

## ARTICLE

# The Online Interface and Social Inclusion: A MOOC Study in Turkey

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One of the virtues of Massive Open Online Courses (MOOCs) is that, because of their scalability, temporal flexibility and digital mediation, they have the potential to increase learner numbers in higher education, boosting their general level of social inclusion. Whether a MOOC actually succeeds in enhancing students' social inclusion, however, is shaped by two elements of the course: 1) the features of the online interface – the embedded linguistic, pedagogical and interactive features that direct students' engagement with the course materials, the educator and their peers; and 2) the knowledge content of the course, especially its relevancy for equipping learners to be able to engage meaningfully with the world after completion of the MOOC. With this in mind, this paper focuses on the first element, exploring Turkish students' experiences of taking a MOOC and their perceptions of how the MOOC interface shaped their sense of social inclusion. Fifteen university-level students registered for a five-week MOOC on how to improve their English language writing skills. They then completed a questionnaire about their views on the learning experience. Nine of the students also kept diaries reflecting on their learning through the MOOC. Findings reveal that these students had a positive view of the MOOC, with different elements of the online interface playing important roles in improving digital, educational and social inclusion. The paper ends by recommending that researchers should further investigate the relationship between social inclusion and MOOCs; that course designers should rethink the role of online interfaces within MOOCs; and that Turkish higher education institutions should develop more MOOCs with locally relevant features embedded within them.

**Keywords:** social inclusion; MOOC; online interface; Turkey; higher education

## Introduction

Massive Open Online Courses (MOOCs) are internet-based courses freely provided for any user from anywhere in the world (Cormier & Siemens 2010). MOOCs have the potential to reach vast numbers of learners who want access to higher education opportunities thanks to such embedded features as videos, self-assessment and animations (Rodrigo & Iniesto 2015). For many countries and higher education institutions (HEIs), MOOCs represent a technologically enhanced educational innovation that can radically scale up the provision of higher education without the attending infrastructural costs it would normally entail. It opens up new possibilities for students, lecturers and educational systems. This potential has attracted the attention of HEIs across the globe, including in Turkey, a developing country where, since 2014, some HEIs started using MOOCs to support and extend learning opportunities for both learners enrolled in courses and those engaged in lifelong learning.

This effort supports the general broadening of the higher education sector that has taken place in Turkey over the last two decades. In the academic year of 2018–2019, Turkey

had 4,4 million undergraduate students (46% females, 54% males) (HEIMS 2019) based at 129 state universities and 73 private universities as well as five private vocational schools. After a series of education reforms in 2008, every city in Turkey was guaranteed to have at least one university, though they are of varying quality (URAP 2019).

However, the Turkish education system continues to lack the necessary physical infrastructure, budgetary finances, training programs, and equality of student opportunities to leverage the social inclusion potential of education (Ercetin et al. 2019). This deficit is revealed most profoundly in the structural differences that exist between various regions in Turkey, in which the wealthier western parts of the country enjoy far greater educational advantages than those in the poorer eastern parts (Inan & Demir 2018). According to a recent Turkish Statistical Institute report (2018), the illiteracy rate in the western part of the country was only about 2% compared to 12% in the eastern part. The unemployment rate in the western part was only 5% compared to 25% in the eastern part. These numbers reveal a general distinction in the levels of development between these two regions. It also means that students in disadvantaged regions often lack the facilities and opportunities to improve their learning skills on their own, which causes them to fall behind their peers in advantaged regions who

are able to access knowledge and information with less difficulty. The wealthier regions enjoy greater technological provision, a situation that places students from those regions in a better position when applying for jobs. This regional disparity creates a sense of social exclusion for many students in the eastern regions, hence the use of technology in education, especially MOOCs, is seen as a means to engender more equitable learning opportunities.

In 2014, a small number of Turkish HEIs – such as Anadolu University, Yasar University (both of which are in the western part) and Ataturk University (in the eastern part)– embarked on a process of developing MOOCs in order to increase the number of students enrolled for their distance education programmes. Anadolu started giving MOOC lectures in Turkish and English about topics related to humanities and social science. All of the universities certified their users upon completing the course.

