

Original Paper

Pedagogical Features of LMOOCs for English as a Foreign Language in China: A Survey of Intercultural Communication Courses

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Abstract

Although Language MOOCs (LMOOCs) now play a central role in China's digital education system and have revolutionized English as a Foreign Language (EFL) instruction, their potential for fostering the intercultural skills essential in our interconnected world remains underexplored. To bridge this gap, this study analyzes the pedagogical design of LMOOCs for EFL learning across three major platforms, including China University MOOC, XuetangX and UMOOCs. Using descriptive pedagogical documentation, we conducted a systematic survey of Intercultural Communication (IC) courses as they represent a critical component of China's EFL curriculum. The results show that: (1) core instructional resources in most courses are short lecture videos and texts, while intercultural cases and slides are less frequently used. (2) Learning activities are largely passive, with minimal integration of interactive or immersive tools such as virtual simulations. (3) Assessment primarily centers on knowledge recall by automated quizzes, with discussions and peer-reviewed tasks being less frequently used. (4) The instructor-learner interaction is infrequent and mostly reactive, indicating limited instructor participation in the learning process. These findings reveal the prevalence of xMOOCs-style designs in Chinese LMOOCs for EFL learning, which fails to support the sociocultural engagement necessary for developing intercultural competence. In response, we propose a hybrid model blending AI-powered personalized learning with collaborative community-based activities. This model offers valuable insights for LMOOC developers, digital platform designers and education policy-makers both in China and globally.

Keywords

Language MOOCs, EFL instruction, IC, pedagogical approach, online education

Introduction

The digital transformation of higher education is high on the global agenda and has become a key driver for boosting national competitiveness and fostering innovation. In 2022, Ministry of Education of the People's Republic of China implemented the *National Education Digitization Strategic Action* to expand access to digital learning resources, create inclusive digital learning environments, and promote resource sharing across educational platforms. This strategy will accelerate integration of emerging technologies in education.

MOOCs, an innovative form of online education with unrestricted access and potentially unlimited participation, have significantly accelerated the digital transformation of higher education. Since their introduction to China in 2013, MOOCs have reshaped online education through innovative pedagogies and expanding access to quality resources over the past decade. In recent years, China has witnessed a surge in the development of LMOOC platforms. At the national level, more than 30 online course platforms have been developed. These platforms host numerous EFL-focused courses offered by domestic universities and institutions, primarily targeting university students and self-directed adult learners. By the end of 2024, China has emerged as the global leader in MOOC-based education, with over 97,000 courses and 454 million registered users.

LMOOCs, a subcategory of MOOCs specifically designed to support language learning, offer scalable and accessible opportunities for millions of Chinese learners seeking to improve their English proficiency (Barcena & Martin-Monje, 2014; Rets & Gromov, 2017). They have become an integral part of digital education in China, revolutionizing EFL instruction at university levels. According to *College English Teaching Guidelines* implemented in 2020, China's EFL curricula in universities typically consist of three components: General English, English for Specific Purposes, and Intercultural Communication (IC). While the first two categories focus on developing overall language proficiency, IC courses represent an advanced stage of language learning that specifically aims to cultivate intercultural communication competence, cultural awareness, and adaptability in globalized contexts. As an extension of traditional English instruction, these courses play a pivotal role in equipping students not only with English proficiency, but with global perspectives and practical skills for effective international communication.

Literature Review

In terms of pedagogical models, MOOCs are categorized into connective MOOCs (cMOOCs) and extended MOOCs (xMOOCs) (Smith & Eng, 2013). cMOOCs, a Connectivist social learning approach that emphasizes communication among participants online, while xMOOCs follows the Cognitive-Behaviorist approach that focuses primarily on content transmission and knowledge acquisition structured course content, repetition and testing (Bayne & Ross, 2014; Motzo & Proudfoot, 2017).

