeira & Mota (2014, p. 37) advocates that competence can be understood as "the proven ability to use knowledge, skills and personal, social and/or methodological abilities in work or study situations and in professional and personal development".

These authors attempt to capture some main principles between traditional and competence-based learning in the 21st century and summarize such core elements as follows:

Table 2 - Traditional & Competence-based Learning

Competence-Based – 21st Century Learning	Traditional Learning
Learner-Centred	Content-Centred
Personalized	Uniform
Flexible	Rigid
Social/collaborative nature	Highly structured
Challenging	Centralized
"Messy"	Competitive nature
Contextual	Academic, curricular
Real life, authentic	Memorizing, reproducing information
Experimenting; mistakes as learning opportunities	Mistakes as failure; fear of experimenting
• "Gamified" • Questioning, creating knowledge • Problem solving • Artefacts/complex object/eportfolios	Tests/Exams

Source: Teixeira & Mota (2014, p. 38)

More specifically, regarding online learning, social-constructivist approaches have been considered the most appropriate to foster collaborative learning in digital environments. According to Teixeira & Mota (2014, p. 39), from such a perspective, the most valued elements can be said to be "autonomy, learner-centeredness, critical thinking, dialogue and interaction, as well as learning in a social context".

As far as LMOOCs are concerned, another important principle should also be taken into account, which is the potential of the platform and content to foster meaningful engagement and interaction within situated and authentic communication practices (Sokolic, 2014). Teixeira & Mota (2014, p. 39)

complement this idea by saying that "if we move past language learning in abstract and frame it within the context of the 21st century learning, then we may start to identify which approaches are more fit and have great potential". According to such authors, in a globalized and technologically connected world, language education can no longer aim at grammar, memorization and learning from rote. Instead, the focus should be on contextual and meaningful language and cultural knowledge use, so that people could communicate and relate to one another.

Taking all the aspects mentioned into account, the most evident challenge in designing (L)MOOCs would have to do with finding ways to overcome the massive nature of the courses, so that community/networked centred practices could be fostered, as well as learner autonomy and collaborative learning could be highlighted (Teixeira & Mota, 2014).

3. Language MOOCs: perspectives and challenges

When discussing LMOOCs, Sokolic (2014) explains that, if MOOCs are seen as a very new controversial field, which would benefit from research in order to grow based on a more informed and principled framework, LMOOCs should be considered an even more recent and unexplored area, being that only a handful of such courses exist today. This authoress points out that most of the language learning materials offered by sites nowadays cannot be considered MOOCs because they fail to attend one or more basic features of courses of this kind. According to her views, being new should not be seen as a negative aspect though. In Sokolic's words:

> It is, however, because of the newness of Language MOOCs that we are presented with the opportunity to get it right – to capture the best of what we know about language learning as well as the best of what we know about online educational experiences especially the successes and failures of previous MOOCs. We can, and should, allay the fears that MOOCs are merely a return to teacher-fronted, "drill and kill" language instruction that cannot, by its very medium, be successful at the task of teaching a language. (Sokolic, 2014, p. 17).

This authoress also offers a definition of LMOOCs. From her perspective, "in imitation the best practices of language teaching and learning, LMOOCs can be describes as "an eclectic mix of practices and tools aiming to engage students in the use of the target language in meaningful and authentic ways" (Sokolic, 2014, p. 20).

LMOOCs are known to suffer criticism as far as their real capacity to engage students in meaningful language learning. Sokolic (2014, p. 17) says that such courses "seem to be downplayed in the literature, if not dismissed outright". In her view, such criticism is usually related to the disbelief that LMOOCs could effectively teach grammar (Stevens, 2013) and to the understanding of LMOOCs as inappropriate language learning environment (Romeo, 2012).

Sokolic (2014) also states that the reasons for dismissals are somewhat vague or based on faulty premises. As far as grammar teaching is concerned, for example, the criticism seems to be based on the

assumption that inferential learning is the only possible way to language teaching. In its turn, the inappropriacy of LMOOCs is linked to the idea that language courses - including self-study - are never taken out of general interest or curiosity. She goes on to emphasize that both intrinsic and extrinsic motivation play an important role in language learning and that in neither case the idea of learner autonomy is negated.

