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# Abstract

This article delves into the demographics of users enrolled in two LMOOCs offered by Spain’s National Distance Education University (UNED). It was motivated by the need to find out more about those people who see MOOCs as an opportunity to learn English in Spain, as this knowledge would help LMOOC designers develop courses that are more appealing to prospective learners, and thus fight low completion rate which is one of the main drawbacks of MOOCs. In addition, as the world battles against the COVID-19 pandemic looking for alternative learning approaches is unavoidable, therefore studying MOOC user demographics could ultimately help educational authorities know the impact of the courses and enable the courses to reach a wider audience. The data collected between 2016 and 2020 using a questionnaire that participants had to complete upon registration revealed that most of them were mid-life adults who held a university degree. In addition, our findings seemed to indicate that female learners are more likely to take the courses than their male counterparts.

**Keywords**: LMOOCs, English Language, Distance Learning, Demographics, Spain

# Introduction

This paper seeks to provide an insight into the profile of MOOC participants in Spain and the Spanish-speaking world through the analysis of learner demographics in two Massive Open Online Courses (MOOCs) over a four-year period of time. This study comes in a context where traditional education has been hit hard by the global COVID-19 pandemic thus making educational authorities push for the transition towards distance learning. Fortunately enough, this transition is feasible as most observers of the international scene agree that we are currently living in the digital era, which is a period characterised by the rapid spread of information. As a matter of fact, the development of Information and Communication Technologies (ICTs) has led to a situation where geographic separation is no longer an impediment when it comes to exchanging information. This development is mostly due to the rapid spread of the Internet, which, according to the 2019 China Internet Development Report, is felt not only in the west, but in a good number of developing countries.

Although technology has the potential completely erase the idea of physical distance, most educational practices have favoured physical contact between the teachers and learners. Nevertheless, this became impossible when the deadly pandemic caused by the novel coronavirus spread around the world and caused most countries to close schools. Though, as of September 2020 the situation has been relatively under control in Europe, it is clear that looking for technological solutions to the need to offer quality education to the public is of paramount importance. Therefore, more than ever before, distance education must be seen as a quality alternative for many people, as it not only allows people to stay safe when a pandemic arises, but can also enable learners to cut costs, save time and maintain family bonds while pursuing their educational goals (Oliveira et al., 2018). Furthermore, even in traditional educational settings, technology has become a key tool (Chacón-Beltrán, 2018) in a context where most teaching approaches are underpinned by the belief that students should be the main actors in the learning process, with teachers acting as mere facilitators or catalysts for learning as Biggs, (2011) puts it. Far beyond traditional education, technology has also provided avenues for lifelong learning, in the form of various online resources which anyone who has completed mainstream education may access in order to upgrade their skills or learn a new language. This is definitely where MOOCs come into play.

This article therefore sets out to analyse two MOOCs aimed specifically at Spanish and Spanish-speaking learners of English. It is built on the assumption that the analysis of learner demographics in both MOOCs can reveal a lot about the demand for online English language courses in Spain and can help educational authorities develop courses to meet this demand which will definitely increase, given the present context.

## English Language education in Spain

Over the last two decades, the English language has gained ground in Spain due to various internal and external factors. Nevertheless, it appears that the growing internationalization of Spain is the main reason behind the increasing demand for the English language in the country. More specifically, the quest for English proficiency in Spain can be said to have been the direct result of regulations at the EU level, such as EU council decisions which emphasize the need for member countries to make sure citizens learn two additional languages (European Commission, 2015) in a context where English has imposed itself as the lingua franca at the European level (Phillipson, 2006). In addition, efforts towards the harmonization of education systems in Europe, such as the 1999 Bologna Declaration, and the increasing mobility of University Students from and to Spain have certainly contributed to major changes in the status of English in Spain (Caraker, 2016).

The aforementioned external factors have led to great innovations in the Spanish education system too. In fact, bilingual education (with English as the second language) has been making great strides in Spain, thus leading Caraker (2016: 27) to state that “Spain has become one of the European leaders in the development of Content and Language Integrated Learning (CLIL)…”. Therefore, Autonomous Communities such as Madrid have now developed bilingual education schemes that move from infant education to the final years of secondary education (Shepherd & Ainsworth, 2017). Nevertheless, the demand for English in Spain seems to go beyond traditional education, as evidenced by the rapid development of language institutes and the high number of people who sit international proficiency tests every year. In its 2011 report on the English Language Market in Spain, the British Council indicates that one of the reasons behind this is that:

There exists therefore a large group of 30–40-year-olds who did not have great opportunities to learn English while at school, and whose English is deficient to a greater or lesser extent for effective business practice. These professionals are now expected to be able to operate in fluent English by their companies, and career progression may depend at least to some extent on their English. They are therefore willing to invest in high value-added courses, very often on a private basis. (Kingsley, 2010: 10)

It is with a view to meeting some of that increasing demand for English that Spain’s National Distance Education University (UNED) decided to foster the development of various MOOCs. UNED is the sole state-owned university which offers distance education only. In other words, UNED makes it possible for students in Spain and around the world to pursue quality higher education remotely, through a solid pedagogical foundation and the constant upgrading of courses and contents. This university can boast over 156,000 students based not only in Spain, but all over the world, which makes it the country’s largest university. In addition to traditional degree programmes which are offered by the different faculties and schools that make up the university, UNED has also been at the vanguard of the development and spread of MOOCs through its branch known as UNED Abierta. Since its creation in 2013, UNED Abierta has contributed to fostering the design and spread of MOOCs dealing with different areas of knowledge, including the LMOOCs which are discussed in this paper. UNED Abierta’s activities are part of one the UNED’s major policies which is to draw university nearer to a wider public. Between 2013 and 2015, 63 courses were offered through the Open MOOC COMA platform and since 2016 the new IEDRA platform based on OpenEdx has offered 399 courses.

## MOOCs in education

The development of the first MOOCs was carried out against the backdrop of a need to make education available to everyone and to contribute to the creation of online platforms that broke away from traditional learning communities where there was a clear separation between teachers and learners, with the latter playing a rather passive role in the learning process. Dave Cormier (2008) was the first person to come up with the appellation MOOCs, which he used to describe Stephen Downes and George Siemens’s “Connectivism and Connective Knowledge” online course. From that time on, MOOCs have evolved and most of them now seem to be different from the initial MOOCs. The difference between the original educational approaches as developed by Downes and Siemens and the approaches that have been favoured in most MOOCs nowadays can be well understood by distinguishing between the so-called cMOOCs and xMOOCSs.

## cMOOCs, xMOOCs… and LMOOCs

Siemens (2012, cited in Beaven et al. 2014) divided MOOCs into two broad types according to learning approaches and strategies. cMOOCs, with “c” standing as “connectivist” greatly differ from traditional learning settings in the sense that on such platforms there are no teachers or specific curricula per se, but all members of the online community can serve as facilitators by eliciting discussions and sharing knowledge. This is exactly what early MOOC developers such as Bousquet (2012, cited in Beaven et al. 2014) had in mind, as they believed that “good MOOCs” should rather be student-centred and based on a connectivist approach to learning. Thus, the very first MOOCs were meant mainly to be platforms where learners would connect and build knowledge through online exchanges and networking with no need to rely on a teacher or specific course programme. This is exactly what makes cMOOCs different from content-based MOOCs, also known as xMOOCs that can be said to somehow replicate traditional learning environments. As a matter of fact, in xMOOCs there is a clear distinction between learner and teacher/facilitator, and these courses are often centred around a specific topic and characterised by clear assessment methods which may entitle course participants to a certificate (See Reeves & Helberg (2014) for a contrastive analysis of cMOOCs and xMOOCs).

It seems that, nowadays, most MOOCs seem to follow a content-based approach, which is evidence of the fact that Siemens’s (2012, cited in Beaven et al. 2014) observation is still true. This is why the acronym “MOOCs” may very often refer to xMOOCs, as they are more common and have been the subject of most publications in the field. Nevertheless, some researchers still believe that cMOOCs are inherently superior or of better quality than xMOOCs which makes Sokolik regret that “there has developed a kind of hierarchy, where many consider cMOOCs to be superior in form and function” (2014:18). Sokolik further indicates that both xMOOCs and cMOOCs have positive attributes that can be used to foster learning. In fact, cMOOCs’ strong attempts to build a sense of community and promote interaction are great advantages in a learning environment, while xMOOCs’ relying on traditional learning approaches may help learners feel comfortable and at ease, when trying to acquire knowledge.

