Language MOOCs and OERs:
new trends and challenges

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Sommario

7. How to improve academic oral skills in a language MOOC: from needs analysis to course design

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Abstract: In recent years, the number of educational resources freely available online for learning foreign languages has grown exponentially and LMOOCs are an emerging category in this field. One of the main challenges faced by LMOOCs is that learning a language is fundamentally skill-based and practicing skills requires interaction with others. Therefore, LMOOCs should provide an adequate learning environment including activities and tools which stimulate social learning (Motzo & Proudfoot, 2017).

In the framework of the LMOOC4Slav project several freely available online learning tools have been created for Slavic-speaking learners who intend to undertake part of their studies in Romance-speaking countries. One of the main results is an Academic Italian language MOOC. To define its goals and contents, we firstly analysed the needs of the target learners, through a questionnaire administered to a total of 209 adult L2/FL learners. Overall findings of the needs analysis revealed that most of the respondents considered particularly difficult those activities which require oral skills, such as performing or understanding an oral presentation, taking an oral exam or participating in a formal discussion.

The aim of this study is to investigate whether language MOOCs are a viable option to elicit oral production and to improve pronunciation and perception of language learners analysing previous experiences (e.g. Rubio, 2014; Estebas-Vilaplana & Solans, 2020), to evaluate the potential or the limitations of LMOOCs and to propose examples of online content allowing to practice speaking skills with tasks that reflect everyday situations and interactive contexts in an academic setting.

Keywords: LMOOC; Oral Skills; Listening Comprehension; Pronunciation; Academic Discourse.

1. LMOOCS and their limitations

In recent years, the number of educational resources freely available on-line for learning foreign languages (FL) has grown exponentially[1]. Language MOOCs (LMOOCs), defined as "dedicated web-based online courses for second languages with unrestricted access and potentially unlimited participation" (Bárcena et al., 2014: 1), are an emerging category in this field. LMOOCs have a great potential for foreign language teaching and learning, but at the same time they present several difficulties. Bárcena, Martín-Monje and Read (2015) point out a series of problems due to the impersonal na-

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[1] The authors confirm contribution to the paper as follows: sections 1-4 BS and sections 5-6 AP.

ture of MOOCs; Beaven et al. (2014) note "that a high level of interaction is difficult to achieve, that it is difficult to engage in social learning of language skills, that there is a substantial time cost for educators, and that LMOOCs, like other MOOCs, have big drop-out rates" (p. 50). The language teaching profession is still doubtful about the effectiveness of language instruction within the structure of massive online courses, considering that ample opportunities to interact synchronously with other learners and with experts (native speakers or instructors) and access to corrective feedback are crucial ingredients for language acquisition (Rubio 2014). Contrary to the principles of the most widely used methodology in foreign language, which is Communicative Language Teaching, students cannot or have very limited occasions to interact with their peers or instructors in the target language and it seems that LMOOCs can provide neither dynamic, learner-driven training, nor sufficiently rich and realistic interaction with competent speakers of the FL. The feeling of isolation and the lack of interactivity have a strong impact not only on the results obtained, but also on student motivation, being strictly correlated with the high dropping out rate (Khalil & Ebner, 2014).

Learning and using a language involve several written and oral skills and competences, including linguistic, pragmatic and sociocultural competences. Regarding oral skills, there seems to be strong agreement that training on perception and/or on production has a beneficial effect on adult learners' overall oral performance (de Bot & Mailfert, 1982; Kennedy, Blanchet & Trofimovich, 2014; Saito & Lyster, 2012; Trofimovich, Ammar & Gatbonton, 2008). Nevertheless, many computer-based language courses emphasize exclusively the development of reading skills and formal rather than functional linguistic aspects (Bárcena et al., 2014). Studies such as Ventura and Martín-Monje (2016) or Vorobyeva (2018) have shown that receptive skills, i.e., reading and listening, can be effectively taught in LMOOCs, while writing and speaking, which require more feedback and oral practice, are rather problematic.