Bárcena & Martín-Monje (2014) advocate that LMOOCs should be seen as a novel model and that their enormous potential to promote learning should always be highlighted and explored. According to theses authoresses:

> the integration of the results of multidisciplinary research projects and teaching experiences related to LMOOCs is fundamental to make the filed advance steadily and meet some of the real challenges and problems faced by individuals working and living in competitive multilingual societies in the 21st century. (Bárcena & Martín-Monje, 2014, p. 10).

As far as LMOOCs availability is concerned, Bárcena & Martín-Monje (2014) say that host institutions are usually prestigious universities around the world and that courses are located on a wide range of different platforms, including main MOOC providers, such as Coursera, edX, or Udacity, as well as small ones, like UNED COMA, which run on a single university's platform. These authors also state that the most popular languages offered in such courses are English and Spanish. This is not a surprise because United States and Spain are considered "the most prolific countries in the world for LMOOCs" (Bárcena & Martín-Monje, 2014, p. 5).

As it is a very dynamic field, it is therefore important that more research into LMOOCs keep being carried out, so that information can be constantly updated and consequently more accurate.

With regard to LMOOCs theoretical suitability, Bárcena & Martín-Monje (2014) state that some important aspects should be initially considered in their interconnected relation between one another. According to such authoresses, it is firstly necessary to recognize that language learning is both knowledge and skill-based and that its main goal is linked to language use. Consequently, the teaching and learning process, whether in digital environments or not, involves, on the one hand, open instruction and assimilation of some context, such as grammar and vocabulary, for instance.

On the other hand, as Bárcena & Martín-Monje (2014) go on to explain, it encompasses putting into practice a diverse and intricately connected array of functional capabilities, of a receptive, productive and interactive verbal (and non-verbal) nature. Such practice plays a prominent role as far as the overall success of the communicative act is concerned and is considered more important than the part played by the formal or organizational elements.

According to Bárcena & Martín-Monje (2014), other aspects also prove relevant. When it comes to language use, it is likewise important to infer that contextualized language practice is an intrinsic part of language learning. Besides, learning a language should be considered a proactive and collaborative process of engaging in situated practice, in which (meta)cognitive skills are activated. It means that

learning a language surpasses just memorization and mechanical reproduction. Lastly, Bárcena & Martín-Monje (2014) point out that it is likewise important to notice that language learners also tend to benefit from explicit or overt instruction. As a result, LMOOCs should include content "partly based on face-to-face/textual/visual explanations with illustrative examples followed by interesting and creative form of practice (Bárcena & Martín-Monje, 2014, p. 3).

LMOOCs are believed to offer the necessary resources for students to develop metacognitive skills, as well as the needed flexibility to allow learners to adapt activities to their personal learning styles, rhythm and circumstances (Bárcena & Martín-Monje, 2014). LMOOC learners are expected to assume an active role in his/her learning. Building connections and strategies that are considered relevant to them is an important part of self-constructed knowledge. Consequently, part of the learning process can prove effective to be undertaken individually (Bárcena & Martín-Monje, 2014).

By contrast, since language learning involves verbal and non-verbal communication practices, it has an intrinsic social nature. As a result, Bárcena & Martín-Monje (2014, p. 3) emphasize how important it is for language learners to collaboratively engage in group work, to provide mutual assistance, as well as to construct and share new knowledges and skills.

Such an emphasis on community building and networked collaboration, in it is turn, reiterated the importance of appropriate learning theories and approaches as far as LMOOCs design is concerned. In order to support more context-bound and meaningful language education practices, LMOOCs should draw on philosophies and be based on platforms that could offer possibilities of knowledge creation and application, while also fostering dialogue and critical thinking (Eaton, 2010; Teixeira & Mota, 2014).

3.1 LMOOCs design and epistemological approaches

According to Read (2014), the difficulty with designing and developing effective LMOOCs is firstly linked to finding an appropriate platform (or philosophy), which includes choosing the most suitable format. Another challenge has to do with defining an associated tool set and developing adequate resources and activities for the course. In this author's point of view, effective LMMOCs should "combine the best of formal and informal learning, bringing structured educational course content and activities together with appropriate social media tools and technologies" (Read, 2014, p. 93).