The covert conflict between cMOOCs and xMOOCs may be the reason behind Bárcena-Madera and Martín-Monje’s (2014) desire to move beyond that dichotomy and favour the use of LMOOCs, which stands for Language MOOCs when discussing MOOCs used for language learning. LMOOCs, as described by Bárcena-Madera and Martín-Monje “are dedicated Web-based online courses for second languages with unrestricted access and potentially unlimited participation” (2014:2). They are MOOCs that build on the strengths of both xMOOCs and cMOOCs to result in what Sokolic refers to as “an eclectic mix of practices and tools aiming to engage students in the use of the target language in meaningful and authentic ways” (2014: 20). This appellation fits this work better by dint of the fact that the two MOOCs being discussed here are definitely LMOOCs, as their subsequent description will reveal. Before that description, it is necessary to revisit research aimed at shedding some light on the different teaching techniques that have been favoured by most MOOC developers.

## Learning through MOOCs

Learning though MOOCs can be a great challenge, as they are designed in such a way that students could have enough possibilities to gain knowledge independently or with very little external assistance. Nevertheless, given their free and open access, MOOCs pose some difficulties which might not be true of formal education. For instance, Alario-Hoyos et al. (2014) indicate that MOOCs are often characterised by the heterogeneity of their participants, and such heterogeneity not only applies to variables like age, location, level of education, profession, but also involves varying degrees of motivation and dedication amongst learners. This is why learner dropout, which remains a real issue in MOOCs (Jordan, 2014; Onah et al., 2014), has sparked in many scholars the desire to find avenues for increasing participation and completion in MOOCs. Attempts at achieving the aforementioned goals have been paralelled by the development of different models aimed at fostering learning through MOOCs. Nevertheless, there is a common tendency towards the use of video lectures, automated quizzes and forums or discussion boards as the main features of MOOCs (Universities UK, 2013).

The above notwithstanding, it seems that low completion rate in MOOCs is unavoidable because of the very nature of the courses, as they are “massive” and “open”, thus virtually everybody can access them. In fact, some users register out of mere curiosity and may not really be interested in the course contents. As Cross (2013) indicated, “learners” on the platform may actually include professionals in academia who are there only to draw inspiration from the courses in order to develop theirs. Furthermore, lack of time may be a great factor behind low completion rate (Conole, 2013), as MOOCs for most learners are a side activity, even when those learners are highly motivated. Finally, Onah et al. (2014) suggested that some learners may drop out of MOOCs due to other reasons such as “course difficulty and lack of support”, “lack of digital and learning skills” and “bad experiences”.

Whatever the case, a careful analysis of the profiles of MOOC participants is always a good idea, as it helps understand the demand for a specific type of knowledge and also enables one to draw inspiration from the data obtained in order to develop more effective and efficient courses.

## Profiles of MOOC participants

Research on the profiles of MOOC participants has targeted various issues such as user demographics, engagement and performance. Overall, there have seemingly been very few studies on the aforementioned topics. This paucity of research works can again be justified by the very nature of MOOCs, which makes it difficult for researchers to obtain a clear picture of the people who are enrolled in the courses.

When it comes to social variables used to describe demographics, amongst the researchers who discussed gender, some of them indicated that males are most likely to resort to MOOCs. This is exactly what Christensen et al. (2013) and Despujol et al. (2014) found, with respectively 56.9% and 56% of their respondents claiming to be male. On the other hand, Morris et al. (2015) and Bayeck (2016) obtained the contrary, with their research works indicating that women enrolled in their respective courses represented respectively 59.83% and 60% of the entire learner population in their courses. Therefore, one can agree with MacLeod et al. (2016) that it would not be a good idea to make general claims about gender distribution, as the latter may vary depending on the very nature of the course offered. Courses whose contents are appealing to the male population would likely attract more males and the other way around. When it comes to level of education, research seems to point to the fact that most MOOC users are university graduates. As a matter of fact, Christiansen et al.’s (2013) findings revealed that a total of 83% of MOOC users went beyond secondary education, with 79.4% holding a Bachelor’s degree. Similar findings were reported by Despujol et al. (2014), Dillahunt et al. (2014) and Bayeck (2016). Finally, most researchers agree that MOOC learners are more likely to be adults, as evidenced by Morris et al. who obtained a mean age of 36.17 years old in their study. On the other hand, Yong Kim et al.’s (2019) study of MOOCs indicates that the highest number of MOOC users in the Republic of Korea are aged between 20 and 29 years old. Therefore, one may want to state here that it would be hard to guess a specific age gap for most MOOC users. Nevertheless, research seems to point to the fact that most of them are early to middle-aged adults.

