

## ESL Learners' Perceptions of a Massive Open Online Course on Writing

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### Abstract

Started in 2008, Massive Open Online Courses, or MOOCs, have succeeded to attract millions of learners to join MOOCs. Well-known institutions such as MIT, Stanford University and Harvard University have already adopted MOOC instructional pedagogy to offer courses on various subjects including English language courses. The present study examined a class of ESL undergraduates' perceptions of a Massive Open Online Course on writing. Precisely, the study aimed to investigate how the participants perceived the Writing MOOC, what they liked about the course, how they learned, and what helped them learn. A case study approach involving both qualitative and quantitative data collection methods was used. The participants comprising 48 ESL undergraduates were from an intact class in a Malaysian public University. Results from the perception questionnaire and learners' reflection essays indicated participants' positive perceptions towards learning in the Writing MOOC. The course, the participants had followed, helped them improve their skills in writing. The empirical findings of the study have contributed to a better knowledge of the nature of learning and participation in a MOOC environment from the perspective of ESL learners.

### Keywords

*ESL, perceptions, learning experience, Massive Open Online Course, writing.*

### Introduction

The rapid development in communication and information technology (ICT) has expanded the English language learning and teaching opportunities through its different forms of technologies, thereby creating the need for language researchers to examine such new learning opportunities created through technologies (Warschauer, 2007; Tschichold, 1999; Levy & Hubbard, 2005). Massive Open Online Course (MOOC) is a recently developed form of online course module designed to provide free education for massive participation. (Bruff, Fisher, McEwen, & Smith, 2013). Currently, well-known Universities such as Harvard University, Stanford University and MIT have embraced the MOOC instructional pedagogy to offer courses in various fields including computer-science, mathematics, business, engineering, medicine, biology, and physics (Malliga, 2013). In the field of second language teaching and learning, MOOC, although a comparatively recent phenomenon, has created massive appeal among ESL learners, teachers and researchers. MOOC model is perceived by many as a dynamic educational technology. However, the

problem lies in the fact that whether it is useful in helping learners learn a second language (Bárcena, Read, Martin-Monje, & Castrillo, 2014). Although the educational benefits of MOOC have been appreciated by many educationists, its application has not been researched adequately in ESL contexts.

The MOOC instructional model originated from the noble vision of free education for all, and it is designed for large-scale participation and open access via the Internet (Kop, Fournier, & Mak, 2011; Daniel, 2012). The idea of MOOC is largely inspired by the Open educational resources (OER) movement that aims at curbing the commodification of knowledge through providing an alternative educational paradigm (Rhoades, Berdan, & Toven-Lindsey, 2013; Baggaley, 2012). The term was coined by Dave Cormier in 2008 during a course called *Connectivism and Connective Knowledge* in which 25 tuition-paying students registered for the course in Extended Education at the University of Manitoba (Milligan, Littlejohn, & Margaryan, 2013). The course was then open to the public, and 2,300 students joined the course free of charge. Subsequently, public awareness in MOOC began to grow fast from 2012 when three MOOC companies i.e. Coursera, Udacity, and edX were formed by higher education insiders in North America to provide MOOCs on various disciplines in partnership with well-known institutions around the world (Milligan et al., 2013).

As far as MOOCs for language learning is concerned, the interest is intense as language MOOCs are growing at a rapid pace. To date, over 800 universities around the world have launched at least one MOOC. About 16 MOOC platforms are offering no fewer than 50 free language courses (Bárcena & Martin-Monje, 2014). More than half of them are English Language MOOCs, although MOOCs for other languages such as Spanish, Arabic, Japanese, and Chinese are also available. In addition to offering MOOCs on language skills such as reading and pronunciation, MOOC providers have offered number of courses on writing. For example, Coursera, a leading MOOC provider, offers several writing courses namely *English Composition I-Achieving Expertise*, *Writing in the Sciences*, *Writing II-Rhetorical Composing*, and *Crafting an Effective Writer-Tools of the Trade*. Another MOOC provider, Futurelearn, also offers a MOOC on writing namely *A Beginner's Guide to Writing in English for University Study*. A third MOOC provider, Edx, offers several writing MOOCs as well namely *Academic and Business Writing*, *English Grammar and Essay Writing*, and *Principles of Written English*.

