16 When Learner Autonomy Meets Open Educational Resources: A Study of a Self-learning Environment for Italian as a Foreign Language

Marco Cappellini[1]

Abstract

The aim of this case study is twofold. On the one hand, it shows a possible use of Open Educational Resources in a self-learning environment as it has been done at Lille 3 University since 2006 (Rivens Mompean & Eisenbeis, 2009). On the other hand, it highlights some of the relations between OER appropriation and the development of learner autonomy. Learner autonomy is defined as the capacity of a learner to take responsibility and control of his/her own learning process. This includes establishing learning goals, developing learning strategies, finding relevant OER, and self-assessing the effectiveness of the learning process (Holec, 1981). During the past years, many researchers and practitioners have argued that OER could play a crucial role in learner autonomy development (Barbot & Camatarri, 1999). This paper considers some necessary conditions for this to happen, the most important of which is the teacher's and the peers' mediation necessary for learners to make the most of OER.

Keywords: learner autonomy, self-learning, OER, open educational resources, affordance, mediation.

1.   Context

This case study presents the possible relations built between Open Educational Resources (OER) and the development of learner autonomy in a self-learning course at Lille 3 University. We suggest that OER can be a tool to develop learner autonomy, but only under certain conditions, including a variety of OER types and the mediation of a teacher or a tutor.

In the first section, we present the post-graduate curriculum in foreign language pedagogy at Lille 3 University and the role the self-learning course has in it. In the second section, we define learner autonomy as opposed to heteronomy and anomy. In the third section, we show the structure of the self-learning course and how OER are used according to the learner autonomy paradigm. In the fourth section, we analyze an example where the development of a student's learner autonomy is intertwined with instrumental genesis of OER based on their learning affordances.

At Lille 3 University, students in foreign language pedagogy at a post-graduate level have, among other courses, a course of self-learning in a foreign language. In this self-learning course, each student chooses a foreign language he/she wants to learn and learns it autonomously with the counselling of a teacher/ tutor. Different foreign languages have been proposed during the years: English, French, Spanish, Italian and Polish. Even if the number of OER available for these languages is very different, the self-learning course has the same structure for every learner and students go through the same learning stages (see Section 3).

The main objective of the post-graduate curriculum in foreign language pedagogy at Lille 3 University is for the students to become pedagogical engineers, able to design, build and run self-learning environments integrating Information and Communication Technologies and to design forms of evaluation adapted to demands in constant evolution (Barbot & Rivens Mompean, 2011, p. 56).

The self-learning course was first integrated into the curriculum in 2006. During its first edition, the course was restricted to students of English as a foreign

language, but it was then broadened to the other languages mentioned above. The self-learning course's integration into the curriculum was based on three main objectives.

First, it was meant to be an opportunity for students to practically experience the theoretical notions they studied in other courses, such as learner autonomy, motivation and educational resources among others. This allows students a stimulating environment to build links between theory and practice (Korthagen & Kessels, 1999). For instance, having used OER for their self-learning, future teachers will be able to anticipate (some of) the difficulties their future learners will encounter using OER. Secondly, a self-learning environment allowed language teachers to deal with the great variety of language proficiency levels among students and to adapt each student's learning objectives to his/ her possibilities. Third, according to Germain and Netten (2004), learner autonomy is related to teacher autonomy. In consequence, the development of learner autonomy through the self-learning course is meant to improve students' subsequent teacher autonomy (Cappellini & Eisenbeis, 2013). The validation of the course and its development are based on continuing action-research.

2.   Intended outcomes:
The development of learner autonomy

The main pedagogical objective of the self-learning course described in this case study is to develop students' learner autonomy while learning a foreign language. Holec (1981)[1] defines learner autonomy as the capacity of a learner to take responsibility for his/her learning process. In other words, autonomy is opposed to heteronomy, where pedagogical decisions are made by someone else (usually the teacher or the institution) and imposed on the learner.