As a burgeoning field, LMOOCs have attracted increased research attention in the past decade. A review of recent literature of LMOOCs shows three common research approaches. The first approach is to understand learners' perceptions, concerns, or sentiments toward LMOOCs by collecting and analyzing learners' posts or reviews in the discussion forums (Peng & Jiang, 2022; Chong et al., 2022). The second approach used by many studies is to analyze learners' engagement patterns by tracking data of their learning analytics (Jiang & Peng, 2023). Another distinct approach adopted in recent studies is to use surveys and other data sources to explore learners' experiences and perceptions of LMOOCs (Fridriksdóttir, 2021a, 2021b). Notably, there has also been growing concern for the quality criteria for LMOOCs in recent studies. Chong et al. (2022) studied 100 LMOOCs and summarized their strengths and limitations. Luo and Ye (2021) proposed a quality criteria framework for LMOOCs based on their study of ten LMOOCs in China.

Regarding the current implementations of LMOOCs, there has been a disconnect between policy aspirations and pedagogical reality. Crucially, no studies have applied systematical pedagogical documentation to examine LMOOCs for EFL learning in China. Rinaldi's (2006) documentation principles, though developed for physical classrooms, offer potent tools for capturing the pedagogical design of digital courses through direct interface engagement. By adapting Rinaldi's documentation principles to digital contexts, this study explored the pedagogical features of IC courses across three major platforms in China. This systematic investigation into LMOOC-based instruction would not only inform the continued development of China's digital education strategy but also contribute to global understanding of how online platforms can effectively promote comprehensive language learning experiences.

Methodology

This study employs the method of descriptive pedagogical documentation to analyze authentic course designs through direct platform engagement. It adopts the same methodology used by the previous research (Bali, 2014; Wong, 2021). Following Margaryan et al.'s (2015) framework for MOOC analysis, we systematically observed and recorded the pedagogical features of IC courses from four pedagogical dimensions (resources, activities, assessments and interactions). The documented features were then analyzed using descriptive statistics to present overall trends.

Data was collected in April and May 2025. The researchers investigated the major MOOC platforms in China by studying closely the official website and selected the most representative ones considering the number of EFL courses, user base and accessibility. Our analysis identified China University MOOC, which partnered with 803 higher education institutions and offering over 14,000 courses, and XuetangX, hosting 10,000+ MOOCs, serving 144 million global learners, as the two dominant platforms in China's MOOC landscape. To ensure a comprehensive analysis of LMOOCs for EFL instruction, we also included UMOOCs, the country's first specialized MOOC platform dedicated to foreign language education, in our study.

Subsequently, we created accounts on all three platforms to simulate authentic learner access and conducted searches on each platform using keywords “Intercultural communication”, “cross-cultural communication” or “communication across cultures”.

After that, we enrolled on each course and reviewed them closely by checking the course portals, descriptions, and syllabi. There were three key criteria for selecting LMOOCs in this study. First, the course must have explicit IC learning objectives. Second, the course had to be offered in English, as many IC courses were held in Chinese, Japanese or other languages. Third, the course websites had to be openly available for enrollment within the time span of our project, between April and May 2025. This scoping process left a final sample of 50 LMOOCs for further analysis. UMOOCs provide nearly half of all available courses, ahead of China University MOOC and XuetangX. A summary of the sampled courses across platforms can be seen in *Table 1* below.

Table 1. Distribution of IC Courses Across Platforms

Platform	Search results	Due date
China University MOOCs	14	05/29/2025
XuetangX	12	05/29/2025
UMOOCs	24	05/29/2025
Total	50	

To ensure consistency, two researchers independently recorded features for 30% of courses. Inter-rater agreement was high, exceeding 90% across all dimensions and any discrepancies were resolved through discussion. After organizing the documented features, we analyzed them to identify key trends and draw conclusions about current IC course design.

Results

To provide a comprehensive view of the sampled IC courses, we organized and analyzed the survey data along four key dimensions: instructional resources, learning activities, assessment methods, and instructor-learner interaction.

Instructional materials

As for teaching resources, five types are identified across the sampled courses. Among these resources, lecture videos are most commonly used and every course in the sample includes both lecture videos and supplementary ones. Text-based materials follow closely and are present in 84% of the courses. Besides, case studies appear in 30% of the courses, while lecture slides are used in only 20%. Study guides turn out to be the least frequently used, found in merely 2% of the sample. The graphical summary of course materials in the existing LMOOCs is shown in Figure 1 below.