In relation to adopting MOOCs for writing instruction and language learning, the MOOC model has its appeal because the model is designed in such a way that it helps learners get quick feedback from massive numbers of learners. Learners who use a MOOC platform are likely to concern that they are going to have a worldwide audience when they publish their essays on the MOOC; hence, they often produce higher quality work than students who write only for the teacher and/or their peers in class (Bárcena & Martin-Monje, 2014). Research has also noted that the arrival of the MOOC technology can facilitate some key characteristics of successful language learning theories such as language input/output, authenticity, peer-to-peer interaction, learner autonomy, and peer feedback (Bárcena & Martin-Monje, 2014; Bárcena et al., 2014). Based on the proposed possibilities for classroom application, the present research study expects that MOOCs offer many opportunities for language learners to develop various skills of English language.

The educational benefits of MOOCs have been appreciated by many academics, yet the idea has not been researched adequately in relation to ESL learners. Although the end users of any MOOC are learners themselves, yet their voices seem not getting the required attention.

Until now, research to gauge ESL undergraduates' experiences in a MOOC on writing has yet to be conducted. In meeting such a gap and need, the present case study was designed to examine ESL undergraduates' learning experience in an English language MOOC on writing. More specifically, it investigated how the participants perceived the Writing MOOC, what they liked or did not like about it, how they learned, and what had helped them learn.

### **Review of Related Literature**

A large body of emerging literature has been published in relation to learning theories associated with the MOOC pedagogy (Boling, Hough, Krinsky, Saleem, & Stevens, 2012; Fini, 2011; Kop et al., 2011; Rodriguez, 2012), and learning experience as well as motivational factors and engagement with MOOCs (de Waard, Abajian, Gallagher, Hogue, Keskin, Koutropoulos, & Rodriguez, 2011; Fini, 2011; Kop et al., 2011; Mackness, Mak, & Williams, 2010). ESL and EFL researchers have also shown their interest in the MOOC instructional pedagogy (see Bárcena & Martín-Monje, 2014; Bárcena et al., 2014; Hibbs & Stevens, S). At present, a few researchers have taken up the challenge to investigate the learning opportunities created by MOOCs. They attempted to gauge the challenges of receiving feedback in language MOOCs (LMOOCs) (Ventura, Bárcena, & Martín-Monje, 2014), investigated learners' participation in a MOOC in terms of satisfaction and dropout issues (Bárcena & Martín-Monje, 2014), highlighted the profile of LMOOC learners, and the motivational aspects in MOOCs (Beaven, Comas-Quinn, de los Arcos, Hauck, & Lewis, 2014). A research effort has also been given to analyze the potential correlation between the types of feedback and pronunciation gains (Rubio, 2014).

In relation to LMOOCs, writing occupies a somewhat paradoxical position right now. In many ways, writing is a foundation of MOOCs in that it is the principal medium upon which the discussion forums function (Reich, Emanuel, Nesterko, Seaton, Mullaney, Waldo, 2014). MOOC learners communicate through writing in the discussion forums for all sorts of purposes. It is through the discussion forum that they are provided with chances to share their individual knowledge on course topics to help them develop their writing skills in English (Bárcena et al., 2014). The discussion forum is one of the dominant features of MOOCs for discussing issues related to the course. In a forum-based learning environment, learners "get different things out of the space based on their own choices, purposes, and identities" (Gee, 2005, p.225). In the MOOC discussion forum, learners build on individual knowledge by sharing, commenting and collaborating on a given task. This idea is similar to Gee's (2005) idea of distributed knowledge that means "knowledge that exists in other people, materials on the site or in mediating devices and to which people can connect or "network" their own individual knowledge" (p.227). It "allows people to know and do more than they could on their own" (p.227).

