

## **Integrating Massive Open Online Courses in Teaching Research and Writing Skills**

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**Abstract:** This research study aims at consolidating and extending students' repertoire about research and writing skills through MOOCs. To this end, fifteen Masters one students at the University of Ibn Khaldoun – Tiaret-, Algeria enrolled in an online course on FutureLearn. Then an attitudinal questionnaire was administered to them about their expectations and experiences throughout the course. The online course also informed the practitioner researchers' in-class teaching to tackle the practical side of some research and writing techniques. The findings indicated that the students exhibited positive attitudes about online instruction and showed a great extent of engagement. At the end of the eighth week of online instruction, the students were well-informed about the requirements of conducting a research study.

**Keywords:** MOOCs, LMOOCs, Online Instruction, Research Skills, Writing Skills

### **1. Introduction**

Within educational innovations in the 21<sup>st</sup> century, there is an urgent need to help university students fulfil their needs and pursue lifelong independent learning. In this respect, practitioner researchers have a significant role in making change in their classrooms by engaging their students in taking an active part in their own learning. Given the fact that 'teachers themselves are the best 'experts'' of their own classrooms.' (Smith, Padwad & Bullock, 2017, p.7), they are well-informed about the classroom environment and the suitable measures that may establish positive change. Therefore, this research study stems from the practitioner researcher's reflection on some situational factors. First of all, allotting one session per week to teaching academic writing in relation to research methodology is insufficient to consolidate the students' skills. In addition, the students are supposed to cover miscellaneous aspects of research and writing to be able to submit their master's dissertations. Finally, they need to be equipped with autonomous knowledge-seeking skills to cope with the requirements of the 21<sup>st</sup> century digital age. Hence, the major aim of this study is to involve Masters 1 didactics of EFL students in a MOOC on FutureLearn platform to experience independent learning. The second objective is to help the students discover new learning experiences in order to consolidate their research and writing skills. Hence, the main research questions revolve around the identification of the potentials of MOOCs in fostering further engagement of the students outside the classroom setting. In addition, we want to explore whether MOOCs inspire the students to carry on autonomous learning. In this context, we hypothesise

that time investment would raise the students' engagement with content related to research and writing. Furthermore, they would voluntarily choose to enrol in other courses. To seek answers for the previous quest, two data collection methods were used. The first method was asking fifteen Masters 1 students at the University of Ibn Khaldoun to take part in an online course on FutureLearn. Then they were handed a post-course questionnaire to report on their experiences. And the second method was the design of practical tasks that address some concepts on this online course such as critical reading, writing an abstract, and referencing...etc.. We concluded that the online course had a positive impact on the students' perceptions about this method of instruction and they reinforced their research and writing skills. Therefore, it is significant to engage the students in innovative methods of learning to cope with the requirements of university studies in the 21<sup>st</sup> century.

## **2. Defining MOOCs**

The term Massive Open Online Courses (MOOCs) stands for the provision of free to access course that are delivered through various media such as videos, forums, and resources to colossal size of participants seeking education from elite universities (Baturay, 2014,p. 427). Historically, 'Connectivism and Connected Knowledge' was the first online course offered by Canadian professors Siemens and Downes in 2008. The concept of their course was about the participation of both of them in providing content about connectivist learning theory, and the students by taking an active part in their learning via blog writing, discussions on Moodle and social media. The core principle of such a course is that connectivity facilitates the exchange of knowledge and all participants can contribute to knowledge imparting (Waks, 2016, p. 39-40).

Subsequently, MOOCs witnessed an omnipresent development due to the fact that they guaranteed the widespread of online university courses at a low cost. For instance, in 2011, xMOOCs brought together high volume participants to three Stanford Engineering Everywhere courses. These courses were originally delivered to campus students in forms of recorded lectures, notes and assignments (Lane et al., 2013, p. 7). As mentioned by Yuan and Powell (2013, p.5), outstanding institutions created their own platforms and diffused online courses like edX. Other profitable organisations such as Coursera and Udacity also collaborated with elite universities to provide free or paid fee to get a certification without credits. FutureLearn is another platform that was launched by Open University in 2012. The total number of participants in its courses exceeds 3.6 students, who have taken part in the courses offered by British and international universities, and educational institutions like the British council. In addition, FutureLearn announced that the participants will be able to get certification and credits by enrolling in its courses (Nava, 2018).