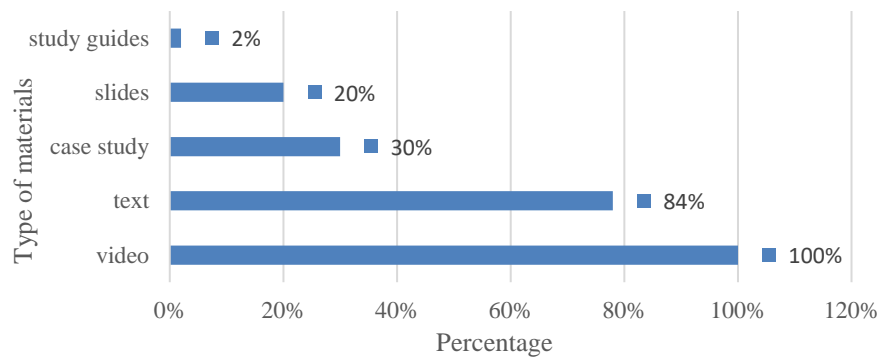


Figure 1. Instructional Materials of IC

According to the survey, the distribution of the video lengths reveals a distinct pattern in terms of course duration (Table 2). Short courses that last 1 to 3 hours constitute the majority at 54%, followed by mid-length courses at 32%, which on average takes 4 to 6 hours to complete. Extended courses, lasting 7 to 10 hours, represent the smallest segment at just 14%. With regard to platforms, UMOOCs leads in short-duration content, suggesting a focus on micro-learning. China University MOOCs and XuetangX show similar declines in course numbers as durations increase. Table 2 presents the distribution pattern of the course duration.

Table 2. Duration of IC Across Platforms

Platform	Duration (Number of LMOOCs)		
	1-3 h	4-6h	7-10h
China University MOOCs	6	5	3
XuetangX	8	3	1
UMOOCs	13	8	3
Total	27	16	7

Learning activities

Figure 2 shows the popularity of different learning activities in the LMOOCs examined. Among the 5 activities identified, watching videos is the most common type used in all 50 courses and reading texts is the second major type made available. Relatively speaking, online discussion shows less frequency, as it is required in only approximately a third of the searched courses. While a quarter involves case studies, activities that are designed to improve students' ability to describe and analyze intercultural phenomenon, identify communication conflict and promote intercultural awareness and competence. Besides, only 4% of these courses offer students access to immersive virtual experiments, so students may not have opportunity to check their understanding of intercultural knowledge and theory after watching the videos and reading the materials, let alone put them into practice.

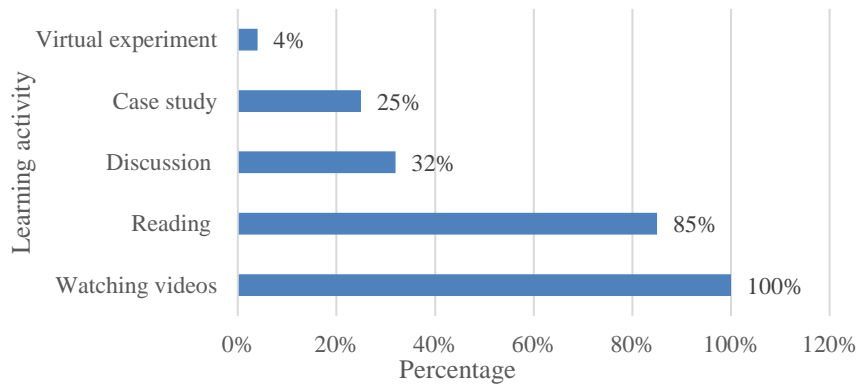


Figure 2. Learning Activities of IC

Assessment methods

As Figure 3 illustrates, almost all courses examined use automated quizzes as assessment, usually as follow-up activities to check real-time comprehension of the learners while or after watching the lecture videos. In addition, the majority of the courses use tests, including unit test, mid-term as well as final exam as assessment activities and no significant differences have been identified in these tests given across the courses. Similar to traditional classroom teaching, over 38% of the LMOOCs regard learners' engagement in online discussion as an important part of the assessment process. Another method of assessment is peer-reviewed tasks such as case study and intercultural comparison, which is found in over a third of the sample courses. It is also worth noting that 4% courses stand out by including students' performance on virtual simulation platforms in the evaluation process, indicating a new trend that results from the constant development and increasing application of Artificial Intelligence (AI).