Peer assessment and peer-to-peer feedback in the MOOC discussion forum is a controversial issue in the MOOC pedagogy because of the poor quality of feedback or unconstructive comments received from peers (Colman, 2013). On the other hand, ample evidence on the advantages of giving and receiving feedback from peers has also been found (Lawley, 2015, Chen, 2014; Liu & Carless, 2006; Rubio, 2014). For example, a study investigating the effects of LMOOC on learners' pronunciation skills compared the gains in comprehensibility of student enrolled in a traditional face-to-face (F2F) pronunciation course with those enrolled in a LMOOC (Rubio, 2014). The potential correlations between types of feedback and pronunciation gains were analysed. The results showed significant improvement in both the course formats, but a larger effect size in the LMOOC.

Other LMOOC studies investigated learners' participation and satisfaction level in a foreign or second language (see Bárcena & Martin-Monje, 2014; Bárcena et al., 2014). Bárcena and Martin-Monje (2014) collected both qualitative and quantitative data from 1,120 MOOC registrants. The findings reveal the participants' satisfaction in terms of course design, content, peer assessment, length of the course, interaction, feedback, and scaffolding mechanisms. However, the participants' overall perceptions towards the LMOOC were found to be positive, the dropout rate was considered serious. One of the reasons for dropping out of the course was that the course provider allowed anyone to register for the course with no commitment to continue. In another LMOOC, Beaven et al. (2014) examined learners' participation and highlighted some issues for course designers to look at. The MOOC, *Travailler en français*, was a 5-week course for learners of French at basic level for developing French and employability skills for working in a francophone country. The results highlighted some significant factors that could directly influence intrinsic motivation for learning in a MOOC environment. Along the same line, Bentley, Crump, Cuffe, Gniadek, MacNeill, & Mor (2014) pointed out that self-direction and prior experience are necessary to be successful learners in a MOOC. A similar idea was found in Cisel (2014) that learners' personal aims and achievements are highly dependent upon their self-direction, employment status, geographical origin and time constraints. The study also found that the use of forums and involvement in peerassessment are significantly associated with the level of achievement in the MOOC, and learners who interacted on the forums and assessed peer assignments were more likely to be successful in MOOCs (Cisel, 2014).

### **Theoretical Framework of the Study**

The study was mainly guided by the prominent theory of learning namely: connectivist learning theory (Downes, 2008). Connectivism is a hypothesis to learning in the network age introduced by Siemens (2005) and Downes (2008). The underlying principles of connectivist learning theory are different from that of cognitivism, constructivism and behaviorism, because connectivist includes principles of ubiquity, complexity and chaos. In connectivism, network-based pedagogies are emphasized through customizing learning activities in the online and network world, provides flexibility and autonomy for learners with more personalized learning experiences (Downes, 2008; Siemens, 2005). Moreover, connectivism provides learners "to exploit the affordance of Web 2.0 and to facilitate personal choices, participation, collaboration, and creating production" (McLoughlin & Lee, 2011, p. 51). In addition, connectivist learning theory elaborates the nature of learning in virtual environment as a process of making connections with people, networks, and resources. (Downes, 2008; Siemens, 2005).

### **Methodology**

The present research adopted a case study approach in which both qualitative and quantitative data was used to gauge participants' learning experience with a MOOC offered by Futurlearn in collaboration with the University of Reading. In the present study, the case was the intact class comprising 48 ESL undergraduates at a public university in Malaysia. The class consisted of 27 Malay, 13 Chinese and 8 Tamil students, and among them 38 were female and 10 male. Most of the students (89.58%) spoke English as a second language and the rest used English since their childhood. A training session was given to help the participants register for the LMOOC named *A Beginner's Guide to Writing in English for University Study* (hereafter, the *Writing MOOC*). The *Writing MOOC* was an assignment that contributed to 20% marks to their obligatory on-campus course. The course was

designed for anyone who wanted to become a better writer. The objectives and the various components of the Writing MOOC were explained to the participants, and they were also shown how to get started.