However, most of the HEIs did not accept their applicants' MOOC certificates. That is, if a student received a MOOC certificate, this did not lead to normal university credits. Likewise, a study by Kesim and Altinpulluk (2014) shows that students regarded the certificate as the least contribution of MOOCs, compared to vocational or personal development, access to knowledge, time-saving and learning without interrupting their work, in order to pursue a career.

Furthermore, when MOOCs were initially rolled out in Turkey, Canbek and Hargis (2015) reveal that there were several problems with regard to legislation, lecturers' instructional and technological knowledge, and a lack of incentives. They suggest that there was a need to understand local participants' perspectives on MOOC use. As Aydin (2017) argues, Turkish HEIs are not generally well acquainted with MOOCs and cannot adapt to offering them easily. In addition, Aydin notes that Turkish students mostly prefer to use MOOCs offered by overseas platforms or universities. This is because of the lack of MOOCs designed by Turkish HEIs as well as students' perception that international MOOC providers currently provide a higher quality product.

These challenges notwithstanding, Siemens argues that MOOCs can lead to “a liberating and enlightening process in the service of a better society and greater opportunities for all [learners]” (quoted in Bonk et al. 2015: xvi). MOOCs can contribute to the expansion of educational opportunities – embracing diverse learners, cultures and pedagogies while providing greater equity (Kurt 2019) – and thereby enhance social inclusion (Conole 2015; Rolfe 2015; Teixeira et al. 2016). This means more than just learners having greater educational “access”, which promotes digital and educational inclusion; it also means understanding how students *learn* through these MOOCs, how the pedagogical structure of the courses – such as the extent to which they are learner-centred and supported by contextually appropriate online interfaces – ensures that increased access is complemented by increased student “success”, leading to greater social inclusion.

While a number of other studies have shown how MOOCs can contribute to social inclusion (Conole 2015; Rolfe 2015; Teixeira et al. 2016), this paper seeks to understand

how they might do so by focusing on a key component of how MOOCs are structured internally, that is, according to the online interfaces which shape learner experiences and their likelihood of success. Focused on the developing country context of Turkey – where students straddle linguistic worlds as Turkish speakers who often study in English – this paper aims to answer the following research questions for Turkish higher education students:

1. How can MOOCs' online interface enable enhanced learning?
2. How can MOOCs enhance digital, educational and social inclusion?

By doing this, it is hoped that we can establish how MOOC creators' pedagogical and design choices influence social inclusion for students who take these MOOCs.

## Literature Review

### *Social inclusion in open education*

Social inclusion is defined as “the process of improving the terms on which individuals and groups take part in society—improving the ability, opportunity, and dignity of those disadvantaged on the basis of their identity” (World Bank 2019). Disadvantaged groups are potentially excluded because of their “socio-economic status, culture (including indigenous cultures), linguistic group, religion, geography (rural and remote/isolated), gender, sexual orientation, age (including youth and old age), physical and mental health/ability, and status with regard to unemployment, homelessness and incarceration” (Gidley et al. 2010: 1).

However, open education has the potential to reduce certain forms of inequality (Arinto, Hodgkinson-Williams & Trotter 2017; Trotter & Hodgkinson-Williams 2018). Lambert (2018) argues that open education can be “the development of free digitally enabled learning materials and experiences primarily by and for the benefit and empowerment of non-privileged learners who may be under-represented in education systems or marginalised in their global context.” In diverse higher education contexts such as Turkey, where learners come from a variety of socio-economic, linguistic and educational backgrounds, recent empirical research shows that MOOCs (as an open education innovation) can play a role in enhancing social inclusion for the more marginalised students, so long as the platforms are designed in such a way as to foster this inclusion (Lambert 2020). This study shows, social inclusion is not just about having “access” to, for instance, open educational environments like MOOCs, but how those environments cater to the needs of the students given their diverse backgrounds and needs.

### *MOOC interfaces and inclusion*

Being massive, open and online, MOOCs are complex course constructions, often calling for innovative pedagogical approaches to ensure that learners get the most out of this non-traditional form of learning. As MOOC learners are self-studying and isolated to an extent, they must decide how they will carry out their studies in a self-paced way. Because

of that, the MOOC interface can often play a key role in determining whether users are able to effectively navigate and complete the course in a timely and effective manner. To ensure this, MOOC interfaces should be welcoming and inclusive for learners with different learning needs and educational backgrounds. They should be equipped with user friendly features, making it easy to connect to, search for and obtain information. They should incorporate a wide variety of pedagogical devices to stimulate learning, such as diverse presentation formats (narrative text, summaries, tables, diagrams, images, audio, video), content examples (real-world, hypothetical, contradictory), assessment options (quizzes, exercises, essay prompts), and feedback opportunities (via comments, email, surveys). They should also consider the cultural, regional, national, and linguistic backgrounds of potential learners (such as through making materials available in multiple languages, or spoken in varied accents), seeking strategies that reach out to them on their own terms rather than alienate them.