In addition to the above, other research works on MOOC user profiles have focused on classifying them according to engagement, since there is great variety at that level too. For instance, Grünewald et al. (2013) grouped MOOC participants into inactive users, passive, reacting, acting and supervising ones. More specifically, inactive users never actually log onto the course platform, though they are listed as registered participants. Passive users may go through the course to gain knowledge without partaking in any activities as opposed to more active learners who include those who only react to questions asked by their peers (reacting), participants who actually initiate discussions through various means (acting) and those who moderate discussions and even summarise what has been learned from such discussions (supervising).

Grünewald et al.’s (2013) classification is not very different from that of Hill (2013), whose basis for describing MOOC participants is the extent to which they actively participate in the course and whether or not they complete it. Therefore, he divided MOOC users into five self-explanatory categories, namely no-shows, observers, drop-ins, passive and active participants. Alario-Hoyos et al. (2014) slightly modified this categorization by talking about non-engaged and engaged, rather than passive and active, participants and adding two more categories, namely latecomers and drop-in latecomers.

The present research work comes as an attempt to add knowledge to the literature on the demographics of MOOC participants, as learning about the latter is important for various reasons. More specifically, research on those people who are interested in taking MOOCs can guide MOOC designers when it comes to adapting their courses to the interests and needs of the general public. Given the potentially worldwide coverage of MOOCs, it is always a good idea know more about the people enrolled in the courses in order to design “tailor made” materials and thus foster learning. Furthermore, studies like the one being carried out here could definitely contribute to making MOOCs more effective, as they would be designed with a view to targeting and attracting users who are strongly motivated and willing to complete the courses. Finally, research aimed at finding out more about participants may contribute to the sustainability of MOOCs by providing a starting point for research into the possibilities of including MOOCs as essential components of traditional education.

# 1. Method

This research work is centred around two MOOCs that were designed by UNED’s Department of Foreign Languages and Linguistics and that were first offered in 2013. Though the two courses can be described as xMOOCs due to their structure, Bárcena-Madera and Martín-Monje’s (2014) nomenclature, i.e. LMOOCs, describes them better because they are platforms dedicated to the teaching of English to Spanish-speaking learners. All the editions being discussed here were hosted on the OpenEdx digital platform and included video presentations, extra materials, assessment and discussion forums. Furthermore, course instructors would readily intervene to elicit discussions, answer questions and guide learners throughout the 4 weeks each edition lasted.

*Empieza con el Inglés: Aprende las mil palabras más usadas y sus posibilidades comunicativas* (abbreviated hereafter as Empieza A1) is one of the two courses that are discussed here. It targets Spanish-speaking people who are learning English from scratch, that is, beginner-level learners. The course is supposed to be completed in 4 weeks and is made up of 6 modules where lexical items belonging to various common domains of use are discussed. The other course being discussed in this paper is Starting to *Write English with no Mistakes*, (abbreviated hereafter as Starting B1) which, as its name entails, is a lower intermediate course where students are introduced to writing in English. This course consists of 12 modules in which users are taught how to plan, produce and self-correct their essays or other pieces of writing with the help of dictionaries and/or authoritative corpora such as the British National Corpus.

Though this research targets specifically editions offered between 2016 and 2020, it is important to note that the courses were designed earlier. As Chacón-Beltrán (2014) indicates, everything started in the early days of 2013, when a number of researchers at UNED decided to design a MOOC which would not only contribute to meeting the then increasing demand for English, but also enable the researchers to gather information relating to the wider public’s interest in MOOCs and their effectiveness. The first course to be developed and offered to the public was Empieza A1, whose first edition delivered between March and September 2013 attracted a record number of over sixty thousand participants. Since 2013, both courses have proved to be great tools for the teaching of English and have drawn roughly two-hundred thousand participants who hail not only from Spain, but also Latin America and other European countries. Empieza A1 is currently on its 12th edition and has had 124,851 subscribers since 2013. Starting B2 on the other hand is now on it’s 9th edition and has been taken by 25,015 students.

Apart from their distinct contents, it is also worth mentioning that Spanish is the main medium of instruction and discussion in Empieza A1 whereas English is the main communication tool in Starting B2.

## Data collection

The data that will be presented and analysed subsequently was obtained through a questionnaire that course participants were asked to complete while registering for the course. In other words, in addition to entering an email address and a password they were encouraged to answer three optional questions which aimed at collecting information about their age, level of education and gender. It is based on these variables presented that we were able to compare and contrast demographics in both courses over time. The results represent seven editions of each course spread over a period of four years, i.e, between April 2016 and April 2020. The rationale for selecting these four years was to make our findings homogeneous while ensuring that they abide by the important principle of currency, as this research aims at eventually providing a solution to the educational issues caused by the 2019-2020 novel coronavirus pandemic. When it comes to the research population, the 14 editions of the courses added up to a total of 32,133 registered users and the average response rate for the three main questions about age, gender and level of education was 93% which is certainly representative of the whole sample.