A perception questionnaire was designed to elicit the participants' views about the course they have followed. In addition, the reflection essays written by the participants at the end of the Writing MOOC were collected. In the essays the students penned about the perceived strengths and weaknesses of the Writing MOOC, pedagogical features, and the aspects of MOOC that were perceived useful for developing their writing skills. The perception questionnaire was administered at the end of the MOOC that covered five weeks of instruction. The response frequency to the questionnaire items and descriptive statistics were calculated and discussed. To analyze the questionnaire responses, a Likert scale was followed to assign scores to responses, for example, 5 = strongly agree, 4 = agree, 3 = not sure, 2 = disagree, and 1 = strongly disagree. Percentages and the central tendency of the responses were also calculated. For analyzing the qualitative data, theme identification was carried out based on the Creswell's (2007) qualitative method of data coding.

According to Creswell (2007), an analytic strategy for a case study would be to identify and categorize issues within each case and then look for common themes that transcend the case. The use of the coding method helped to make sense of the textual data through arranging data into different sections, assigning a code to each section, reading the codes to find repetition and overlap, and converting the codes into general themes (Creswell, 2007). The textual data of the present study were coded and analyzed for themes that emerged in the participants' reflection essays to eventually decode meanings and draw findings.

## Results

The study investigates a class of ESL undergraduates' perceptions of a Massive Open Online Course on Writing offered in Futurelearn platform in collaboration with the University of Reading. The participants' competence in computer skills is one of the primary requirements for successful participation in any online course. The participants' responses to the questionnaire suggested that most of them were technologically competent which could help them learn from the MOOC comfortably. The majority of the participants (71%) did not attend any online course before the Writing MOOC. The present study found that more than half of them (57%) had successfully completed the Writing MOOC and received a certificate of accomplishment. The present study had a higher completion rate than other MOOCs because the Writing MOOC was an assignment that contributed to 20% to their obligatory on-campus course. Generally, more than 90% of registrants of a MOOC tend to drop out from the course and do not complete it.

Typically, the MOOC pedagogical features comprise a series of video lectures, quizzes, discussion forum, journal resources and articles, lecture slides, and peer assessment. The participants of the study responded positively toward the importance of the MOOC pedagogical features and tools. They rated each MOOC pedagogical feature as either "very important" or "important" (see Table 1). Their responses to the open-ended question on the importance of the Writing MOOC features indicated that quizzes and video lectures are the two most significant components. The short video segments of the lectures (usually 4-20 minutes) and the design format of the videos helped them understand the course content (said Participants 4, 22, 34). Besides, quizzes usually contained five to ten multiple-choice questions were not time-consuming, and they guided the participants to practice grammar.

Moreover, the discussion forum that was placed in the third position of importance played a major role in providing, answering, and giving feedback on the participants' postings. Finally, peer assessment was placed in the last position of importance.

**Table 1: Rating on the Pedagogical features of the writing MOOC**

Question Statements (1-5 from unimportant to very important)	N	1	2	3	4	5	Mean
Quizzes	48	0	2	0	9	37	4.68
Video lectures	48	0	4	3	15	32	4.33
Discussions forum	48	0	1	1	35	11	4.16
Journal resources and articles	48	0	6	2	21	19	4.10
Lecture slides	48	3	2	5	20	18	4.0
Peer assessment	48	5	12	8	10	13	3.29

The results of the questionnaire responses showed participants' strong agreement with the statements that learning in the MOOC enhances learner-autonomy, supports them to