Rodrigo (2014) describes the features of what socially inclusive MOOC platforms – accessible to all learning, including those with special needs – should look like:

- “Different themes should be available so as to invite users to choose the interface layout which best meets the needs”.
- “The MOOC platform should be compliant with accessibility standards, not only related to the Web interface”.
- “The MOOC platform should also address the accessibility from an instructor’s point of view, not only from students’.” (214)

In addition, MOOC platforms should incorporate learner interaction (Coetzee et al. 2014; Guo, Kim & Rubin 2014), such as discussion forums where learners can engage with peers or lecturers (Cheng 2014; Sharples et al. 2015; Wise & Cui 2018; Wong et al. 2015), thereby increasing their participation in the learning process, enhancing inclusivity and propelling their sense of motivation.

This suggests that social inclusion encompasses more than just checking off a list of inclusive features on a MOOC platform, but rather speaks to the more subtle emotional sensibilities that learners feel as they engage with course activities. For example, Cheng (2014) investigates the emotional affordances of MOOCs, especially non-achievement emotions, through the action of “posting” contributions to discussion forums. This enhances two non-achievement emotions: altruism, which is “the desire and the behaviour to help other participants unconditionally” (Cheng 2014: 43), and intergenerational emotional resonance, which is a “phenomenon with participants coming from a wide age spectrum” (Cheng 2014: 44). Such emotional outcomes allow learners to feel more included in – and responsible for – the learning process that they go through in the course.

### **MOOCs in Turkey**

To date, no other study has focused on how MOOCs might enhance digital, educational and social inclusion for Turkish higher education students. However, a number

of Turkish studies do inform this paper, such as the work by Balaban (2015) on social inclusion policies in Turkey, and the research by Sekret and Jansen (2019) on the challenges posed to higher education in the country due to migration.

In addition, Polat’s (2012) research investigates the digital divide in Turkey with regard to national and institutional policies. It shows that “digital exclusion can have a ‘reinforcing’ effect on social and/or economic inequalities” (Polat 2012: 595). Although Turkey puts a priority on expanding ICTs for economic development, it often does so without regard for how it sometimes (inadvertently) exacerbates the digital divide in the country. ICT provision has often been more robust in the wealthier regions and the urban centres, disadvantaging those from marginal communities – especially women, the elderly and the disabled – in rural regions (Polat 2012).

Aydin (2015) addresses barriers to designing MOOCs in the Turkish context such as copyright, legal issues, institutional support and motivation, and educational policy regarding informal and non-formal learning. Aydin (2017) also indicates that most Turkish HEIs do not have sufficient capacity to adapt MOOCs for their own context.

Thus, with the maturation of MOOCs as an educational offering, and one gaining popularity amongst Turkish learners, this is a good moment to consider how MOOCs can contribute to social inclusion.

## **Methodology**

### **Participants**

Fifteen Turkish students (six males and nine females) aged between 21 and 27 years old participated in this research study voluntarily. They were second-year students in the Department of Interpretation and Translation at a state university located in one of the least developed cities in eastern Turkey, a region that is comparatively underdeveloped within the country (Yucer & Erener 2018). The university was established after the education reforms of 2008.

The students hailed from a number of Turkish cities, but most chose to study in this university for one of two reasons (or both): because they did not earn high enough test scores to attend a different, more prestigious university; or because they wanted to attend a university close to their hometown.

The researcher of this study was their lecturer for a Linguistics for Translators course, thus she contacted these students in person to invite them to participate in the study. Before commencing, the researcher asked the students to produce a writing sample related to their classroom learning topics. Their writing samples showed that they would benefit from extra opportunities to improve their English writing skills.