# 2. Results and discussion

It is important to note that this research work was based on the assumption that the overwhelming majority of course participants would be Spanish speaking, as the courses were mainly advertised in Spain. This hypothesis was confirmed by the data obtained through registered users’ IP addresses. In fact, we were able to confirm that most participants resided in Spain, followed by other Spanish speaking countries such as Mexico, Colombia and Peru. More specifically, in both courses, there was an average of 72% of participants who were located in Spain, that is, far more than the participants based in Mexico (2.6%) and Peru (1.3%). Finally, 11.5% of respondents used devices that hid their IP address, thus making it impossible to know where they were located.

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| **Table 1.** Location of course participants based on IP addresses |
| Country | participants (%) |
| Spain | 72 |
| Unknown | 11.5 |
| Mexico | 2.6 |
| Peru | 1.3 |

All in all, IP address data certainly indicates that the results we got from our survey are fully representative of Spain and can provide some information about the situation in Latin America, though the English learning situation in Latin American countries is different from that of Spain. Having that in mind, we shall discuss the results of this study with a clear focus on Spain, as it is now clear that most of our respondents reside in Spain or at least have very close ties with the country.

## 2.1 Age

Studying the age of learners is a suitable way to obtain more information about the demand for a specific type of knowledge. In addition, it can help MOOC developers design materials that are more appealing to the users, and thus increase participation and reduce dropout rates. As concerns this study proper, what was first noted is that both MOOCs attracted an audience whose median age places them very within middle adulthood. Overall, there was no consistent evolution over time, which indicates some stability with regard to the age of users that resort to MOOCs in order to study English in Spain. More specifically, the median age in both courses is situated around 40 years old with very little changes over time. Nevertheless, users in Empieza A1 were found to be slightly older than the ones in Starting B1, In fact, while the overall median age in Empieza A1 is about 44 years old, learners registered in Starting B1 were about 40 years old on average.

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| **Table 2.** Median age over time |
|  |  | **EMPIEZA A1** | **STARTING B1** |
| ***Editions***April/May 2016November/December 2017May/June 2018November 2018/ February 2019April/June 2019November/December 2019April 2020**Overall median age** |  |  |
| 44 | 40 |
| 47 | 42 |
| 44 | 42 |
| 43 | 38 |
| 43 | 41 |
| 44 | 40 |
| 42 | 33 |
| **43.85** | **39.42** |

A close look at Table 2 reveals a sharp decline of the median age in the April 2020 edition of Starting B1, which can be explained by the high proportion of young learners (aged 25 and less) in that edition, as opposed to previous ones. This suddenly high number of learners under 26 is certainly due to the fact that after the outbreak of the coronavirus pandemic in Spain, the government imposed a national lockdown which implied the closure of all schools and universities. This could have made students look for alternative ways to learn English. Nevertheless, when one carefully considers the proportion of learners aged 25 and less in both courses, it is clear that those numbers have increased over time as illustrated in Table 3. Though we are unclear as to what could have caused the increase, this finding seems to indicate that more and more youngsters see MOOCs as a complement to formal education. When it comes to Empieza A1, in April 2016, 4.3% of the users who enrolled in the course were younger than 26, 36.6% were aged between 26 and 40 (both inclusive), and 41% were 41 and over. Over time, the number of users under 26 increased, though it never matched that of older users. Hence, in April 2020, there were 7.1% of users under 25, 39.3% of those ones aged between 26 and 40 and 53.6% that were 41 and older. A similar trend was witnessed in Starting B1, where the frequency of learners under 26 increased from 3.1% in the first edition to 20.2% in the April 2020 edition.

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| **Table 3.** Percentages of users aged 25 and under |
|  | **EMPIEZA A1**  | **STARTING B1**  |
| ***Editions*** |  |  |
| April/May 2016 | 4.3 | 3.1 |
| November/December 2017 | 3.4 | 4.8 |
| May/June 2018 | 5.7 | 6.3 |
| November 2018/ February 2019 | 7.2 | 9.9 |
| April/June 2019 | 7.2 | 7.5 |
| November/December 2019 | 8.5 | 11.3 |
| April 2020 | 7.2 | 20.2 |
| **Mean percentage** | **6.2** | **9** |

Another striking finding about age is that there was definitely a higher proportion of older participants (aged 41 and above) in Empieza A1 than in Starting B1. This is clearly seen in Figure 1 where there is a significant difference between the bars illustrating frequencies of users older than 40 and the bars applying to users aged between 26 and 40. The difference is not that striking in Figure 2, where, overall, there is little difference between the percentages of learners older than 40 and the ones who are aged between 26 and 40. Another important thing these figures reveal is that, by and large, Starting B1 seemed to be attractive to younger learners than Empieza A1. The fact that younger learners would readily skip Empieza A1 to enrol in Starting B1, might indicate that they are more proficient in English than their older compatriots.