## **3. Review of Literature**

MOOCs have offered various courses across disciplines, and languages are not an exception. Within this eminent trend, researchers and teachers conducted research studies that examined multiple dimensions. Motzo and Proudfoot (2017) explored the opportunities and the challenges they faced when they designed and conducted a Language MOOC on FutureLearn about Italian for Beginners. They reported that MOOCs have the potential to provide educational resources to huge numbers of participants. They also represent an opportunity for designers to experiment with new methods of delivering content. However, they constitute other issues:

- Moderation

The huge volume of participants makes it challenging for the instructors to respond and interact with all the comments.

- Cultural Issues

The participants have different cultural backgrounds and opinions. This fact entails a certain possession of intercultural awareness to avoid disputes and sensitive issues in the discussions section on the course platform.

- Retention

The nature of participants, who are mostly leisure learners and the absence of any financial commitment to finish the course are the main reasons of high rates of drop out. Lin and Zhang (2014) advocate the use of xMOOCs since they promote teacher-student instruction and interaction. Hence, xMOOCs are the proper choice to teach Chinese effectively. They also highlighted the correlation between the kind of MOOCs and the requirements of each level. For instance, MOOCs are appropriate for beginning Chinese since the focus is on acquiring basic vocabulary. For an advanced level in grammar or Chinese culture, the participants can enrol in xMOOCs or ChinaX because they require a certain proficiency of the Chinese language. Moreover, in ChinaX, the course provides English subtitles in the videos. Another important dimension within research on Language MOOCs is the new roles of LMOOCs teachers. Castrillo (2014) proposed a framework of the language teacher on MOOCs. Based on her experience and roles attributed to teachers in online and non-open courses, she adopts the constructivist model because it facilitates interaction, negotiation of meaning and appropriate for foreign language learning. The proposed framework goes beyond the role of teacher as structure designer and content generator to include other functions such as: the designer of self-and peer-assessment tasks, a forum curator, a facilitator, a course manager, and a researcher within LMOOCs.

Baker, Mitros, Goldberg, and Sottolare (2017) criticised MOOCs for a significant component that MOOCs need to incorporate effectively, which is assessment. Though online courses are an eminent form of instruction, it still lacks assessment consistency throughout the provided norms of assessment. Focusing on the improvement of assessment practices will guarantee credible certification and the promotion of formative assessment and successful learning. Therefore, they proposed the changing of multiple-choice and fill-in-the blank questions, and incorporate psychometric aspects instead to challenge the students in their learning and help them learn better. Moreover, they provided a new vision of assessment by granting the participants a more engaging part. This new role for the participants should be also accompanied with support and resources so that they can perform on advanced assessment level such as automated essay scoring. Other solution to the issue of effective assessment that aligns with learning is blended learning or flipped classroom. In this respect, the students still have access to the MOOC content, but they deal with the practical aspects of the course with a local teacher (Suen, 2014)

In this study, we will extend research on the incorporation of MOOCs in language classrooms. We will investigate the establishment of MOOCs as a supportive learning tool outside the classroom. Besides, we will extend the proposed notion on MOOCs by providing further practice and engagement in the classroom.

#### 4. Data Collection Methods and Procedures

We opted for the participation of Masters 1 students in an online course entitled ‘Developing your Research Project’ on FutureLearn platform. One of the researchers conducted the in-class inquiry with the students. The first session of the study was devoted to introducing MOOCs and online learning to the students. To do so, the students watched some videos about FutureLearn platform, the online courses and a short presentation about the course they would enrol in. Then the researchers explained to them how to have an account on the platform so that they could follow each other. Eventually, we asked for their consent to take part in this study, 15 out of 43 students agreed on participating in the course. Throughout the course, the participants were exposed to content about research methodology and writing such as the abstract, research proposal, referencing, and the oral presentation. However, they have not the opportunity to write and get the appropriate feedback about their performance. In this case, this online course informs in-class instruction. That means that we designed the online lessons in a more detailed way and module-based notions in which the students practised them. After that, the students received formative feedback about their writing.

The online course lasts for 8 weeks. However, the participants were asked to complete four weeks of enrolment only. Fortunately, they decided to finish all the remaining stages of this course. Then we administered an attitudinal questionnaire about the participants’ reflections on previous learning situations and their experiences on MOOCs. The questionnaire incorporates 08 open-ended questions. The participants are Master’s one students, section of English, at the University of Ibn Khaldoun Tiaret, specialised in Didactics of EFL. The study includes participants from the LMD system and Classical System. Table 1 provides more details about this sample.