Learner autonomy involves five stages:

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1. The reader should refer to Little (2012) and Sockett and Toffoli (2012) for discussions about the relevance of this definition in today's learning society.

- *Determining the objectives* according to one's specific needs. This is usually done in terms of procedural knowledge or skills, with sentences such as "I want to be able to…" and not in terms of content knowledge.

- *Defining contents and progressions*, that is the materials, in our case OER, to be used and their organization in a sequence. Materials are not necessarily chosen only for the linguistic forms they address, but may also be selected according to the contexts in which the learner will have to communicate.

- *Selecting methods and techniques to be used*. This is linked to the learner's linguistic biography and especially how he/she previously learned foreign languages (see Section 4). However, learning methods can change during the learning process.

- *Monitoring the procedure of acquisition*, which means that the learner decides when to study and how much time he/she will dedicate to those studies. He/she also decides where his/her learning takes place.

- *Evaluating what has been acquired*. At this stage, the learner evaluates to what extent his/her results meet the initial pedagogical objectives he/she established. Porcher (2004) suggests that in the case of language learning, the most effective way to do this is by direct exchange with other speakers of the target language. Of course, the criteria for this evaluation must be chosen by the learner, according to his/her learning objectives.

To accompany students toward learner autonomy, there are two main general pedagogical principles we adopted in the design and development of the self-learning environment. The first principle is that self-learning does not mean to learn alone and without any structure (Holec, 1981; Rivens Mompean & Eisenbeis, 2009). Holec (1981) argues autonomy "is not inborn but must be acquired either by 'natural' means or (as most often happens) by formal learning, i.e. in a systematic, deliberate way" (p. 3). In fact, autonomy is not only opposed to heteronomy, but also to anomy, that is the lack of any support or structure for

the learner to rely on. The second principle is that OER could be a tool for the development of learner autonomy. However, OER need to be of different types in order for learners to make the most of their different cognitive and learning profiles (Barbot & Camatarri, 1999). Moreover, learners need to learn how to *find* and *use* OER, which is at the center of learners' advisors' concerns in self-learning environments (Little, 2012).

3.   Nuts and bolts: The self-learning environment at Lille 3 University

Every student goes through different stages advised by a tutor (whose roles are summarized at the end of this section). First of all, the learner takes two tests: a placement test, such as Dialang, to know his/her current proficiency level in the foreign language, and a test to discover his/her learning profile, such as SILL. Then, the learner has an individual advising session with the tutor to establish his/her learning objectives and consider possible OER and possible learning strategies to attain these objectives (Holec, Little, & Richterich, 1996). On one hand, learning objectives are formulated in terms of real life skills and based on the possible future use of the language by the learner (Porcher, 2004). On the other hand, the choice of OER and learning strategies is based on the learning profile and the proficiency level. OER are indexed in a closed database similar to that of the Merlot website for world languages.

During the first week after the advising session, each learner organizes the possibilities emerged during the session into two learning tasks. Beside task progression, students decide the parameters of two final products they will deliver at the end of the semester. They also establish an evaluation scheme which the tutor will use to grade these products. The criteria of the evaluation reflect what each learner thinks is most important for his/her language learning.

After these first stages, learners start to work autonomously. Each learning session ends with learners writing an entry in a logbook about their learning activities. In the logbook, learners explain their learning strategies and the OER

used and they reflect on their efficiency. Learners send their logbooks to the tutor, who will give advice about learners' choices and will ask questions in order to allow learners to analyze more deeply their practices. These questions are aimed at guiding learners' attention to OER learning affordances (Van Lier, 2004) and how learners could possibly "divert" or adapt OER to better suit their learning objectives and strategies (see Section 4). From a cognitive point of view, this "diversion", which is in fact a particular case of appropriation, has been studied in terms of "instrumental genesis" (Rabardel, 1995; Rivens Mompean & Guichon, 2013). Finally, as part of their self-learning, learners can also attach language productions to their logbook and ask the tutor for feedback.

