Abstract

This study presents an attempt to integrate MOOC discussion forums posting into the curriculum of teaching English for specific purposes. Academic writing seems to be the least appreciated component of the ESP courses, which can be partially attributed to the fact that students lack natural environment for quasi-professional discussions on their major subject. Besides, writing lengthy academic papers presents a massive challenge for beginner students, both due to their level of English proficiency and insignificant expertise in the chosen discipline. However, writing in small chunks in the forum posting format appears manageable and even motivating. In this paper, we are presenting the results of a pedagogical experiment that took place at the Ecological Faculty of the RUDN University in November 2016-March 2017. 16 first-year students aged 18-19 were asked to participate in the experiment, registering for the MOOCs on environmental sciences and completing the tasks in the semi-flipped classroom mode. Apart from watching and reading the materials of the MOOCs they were specifically asked to write postings on the discussion forums and submit print-screens to the English instructor. Upon the completion of the experiment the students were asked to complete a survey on their reflections upon writing assignments. Besides, a small corpus of postings was compiled for further qualitative and quantitative analysis. The paper elaborates on the outcomes and challenges of using discussion forums posting in ESP classes and outlines the pedagogical effect of the experiment.

1 INTRODUCTION

Although discussion forums have been widely used in MOOCs and there have been a few studies on those, their pedagogical effect is yet to be researched. It has been pointed that discussion boards increase engagement [1] and also foster a certain level of commitment that results in higher completion rates [2]. However, negative impact of discussion forums on student motivation has also been acknowledged [3]. Large volumes of unsearchable posts appear to be hard to process and fragmented structure does not foster better understanding [4]. Fini [5] admits that MOOC participants prefer perceptive participation to active one. Schweizer [6] acknowledges that discussion forums can be characterized as “unfocused, tentative and misinformed”. Complex nature of interaction within the framework of discussion forums has been studied by a few researchers [2], [7], [8]. According to Yang et al [9] language is one of the major barriers. Therefore, seeing the pedagogical effect of discussion forums for language classes is of great interest.

2 METHODOLOGY

A group of 16 1st year BSc students of Ecological faculty were asked to take part in a pedagogic experiment to estimate the value of discussion forums in teaching academic communication. Since ESP classes go in line with students’ major curriculum the course “Introduction to Ecosystems” by Open University (UK) at futurelearn.com was chosen. It was meant to complement knowledge that students gained at their lectures conducted in L1 as well as expand their professional outlook. The course lasted for 6 weeks, however, the weekly volume of information appeared to be challenging for the students, thus the timing of the course was doubled to reduce the workload. Each week the instructor provided the students with a list of discussion questions that were sent prior to the lesson. In class, the students and the instructor discussed weekly input in terms of new professional vocabulary and various approaches of studying ecosystems. Upon completion of each chunk of the course the students were asked to log in at futurelearn.com and post a comment, immediately sending the screenshot of the comment to the instructor. All comments were collected and will be subject to further thorough analysis. Upon completion of the course the students were asked to complete a survey reflecting upon their impression of this format of work. We were also specifically interested in major challenges and flaws of this type of classroom activity from the students’ perspective.
3 OUTCOMES

According to the past research [10] students are reluctant to take part in written interaction, in previous experiments none of the students wrote comments on discussion boards. This is in line with general behavioral pattern of online users, according to J. Robes 90% of users only read, 9% write rarely and 1% of users are involved in almost all discussions. [11]. Thus, we were interested in finding out what behaviour was typical of the participants of the experiment. They were asked to comment on how often they write comments on the internet. The results are presented in Chart 1:

According to Chart 1, only 25% of respondents avoid commenting posts on the internet. 37,5% of students prefer personal interaction, thus comment only the people they know offline. Another 37,5% of students comment any time they feel they have something significant to say, which proves to be a very high percentage in comparison to general picture.

We were also interested whether the students read the comments by other MOOC participants. Since we expected discussion forums to foster academic communication, it was crucial to find out if communication in fact existed or if it was random posting. The results are presented in Chart 2.

According to Chart 2, most students were interested in interaction rather than in blunt posting. 75% of students read comments by other MOOC participants in order to fit in and produce adequate responses themselves.
The students were also asked if they were interested in their peers’ performance and whether they looked for familiar names to read through their comments. It appeared that the majority of students were interested in the opinions and communication strategies of their groupmates, the results are presented in Chart 3.

Taking into consideration the importance of academic writing and the overall lack of interest and motivation it was essential for us to get feedback on the degree of engagement of this activity. Therefore, the students were asked whether they found writing online posts more engaging and motivating than writing traditional essays, reports and articles. According to the results of the survey, most students found this activity more appealing and highly motivational. The results are presented in Chart 4.
4 CHALLENGES
Online posting as a classroom activity proved to be highly engaging, most students were positive about the innovative approach to teaching academic communication. However, the experiment presented a few challenges, both for the instructor and the students. The students were asked to comment on major difficulties they had participating in the experiment. One of their biggest concerns was lack of professional expertise and very limited background on professional terminology. Although MOOCs are intended for general public and do not require any professional background, writing seems to present difficulties. Another challenge the students mentioned was lack of understanding the format of MOOC discussion, they admitted to reading a few comments before formulating their own opinion. One more challenge they mentioned was a very limited format of an online post, the students would rather appreciate lengthy oral discussions, as the tasks were very inspiring and required in-class follow up. As for desired perspectives, the students requested personal feedback on their comments – both in terms of organizational structure and in grammar, terminology. Besides, they considered it useful to have vocabulary input sessions prior to watching a MOOC. Finally, they acknowledged that increase of academic writing activities would foster their understanding of academic communication in general. The major challenge on the instructor’s side was lack of professional expertise in ecology and significant amount of time required for class preparation. Since the students were new to the MOOC format on presenting information, it was essential to conduct weekly follow-up sessions, answering a few technical questions, discussing the content of weekly curriculum in the class.

5 CONCLUSION
Overall introduction of online posting as a part of ESP curriculum should be considered a positive experience as it elicited high degree of motivation. Writing in small chunks was considered a less challenging task than writing academic essays, however a more engaging one. A few challenges yet have to be met. It is essential to present students with clear instruction on how to write a MOOC post, formulating principles, providing examples and formative assessment. All posts have to be reviewed by the instructor and provided with positive feedback on grammar, vocabulary and organizational structure. Writing designated posts can not be considered a self-regulative activity, only in this case it acquires pedagogical value. In case the abovementioned requirements are met, MOOC discussion forums are prone to become a powerful tool for teaching academic communication.

REFERENCES
[5] Fini, A. The technological dimension of a massive open online course: The case of the CCK08 course tools. The Int. Review of Research in Open and Distance Learning, 10(5), 2009.