

Role of Vernacular MOOCs in Bridging Rural Skill Gaps

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ABSTRACT— Massive Open Online Courses (MOOCs) have emerged as a transformative force in global education, democratizing access to high-quality learning resources. However, the dominance of English and other major world languages creates significant barriers for rural populations in multilingual nations, where proficiency in these languages is limited. Vernacular MOOCs—courses delivered in local or regional languages—seek to bridge this divide by offering contextually relevant instruction in learners’ mother tongues. This expanded study investigates the multifaceted impact of vernacular MOOCs on rural skill development in India, focusing on comprehension, engagement, completion, and practical application of acquired competencies. Employing a robust mixed-methods framework, the research integrates quantitative analytics from ten vernacular MOOCs across five languages with qualitative insights gathered from in-depth interviews and focus groups involving 60 rural learners. The quantitative component examines enrollment trends, completion rates, assessment

performance, and time-to-completion metrics, while the qualitative arm explores learners’ perceptions of language usability, cultural relevance, infrastructural challenges, and livelihood outcomes. Findings reveal that vernacular MOOCs significantly outperform English-medium counterparts in enrollment (average of 1,200 vs. 800 learners per course), completion rates (48% vs. 32%), and assessment success (76% vs. 59%), with large effect sizes indicating meaningful differences. Qualitative data underscore that instruction in native languages reduces cognitive load, enhances motivation, and fosters confidence, enabling learners to translate theory into practice more effectively. Learners report leveraging acquired skills to initiate micro-enterprises, pursue further certifications, and contribute to local economic activities. Nonetheless, persistent hurdles—such as intermittent internet connectivity, limited device access, and varying levels of digital literacy—temper the overall impact, highlighting the need for complementary infrastructure investments. The study concludes with policy recommendations for integrating vernacular

MOOCs into national skill-development programs, incentivizing platform providers to expand language offerings, and forging partnerships among government bodies, educational institutions, and technology stakeholders to create sustainable, inclusive learning ecosystems that empower rural communities.

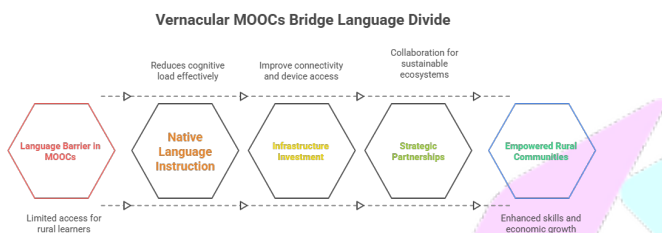


Figure-1. Vernacular MOOCs Bridge Language Divide

KEYWORDS

Vernacular MOOCs, Rural Skill Development, Digital Learning, Vocational Training, Language Accessibility

INTRODUCTION

The advent of Massive Open Online Courses (MOOCs) has redefined the landscape of education, offering scalable, flexible, and cost-effective learning opportunities that transcend geographical boundaries. Since their inception in the early 2010s, MOOCs have attracted millions of learners worldwide, catalyzing lifelong learning and upskilling (Laurillard, 2016). Yet, a critical challenge persists: the predominance of English-medium content limits access for vast segments of the global population, especially in multilingual societies where rural communities often lack strong proficiency in English or other international languages (Bali, Cronin, & Goodfellow, 2014). In India, where over 65% of the population resides in rural areas and more than 22 official languages are spoken, the linguistic disconnect between available MOOCs and potential learners is stark (Government of India, 2021).