As the researcher was also the lecturer of the class, the ethics of this study was reviewed by a second reviewer who had many years of experience in the field. The researcher and the reviewer ensured that the students’ participation in the study was voluntary and that it would have no bearing on their grades for their university course.

### **Data collection procedures**

The study was conducted during the second semester of the 2018–2019 academic year. For the Linguistics for Translators course, the objective was to improve translation skills and increase students' chances to be employed after graduation, thus students were required to do a project that needed them to have good writing skills in English. Before starting the project, they were asked to sign up to a FutureLearn MOOC called, "An Intermediate Guide to Writing in English for University Study".<sup>1</sup> It was a five-week course taught in English by lecturers from a UK university. The course aimed to expand students' academic English skills, especially their writing. They were expected to produce a high standard essay without any other language support. Although the course did not restrict students' ability to sign up for it, it clearly stated that students should be at Level 5.5 of the International English Language Testing System (IELTS). As the participants were required to be upper-intermediate or above to study in the second class, this MOOC was seen as appropriate. The other reasons this MOOC was chosen were because it was available during the time period of the study, and because it offered students the opportunity to improve their English writing for the project.

To answer the two research questions, data were collected through mixed methods research, "where the researcher mixes or combines quantitative and qualitative research techniques, methods, approaches, concepts or language into a single study" (Johnson & Onwuegbuzie 2004: 17). For the quantitative research, a questionnaire (see Appendix) was designed based on studies by Aharony and Bar-Ilan (2016), Gorter (2018), Muzafarova and Kaya (2014), Perris (2015), and Shigeta et al. (2017). It was divided into two sections: (1) demographic information, such as participants' age, gender, hometown, level of English language learning (i.e. writing, listening, speaking and reading skills), possession of smartphones, access to and use of the Internet, and length of English language learning; (2) students' perceptions of learning in the MOOC, their personal use and benefits (i.e. having fun, spending time, receiving help for the present and future self, etc.), their recommendations about it, and the online interfaces in the course (i.e. the hardship of language level, comments or discussion forums, quizzes, presentations including audio and video, the delivery and quality of the course, and the presenters' knowledge).

Each item was rated according to a 5-point Likert scale: Strongly Agree (SA), Agree (A), Not Applicable (NA), Disagree (D), Strongly Disagree (SD). Not applicable was added as a rate to give options to students to choose if the item was not related to them, as suggested by Fray (2013). Additionally, three open-ended questions were included to let the participants express their views on their learning, the online interface and suggestions for the MOOC. The participants filled out the questionnaire online in a Google Form.

For the qualitative research, students were asked to keep a diary about their learning in the MOOC. Nine (60%) of the fifteen participants did this each week. This approach was inspired by a study by Aharony and Bar-Ilan (2016) which asked about participants' views on the course platform, course and content.

### **Data analysis**

Data from the quantitative research were analysed through descriptive statistics, the percentages and frequencies of the participants' views on each item, calculated in the Google Form. Data from the qualitative research were analysed through content analysis, in which both directed and conventional content analyses were applied (Hsieh & Shannon 2005). In the former, the text data in diaries were coded according to the research inclusion in the literature review, while in the latter, more codes were generated from the text data. The text data were analysed in NVivo. Codes were assessed for the interrater reliability by two researchers (Miles & Huberman 1994) and the agreement was 80%. When giving data from participants, each of them were numbered (rather than named) in order to ensure their anonymity (see **Table 1**).

### **Findings**

This section explores participants' demographics, technology and MOOC use, and the learning enhancement they (may have) experienced through the MOOC. As stated earlier, participants had never taken a MOOC before and were disadvantaged compared to their peers in other regions in Turkey who enjoyed better ICT access. Therefore, their experience in taking this MOOC helped – at least in terms of sheer exposure to new educational innovations – to close the social, digital and educational gap that they had hitherto known.

#### ***Participants' demographics, technology use, and MOOC use***

Data from the questionnaire show participants' demographics and technology use. All fifteen participants stated that they had been learning English for over four years. All had smartphones, which helped them "learn and access FutureLearn course anywhere and anytime", while eleven (74%) also had other digital devices such as computers or tablets (**Table 1**). All indicated that they had mobile Internet access as well as other Internet access facilities (such as broadband at home, dormitory or university) and that they spent time on the Internet every day, however, in different frequencies. Seven of them (47%) used it "very often" and five (33%) were on it "always". The rest used it "sometimes" (13%) or "rarely" (7%). Despite their digital literacy at some level, they had never taken a MOOC. Indeed, this was the first time they had heard about MOOCs.

