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English Pronunciation in a Global World: A MOOC course for pronunciation teaching

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The paper presents the Massive Open and Online Course (MOOC) English Pronunciation in a Global World (Rupp, 2019). We outline the context in which the MOOC was created, one in which English is a global language yet the majority of the world's population do not speak English (Crystal, 2017), and one in which linguistic misunderstandings occur and accent discrimination persists (Lev-Ari, 2021). We outline the aims of the MOOC and describe how we sought to achieve these aims using linguistic and psychological theories (Derwing & Munro, 2015; Ryan & Deci, 2000), as well as methods from the Mixed Classroom Model in Practice (Ramdas et al., 2019). We report on the findings from running the MOOC thus far, some of which we anticipated (e.g., the new type of pronunciation data it generates) and some of which were not immediately foreseen (e.g., participants spontaneously mentoring other participants). In the discussion we reflect on the advantages and challenges associated with using a MOOC for pronunciation teaching, and address the opportunities that it provides.

Keywords: Massive Open and Online Course (MOOC), English pronunciation, inclusive English education, English accents, English pronunciation research



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1 Introduction

English is the most widely spoken language in the world and using English as a Lingua Franca has provided numerous opportunities for people to connect to each other. However, many ‘disconnections’ have arisen at the same time.¹ First, estimates of the number of English speakers in the world (Crystal, 2017) suggest that the majority of the world’s population cannot speak (much) English because they have not had the opportunity to learn it. Second, speakers of English speak with various accents, from which linguistic misunderstandings may arise. One specific example that led to a near-conflict happened in 2008, when Bernard Kouchner, the then French minister of Foreign Affairs, warned that one country would ‘eat’ another country. This sounded very aggressive and caused a great upset. Kouchner had wanted to say ‘hit’ but he had dropped ‘h’ and pronounced a different vowel, as many French speakers would do. He felt compelled to apologise for the phonetic confusion that he had caused.² Third, accents are associated with particular personal characteristics and this may lead to discrimination based on accent (Lev-Ari, 2021). For example, testimonies of witnesses have been discredited because of the way they speak English.³

2 The MOOC and its aims

In this context, we created a Massive Open and Online Course (MOOC) called English Pronunciation in a Global World to see whether it could be an instrument in addressing these three matters related to English pronunciation. The MOOC therefore has three aims, both linguistic and social:

1. Aim 1 – To provide an academic, research-informed course on English pronunciation that is freely accessible and can be attended by anyone in the world on any device.
2. Aim 2 – To enhance linguistic understanding of both learners’ own accents and variation in English accents to help prevent misunderstandings. Here we adhere to the Intelligibility Principle: “The notion that the goal of pronunciation instruction should be to help learners to become more understandable by focusing on those aspects of an accent that interfere with listener comprehension.” (Derwing & Munro, 2015, p. 178)⁴
3. Aim 3 – To enhance sociolinguistic appreciation of variation in English accents to help combat social issues associated with English pronunciation e.g., accent discrimination. To quote one MOOC participant⁵: “The most remarkable thing that I learnt ... is the fact that it's ok for me to have my own identical accent ...I'm glad that maybe I won't feel so embarrassed now every time I speak aloud.”

At a more general level, our aims relate to three larger goals:

1. The United Nations Sustainable Development Goals (UN SDG) #4 Quality Education (Ensure inclusive and equitable quality education and promote lifelong learning

¹ In this paper, we will not venture to address the reasons for this, one of which has to do with the colonial roots of English. See Philipson (1992) for discussion and the notion of linguistic imperialism.

² http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/world/middle_east/7658728.stm

³ https://www.linguisticsociety.org/sites/default/files/Rickford_92_4.pdf

⁴ Levis (2005) was the first to introduce the notion of Intelligibility Principle.