Three times during the semester, the tutor organizes a "learning to learn" group session. During these sessions, learners share their learning objectives and learning strategies and how they choose, use and possibly divert OER. During the discussion, learners could discover new learning strategies from other learners and possibly decide to try these strategies. Moreover, when a learner explains his/her strategies, he/she can benefit from other learners' suggestions and comments.

At the end of the semester, each learner has an individual self-evaluation session with the tutor. During this session, learners evaluate if they attained their initial learning objectives, they summarize their learning process and how their metacognitive skills – i.e. their ability to analyze their learning practices – evolved. The final grade combines the grades of the two language productions, evolutions in metacognition showed in the logbooks and the final self-evaluation.

Concerning the roles in this self-learning course, students are led to take responsibility for each stage of the learning process (Section 2) and are provided with different types of scaffolding (Van Lier, 2004). Consequently, the tutor has many roles. First of all, the tutor has to find OER and organize them into a database, which is a sort of "upstream scaffolding" (Rivens Mompean & Eisenbeis, 2009). Second, the tutor helps learners to elaborate strategies to find and select OER. Third, the tutor is an advisor, suggesting learning strategies to make the most of OER. It is important to highlight that the tutor never makes a

decision for the learner, who is always a free decision-maker. Fourth, the tutor is an expert in the foreign language, able to give feedback adapted to learners' needs (Aljaafreh & Lantolf, 1994).

4.   In practice: An example
of instrumental genesis of OER

In this section, we show an example taken from the self-learning process of Valérie[1], a learner of Italian as a second language in the first post-graduate year during the academic year 2011-12. Her mother tongue is French and she studied English (advanced level) and Spanish (intermediate level) as second languages. She also studied Italian in a classroom-based course during one year in her undergraduate curriculum.

The first of her two tasks is to plan a trip to Italy and more specifically to find and book a hotel in Rome. The product delivered at the end of the task is a phone message to the answering machine of a hotel. She finds OER to work on basic expressions, communicative situations and grammatical contents useful for her task.

At the beginning of her self-learning process, she searches for OER adopting a "deductive" approach to grammar. For instance, when she studies articles, she starts from the grammatical rule and then she does some exercises to memorize the rule. In her logbook, she records the reasons for her choice[2]:

> […] The reason why I choose to learn using this [deductive] method is because in all the language learning experiences I had, I used this method. So, I did the same way from habit. […] Personally, the only efficient method for me to learn a new language is just the deductive method (13/10/2011).

1. A pseudonym.

2. We translated the logbook from French.

However, a week later evaluations of what has been acquired lead Valérie to notice that results are not as good as expected, which brings a drop in motivation:

> […] I feel that for now, the work I've done isn't fixed in my memory. So, I need to read again and again, many times what I did earlier and this takes lots of time. […] I lack motivation even though learning the language itself really interests me (18/10/2011).

The observation of a lack of efficiency leading to a lack of motivation brings Valérie to the conclusion that she should try another learning approach. This is suggested during a group session, when another learner explains his "inductive" method, which Valérie is then willing to try for herself. This implies a different use of OER, visible when she studies interrogative adverbs. She does not use OER to read the rule and then to put it into practice in grammar exercises. On the contrary, she decides to start with exercises to formulate a hypothesis about the grammar rule. Then, she tests her hypothesis on other exercises. Only at the end, does she compare the rule she elaborated with an online rule. This inductive approach proves to be more effective for her:

> […] Before studying interrogative adverbs, I was reproducing the way I was taught languages. However, I felt that by doing exercises I didn't memorize what I was learning. I was learning deductively, relying on the rule and then doing exercises. I tried the other way around, that is to learn in an inductive way, which I had never done before. […] Changing my learning strategy, I discovered that my previous way to learn a language wasn't the only one. […] By creating my own grammar rule, I acquired more knowledge than before, since my memorization seemed to be more complete and efficient. Before, at the end of each learning session, the most of what I studied was already forgotten, while now I remember each adverb even two days after (1/11/2011).

