

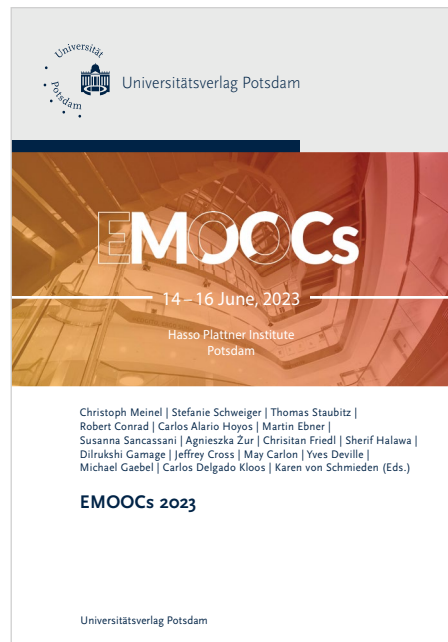
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MOOC in Private Chinese Universities

Behavior and Attitude of Students Learning Foreign Languages

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This paper investigates private university students' language learning activities in MOOC platforms and their attitude toward it. The study explores the development of MOOC use in Chinese private universities, with a focus on two modes: online et blended. We conducted empirical studies with students learning French and Japanese as a second foreign language, using questionnaires (N = 387) and interviews (N = 20) at a private university in Wuhan. Our results revealed that the majority of students used the MOOC platform more than twice a week and focused on the MOOC video, materials and assignments. However, we also found that students showed less interest in online communication (forums). Those who worked in the blended learning mode, especially Japanese learning students, had a more positive attitude toward MOOCs than other students.

1 Introduction

The MOOCs have brought heated discussions and changes in terms of teaching and learning in Chinese universities. Universities use MOOCs in two ways: online and blended. While recent studies suggested that blended learning yielded higher improvements in students' performance than solely online learning [1, 7], it cannot be denied that both modes of learning positively impacted students' achievements. In this regard, analyzing student behavior in both online and blended learning environments is crucial for better acquisition on a MOOC platform. Previous studies have explored several aspects of online and blended learning, including the usage of supported tools, instructional approaches [8], learners' achievement and academic outcomes [5]. Nevertheless, limited research has been conducted to compare student activities in online and blended learning during the COVID-19 pandemic, particularly for non-English learners of foreign languages. The suitability of different instructional designs remains a challenge in recent language MOOC studies [3], which may result in varied learning activities and attitudes toward MOOCs

learning. Additionally, relevant literature has indicated the influence of cultural and learner traits [6] on students' engagement with and attitudes toward online education. Online forum participation, an indicator of learning engagement, is affected by relationship with peers and teachers, response time to questions, etc. [2].

In this study, we will examine the current usage of MOOC resources and platforms in a private Chinese university, with a particular focus on exploring potential differences between online and blended language learning. We will investigate usage patterns and acceptance levels of online learning among students studying foreign languages for the purpose of seeking an appropriate instructional design based on MOOC platform. This work is a component of a PhD study whose goal is to document collaborative activities in online learning.

2 MOOCs uses in Chinese universities

2.1 Development of MOOCs in China

The introduction of MOOCs in China has attracted a significant amount of attention in the field of education. To keep pace with the rapidly evolving landscape of online learning, universities and pioneering companies have established a number of online open course alliances, which can be broadly categorized into two types: subject-based and region-based alliances. One example of a subject-based alliance is CMFS ("China MOOCs for Foreign Studies"), which built UMOOCs platform for foreign language online courses in 2017. Similarly, the "Guangdong, Hong Kong, Macao Universities MOOCs", established in 2018, is an example of a region-based alliance. As the popularity of MOOCs continues to surge in China, the Ministry of Education has taken the initiative and supported the creation of two international MOOC platforms in 2020: iCourse and XuetangX international version. This move aims to promote the development of MOOCs and online resources, while simultaneously encouraging their internationalization. China's Ministry of Education launched the "Chinaooc" website on March 28, 2022, which consolidates all the major MOOC platforms in China and grants users' access to their data and resources, including iCourse, Zhihui Shu, ErYa, and others. In early 2023, approximately 100,000 courses are available to Chinese students through these platforms.