The importance of interaction in acquiring and developing language skills has been highlighted by a number of studies, starting with Vygotsky (1978) and his concept of 'zone of proximal development', Bruner (1983) and, in particular, his notion of 'scaffolding', as well as Long's (1981, 1996) works on the interaction hypothesis. Interactionist theories assign a fundamental role in the language acquisition process to the cooperation between the learner and the mother tongue speaker (or a more competent speaker) and to the negotiation of meaning. Interaction is of paramount importance in both traditional and virtual classrooms, but in the later it is particularly affected by the limitations of the medium. Along with interaction, corrective feedback is a central issue in second language learning and teaching. Since Hendrickson's (1978) review of the issue of error correction in the classroom, feedback has

occupied a prominent role in Second Language Acquisition research. The main question is whether errors need to be corrected and, if so, which errors, by whom, when and how. Regarding oral production and perception, several recent studies have found that, in addition to implicit feedback, the presence of explicit, individualized corrective feedback has an added beneficial effect (Dlaska & Krekeler, 2013; Rubio, 2014; Saito & Lyster, 2012).

Summing up, one of the main challenges faced by LMOOCs is that learning a language is fundamentally skill-based and practicing skills, in particular productive skills, requires interaction with others. Therefore, LMOOCs should provide an adequate learning environment including activities and tools which stimulate social learning (Motzo & Proudfoot, 2017) as well as meaningful constructive feedback. The challenge of providing feedback to a large number of learners is typically faced in MOOCs, giving peers an increased role in the feedback and assessment process (Rubio, 2014). However, peer correction in LMOOCs might be problematic, since learners often do not feel competent enough to correct their fellows and they consider this kind of activity particularly demanding and time-consuming (Clifford et al*.,* 2019).

2. Understanding language learners' needs

In the framework of the LMOOC4Slav project, funded by the Erasmus+ Programme of the EU during 2021-2024, several freely available online learning tools have been produced for Slavic-speaking learners who intend to undertake part of their studies in Romance-speaking countries. One of the main results is an Academic Italian language MOOC, available on EduOpen platform. International students who are beginning university studies face a bewildering range of obstacles and many of these difficulties involve the use of the foreign language. In Italy, in most of the University courses, Italian is the medium of instruction. "This language policy choice, in line with the plurilingual approach of the Council of Europe that safeguards linguistic diversity, can represent either a means of attraction or an obstacle. Many students choose to come to Italy because of its language and culture. Nevertheless, the language proficiency level required is not adequate to cope with studying in Italy" (Troncarelli & Villarini, 2017: 8-9). So, the main objective of the course is to provide participants with the necessary tools for a successful university experience in Italy. In particular, the MOOC is aimed to help students of B1 or higher proficiency level, preferably before their arrival to Italy, to develop intercultural competences, linguistic and communicative skills specific to the academic domain, including those of comprehension and production of academic texts, and to acquire the most effective study strategies.

To develop the syllabus of our Academic Italian language MOOC, the first activity was to analyse the needs of the target learners to make decisions on the goals and contents of the MOOC. A questionnaire was developed and administered to a total of 209 adult language learners living in Italy (L2 (second language) learners – 21 informants) and in various Slavic-speaking countries (FL learners – 188 informants). The questionnaire was administered online using Microsoft Forms and it contained generic questions about previous instruction and foreign language knowledge and specific questions inquiring about knowledge and skills in Italian academic language and culture (e.g. textual genres considered difficult to produce or to comprehend) as well as about learning strategies. Overall findings of the needs analysis revealed that most of the FL/L2 respondents considered as one of the main difficulties those activities which require oral skills, such as performing or understanding an oral presentation, taking an oral exam, or participating in a formal discussion. In particular, the answers to Q.15 (Fig. 1) show that the main worries of foreign learners of Italian concern oral presentations and oral exams at the University (for 100 and 96 FL/L2 learners, respectively), but expressing one's opinion and understanding university lectures are also considered problematic for many learners.