When thought from a more practical perspective, as the one presented above, *design* can be understood as primarily involving a *task*, as discussed by Kress (2010, p. 136):

> […] at the beginning of design stands a task; […]. Design starts with the designer's imagining of the task; a knowledge of the resources available to make the tool that will be used to perform the task; an understanding of the characteristics of the object to be worked with – […]; and a knowledge of the workers/agent and her or his capabilities […].

In terms of LMOOCs and also of the research initially mentioned in this paper, such a task should be firstly defined as the development of the central guidelines concerning the instructional design of the
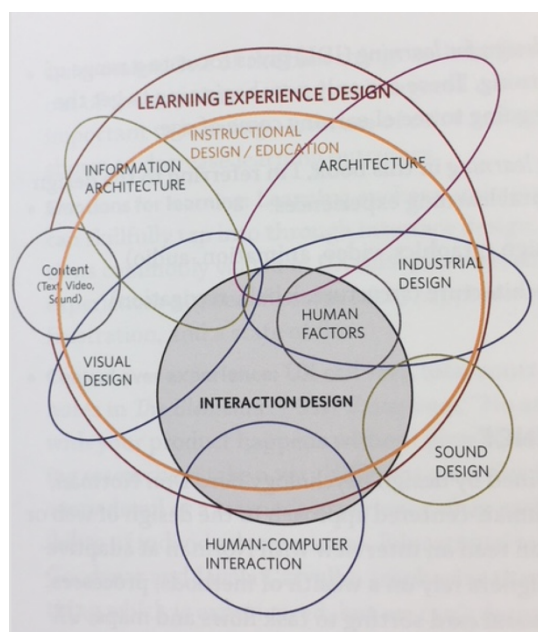
course.

For Peters (2014), design should be approached as *learning experience*. Drawing on the work developed by Don Norman, Peters (2014, p. 5) explains that concept of *user experience* refers to a holistic and human centred approach to the design of web or software environments". This author complements such ideas by saying that "user experience designers rely on a wealth of methods, processes and deliverables, from personas and card sorting to task flows and maps" in order to develop effective courses (Peters, 2014, p. 5).

Peters (2014) advocates that the idea of user experience should be reconceived so that the it could be approached from a broader angle and involve the quality of the *learning experience*. This author also states that, from the *design as learning experience* framework, *learning/instructional design* should be considered a central element, since "the design of content and activities created to support learning objectives" is of prior importance as far as the quality of any learning experience in digital environments is concerned (Peters, 2004, p. 7).

Reconceiving Dan Saffer's model, Peters (2014, p. 6) illustrates the key elements of Learning Experience Design as follows:

Figure 3 - Learning Experience Design

Source: Peters (2014, p. 06)

Peters (2014) states that the process of digital environment course design presupposes teamwork, which may include a manager, developers, interface/interaction designers, information architects, and content strategists, instructional designers, subject-matter experts and learning interface designers. From his point of view, it would be most relevant that "all members of the team have some knowledge of pedagogy and the distinctions of designing for learning" (Peters, 2014, p. 7).

Interface design, in its turn, can be defined as "intended to support learning objectives" and is supposed to be constituted of many different layers, according to Peters (2014, p. 7). from this author's perspective, interface design for learning experiences, involve, in an intertwined way, system design, interface styling and multimedia content, and can be described as shown below:

Figure 4 - The layer cake of eLearning design



Source: Peters (2014, p. 08)

When seen from a multimodal social semiotic approach (Bezemer & Kress, 2016), the task of designing a LMOOC can be said to be initially approached from the shaping agent's (or course designer's) point of view. As Bezemer & Kress (2016, p. 72) point out, digital learning "environments are often designed by social agents who are entirely visible, identifiable and knowable, and co-present as the learner is engaging with the learning environment".

Drawing on the principles of the multimodal framework proposed by such authors, it is also important that the course design be epistemologically and methodologically guided so that it finds ways to include the learner's views, cultural and linguistic repertoires, while also taking into account his or her interest and his or her semiotic work as sign-makers.