⁵ All examples from MOOC participants are quoted in their original version. Grammatical errors and non-idiosyncratic word choices have not been corrected in the text.

opportunities for all) and #10 Reduced Inequalities (Reduce inequality within and among countries).⁶

2. Sociolinguistic principles like Labov's (1982) Principle of Debt Incurred, that "Linguists have an obligation to expose misunderstandings and misinterpretations about language to the attention of the widest possible audience" (p. 173).
3. Community engagement seeking to "generate activities that build capacity and affirm human dignity through sustainable and *reciprocal* [emphasis added] collaborations with communities who experience disadvantage or marginalisation."⁷

3 Previous research on the topic

One important tenet of the MOOC is that it should be informed by academic research. Therefore, to achieve our aims in the creation of content for the MOOC, we took account of linguistic research on the intelligibility of, and attitudes towards (Beinhoff, 2013), pronunciation features in speakers of English. Regarding intelligibility research, we were aware of the difficulty of establishing the intelligibility of pronunciation features in the tradition of Jenkins's (2000) Lingua Franca Core (see Henderson, 2008, p. 6); nonetheless we felt the best approach was to take into account the evidence that has been reported in the literature, expressing appropriate caveats in the MOOC. We adhere to the distinction proposed by Derwing and Munro (2009) whereby "accent is about difference, comprehensibility is about the listener's effort, and intelligibility is the end result: how much the listener actually understands" (p. 480).

Furthermore, to ensure successful learning, we considered psychological and educational approaches to learning. First, to foster motivation and development in the learners, in the absence of a physically present teacher, we deployed Ryan and Deci's (2000) Self-Determination Theory (SDT). This psychological theory suggests that people have three needs, i.e., a sense of competence, relatedness, and autonomy; when these three needs are fulfilled, they can make choices and stay motivated. Second, to ensure that the diverse group of learners in a MOOC would form a community, engaging with one another and developing together, we deployed the VU Mixed Classroom Educational Model (MCEM). This educational approach "builds upon differences to enrich the learning experience for all students present" (Ramdas et al., 2019, p. 5). It works in a three-phase process (Ramdas et al., 2019, p. 9):

1. *Sensitising* – students need to be sensitised to their own frame of reference and the existing diversity in the classroom, and a safe learning environment to do so should be created;
2. *Engaging* – students should interact constructively with different perspectives present in the classroom; and
3. *Optimising* – every student's learning process should be optimised by having them capitalise on different perspectives and approaches.

Thus, the MCEM seeks to "to open up to differences, to co-create an inclusive environment, and capitalise on different perspectives in order to create value" (Ramdas et al., 2019, p. 5).

⁶ <https://sdgs.un.org/goals>

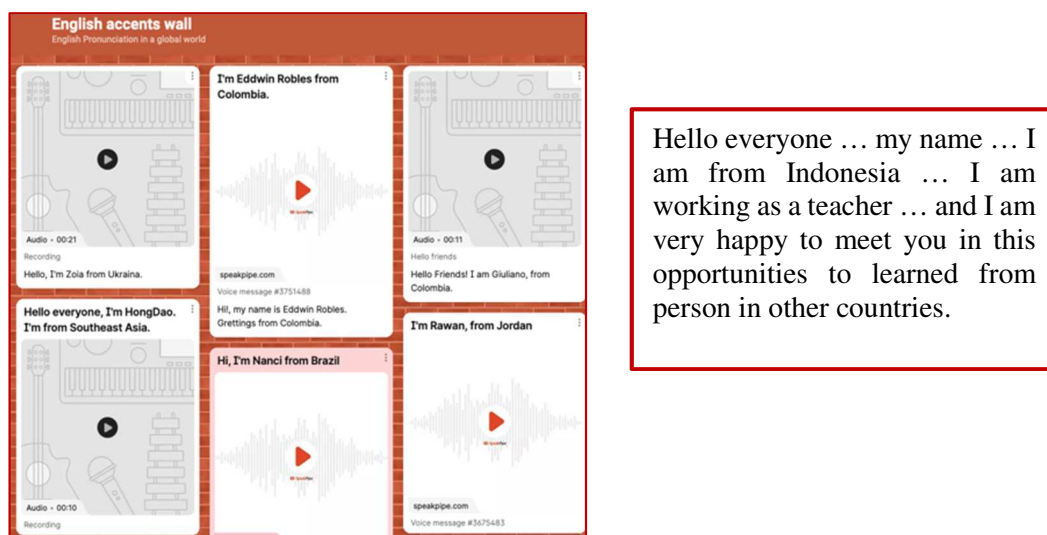
⁷ <https://www.acu.edu.au/about-acu/community-engagement>