15. In your opinion what could be the main difficulties you will encounter while studying in Italy? You can choose more than one option.
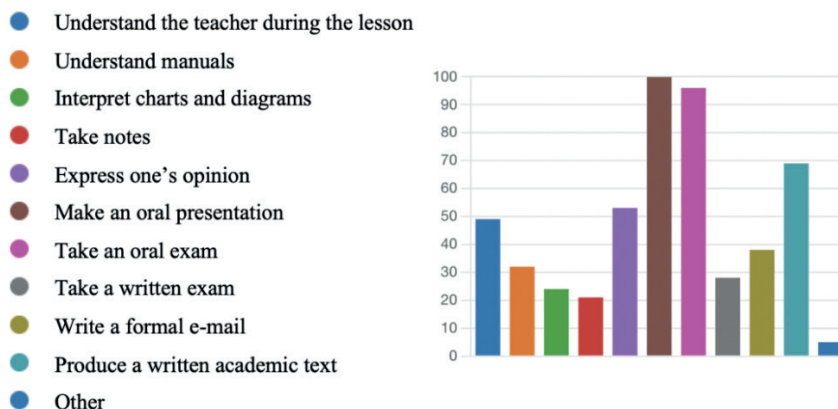
Fig. 1 FL learners' expected difficulties while studying in Italy

Regarding oral discourse in general, Mauranen's (2012) statement that speaking has been overlooked in English for academic purposes due to the main interest in written texts could be generalized for other languages as well, including Italian. Written and spoken texts in academic setting have their own characteristics, so in a syllabus of Academic Italian language MOOC

it is necessary to dedicate specific modules to each of them. An academic lecture and textbooks on the same topic do not present the same linguistic features (Biber 2006): in classroom discourse there are specific linguistic features used to signal the organization and coherence of a lecture, for example discourse markers (e.g. Chaudron & Richards, 1986; Flowerdew & Tauroza, 1995) or metadiscourse and intonation (Thompson, 2003). Apart from university lectures, there are many specific spoken registers that are common in university life, for example conversational exchanges of study groups (Basturkmen, 2003) or one-to-one meetings during professors' office hour, situations that learners need to be aware of.

Finally, we need to consider that registers and genres follow different cultural traditions. As Ylönen claims, "Due to different legal and conventionalized rules of various countries, institutions, disciplines or paradigms, the patterns of the genre (in terms of both the setting within a certain social practice and verbalized realization) may vary in manifold ways even though the inherited genre names sound similar" (2018: 370). To give a striking example, an undergraduate examination at an Italian university is mainly held orally whereas in Poland it is almost invariably written. In fact, Q.14 of the questionnaire (Fig. 2) gives us some clues about the expectations of FL Slavic-speaking students regarding cultural differences in academic settings: 122 students expect having problems in communicating with offices, 63 students foresee problems deriving from different ways of carrying out lessons and exams, 53 predict difficulties in communicating with their Italian teachers.

14. Which cultural aspect could create problems for you while studying at an Italian university? (You can choose more than one option)
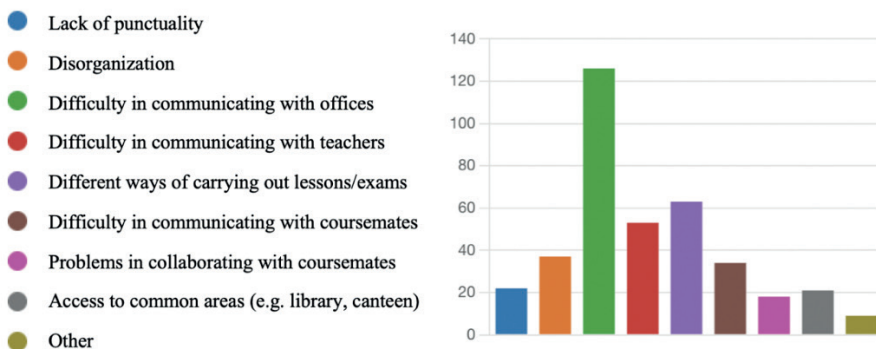
Fig. 2 FL learners' expected culture-related difficulties