Such principles, in their turn, resonate with the importance of a learner-centred and collaborative approach regarding LMOOCs, as discussed by Siemens (2012), Sokolic (2014) and Teixeira & Mota (2014), as previously discussed. Consequently, the challenge presented for course designers seems to be, from this point of view, to foster the visibility and the co-presence of learners, so that design can become "a dynamic ongoing process" also realized/designed "with the learner" (Bezemer & Kress, 2016, p. 72).

According to Dalziel (2016), a learning design framework should include guidance on how to use digital technologies in a contextual and appropriate way, while also representing a shift from a teaching-centred and belief-based approach to an explicit, design-based set of principles. This author complements these ideas by stating that course design approaches should move from a teaching and content-centric perspective to and activity-based and learner-centric frame.

Dalziel (2016, p. 119) synthetizes and illustrates his course design propositions as follows:

The **E** specialist

Figure 4 - The 7Cs of Learning Design
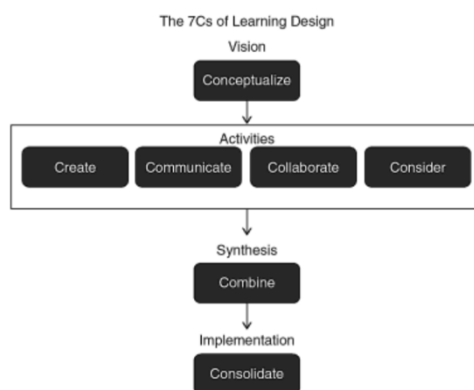
With regard to the implications of all the principles presented so far to LMOOCs design, it is possible to say that, in general terms, they are all pointing to the importance of approaching design as a complex and dynamic process of meaning making which should be as open as possible so that it could foster learning from a situated and learner-centred perspective.

Consequently, it is worth reiterating some challenges already pointed out as far as LMOOCs design and development are concerned. As Read (2014, p. 97) explains, a crucial aspect in this area involves establishing "the optimal pedagogic framework in an online context, and as such, which tools and types of interaction are necessary". As far as this topic is concerned, this author draws on ideas presented by Mesh (2010) and Laurillard (2007) to suggest the integration of instructivist learning techniques - since overt instruction seems to be useful to support language structures, lexicon and pronunciation, with constructivist guided practices, so that discursive, adaptive, reflective and interactive processes could be also approached in the learning experience provided by the designed course.

The second point has to do with the choice of a suitable platform for LMOOCs, "as well as its ability to provide the functions required for the pedagogic framework". (Read 2014, p. 97). As Read (2014) points out, xMOOCs seem to provide a more controlled learning experience, being that the set of tools available can be considered somewhat limited.

According to Read (2014), the usual recourses involved with this format are: a) different types of reading material (web pages, PDF files and so on); b) audio/video recordings (usually uploaded to social video sites, while transcripts could be also made available); c) closed multiple-choice tests; d) forums.

The absence of interactive activities, which could better fit the development of competencies and communication abilities, is a clear limitation of xMOOCs regarding language learning. Furthermore, scaffolding should be provided so that learners could be supported as far as their engagement in more complex activities aimed at language use are concerned (Read, 2014).

By contrast, Read (2014) finds support on the work developed by Yeager et al (2013) to advocate that cMOOCs formats seem to provide four types of activities which can be considered more effective for language learning. Such activities involve: a) aggregation/curation (bringing together links to existing

resources); b) remixing (documentation, blogging and so on); c) repurposing/constructivism (where user arguably build their own internal connections); d) feeding forward (sharing new content, summaries, resources etc with others). Also, according to Read (2014), cMOOCs can better comprise activities which respond to the development of competences regarding reception (listening and reading), production (spoken and written), interaction (spoken and written), and mediation (translating and interpreting), which are considered central in language learning, as stated by the Council of Europe (2001).

Taking into account the great potential of iMOOCs to provide effective language learning experiences, mainly because of their connectivist oriented approach, Sokolic (2014) discusses main points concerning the design of collaborative courses.