Table 1: The participants’ details

Participants	Sex	Age	B.A educational system
B.C	F	22	LMD(Licence, Master,
A.H	F	22	Doctorat)
B.R	F	22	LMD
B.F	F	23	LMD
O.H	F	23	LMD
B.I	F	23	LMD
K.M	F	23	LMD
F.L	F	23	LMD
B.A	F	24	LMD
T.N	F	25	LMD
B.H	F	26	LMD
B.S	M	30	LMD
B. So	F	32	Classical system
B.Z	F	33	Classical system
M.N	M	34	Classical system
			Classical system

## 5. Data Analysis and Discussion

The first section of the questionnaire attempts to identify the participants' details. The second section deals with their expectations and experiences. The majority of the participants with 40 % expected that the course content would be difficult for them. We justify this finding by the fact that these participants were afraid that their proficiency level in the areas of research and writing would not allow them to master it. In addition, they admit that part of their concern is related to their lack of computing skills. This result may also refer to the students' reaction on the first day of the study. Only one student in the whole class knows about MOOCs. 20 % of the participants exhibited positive attitudes about enrolling in this course. They admit that they are looking forward to develop their research and writing skills. Some participants with 13.33% express the belief that this course will help them discover additional content in research and writing. The main reason behind this finding is that these participants belong to the classical system. That means that, during their undergraduate studies, they did not study the module of research methodology and writing techniques. Hence, they show a great interest in consolidating their skills. The remaining expectations include motivational content, taking notes for further testing at the end of the course, covered content, and an uninteresting experience due to lack of time and commitment with 6.67% for each.

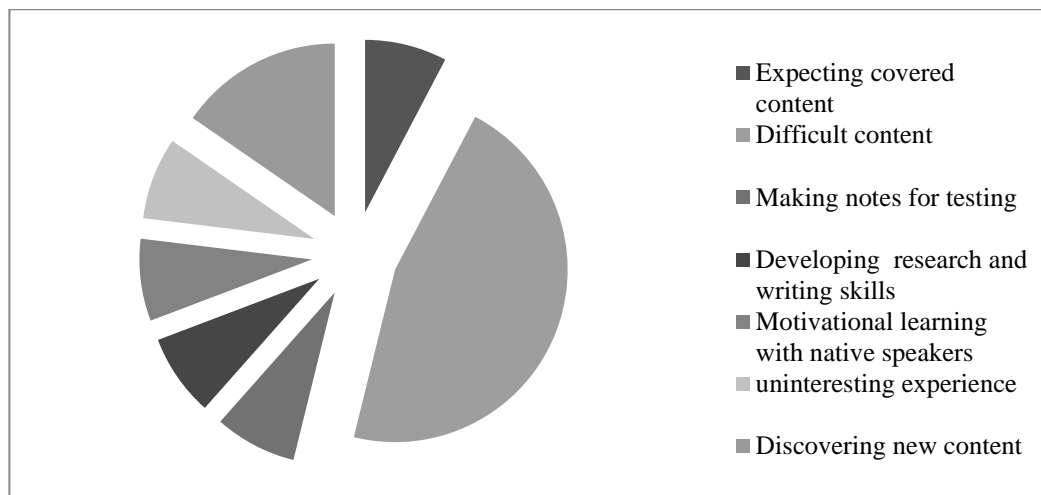


Figure 1: The students' expectations about MOOCs

When asked about the extent to which they are engaged to finish the tasks, the majority of respondents with 93.33% affirmed that they are highly motivated and excited about online learning. They justified their willingness and commitment to complete the course by referring to the following factors:

- MOOCs constitute a new experience of learning and the method of online teaching is appealing to them, particularly the use of videos and the availability of downloading resources.
- The discussion section facilitates their participation and contribution. Besides, they share their experiences with native speakers and participants from all over the globe.
- Anonymity gives them a sense of security to express themselves without being afraid to be judged by other participants.
- The course provides them with useful tips that apply to other modules and they appreciate the assigned activities and quizzes at the end of each stage.

Only 6.66% of the participants state that they are not engaged because they dealt with the online course content during their undergraduate studies.

In this prospect, we deduce that the selection of MOOCs, as an inclusive procedure in the EFL classroom, proves to be effective since the course infuses in the students' motivation to devote their time to study it. In addition to that, online teaching engages the participants in taking active parts in developing themselves. Moreover, this engagement widens their horizons by bringing them in this scientific hub where they share and learn from other participants. Eventually, showing more involvement and commitment reinforces their in-class achievement.