**Figure 1.**Evolution of users’ age in Empieza A1

**Figure 2.** Evolution of users’ age in Starting B1

At this juncture, this paper has revealed that people in Spain who are more likely to resort to MOOCs to learn English are adults in their early forties. Nevertheless, it seems that older people tend to be at lower proficiency levels, which explains the difference between the median age in Empieza A1 (43.85 years old) and Starting B1 (49.42). Furthermore, this research paper has revealed that MOOCs have the potential to attract a greater number of younger learners. The fact that they flocked into the courses during lockdown is clear evidence that MOOCs can be an alternative way to teach English, not only to adult learners but also to youth. Furthermore, the latter’s higher presence in Starting B1, may indicate that youth are more proficient in the language than older Spaniards, and this would be no surprise, since the teaching of English is very widespread nowadays, as opposed to 20 years ago. Therefore, the designers of MOOCs aimed at younger learners in Spain should stress intermediate and advance proficiency levels.

## 2.2 Level of Education

This research work was also motivated by the desire to know the levels of education of the users who enrolled in the two courses, as this would help us correlate the demand for online English learning in Spain with learners’ educational background. To achieve that purpose, users were asked to provide information about their highest educational attainment, with options ranging from “Elementary/primary school” to “Doctorate” and the possibility for people with little or no formal schooling to indicate it by selecting “Other education” or “No formal education”.

The most salient finding here is the fact that across all editions of both courses, the majority of participants are university graduates, with most users holding undergraduate and postgraduate degrees, including a number of them who state that they hold a PhD. In fact, as Table 4 reveals, an average of about 60 percent of registered users in both courses hold a Bachelor’s or any other associate degree.

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| **Table 4.** Percentages of users holding an undergraduate degree |
|  | **EMPIEZA A1**  | **STARTING B1**  |
| ***Editions*** |  |  |
| April/May 2016 | 62.1 | 60.7 |
| November/December 2017 | 61 | 62.7 |
| May/June 2018 | 59.7 | 60.8 |
| November 2018/ February 2019 | 55.8 | 57.8 |
| April/June 2019 | 57.7 | 56.7 |
| November/December 2019 | 57.3 | 58 |
| April 2020 | 58.1 | 56.9 |
| **Mean percentage** | **58.8** | **59** |

Furthermore, we also noted a high percentage of registered users who said they hold a Master’s degree (See Table 5), which is relatively surprising, when one takes into account the fact that we are dealing here with beginner and lower intermediate courses, respectively. The conclusion one can draw from these findings is that until very recently tertiary education in Spain did not guarantee proficiency in English.

When looking deeper into the percentages of master’s degree holders, we could see that there is a great difference between Empieza A1 and Starting B1, with the latter having a higher frequency of master’s degree holders (27% versus 21.1%, overall). Therefore, the latter seem to be more likely to register in an English course at the B1 level, which may lead to the logical conclusion that there is some correlation between the MOOCs being studied and users’ educational backgrounds.

Nevertheless, it is important to note that other researchers who did not target specifically English language MOOCs in Spain also found most of their sample members to be university graduates (Christensen et al., 2013; Despujol, 2014, Dillahunt et al., 2014 & Bayeck, 2016). Therefore, it would impossible to establish a clear causal relation between the high presence of Bacherlor’s and Master’s degree holders in the courses their English skills, as MOOCs tend to attract people holding higher education degrees or diplomas.