First of all, with regards to the *technological environment*, she advocates that a Learning Management System (LMS) should be used, so that information regarding contents, resources, suggested activities, schedule, learning guide, relevant course announcements, etc., could be centralized. Besides, Moodle and Blackboard are mentioned as interesting discussions forums platforms, able to allow learners' discussions on course content and activities. Likewise, Sokolic (2014) also suggests Elgg (http://elgg.org/) as a very suitable free, open source social networking platform.

As far as *course duration* is concerned, some empirical data is presented based on the work of Weller (2013) and six or seven weeks is the recommended length of time the course should run. Regarding the educational process, Sokolic (2014, p. 42) advocates that "learning should be based on the realization of tasks", being that participants should be expected to "study independently", while also "exploring the resources, searching and exploring other relevant material on their own, doing the activities and reflecting on their learning experience, and producing artefacts that demonstrate their understanding of the topics and their competences in applying that knowledge".

This authoress alerts that LMOOCs do not count on direct teacher intervention. Instead, *learning support* should be made available by means of the documentation and resources provided within the platform. Sokolic (2014, p. 42) explains that teacher/teaching presence could be created "through the learning guide, the detailed instructions for the task, the introductory videos for each topic and a weekly feedback message, based on the information prepared by the support team". Such a team could consist of volunteers recruited in order to collaborate regarding the course progress. Also, Sokolic (2014) suggests that synchronous sessions, realized through the use of some tools like Google Hangout, should be considered to complement learning support along the course.

Regarding *resources*, Sokolic (2014) states that LMOOCs should count on both OERs made available by the institution and published with an open license and also on other material which is free online. Besides, all the artefacts produced and published by participants should integrate the course. From her perspective, "a variety of suggested tasks should be made available, supporting and scaffolding participants' exploration, reflection, production and dialogue" (Sokolic, 2014, p. 43). It is important to notice that such tasks should be designed in a way that could involve different levels of difficulty or

complexity, as an attempt to respond to the broad and varied range of learners' skills.

Applications like VoiceThread (http://voicethread.com/) are recommended concerning oral communication and practice. Other applications, such as Skype and Google Hangouts, are also considered interesting to foster oral discussions.

Finally, according to Sokolic (2014), as a complement to teacher's general feedback, formative *assessment* with self-correction and also based on peer work seem to be suitable forms of evaluation. E-portfolios are also recommended as relevant to provide samples of the work done by participants throughout the course, which could likewise be subject to peer assessment.

Nevertheless, as far as language production is concerned, Read (2014, p. 101) alerts that, in general, "oral skills are harder to practice" and that LMOOCs usually fail to present proper platforms, tools and techniques to foster oral interaction. From this author's point of view, the connectivist approach which underlies cMOOCs can also be considered limited for language learning in digital environments. In Read's words:

> Connectivism, as the learning theory underlying cMOOcs, does not take into account a student's prior knowledge, the cognitive load of materials or resources (or the sheer volume of information, number of tweets, posts, etc.), the difficulty of activities (with no sequencing nor guidance on how to take them), the need to work across several different platforms (where the information can be found is not always clear, the sensation of never having enough information, etc.), or any of the many different issues related to the needs of novices (eg., the feeling that the others are all connecting and learning and that you are not).

As a result, the biggest challenge posed by such restrictions to LMOOC designers lies on "how to produce a course that can overcome the limitations of both cMOOCs and xMOOCs platforms" (Read, 2014, p. 102).

In other words, in global times, LMOOCs learning design is expected to epistemologically and methodologically respond to more complex theories of communication and learning, which will be initially considered from the course designer's point of view, but that should also involve the learner's singular, context-bound and purposeful ways of ensembling semiotic resources and (re)shaping semiotic complexes while experiencing learning.

When thought from this point of view, LMOOCs should be approached as *sites of learning,* which are developed "in response to new patterns of mobility, migration and internationalization", and also, new forms of learning (Saint-Georges, 2013, p. 4-5). LMOOCs can then be said to be constituted within *contact zones*, since the design of the course would allow for formal and informal learning, together with a plurality of media and other resources, including language and other semiotic modes, to intersect (Read, 2014). LMOOCs design should therefore respond to the "sophisticated, hybrid, and typically hypertextual (electronically linked) systems of multimodal *meaning*" which are constitutive of the digital age (Mills, 2016, p. 88, emphasis added).