**Table 2: ESL Undergraduates' Perceptions of the Writing MOOC**

Question Statements (1-5 from strongly disagree to strongly agree)	1	2	3	4	5	Mean
1. Learning in the MOOC enhances learner-autonomy.	0	1	1	21	25	4.5
2. It was easy to organize my learning activities during the course.	0	3	2	12	31	4.5
3. I liked the synchronous and asynchronous sessions.	0	1	3	18	26	4.4
4. Learning in the MOOC improves self-directed learning.	0	0	1	28	19	4.4
5. The lessons are more fun when I am working with the MOOC.	0	2	3	19	24	4.3
6. Participating in the MOOC has encouraged me to use a range of Web 2.0 tools and has developed my technological competency.	0	0	1	29	18	4.3
7. The course structure and learning activities were flexible and supported my learning.	0	0	2	31	14	4.3
8. Participating in the MOOC has helped develop my personal learning environment.	0	1	1	27	19	4.3
9. Participating in the MOOC encourages creation and involvement in online learning networks.	0	2	2	29	15	4.2
10. Learning in MOOC is engaging and motivating.	0	2	1	32	13	4.2
11. Participating in MOOC promotes more social interactions.	0	4	3	24	17	4.1
12. I had more freedom to apply my own learning strategies on the MOOC.	2	7	3	19	17	3.9
13. I can understand the lecture much better when working with the MOOC compared to my usual face-to-face lectures.	2	12	0	18	16	3.7
14. Learning in the MOOC is challenging, frustrating and confusing.	29	13	3	2	1	1.6

The statements were ranked 1-5, with 1 = "strongly disagree", 2 = "disagree", 3 = "neutral", 4 = "agree", and 5 = "strongly agree".

organize their learning activities, improves self-directed learning, encourage them to use a range of Web 2.0 tools which has developed their technological competency, promotes social interaction, supports learning, helps develop their personal learning environment, encourages creation and involvement in online learning networks, promotes motivation and engagement, and provides freedom to apply their own learning strategies on the MOOC (see Table 2). The majority of them also agreed or strongly agreed with the fact that the lessons are more fun when they are working with the MOOC; however, most of them did not support the statement that learning in the MOOC is frustrating and confusing. In addition, the majority of the participants felt that they can understand the lecture much better when working with the MOOC compared to their usual face-to-face lectures.

In relation to the learning of writing skills from the Writing MOOC, the results from the questionnaire suggested that most of the participants felt that the MOOC features helped them develop various aspects of academic writing (see Table 3). They received adequate support and ideas from their classmates' postings at the discussion forum. They also felt that they could compare their writing with that of their peers to help them correct and improve their own writing. Moreover, most of the participants found the MOOC discussion forum interesting, and they liked to share their personal ideas with others through it. Almost all of them thought that using the MOOC to learn writing was not a waste of time.

**Table 3: Participants' views on using the MOOC to learn writing**

Question Statements (1-5 from strongly disagree to strongly agree)	1	2	3	4	5	Mean
1. The MOOC features help me develop various aspects of academic writing.	0	2	5	27	14	4.10
2. The MOOC helps me learn new words and expressions.	0	2	5	22	19	4.20
3. The MOOC helps me learn new sentence structure.	1	2	3	21	21	4.22
4. The MOOC helps me get new ideas from my classmates' postings	0	3	2	29	14	4.12
5. I think writing on discussion forum builds my critical thinking	0	4	6	13	25	4.22
6. I think writing on discussion forum is interesting	2	6	3	19	18	3.93
7. It is interesting to share my personal ideas with others through discussion forum	2	5	4	21	16	3.91
8. I can compare my writing with my peers' on the MOOC.	0	2	1	27	18	4.27
9. Using the MOOC to learn writing is a waste of time.	28	9	2	5	4	1.91

In addition to the above quantitative results, data from the participants' reflection essays were analyzed qualitatively to triangulate the findings with questionnaire. The MOOC, participants had followed, comprises many features and tools to facilitate learning such as video lectures, quizzes, discussion forum, and social networks. Participants of the study frequently mentioned in the reflection essays about the innovative and interactive features of the course format which helped them understand and learn the course contents (according to Participant 4, 7, 8, 12, 22, 21). For example, the design of the video lecture is one such feature which helped them to learn course contents and tasks as well as to interact with the content and their peers. The videos were published weekly, but students can watch them any time, and this flexibility removed any scheduling conflict. However, it also meant that there was no live interaction with the course instructor during the lecture although the interaction

with the content and their peers could be achieved via the discussion forum (as commented by Participant 4).