3. Developing oral skills in LMOOCs: previous experiences

To investigate whether language MOOCs are a viable option to elicit oral production and to improve oral skills of language learners (i.e., speaking, including pronunciation, and listening comprehension skills), we propose to analyse shortly some previous experiences through the observation of the MOOCs *Professional English* (Bárcena et al*., 2014)*, *Improving your Spanish pronunciation* (Rubio, 2014) and *Aprendizaje de la pronunciación inglesa a través de canciones y textos literarios* (Estebas-Vilaplana & Solans, 2020), each of them having a focus on oral skills.

The course of *Professional English* (2013, MiríadaX platform), described in Bárcena et al*.* (2014), includes oral and written interaction and sociolinguistic competence, relying on peer-to-peer tools of the platform. Interaction was key to the course design, implemented through a series of activities to foster collaborative learning in the MOOC, such as the use of forums to practise open writing and peer-to-peer (P2P) activities to provide feedback on each other's video recordings. For the P2P activities students were divided in small groups of four and acted as evaluators of each other's activities following guidelines provided in the MOOC. Only students who uploaded their own videos could evaluate their peers. The guidelines contained evaluation criteria designed to make the review meaningful for the learner who would receive it. Furthermore, the course guide provided indications about how to give useful and respectful feedback. Another key term in the course design was scaffolding. Students who performed below 60% in fundamental activities were invited to complete extra support activities to gain reinforcement, on an optional base, in order to provide flexibility. Also, in the module tests, a link from each question gave learners explicit feedback taking them back to the point in the course where the problem was explained. Maybe surprisingly, it appears that peer-to-peer activities were not the most popular ones among learners. To complete the course, students had to do 80% of the activities. Whenever it was possible, P2P activities were left out. Even students who acknowledged the importance of interaction in the questionnaire failed to make the most of this opportunity, maybe because of the workload, time, and effort they required. As a reaction to the lack of interaction, the teaching team tried to change learners' attitude emphasizing the importance of collaborative learning in the following edition of the MOOC.

The LMOOC *Improving your Spanish pronunciation* (2013, Canvas Network) described by Rubio (2014) was designed to give learners the opportunity to listen to native speakers' pronunciation and to practice extensively, recording their own production. The MOOC provided grids for self-evaluation, allowing learners to compare their own production and the native model. Beyond the

grid, students were also able to visualize their speech patterns on a spectrogram and compare them with a native speaker's patterns. The practice sections were not evaluated, and the learners could record themselves as many times as they wanted. Apart from self-evaluation, the MOOC included peer evaluation as well. Students had to listen to peers' recordings and provide feedback using the same grid they used to evaluate themselves. Finally, at the end of each module, students had an assignment where they had to record an oral production including the pronunciation features practiced. The recording was evaluated by the instructors using the grid previously used by the students. In addition to the grid, instructors also provided individualized audio feedback to every student, focusing on the learners' problems, providing correct models, and specific suggestions for improvement. As Rubio (2014) states, in a massive online course, the crucial difference is the access to feedback, since the native speaker models and the chance to self-evaluate could not be sufficient to bridge the gap between the actual performance and the target pronunciation. In this course learners received individualized feedback both from peers and an expert (the instructor). Under these conditions the absence of face-to-face interaction and the presence of a high number of participants did not constitute an obstacle for effective pronunciation learning. As for the individual feedback, we have some doubts about its feasibility whenever a very large number of students would participate in the MOOC.