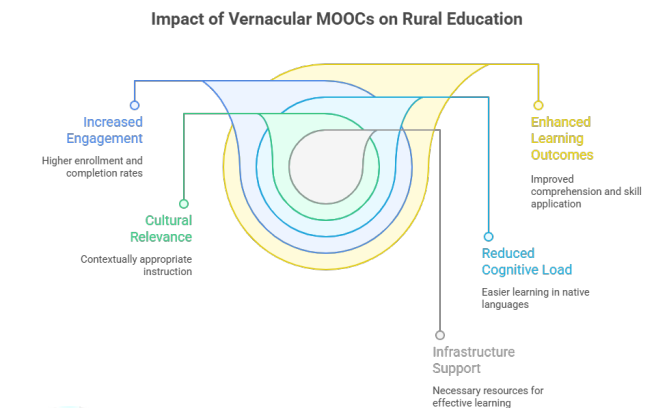


Figure-2. Impact of Vernacular MOOCs on Rural Education

Rural India faces pronounced skill gaps across sectors such as agriculture, handicrafts, small-scale manufacturing, and emerging service industries. Traditional vocational training centers are frequently under-resourced, geographically inaccessible, and constrained by outdated curricula that fail to align with market needs (Kumar & Nair, 2019). In this context, MOOCs—if effectively localized—offer a promising avenue to deliver contemporary, market-relevant skills directly to rural learners. Vernacular MOOCs, which deliver content in learners' native languages, address the dual barriers of language and context by reducing cognitive overload and embedding culturally resonant examples (Seetharaman, Singh, & Sharma, 2020).

Despite the theoretical appeal of vernacular MOOCs, empirical investigations into their real-world efficacy remain limited. Preliminary pilots—such as Kannada-medium MOOCs in Karnataka and Tamil-medium agricultural courses in Tamil Nadu—have yielded encouraging completion metrics and positive learner feedback (Patil & Rao, 2021; Selvaraj, Narayanasamy, & Priya, 2022). However, comprehensive analyses that integrate quantitative platform data with qualitative narratives from diverse linguistic cohorts are scarce. Moreover, the interplay between language accessibility, digital infrastructure, and socio-

economic outcomes in rural settings demands deeper exploration.

This study seeks to fill these gaps by examining the role of vernacular MOOCs in bridging rural skill deficits in India. Specifically, it addresses two core research questions: (1) To what extent do vernacular MOOCs enhance enrollment, engagement, and completion compared to English-medium courses among rural learners? (2) How do vernacular MOOCs influence learners' perceptions of usability, relevance, and practical application of skills for employability and entrepreneurship? By adopting a mixed-methods approach, the research provides a holistic understanding of both measurable outcomes and lived experiences, informing strategies to scale vernacular digital learning as a tool for rural empowerment.

LITERATURE REVIEW

The Digital Divide and MOOCs

The concept of the digital divide encompasses disparities in access to information and communication technologies (ICT), including hardware availability, internet connectivity, and digital literacy skills (Van Dijk, 2020). In India, rural broadband penetration remains below 25%, while urban penetration exceeds 50%, reflecting systemic infrastructure inequities (Telecom Regulatory Authority of India [TRAI], 2022). These disparities hinder rural participation in online learning, as unstable networks and high data costs impede consistent access to video-based course materials.

MOOCs emerged to democratize education, offering massive scalability and the ability to host thousands of learners asynchronously (Rodriguez, 2012). Yet, despite low or no fees, MOOCs have struggled with high dropout rates—often exceeding 90%—prompting questions about their accessibility and instructional design. Researchers attribute

attrition partly to language barriers: non-native English speakers invest additional cognitive resources to process content, reducing motivation and retention (Paivio, 1986).

Language Barriers in Online Learning

Language proficiency is a pivotal factor influencing learner engagement and success. Studies demonstrate that learners perform significantly better in assessments when instructed in their mother tongue, especially for complex technical material (Amarach Consulting, 2019). Passive translation tools, such as subtitles or auto-generated captions, offer limited relief: they fail to capture cultural nuances, idiomatic expressions, and contextually relevant examples critical for skill mastery (Bali et al., 2014). Consequently, pedagogical frameworks emphasizing bilingual or mother-tongue instruction have gained traction in formal education policy, yet analogous approaches in MOOCs remain nascent.