In this context, language MOOCs have emerged as an effective strategy due to Chinese foreign language education reform initiatives and teachers have been actively pushed to develop new courses. More than 300 language MOOCs are hosted by China's platforms (iCourse and xuetangX) [3]. A variety of MOOC have been examined with English lessons being the most frequently investigated,

while the study of other minor languages occupies a small proportion in China. The research of online and blended minor languages learning is also of great significance, particularly for the influence of language type on the effectiveness of MOOC language learning [8].

2.2 Development of MOOCs in Chinese private universities

Chinese universities have actively supported the development of MOOCs in response to measures implemented by the Ministry of Education since 2013. This study examines the case of Wuhan University of Bioengineering, one of the best private universities in China. The university introduced MOOCs in September 2014, providing students with access to online learning resources. The online credits were equivalent to those of on-campus courses, which encouraged students to enroll in elective courses through MOOC platforms. Students who registered for the iCourse and completed the exam would receive a credit certificate. Up to May 2018, 150,000 students had participated in MOOCs. The emergence of MOOCs had indeed made it possible for students to get access to online learning resources, but initially, they were only used as optional courses and not as required courses. In other words, MOOCs were used as a supplementary tool for learning. However, after the outbreak of COVID-19 in 2019 and the demand for school closure in the city of Wuhan, the university employed a variety of strategies to offer remote teaching, including MOOC platforms like iCourse and Zhihui Shu, as well as videoconferencing platforms. MOOCs have served as a prominent educational resource, with MOOC platforms taking a dominant role in nearly all university courses. Even after students returned to school in September 2020, because of the uncertainty of the virus, some courses remained online while most courses were taught through blended learning, combining MOOC content with traditional classroom instruction.

This private Chinese university selected several MOOC platforms to facilitate effective online learning, among which Zhihui Shu has been used for a long time and is still in use today. Zhihui Shu, which translates to “Wisdom Tree” in English, is one of the most well-known MOOC platforms in China and offers access to 14,100 online courses, with 75 % of them exclusively designed for on-campus students and providing credits for their completion. For the purpose of using the service of this MOOC platform and its MOOC resources, the university pays a charge to the company of Zhihui Shu each semester. The university chooses and pays for multiple high-quality MOOCs on this platform that serve as credit courses. Students are able to select these credit courses through the university’s course selection system and then use the platform to begin their online studies. Two primary types of learning are provided on this platform: online learning,

wherein students learn the credit courses paid for by the university, complete all online missions, and submit their credit certificates to the college; and blended learning, which combines online credit course learning on the platform with offline classroom teaching, with both the online and offline activities being evaluated.

3 Students practices and opinions about MOOCs

3.1 Data collection: Interviews and online survey

We present the findings from interviews and an online survey conducted at Wuhan University of Bioengineering. We investigated the usage and acceptance of MOOCs in an online French course, a blended French course and a blended Japanese course offered through the Zhihui Shu platform. The university provided French and Japanese classes for students interested in learning a second foreign language. 103 third-year students enrolled in the online French course from September to December 2021, during which they engaged in all learning activities using the Zhihui Shu platform. This included accessing MOOC resources principally videos, supporting materials uploaded by teachers, completing assignments, participating in group work, and other activities. 101 second-year students registered for the French blended course and 195 third-year students for the Japanese course from March to June 2022. In these courses, students utilized a blended approach that integrated on part online learning using MOOC resources in Zhihui Shu and another part of face-to-face instructions.

We started by conducting semi-directive interviews with 20 online learning students selected at random. The objective of these interviews was to gain insights into the students' collaborative experiences in online learning. In their statements, students also shared their use of Zhihui Shu for online learning, as well as their attitudes regarding this platform. All of the interviews have been recorded and transcribed and the analysis of the data is currently in progress.