The course *The Acquisition of English Pronunciation through Songs and Literary Texts/ Aprendizaje de la pronunciación inglesa a través de canciones y textos literarios* (2019, 2020; OpenupEd), as described by Estebas-Vilaplana and Solans (2020), focuses on listening and ear-training activities based on singing and reciting songs and literary texts, combining explicit instruction on English phonetics with implicit learning through singing and reciting. At the end of each module, after the presentation and the practice, participants were evaluated through a multiple-choice perception exercise with immediate feedback. Besides, in the discussion forums participants could interact and make questions and comments to their peers and to the teaching team. The study demonstrates that the LMOOC helped learners to improve efficiently their oral production skills, even if the production activities (singing and reciting songs and literary texts) did not have explicit correction and feedback.

4. Oral skills in the Academic Italian language MOOC for Slavic speakers

Based on the results of the needs analysis (§2) and the analysis of previous experiences (§3), let us see how oral skills in academic setting are presented

and practiced throughout the Academic Italian LMOOC for Slavic-speaking students. Table (1) shows the selection of videos (to watch, to analyse, and to produce) connected to oral skills, including those regarding cultural aspects that could represent obstacles when communicating with native speakers in Academia. In each module, except for module 4, focusing on academic writing skills, ample space is dedicated to speaking and listening for academic purposes, through semi-authentic videos followed by activities, video-lessons, specific exercises, and production activities. Several video-lessons and exercises focus on the characteristics of spoken texts in academic setting, for example on discourse markers.

Module 1	Studying in Italy
1) Semi-authentic videos	Dialogue in formal context (student introduces herself to a professor) Dialogue in informal context (student introduces himself to a group of coursemates)
2) Video-lessons	Differences between formal and informal contexts Problematic aspects for a student of Slavic origin in the Italian culture
3) Production	Record two short videos introducing yourself to a teacher/a group of coursemates
Module 2	Communicating at the University
1) Semi-authentic videos	Meeting of an Erasmus student with the university tutor Meeting of an Erasmus student with the employee of the Erasmus office Exchange between classmates on a task to be carried out
2) Video-lessons	How to communicate with professors, with university offices, with classmates Awareness of registers in language
Module 3	Understanding university lectures and taking notes
1) Testimonial videos	The first time at a university lecture in Italy Cultural aspects of university lectures in Italy
2) Semi-authentic videos	Excerpt from a university lecture Questions and answers during a university lesson Teacher gives instructions for a homework assignment
3) Video-lessons	The characteristics of the oral academic discourse Strategies for understanding university lectures
4) Exercises	Listening comprehension
Module 4	Written academic tasks
-	-
Module 5	Make an oral presentation at the University
1) Testimonial videos	The first oral presentation at the University
2) Semi-authentic videos	Excerpts from oral presentations of native speakers

3) Video-lessons	How to structure and implement an oral presentation Effective communication strategies
4) Exercises	Pronunciation Oral discourse markers
5) Production	Send a video with a short oral presentation based on a given text
Module 6	Express your opinion, take an oral exam
1) Testimonial videos	Exams at Italian universities
2) Semi-authentic videos	Excerpt from an oral exam
3) Video-lessons	How to participate in a debate at the University How to conduct group work Argumentative strategies in formal and in informal contexts How to answer questions effectively
4) Production	Record a short video on how to study effectively using textbooks and handouts

Tab. 1 Focus on oral skills in the syllabus of the Academic Italian LMOOC for Slavic-speaking students