4 Research methodology

To achieve the aim of providing inclusive English education, we ran the MOOC on the platform FutureLearn.⁸ In FutureLearn, learners have free access for the duration of the course (four weeks) and the following six weeks.⁹ More importantly, FutureLearn offers technical support, ensuring that the course can be attended on any device anywhere in the world. Adhering to the MCEM's sensitising phase and the SDT component need of relatedness, we created an inclusive learning environment through introductory activities in the MOOC in which the learners get to know one another. For example, learners share their English accents by posting audio clips on a virtual Padlet wall (see Figure 1).

Figure 1

English Accents Wall in the MOOC: Learners Upload Recordings to Introduce Themselves



On another Padlet wall, learners can voice prior experiences speaking English. They find commonalities with other participants such as employment prospects, educational ambitions, or a lack of confidence in speaking English, as in the examples (1a) and (1b) from two MOOC participants:

- (1a) Hi, I'm from Malaysia. ... I'm from the city that mainly speak Chinese thus my pronunciation is not that proper and afraid to talk in English.

⁸ <https://www.futurelearn.com/>. One advantage of the FutureLearn platform is that one can make use of their experience regarding online learning, expressed as four pillars of social learning: 1) telling stories; 2) designing for conversation; 3) developing skills; and 4) celebrating progress.

⁹ For longer access and other advantages, learners need to purchase an upgrade. However, we seek as much as possible to distribute upgrades to disadvantaged learners (amongst others, Sakhi for Girls Education; <https://sakhiforgirlseducation.org>), as well as via our mentor programme (see §7). Note further that material in the MOOC that we have created ourselves is Creative Commons (BY-NC-CA). This material can be freely downloaded and adapted, as long as the source is acknowledged. We hope that English teachers find the materials useful for their own English classes.

- (1b) Greetings! I'm from India and as you all know India had been a British colony and their influence is clearly seen in India, even after 75 years of independence. At present it has become kind of necessary to learn English here in India otherwise you end up being the inferior one.

Learners can join our social media channels and thus remain part of the MOOC's community of learners also after completing the course.¹⁰

The introductory activities are addressed in week 1 and are part of the first main topic, i.e., what is important in English pronunciation. The other three topics in weeks 2, 3 and 4 are: English vowels, English consonants, and suprasegmental features. Each week contains a number of steps. Each step contains a type of activity that helps achieve the MOOC's aims of enhancing participants' understanding of English pronunciation features and their appreciation of different English accents. At every step, learners can meet and engage with other learners, share their ideas, join in by leaving comments, adding their perspectives. For instance, in the activity 'Discussions', learners learn about linguistic and social aspects of English pronunciation, in particular the notions of intelligibility, credibility, and identity in English. There is also a range of practice activities in the MOOC that contain, amongst other tools: explanatory videos (which explain the IPA and why English sounds different from the way it is written by outlining phonological changes that have occurred in the history of English), listen-and-repeat exercises, analytical assignments of real or near-real life data, quizzes, etc. By introducing learners to a variety of practice tools, we hope to boost their autonomy (in line with Ryan and Deci's (2000) Self-Determination Theory - SDT) and to empower them by showing where to look for such tools themselves, so they can continue to develop their pronunciation after the course.¹¹ Also, there is a peer-review exercise in which learners: 1) set pronunciation goals for themselves according to the kind of accent they wish to develop; 2) make a recording of a word list and a reading passage at the beginning of the course; 3) make a second recording at the end of the course, focusing on their goals and attempting to apply what they have learnt; and 4) peer-review one another's recording. In this way we aim to enhance learners' feelings of competence (consistent with SDT) and to optimise their learning from one another (consistent with MCEM) so that they: 1) they take agency over their own accents; 2) find out on their own about differences between their accents and others'; 3) help others by giving feedback regarding what is difficult to understand and what they like about the other person's accent; and 4) support and encourage each other. Examples (2a) and (2b) illustrate these endeavours:

