

Introduction on Case Studies of Openness in the Language Classroom

Ana Beaven¹, Anna Comas-Quinn² and Barbara Sawhill³

1. Project background

The last ten years have seen a considerable increase in the sharing of resources and practices in education, mainly based on the huge potential that online technologies and the internet have for making knowledge available openly (Pantò & Comas-Quinn, 2013). The shift now is from an interest in Open Educational Resources (OER), defined as “materials used to support education that may be freely accessed, reused, modified and shared by anyone” (Downes, 2011), to the realisation that openness itself, rather than the resources alone, can bring enormous benefits to the education community. Hence the focus on Open Educational Practices (OEP) defined as practices which “support the production, use and reuse of high quality OER through institutional policies, which promote innovative pedagogical models, and respect and empower learners as co-producers on their lifelong learning path” (ICDE, 2011).

Beyond the abundance of information that is available via the Internet, and the possibility of sharing and reusing resources, the web also offers huge opportunities to create connections for learning. This has great potential to transform education, as easy access to information, and the possibility of learning from others outside the classroom make teaching less hierarchical, thus disrupting the traditional pedagogical paradigms. In the specific case of language teaching and learning, this profusion of information and connections facilitate a more authentic use of

1. Università di Bologna, Italy; anamaria.beaven@unibo.it

2. The Open University, UK; anna.comas-quinn@open.ac.uk

3. Oberlin College, Oberlin, OH, USA; barbara.sawhill@oberlin.edu

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the target language as well as contact with different cultures through accessing online text and audio-visual material in every language, as well as existing online communities. Clearly, this requires both teachers and learners to engage with language teaching and learning in novel ways.

In addition, open access initiatives to make research publications freely available online or the adoption of open source software solutions are already impacting education at all levels worldwide. For example, teachers and learners can make their voices heard and can create an online presence in the discipline through online publishing, be it in blogs, forums, through repositories, webpages, etc. Many language teachers already contribute to their discipline by sharing resources and ideas through online repositories such as Merlot, Connexions, Humbox or LORO, or in online communities such as mfltwitterati or the Guardian's Teacher Network.

The present publication arose from the two-day conference “Learning through Sharing: Open Resources, Open Practices, Open Communication” organised jointly by the EUROCALL Teacher Education and Computer Mediated Communication Special Interest Groups at the University of Bologna (Italy) on 29-30 March 2012 (<http://eurocallsigsbologna.weebly.com>). The main objective was to showcase the many ways in which practitioners in different settings are engaging with the concepts of open resources and practices, and to provide ideas for language teachers who might want to dip their toes into the OER/OEP world, or experiment further.

2. Contents and audience

This collection of case studies is addressed specifically to practitioners, foreign and second language teachers both in secondary and tertiary education. These are not research papers, although research certainly was essential in the creation of many of the projects these studies describe. Rather, they are short, directed descriptions of tools, projects, or activities with concrete examples of ways for teachers to consider using them in their practice. To make it simpler for readers

to find examples of openness that are relevant to them, the case studies have been organised into five sections dealing with open tools for collaboration, sharing resources, sharing practices, collaborative learning and student-generated content, and learner autonomy.

2.1. Open tools for collaboration

Sawhill opens the section on collaborative tools with an interesting case study on the implementation of an open blogging tool adapted to the needs of the language classroom. This provides a central page that aggregates the information from learners' blogs to make it easier for the teacher to monitor blogging activity and comment on others' contributions. Through a series of examples, Sawhill illustrates how a tool that facilitates the effective integration of blogs in language learning can encourage teachers and their learners to connect with the outside world and become part of authentic conversations with target language speakers.

Facilitating communication and enabling connections between speakers of different languages is also the purpose of The Mixxer, a platform described by Bryant in the second case study, which currently boasts over 100,000 users representing over 100 languages. This free, flexible platform for learners and teachers allows them to connect with native speakers on either an individual or class-to-class basis, making it possible for students to engage in synchronous, real time exchanges to develop their language proficiency and increase their intercultural awareness. The author provides engaging examples of ways to use this tool, as does the third case study, in which Blyth describes the development of an open source annotation tool called eComma, which turns reading into a group activity by encouraging learners to help each other understand a text. eComma provides readers with guidance and feedback during the reading process and allows learners to analyze texts in a collaborative and exploratory manner.

2.2. Sharing resources

The second section includes three examples that illustrate the benefits and challenges of sharing and reusing resources. First, Motzo describes the

contribution made by learners in the creation of reusable and adaptable digital and interactive materials. She argues that the creative engagement of the learners leads to an increase in both their participation in the learning experience as well as their appreciation of the importance of gaining transferable skills.

Conversely, Winchester focuses on her own experience as a teacher engaged in the practice of repurposing resources, and provides practical advice on how to select and adapt OER based on different pedagogical criteria. She reflects on the process of reusing and adapting resources for language teaching, and how this process can contribute to the professional development of teachers.

Calvi, Motzo and Silipo close this section with a description of a collaborative experience of producing audio-visual OER to help Italian learners with the pronunciation of specific sounds. They report on the advantages of working and sharing openly, and reflect on the benefits that working collaboratively can have for individuals and institutions.