Another advantage of the short video segments (usually 4 to 20 minutes each) was less daunting than the idea of watching an hour-long video of a lecture (said Participant 23). Despite the benefits of watching lectures, a few of the participants faced some difficulties while streaming the videos due to slow Internet speed (according to Participants 4 & 7).

Discussion forum of the Writing MOOC is one motivating aspects which facilitated participants' learning in the MOOC. Participants received adequate feedback from their peers when participants posted something about the course contents. Participants valued the feedback and comments received from their peers. Participant 32 commented, "I can understand how foreign students tackle questions asked and based on their comments I can provide my own arguments on the topic". However, the major disadvantage of the writing course, as shown in Excerpt 1 was the lack of interaction with the course instructor. Besides the participants from the intact class of the present study, the rest of the learners in the Writing MOOC came from different parts of the world, and there was no way the MOOC instructor could interact or engage with each of them (as commented by Participant 4). Participant 19 pointed out the similar fact in Excerpt 1:

#### **Excerpt 1**

I wasn't that comfortable during the course because of the lack of interaction with the peers from other parts of the world. I didn't know them and I didn't have a connection with them although we were connected through reading and commenting peers' post on the discussion forum (Participant 19).

However, participants were satisfied with the course features and tools, especially the teaching method of the instructor that was supportive as penned by Participant 10, "the course instructor made difficult concepts and ideas easier to understand as well as the steps provided was easy to follow." In general, they were given plenty of opportunities to communicate and interact with other learners on the discussion forum. However, not all of them were positive about the support they received from the Writing MOOC course mates (Participant 34).

The participants frequently mentioned some added benefits of the Writing MOOC and how the course was useful and helpful for developing their writing skills. They talked about the course design and the instructional features that helped them develop their skills in writing and pointed out the challenges they faced while completing the writing tasks. In general, they felt that the MOOC helped them a lot in producing an academic essay. They regarded the steps given to them for writing an essay were helpful, and the quizzes provided to develop their grammatical skills were systematic and fun learning (Participants 4, 12, 33). In this light, Participant 4 commented, "In the five weeks of the course, I managed to learn a lot of things about writing. Besides, I reviewed peers' essays which helped me detect my own errors in my essays." While Participant 7 wrote that "I feel like I can construct a critical argument and my analytical skills have improved." As shown in Excerpt 2, Participant 12 penned about the tips and steps provided to write an academic essay was useful and helpful. She further added that the course was rich with useful content to enhance her skills in producing an academic essay.



## Excerpt 2

The tips are very useful for me to improve my academic writing skills. I will apply all the tips given every time I am about to start my writing routine. Furthermore, the course also rich with useful contents, such as the defining an academic essay, what makes an essay is an academic essay, some grammar skills and the most important of all is about the steps provided was useful in producing a good complete essay (Participant 12).

In relation to quizzes, the participants highly appreciated the design format of the quizzes because through quizzes they had learned to master various forms of grammar such as articles, tense, simple, complex and compound sentence, subject-verb agreement. Participant 29 said that “over the five weeks of the course I gained a lot of knowledge about grammar, sentence structures, brainstorming ideas for essay writing and reviewing the peers’ essays.” while Participant 33 added that “I have learned numerous lessons that could actually take a semester or even a year to be fully learned.”