The contexts and communicative situations presented include university lectures, questions and answers and debates during the lectures, oral exams, oral presentations, conversational exchanges of study groups, meetings with professors, tutor, and the employee of the Erasmus office. We tried to face the issue of different cultural traditions through testimonial videos and video-lessons reinforcing observation, reflection, and the development of effective strategies to face them. As for the feedback, in addition to automatic corrections and comments, students were also invited to evaluate themselves using grids provided and to listen to/watch peers' recordings and provide feedback using the same grid. For example, in Module 1 learners are asked to record two short videos introducing themselves to a teacher and to a group of coursemates. The evaluation grid guides the learner to assign from 1 to 5 points, separately, to phonological, grammatical, lexical, and sociolinguistic competence. The grid offers, for each point assigned, a descriptor clear and understandable for a B1/B2 learner. As a final activity, students can optionally provide feedback to their peers, following Castrillo's (2014) recommendation to give a voluntary approach to these activities. Looking at another example, in Module 5 participants are asked to record the production of a series of problematic sounds for Slavic speaking learners of Italian and to compare it to a native speaker's model. This kind of activity was integrated in the MOOC because self-assessment in pronunciation instruction is suggested in the literature as a useful tool to enhance learners' awareness, to increase their motivation and to make the assessment process more learner centred (Costamagna, 2000; Dlaska & Krekeler, 2008), aspects stressed also in the studies presented in §3. In the same module learners are also asked to pro-

duce a short oral presentation (5 minutes), to observe and comment on the production of their peers.

5. Assessing efficiency of the activities aimed at developing oral skills

Assessing efficiency of an LMOOC differs from assessing efficiency of a face-to-face course, since the learning process of a massive and heterogenous group of MOOC participants requires constant monitoring to keep track of its progress. As numbers might be considered an indicator of the course success, some researchers argue that high enrolment numbers should not be confused with the course efficiency. As Kulkarni et al. state, "Typing one's email address into a webpage is not the same as showing up for the first day of a registrar enrolled class. It's more like peeking through the window, and what the large number of signups tell us is that lots of people are curious" (Kulkarni et al., 2013: 25). A successful course should therefore be able to transform students' curiosity into a meaningful learning opportunity.

The question about how to define success in a MOOC has been partially answered by Sokolik by deferring it to the participants themselves: "For a MOOC, given the large numbers – however real they may be – success has to be driven by students themselves. As no student is compelled to sign up, attend, or even participate in any way in a MOOC, our usual ways of measuring success have to be questioned" (Sokolik, 2014: 26). Thus, given different student profiles and typologies of MOOC, we will have different definitions of success. A MOOC on English for general purposes, for instance, will measure its success in achieving learning goals connected with the development of skills and competences for general communication in regards with the given CEFR level. For an Academic Language MOOC addressed to university students, success may be defined in terms of obtaining specific learning objectives, such as: being aware of different language registers used in various academic contexts, developing comprehension strategies in the domain of academic discourse, learning how to enhance production in the domain of academic disciplines, etc.

To assess the efficiency of the *Academic Italian for Slavic-Speaking Students* in its preliminary design phase, the evaluation of its pilot has been conducted in the months of March-May 2023. As for the evaluation methodology, both quantitative and qualitative methods for collecting and analysing data have been applied, following a mixed-method approach. The EduOpen delivery platform has provided a quantitative collection tool, allowing to monitor in real-time students' progress (e.g. access to the platform, participation in forum discussions, test results). As for qualitative data collection tools, a post-course student questionnaire has been administered upon course com-

pletion so as to verify learner satisfaction with the course itself. The survey questions investigated in particular the participants' fulfilment of course expectations and achievements as well as their satisfaction in terms of the course structure, its contents and duration, the promoted interaction, and the provided feedback and scaffolding mechanisms. By means of the teaching team's observation, another qualitative data collection tool, students' performance in activities and their interaction in forums have been assessed.

The six-week pilot course was released on 20th February 2023 with 37 participants recruited from the Ss. Cyril and Methodius University (UKiM) in Skopje. The participants' group represented quite a homogeneous student profile in terms of age, education and the field of study, with a mean age of 18-24 years and the majority of participants being university Italian Language and Literature students. Regarding other actors, one professor responsible for the course coordination and tutors' management as well as four tutors responsible for the course monitoring and forum management were involved.