Although the students needed near advanced English language level to study in the second year, six (40%) thought that their levels were intermediate while nine (60%) thought they were upper-intermediate. Specifically, they perceived that their reading skills were highest, their speaking and listening skills were moderate, and their writing skills were lowest. This confirmed the value of conducting this study in order to see how MOOCs can help their digital, social and educational inclusion.

As for their MOOC use, only two of them (13%) did not finish all of the weekly topics because of exams in the class, so they just spent one hour on the course. The others spared more time, at least 12 hours, to complete

**Table 1:** Students' technology use.

Student No.	Gender	Digital device(s) other than mobile phones	Internet access method(s)	Internet access place(s)	Frequency of time spent on Internet
1	M	No	Mobile	Home	Very often
2	M	Laptop	Mobile	Home	Sometimes
3	F	Laptop	Mobile	Home	Very often
4	M	Computer	Mobile	Dormitory	Always
5	F	Laptop	Mobile	University	Always
6	F	Laptop	Mobile	Home	Very often
7	F	Laptop	Mobile	Home	Very often
8	F	No	Mobile	Home	Always
9	M	Laptop	Mobile	Everywhere	Sometimes
10	M	Computer	Mobile	Home	Always
11	M	Laptop	Mobile	University	Always
12	F	Laptop	Mobile	Home	Very often
13	F	Laptop	Mobile	Home	Rarely
14	F	No	Mobile	Home	Very often
15	F	No	Mobile	Home	Very often

everything while just three (20%) stated that they studied it weekly, completing it in five weeks.

#### ***How the MOOC platform enhanced learning and inclusion***

This section focuses on student perceptions of how specific elements of the MOOC online interface – its language use, quizzes, examples, audios/videos, and comment sections – enabled enhanced learning and promoted digital, educational and social inclusion (see **Table 2**).

First, the students believed that the language level in the MOOC was fine for them, meaning that it was accessible. This is an important, foundational form of inclusion, determined in conjunction between the creators of the MOOC and the students themselves in selecting the appropriate course for their own development. Affirming this, twelve of them (80%) expressed that the language use, including the delivery and quality of the course, was at the expected level. The presenters were seen as having a good knowledge of the subject matter, making it a generally successful offering.

Secondly, the quizzes that were incorporated into the course design were seen as effective by most students as they were assessed through a variety of exercises at the end of each weekly topic. These were combined with “right and wrong functions” colourful texts, and answer hints, all of which added to the pedagogical value of the quizzes as tools not only of assessment, but of further learning. As one student noted, the immediate feedback given to quiz answers allowed them to better understand how and/or why they got a quiz answer right or wrong.

Thirdly, the MOOC lessons were populated with examples illustrating problems and issues in either hypothetical

or real-life environments, showing various approaches to achieving learning objectives, and demonstrating contradictory use of words (which was specifically useful for this language course). These examples were considered highly effective by the students, and as leading to the improvement of their functional language skills.

Fourthly, six participants (40%) reported that videos and audios were the most practical and valuable teaching element because the subtitles, transcripts, and diverse accents – particularly of native speakers – helped them, as non-native English speakers, feel more confident and motivated when they were able to understand the speech of native speakers. The subtitles gave greater clarity of such speech in the moment, the transcripts allowed for later review, and the speech in native accents allowed the students to accustom themselves to intonations of the language that prevail outside their local context. The success of these interface features also contributed to their determination to study different topics in MOOCs, as one student shared: “I am decided to use it to learn other languages such as Spanish, as I want to work in Spain.”

Lastly, the comment section in the discussion forums were regarded as a way to share their ideas and hear others' ideas. This feature attempted to elicit greater participation by the students, broadening their engagement beyond passive or prompted learning situations. Four of them (27%) stated that they made at least one comment in the discussion forum and nine (60%) thought that the comment section was a useful feature. On the other hand, some of the participants found long paragraphs boring.