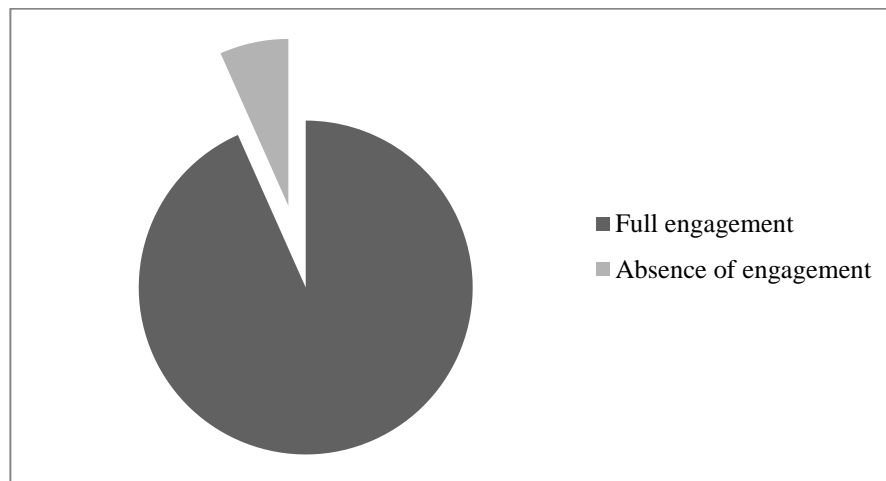


Figure 2: The extent of the students' engagement with MOOCs

The third question aims at identifying the aspects that the students encounter for the first time in this online course. Only 20% dealt with the same online content during their undergraduate studies. However, they report that the way of presenting this content is dynamic and challenges traditional methods of delivery and involvement of the students. For some participants, with 26.66%, the course is an opportunity for them to extend their in-class knowledge. The remaining participants with 53.33% admitted that the course tackled new techniques and study skills such as critical thinking, academic and critical reading, transferable skills, oral presentations and note-taking.

Results in Figure 3 indicate that traditional modes of delivery still dominate the Algerian university context. Therefore, it is essential to incorporate ICTs and e-learning platforms and methods such as blended learning and flipped classrooms to respond to the requirements of the 21<sup>st</sup> century students. This finding goes hand in hand with the assertion of Belaid and Sarnou (2018) in which they find out that 70% of university lectures in the Algerian university environment are traditional and rely on face-to-face delivery and handouts. The course also helps the participants consolidate their knowledge because devoting two sessions for research methodology and writing techniques is insufficient to cover all the important aspects. Finally, the course tackles new methods and skills that the majority of participants are not well-informed with.

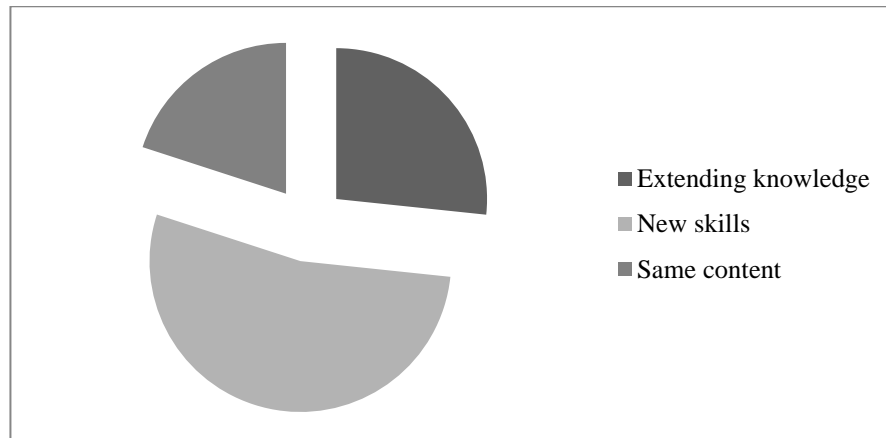


Figure 3: The course content on MOOCs

As illustrated in Figure 4 below, 60% of the participants reported that they develop an awareness of the importance of study skills such as note-taking, the role of critical reading in the identification of arguments, and the need to develop a repertoire of academic writing skills. Whereas 40% of the participants stated that the course equips them with essential research assets such as: the personality of a researcher, the scientific method of conducting research, developing hypotheses, narrowing a research topic and developing analytical skills. In fact, the participants exhibit a positive change throughout the course. It is clearly indicated that this experience raise their awareness about developing skills that apply to other modules such as note-taking. Besides, the course enables them to identify a repertoire of required skills and traits in order to begin their research journey and proposal writing.