All the interaction between students and tutors took place in the communication area, consisting of four forum types: announcements, assistance, production and discussion forum. As communication tools allow tutors to observe only the activities of active participants, information on the involvement of "invisible learners" (Beaudoin, 2002) is difficult to detect without Learning Analytics techniques. Thus, Table 2 reports the data extracted from the learning system's activity log, the number of forum discussion views and forum views, as well as the number of users who viewed the forum discussion and the forum, so as to verify whether the learning process has actually taken place. The results show that most learners viewed the forum but did not read the discussion, the exception being the communication area dedicated to announcements and assistance, where quite a high participation of "invisible students" can be observed. The Announcements' discussion was viewed 109 times by 21 students, while the Assistance Forum discussion 92 times by 11 students, which is quite a high amount when compared to the total number of participants.

Module	Forum	Viewed discussion	Viewed discussion: number of users	Viewed course module	Viewed course module: number of users
Module 0	Announcements	109	21	59	21
	Assistance Forum	92	11	106	27
Module 1	Forum 2.6 Production	1	1	97	34
Module 2	Forum 2.8 Production	15	2	97	35

Module 3	Forum 2.6 Production	10	1	80	34
Module 4	Forum 3.4 Production	2	2	65	34
Module 5	Forum 2.5 Production	1	1	59	33
	Forum 3.1	6	2	142	33
Module 6	Forum 3.4 Production	1	1	53	32
	Forum 3.1	0	0	142	33
	Forum 3.2	0	0	59	33
Total Module 1-6		237	27	817	36

Tab. 2 Data extracted from the learning system's activity log related to the number of forum views

As for the communicative interactions taking place in the forum, the results show that the volume of communication is generally very low. In the Assistance Forum the conversation takes place between two interlocutors, the learner and the tutor, and is often limited to a triplet: a learner's request, a tutor's response, a learner's thanksgiving. The conversation is generated by the technical assistance requests concerning the assignment submission, the activity performance or access to the platform. In the Production Forums an occasional communicative exchange can be observed between the learner and the tutor consisting of two turns: learner assignment, tutor feedback. As can be seen from the graph (Fig. 3), communicative interactions in forums constitute a very small percentage of the total amount of posts with the exception of the Assistance Forum and the Production Forum of Module 1, where the tutor presence is constant and the feedback provided.
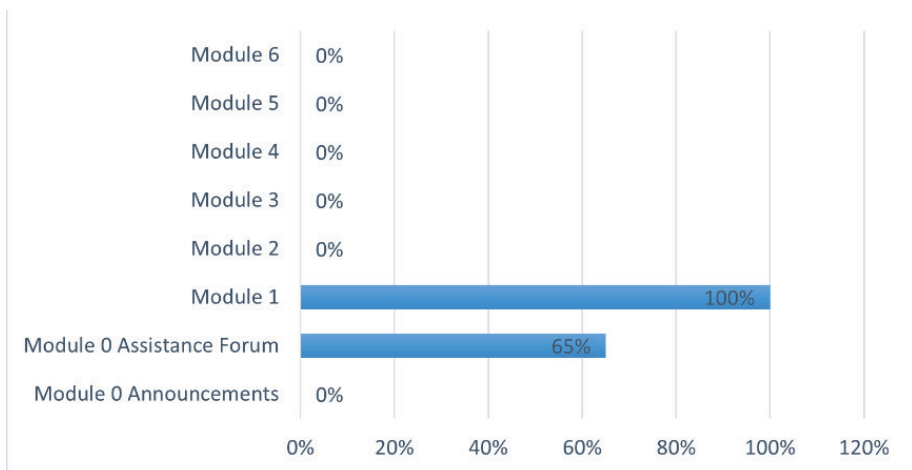

Fig. 3 Communicative interactions in the LMOOC forums

The linguistic analysis of students' oral performance has confirmed the B2/C1 level declared by most participants in the pre-course questionnaire, which means that students have the required language skills for academic communication, tending to expand the conversation and using the appropriate formal register. The video-presentations have the approximate length of 1 minute in the Forum 2.3 Production (a formal and informal self-presentation) and of 3 minutes in the Forum 3.4 Production (learning strategies presentation), as required in the task.