In addition to this, some students expressed their views in the open-ended questions in the questionnaire, stating that they improved their learning thanks to:

**Table 2:** The online interfaces in the MOOC obtained from the text data.

The online interfaces	Benefits
<b>1. Language Use</b>	Provides clear, step-by-step instruction to achieve goals
Bullet points	Helps to reveal important points in one place: "I can see these notes are better than mine. They are very clear and informative."
Content	Offers appropriate teaching with an overview, with weekly and general topics appearing in the course
Web links	Extends learning materials and examples beyond those just in the course materials
Summaries	"An effective way to check what was learned in the previous week" to pursue learning
Tables and diagrams	Helps in deducing what to take in from the course
Highlighted texts and images	Focuses attention to key concepts
Font style	Distinguishes between types of materials and concepts
<b>2. Quizzes</b>	"A good way to practise" and "evaluate myself"
A variety of exercises at the end of each weekly topic	Repeats and reinforces what has been learned
Right or wrong functions	"A good way to be warned until I find the right answer"
Colours	Draws attention to questions
Giving hints	Makes it easier to reply to questions
<b>3. Examples</b>	"A great chance to understand topics by giving examples and explaining each example"
Exemplifying, for instance, essay types and giving suggestions on books to read	"Not feeling lost but integrated into the course"
Showing different ways to achieve learning goals, such as writing a good heading or note-taking etc.	"I can now better understand the aim is to teach thoroughly"
Contradictory use of words	"Feeling part of the teaching by looking at diverse perspectives"
Dealing with realistic or real-life issues	Promotes problem-solving: "I can understand that I can correct both my and my friends' mistakes."
<b>4. Videos and Audios</b>	Impacts on language skills and the curiosity
Subtitles and transcripts	Checks how to pronounce some words and if known words are correctly pronounced
Accent	Promotes familiarity with native speakers' speaking
<b>5. Comment section</b>	"Nice to share ideas and hear others' ideas"

- practice: "I know I have to work every day, so I can improve my English and have a better position in doing my job in the future"
- the FutureLearn approach: "Future Learning is very good at everything, for example, audio, video, subtitles and speakers speak English perfectly and the text is up-to-date"
- the MOOC's enhancement to their speaking abilities: "I can understand native speakers, so I feel I am improving"
- revitalized listening: "Both videos and audios were so clear and helped me a lot with subtitles"
- watching and reading the whole texts
- speaking on their own and listening to audios and videos
- increased motivation: "I learned that I should not be afraid of learning a language online or any platform".

Data from the diaries indicate that "the more [they] read, the more [they] learn", and "the course provides [them] to

join it whenever and wherever [they] wish." In addition, the design of the MOOC generally helped the students overcome any fears they might have had in learning through this new course structure. The vast majority of students (87%) thought that using the MOOC was very useful, would help them in the long run, and would contribute to their personal success in the future. And even though eleven (74%) believed the MOOC needed improving, 80% still believed that the MOOC would improve their learning processes in the future and said they would recommend it to others.

Given that, as one student stated – "In Turkey, language learning is a really trouble ... because of the culture and education system" – the majority generally believed that the MOOC had utility for their lives.

### Discussion

With the information from the Findings in mind, this section discusses the findings in relation to digital, educational, and social inclusion.

### **Digital inclusion**

Polat (2012) says that digital exclusion, which arises from the digital divide, increases social and economic inequalities. This study suggests that, despite the participants' modest socio-economic status, they were nonetheless able to take part in a fully online MOOC largely via their mobile phones. Indeed, because of the convenience their mobile phones afforded them in terms of them being able to flexibly learn anytime and anywhere, they continued to use their phones to engage with the MOOC even though some could have accessed the course through other digital devices (such as a computer). Students' ability to access the MOOC from their favoured digital device increased not only their access to it, but their motivation to engage with it.

It is important to stress that, just because the MOOC was "online" and "digital" did not automatically mean that it was accessible if the students had digital devices. The type of digital device can sometimes play a critical role in how large one's experience of the digital divide is. In this case, the MOOC developers designed the online interface to be workable not only with computer browsers (large screens), but smartphones as well (with smaller screens). This allowed these students to still be able to participate in this valuable educational experience. Because the educators designed their digital offering to meet students where they were at (in terms of digital capacity), the students enjoyed increased digital inclusion.