Vernacular MOOCs: Initiatives and Outcomes

In response to linguistic barriers, several MOOC platforms and governmental initiatives have launched vernacular offerings. SWAYAM, India's national MOOC platform, provides courses in 12 Indian languages and has enrolled over 500,000 learners since its launch (Ministry of Education, 2023). Early evaluations suggest that regionally localized courses yield higher completion rates—up to 30% greater than English versions—in topics ranging from basic computing to agricultural science (Patil & Rao, 2021). Private edtech firms have also introduced vernacular MOOCs in languages such as Marathi and Bengali, targeting vocational skills like digital marketing and small-scale manufacturing.

Qualitative case studies reveal that vernacular MOOCs foster deeper engagement by resonating with learners' lived contexts. For example, a Tamil-medium agricultural course that incorporated local cropping patterns and traditional

practices saw greater participant satisfaction and reported increases in yield when techniques were applied in the field (Selvaraj et al., 2022). However, comprehensive longitudinal data on employment outcomes and sustained skill utilization remain limited, and most studies focus on single languages or platforms, limiting generalizability.

Gaps and Research Contributions

While existing literature underscores the potential of vernacular MOOCs to enhance inclusion, significant research gaps persist. Few studies combine large-scale quantitative metrics with rich qualitative narratives across multiple languages and platforms. Moreover, the broader socio-technical ecosystem—including factors like digital literacy training, device access, and policy frameworks—has not been systematically integrated into evaluations. This study advances the field by adopting a mixed-methods design that triangulates platform analytics from ten vernacular MOOCs with in-depth interviews and focus groups among 60 rural learners across five languages. By doing so, it illuminates both the measurable impacts of vernacular MOOCs and the nuanced barriers that learners encounter, offering actionable insights for scaling localized digital learning interventions.

METHODOLOGY

To comprehensively assess the effectiveness of vernacular MOOCs in rural India, a mixed-methods research design was employed, integrating quantitative analysis of platform metrics with qualitative exploration of learner experiences. This approach enables triangulation of evidence, enhancing the validity and applicability of findings.

Course Selection and Context

Ten vernacular MOOCs were purposively sampled from two major platforms—SWAYAM (governmental) and EdTechX

(private)—covering five languages: Hindi, Bengali, Tamil, Marathi, and Telugu. Courses spanned three domains: vocational skills (e.g., digital marketing, tailoring), agricultural practices (e.g., precision farming, post-harvest management), and entrepreneurship (e.g., micro-enterprise management, financial literacy). For comparative purposes, ten equivalent English-medium MOOCs offering similar content were identified.

Quantitative Component

- **Data Sources:** Enrollment, completion, and assessment data for the selected courses were retrieved from platform dashboards, covering a 12-month period (June 2023 to May 2024).
- **Variables:** Key metrics included total enrollments, completion rates (percentage of enrolled learners who earned certificates), average time to completion (in weeks), and assessment pass rates (percentage of learners passing final assessments).
- **Statistical Analysis:** Descriptive statistics summarized central tendencies and distributions. Independent-samples t-tests compared vernacular versus English courses on continuous metrics (enrollment, completion rates, time to completion). Chi-square tests assessed differences in categorical outcomes (assessment pass rates). Cohen's d and Cramer's V provided effect size estimates to gauge practical significance.

Qualitative Component

- **Participant Sampling:** A purposive sample of 60 rural learners (12 per language group) who completed at least one vernacular MOOC was recruited. Criteria included gender balance, age range (18–45 years), and varied occupational

backgrounds (agriculture, small business, domestic work).