To obtain a more comprehensive understanding of all students, we created an online questionnaire based on the responses provided by the interviewees. The questionnaire was designed to identify trends in online collaborative learning, including questions about students' online learning habits, such as the frequency of accessing the MOOC platform, types of learning activities engaged in, and their attitudes towards MOOC platforms. Thus far, we have received 94 answers from the online course (a response rate of 91 %) and 293 answers from the blended course (a response rate of 98 %). The in-depth analysis is still ongoing. The software Excel and SPSS are being used for this research.

3.2 Results: Learning activity and attitude of students

All students enrolled in the language courses were encouraged to make use of the MOOC platform Zhihui Shu and its resources to enhance their language learning experience. Every one of them developed his or her own pattern for organizing their online learning. Table 1 displays the frequency of MOOC platform use by students, indicating that they were actively engaged in online learning using this platform. In general, the majority of students accessed the platform several times a week. As stated in the interviews, some students preferred to watch the MOOC resource videos and review the materials once a week, while devoting another time of the week to working on their assignments. They also expressed a concern that if they did not maintain a consistent learning routine throughout the semester, they might end up with an excessive amount of work at the end of the term. However, they were less likely to utilize the platform excessively during the day due to factors such as online learning fatigue and cognitive load.

Table 1: Frequency of MOOC platform use

Learning model	2+ /month & less	1 /week	2+ /week	1 /day	2+ /day
French Online (n = 94)	11 %	18 %	49 %	13 %	9 %
French Blended (n = 98)	20 %	13 %	45 %	19 %	2 %
Japanese Blended (n = 195)	8 %	21 %	50 %	14 %	7 %

Regarding the differences in frequency of platform use between online and blended learning, we observed a disparity for the French language course. The French online learners exhibited greater engagement with the MOOC platform compared to French blended students. This difference could be attributed to two possible explanations based on interview data. Firstly, online students heavily relied on the platform as their primary source of knowledge acquisition, whereas blended learning students had the option to attend offline classes, which might have been more comfortable for them, thus leading them to spend more time on it. Secondly, the assessment structure for the two types of courses differed. For the online French course, the online performance was the only factor that determined the final grade, while for the blended French course, it constituted only 50% of the final grade, with the other 50% attributed to the offline class performance. This

assessment structure might influence blended learners to invest less time and effort in using the online platform.

In addition to monitoring usage frequency, it is crucial to consider students' online activities on the MOOC platform to track learning process and identify trends. Figure 1 presents the various learning activities that students engaged with on the platform. This finding reflects that Chinese students were focused on accessing learning materials and completing assignments, which is consistent with prior studies that reported the most frequently occurring online learning activity was accessing learning materials including slides and video lectures, shared assignments, and forum messages [4]. However, using forums was the least popular activity compared to other ones. Instead of discovering online communication, many students concentrated on the role of MOOC platforms in the domain of knowledge transfer. Interviews with students revealed that their reluctance to use forums might be due to their fear of making mistakes and losing face in public. Some students favored using the internet forum to post ideas in anonymity. Chinese students are accustomed to being cautious, and they typically view embarrassing themselves in front of others as unacceptable behavior [6]. Students with a cautious personality type may avoid speaking in online public forums. Interestingly, the French blended learners were relatively more active in the online discussions, which could be attributed to the interviewees' statement that their interactions in the offline classroom helped them become closer to one another, and led to their desire to share more in the online forum. These findings highlight the importance of considering cultural and social factors in student participation and engagement.

In contrast to blended learning students, online learning students appeared to be more reliant on the MOOC platform, as evidenced by their higher frequency of MOOC video consultations and online assignments. They were more likely to have a higher level of engagement in online learning.