### **Educational inclusion**

The MOOC interface enabled learners to take a role in their own learning. Students completed their learning assessment without the presence of a tutor and also grasped new cultural and educational differences in the English language (contradicting their traditional learning in the Turkish education system). The interface was populated with quizzes, colourful texts, right/wrong functions, examples, and written hints allowing them to give responses quickly while maintaining their learning. This helped them to focus on the key ideas and engage with the materials that were most beneficial (in the eyes of the instructors). However, the most effective components in the MOOC interface were videos and audio clips, especially those supported by subtitles and transcripts. Students felt that it was valuable for them to hear native speakers' accents delivering the lessons, leading to greater interest and curiosity as to what would be in the next multi-media clip.

Moreover, students were able to use the MOOC not merely by following external guidelines but by shaping it to enhance their own learning goals. That is, even though the MOOC was aimed at helping learners with their English writing skills, they approached it as an opportunity to also improve their speaking, listening and reading skills, which they believed would contribute to their future success. These sorts of experiences helped remove any fears they may have had of taking an online course, a result that corroborates Conole's assertion that "MOOCs ... offer an innovative, potentially exciting educational experience, which promotes social inclusion" (2013).

### **Social inclusion**

At a literal level, the students' participation in the MOOC enhanced their level of social inclusion, in that they were able to engage in an activity – digital education – that is still only emerging as an option for those in marginal regions and communities. It is an activity that remains shaped by the digital divide. Thus, gaining "access" to such an opportunity comprises an important, if still relatively elementary, form of social inclusion (Gidley et al. 2010).

However, the more important question is whether the MOOC led to greater "participation" and "empowerment" for the students, two higher order dimensions of social inclusion (Gidley et al. 2010). The discussion above shows that, within the MOOC environment itself, students participated with enthusiasm, with many feeling better about the skills that they learned through the MOOC. Yet this question has more significance for the period after the MOOC, especially when students try to utilise the skills they learned out in the real world. Will their improved English skills open more opportunities for social participation in the future? Will it lead to greater personal empowerment in the workplace? At this point, it is too early to tell. The real proof of that will likely only come later when the skills that they have learned are assessed by the employment marketplace.

For the moment, we only have the perceptions of the students to assess this. In their estimation, the MOOC experience enhanced their English skills just as they had desired which, given their understanding of how their future options will play out in Turkey, will elevate their level of social inclusion.

### **Conclusion**

MOOCs have a significant role to play in opening up greater access to higher education for learners around the world. As students come from different backgrounds and cultures, this study raises a crucial issue of concern for both MOOC designers and users, that of MOOCs' online interfaces. The study indicates that learning anytime and anywhere in MOOCs, especially using mobile phones, enables learners not only to enjoy continued access to new coursework opportunities, but to also be motivated to finish the course. Besides this flexibility, the features of MOOC online interfaces (i.e. language use, quizzes, examples, videos, audios and comment sections) can boost learner access and engagement within the course, enabling digital and educational inclusion for disadvantaged learners. Additionally, this paper concludes that these interfaces enhance social inclusion to the extent that disadvantaged learners believe that the learning they enjoy through such enhanced MOOCs will boost their personal job prospects in the future, a direct result of their increased digital and educational inclusion through the MOOC.

The paper also suggests that Turkish university level students are ready and willing to use MOOCs, thus HEIs can start designing MOOCs as part of their teaching for classroom as well as lifelong learning. In doing this, some issues should be borne in mind: For instance, HEIs in different parts of Turkey have diverse students regarding culture,

socio-economic, regional and linguistic backgrounds, age, religion, gender and employment status. This means that the MOOC content will need to reach out to them on this complicated basis. In addition, the government should establish proper legislation and regulation for integrating MOOCs into HEIs.

Considering the above, there should be more studies on MOOCs in the Turkish context. A further study can explore social inclusion and social justice by allowing HEIs, teachers and students to adapt and create MOOCs or learning materials based on their culture. Lastly, given that this was a relatively small-scale study, further studies could look at larger cohorts of students across multiple HEIs in Turkey to get a broader sense of how MOOCs shape the prospects for social inclusion for higher education students.

#### Note

<sup>1</sup> <https://www.futurelearn.com/courses/english-for-study-intermediate>.

#### Additional File

The additional file for this article can be found as follows:

- **Appendix.** Survey for the Linguistics for Translators Course. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.5334/jime.558.s1>

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#### Competing Interests

The author has no competing interests to declare.

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