This shift from a deductive strategy to an inductive one represents a step toward learner autonomy for two reasons. First, the learner realizes that there is a variety of possible learning strategies to attain the same learning (in this

case: grammatical) objective. Alternatives are obviously a necessary condition to operate pedagogical choices and therefore to practise learner autonomy (Jézégou, 2002) and more generally pedagogical innovation (Alvarez, Beaven, & Comas-Quinn, 2013). Second, the learner realizes that the same type of OER can become an affordance to learn in different ways. In other words, the learner develops an instrumental genesis of OER to attain her objective in a way more suitable to her profile.

5. Conclusion

Through the sections of this case study, we showed one way among others in which OER could be a tool for the development of learner autonomy and more generally of a learner-centered pedagogy. We would like to underscore that the self-learning environment shown in this case study gathers many different features that could be separated and adapted to classroom-based language teaching (Eisenbeis & Cappellini, 2013). As for this case study, it aimed at showing a practical example of how the same type of OER can be re-used in different ways according to learners' needs and profiles. To make the most of OER, our research suggests that it is important for learners to be aware of and open to different ways of using them. The learner "autonomization" process (Little, 2002) is triggered by an observation of a lack of efficiency, which leads him/her to search for and find new pedagogical contents and methods. The process goes from a use based only on previous learning experiences toward a reasoned usage based on the student's learning profile and the learning affordances of OER.

Therefore, we think that the availability of OER is necessary but not sufficient for the development of learner autonomy. In fact, mediations are at the very core of this process. First of all, the mediation of the teacher/tutor has to make learners question their pedagogical choices in order for them to open to different possibilities. Second, the mediation of peers through shared practices allows learners to discover other ways to use OER. To facilitate awareness of different possible usages of OER, it could be useful to associate each OER in a database with descriptions by learners of how they used it, including the learning

objectives and strategies. These descriptions would constitute a repository of Open Practice (OPAL, 2011, p. 12) associated to the OER database aiming at promoting learners' awareness of different possible pedagogical choices and usages, hopefully leading in the end to learner autonomy. Future action-research is needed on this point.

In conclusion, we agree with McAndrew, Scanlon, and Clow (2010) arguing that OERs are a part of the educational experience and that "release of content is a key enabler for other activities" (p. 2). OER and OEP are an opportunity to develop "learning to learn" skills in initial education and to prepare learners for lifelong learning. It is our belief that in the future, educational institutions will not only be implicated in certificating learning (Pantò & Comas-Quinn, 2013[1]), but that they should also have a central role in implementing and evaluating new forms of mediation. Without such mediations, only learners who are already autonomous will take advantage of the open education movement, which would mean to deepen the gap between learners. On the contrary, if educational institutions develop learners' autonomy, more learners will be enabled to efficiently use OER, which would be a real step towards the democratization of education.

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Links

Dialang: http://www.lancs.ac.uk/researchenterprise/dialang/about

Grammar rules and exercises: http://www.edelo.net/italie/base.htm#Les articles, http://www.oneworldditaliano.com/grammatica-italiana/avverbi-interrogativi-esclamativi-italiane.htm, http://www.oneworldditaliano.com/esercizi-di-italiano/articoli-determinativi-indeterminativi-italiani.aspx and http://www.oneworldditaliano.com/corso-di-italiano/esercizi-corso-di-italiano/corso-di-italiano-15.aspx

Learner profile test: http://www.apprendreaapprendre.com/tests/index.php

Merlot database: http://www.merlot.org/merlot/materials.htm?category=2440&&sort.property=overallRating

OER basic expressions: http://www.loecsen.com/travel/0-en-67-2-8-free-lessons-italian.html

OER communicative situations: http://www.oggi-domani.com/site/tableofcontent.htm

SILL: http://www2.education.ualberta.ca/staff/olenka.Bilash/best%20of%20bilash/SILL%20survey.pdf

Case Studies of Openness in the Language Classroom
Edited by Ana Beaven, Anna Comas-Quinn and Barbara Sawhill