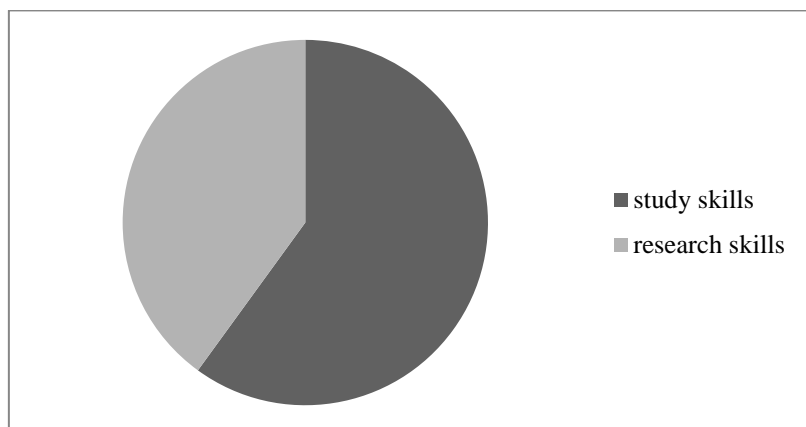


Figure 4: Study and research skills on MOOCs

The objective of the 8<sup>th</sup> question is to highlight the aspects that the participants appreciate about the online course in general. 53.33% of the students focused on the practical side of the course. They emphasised the fact that with every notion they encountered, they were engaged in responding to questions, dealing with activities, expressing their opinions, and dealing with a fill-in-blanks activity or a quiz, instead of dealing with theoretical concepts and abstract ideas in the traditional classroom. 46.66% referred to the nature of the online course by admitting that they favour the mode of online



teaching because it is dynamic and up-to-date (the use of ICTs). Besides, the course encourages learner-centeredness and gives the opportunity to them to express their opinions and discuss other ideas in the discussion and commenting section.

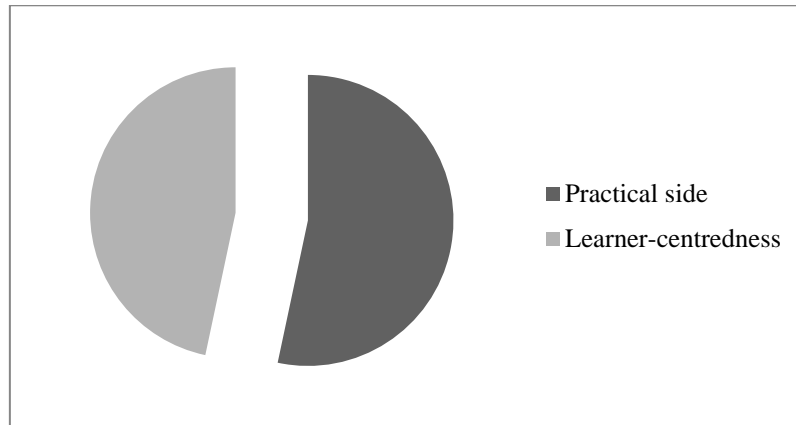


Figure 5: Strong Components of MOOCs Design

We synthesise that online learning is beneficial for the students since it is no longer about imparting information, but about dealing with practical aspects that the students may use in other learning contexts. Furthermore, the combination of using ICTs and interaction rubrics successfully address the issue of involving all the students. In this course, the participants can make a contribution by engaging in conversation with teachers and other participants, contrary to the traditional classroom in which they are limited by the session time and syllabus coverage.