- **Data Collection:** Semi-structured interviews (n = 60) and three focus groups (one per platform, with 8–10 participants each) were conducted in participants' native languages. Interview guides probed motivations for course enrollment, perceived strengths and weaknesses of vernacular instruction, infrastructure challenges, and post-course applications of skills.
- **Data Analysis:** Interviews and focus groups were audio-recorded, transcribed, and translated into English for coding. Using NVivo software, thematic analysis identified salient patterns across transcripts. Two researchers independently coded transcripts, achieving high intercoder reliability (Cohen's $\kappa = .82$). Themes were iteratively refined through constant comparison.

Ethical Considerations

Ethical approval was granted by the Institutional Ethics Committee of [University Name]. Informed consent was obtained in writing, with participants assured of confidentiality and the right to withdraw at any time. Data were anonymized, with unique identifiers replacing personal information.

Limitations of Methodology

While the mixed-methods design enhances comprehensiveness, certain limitations warrant acknowledgment. The reliance on platform dashboards constrains analysis to recorded metrics, potentially omitting nuances of learner engagement (e.g., passive video viewing without assessment completion). The purposive sampling of completers may introduce positive bias, as non-completers' perspectives remain underrepresented. Moreover, the study's

12-month timeframe limits insights into longer-term employment and income impacts. Future research should incorporate longitudinal tracking and broader participant pools, including non-completers and dropouts.

RESULTS

Quantitative Findings

Enrollment and Completion

- **Enrollments:** Vernacular MOOCs attracted an average of 1,200 learners per course (SD = 350), significantly higher than English-medium equivalents (M = 800, SD = 290; $t(18) = 2.45$, $p = .025$, $d = 1.08$).
- **Completion Rates:** Vernacular courses achieved a mean completion rate of 48% (SD = 10%), versus 32% (SD = 12%) for English courses ($t(18) = 3.12$, $p = .006$, $d = 1.39$), indicating a large practical effect.

Time to Completion and Assessment Performance

- **Time to Completion:** Learners in vernacular courses completed requirements in an average of 6.5 weeks (SD = 1.2), compared to 8.2 weeks (SD = 1.5) for English courses ($t(18) = -2.68$, $p = .015$, $d = -1.20$), suggesting accelerated progression.
- **Assessment Pass Rates:** Vernacular course participants achieved a 76% pass rate (SD = 8%), significantly higher than 59% (SD = 11%) in English courses ($\chi^2(1, N = 20) = 4.67$, $p = .031$, $V = .48$).

Qualitative Themes

1. Language Usability and Cognitive Ease

Participants consistently reported that instruction in their mother tongue reduced reliance on dictionaries or translation tools, enabling smoother comprehension of complex

concepts. A Bengali-speaking tailor remarked, “When technical terms were explained in Bengali, I could immediately visualize processes without confusion.” This reduction in cognitive load translated into greater confidence and persistence when facing challenging modules.

2. Cultural and Contextual Relevance

Courses that integrated region-specific examples—such as millet cultivation methods in Marathi MOOCs and local financial practices in Hindi entrepreneurship courses—were deemed more relatable and actionable. One Tamil farmer noted, “Learning about irrigation techniques that mirrored our village’s soil structure made the content feel designed for us.” Such localization fostered stronger motivation to apply learned skills in real-world settings.

3. Digital Infrastructure Barriers

Despite positive experiences with vernacular content, participants highlighted ongoing challenges: unstable internet connections, frequent power outages, and limited device availability. Approximately 40% of learners traveled to community internet centers for uninterrupted access, incurring cost and time burdens. Additionally, varying digital literacy levels necessitated basic ICT training before meaningful engagement with MOOCs.

4. Livelihood and Employability Outcomes

Follow-up interviews conducted three months post-completion revealed that 35% of participants had initiated micro-enterprises—ranging from solar-powered irrigation services to digital marketing for local artisans—and 50% had enrolled in further certification programs. Increased self-efficacy emerged as a central motive: “Completing a course in my language made me believe I could learn anything online,” stated a Marathi entrepreneur. These findings suggest that vernacular MOOCs can catalyze both entrepreneurial activity and continued learning trajectories.