2.3. Sharing practice

The four case studies in the third section focus on sharing practice amongst teachers in the context of projects that harness openness to maximise the impact of professional development activities. First, Watson describes the experience of a group of part-time language teachers involved in the FAVOR (Find a Voice through Open Resources) Project, aimed at spreading the word on the advantages of open working and sharing amongst part-time teachers. Through the use of interview data, the author investigates the impact of the teachers' involvement in the project on their professional practices. She concludes that the most significant outcome of the project may have been the teachers' increased awareness of the learning design inherent in their own OER and those of other people.

A similar experience is described by Borthwick and Dickens with reference to the Community Café project. Through it, a community of open practice amongst

community-based language teachers who were new to OER and OEP was fostered by providing a space to create and publish open educational resources related to their teaching. The authors provide practical examples of teacher involvement, and discuss some of the issues that should be considered when reaching out to a culturally diverse community group. They conclude that working with OER and OEP can impact significantly on the professional lives of community-based language teachers as long as participants are given the necessary time to absorb the new knowledge effectively.

Another initiative is presented by King, who describes the Onstream Project, aimed at encouraging collaboration and the sharing of resources and pedagogical approaches between teachers of Russian in supplementary schools, who are often volunteers working in isolation, and those in a mainstream secondary school and a university's Russian Department. The collaboration involved an online discussion forum, a resource bank for sharing materials and lesson observation. The researchers found a number of obstacles in the development of a culture of sharing among teachers, including contextual differences in the production and use of the materials, the variety of pedagogical approaches and, significantly, psycho-sociological factors inherent to the act of sharing with strangers.

Finally, Duensing, Gallardo and Heiser look at the collaborative development of OER from a staff development perspective. They present a project that aimed to promote open practices in a blended teaching context through collaborative writing and peer review of resources. They describe the various steps and activities in the project and discuss the gains in understanding of social online tools, and the enhancement in teaching practice that can result from teachers collaborating openly in the creation of OER.

2.4. Collaborative learning and student-generated content

The fourth section in this publication comprises a selection of case-studies dealing with student-generated content and collaborative learning. Rossade

opens this section with an interesting example of the use of task forums to promote open discussion amongst learners in an advanced German course. He looks at the learning benefits of engaging in open communication in a protected environment, and the potential of using the resulting learner-generated content as a teaching resource in itself. Iglesias Mora and Leeming take this one step further by involving some of their beginners' Spanish learners in turning the content generated through forum discussions into open educational resources. They present examples of how the forum activities can be turned into open resources, and discuss the benefits for learners deriving from their engagement in this process.

Another two interesting case studies explore different ways of utilising materials made available openly through the OpenLIVES project (Learning Insights from the Voices of Émigrés from Spain). Nelson and Pozo-Gutiérrez present the collaborative work undertaken at the University of Southampton, which involved a group of undergraduate students in the production of learning materials based on the oral histories gathered by one of the authors in the course of her research into immigration. The authors discuss how the process was central to students' language learning but also provided relevant academic knowledge of cultural and historical events. In addition, the learners developed a range of very relevant skills such as transcribing and subtitling. Martínez-Arboleda uses the same resources as the basis for a final year module in which his students learn to become responsible digital scholars gaining a critical and ethical understanding of the social, epistemological and educational issues of economic migrations in Spain in the last century.

This section closes with Goría's description of the open course Collaborative Italian (Collit), an online learning initiative which targets adult students of Italian and provides them with a communicative language learning experience based on collaboration and social interaction. Through the use of a wiki, it requires learners to take responsibility for their own learning outcomes by repurposing open online resources to create new learning materials to be shared within the learning community. The author reflects on the difficulties caused

by high dropout rates and varying levels of proficiency, although she found that the learners who participated in Collit showed increased engagement and involvement with the learning process.

2.5. Learner autonomy

The last section in this book comprises two studies on learner autonomy. First, Capellini explores how creating OER can enhance student autonomy in the context of a self-study environment. He argues that, in order to benefit fully from the potential offered by OER, learners need to be aware of and open to different ways of using them. He also claims that learner autonomy does not imply learning alone, and that the mediation of teacher and peers is a necessary condition for the experience to be successful.

In the last case study, Beaven discusses the possibilities offered by MOOCs to supplement English for Academic Purposes courses at university level, and shows how they can enhance the learning experience by providing on the one hand content that is academically more relevant to the individual's studies, and on the other a higher level of choice for the learner to use the resources that are more appropriate to their language needs and personal learning style. The effect on learner autonomy will potentially be beneficial in terms of the individual's lifelong learning process.

3. Final words

We hope that this wide-ranging selection of case studies will provide practical and inspiring examples of how OER and OEP can become part of the language classroom, to be used by both teacher trainers and practitioners in different educational contexts. Our ultimate aim, however, is to showcase the fact that there is no one way to engage in “open” practices in language teaching, and that there are multiple ways of pursuing “openness” in language teaching. Ultimately however, there is one constant which emerges from all of these case studies: the belief that engaging in open practices not only benefits students and their learning

but also teachers by providing access to new tools, ideas, and communities from all around the world.

It has been a pleasure for us, as editors, to work together (albeit while being in three different countries and timezones) on this project over the past year. We are delighted to help make public through this book the important work that our colleagues are doing in the area of OER, OEP and language instruction around the world. We hope that you will find these case studies as inspiring as we did.

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info@research-publishing.net

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Edited by Ana Beaven, Anna Comas-Quinn and Barbara Sawhill

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