- (2a) I noticed you didn't pronounce the final -es in words like 'increases' and 'focuses'.

- (2b) Once again, congrats!

Finally, the MOOC team act as mentors, offering support to learners by responding to a selection of posted comments. In two runs every year, we facilitate the course, which means that we offer participants the opportunity to directly communicate with us, thus providing a bridge between online learning and the classroom. For example, we hold an online live session in which learners can join us and we answer questions, reflect, and award the winner of the most insightful comment.

¹⁰ www.facebook.com/globalenglishlearn; www.instagram.com/moocenglishpro.

¹¹ The MOOC draws as much as possible from available material from the Internet that is of good quality, and has complemented this material with self-created material.

5 Results and discussion

In three and a half years, the MOOC has reached over 117,000 learners from over 191 countries (see UN SDGs #4 and #10). We have seen a great deal of interaction amongst the learners, with some of the comments liked around 200 times and giving rise to threads of nearly 60 comments. Interestingly, learners are not only looking to us for advice or help, but also acting as a community and giving each other advice and helping each other out, an unexpected level of collegiality. For example, in (3a), one MOOC participant explains the pronunciation feature of voicing to another learner, and in (3b), one participant explains how to upload their recording.

- (3a) A: I got confused between /t/ and /d/ sound and also /b/ and /p/.
B: If you put your hand on your throat and say first /p/ then /b/ you'll feel the throat vibrate on /b/... the same with /t/ and /d/, the first is voiceless and the second voiced.
- (3b) A: How can I share my audio. I recorded through speak pipe. But I don't know how to send.
B: ... did you ... If so, you can share that link here in the comments.

Regarding our Aim 2, we found that the MOOC participants developed insights about intelligibility, and optimised their understanding of pronunciation features by capitalising on differences between their accents and those of fellow learners (see the MCEM's optimising phase). The examples (4a) and (4b) illustrate this point:

- (4a) The course brought me a greater awareness of different accents. The accent itself is not a mistake, as long as it meets certain pronunciation features necessary for good communication. It made me lose some fears, and risk more to speak without fear. I believe that this can lead me to improve the pronunciation of the English language.
- (4b) I have realised that the position of stress is different from mine.

Regarding our Aim 3, we found that the MOOC participants constructively interacted with each other to derive a nuanced understanding of the notion of credibility and the prejudice that goes with it (see the MCEM's engaging phase). The following examples illustrate and exchange of ideas beginning with an insight into this topic (5) and then a discussion of it between different learners in a thread (6a, 6b, 6c, 6d):

- (5) I often have the feeling that people question my knowledge comparing to people with better pronunciation and fluency. Until now I never read there was actually some research on credibility and accent relation. At least I understand it better and I feel my perception of those situation was correct.
- (6a) Yeah, I was also impressed about accent affecting credibility. When I watched the video, I considered what happens in my country and I agree about accent causing discrimination. ... Actually, these pronunciation features are wrongly related to ... laziness, illiteracy ...
- (6b) I guess it is something seen and experienced in many places (if not all). Where people are judged (criticised) on the basis of their accents.

- (6c) I never thought about it ... I did not want to change my accent because I am Spanish, what can I do? I have a Spanish accent ... However, recently I am finding it challenging to progress in my career, and I think language might be something that could help me. Everyone says “what a lovely accent you have” but I am not sure is in a patronising or genuinely way.
- (6d) Around the world happens the same discrimination about the bad accent ... we could be better people because, in this way we study to understand the need[s] of other people from different places and help them[,] like in this group. More educated day after day.