After examining the learning experience on the MOOC platform, it is essential to take into consideration students' attitudes toward the MOOC platform. In line with the results of Table 2, the majority of students demonstrated a highly favorable attitude toward learning through the MOOC platform. It is observed that blended learning students tended to exhibit a more positive attitude toward the MOOC platform learning than those engaged in online learning. The online learners' neutral attitude might imply their reluctance and a lack of enthusiasm to utilize the MOOC platform. Interviewees conveyed their preference for blended learning over online learning, as it provided them with direct engagement with teachers and students, which could potentially account for this trend. They further explained that if they started learning a new foreign language that seemed challenging for a beginner, they would feel more comfortable taking a hybrid or offline lesson.

Moreover, as depicted in Table 2, students in Japanese blended learning displayed an exceptionally positive attitude toward MOOC use for learning. The university's

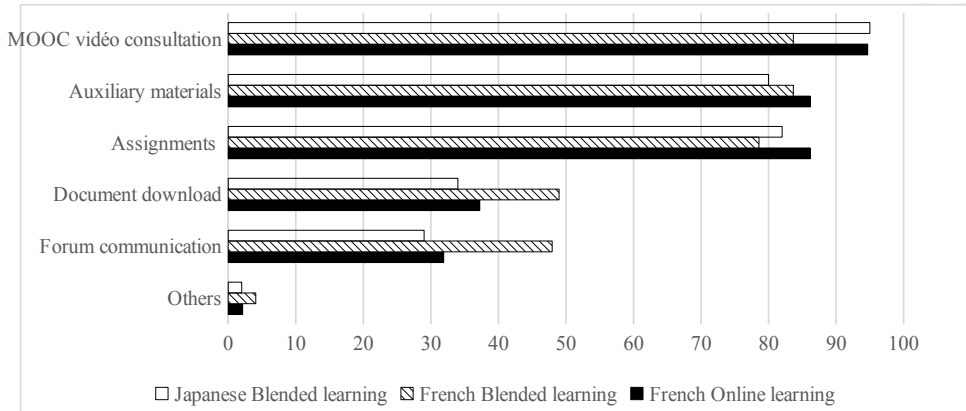


Figure 1: Online activity in MOOC platform (by percentage) (What activities do you engage in the MOOC platform?)

Japanese teacher clarified that the geographical proximity of China and Japan allowed Chinese students to easily access Japanese culture and internet-based learning resources. Such ease of access might contribute to a stronger inclination among students learning Japanese towards online language learning compared to those studying French. This emphasizes the potential influence of cultural background on individuals' attitudes toward learning.

Table 2: Attitude toward MOOC use for learning (Do you think that MOOC use and platform are beneficial for foreign language learning?)

Learning model	Strongly disagree & Disagree	Not sure	Agree	Strongly agree
French Online (n = 94)	4 %	47 %	34 %	15 %
French Blended (n = 98)	1 %	36 %	46 %	17 %
Japanese Blended (n = 195)	4 %	26 %	40 %	30 %

4 Final thoughts

Chinese authorities have made efforts for policies and recognition of MOOC certification, such as its integration with university curricula, establishment of national MOOC evaluation and accreditation system, recognition as professional qualifications. Chinese private universities are increasingly recognizing the benefits of MOOCs and are incorporating MOOC platforms and resources into their online or blended classroom setups. As part of this process, students get regular access to the MOOC platform, which exposes them to a range of tools and services. MOOC forum, as a vital tool in a foreign language class, not only offers the opportunities of social interaction and authentic collaboration, but also provides an environment to practice the target language in the context and develop pragmatics skills. However, despite the availability of online forums, students do not seem particularly engaged in these forums. In order to gain a deeper understanding of this issue and move forward, we will conduct a study based on forum observation and interviews. Specifically, the study will investigate the frequency of online forum use, the content of the forum, and how students interact with a forum. The forum constitutes an indispensable element in online collaborative activities, which is the focus of our PhD research. In addition, we observe that Japanese blended learners exhibit a high level of motivation and a more positive attitude toward MOOC learning. This discovery raises the question of whether different disciplines have an impact on students' online learning activities, which warrants further investigation.

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