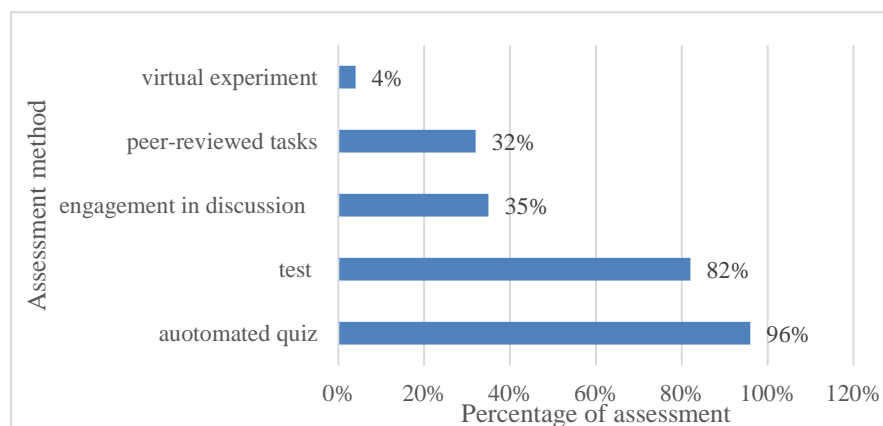


Figure 3. Assessment Methods of IC

Instructor-learner Interaction

Table 3 displays the availability of discussion forums across the sampled LMOOCs. On average, 78% of courses on the three platforms offer discussion forums to students. Although discussion forums are easily

available, the percentage of courses that have generated discussion threads only average out to 17%, with many identified on UMOOCs, which reveals a lack of interaction between the instructor and students in online learning.

Table 3. Online Discussion Engagement in IC

Platform	Percentage of courses with discussion forum(s)	Percentage of courses with active thread(s)
China University MOOCs	78%	15%
XuetangX	76%	14%
UMOOCs	80%	23%
Average	78%	17%

Notes. Courses with discussion forums refer MOOCs that include at least one discussion forum. Courses with active threads refer to MOOCs where at least one discussion thread was created by learners.

Figure 4 further examines the instructor's participation in the discussion forums available. In courses with active discussions, instructors employ both asynchronous and synchronous interaction methods. They more often use asynchronous interaction, such as answering forum questions, giving feedback, posting announcements, and providing technical support. Though instructors tend not to use synchronous interaction, there is a growing tendency as live Q&A sessions and small group workshops are provided in 8% of the courses.

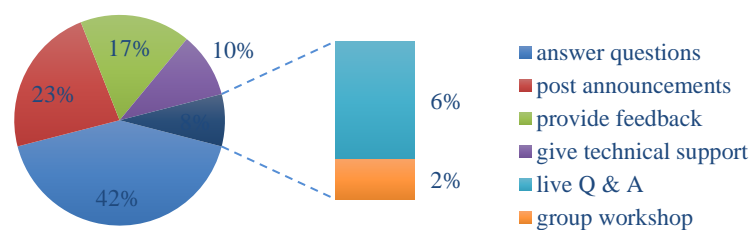


Figure 4. Types of Instructor's Participation in Discussion

Discussion

A key pattern emerged across the sampled courses is most rely heavily on short pre-recorded video lectures and reading materials as core instructional tools. While these materials make courses widely accessible and easy to scale, relying too heavily on them can prevent students from engaging deeply with the content and building meaningful knowledge. A notable gap in these courses is the absence of comprehensive study guides, which could provide crucial support for independent learning and scaffold students who struggle with self-regulation. Similarly, with only 25% of courses including case-based

tasks (Figure 2), most students lack opportunities to practice language skills in real-world situations. These practical exercises are crucial as they help develop both critical thinking and practical language abilities that today's learners need.