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| **Table 4.** Percentages of Master’s degree holders |
|  | **EMPIEZA A1**  | **STARTING B1**  |
| ***Editions*** |  |  |
| April/May 2016 | 20.9 | 26.9 |
| November/December 2017 | 20.3 | 26.5 |
| May/June 2018 | 21.4 | 25.2 |
| November 2018/ February 2019 | 22.3 | 27.8 |
| April/June 2019 | 21.4 | 29.5 |
| November/December 2019 | 21.5 | 27.5 |
| April 2020 | 20.4 | 25.7 |
| **Mean percentage** | **21.1** | **27** |

By and large, those participants who hold only a primary or secondary education certificate represent a very tiny proportion of the research population. This may be explained by various reasons, such as the education policy in Spain which not only makes it compulsory to complete at least 12 years of education but also fosters higher education. In addition, perhaps the courses are not that interesting for their jobs, as primary and secondary school leavers are often employed in low skilled jobs that may not require the ability to speak a foreign language like English. In addition, members of this group of people may be less aware of ICT educational tools and less skilled when it comes to accessing and making use of them. Finally, the frequency of primary and secondary education leavers which stands at about 9% when considering both courses may simply be the result of nowadays’ high proportion of university graduates who need to increase their employability and CVs.

To sum up, Spanish learners of English through MOOCs are most likely to be mid-life individuals who hold a university degree. Their quite advanced age may indicate that they specifically need to upgrade their skills and meet the increasing demand for the language.

## 2.3 Gender

The last variable that this research work attempted to decipher was gender. The aim here was to tell who between males and females is more likely to study English through MOOCs in Spain. Therefore, the participants in both courses were asked to provide information about their gender, with three options available, namely “Male”, “Female” and “Other/prefer not to say”, which would enable those learners who were not clear about their gender or did not abide by binary approaches to gender to express themselves.

Our findings revealed that overall, women were more likely to resort to enrol in the courses than men. In fact, out of the fourteen editions of both Empieza A1 and Starting B2, men were the majority only on one edition, with the other editions having women as the gender with the highest representation. Though these findings concur with those of Morris et al. (2015) and Bayeck (2016), they are contrary to what Christensen et al. (2013) and Despujol et al. (2014) obtained. Therefore, it would be too risky to make general claims about which gender group would most readily turn to to MOOCs.

One might claim that these results point to the fact that Spanish men have better English skills and if they ever wanted to study English, maybe the courses being offered did not match their level. Nevertheless, this assumption is unlikely to reflect reality, as there is no established study indicating that Spanish males are more proficient in English than their female counterparts. In fact, the few studies which discuss English proficiency by gender seem to indicate that female learners actually outperform male learners, as evidenced by the 2017 British Council report on English learning in Spain. In addition, 60.4% of the learners who registered for the April 2020 edition of Starting B1, which was offered during the COVID-19 lockdown, were male. This finding thus adds a certain complication to the gender variable in MOOCs and makes one think that other socioeconomic reasons beyond age, level of education, employment or proficiency might actually explain why a certain gender group dominate a MOOC or not.

**Figure 3.** Gender distribution in Empieza A1

**Figure 3.** Gender distribution in Starting B1

# Conclusion

This research work aimed at studying the profiles of learners enrolled in two MOOCs over a period of four years in order to gauge the demand for free online English language courses in Spain and draw conclusions that might help course designers develop materials that would be appealing to a wider public and therefore enable people to keep improving on their English language skills in the midst of the COVID-19 pandemic. After studying a population which totalled over 32,000 participants located mainly in Spain (with a tiny minority of them found in Latin America and elsewhere) we were able to draw conclusions regarding three main features that have been used to study population groups, namely age, level of education and gender. The data obtained were then used to establish some correlations between the aforementioned variables on the one hand, and English proficiency and the demand for free online English education in Spain on the other hand.

When it comes to age, the data of this research paper revealed that most learners who make use of MOOCs in order to learn English at beginner (A1) or lower intermediate (B1) levels are generally individuals in their early or mid-forties. Furthermore, the data seemed to indicate that age is negatively correlated with English proficiency, that is to say, the older an individual is, the less likely they are to be proficient in English. This is exactly why a higher figure was recorded with regard to median age in Empieza A1 as compared to Starting B2. What’s more, a higher number of younger learners enrolled in the B1 course than in the A1 course, though the overall number of learners aged 25 and under was quite low. This research might have also confirmed that the younger a learner is, the more likely they are to enrol in an intermediate course rather than a beginner course. The gradual increase of learners younger than 26 between 2016 and 2020, especially in the B1 course, was seen as possible evidence for the fact that more and more youngsters may resort to MOOCs as a complement to formal education. Therefore, it seems that younger learners are more attracted to higher proficiency courses because they are generally more proficient in English than older Spaniards. Therefore, developing courses that fit within intermediate and advance proficiency levels in nowadays’ context can also contribute to attracting more youth whose education has been jeopardised by the pandemic.