Regarding the feedback, in the production forums students are asked to self-evaluate their work by observing the self-assessment grid and to provide feedback to their course mates' productions. Nevertheless, forum peer interaction has not been observed and consequently no communication exchanges with peer feedback have been recorded. Students tend to post their task in the form of an individual assignment, in some cases observing their course mates' posts without commenting on them.

Interestingly enough, the tendency towards forum passive participation and the lack of interactive exchanges between learners has not been perceived by the participants, as revealed by the final questionnaire results. 51.72% of students totally agree with the statement "The course promotes interaction between students", while only 3.45% totally disagree, 13.79% partially disagree and 20.69% have no opinion. The responses have shown the participants' positive perception of the forum activities and tutor assistance as well. The majority of students (58.62%) totally (37.93%, 51.72%) or partially (20.69%, 6.90%) agree with the statements: "The forum activities have encouraged student participation", "The tutors have helped me to understand the course content better and have given me useful feedback". Additionally, 68.97% of respondents feel more confident in making oral presentations and interacting in groups after the course completion, with only one student not agreeing with that and five having no opinion.

The questionnaire also includes two open-ended questions to verify learner satisfaction with the activities. Forum production activities have been indicated as the most motivating ones by only one student, who feels stimulated by an opportunity to test herself and reflect on her own production. Nine respondents indicate the production activities, in particular video recording (4 respondents), as less motivating, some of them justifying their responses with the lack of time available. It can be assumed that oral university assignments have been perceived as complex and time-consuming, and therefore less stimulating than others.

6. Conclusions

The paper aimed to investigate some factors that determine oral production in a Language MOOC by analysing the previous studies and assessing the efficiency of the *Academic Italian for Slavic-Speaking Students* course in its preliminary design phase. The data analysis from the pilot test has helped to observe both the visible and invisible side of the course dynamics so as to better understand how online learning process takes place and how to enhance students' production. Some problematic areas that need improvement have been identified, such as passive forum participation and the lack of communicative interactions between learners, the role of tutor resulting crucial in addressing these two issues.

As students tend to skip P2P activities, the tutor presence proves to be essential to stimulate and guide peer communication in the forum. According to Brinton et al. (2014), active participation of the teaching staff can contribute to an increase in forum discussion volume (Brinton et al. 2014: 357). Lantolf and Thorne (2006) claim that receiving tutor and peer feedback results important to promote autonomous learning through the development of the learner's 'zone of proximal development' (Vygotsky, 1978). It still remains to investigate how to guide self-paced online learning, when tutor supervision cannot be provided, so as to reduce the decline of activity on MOOC forums, thus enhancing active participation aimed at developing learner productive skills as well.

7. Acknowledgments

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The year 2020 has recently been referred to as "the second year of MOOCs" (Shah, 2020). MOOCs are one of the most widespread means of development of education and a wide range of higher education institutions offer some kind of distance education through MOOCs. Open learning has progressively gained place in higher education, introducing new models of flexible tools linked to long-distance education. This volume presents Language MOOCs from a wide array of perspectives, framing them with respect to OERs and new available technologies. The authors of the chapters are higher education professionals, applied linguists, and language technologists working on issues related to language learning and teaching, namely: MOOCs, OERs, new approaches in language teaching and learning, academic mobility, linguistic description of languages, linguistic diversity, language for specific purposes, digital transformation in education and new educational technologies. The volume includes a selection of contributions presented at two international conferences organized within the project "Romance languages for Slavic-speaking university students" (LMOOC4SLAV), funded by the Erasmus+ Programme of the European Union.