In terms of learning activities, the current designs largely follow a one-way content-delivery approach, with little opportunity for meaningful interaction. Most activities require passive engagement, such as watching videos or answering multiple-choice questions, rather than active participation or collaboration. Only 4% of courses incorporate immersive tools like virtual simulations, missing a key opportunity to make learning more experiential. Given how crucial interaction and practice are in language learning, future designs should shift toward task-based activities, peer-supported learning, and scenario-driven practice. These changes would better meet the expectations of today's learners, especially Gen Z, who prefer dynamic, social, and hands-on learning experiences.

In addition, assessments in the courses surveyed mainly focus on knowledge recall through automated quizzes and peer-graded assignments. Although these practices support efficient evaluation at scale, they often lack detailed qualitative feedback, which limits their formative value. Besides, the lack of reflective tasks or real-world scenario assessments means most fail to measure higher-order skills like critical thinking, key goals in communicative language teaching. To improve learning outcomes, we should explore blended assessment methods that combine automated tools for instant feedback, guided peer reviews with proper training and targeted teacher feedback at key moments. Adding diverse evaluation methods like reflection exercises and hands-on projects would align better with real learning outcomes and foster student progress.

As for instructor-learner interaction, while 78% of courses offer discussion forums, engagement remains limited in both frequency and depth. Instructors mostly play the role of facilitators, responding to students' questions but seldom starting or steering discussions toward deeper understanding. These findings reveal a gap between what online platforms can offer and how they're actually being used. Since social interaction is crucial for language learning, future LMOOCs should improve instructor presence through methods such as regular live Q&A sessions and AI-supported feedback tools etc. This way, courses could still reach more learners while offering more personal help.

In a nutshell, LMOOCs for EFL instruction in China primarily follow the pedagogical approach of xMOOCs, which emphasizes structured knowledge transmission over sociocultural engagement. This approach aligns with traditional Chinese educational values that stress teacher authority and content mastery and proves particularly limiting for developing intercultural competence. Our data shows this paradox clearly: despite 92% course completion of cultural knowledge modules, only 12% incorporated guided intercultural discussions, and a mere 5% utilized immersive technologies like VR that could facilitate experiential learning (UMOOC, *Communication across Cultures*). With such limited designs, learners aren't properly equipped to handle actual cultural exchanges.

To bridge this gap, we propose a pedagogical shift from traditional, content-centered design to more interactive, learner-focused model. This model intends to integrate emerging technologies such as AI and

VR and promotes smart teaching by expanding the in-depth application of LMOOCs in teaching. With this pedagogical shift, instructors' roles are changing from content presenters to learning facilitators. In this new role, they are now responsible for offering constructive feedback, guiding interactive discussions, and designing genuine intercultural exchanges for students. By blending innovative technologies with established teaching practices, this approach will both enhance students' intercultural communication skills and improve the overall quality of digital English education.

Conclusion

This study profiles a representative sample of China's LMOOCs to map the recent development and pedagogical patterns. Findings indicate that most courses basically adhere to the xMOOC model and prioritize one-way knowledge transmission over meaningful interaction, despite the presence of discussion forums. This reliance on instructor-centered delivery underscores an urgent need to transition toward learner-centered pedagogies incorporating authentic collaboration. Such shift would significantly enhance both MOOC quality and the effectiveness of online language education practices in China.

While this study offers a systematic examination of pedagogical patterns in Chinese LMOOCs, it has some limitations. First, its focus on IC courses across three major platforms with limited sampling restricts generalizability to broader EFL-oriented courses. Second, while instructor-learner interactions were quantified, qualitative dimensions, including discussion depth and learner perceptions, remains unexplored. Third, the analysis confirms most courses replicate traditional classroom model, relying heavily on pre-recorded lectures and fixed assessments, which underutilizes the interactive capabilities of digital learning environment. These limitations highlight key areas for future research. First, learner discussions and feedback over time can be tracked to develop better ways of evaluating online English courses. Second, it's worth exploring innovative teaching methods, like AI-powered lessons, VR language practice, and group-based learning, to move beyond the standard format of pre-recorded lectures. Third, empirical research is needed to examine how these emerging technologies actually impact student engagement and learning outcomes. Addressing these gaps would contribute to promoting online language learning experiences that aren't just widely available, but genuinely effective and engaging for diverse learners.

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