3.2 Multimodal and ecological views on LMOOCs design

When it comes to education and literacies theories for the digital age, Mills (2016, p. 88) argues that "multimodal approaches to understanding how we live and communicate in different social, political, and cultural contexts will open the door to more relevant practices of schooled literacies". Supported by studies previously published (Mills, 2013; Jewitt et al., 2016), Mills (2016, p. 88) goes on explaining that the importance of multimodal approaches lies in the fact that they "challenge monolingual interpretations of literacy practices" and also "acknowledge the sites of display are being transformed by the design of new ubiquitous technologies, learning spaces, and architectural and cultural spaces"

Likewise, Bezemer & Kress (2016) advocate that Social semiotics and Multimodality can offer insights that help us respond to such a challenge. These authors claim that communication is both a social and a semiotic practice. In its turn, multimodality focuses on the material means for representation, that is, on modes as the resources for meaning making (Kress, 2011, p. 208- 209). Kress (2011, p. 208) defines modes as "socially made and culturally available material". In other words, they are "semiotic resources for representation" (Kress, 2011, p. 208).

Bezemer & Kress (2016, p. 7) emphasize that modes always appear in combination – in ensembles. From this point of view, communication as a situated and context-bound meaning making process or practice is always multimodal. Besides, as Kress (2013) advocates, from a social semiotic point of view, communication only happens when there has been interpretation. Likewise, communication always happens as a response to a *prompt*, and such a prompt offers the ground for interpretation to take place.

As Bezemer & Kress (2016, p. 9) explain, *signs* are "elements in which the signified (a meaning) and the signifier (a material form) are brought together" and are considered of central importance for Social semiotics. Kress (2011, p. 209) defines signs as "motivated conjunctions of form and meaning", highlighting that they are "the product of the sign maker's agency and interest". Bezemer & Kress (2016, p. 9-10) state that signs have three main characteristics. First of all, the relation between form and meaning is motivated and not an arbitrary one. Secondly, signs are always shaped both by the environment in which they are made and also by their places in such environments. This way, sign makers intently choose from a range of modes that are available in such spaces. Finally, each mode has specific affordances, that is, offers certain potentials for meaning making.

These authors also call our attention to the fact that "signs are organized as sign complexes – that is, as a complex of coherent elements within coherent textual entities" (Bezemer & Kress, 2016: 23). It is also important to note that, "to make a sign is to make knowledge" (Kress, 2011, p. 211). Consequently, "sign-, meaning- and knowledge-making are effects of communication in social environments (Kress, 2011, p. 213).

As Bezemer & Kress (2016, p. 3) see it, communication and learning are intrinsically interconnected and, as such, they are mutually constitutive, "defining each other in a closely integrated

domain of meaning making". In his turn, Kress (2013, p. 121-122) states that "without interaction-as-communication there is no meaning-making, no learning, no (change to) knowledge.

Such guidelines emphasize the social semiotic nature of *teaching* and *learning*, which could be defined as *multimodal communication instances* (Kress, 2011; Bezemer & Kress, 2016), deeply interconnected with and embedded in the "constantly transformative and innovative character of human meaning making" (Bezemer & Kress 2016, p. 5).

As far as the concept of course design is concerned, the theoretical views presented so far shed light to the importance of the course to be developed as a semiotic landscape or environment able to afford and foster – in an open, not rigid or fixed way - the learner's purposeful engagement in academic oral practices as a critical and creative process of (re)design aimed at (social) transformations and transductions (Bezemer & Kress, 2016).

Such principles also resonate with the ideas defended by Kress (2010), while problematizing the intrinsic connection between design, agency and transformation, as discourses, identities and subjectivities are dynamically being reshaped in meaning making processes, both in and of formal learning sites. In his words:

> […] There is a need for careful considerations of designs for meaning and knowledge-making: the shaping of routes and environments of meaning-making and production of knowledge and, in this, the shaping of 'inner' semiotic resources. The sites, the processes, the designs all shape 'concepts' and, in that, they shape what dispositions become habituated as subjectivities and as identity. (Kress, 2010, p. 27).