5. Recommendations from Learners

Participants advocated for blended learning models that pair vernacular MOOCs with in-person workshops to bolster digital skills and facilitate peer learning. They also recommended offline access options (e.g., downloadable video lectures) to mitigate connectivity issues, and greater collaboration between MOOCs providers and local training centers.

CONCLUSION

This comprehensive investigation demonstrates that vernacular MOOCs substantially enhance educational access, engagement, and skill acquisition among rural learners in India. Quantitative analyses reveal that vernacular offerings outperform English-medium courses across key metrics—enrollment, completion, time to completion, and assessment success—with large effect sizes underscoring the practical significance of language localization. Qualitative insights further illuminate the mechanisms driving these outcomes: mother-tongue instruction reduces cognitive load, fosters cultural resonance, and bolsters learner confidence. Importantly, vernacular MOOCs have tangible downstream effects on livelihoods, with a significant proportion of participants launching micro-enterprises and pursuing advanced certifications.

However, the promise of vernacular MOOCs is tempered by enduring infrastructural and digital literacy barriers. Intermittent internet connectivity, device scarcity, and limited ICT competencies constrain the reach and sustainability of online learning interventions in rural areas. Addressing these challenges requires a multifaceted strategy: investments in rural broadband infrastructure, expansion of community learning centers equipped with reliable hardware, and integration of basic digital literacy modules into vernacular MOOC curricula.

Policy frameworks should prioritize vernacular localization within national digital learning initiatives—mandating multilingual course offerings and incentivizing platforms to co-create content with local experts. Public-private partnerships can mobilize resources and foster innovation, while collaborations with grassroots organizations ensure that course design remains contextually grounded. By embedding vernacular MOOCs within broader rural development programs, stakeholders can leverage digital education as a pivotal driver of socio-economic empowerment.

In sum, vernacular MOOCs represent a potent tool for bridging rural skill gaps, democratizing access to vocational and entrepreneurial training tailored to local contexts. Realizing their full potential necessitates concerted action across policy, infrastructure, and pedagogy domains—transforming localized digital learning into a cornerstone of inclusive, sustainable rural development.

SCOPE AND LIMITATIONS

Scope:

1. **Linguistic Diversity:** Focuses on vernacular MOOCs delivered in five major Indian languages—Hindi, Bengali, Tamil, Marathi, and Telugu—across two prominent platforms (SWAYAM and EdTechX).
2. **Domain Coverage:** Encompasses vocational skills, agricultural practices, and entrepreneurship, reflecting critical rural skill areas.
3. **Mixed-Methods Design:** Integrates quantitative platform analytics (enrollment, completion, time to completion, assessment performance) with qualitative data (interviews, focus groups) to capture both measurable outcomes and learner experiences.
4. **Temporal Frame:** Analyzes data collected over a 12-month period (June 2023–May 2024), with

follow-up interviews conducted three months post-course completion to assess short-term livelihood impacts.

Limitations:

1. **Selection Bias:** Participants in the qualitative component were learners who completed at least one vernacular MOOC, potentially skewing insights toward more motivated and digitally literate individuals. Non-completers' perspectives on barriers remain underexplored.
2. **Platform Constraints:** Data sourced from SWAYAM and a single private edtech provider may not generalize to other MOOC platforms with differing pedagogical models or technological infrastructures.
3. **Short-Term Assessment:** While three-month follow-ups offer initial evidence of livelihood outcomes, longer-term tracking is necessary to evaluate sustained career progression and income changes.
4. **Infrastructure Variability:** Findings reflect the conditions of specific rural regions; infrastructural realities (e.g., connectivity, electricity) may differ across states, affecting transferability.
5. **Self-Reported Outcomes:** Qualitative data rely on self-reported measures of skill application and entrepreneurial activity, introducing the potential for positive response bias. Triangulation with external indicators (e.g., income records) was beyond the study's scope.

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