To summarise, we have created an academic, research-informed MOOC that is freely available (Aim 1). We examined if a MOOC could help make English education accessible and enhance understanding of English pronunciation features and appreciation of different English accents. We believe the results discussed in this section support these ideas. In this context, the three key findings are:

1. The MOOC reaches out to tens of thousands of learners around the world (contributing to the UN SDGs #4 and #10), who interact with the material in the MOOC and with one another (Principle of Community Engagement; see also §6);
2. Learners express understanding of the notion of intelligibility, and of the pronunciation features that affect the intelligibility of their own English accents and that of other speakers of English (see Aim 2);
3. Learners express understanding of the notion of credibility, and an appreciation of diversity in other English accents (see Aim 3).

In this way, a MOOC can play an important role in Labov’s (1982) Principle of Debt Incurred.

6 Conclusion and implications

Having concluded that a MOOC is a suitable tool for making English education accessible, and for enhancing understanding of English pronunciation features and the appreciation of different English accents, we can now apply the MOOC in various ways, both in pronunciation research and in pronunciation teaching.

In research, the MOOC provides a new type of data. Comments that participants make in the MOOC are self-reported and not affected by the presence of a teacher or a native speaker. Therefore, they provide a window on various aspects of pronunciation features directly from the perspective of the learner, for example revealing the salience of pronunciation features. A broad definition of salience is that it concerns linguistic features that are ‘noticeable’ or ‘stand out’. Taking into account work by Trudgill (1986), Auer et al., (1998, p. 167) distinguished between two types of salience: objective and subjective. Objective salience involves language-internal properties, such as the phonetic distance or phonological contrast between two pronunciation features. Subjective salience involves extra-linguistic properties, such as a feature being a high-prestige variant or an overtly stigmatised or stereotyped one. We conducted a pilot study amongst Spanish speakers of English, examining their responses to: 1) a step in the MOOC in which they set pronunciation goals, and 2) one of the questions in a questionnaire concluding the course (What feature(s) of your English accent would you still like to improve? Why?). In 235 responses from Spanish speakers of English, we found that 25% put rhythm and stress first (Kamps, 2021) ■ suprasegmental features which apparently stood out for the learners but may not fit either category of salience straightforwardly.

Therefore, we could explore MOOC data to gain more insight into the nature of a notion such as salience. Additionally, it has been argued that salience plays a role in a number of linguistic processes, such as language change, dialect accommodation and second language learning (see the overview in Jansen, 2014). Accordingly, we could take account of features that learners conceive of as salient themselves when we prioritise the pronunciation features we teach. Furthermore, we may use the MOOC data to probe other pronunciation issues, such as the perceived intelligibility of particular pronunciation features or the comprehensibility of English accents. For instance, in one step in the MOOC, learners learn about rhoticity and comment whether they consider rhotic or non-rhotic English accents more comprehensible, as shown in examples (7a), (7b), and (7c):

- (7a) Rhotic speakers are easier to understand (MOOC participant from the Philippines)
- (7b) The non-rhotic is very British. I like it! But it's a little bit difficult to understand. (MOOC participant from Spain)
- (7c) I lived in New Zealand for 4 years, and they have a non-rhotic accent. It was difficult to understand ... (MOOC participant from Chile)

Another application of the MOOC in pronunciation research is how we can learn about the pronunciation of English by speakers of languages that are less familiar. For example, one of the MOOC participants commented that “My language Ibibio, spoken across the Niger Delta region of south Nigeria does not have the /ɜ:/ sound”. Such a comment illustrates the way in which the MOOC is meant to constitute a true form of Community Engagement; we share the pronunciation material that we have with learners, and conversely, we learn from our learners and can improve the content of the MOOC through the input they provide.