Taking into consideration the urgent need of Higher Education policies, institutions and practices to more effectively play their counter-hegemonic roles, showing concern for equity (Unterhalter & Carpentier, 2010) and the development of democratic consciousness (Abdi & Carr, 2013), LMOOC design should be based on a more pluralist and critical approach to language teaching and learning for academic purposes (Benesch, 2001; Rocha, 2013, 2015) proves to be relevant. Aligned with a socio semiotic frame (Kress, 2010, 20111; Bezemer & Kress, 2016), critical and transformative foreign language education would have to do with enabling learners to experience new/other discourses and (re)shape knowledges, in a socially responsible and collaborative way. According to Benesch (2001, p. xv), it would imply encouraging learners to "increase their participation in the workplace, civic life and other areas", while also questioning the values upon which social and educational practices and relations are based.

If approached from such a critical and multimodal perspective, the notion of design within digital language learning environments should be oriented to social transformation and, as a result, help learners to "perform well in their academic courses", while also "encouraging them to question" and reshape "the education they are being offered" (Benesch, 2001: xvii).

From a social semiotic perspective, agency is of central importance as well. As Kress and Bezemer (2016, p. 38) argue, it is imperative to recognize "the agency of all learners" as sign- and meaning-makers

and, this way, as responsible for transformative ad creatively interpreting the shaping agent's messages and prompts in stances of communication and therefore in learning. The authors complement their ideas by emphasizing the extreme importance for *sign agents* (and therefore also for MOOC developers) to "give recognition to all forms of agency, identity, knowledge and learning" (Bezemer & Kress, 2016, p. 132) in and out of formal educational contexts.

When approaching the concepts of *agency* and *interest* in meaning making/learning practices, Bezemer and Kress (2016, p. 132) state that "design is prospective and therefore always a necessary innovative and transformative process rather than a competent implementation of conventionally given practices".

Aligned with such principles and theories, Peters (2014, p. 32) advocate that concepts like *situated learning* and *ecologies of learning* can be very helpful to support what he calls "designing for experience". Very briefly, as Lave & Wenger (1998) and Gee (2004) argue, the idea of learning as situated practice acknowledges how important it is for learning to be a collaborative process of knowledge (re)construction, based on real-world context and learner's experiences. As Gee (2014, p. 106) states, situated learning is realized within "concrete exemplifications in experiences learners have had (repeatedly, since learning is partly a practice effect)".

According to Peters (2014, p. 29), the ecology metaphor, as suggested by John Seely Brown, is considered very useful to emphasize that everyday practice, structural conditions, technologies, knowledge and learning experiences and discourses are all interrelated in a world where the "traditional boundaries around learning and expertise are bursting wide open". In this author's view, design as learning experience would profit from such a framework, since it takes into account "the gradual embedding of digital connectedness into everyday aspects of our lives", approaches learning from a richer and more dynamic way and highlights the pedagogical value of learning by (re)constructing objects and practices.

Drawing on the work developed by Nadin (2010), Álvarez (2014, p. 127), calls our attention to the fact that, while some attention has been given to "design functionality", the learning experience can be enhanced, none seems to focus on diverse practical experiences by means of which we, as teachers/designers and learners, experience "ethical expectations and aesthetic awareness". This seems to be a crucial point critical language education in digital environments and calls for a broader view on learning and language practices as well.

Based on Macmurray's ideas, Álvarez (2014) emphasizes that a more humanistic approach should also be considered as far LMOOCs are concerned, from which critical reflection about what it is to be human and about how we can learn to be human could be carried out. In his views, this is a very important approach regarding language education, since it is based on "human perception, communication and interaction", focuses on "the cultivation of our sensibility" and argues for "learning to live in our senses", consequently building a "connection between our ethical and aesthetic development" (Álvarez, 2014, p. 130).

This author also emphasizes the relevance of our acknowledgment that "technologies and their designs are nor neutral", that is, " they embed human, cultural and social values" (Álvarez, 2014, p. 131). From such a perspective, Álvarez (2014, p. 132) proposes:

> We should pay attention to the ethical and aesthetic dimensions that come within the rich virtual environments, communication tools, simulations, games, social media and digital objects, but also to those that teachers and learners create or encounter, use and share in online interaction.