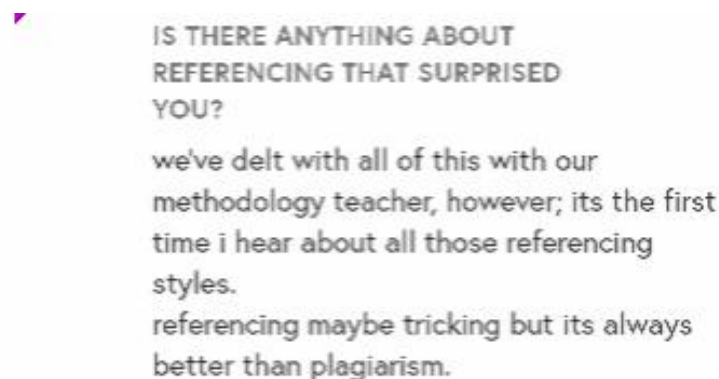


Figure 6: A sample of a students' discussion on the online course

The ultimate aim of university studies is to help the students seek independent learning. Therefore, we asked the participants to reflect on this online learning experience. 40% of the participants considered this online course as an opportunity to consolidate their research and writing skills on the one hand, and a basis to prepare them for conducting their own research in Masters 2 enrolment. 33.33% of the respondents expressed their appreciation of being involved in such an experience where they are out of their comfort zone, and they embrace the idea that that they can achieve their goals when they have a step by step plan. 26.66% of the students stated that this course develops a sense of autonomy and



independence in them. Throughout 8 weeks of online instruction, they are ready for other exciting opportunities of autonomous learning.

We interpret these findings by the fact that the online course contributed positively to the students' attitudes about online learning. After finishing 4 weeks of the course, the participants note that the course makes a difference in their studies since they are aware of their potentials and what it takes to conduct a research study. Then this course puts them on the path of independent learning in an age that offers this privilege. Besides, this experience highlights the importance of consolidating in-class instruction by consulting other resources of knowledge.

The last question intends to identify whether this experience support the students' current or future plans. 60 % of the students reported that the progress they made throughout the course reinforced their self-confidence and self-esteem. In addition to that, they thought that they were put on the right path since they learned about research and writing skills to design their research proposal. 20% of them admitted that this course had a positive impact on them since they realised that they could assume responsibility to conduct their research without full reliance on their supervisors to guide them. The last 20% of the students finished the 8<sup>th</sup> week and enrolled in other courses on FutureLearn to deepen their knowledge mainly in writing a review of literature and consolidating their academic writing skills.

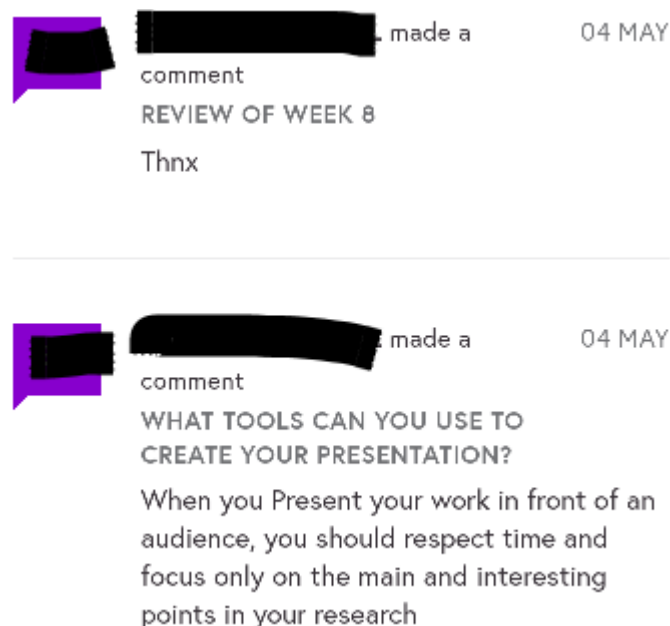


Figure 7: A sample of a student's accomplishment of the course

We believe that the course achieves the intended objectives since the participants express their satisfaction about online learning. In this prospect, this experience opens new learning possibilities for the students to reinforce and/or to extend their set of research and writing skills. Additionally, they are well-aware of the investment of these skills to achieve a short-term goal, which is designing their Masters Degree research proposal and their engagement in lifelong learning by enrolling in other courses on FutureLearn platform.

## 6. Conclusion

The ultimate aim of teaching is to inspire the students to pursue a journey of seeking lifelong learning. Hence, the practitioner researcher's mission is to bridge the gap between in-class instruction and his/her students' interaction with this instruction outside the classroom setting. Our research study attempted to help Masters one students take an active role in consolidating their research and writing skills. To do so, they participated in the online course 'Developing your Research Project' to learn more about the requirements of scientific research and what it takes to write academically in order to contribute to the existing body of knowledge. Fortunately, the participants showed great engagement and interaction with the online course content. It is also worth noting that this learning experience equipped the students with a sense of readiness to begin their research projects confidently since they had a clear idea of the skills they need to utilise throughout the various steps of conducting a research study. Eventually, their involvement in this online course in general fostered independence and motivation to participate in other online courses in English Language Teaching.

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