Third, research into e-learning could be conducted, by setting up studies in which the MOOC is used in pronunciation teaching in an experimental group and a comparison group receives in-class pronunciation teaching. Some steps in the MOOC are suitable for evaluating learners' progress in the learning of pronunciation features and the understanding of other speakers' accents. Examples of this are steps in which learners make a recording of their English pronunciation and peer-review the recording of another learner, respectively, and steps where they make a second recording and conduct a second peer-review, applying what they have learnt in the course.

In teaching, we have capitalised on the finding that MOOC participants provide feedback to other participants of their own accord. Namely, we have established a network of external mentors, contacting MOOC alumni in the first instance, and now drawing from a pool of MOOC alumni who volunteer as external mentors in a Google form in the MOOC. We aim to have external mentors speaking a range of different native languages because they will be able to provide tailor-made feedback to learners who share the same native language (as well as providing expert input to the MOOC that we do not have ourselves). External mentors give feedback in the MOOC for four weeks and write a reflection of their experiences as a MOOC mentor; they are then awarded an upgrade to the MOOC and a certificate. More recently, we have engaged current university students in mentoring, too, offering them a teaching opportunity and hoping for them to gain valuable experiences. According to the ‘Lernen durch Lehren’ principle (Martin & Oebel, 2007), students may learn about pronunciation differences by trying to explain these to others. Furthermore, students may struggle to make their theoretical knowledge feel tangible and may not feel educated enough on a topic to legitimately join the conversation. Mentoring in the MOOC may help to bridge that gap for them, because

they get first-hand experience of pronunciation research pursuits and the effects of this research on both a real-life curriculum and, importantly, in real people's lives.

The importance of native speakers also participating in the MOOC should not be forgotten, as one observed: "Knowing what I know now from this course I am so grateful to be a native English speaker. I had no idea of the intricacies of pronunciation and the challenges posed to learners of English in this regard." Real-world communication involves speakers from diverse backgrounds and proficiency levels, so encompassing such diversity with the MOOC is key to truly achieving inclusion and promoting understanding.

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¹² <https://epip7.sciencesconf.org/>

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Amrita Das is the Programme Manager of Didactics & Communication at VU's Centre for Teaching & Learning, overseeing the spectrum of teacher professionalisation, from early career development to senior management and leadership. She worked on the MOOC as a mentor and coordinator, facilitating several runs and helping learners. She is the co-coordinator of Vrije Universiteit's University Teaching Qualification programme and specialises in the VU's Mixed Classroom Educational Model. She has used the Model to understand better the aspects of inclusion and belonging in the MOOC, and wishes to extend its uses across curriculum reflections and other educational practices. Her extensive academic background includes a doctorate in cultural mobility and transnational poetry, specialising in the American ghazal.

Alisah Kamps is a Masters student of sociolinguistics at the Universiteit van Amsterdam, The Netherlands. She completed her undergraduate degree in Communication & Information Studies at Vrije Universiteit Amsterdam (VU) with a specialisation in English Language and Linguistics. Alisah has been part of the team of the MOOC English Pronunciation in a Global World since 2020 after she conducted her honours programme project on the saliency of pronunciation features using MOOC data. Currently, she is an internal mentor whose role is to guide learners in the MOOC. After co-presenting the MOOC at EPIP7, Alisah has taken up a new research project that probes the deployment of VU educational Mixed Classroom methods for informing the linguistic attitudes of learners in the MOOC.

Ericka Acosta completed a BA degree in applied linguistics from the Communication & Information Studies programme at Vrije Universiteit Amsterdam (VU), The Netherlands. Her specialisation is in language education, and she has a combined minor in neuro studies and digital humanities. In the MOOC English Pronunciation in a Global World, Ericka serves as an internal mentor and a research assistant. As an internal mentor, Ericka supports learners and addresses their questions and concerns. In her role as a research assistant, she organises and enriches MOOC data and she assist in managing social media accounts. Ericka was part of the team that presented the MOOC at EPIP7 in Grenoble. Ericka is to pursue an MA programme in Text Mining at VU.