Regarding LMOOCs design, these ideas highlight the need to integrate media, tools and activities (Beaven et al., 2014; Read, 2014) that foster discussion among learners as well the creation of virtual communities (Heeman & Leffa, 2014; Ferguson et al., 2018) that favour the development of learners' "attitudes and sensibilities" (Álvarez, 2014, p. 133). It is interesting to point out that, from this perspective, according to Álvarez (2014), LMOOCs could also be seen as platforms that encourage what Phipps & González (2004) have called *languaging*.

Based on the discussions developed by Álvarez (2014), we can say that the concept of *languaging* resonates with the ideas presented by García (2009) and García & Li Wei (2014), which advocate in favour of a perspective that challenges monolithic and monolingual approaches to the conceptualization of language. Álvarez (2014, p. 138) reiterates the invitation made by Phipps & González' (2004) so that we "reframe language education" in order to "focus on student's embodiment and engagement with words and cultures". From this point of view, languaging can be described as "a practice of languages that embraces reflective approaches, intercultural understanding and diverse values" (Álvarez, 2014, p. 138).

4. Brief final remarks: a point of return to LMOOCs challenges

This paper was intended to debate theoretical guidelines as far as LMOOCs design is concerned. The concept of MOOC as a promising field regarding language education was firstly problematized. Some key aspects with regard to design and appropriate pedagogies in order to foster critical situated language learning were also debated.

As Colpaert (2014) advocates, some important work has been done on LMOOCs, from a multiplicity of perspectives, concerning design, motivation, pronunciation and accessibility, as well as on the methodological, ethical, aesthetic, architectural and social aspects of such courses. However, taking into account the views and principles presented here, it seems fair to say that, as far as LMOOCs design is concerned, more research and empirical studies should be developed so that we can more consistently build a set of guidelines to "support massive online language education with appropriate digital designs, methods and content that are accessible, representative, safe, meaningful, and motivating" (Álvarez, 2014, p. 140).

Besides the fact that LMOOCs can be considered a highly complex technological phenomenon and a very recent, controversial and unexplored field, other restrictive aspects can be mentioned in this area, such as, the big rate of dropouts, some resistance on the part of teachers and design-related problems. A crucial restriction to be faced, according Colpaert (2014, p. 162), is the need to expand usability and accessibility criteria "for people with visual, auditory and physical disabilities", while also challenging the elitist nature such courses have presented so far.

From an ontological point of view, Colpaert (2014) goes on to say that LMMOCs should draw on stronger conceptualizations of language, which would have an impact on the massive nature of such courses. Likewise, this author advocates that, although they are called open, LMOOCs are not. Therefore, such a feature calls for deeper and more careful reconsideration.

Some limitations should be also taken into account as far as the *online* dimension of LMOOCs are concerned. Personalization and contextualization are features that should also be deeply debated and researched into, since LMOOCs show limitations as far as their potential flexibility - regarding course adaptation in terms of degrees of freedom and task difficulty, structure and progression, task typology, learning styles, assessment, feedback, interaction quality and so on – and capacity to allow for adaptations in order to provide more substantially relevant content to learners (Colpaert, 2014).

Epistemologically, LMOOCs have to find ways to better promote co-construction of content (Colpaert, 2014; Sokolic, 2014) and to cope with psychological and affective factors (Álvarez, 2014). Besides generic, content should be developed so that it could more effectively be "reusable, transportable, scalable and exchangeable" (Colpaert, 2014, p. 168).

It is also important to reinforce that, as discussed in this paper, (L)MOOCs are environments realized within zones of great tension. Colpaert (2014, p. 171) reminds us that, in order to survive, such courses have to face conflicts "between market expectations and technological limitations, between requirements and affordances, between the individual and the global learner, between pedagogical theories and practical expectations, between free sponsored access and paid tuition".

Nevertheless, it is also important to point out that the development and value of LMOOCs should not be thought in terms of rigidly fixed categorizations and that, so far, they have also proved their rich potential to promote inclusive learning (Sokolic, 2014; Ferguson et al., 2018). Given this, it is expected that the discussions developed in this paper can add positively to the growth of this field.

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