The overall median age of registered learners in our courses might be explained by various reasons. One of them is the fact that until the beginning of the 21st century, the teaching of English was not that widespread in Spain and higher education back then did not guarantee the ability to speak or write English with ease. Furthermore, those who received quality English education at school might have failed to practise the language on a daily basis (given that until very recently proficiency in English was not that necessary for professional development in Spain), which made them lose some skills. This might explain why our sample of learners is made up of an overwhelming majority of university graduates, including a huge number of undergraduate degree holders and a decent percentage of postgraduate degree holders too, including those who completed a PhD. In both courses, about two thirds of all registered users held a bachelor’s or associate degree and close to a quarter of them were master’s degree holders. Nevertheless, a closer look at the mean percentages of Master’s degrees holders in both courses provided evidence that level of education is to some extent positively correlated with English proficiency in Spain, especially when considering advanced degree holders. As a matter of fact, results indicated the presence of about 21% of master’s degree holders in the A1 course as compared to 27% in the B1 course. All in all, according to our findings, the people less likely to seek online English language courses in Spain are primary school leavers (or people with little or no formal education) on the one hand, and PhD holders, on the other hand. The foregoing might be explained by the fact that nowadays there are very few people who actually stopped their education at the primary level and those who did so may not necessarily need to upgrade their English skills for their professional or personal development. In addition, people at that level of education are less likely to enroll in MOOCs or study online. As concerns PhD holders, building on the assumption that English proficiency is positively correlated with level of education, one can state with a high degree of certainty that the overwhelming majority of those people who were persistent enough to attain that level of education must have upgraded their English skills and are at higher levels than B1. When considering things from a different perspective, one can also assume that the proportion of primary school leavers and PhD holders in our sample may simply be representative of their overall percentage in Spain. Whatever the case, the results of this paper confirm something that has been observed in other studies, namely the fact that MOOC users are most likely to be university graduates (Christiansen et al., 2013; Despujol et al. 2014; Bayeck, 2016).

Finally, this research work has proved that something must be done in order to attract more males to the courses. In fact, out of the 14 editions of courses, women enjoyed a solid majority in 13 editions of the course. This finding does not however indicate that male Spaniards are more proficient in English, as there is no scientific evidence pointing to that fact. The higher presence of female users is in line with Bayeck’s (2016) and Morris et al.’s (2015) findings and thus goes against Christensen et al. (2013) and Despujol et al. (2014) whose respondents were mostly male. Therefore, following MacLeod et al. (2016) there might be various explanations for the higher presence of female participants. Perhaps Spanish women are more determined to seek ways to improve their English skills than their male counterparts and MOOCs provide avenues for them to achieve their goals. The lower representation of men may also be explained by the contents and structures of the courses which might not be appealing to the male population. Further research must be carried out, in order to understand the reason behind this disparity and correct it.

Considering everything that has been said before, one can state with some certainty that, at the moment, the Spaniard more lilely resort to MOOCs in order to learn English at beginner or lower intermediate levels would be a woman who is aged 42 and holds an undergraduate degree. Therefore, MOOC designers should take this piece of information into account when developing their courses, since they could diversify enrolment, increase engagement and foster effective learning by designing materials that suit a wider public.

## Bases for further development

It is important to note that though some of the respondents in this study were based in Latin America, it would be too adventurous to apply the findings of this paper may be applied to Latin American countries. Therefore, it would be a good idea to carry out similar research works with a population made up of a majority of participants from those countries in order to come up with definite conclusions. As far as Spain is concerned, this work might initially guide educational authorities working on the development of LMOOCs aimed at fostering the study of English as a Foreign Language, especially at beginner and intermediate levels. In fact, bearing in mind that the average English LMOOC user in Spain at the moment is a mid-age female who holds an undergraduate degree, it would be a good idea to carry out research on ways to make English LMOOCs more appealing to younger learners, to the male population as well as to people with lower academic qualifications. It might also be a good idea to work towards the promotion and dissemination of such courses amongst people with lower qualifications and the development of contents that might be of interest to them, as their poor representation might be the result of poor dissemination and/or unappealing design. In short, a solution to the educational crisis caused by the COVID-19 pandemic would be, not only the design of inclusive materials which would appeal to both males and females, but also the development of courses across all proficiency levels, bearing in mind that youth would definitely be attracted to higher proficiency courses. This will definitely be in line with Macleod et al.’s (2016) claim that the reason behind the overwhelming presence of participants with certain demographic characteristics might also be explained by the very structure of the courses, which makes them more appealing to a certain group of people.

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