## Discussion

To summarize, the present study investigated how a class of ESL undergraduates perceived the Writing MOOC offered in Futurelearn platform. The results from the perception questionnaire showed that many of the participants had positive views toward learning from the Writing MOOC. They enjoyed the learning and valued the instructional features and tools for learning writing. The findings from the questionnaire and reflection essays are also evident that the participants showed positive attitudes towards MOOC instructional pedagogy for developing their writing competence as most of them agreed or strongly agreed with most of the question items from the questionnaire that the MOOC features helped them develop various aspects of academic writing. The study documented higher completion rates since the participants were provided with 20 marks in their on-campus face-to-face course to participate in the Writing MOOC. Often, more than 90% students who registered for the MOOC do not get to complete it. Early data from Coursera suggest a completion rate of only 7% - 9% (Koller, Ng, Do & Chen, 2013). Usually, students who register for a MOOC signature track course (paid course) have higher completion rate (70%) than those who do the course free of charge (Kolowich, 2013). In this aspect, the free-of-cost feature of most MOOCs may not help to retain students, and MOOC providers do need to weigh the issues related to course attraction and retention.

The participants also responded positively when they were asked to rate the importance of the MOOC instructional features. They rated most course components such as video lectures, quizzes and forum as either “very important” or “important” except for peer assessment. In this respect, Grainger (2013) reported similar responses to peer assessment from graduate students who experienced a MOOC. However, in his study, both groups considered both discussion forum and peer assessment as “of little importance.” His students indicated that they did not care to participate in the discussion forum. In comparison, the participants of the present study considered the discussion forum “very important” as it facilitated their interaction and created interest to discuss various topics. The participants of both studies questioned about the reliability and validity of peer assessment because they felt that the MOOC learners did not have the expertise or experience to provide accurate and quality feedback to their peers’ essays. Assessing such higher-level thoughts in the essays requires human experts and formal evaluation or examination (Sharples, McAndrew, Weller, Ferguson, FitzGerald, Hirst, Mor, Gaved, & Whitelock, 2012). Moreover, peer assessment is

one of the debatable issues in MOOC pedagogy which is considered as the main reason for dropping out from MOOC (Colman, 2013). Although, there are arguments for and against peer assessment Sharples et al. (2012) regards peer evaluation is an aid to the learning process but it should be considered as a means of assessing the learning outcomes. The process of peer evaluation can provide learners with a valuable learning experience.

MOOC pedagogy is believed to have a sound pedagogical foundation that facilitate learning and teaching to be effective (Hanley, 2013). Massive participation, open access, formatted and short video lecture, quizzes, forum and peer assessment are such distinctive features that support learning (Hanley, 2013). A short form of video lecture might engage a sense of belonging and commitment (Bruff et al., 2013; Hanley, 2013). In a MOOC discussion forum, learners ask questions, exchange ideas about the course content, and get to know fellow students. Participants of the present study were highly tech-savvy which were involved in various kinds of activities through using course features and tools. However, some participants reported difficulties organizing their own learning activities in the MOOC; especially difficult was for learners to track the discussion in the discussion forum. Learning through MOOC pedagogy and organizing online resources require a great deal of effort and autonomy (Mackness et al., 2010; Tschofen & Mackness, 2012). In order to be successful in MOOC, learners need to keep up with materials, maintain interactions with peers, evaluate peers' essays, engage fully in the activities and create and share materials in the MOOC platform (Mackness et al., 2010). The volume of information flowing in the MOOC can also be disorienting and daunting (McAuley, Stewart, Siemens, Cormier, 2010). Learning in the MOOC is reported to be quite overwhelming especially for students expecting instructional processes similar to those of traditional models of higher education.

## Conclusion

The present study explored a class of ESL undergraduates' perceptions of a Massive Open Online Course on Writing. In summing up, the participants of the study highly appreciated the Writing MOOC instructional design for enhancing and developing their academic writing skills. Most of them showed positive perceptions and attitudes toward learning from the Writing MOOC. They also appreciated the design format of the video lectures and embedded quizzes for creating an interacting learning environment. The study assumes that ESL learners can be motivated to improve their skills in the English language through MOOC instructional pedagogy. Although the descriptive results of the present research were based on a modest number of participant responses to the questionnaire, the data triangulation from the reflection essays provide a rich account of the nature of learning and participation in the Writing MOOC. Certainly, the study had some limitation such as it investigated only one intact class of students and only one Writing MOOC. Nevertheless, some valuable findings have been found, and some issues such as peer assessment and interaction warrant further research.

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